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Aim to lessen access challenges by increasing student engagement

Influences on these practices

The two practices described in this statement focus on enabling student success regardless of potentially challenging pre-existing structural issues for students – their educational background, level of support, family background and the 'life load' they bring to their study efforts. Both practices are drawn from institutional case studies at different regional universities that showed that these practices had a mitigating affect early in students' engagement with the university – the first case study involves a university level initiative that connects with students before commencement and the second demonstrates the value of relationship building in peer-led programs, particularly for students from under-represented groups.

Good practices at Regional Universities

These practices show how the challenges of a successful transition to university for students from diverse backgrounds can be mitigated. In this way these practices promote achievement of the national imperatives for access and equity in higher education, which has been embraced by regional institutions. These two practices focus on early engagement, considering readiness for study, and promoting activities and relationships that lessen the impact of social incongruence on students in under-represented groups.



CQUniversity Case study theme: Early people-rich intervention improves transition and first year retention

Good practice 2.1

Begin students' transition to university with personalised two-way interaction to discuss students' needs in relation to inherent program requirements.

The case study demonstrated the benefits of the practice of engaging with students early in their student journey in a personalized way, to communicate the requirements of the student's program and to support students in identifying strategies to assist them in meeting those requirements.

The practice involves an initial phone call in which a staff member from CQUniversity invited commencing students to participate in a phone interview, during which the inherent and program requirements were explained to them, and any issues that might impact on their capacity to meet those requirements were discussed. A follow-up interview was conducted at the end of the term, during which students were asked to reflect on their first term of study, and provide feedback on how they coped and any changes that needed to be addressed to ensure their success.

Recurring issues identified in the pre-commencement interviews included personal concerns, time management issues for students trying to balance work, study and family commitments, and challenges experienced by mature-aged students.

to have somebody contact me and just see how I was going... I don't know if you realised that I hadn't been to uni before or realised that being an older student and being so far away, it was nice to have somebody contact me and see how I was going and if I was prepared and what my expectations were.

(Student)

The pre-commencement interviews helped students negotiate more achievable course commitments. Student feedback from those who participated in the project indicated that they were better prepared and able to successfully progress through their studies as a result of the pre-commencement interviews. This highlights the need for engagement with students before the commencement of their study, as indicated by the number of students who reflected that they felt they belonged to the university and felt 'that they were not just a number', which in turn motivated them to continue.



Federation University Australia (FedUni) Case study theme: Student support promotes 21st Century student engagement in a regional context

Good practice 2.2

Select and support high-quality and enthusiastic Student Leaders to facilitate positive interactions among less experienced peers in the transition to university.

FedUni offers students a range of centrally-facilitated academic and transition support services and programs (SS&Ps): Mentors, ASK Service, FedReady, yourtutor, Study Skills Website and Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS). These programs focus on creating a positive student experience, and improved student retention and success outcomes. The good practice is that these programs are facilitated by Student Leaders (students employed in leadership and facilitating roles within SS&P). The case study research showed the positive impact of peer-to-peer relationships on students and student leaders.

Students reported a direct association between their level of engagement with the SS&P and increased levels of confidence, decreased anxiety (regardless of the student's age and background) and greater feeling of being connected to the

university. Many of these factors led to a sense of positive achievement/choice and a sense of belonging. Students stated that they encouraged other students to get involved with SS&P and were quick to highlight the positive outcomes of the mentioned programs. The impact on preparedness for study for those students who participated in SS&Ps was significant in student comments, and hinged on the knowledge, commitment and relationship-building capacity of the mentors.

mentors... learn about what each of the... student services [offer] pretty much in and out... a mentor is a really good way of providing that... extra little push to help them out and make them realise that there are more options than just dropping out, so I think mentoring has very high potential for that

(Student 7)

Participating students reported that the quality of SS&P student leaders was crucial to the value of their experience. Students commented that personality, character, work ethic and ability to perform in a student leader role were integral to successfully meeting the needs of the students and achieving the program desired outcomes. Thus, selection and support of well-qualified students as student leaders is essential.