The evolution of QUT's Student Success Program: 20,000 students later

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Abstract

"The Student Success Program (SSP) is a monitoring and early intervention program in operation at QUT designed to identify and support those students deemed to be at risk of disengaging for their learning and their institution" (Nelson, Quinn, Marrington & Clarke, 2011, p. 83). This report reflects on the development of the program since its inception in 2007. In acknowledging similar initiatives within the sector that monitor student learning engagement, the Nuts & Bolts session allows for identification and discussion of the critical success factors for these intervention and support programs.

The Program in brief

The Student Success Program (SSP) embodies the second core principle underlying QUT's First Year Experience initiatives: timely access to support, and contributes to the third: a sense of belonging (Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010). As early diagnostic and intervention practices are critical in supporting at risk students (Purnell, McCarthy, & McLeod, 2010, p. 80), the SSP is an early intervention program that is designed to identify, monitor and support students who are at risk of disengaging from their studies for a range of reasons. All SSP practices are underpinned by a social justice philosophy and are research-led. A good practice guide for early diagnosis and intervention activities is currently being articulated for the sector as part of an OLT-funded national research project "Safeguarding Student Learning Engagement" which is led by QUT and involves nine other Australasian universities (Nelson, 2010).

The expansion of the Program

From pilot to core business

The program dates back to a number of interviews conducted in 1998 with students who had left QUT. A series of discussion papers was followed by a blueprint for enhancing transition funded by a QUT Teaching and Learning Grant which laid the foundations for the 2007 pilot program to monitor at risk students in five units in one faculty. A gap analysis later identified the systems, processes and resources required to monitor and provide timely support interventions for such students (Nelson, Duncan & Clarke, 2009, p. 3). While the Program initially focused on supporting students at risk of disengaging within selected units of study, the SSP quickly expanded its operation to a university-wide monitoring of all commencing students during their first year of study at QUT. In alignment with the recently revised First Year Experience and Retention policy (QUT, 2012), the SSP now operates a number of sequential campaigns that allow large scale monitoring of commencing cohorts at key points

within their transitioning student lifecycle while maintaining its original focus of supporting commencing students through targeted interventions at the unit level. The campaigns are summarised in Table 1, while Figure 1 indicates when the various campaigns were introduced and the number of successful contacts in each.

Timing	Campaign	Target Cohort	Stakeholders and Partners	
Pre-semester	Follow up of offer	Prospective first year undergraduate students who have received a QTAC[1] offer of a place at QUT but have not yet accepted that offer.	• Student Business Services (SBS) • Careers and Employment	• Faculty staff – identifying priority courses/cohorts that require timely contact
Early semester	Welcome to QUT	First year students who were unable to attend faculty or cohort Orientations.	• Student Engagement Team • International Student Services • Library	• Counselling • Careers and Employment • Faculty Student Services
In semester	Learning Engagement	First year students and/or students who have been identified as at risk within specific subjects/programs.	• Peer Programs • International Student Services • Careers and Employment	• Library • Counselling • Faculty Academic and Professional Staff - Subject / Program / FYE Coordinators
In semester	International Student Progression	International students who: (a). have fallen out of their agreed course progression; or, (b) require approval for non-standard enrolment or course progression.	• Student Business Services • International Student Services	• Counselling • Faculty Staff - Unit/Program/Student Support Coordinators
In semester	Cohort calls	Specific to objectives of campaign.	• Various staff from Divisions	• Various staff from Faculties
End of semester	Academic Progress	First year students who either: (a) after 48 & 96 credit points (CP) have achieved a GPA< 4.0 (at risk); and, (b) after 96 CP have met one or more of the criteria for being placed on academic probation).	• Student Business Services • Counselling • Careers and Employment	• Library - Academic Skills Advisors • Faculty Staff - Unit / Program / Student Support Coordinators

