CQUniversity
Case study report

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This case study is one of eight studies which contribute to a wider project:

Shaping the 21st Century Student Experience at Regional Universities

http://shapingtheregionalstudentexperience.com.au/

Executive summary

The research project on which this case study is based involved qualitative research undertaken with a randomly selected sample of 124 CQUniversity undergraduate nursing students commencing the first term of their first year of study. The case study focused on semi-structured phone interviews with a purposive sub-sample of six of the 124 students from the larger study and six staff members who were either directly involved in lecturing first year students or in a support role of students. The findings of this case study suggest that a pre-commencement interview assisted students in that they were more aware of inherent requirements as well as having a better understanding of the requirements of the program itself. The findings also show that the staff interviewed believed that the students who received the pre-commencement interview were better prepared. The findings are consistent with the findings from the larger project on which the case study was based.

1   Introduction

This report defines an institutional case study conducted as a component of Stage 2 of the OLT project of the *Shaping the 21st century student experience at regional universities* developed (Australian Office for Learning and Teaching Grant SP14-4602). The case study was conducted in conformity with the project Case Study Protocol. The case study theme chosen by the institution was determined through the consultative process outlined in the Case Protocol (*#4. Choosing Case Themes*).

1.1   Context

CQUniversity has the highest rate of students from low SES backgrounds, and the most recently reported data from the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training shows that CQUniversity also has close to the highest level of attrition compared to other Australian higher education institutions (2014). Therefore, research into the factors that contribute to high levels of attrition and strategies for supporting students transitioning into university to improve the retention and success of students, especially those of low socio-economic backgrounds located in regional areas, is a high priority for CQUniversity.

This report describes the case study of an initiative undertaken by CQUniversity, which aimed to address the continuing high levels of attrition of regional students through a pilot study aimed at evaluating the impact of the provision of supporting first year commencing Bachelor of Nursing students to improve their retention and success. The initiative involved an initial phone call in which a staff member from CQUniversity invited commencing students to participate in a phone interview during which the inherent and program requirements were explained to them, and any issues that might impact on their capacity to meet those requirements were discussed. A follow-up interview was conducted at the end of the term during which students were asked to reflect on their first term of study and provide feedback on how they coped, and any changes that needed to be addressed to ensure their success. Six of the students who participated in both the pre-commencement interview and the follow-up interview at the end of the study were invited to contribute their experience of the initiative to an institutional case study. The methodology employed for the case study and the findings are reported in the following sections of this report.

1.2   Purpose of the case study report

This purpose of this report is to highlight the findings of the case studies and to highlight the impact that it had on the students' retention and success. The evidence grained from these interviews will be used to inform institutional policy and practices. The findings also contribute to the national OLT funded project, *Shaping the 21st century student experience at regional universities,* and are being disseminated to the wider sector via peer reviewed publications and conference presentations.

2   Case design

This case study focuses on improving student engagement, retention and success through a pre-commencement strategy aimed at communicating inherent and program requirements, and supporting transitioning students in addressing potential challenges in meeting those requirements prior to their commencement or during the first few weeks of their program.

The project team consists of:
- Case study leader – Professor Denise Wood (CSL)
- Project officers – Robyn Bailey (PO) and Paul Collins (PO)

Step 1: Background description of the scope, intention and use of the CQUniversity pre-enrolment interviews designed to communicate program requirements to improve the student experience of commencing 1ˢᵗ year Bachelor of Nursing students. Human Research Ethics approval obtained prior to recruitment of the students.

Step 2: Six students and six staff participated in a semi-structured interview examining the impact of the pre-enrolment student interviews on students' first year experience in the program.

The project explored Kahu's (2014) conceptual model through:
- Engaging students who were contacted during the pre-commencement phase of the student journey to self-reflect, self-assess and articulate their personal context in relation to the program requirements, thereby addressing the structural and psychosocial influences domains;
- Examining the impact of the pre-enrolment student interviews on student engagement, and the proximal and digital consequences domains.

2.1.1   Theme title

Improving Student Transition and First Year Retention.

2.1.2   Theme description

The project aimed to engage commencing first year Nursing students through a pre-commencement interview that focused on communicating to students the requirements of their program, and engaging them in self-reflection to consider their ability to meet those requirements.

2.1.3   Unit/Units of analysis

The impact of pre-commencement interviews that incorporate program requirements (including inherent requirements) on the regional student's first semester study experience.

2.1.4 Theme scope

The project focuses on commencing Bachelor of Nursing students.

