Assessing the impact of an intrusive academic support initiative

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Abstract

Universities are accepting larger cohorts of students into undergraduate programs than ever before. These students come from diverse academic backgrounds and may be underprepared for independent learning as expected in higher education. An academic support initiative has been trialled in two second year Commerce subjects that have large cohorts of commencing students with many receiving exemptions for pre requisite units. Academically engaged students who did poorly on early tests were classified as ‘middle band’ and targeted for the intrusive intervention initiative. Such interventions are costly in terms of the university resources that are involved, including both professional and academic staff. The paper discusses how the real impact of such an academic support intervention might be considered and measured beyond the standard measures of GPA, student retention and progress for the targeted cohort, and financial cost/return to the university.

Introduction

Through policy design as well as population growth there has been an increasing number of students entering and participating in higher education in Australia. In 2002 there were 2,277,700 persons enrolled across Australia in non-school qualifications aged between 15 and 64, which represented 17.6% of the population. By 2012 this figure had increased to 2,820,700 persons representing 19.0% of the population (ABS 2012). Furthermore between May 2001 and May 2012 the proportion of the Australian population with an undergraduate degree rose from 17 to 25% (ABS 2012). Figure 1 depicts the increase in post school qualification via age group and it can clearly be seen that in all age groups there has been a significant increase over the decade.

![Figure 1: Proportion of people aged 20–64 years with a non-school qualification, May 2001 to May 2012](Source: ABS 2012)

We are now in the era of universal or open access education (Trow 2005). With increased participation comes diversity as well as variety in students’ academic backgrounds and levels of preparedness for independent learning. Commencing undergraduate students at Swinburne University come from diverse cultural and academic backgrounds. About 30% of commencing Commerce students are school leavers with 70% having had some post-secondary school education and often gaining exemptions on enrolment. It is acknowledged...
that not all commencing undergraduate students have the fundamental skills to successfully undertake university degrees (see Brown and Evagelistis 2011). Furthermore, many academics at Swinburne University who teach undergraduate students feel that students who are granted matched credits for foundation or core subjects end up underprepared for subsequent studies.

In 2011 the attrition rates for undergraduate students studying Commerce at Swinburne University was 14.4% for domestic students and 13.9% for international students. The average attrition rate across public Australian universities in the same year was 15.6% (Ross, 2011). Whilst these course specific figures are slightly below the average there is scope for improvement. Adams, Banks, Davis, and Dickson (2010) note that it is cheaper for an institution to retain a student than to recruit one, although they also acknowledge that attrition rates cannot be completely eliminated with the lowest likely attrition rate being about 5%.

Student engagement and academic success

Extant literature cites various reasons why students do not succeed in their studies with some relating to external factors which are outside the university’s control. Most universities acknowledge these factors and provide services to assist and support their students. Adams et al. (2010) drawing on various earlier studies list various factors that are within the control of universities and may impact on student success, retention and intention to complete their studies. These include academic preparation for studies, prior academic success, adequate information about courses and institutions, as well as commitment to studies. Students who are academically engaged exhibit behaviours that support their learning, like attending and actively participating in classes and engaging with learning materials. In the early 1990s Vincent Tinto encouraged educational institutions to have a focus on student engagement in order to facilitate learning and retention. McInnis, James and McNaught (1995) and Adams et al. (2010) encourage universities to monitor student engagement, identify early signs of disengagement, and develop early intervention strategies in order to set up students for success and reduce attrition rates.

The academic student support initiative

During 2012 Swinburne University embarked on a university wide Early Intervention Project (EIP) to facilitate early student engagement. The EIP involved identifying commencing students using pre-entry attributes as being potentially ‘at risk’. These students were contacted directly by a third party provider to facilitate a smooth transition to the university. Students from all faculties were involved.

In semester 2, 2012 the Faculty of Business and Enterprise decided to leverage off the EIP and developed a targeted academic student support initiative which was intrusive, that is reaching out to students, rather than passive, or expecting students to seek out support (see Brown and Evagelistis 2011). Two well established second year Commerce subjects were selected with experienced teaching panels yet disappointing completion rates. In both of these subjects over 60% of the cohorts had received exemptions. The failure rates for the selected subjects have recently been as high as 28% which is significantly higher than faculty guidelines. Enrolments for the two units were 190 and 373 respectively. In both of the selected subjects there were minor tests early in the semester and the results in this assessment coupled with class attendance, and frequency and duration of visits to the learning management system (Blackboard) were used to identify students who were academically
engaged yet where the test results did not appear to match the students’ input efforts. These students were classified as being in the ‘middle band’. In subject 1 40% of students were classified in the middle band whilst in subject 2 the proportion in the middle band was deemed to be 27%. The ‘intrusion’ commenced around the middle of the semester and involved phoning students and asking them how they were going thus far in the semester. Direct phone contact was made with about 70% of those categorised as middle band and all middle band students were sent SMS and emails directing them to the various academic and personal support services available. It was found that students had very low awareness of both faculty and university students support services. This is believed to be associated with students’ resistance to self-identify as needing support.

The third party provider account manager worked very closely with the faculty based project officer in coordinating the project and providing timely feedback on the progress of the initiative. The project officer liaised with the subject convenors to seek efficient and effective resolutions to concerns that the contacted middle band students had raised with the third party provider. Often the concerns raised by the students simply required guidance to locate information. For example, when students raised concerns about groupwork they were direct to links on Blackboard which contained the required resources. In addition, a variety of actions were taken in response to the real time feedback from the middle band students including: the development of a student support flyer ‘Just in time. Just for me’; additional tutorials targeting specific problems for example use of financial calculators; and, subject specific exam preparation workshops which were offered in addition to standard revision lectures. This additional academic student support was offered to all students enrolled in the subjects involved, not only the targeted middle band cohorts.

