‘Link-In to Study’: Supported intervention for commencing, undergraduate external students

Kate Borrett and Cassandra Colvin
Learning and Teaching Unit, University of South Australia

Abstract
Increasingly, universities are offering distance or (external) study options to students. However, research shows external students represent a vulnerable student population at higher risk of attrition and lower rates of success relative to internal students.

Staff at the University of South Australia have developed a pilot initiative to help external students overcome their unique study challenges. This ‘Link-In to Study’ program involves commencing students being virtually paired with existing senior students (e-Pals) who mentor students both prior to and after the commencement of their study. Additionally, commencing external students have access to improved online resources, referral to student services, and specialised preparation program workshops. At the core of this initiative is a tailored reflective tool that guides students through key pre-readiness issues including motivation, time management, study habits and access to information technology.

This session will offer an overview of the design and implementation of this program.

Questions for discussion
- Has your institution developed any specific programs to support external students in their first year?
- How is your institution measuring the impact of these programs?
- What are the challenges in both developing and measuring the impact of such programs?
- If your institution is not currently offering support programs targeting external students, do you think there is a need to explore support initiatives for this cohort?
- Have you considered developing and implementing a ‘pre-readiness’ instrument?

Full Submission: Nuts & Bolts
External students have been identified as a vulnerable cohort (Simpson, 2012) in universities throughout Australia, UK and America (Kahu, Stephens, Leach, & Zepke, 2013). Emerging research focusing on their experiences highlights the unique challenges faced by external students in adjusting to, and succeeding at, university study. Recent program initiatives targeting this cohort of students at a small number of Australian universities have demonstrated improved retention and success outcomes (Boyle, Kwon, Ross, & Simpson, 2010; Simpson, 2008).

Within the University of South Australia (UniSA), undergraduate external students experience poorer student success, and higher attrition rates, than both their undergraduate internal, and postgraduate colleagues. In response to these student outcomes, staff across UniSA have collaborated to develop an intervention targeting commencing undergraduate external students undertaking core first-year Programs in one of its primary academic Divisions (Education, Arts and Social Sciences, or EASS). Called ‘Link-In to Study’, this pilot program involves a number of different elements that are presented to the student as a unified whole. These dimensions include
- Friendly mentors
- Pre-readiness questionnaire
- Targeted Library support
- Specialised preparation program
- Tailored online materials

Each of these dimensions will be discussed in turn.

**Friendly Mentors**

A key feature of the ‘Link-In to Study’ pilot is the mentoring program. Commencing external students are virtually paired with existing senior students (e-Pal mentors). The e-Pal mentors each have a commitment to, and experience of, mentoring and volunteering, as well as a good knowledge of the university and its support structures. The e-Pal mentors phone each mentee at least three times during the pilot (an approximate 4-5 week period). Mentees are asked about how they are progressing with their orientation, preparation for study and first few weeks of learning. Every e-Pal mentor is a current, senior student studying at UniSA within the same Division (EASS) as the identified external students. All e-Pal mentors undergo a 5 hour training session to help them understand the particular challenges faced by external students as well as their many other mentoring responsibilities. The e-Pal Training includes:

- Insight into external students’ experiences
- Models of effective communication
- Phone communication
- Responding to sensitive information, challenging emotional responses – e.g. threats to safety
- Strategies for communicating effectively with students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- Case examples
- Self-care strategies
- Referrals to student support services

A strength of the mentoring program is the relationship between the e-Pal mentors and University support services staff. The e-Pal mentors have regular opportunities to meet with staff and de-brief in relation to their contact with students. Calls to new students are conducted in a call centre environment with support staff present. Calls are conducted using VOIP Soft Client telephone software and details from the calls are captured in a pre-designed script template on the University’s SharePoint.

Each call by an e-Pal mentor to a mentee is designed to present information to the new student in a structured and timely manner. The first calls, conducted approximately three weeks before the first study period begins, focus on students’ pre-readiness for study. Subsequent calls are structured around the University’s online resources and orientation material as well as checking with students’ on their early experiences of University life. The e-Pal mentors offer a final contact with students before the census date for the first study period of 2014.

External students can at any time ‘opt-out’ of the ‘Link-In to Study’ program should they no longer wish to receive contact with e-Pal mentors during the first few weeks of their study. However, students are encouraged to maintain contact with their virtual mentor as a valuable opportunity to raise questions about services and resources available at UniSA. Non-engagement by any commencing external students is monitored as a possible indicator of
broader engagement issues. When a caller (e-Pal mentor) is unable to engage with a student, the call is reported to a staff member who follows up with the student.

