Turning Attrition Around: Effective Partnerships for Improving Student Retention.

Corinna Ridley, Department of Academic Support and Development
Alan McWilliams, College of Business, Victoria University, Melbourne

Abstract

Retaining students is a critical strategy for Australian universities. Victoria University (VU), Melbourne, had levels of attrition which were higher than operationally and educationally palatable. As one intervention to address this issue, VU embarked on a project to operationalize a whole of university approach to the first year experience which was strategic, systematic, flexible and responsive. A key aim of the project was to ensure that ownership of the initiative rested with the Colleges of the University in partnership with supporting professional staff. This paper reports on a pilot model for achieving this, through the development of an academic First Year Champion role, working with Academic Support and Development lecturers towards implementing a ‘transition pedagogy’ in the largest College at the University. Early indications suggest that the pilot has increased awareness of the importance of effective partnerships around retention. The model has now been extended to other Colleges.

Introduction

There is growing evidence around the impact of different strategies on student retention, and while these vary across institutions and disciplines there is broad agreement on a number of practices which appear to consistently lead to positive student engagement and a subsequent reduction in attrition (Adams, Banks, Davis, & Dickson, 2010). However, while these strategies have been identified as contributing positively to student engagement, ‘whole of institution approaches’ are increasingly seen as the key to improving retention outcomes (Kift, 2009; Tinto, 2012). This has been encapsulated in the notion of a ‘transition pedagogy’ in which there is intentional curriculum design and cross institutional engagement with the First Year Experience combined with strong senior leadership and support (Kift, 2009). Research has also indicated however, that caution must be exercised in adopting a ‘one size fits all’ philosophy, as differences in factors which influence student attrition have been noted both cross institutionally and across disciplines (Adams et al., 2010; Smith, 2011). It is therefore important to consider how any approach adopted can be coherent and systematic but also flexible in its capacity to respond to the particular attrition patterns within an institution or discipline.

Organisational context

Victoria University (VU) is a dual sector university located in the western suburbs of Melbourne and is one of the top ten universities in Australia for low socio-economic status enrolments. In recent years VU has implemented a number of strategies aimed at improving student retention. However, these were largely faculty based and unsustainable. In 2012-2013 the University underwent an organisational restructure, centralising both administrative and professional services while at the same time integrating higher education and vocational education faculties into unified Colleges. This restructure provided an opportunity to develop
a more coherent approach to improving retention in which specialist academic and professional staff from across the university would work collaboratively with discipline academics in a targeted and systematic manner.

The College of Business pilot

An integrated model for improving retention based on best practice at other Australian universities was piloted in the Bachelor of Business. This degree was selected as one of VU’s larger programs and an area which was experiencing significant retention challenges. While historically at VU retention had been seen as the primary responsibility of professional and support staff, such as those in student orientation, counselling and wellbeing, academic support and student services, a primary aim of the pilot project was to ensure that academic teaching staff were fully engaged with any retention initiatives and that these were seen in the context of broader initiatives around effective teaching, learning and curriculum design.

The VU Curriculum Blueprint (Victoria University, 2012) developed in support of VU’s strategic plan identified the importance of foregrounding ‘transition pedagogy’ in all VU undergraduate programs. The ‘transition pedagogy’ approach developed at VU was firmly based on the model developed by Kift, Nelson, and Clarke (2010), but also influenced by the work of Devlin (2013) and Gale and Parker (2011) extending the focus to multiple transitions across the student learning journey and drawing on students’ diverse life and learning experiences and aspirations. It promoted pedagogical approaches which supported students in engaging with new identities and social practices (Lea, 2008; Northedge, 2003), questioned possible assumptions (by educators and the institution) about students’ existing skills and knowledge (Devlin, 2013) and argued for a ‘whole of course’ approach to curriculum design to better embed appropriate scaffolding and support of learning (Kift et al., 2010). Broadening understanding and engagement with approaches consistent with this transition pedagogy were therefore seen to be of critical importance in the context of retention.

Lecturers from Academic Support and Development (ASD) at VU have worked collaboratively with discipline based academics consistently over the last decade in scaffolding learning within units of study (see for example Henderson, Whitelaw, McWilliams, & Aubke, 2006). This existing partnership was seen to offer opportunities to build strategies consistent with the ‘transition pedagogy’ approach, if it were developed beyond the unit level where it most commonly operated. In order to achieve this enhanced partnership, an academic from within the College, who would work closely with a designated ASD lecturer, was appointed as First Year Champion.

Effective partnerships: the First Year Champion and Academic Support and Development

As the literature suggests that entering students need to be supported to develop the required academic literacies for success and achievement in higher education, the First Year Champion role was seen as integral to furthering engagement between Academic Support and Development (ASD) lecturers and academic staff. This approach is grounded in a developmental and embedded model of Academic Support which sees scaffolding of the development of discipline related academic literacies as an integral component of higher education study, rather than a deficit model in which academic skills are seen as independent of discipline knowledge (Lea, 2008). A principle task of the First Year Champion was therefore to facilitate and coordinate the building of a community of practice of first year unit coordinators and ASD lecturers and through this to promote discussion and activity in
relation to the implementation of a ‘transition pedagogy’ approach. This activity included encouraging engagement with the body of research on the first year experience and discipline specific studies on retention and the sharing of good practice in relation to teaching and curriculum design. In addition through the community of practice and with assistance from ASD the First Year Champion led a review of first year units of study. This review focused on the layout and language used in unit guides, assessment guides and rubrics and consideration of first year learning outcomes and assessment requirements. The aim of the review was to ensure that information offered to first year students was explicit and clear and to determine how each unit was contributing to the overall first year experience.