What was not included: The project did not include students from other programs or at any other stage of their studies at this stage.

2.1.5 Participants

Six students enrolled in Bachelor of Nursing.

Six staff who have actively been involved with these six students in either teaching or student support roles.

2.2 Data Collection, management and Analysis

The interviews were scripted, recorded and transcribed before being analysed using nVivo software to identify themes and allow cross-case analysis. The data from the pre-commencement and follow-up interviews/phone-calls with students was mapped against the domains of Kahu's (2014) student engagement model. The data from the staff interviews was also mapped against the domains of Kahu's (2014) student engagement model.

3 Timeline

The case study was completed as early in the allotted timeline as possible as per the project proposal.

4 Findings

4.1 Overview

The project found that there were a variety of factors contributing to student challenges in meeting the requirements of their program and may potentially contribute to student attrition. Students who participated in the pre-commencement study reported that they found that the initial interview was helpful because they had the opportunity to discuss the program and their needs with a staff member early into their program. The initiative enabled students to ask questions and seek clarification. It also facilitated their self-reflection, thereby helping them to decide if the program was suitable for their circumstances. Staff involved in the process also reported that the initiative was beneficial for the students.

4.2 Description of themes

Balancing responsibilities: One of the major recurring issues identified from the interviews with the commencing students related to work/life/study balance and time management concerns. The interviews provided students with detailed information about the workload involved and helped them to avoid taking on too heavy a work and/or study load, thereby seeking to avoid challenges the student might experience leading to poor results and, ultimately, increased risk of drop out and failure to reach their study and career goals. Students underestimated the program requirements and the potential impact of combining study with either paid employment hours/week and/or

significant family responsibilities. Comments made by students suggested that the contact helped them to prepare for their studies by considering various options to support decisions for a more realistic and achievable workload balance. Comments from staff: ". … not aware of the amount of study required. One student was working full time and enrolled in a full time load, had a family and after being interviewed was considering dropping to part time initially to see how she went."

Support and Challenges: Another aspect that was highlighted was that students did not realise that they would need to travel to one of the four campuses for residential schools.

Of the six students who participated in the case study follow-up interviews, four advised that their studies were going well; one student had deferred as she relocated to be closer to campus and having more support as family lived close by; one had dropped courses and enrolled with a university closer to their home due to financial responsibilities and having to care for elderly parents. For this student the logistics of needing to participate in activities conducted on campus proved an insurmountable challenge despite the support provided. As the student noted, "…coming to Rocky was too expensive. As much as I enjoyed staying up there I couldn't afford to do that several times a year."

Students participating in the case study follow-up reported that the phone interview was worthwhile. Qualitative comments suggest that students found the information relating to inherent requirements for nursing "…really good; …it was good to have somebody to talk to sound out some issues that I was having and just to realise even that I do have a lot of support with things, it was just bringing things to your attention so it was good". Another recurring theme related to the sense of connection established through the pre-commencement interview process, describing the experience as "…really good", "… to have somebody contact me and just see how I was going like I don't know if you realised that I hadn't been to uni before or realised that being an older student and being so far away, it was nice to have somebody contact me and see how I was going and if I was prepared and what my expectations were".

Assistance by university: The students who completed the term successfully reported that they felt much more confident and a number of these students were already enrolled and progressing, while others said they were wanting to take a break ready for the commencement of the first term in 2016. One however indicated that she would never study of Term 3 again "… as there was too much happening over Term 3". Of course as with all projects there were a number of students who despite extra effort by the university were unable to continue with their study.

The majority of students interviewed commented on how useful the interview was to them and how they felt more prepared and confident to commence their studies. After the phone interview one student said she felt more enthusiastic and confident about beginning studying and was appreciative of the contact and having the opportunity to discuss issues of concern. Students commented on "how impressed they were that Nursing cares about their students" and indicated that they found the phone interviews extremely useful for increasing student preparedness and confidence. A staff member commented "…Yes, I think spelling it out to them right at the front before they even start anything at all as to what is required and what going to be involved and all of that has to be a good thing." A further student commented "..being an older student it was very daunting and I think that helped it put me in the right direction it helped me with resources." Most students commented the

follow-up email of resources was useful even if they did not need them during the term, it was good to know they were there.

4.3 Observations from the case study

Observations from this case study are that students felt a connectedness to the university from receiving a phone call and speaking to an actual person. Feedback from staff was that students benefited from the interaction and were better prepared. Staff believe that although orientation was a time when students were provided with important information, they were often overloaded and retained about 10% of what they were told.

