

Supporting Academic Success: a strategy that benefits learners and teachers. How can we demonstrate this?

Helen Johnston, Learning and Teaching Unit, University of South Australia
Diana Quinn, Learning and Teaching Unit,
Syed Mahfuzul Aziz, School of Electrical and Information Engineering,
C. Yalçın Kaya, School of Mathematics and Statistics

Abstract

A high proportion of commencing engineering and computer science students at the University of South Australia's Mawson Lakes Campus are members of one or more equity groups and the first in their family to enter university and the numbers are likely to increase with the introduced changes to Higher Education. These students are often at risk of leaving the university, some within the first six weeks unless they understand university expectations. A staff-student intervention timed early in the study period is aimed at improving first year retention and success: the 'Supporting Academic Success' (SAS) strategy. Through SAS, students who are not attending or engaging with their coursework are identified and then contacted individually by a learning adviser. Staff offer them encouragement, support and course-based advice. There are two points of contact: before Census date and after the first assessment and the result has been that both retention and success have improved. In this session participants share insights into evaluating interventions which, while effective, may seem to be a minor element in the teaching and learning situation.

Introduction

The current plan to broaden university participation in Australia will see more students unfamiliar with university norms and expectations entering higher education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2009). Students from recognised equity categories, and especially those from low socio-economic backgrounds and those who are the first in family to enter university, are known to be among those most vulnerable to dropping out, some early in the first year (Tranter, 2003). Often their choice to enter university, even when encouraged, isolates them to some extent from family or friends unable to share the experience. Some also come from disadvantaged schools where “for the vast majority of students ... university is an alien and inaccessible concept” (Tranter, 2005, p.3). Separated from their familiar “habitas” and without the knowledge or the cultural capital needed to thrive, it can be easy for them to feel alienated and disengaged (Tranter, 2003, p. 7). Despite the fact that it may have taken an extraordinary effort for them to earn their place at university, they may view themselves as “fish out of water” and need “a very high level of inner motivation” as well as ongoing support to persist (Tranter, 2003, p.1). The nature of that support will be important to their retention and success.

Student retention is an issue in Australia as it is in both the United States and the United Kingdom and it needs to be addressed through practical and effective student support strategies. There are known points in the semester when students are more likely to withdraw (Gibbs et al., 2005). At the University of South Australia, Census date and the point of the return of feedback on first assignments are seen as two watersheds that prompt students to reconsider their enrolment (Smith, 2006). Withdrawal before Census date, four weeks into

semester and before the start of the assessment cycle, allows students dissatisfied with their first taste of university to avoid higher education fees and any potential loss of face associated with failure. The return of failed first assignments a few weeks later can undermine student confidence and sow doubts about their chances of success (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005). Gibbs, Regan and Simpson (2005, p. 6) recommend the adoption of a proactive approach to student support that takes advice to the students rather than rely on them recognising their needs and being “sufficiently assertive to respond to offers”.

In 2006 in the Division of Information Technology, Engineering and the Environment (ITEE) at Mawson Lakes Campus, University of South Australia (UniSA), the ‘Supporting academic success’ (SAS) strategy was developed as part of the divisional First Year Experience Program. Initially badged as ‘Supporting students at risk’ it was renamed in 2009 to frame its intent more positively. SAS is modelled on the Open Learning (UK) approach of staff telephoning students (Gibbs et al., 2005). At Mawson Lakes Campus it was prompted by evidence that first year ITEE students had a “lower than average retention rates compared to other academic divisions ... and more issues with student satisfaction” (Smith, 2006). SAS was introduced to provide students who might be at risk of dropping out or failing with early, appropriate, and informed staff guidance.

The SAS approach suits the ITEE cohort. Many can be defined as “vulnerable to dropout” (Seidman cited in Gibbs et al., 2005, p. 7). A high proportion of the students identify with one or more equity groups (72% at Mawson Lakes in 2005) and are the first in their family to enter university. Many are from schools in the nearby Northern region, an area with one of the lowest university participation rates in Adelaide and Australia, (Stevenson, MacLauchlan & Karmel, 1999 cited in Quinn, 2008). Once these students enter university they find that their suburban campus offers limited early opportunities for socialisation, an issue for students needing to develop well-informed peer networks (Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). SAS increases the level of staff – student interactions and offers early encouragement and guidance.

“Supporting academic success” (SAS)

SAS is a collaborative approach involving course coordinators and Learning Advisers in the Learning and Teaching Unit (LTU). By signalling a supportive campus environment and increasing staff-student interaction, two benchmarks of effective educational practice, this approach is able to students’ sense of well-being and offer timely advice on how to succeed academically (Kuh, 2007). The affected course coordinators have ongoing access to feedback from SAS which they can use to inform their classroom practice (Johnston et al., 2008).

SAS is selective rather than broadly-based. It operates in Computer and Information Science programs and the First Year Engineering Program. It does not attempt to contact all first year students, only those who may need support in certain courses. It operates in core courses that are either known or expected to be difficult. Most are mathematics and computer programming courses where the curriculum requirements mean that both attendance and the completion of weekly quizzes are vital to success (Gibbs & Simpson, 2005). Secondly only the students in those courses meeting the criteria chosen by the course coordinators are referred to SAS. But the fact that all students in those programs enrol in those courses means all commencing students are monitored and have access to this support.