Table 1. Student Success Program: Summary of campaigns

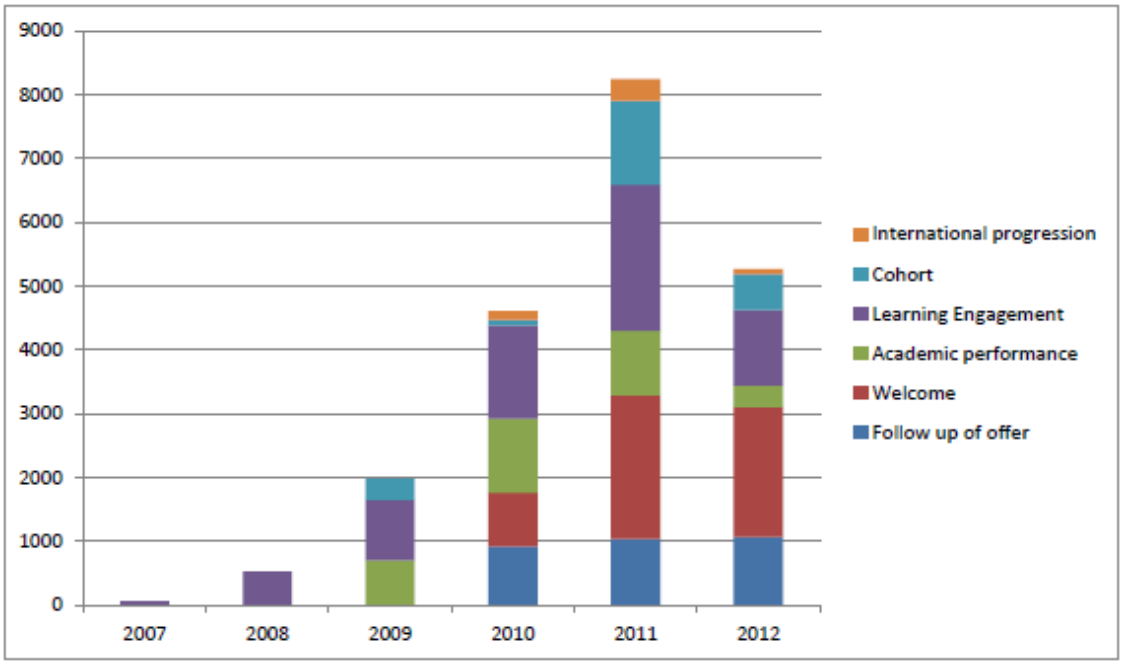


Figure 1. Student Success Program: Successful phone contacts 2007-2012

[1] Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre, the agency in Queensland, Australia charged with the responsibility of processing applications for the majority of undergraduate courses at Queensland universities. See http://www.qtac.edu.au/

Building and maintaining academic and professional partnerships

The success of the Program relies on well established and maintained relationships with academic and professional staff across the University. It is the role of the SSP to support the business of our stakeholders in providing an educationally rich and seamless learning experience for our students. Maintaining the communication channels in a large organisation with significant staff turnover and many formal and informal communication pathways presents challenges. We work with these stakeholders to identify students, ascertain a course of action and then connect the students with services that exist to support them. Formal agreements specify when we will intervene and what kinds of advice we provide to students. Agreements with support services outline how and when students will be directly referred. We work collaboratively to ensure that our information and data collection processes are effective and accurate. Together we can connect students to the resources and services they need when they need them and empower them to succeed.

Indentifying at risk students

The SSP uses a number of dynamic indicators of at-risk academic behaviour to universally monitor the commencing cohort. Multiple iterations over many semesters have allowed us to fine-tune the data collection process and identify some on-going challenges: The orientation team scans ID cards at large faculty and discipline orientation programs to provide attendance data however we need to build an exception[2] report to identify non-attendance. However, only calling students who do not attend orientation excludes those who did but who are still anxious and uncertain about attending university.

Within the Learning Engagement campaign, and some of the cohort calls, we have trialled a number of indicators that potentially identify disengagement such as non-attendance at tutorials, non-submission or failing assessment, participation in team activities and engagement with BlackBoard, the on-line learning management system. In each instance, it is important to obtain a complete data set and to identify students who have received extensions. Calls need to be made as quickly as possible so students can take action promptly. Minimising additional workload and offering a range options to monitor cohorts within uniquely structured units of study is influential in engaging academics new to the Program.

Working with our stakeholders in Student Business Services we have expanded the use of corporate data from the Student and Academic Management System (SAMS) from identifying students after the fact (who are on probation or who failed units in previous semesters) to identify problematic enrolment patterns (students with a failing GPA who over-enrol for the semester) to advise students of the riskiness of their enrolment plan.

