Bridging the gaps: Improving First Year Experience and the quality of engagement for all students at the University of Newcastle

Cathy Stone and Kate Hartig, University of Newcastle

Abstract

It is widely acknowledged that students who have a positive transition into University are more likely to succeed academically and less likely to withdraw from their studies and university. Accordingly, First Year Experience (FYE) initiatives have been implemented across Universities to assist in the transitional phase. However, despite the success of these programs, in many instances they have at best been fragmented and/or dependent on individual staff members. As noted by Craig McInnes (2003) one of the greatest challenges in engaging students will involve “[B]ridging the gaps between academic, administrative and support programs.” This paper traces the way in which the University of Newcastle is building bridges across those gaps resulting in an enhanced engagement for all students.

In 1999 one of the co-authors of this paper introduced a peer-mentoring program named SOS (initially ‘Students for Other Students’ later changed to ‘Supporting Other Students’) at the Ourimbah campus of the University of Newcastle (Stone, 2000). The success of this program and the closer integration between the two campuses in 2006 prompted an initiative to extend it to the larger Callaghan campus at Newcastle. The marked differences between the two campuses particularly with respect to student numbers (Callaghan with over 20,000 students and Ourimbah with under 4,000 students) presented some challenges. To ensure a successful introduction of the SOS program, in 2007 it was trialled in two Faculties: Business and Law and Science and Information Technology as well as in one other degree program; Bachelor of Nursing. While it could be expected that this would enhance the transitional experience for the First Year students, a survey undertaken by the mentors provides evidence that, in addition, the mentors’ participation in the program greatly increased their engagement with the University, staff and their studies.

This paper also explores the other ways in which an integrated approach between academic, administrative and support programs is being developed at the University of Newcastle, in order to achieve quality outcomes for the FYE and the wider University community.

Introduction

Since the mid 1980s participation in higher education has been steadily increasing. The growing trend for professional qualifications to improve career opportunities has ensured a greater intake of High School students as well as those entering higher education as mature age students. Additionally, the expansion of internationalisation of tertiary education has resulted in increasing numbers of international student enrolments. The outcome of these changes has resulted in a greater diversity of the student cohort in terms of age, social and educational background, family status, engagement in paid work and ethnicity. Correspondingly, economic realities have meant that Universities are become increasingly concerned over retention and attrition rates. Maintaining retention not only indicates student satisfaction with their experience thereby enhancing institutional reputation but also accrues economic stability.

Research into attrition has overwhelmingly indicated that the decision to withdraw from University cannot be attributed to one factor. McInnes and James (1995) lists a range of issues that can lead to student disengagement. This includes a lack of identity (or sense of belonging) with faculty or cohort; a general dis-satisfaction with the university experience; and a lack of interaction with academic staff. Yorke and Longden (2004) support these reasons and group them into four categories:

- Flawed (or wrong choice) program decision making;

[Please continue with the rest of the text]
Students’ experience of the program and the institution generally;  
Failure to cope with the program academically; and  
Events that impact on students’ lives outside the institution.

They argue that institutions have some influence to varying degrees over the first three factors (Yorke and Longden, 2004:104). Although, it could also be argued that with the right support and advice the fourth factor could also be mitigated it is now widely acknowledged that the early weeks of a student’s university experience is critical to their engagement and subsequent retention at the institution (James 2002).

The early transitional weeks is now widely recognised as being difficult and sometimes a disappointing experience. Notwithstanding the above noted categories the inability of a student to find a ‘place’ within a new peer group is a significant contributor towards the decision to withdraw from their university studies (James, 2002). The recognition of the role that social engagement plays in the transitional process has led to the implementation of First Year Experience programs throughout most Universities. However, responsibility for transition is in the main, strongly located within administrative, particularly student support services rather than academic structures within the University. This paper explores the way in which a First Year (FY) peer mentoring program, initially strongly embedded within Student Support Services became mainstream across the University of Newcastle and is now opening up new opportunities for greater administrative and academic collaboration in FY initiatives.

**Background to UoN: Our geography and our students**

The University of Newcastle has a student body of approximately 24,000 students. Nearly forty per cent of these students are mature age and there is a high percentage of the student body (of all age cohorts) representing the first in their family to attend University. Currently around 10 per cent of the students are International students. As well as an international presence in Singapore the University of Newcastle has three campuses in New South Wales. The major campus is situated at Newcastle, a former industrial steel city located in the Hunter Valley. The second campus with approximately 4,000 students is located 60 kilometres south of Newcastle at Ourimbah on the Central Coast. The Central Coast is clearly identified as a place with affordable housing within commuting distance of Sydney. Two hundred and fifty kilometres north of Newcastle a third campus has been established on the Mid-North coast at Port Macquarie, a holiday resort, sea-change-retirement centre. Overwhelmingly, at all three campuses the student cohort is drawn from their respective local environs and immediate catchment areas. Despite the geographical differences of the campuses, all are in regions that exhibit low levels of tertiary education participation, higher than State average levels of unemployment and a higher than average percentage of the population forming low income earners and families in receipt of government pensions and benefits.

The growth of student enrolments at the University of Newcastle, has occurred in a period that Krause et.al (2005) has referred to as “student as client.” They argued that over the previous decade, students have developed a clearer understanding about why they are at university and consider themselves a client to be served by the university. Students want a portable degree with skills that are transferable to multiple career pathways. Although students are spending less time on campus and showing less interest in extra-curricula activities they tend to seek more advice and expect greater choice and access to resources.