Who was involved?

At the faculty level, the program involved several academic and professional staff including the faculty manager who resourced the project, the undergraduate program director who championed the project, the manager of student support services, a project officer who was employed specifically to run this project, the academic head of group whose subject convenors participated in the project, the subject convenors and the subject teaching panels. The middle band students were contacted by the external provider who was concurrently working on the EIP. There was a key liaison person between the university and the provider. Thus it can be seen that as well as the project officer who managed the operational side of the project, there was a very large university investment in the project – both direct and indirect. The variety of human resources involved in such interventions is also noted by Brown and Evagelistis (2011).

Assessing the impact

Evaluation of such intervention projects should be considered from the outset. There is a significant investment required to offer such programs and thus the assessment of the impact and effectiveness of the intervention needs to be careful considered.

Students

According to Rienks (2011) common success measures that relate directly to assessing the impact on students would include retention data, grade point averages (GPA) and completion rates. However these measures are not totally straightforward to assess (see Rienks 2011 for a
comprehensive discussion) and thus correlation between the intervention strategies and these measures is very difficult to assess. The academic student support initiative described above potentially impacted all students enrolled in the two subjects not just the targeted middle band students as convenors and teaching panels responded in real time to the issues raised, which benefitted all students. Thus the impact of such initiatives needs to be assessed more broadly than simply with the targeted students.

It is hoped that through the guidance provided through the ‘intrusion’ as well as the enhanced learning environment created by the subject teaching panels in response to student feedback, the middle band students would be set on the path to academic success and the impact of the initiative would have both short term and long term ramifications. Rienks (2011) notes the importance of the timeframe over which one is measuring the impact of the intervention. Hence students should be tracked for the duration of their courses not just for a semester post intervention.

Once students become aware of the importance of academic engagement throughout the course of the semester, their own learning strategies and behaviours, faculty and university support as well as the accessibility of academic staff it is hoped that they will reap benefits long after the intervention. To fully understand the impact of the academic student support initiative one would need to couple quantitative measures with qualitative data which could be collected through individual interviews and focus groups.

In order to accurately assess the impact of such initiatives a control group would need to be identified who matched the characteristics of the middle band students but who did not have access to the intervention or the resulting learning and teaching initiatives. This would be neither realistic nor desirable.

Other stakeholders

As there are many stakeholders involved with intervention projects the impact on them should also be considered and evaluated. The financial impact associated with early intervention programs has been detailed in Adams et al’s (2010) report. When assessing the cost of attrition one needs to consider the cost of recruitment and the loss of potential income when the student leaves the university, and Adams et al. (2010) assessed this cost at about $14,000 per domestic students and $17,000 per international student, or a total of $1.4 billion the public university sector in Australia in 2010. This is likely to have increased since then. However Adams et al. (2010) also note that a 1% drop in attrition would result in savings of up to $1 billion for the public higher education sector in Australia. Thus investment in effective student engagement and early intervention strategies that positively impact the student experience are likely to provide substantial returns to universities.

Close cooperation between academic and professional staff is required for such initiatives. There is a need to build relationships and trust and ensure that teaching staff are aware that such initiatives are about student engagement and learning and not an evaluation of teaching capability or quality. It takes time for such relationships to develop especially when the intervention involves an external provider and the project officer managing the project is not an internal staff member. Although permission was sought well in advance of the intervention it was not until the initiative commenced that academics became aware of the effort required. There was reluctance and hesitation on the part of the convenors to respond in ‘real time’ to the issues the students had raised, as usually student feedback is sought at the end of the
semester through subject evaluations. This feedback is then considered by the teaching panel at the end of the semester review, not during teaching time.

Simply considering the short term effect on academic staff would not capture the real impact as hopefully some of the investment in the academic student support initiative will become embedded in teaching practice and lead to improved results for future cohorts as well as impact on teaching practice in other subjects taught by the teaching panels. Some examples would include highlighting where to find certain information, re organising the Blackboard site, or using an early identification system to locate struggling students who should be referred to faculty and university support services.

Conclusion

Academic student support initiatives targeted at commencing students can have a significant impact. The importance of student retention, progression, satisfaction and completion data on performance funding and in a demand driven uncapped system cannot be ignored. More information is available publically than even before, for example through the Good Universities Guide, My Universities website and VTAC. When designing interventions and initiatives universities need to give careful consideration as to how these can and will be assessed, beyond the traditional measures which have limited scope and do not truly reflect the impact of the intervention on the various stakeholders.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nuts and bolts session outline</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Welcome and introductions – 2 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consideration and identification of key stakeholders (in small groups) – 3 minutes</td>
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<td>What academic student support initiatives have been trialled? Have these been evaluated? If so, how? What have been the findings? (group discussion) – 12 minutes</td>
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<td>Presentation of the intrusive academic support initiative and its evaluation – 8 minutes</td>
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<td>Questions and conclusions – 5 minutes</td>
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References:


McInnes, C., James, R., & McNaught, C. (1995). First year on campus: Diversity in the initial experience of Australian undergraduates. Melbourne: Centre for the study of higher education