**Pre-readiness questionnaire**
The ‘pre-readiness questionnaire’ has been tailored for external students to help them determine their readiness for study. Designed in consultation with staff in the Learning and Teaching Unit and Division of EASS, the questionnaire involves structured statements that cover dimensions known to shape external student experience – including motivation, goal setting, time management, access to IT, environment, and study habits. Statements in the self-assessment questionnaire are anonymous and depending on the response (that is, students may self-admit to being reluctant about a particular issue) formatted advice is generated that refers the student to relevant information, resources and/or services.

**Targeted Library support**
The ‘Link-In to Study’ program has collaborated with Library staff to ensure that external students have a direct web link to helpful Library resources. Through the ‘Link-In to Study’ website, external students are directed to the Library’s online collection including electronic books and journals, streamlined video and digitised weekly course readings, via the Library Catalogue or the student’s Learnonline course page. External students can link to the ‘Off Campus Library Service’ at UniSA that supports them with phone and online assistance. A specially designed video link has also been developed for external students that overviews all of the above.

**Specialised preparation program**
A specialised Early Preparation Program (EPP) is provided prior to the commencement of semester aimed at external students who are mature age and returning to study after a break. The EPP is designed to assist students to prepare for their first year at University, and cover topics such as academic reading and writing, expectations of university study, and managing the transition to life as a university student.

**Tailored online materials**
Tailored online materials include:
- A ‘Link-In to Study’ site that presents a brief overview of the program, plus links to the ‘Pre-readiness’ questionnaire and other resources.
- Comprehensive information pages on all aspects of study at UniSA as an external student.
- An online discussion forum monitored by staff.
- A Facebook site for student networking.
- Resources on using the library.

**Communicating the program**
The ‘Link-in to Study’ program is highlighted to students in both hard copy and email correspondence shortly after they have completed their enrolment.

**Theoretical underpinning:**
This external student pilot has been predicated on a number of assumptions, these informed by the literature as dimensions relevant to the external student experience:

1. **The importance of belonging and engagement**
The relationship between a student’s sense of belonging to and level of engagement with an institution, and their academic and retention outcomes, is noted in the literature both conceptually (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Kuh, 2009; Tinto, 2010) and empirically
External students can be less likely to engage with their institutions, or with peers within them, owing to the ‘removed’ design of their study experiences (McBrien, Cheng, & Jones, 2009). The inclusion of peer mentoring in the ‘Link-in to Study’ program is designed to enhance a student’s sense of belonging to the university through the early development of a relationship with a peer. Further, the employ of voluntary e-Pal mentors picks up on the tenets of peer-support as a non-threatening and meaningful form of support for new students (Arcario, Eynon, & Lucca, 2011), with demonstrated benefits for retention (Boyle et al., 2010).

2. The importance of early intervention
The timing of this intervention immediately prior to, and post the commencement of a student’s first semester of university, recognises that attrition is a process that begins early for students (Tinto, 2010). Touchstones such as early contacts with institutional, and early academic and social experiences, have been found to influence student success outcomes (Thomas, 2014). However, equally important are the expectations that student have of their forthcoming university experience (Tinto, 2010), and the educational ‘capital’ that the students brings with them to their study experience (Thomas, 2002). These latter elements informed the design of the pre-readiness questionnaire utilised in the intervention.

3. Student preparation and readiness for study
Emerging theoretical and empirical literature focusses on student readiness for study (Dray, Lowenthal, Miszkiewicz, Ruiz-Primo, & Marczynski, 2011; Hung, Chou, Chen, & Own, 2010). This body of literature brings together multiple dimensions known to shape student success outcomes into a diagnostic instrument that can be used as a self-reflective or self-awareness tool by students, or by institutions to gauge student personal and academic support needs. There is no universal consensus vis-à-vis the design and content of such an instrument, with the recent design of differing models, (Dray et al., 2011; Hung et al., 2010), these influenced by diverging conceptualisations of the instrument’s purpose, and varying operational contexts. However, a number of elements appear to be common to most pre-readiness questionnaires, and these have been incorporated in the pre-readiness instrument developed by UniSA. These include student motivation for learning (Simpson, 2008), computer and IT proficiency and self-efficacy (Hung et al., 2010), student capacity for self-directed learning (Hsu & Shiue, 2005; Stansfield, McLellan, & Connolly, 2004), time management (Nonis & Hudson, 2010), and student understanding of university expectations of them (Tinto, 2010).

Evaluation and data capture
The following measures are proposed to evaluate the program’s effectiveness:
1. Retention outcomes:
   - Retention outcomes for external students commencing in 2014 will be compared to those commencing in the same programs in 2013 (historically controlled study).
2. Student Success outcomes
   - Student success outcomes for external students commencing in 2014 will be compared to those commencing 2013 in the same programs (historically controlled study).
3. Student feedback regarding the call
   - To be measured through a survey (either hard copy or phone call conducted at the end of the semester)
- Questions to include perceived effect of the initiative on the student’s approach to study, their confidence to start study, their preparedness for study, and general rating of its value to them.

References