Whilst current practice allows for efficient data collection of various target cohorts across faculties and disciplines, these indicators omit students who submit assessment and have passing grades but who leave university because of non-academic factors such as course choice or life issues for which the university could have provided support if the circumstances were known. The goals for extending the reach and impact of the SSP acknowledge the University of New England's new computer-mediated communication model (Leece, 2011) and include plans to develop a mechanism which will allow our students to self identify their at-risk status and enable immediate communication, referral and ongoing case management as appropriate. Also in-progress is the development of predictive at-risk

[2] This report is the result of comparing a list of students who should have attended versus those who did attend.

indicators based on the analytical modelling of student demographic and academic data for additional interventions with students.

Physical space

Initially, one or two staff members were located in an office with a phone; then we had a dedicated space shared with "duty" tutors; and now the SSP operations, which involves a team of up to 12 persons at any one time are housed in the QUT call centre with Client Information Services (CIS) providing in-kind infrastructure and financial support to the program. Apart from the resourcing benefits, the co-location of the team with other staff providing advice to students has facilitated the sharing of information to provide timely advice. However, the rostering of staff during normal work hours may be seen as an operational challenge particularly during semester, but in general, the optimal time for our calls to students is after normal working hours, so this is less of a challenge that was initially thought. The co-location has supported our continued good relationships with CIS, as we are allocated limited space during office hours, but have the option to expand across the entire space after 5.00pm. This also facilitates the completion of large campaigns such as Follow up of Offer which we can run before the semester begins.

The skill set of the Student Success Advisors

A team of discipline-experienced and trained students employed as Student Success Advisors (SSAs) in the FYEP team makes the outbound contact by telephone. In addition to an induction program that addresses communication skills, listening strategies and ethical responsibility, the SSAs receive ongoing professional development have regular opportunities to debrief and reflect. Experienced SSAs discuss their experiences in making calls and are on-hand to help familiarise new SSAs with course and faculty information as well as access to administrative forms and other QUT resources. New SSAs listen to experienced SSAs making calls until they are comfortable making a call themselves.

Focus groups with the SSAs highlighted that they were interested in learning about other dimensions of the Program, particularly the reporting and outward communication of activity. We provided report templates so interested advisors could build reports of the aggregated data to provide to various stakeholders. As a result of these new duties in analysing and reporting, along with training the team in basic spreadsheet skills and the use of data from Outreach (see next page), we are observing continuous improvements in the quality of the work undertaken by the SSAs. We are also encouraging the SSAs to take responsibility for quality assuring their own and others' work in terms of data entry, script preparation and the development of associated email templates.

Operational communication tools (internal)

The SSP uses a wiki space, which is supported by the University, as an online collaboration tool with some functionality for virtual communications and document storage. The wiki houses training manuals, call scripts, task allocations and advice about campaigns. It has a facility for news, comments, discussions and advice about operations. We have a managed email account from which all email communications are sent to students as part of each campaign. The main advantage of the managed account is to reinforce the presence of the advisers as contactable, but it also ensures that the team preserve their anonymity while in this paraprofessional role. It also allows all the SSAs and management team to see all outgoing emails and monitor and respond to incoming mail and requests for assistance. The

team has recently begun using *Office Communicator* in Microsoft© which is an on-line secure chat application that allows the SSAs and their Manager to be in communication from different locations or while on the phone. This facilitates speedy information sharing and increased mobility and productivity.

Contact Management System (Outreach)

We are constantly endeavouring to minimise the manual handling of data. The initial design of Outreach was based on monitoring students enrolled in identified units. The implementation of SAMS has automated importing student enrolment and demographic data into Outreach but often preparing call lists still requires manual intervention. Outreach interfaces with some other corporate systems (e.g. the assignment submission system), however further development and integration of the contact management system is necessary to optimise the potential for real time monitoring of student engagement; this too is currently underway.

Session Outline (30 mins)

Participants will be engaged in a discussion around the critical success factors for establishing, implementing and sustaining programs that monitor student learning engagement.

Key Question: What can be learned from the experience of programs like the SSP about the critical success factors for MSLE?

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