



Targeted Student Contact to Improve Retention

In Australia, around 20 per cent of domestic students who begin university do not continue to their second year (DEEWR, 2009).

Whilst the University of Newcastle of Newcastle had attempted to reduce student attrition in many ways, it had done so in a non-systematic nor comprehensive manner.

The University took the lead from a number of other institutions and decided in 2013 to increase the activity of direct contact with students in an effort to improve retention, targeting those in their first year as well as looking at cohorts of students deemed as more likely to face challenges. A retention project commenced in early 2013 with trained staff engaging with students on a personal level with contact by phone and in person if desired.

The main objectives of the project were:

- Early identification of students at risk of attrition.
- Implementation of initiatives, strategies and support to improve the retention and reduce attrition rates of students.
- Improve the University's capacity to capture and engage with students for intervention and support
- Identification and understanding of the factors affecting retention and attrition of undergraduate students particularly from a low socio economic background.

The project sought to employ experienced staff that had knowledge of a range of issues that may affect students. Our existing Program Officers were targeted and asked for an expression of interest in becoming a Student Experience Officer (SEO). From this pool five staff members who had worked across all Faculties were seconded to the project for 2013. A casual pool of staff was also employed to make the initial call to students in many cases.

The project targeted both students who had performed poorly in end-of semester results and those who had been identified by predictive modelling.

There were several sets of data used to determine students who required targeted contact;

- Students at the 'Show Cause' stage (Failed 50 per cent or more of their studies in consecutive semesters)
- Students who were deemed 'At Risk' (Failed 50 per cent or more of courses in first semester)
- Students with credit
- Students who presented multiple Adverse Circumstance applications
- Bachelor of Nursing students going on placement

- Data was gathered from a three year period (2009 – 2011) of students that withdrew in their first year. Analysis of this data outlined characteristics of those students. This data was modelled against the commencing student cohort in 2013 and a list of students produced.
- Other commencing students that were not identified in the above cohort.

Our casual staff pool made many of the initial calls, referring to our SEOs if students indicated that they needed further support or assistance. SEOs then made contact with the student and if needed a face-to-face appointment was arranged.

All engagement with students during the project was tracked in RightNow (a Customer Relationship Management system). This system facilitates the storing and displaying of phone scripts, the recording of data from student contact (call around) processes and the preparation of reports for accurate evaluation. RightNow also records and displays student appointments as well as monitoring email correspondence during the case management of students.

The University's targeted contact aspired to give students the opportunity to open up and express concerns and feedback to our staff, in a secure and safe environment that may not become available to them in class.

In the case of commencing students, speaking with students at the start of their first year aimed to guarantee that they would not be left to navigate the sometimes intimidating and difficult landscape of a university without support.

This presentation will provide analysis of the impact of the retention project in 2013 and address the question of whether the retention rates of those who were contacted and engaged with the process were higher than the overall student population.