



Student support promotes 21st Century student engagement in a regional context

The challenge

Federation University is a regional Victorian university and a member of the Regional Universities Network (RUN). According to the 2015 September QILT Report, students completing the 2014 University Experience Survey (n=867), report 78.5% satisfaction with the level of Student Support offered across the university. The university provides a range of student academic and transition support services and programs (SS&Ps) which include: Mentors, ASK Service, FedReady, yourtutor, Study Skills Website, and Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS). All these programs focus on creating a positive student experience, and improved student retention and success outcomes. Many of these programs are facilitated by Student Leaders (students employed in leadership and facilitating roles within SS&P). However, there is currently a lack of understanding about how these SS&Ps influence the student experience.

This case study investigated how centrally provided SS&Ps shape the student experience, by exploring the relationships between the SS&Ps and student motivation, emotion, well-being and satisfaction.

Seven students who had accessed one or more SS&Ps in the previous 12 months and six staff involved with aspects of SS&P delivery participated in interviews.

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Key findings

The case study revealed some expected and unexpected findings.

- Staff observations that there were clear, positive benefits for students who participate in the SS&Ps were juxtaposed with concerns for students who deliberately choose not to engage with SS&Ps.
- Staff and student data indicated a lack of understanding and awareness of the full range of support opportunities available to students. In addition, staff data indicated that training about SS&Ps should be prioritised to improve efficient and timely access and referrals of students to SS&Ps.
- Student Leaders (i.e. students employed in leadership and facilitating roles within SS&P) have an enormous responsibility to facilitate SS&Ps.

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They require ongoing support to offer guidance to students, relevant to their specific needs. The data also suggested that achievement of the intended outcomes of the SS&Ps was strongly associated with the quality of the Student Leaders.

- There was a perception that the SS&Ps were not focused enough on academic achievement.

How support services shape the 21st Century student experience

The findings of the interviews demonstrated a strong connection with several elements, dimensions and facets of Kahu's 2013 model. The most frequently coded facets in this case were Support (n=189), Staff (n=86), and Emotion (n=48). Preliminary analysis also highlighted differences between staff and student priorities. For example, Interaction occurred at a rate of 2.1% of the total staff data codes, compared with 40.3% for the student data. Similarly, Emotion was coded at a rate of 3.9% in the staff transcripts, compared with 76.5% for students.

In addition, this study offered some insights into the association between students' interactions with the SS&Ps and facets in Kahu's model:

- Peer interaction and support has a positive impact on student well-being

Mentoring I definitely think so because your mentors, they learn about what each of the... student services [offer] pretty much in and out... I think with mentoring, that could definitely save a student. (Student)

- Satisfaction and well-being in mature-age students, and transition anxiety are positively influenced by involvement with SS&Ps

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- There is a strong association between participation in SS&Ps and positive student belongingness, emotion and well-being

[Y]ou find that once you get involved it's easy to stay involved... [O]bviously feeling connected somewhere is a big part of retention. (Student)

- There is a strong association between participation in SS&Ps, and positive personal growth and satisfaction
- There is a strong association between students who participate in SS&Ps, and motivation and interaction

FedReady gave you that taste of what you're going to be doing. I'd walked out of the class on the first day of FedReady, I just went, 'Oh, my God, I just want it to be next week'. (Student)

Implications for practice

The nature of student support programs and importantly the linkages among services needs to be explicit. The training, awareness and communication regarding student referrals needs to deliver to agreed student outcomes. There should be feedback mechanisms to close the loop on identified issues or matters that are impacting on student engagement and satisfaction, and ways to reach out to students who would benefit from accessing SS&P but do not access these services. It is critical for the training of Student Leaders to be quality assured and for them to be provided with additional support when unexpected incidents occur.

Conclusion

This case study demonstrated the impact that SS&Ps have on student well-being, retention, satisfaction, motivation and engagement in a regional university context. The findings aligned strongly with the Kahu model, and in particular showed associations between the influences on student engagement and the consequences of engagement. The case also highlighted possible areas of focus for the provision of support services to maximise student success and engagement within a university context.