

CASE STUDY F: Enhancing retention at Edith Cowan University

Edith Cowan University (ECU) in Perth, Western Australia is considered a leader in the development of alternative entry pathways to higher education. The student population is diverse and largely from non-traditional backgrounds. ECU has had a five star rating for six years in a row for teaching quality, generic skills, and overall satisfaction. The strategic priorities are to maintain this track record and focus upon supporting students to improve retention. An institution-wide initiative was initiated to support these priorities using learning analytics. (AUTCAS, 2014; Jackson and Read, 2012)

Key takeaway points

- » Implementing an institution-wide retention programme involves both technical and organisational systems. Support staff need the means to manage their case-load, once learning analytics have identified extra students in need of support
- » Extensive work was done to identify which student variables predicted attrition at this institution, using institutional data. Six models were developed to cover undergraduate and postgraduate courses
- » The success factors include: trained and knowledgeable student support staff, partnerships with institutional stakeholders, knowledge of clear roles and boundaries with other institutional activities, procedures that work on a daily basis, and strong support from the executive
- » The challenges include: student suspicion, institutional culture and perspectives, integrity of the data, resource constraints for student support especially at peak times, and integration of institutional systems across multiple platforms

The initial project

The first stage of the project was a comprehensive review of the literature and best practice in evidence-based initiatives. As Jackson and Read (2012) noted, the review indicated that proactive support is more effective than reactive support in retaining students. Simpson (2005) found that institutions in which staff initiate contact with individual students, rather than waiting for students to self-refer, retained more students. Fusch (2011) and Kinnear et al. (2008) note the irony that the students who require support are often the ones who do not seek it.

There were two strands to the development of C4S. There needed to be a technological system for automatically identifying students likely to need support. There also needed to be an organisational system for support staff to contact a large number of students and manage a series of interventions for each student.

A project team was established to guide the rollout of C4S across the university, from initiation through establishment, piloting and deployment to continuous improvement. From the start, the project team planned a phased programme including governance, control processes, organisation, communications and risk management. Notably, the staged process, over two to three years, allowed time for the development of technical solutions and for HR to organise a change management process to support the staff involved and to establish new roles in the student-facing teams.

Data sources and indicators of engagement

The University invested in extensive work to identify which student variables were most effective in predicting attrition at ECU. Although the research review identified some common factors in student attrition at other institutions (including grades, university entrance scores and language skills), the reasons for students leaving or staying at university are multi-faceted and the factors may be interdependent. Hence ECU decided it was important to gather and analyse institution-specific data to accurately identify students most likely to need support. Statistical models were developed for the first three semesters of a student's time at ECU, based upon over 200 student variables. The models used data from ECU's Enterprise Information Management system, including demographic and progress information, split into undergraduate and postgraduate courses. In total, six models were developed to predict retention. As a result, ECU has a probability score for each new and continuing student enrolled in an undergraduate course.

Dashboards and interventions

Jackson and Read (2012) describe the operational organisation of C4S. The Student Connect Team manages C4S. Connect Officers are a specialist student support role responsible for addressing and resolving complex individual student issues and enquiries. For example, they may offer a one-to-one consultation, or refer a student to a range of internal and external services. The learning analytics model generates a list of students who may need support. Currently, this is triaged by staff, although in future, this process will be automated. The triage stage ensures that no student is contacted too frequently. Support staff then send a personalised email to each student, offering assistance. The email contact and all subsequent actions are recorded through the University enquiry management system. If students do not reply to the initial email they are contacted by telephone with a similar message.

A student can decide whether to opt-in for support, once they have contacted a member of support staff. For each student who does require help, an action plan is drafted in collaboration with the Connect Officer. This plan records and outlines what support needs to be provided by the University. The Connect Team works closely with academics, student information officers, learning advisors, counsellors, careers advisors, and others to ensure students are accessing the appropriate resources available. The student is case-managed by the Connect Officer until the student decides they no longer require assistance.

A new dashboard was added to ECU's customer relationship management system to support C4S activity. This enables Connect Officers to log and manage contacts and support for each student. The front screen

shows the tabs available, which include: case details, contact log, view appointments, add/manage appointments, case attachments and student incidents. The Connect Officer can create an action plan, agreed with the student, which may include referrals to specialist support services, other appointments or interventions.

Critical success factors and challenges

Nelson and Creagh (2013) identify the critical success factors as

- » Trained and knowledgeable Student Connect Officers
- » Partnerships with institutional stakeholders
- » Knowledge of clear roles and boundaries with other ECU services
- » Procedures that work (on a day-to-day basis)
- » Strong executive support

The challenges included:

- » Institutional perspectives of the programme
- » Integrity of the data – interpretations and the manual activity at the beginning phases
- » Resourcing the program at peak times – for example during Orientation
- » Integration of systems at an institutional level – for example Callista and RightNow
- » Student suspicion

Findings and outcomes

According to the Annual Report, "The first phase of the Connect for Success program was implemented in Semester 1, 2012. Approximately 700 students were contacted via email and/or telephone and offered the opportunity to opt into a case-management initiative to support their studies. The opt-in rate was 20 per cent, which is in line with take-up rates for similar programs at other universities." (Edith Cowan University, 2012, p. 22). Connect for Success is key part of the retention strategy for ECU featured in the University's annual reports.

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