**Effective partnerships: the ‘first five weeks’ project**

The First Year Champion was also required to work closely with the Transition and Retention Co-ordinator (TRC) and with their support draw to the College available professional services. An active and engaging orientation and transition to University is well documented as a key element in establishing a positive student experience and VU had implemented a range of initiatives in recent years to strengthen its ‘O’ week offerings. Despite these improvements a review established that many areas of the University were organising these activities independently of each other and students were being overwhelmed with information. In addition there was limited involvement from academics and Colleges were organising their own introductory strategies independently of central supporting units. In order to offer an improved orientation and transition experience the First Year Champion, ASD lecturer and the TRC implemented a pilot project directed at extending orientation and transition to the first five weeks of semester and throughout this period ensuring students were given consistent key messages to support their success at University. This required organisational units from across the University to be brought together and all transition and orientation related activities mapped onto a single document. Multiple communication channels were then used to relay key messages to students.

**Effective partnerships: the ‘at risk’ project and the Student Link initiative**

In recent years a number of institutions have implemented initiatives aimed at making personalised contact with first year students and particularly those designated as ‘at risk’ (Nelson, Quinn, Marrington, & Clarke, 2012; Smith, 2011). While determining which students might be considered to be ‘at risk’ is a topic for on-going research there is agreement that a range of demographic features such as being the first in family to attend University, may place a student more at risk of dropping out (Devlin, 2013). There is also evidence that certain behaviours are typically associated with a student being at risk of dropping out. These behaviours include not accessing materials and information on the University online learning management system (LMS), or not submitting an early assignment (Adams et al., 2010). Alongside the Business retention pilot project, in 2013 VU contracted an educational consultancy firm to contact all first year undergraduate students. Operating under the title of ‘Student Link’, first year students were ‘opted in’ by unit coordinators to be contacted on the basis of a range of behavioural and demographic triggers. While details of this initiative and its outcomes will be more fully documented elsewhere, ensuring systematic use of the Student Link service was another priority for the College based pilot project. In order to achieve this, the First Year Champion, ASD lecturer and the TRC designed a structured ‘at risk’ framework, which required all first year students who had either not logged on to the LMS, not handed in or who had failed an early assignment to be opted in for contact by Student Link during weeks 5 and 6 of the semester. Through this approach it was possible to
see which students where exhibiting at risk behaviours in multiple units of study, and those who were only at risk in individual units. Students contacted by Student Link were offered a range of targeted supports for re-engaging with their studies, and were re-contacted 2 weeks later to review their progress.

Outcomes

Early data has indicated that the approach has improved progression rates in the targeted degree, and while an independent evaluation of the project is still underway a range of positive outcomes have been anecdotally reported. These include a renewed and energised focus on first year teaching and a breaking down of organisational silos, facilitating a greater level of collaboration across academic and service areas. This is critical in ensuring that existing staff and resources become central to the first year experience, that initiatives become sustainable and that any changes as a result of the project become institutionalised (Kift, 2009; Nelson et al., 2012). In addition the project has provided a model for systematising a university wide approach to the first year experience, while ensuring a high level of engagement and ownership for Colleges who through this model are able to customise and develop specific activities which are relevant and responsive to local priorities.

The early outcomes from the project and its effective use of existing university systems and resources, have facilitated a strong commitment to extending key elements of the approach across the institution to all Colleges. These key elements include the appointment of academics as First Year Champions in thirteen large degree programs in 2014. Each Champion is working collaboratively with a designated ASD lecturer to develop a customised project plan which draws on literature on the first year experience and specific discipline based retention research.

Conclusion

Building on the existing collaborative relationship between ASD and discipline lecturers the VU first year experience pilot project has at its centre a partnership between ASD and first year teaching academics. Together they have developed a customised plan which aims to build first year teaching capability, embed academic support into key first year subjects and strengthen links to professional services, including co-curricula supports which have the capacity to impact on retention. This partnership model has been effective in promoting awareness of the needs of first year students, and has opened up possibilities for further embedding of academic skills development within first year subjects of study, moving from a deficit model of academic support to an integrated developmental approach (Kift, 2009; Lea, 2008). In addition the model has provided a mechanism through which all areas of the University are drawn together to collaboratively work towards strengthening the first year experience, while ensuring that local strategies are discipline linked and College and academic ownership is maintained.

Questions for discussion

1. What partnerships have other institutions found critical in improving the first year student experience?
2. How have other institutions attempted to achieve a balance between a ‘university wide approach’ to transition and the first year experience and faculty ownership and discipline specific strategies?
References


