



Citizenship and graduate attributes enrich the experience of distance students

The challenge

The University of New England (UNE) serves a diverse and distributed student population, with more than 80% studying by distance (online and at distance from the UNE campus in regional NSW).

The New England Award (NEA) program is designed to encourage, recognise and reward students' personal and professional development through participation in extra-curricular activity. It is open to all UNE students and is targeted at 'whole person development'. The NEA, which has been offered for more than a decade, provides a framework for students to plan and reflect on their learning and development.

Most UNE students studying by distance are aged over 24 years; studying part time; and occupied in part time or full time work, which they balance with study as well as family commitments. Students report that participation in the program has multiple benefits, which manifest differently for each individual. However, common experiences among UNE's distance students are that participation leads to a greater feeling of belonging to the institution, an increased sense of citizenship and immediate as well as longer-term professional success.

Students who participate in the NEA, regardless of whether they complete the requirements, complete their studies at a much higher rate than the general UNE student population.

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Key findings

The five student/graduate participants in this study reported that their participation in the program:

- increased their sense of belonging to the institution,
- influenced their sense of citizenship, and
- had a positive impact on their work success

Belonging, Motivation and Identity

The data indicated students felt valued because the NEA program was available to students studying by distance and it recognised the contributions these students made in their own communities. Students and graduates also noted that feeling connected to the university and other students had benefits in terms of motivating them with their academic studies, as well as their identity as a student of UNE. Interactions with their peers also stimulated feelings of belonging to a broader community.

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They observed that the feeling of connectedness provided a way of remaining 'linked' during periods in which they weren't formally enrolled.

Citizenship

Participants noted that the NEA led them to engage in activities that stretched them personally – 'stepping out of the comfort zone', leading to increased confidence, self-awareness and development of leadership skills. Participants expressed the positive impact on their satisfaction, well-being and sense of achievement.

Overall the community thing has been really valuable because it has made me stretch myself outside my normal areas of comfort. (Student)

you have all these things that you can do within the university community as well as within your own community, that will help you contribute and develop you as a person, and impact on your well-being. (Student)

Future work success

Participants indicated that their participation in the NEA program was influenced by their expectation that doing so would contribute to their current and future work success. They spoke of development of skills related to employability such as team-work, time management and communication, as well as expanded professional networks. They were strategic with the activities they chose, with the aim of being able to demonstrate to potential employers that they had achieved more than 'just a degree' during their time at UNE. Participants explained how involvement in the NEA gave them confidence in their current employment and for future employment.

Civic engagement shapes the student experience

The focus of this case study was on the experiences of students studying by distance with a regional university. These students are not necessarily residing in, nor do they come from, regional areas, and in many cases never physically visit the institution. Participants said that the NEA program led to them becoming involved in community activities which they otherwise wouldn't, or that they extended themselves, resulting in personal growth.

This case study has shown how community service (citizenship) effectively shapes the student experience because it increases students' sense of belonging and motivation, it helps students develop their identity, it promotes their sense of citizenship, and it builds confidence for work success.

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(Staff)

Implications for practice

The combination of this case and corporate data indicates that participation in the program is associated with higher levels of attainment. However, there is some ambiguity about whether participation in the program promotes greater student engagement and success, or whether students who are more likely to succeed and already have the attributes of well-engaged students are more likely to participate in the program. Nevertheless, the data analysed for this case study indicate that students who undertake civic activities and register these with the NEA program report some of the attributes positively associated with student engagement.

Conclusion

Students who study by distance with regional universities do not comprise an homogenous 'student body'; there is diversity between institutions, and within institutions. Civic engagement (citizenship/community service) will improve student engagement if it accommodates the personal aspirations, opportunities and circumstances of diverse cohorts. Civic engagement stimulates personal growth, provides a sense of achievement, and promotes lifelong learning and thus enhances the student experience.