As students have moved towards being clients within higher education, research has confirmed that the majority of undergraduate students are in paid work. Due to work and other commitments there is a high proportion of the University of Newcastle students completing their studies on a part-time basis. Being a part-time student and/or whether or not employment is to cover basic necessities or lifestyle costs, both aspects represents a threat to student engagement, retention and completion (McInnes, 2003).

Demand for higher education has been stimulated by employers’ knowledge-skills expectations but as James (2002) has noted invariably a significant contributor towards a students’ decision to leave university is unfulfilled expectations or expectation-reality mismatches. Evidence suggests that students select their programs on limited and often subjective information (James, 2002:74). Therefore the transitional period is critical to testing, reshaping and sharing program expectations with other students.
Peer-Mentoring: Building a sense of community and connection

There is a considerable body of literature that indicates that retention rates are highly dependent on students’ sense of connection with their institution. As already noted the first year of tertiary education, particularly the early transitional weeks represent a difficult period for many students. This is the period when students are most likely to withdraw from their academic studies (Tinto, 1987). As noted by Kuh et.al (2005) students will not become engaged academically if they find the social environments unfriendly and challenging to navigate. Kuh reinforces early research on students’ attrition such as Tinto (1975, 1987) who maintained that students’ were more likely to make the effort required to adjust to their academic studies if they felt a sense of belonging and acceptance within their peer group. Acceptance on the importance of social integration has prompted various student mentoring programs sometimes known as buddy systems or peer-mentoring programs. Additionally, recognition that social activities should begin as soon as new students arrive on campus has ensured that a strong emphasis on social activities between students begins in Orientation week.

SO 5: Supporting Other Students

A student peer mentoring program was established at the Ourimbah campus in 1999 (see Stone 2000). Initiated by Student Support Services, it did, however, collaborate with academic staff in the early discussions and with student recruitment. The underlying objective of the program was for student mentors to make commencing students feel welcomed, more confident and assist their transition into University life by:

- Giving them information (and/or how to access information) relating to student support services, administrative and academic (library, computer, email access);
- Actively encouraging them to ask for help if they encounter any difficulties over their initial weeks;
- De-mystifying academic life by giving them a ‘students’ perspective;
- Encouraging social interaction between groups of enrolling students; and
- Providing escorted familiarisation tours around campus.

The program which was initially piloted in two schools (Humanities and Business) proved to be successful and was extended across the Ourimbah campus in 2000. An outcome of its success led to the introduction of some program and/or cohort specific mentor programs at the larger campus of Callaghan. However, the impetus for the programs remained strongly within the administrative structures of the University. In 2006 partly from an initiative from Student Support Services and also due to the appointment of a new DVC (Academic) a new position of a First Year Experience (FYE) Initiative Project Manager was established. An academic was seconded to this position with clearly defined line-management links to the administrative Support Services portfolio.

In 2007 the SOS program at Callaghan campus was piloted across two Faculties (Business & Law and Science and IT) as well as in one program, Bachelor of Nursing. The success of the pilot scheme has resulted in the SOS program, as well as continuing at Ourimbah being extended across all Faculties at the Callaghan campus and will also be introduced at the Port Macquarie campus in 2008.

The success of peer mentoring is strongly dependent on the goodwill and commitment of existing students. Students are often prompted to volunteer due to the skills that that they develop along the lines of ‘it looks good on your resume.’ Overwhelmingly, universities have failed to capitalise on students’ enthusiasm to volunteer (building capacity) and forge closer connections to staff and other students. Evaluations undertaken indicate that students thoroughly enjoy the experience. More significantly, by becoming a mentor, they develop a stronger identification with the University and the knowledge and skills gained improve their self-confidence and communication skills. Their experience can also enhance the services provided. Student mentor recommendations in 2007 on ways to improve the First Year Experience have been noted and implemented into transitional programs for 2008. Their input creates a dynamic situation of experimentation and innovation. For the students’ they feel valued and a greater sense of commitment to the program.
Working together

Induction into the university is one of the most critical relationships that the university develops with commencing students. Although initially it may resemble a pastoral relationship (student support) it also involves two other inter-connecting relationships; administrative transactions and educational processes (Dunkin 2002). To ensure a successful collaboration Kift (2005) asserts that there needs to be an institutional commitment. It would be misleading to say that achieving this is not without substantial challenges (McInnes 2003). Nonetheless, there is support from “the top” with commitment from the VC and DVC levels for an institution-wide approach to improving the student experience at the University of Newcastle. Embedded within the Institutional Strategic Plan 2007-2011 it is stated:

“The University will ensure that the enhancement of the quality of the student experience remains at the forefront of university planning and action under this Strategic Plan”

Over the past two years this commitment has been demonstrated by a wide range of activities that have involved the sharing of knowledge and skills across administrative, student support and academic staff. This includes the establishment of one-stop administration and student support information centres referred to as Student Hubs; greater consistencies and coordination of FYE Initiative Transition programs across the three campuses; the development of an Orientation CD for all new students and FYE Project grants awarded across the five faculties. A total of 10 projects including collaborative academic and administrative initiatives across faculties and student support services were awarded $110,000. The relationship between faculties and student support services was further strengthened by the establishment of the FYE and Student Retention Steering Group in 2007.

This collaborative approach between academic and administrative staff could not have been achieved without integrative partnerships based on mutual respect and a shared affinity and commitment for the best student outcomes. As argued by Kuh et.al (2005:159) the health of the University depends very much on how it cares for its students and effective relationships between staff (faculty and student support) that have the most contact with students is integral. The shift towards joint responsibility in the development of FYE activities encourages the dissemination of good practice and enables the efficient use of resources. Ultimately, the continuation and fostering of closer relationships between academic and administrative staff will ensure a continuation of favourable outcomes for the staff and students at the University of Newcastle.

References