5 Understanding the regional student experience

5.1 Relationship to the Kahu model

This study has highlighted the importance of encouraging a sense of belonging, ensuring that the student is motivated and supported by a whole of university approach, that their emotional well-being is of concern to not only themselves, but also to the university.

5.2 Insights gained

The majority of students interviewed commented on how useful the interview had been to them and how they felt more prepared and confident to commence their studies. Most indicated that they would like to receive follow-up calls in a couple of months' time after they commenced their studies. Students commented on how impressed they were that CQUniversity cared about their students and indicated that they found the phone interviews extremely useful for increasing student preparedness and confidence.

5.3 Good practice examples

The case study and the findings of the larger study on which the case study is based have demonstrated the benefits of engaging students early in the student journey and have also highlighted the importance of the personalised approach to communicating the requirements of the student's program and supporting students in identifying strategies to assist them in meeting those requirements. Although this pilot project was limited to students enrolling in the Bachelor of Nursing program, the importance of an all of institution strategy has been identified. One way to begin this process is to review institutional processes and policy frameworks that are already in place and identifying opportunities to implement changes that reflect a consistent approach to personalising the transition process for commencing students. Such an approach builds on engagement with each student as an aid to the retention and success. Involving every member of the university to focus on their own relationship with students can also contribute to student engagement, participation, retention and success. The study highlights that when staff have greater understanding of each individual student, a more equitable approach to accommodating student diversity is achieved. The achievement of an institutional strategy that reflects such an equitable approach involves a range of other strategies that are currently being implemented at CQUniversity including a new cultural responsiveness training program to be introduced in 2017, developing academic staff capacity to

embed Indigenous perspectives and understandings into the curriculum, and the development of a number of training resources on strategies for designing more inclusive educational materials.

6   Implications

This study has highlighted the potential benefits of an institution wide implementation of a pre-commencement interview strategy for all commencing first year to students as a strategy for promoting a sense of belonging, providing them with an understanding of the requirements of their program, and helping to connect students to services they may require to address potential barriers to their success. The success of such a strategy requires institutional commitment and resources to provide such a service and may involve a reconsideration of how existing support services are structured and deployed. The findings also highlight factors likely to derail a student early in their program and the strategies students could themselves employ with greater understanding of the requirements of their program and the services they can access.

7   Conclusion

The findings reported from this case study resonate with Kahu's framework and highlight the importance of understanding the sociocultural influences on students. Recurring issues identified in the pre-commencement interviews included personal concerns, time management issues for students working and trying to balance workload with study commitments and family commitments and challenges experienced by mature-aged students. The pre-commencement interviews helped those students negotiate more achievable course commitments, with some students deferring studies and others reducing their study load for the term. Student feedback from those who participated in both phases of the project indicated that they were better prepared and able to successfully progress through their studies as a result of the pre-commencement interviews. Students also noted the benefits of being made aware of processes at the outset of their studies, and they appreciated being made aware of the inherent and program requirements, as well as the supports the University could provide to assist them to achieve their goals. (Wood, Gray-Ganter, Bailey, 2016).

The findings from the follow-up interviews suggest that students were satisfied with the engagement provided through the pre-commencement interviews. The findings highlight the need for engagement with students from the commencement of their study as indicated by the number of students who reflected that they felt they belonged to the university and felt "that they were not just a number", which in turn motivated them to continue. The findings reflect Kahu's model of proximal consequences in that the strategy appeared to provide the students with a sense of well-being early into their program. The research also highlighted a need for ensuring an all-of-institution approach to plan the supports available to them. For example, the finding that one student who participated in the study withdrew to enrol in a program offered at an alternative university to address the high cost associated with her travel to the campus, highlights potential issues that may impact on the institutions' ability to meet regional student needs. One of the advantages of the pre-commencement interview, therefore, is to also identify gaps in services that may need to be addressed by the university and may not be resolved by focusing only on the individual student's needs.

The research has highlighted a need for ensuring an all-of-institution approach to providing a consistent alignment between what a university promises to its students, its processes and strategies for monitoring and supporting student progress throughout their studies and therefore working towards a more holistic approach to supporting student needs. The information gained from both the initial study and the follow up case study interviews will inform future decisions regarding the feasibility of extending the trials to other disciplinary areas across the University and the sustainability of the model in the longer term.

8   References

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9   Funding acknowledgement