The iterative process is shown in Figure 1 (Johnston, Aziz, Kaya and Quinn, 2008). Course coordinators refer students to SAS twice in the first half of each semester and provide course-

specific advice to students in that course. The two SAS stages are timed to match the two watersheds in the first few weeks of semester: Census date and the return of feedback on first assignments (Krause et al., 2005). Stage one referral lists are usually based on attendance; stage two on results. The course coordinators' lists are forwarded to the SAS coordinator, a Learning Adviser. All referrals are followed up and active students contacted. The SAS team contacts students by telephone and then email when phone contact is not possible. The calls and messages are friendly and clearly focussed on fostering approaches to study that will lead to success, including the course coordinators' suggestions about studying in that course. Callers explain the relationship between attendance, early academic performance and success (Halpern, 2007). For reporting purposes contact is only considered successful when there is a student response and these responses are noted and later summarised. SAS staff collate this and other SAS-related data using a Microsoft SharePoint.

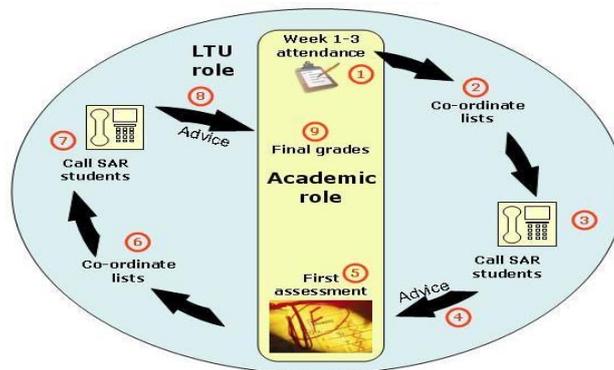


Figure 1 - Supporting academic success (SAS) (Johnston et al., 2008, p.30).

In Stage 1 (steps 1-4), student attendance is monitored in early weeks across several selected courses and non-attending students identified, contacted and provided with advice. In Stage 2 (steps 5-9), students who failed early assessments are identified, contacted and provided with advice.

This strategy is the most directed student-support element of a campus-based First Year Experience Program.

Evaluation of SAS's impact

Evaluation of the impact of SAS is important because this is an innovative approach to supporting students in UniSA. The learning advisers at Mawson Lakes are the only LTU staff working in this way. But it is difficult to demonstrate its impact clearly because it is one of several FYEP initiatives affecting retention and success. Others are likely to be much more influential e.g. the revised curriculum in the First Year Engineering Program.

There is evidence that retention and student success in ITEE have improved markedly since FYEP and SAS were introduced in 2006. Government-reported equity statistics for 2004 - 2009 for the Division reveal continuing improvement in the percentage of equity students who persist with and are successful in their study (Figure 2). The same data indicates that success and retention are improving. 82% success and 79% retention in 2005 improved steadily to 86% success in 2008 and 84% retention in 2009.

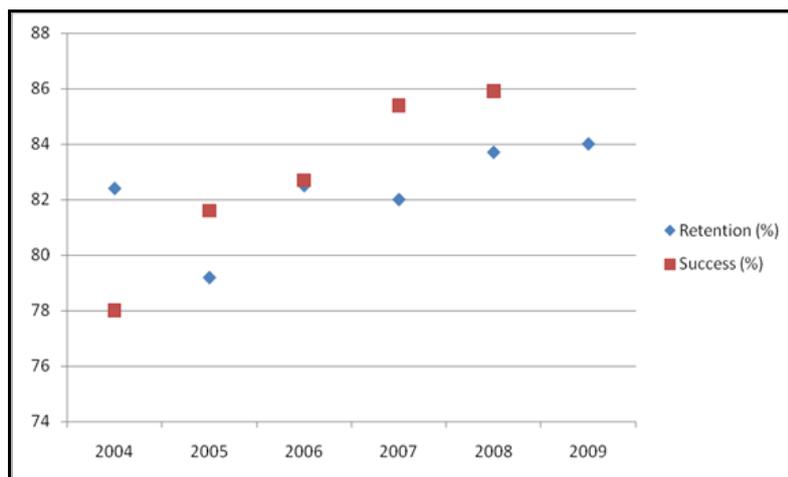


Figure 2: Trend of retention and success rates for students studying in the Division of ITEE who are classified in an Australian Government (DEEWR) equity category.

It is also possible to draw on large studies which demonstrate the validity of the SAS approach. For example in the UK where government funding is partly dependent on retention, Simpson (cited in Gibbs et al., 2005) has shown that the telephone contact model of student outreach is effective both in terms of impact on students and cost-effectiveness. Simpson (cited in Gibbs et al., 2005, p. 7) found that “targeted telephone interventions led to an increase in retention of 3% with a cost per student retained of around \$300 (\$500) giving a return of investment of 300%. This type of data is important but it falls short of demonstrating that ITEE’s version of this intervention is effective.

Session outline

Presenters (10 minutes): Outline the SAS initiative and the issues associated with evaluating initiatives like SAS where the link between the intervention and student outcomes can be difficult to demonstrate.

Group discussion (10 mins): In small groups participants will review the issues and map their own or familiar initiatives and approaches they use to evaluate that work.

Presenters + Whole group discussion (10 mins): participants share findings on effective evaluation practices.

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