Enhancing Student Success and Retention in Online Open Education

Dr Cathy Stone, Open Universities Australia

Abstract

There is a wealth of both anecdotal and sound research evidence which demonstrates a clear link between a student’s engagement with their learning community and their academic outcomes. Developing a sense of belonging and engagement with the institution and having quality experiences in their first year of study, through positive contact with lecturers, fellow students, other university staff, can make all the difference between persistence and academic success; and disillusionment, disappointment and abandonment of studies. With the expansion of online studies, an additional challenge for all of us is to develop and implement strategies appropriate for online students, by which these students can be given access to life and learning support to help them engage and succeed. This paper discusses some of those challenges for the Student Success team at Open Universities Australia and the initiatives being developed in order to meet them.

Introduction

Enhancing academic achievement is a goal that all of us involved in education strive to meet. The presenter of this session has had close contact over many years with students in different settings, from many diverse backgrounds and of all ages. It is through this close contact that I have been constantly reminded of the importance of students feeling a sense of belonging and connection with the learning community. Hand in hand with this goes the need for appropriately targeted and effective life and learning support – both academic and personal, to ensure that every student has the opportunity to reach their potential (Stone, 2000, 2004; Krause, 2005; Tinto, 2009). How we can effectively ensure the provision of quality experiences in the first year of study in an online environment is a new challenge for many, as universities and other tertiary institutions move increasingly to online delivery.

Open Universities Australia

Open Universities Australia (OUA) is owned by seven Australian Universities and provides online education provided by 13 Australian Universities. Qualifications are awarded by the university which has provided the course of study, and these qualifications are identical to those awarded to on-campus students. Online delivery removes many of the traditional barriers to higher education, hence enabling and promoting access to the first year of university study. Entry to OUA undergraduate units requires no pre-requisite qualifications and hence is open to all. Students can choose to study individual units, which may be based purely on interest, or can select those which will enable them to study towards a full degree program. Entry to a degree program can be achieved via the credit gained from units successfully completed. Over 70% of OUA students use Fee Help to fund their studies. They can choose from a wide range of units

Who are OUA students?

OUA students come from all walks of life, including school leavers, mature workers, full-time parents and those who are unemployed. Approximately 60% of OUA students are female and the majority is aged over 21 – therefore ‘mature-age’ by definition. Most live in NSW, Victoria and Queensland, but every other state and territory is represented. Nearly 78% of students live in major Australian cities with most speaking English as their first language. Over 80% nominate career development as their primary motive for studying. Nearly 70% are employed full time or part time, while around one in ten are in full-time home duties and a similar number is seeking work. Just under half come from families where neither parent has a university qualification and around a quarter are from the lower five deciles for socio-economic status as determined by postcode. Similar to the statistics in the higher education sector in general, around 5% of students identify as having a disability. These statistics indicate that OUA students can generally be considered ‘non-traditional’. As such, OUA provides an important pathway into higher education for identified equity groups. Its open-entry environment truly enables students, in all their diversity, to realise their potential in higher education.

Value of support mechanisms

Tinto and others’ work in the area of student retention over many years points to the impact of support, particularly academic and social support in the first year of study, on positive academic outcomes (Tinto, 2009). Forging positive connections with teaching staff and fellow students has also been demonstrated to increase the quality of the first year experience and to play a significant role in student satisfaction, persistence and academic success (Coffman & Gilligan, 2002; Quinn, 2005; Skahill, 2002/2003). According to Skahill (2002/2003) “the most important criterion for staying in college is the student’s social support network” (p. 39) while Rendon’s (1998) work with mature-age and other non-traditional students in American colleges indicates the importance of “validation, when faculty, students, friends, parents and spouses made an effort to acknowledge these students and what they were trying to achieve” (p. 3). Kuh et al. (2008) find that there is a “compensatory effect” (p.555) of student engagement for students who are “academically unprepared or first in their families to go to college” (p.555) in that such students, when engaged, perform better academically than expected, in comparison to more advantaged students.

Mature-age student experience

Research with Australian mature-age students (Stone and O’Shea, 2012) who are the first in their families to come to university (and who form a significant cohort within OUA) demonstrates that establishing positive connections with others, such as lecturers, friends and fellow students, library staff and others on campus plays a major role in determination to persist with studies, despite the many pressures of time, money and family issues. Also important is the availability of free, well-resourced and easily accessible support services. “Easy and free access to [support] services is clearly of high importance in terms of supporting students to stay and succeed” (Stone & O’Shea, 2012, p.95).
Challenges for engagement

But how do online teaching staff and support staff connect with students in a meaningful way when we never see them face-to-face? And how do we help students to connect with each other when they never come together as a group? And to complicate matters even further, how do we successfully help them to feel connected to and part of a learning community, when they are often studying across two or more different institutions? We know that student and staff interactions are highly important in student learning (ACER, 2008), particularly for non-traditional students, and that initiatives such as student mentor programs are recognised nationally and internationally as contributing significantly to student satisfaction and retention (Dearlove, Farrell, Handa, & Pastore, 2007; Erskine, 2000; Krause, 2005; McInnes, James & Hartley, 2000; Stone, 2000). So, how can we make this work in an online environment and ensure that we are sufficiently engaging students in order to enhance their academic success?

Student Engagement Cycle

Students who begin their first year of university study with OUA are at the starting point of a cycle, in which there are many points where it is possible for OUA to connect and engage with students in ways that will enhance the quality of their first year experience, their overall learning experience and their academic outcomes. OUA has developed and is continuing to develop a number of strategies and initiatives which offer academic and personal (learning and life) support at the different points along this cycle, which currently include:

- **Preparatory Units (PREP):** to prepare and enable students for their first year of university study at OUA, assisting them to develop the academic skills required for successful online study.
- **Online Tutorial Support:** offered free to all enrolled students.
- **Student Counselling:** distance counselling by telephone, Skype and online.
- **Student Coaching:** All new students in their first session of study routinely contacted.
- **OUA Connect Library Program:** collaboration with local council libraries offering dedicated library sessions for online students.
- **Equity Scholarships:** offering pathways into degree programs for students from equity groups, promoting access to the first year of a university degree.

Improving the targeting of support for success and retention

Analysis of data on the impact of these strategies is demonstrating some very positive results, particularly in the areas of PREP units, Smarthinking and Student Coaching. This Nuts and Bolts session will present findings on the evaluation and the evidence for the success of these initiatives which primarily impact upon those in their first year of study. The session will also generate discussion on ways in which such strategies can be improved, expanded and any gaps filled. Upcoming developments at OUA include plans for the expansion of Online Orientation for new students entering their first session of study, including the development of an online peer mentoring program. Discussion and ideas generated during this session will be of great assistance to the presenter and hopefully also to participants.
Conclusion

It is the responsibility of all of us involved in the education of online learners to ensure we have the means in place to encourage and support online students, particularly those who are entering their first year of online study, to assist them to develop a sense of identity as students, to feel that they belong to the learning community, to remain engaged and connected with their learning and to realise their full academic potential. OUA is using a range of strategies to engage and support our new students and is keen to develop these further as well as implement others. Analysis of student data is providing us with evidence that our support strategies are making a difference to students’ academic achievement, and are therefore worth continuing, refining and improving. This session will allow for the presentation of findings from OUA student data on the outcomes so far of current strategies, as well as exploration of ways in which other intentional, structured and proactive strategies can be developed and implemented for the increasing numbers of online students entering their first year of higher education.

References


