

On the road to success: Towards retention best practice

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Abstract

In a higher education environment of unprecedented change, student retention has become a major concern for Australian universities. This paper charts the road followed by one Australian university in its quest to increase student retention and improve the success rates of its students. Initiated as a pilot project in 2008, the retention programme has now been embedded in university practice. Although the basic features remain the same, some aspects have been changed in response to continuing analysis of the data derived from the programme, and to accommodate changes in university policy. Using a range of programme data, the paper focuses on the factors that contribute to academic failure at this university, highlighting the need to enhance student engagement and lower the institutional barriers encountered by students on the road to success at university.

Introduction

In an era of dramatic change, the success and retention of students has been a long-term concern for universities and other tertiary institutions, not only in Australia but also elsewhere in the western world. Indeed, Tinto and Pusser (2006) regard retention as “easily one of the most widely studied topics in higher education over the past 30 years” (p. 4). And no wonder. The problem is a complex one which poses major challenges for societies in all developed countries, not least of which is the financial cost to students, individual institutions and governments of students failing to complete their course and dropping out of higher education (Simpson, 2005). In Australia, where the sector has had to grapple with reduced funding, widening participation and increased competition, universities that are able to demonstrate improvements in student success and retention rates are likely to benefit as funding is increasingly linked to retention.

Estimates of university non-completion vary. In general, however, the percentage of students who fail to complete their studies hovers between 20% (Crosling, Thomas, & Heagney, 2008) and 23% - 25% (DEST, 1999, as cited in Zimitat, 2006). Clearly, such a high non-completion rate is a powerful incentive for universities to respond effectively to the challenge of student retention. However, many factors have an

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impact on academic success and ultimately on the retention of students. These include difficulties with course content, time management, work/study balance, financial support, health and wellbeing, disability, confidence, motivation, adjustment to study, and language and learning skills (Prentice, Collins, Couchman, Li, & Wilson, 2009). Clearly, not all these factors lie within the power of one university to control. Nevertheless, as Tinto and Pusser (2006) observe, there are individual, social and organisational factors that can be controlled and acted upon by individual institutions, at least to some extent. Crucial to the factors within the control of the institution is the need to create a learning environment which, in the minds of students, instills and nurtures a sense of belonging (Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010). The literature suggests that individual universities need more empirical evidence in order to understand retention and the impediments to academic success, so that institutions can effectively change and improve current practices and meet the needs of their increasingly diverse student populations (Jardine, 2005). This paper documents the response of one university to the challenge of student success and retention. Drawing on data from students' results, as well as evidence from consultations, interviews and questionnaires, the paper explores the road towards retention best practice travelled by the University of Canberra (UC) in its continuing search for effective solutions to the problem of students failing and/or abandoning their studies.

The challenge

The challenge of student retention has received considerable research attention in the higher education literature over several years, as concern about what sometimes appears to be an intractable problem continues to grow across the tertiary education sector. Nevertheless, retention remains a vexing question. The literature reveals the complexity of the problem, describing it, for example, in terms of "student persistence" (Jardine, 2005; Wylie, 2005), "engagement" (Ali & Lockstone, 2006; Scott, 2005), "attrition" (Danaher, Bowser, & Somasundaram, 2008), "non-completion" (McCormack, 2005; Taylor & Bedford, 2004), "drop out" (Tinto, 1975), and "at-risk" (Ali & Lockstone, 2006). There is also confusion as to what exactly the term student retention means. In some cases, it can refer to the retention of students who drop out of a unit or a course and take up another course, or perhaps even transfer to another university. According to another definition, retention is "the length of time a student remains enrolled at the first institution toward completion of a degree" (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004, p. 4). For the purposes of this paper, however, the challenge of student retention is seen from the institutional perspective as referring to "the policies, actions, strategies and culture of the institution that are designed to keep a student" (Jardine, 2005, p. 22).

Many of the factors that contribute to non-completion can be ameliorated by policies, actions and strategies that address two major aspects of the problem: student expectations and the cultural climate of the institution. Whether their experience at university fulfils their expectations can be a major factor in students' decisions to withdraw from their courses. One of the common reasons given by students for

dropping out of university is dissatisfaction with the course of study (Danaher et al., 2008; Scott, 2005). Yorke (1998, as cited in Danaher et al., 2008) supports this view, finding that “chose wrong field of study”, “lack of commitment to the programme”, and “programme not what I expected” (p. 272) were amongst the most frequently cited reasons for withdrawal. It seems clear that to encourage students’ persistence with their courses, policies and strategies need to focus on students’ expectations by providing course content that students perceive as relevant, offered by teaching staff actively involved with students in the learning process. One group of students appears to be particularly vulnerable: First-year students are reported as having the highest dropout rates (Currant, 2010; Kift et al., 2010; Tinto, 2000). It is important, therefore, for universities to facilitate the transition process from secondary to tertiary education. Early engagement with students via transition and enabling programmes, and prior to enrolment and at the decision-making stage when potential students are considering their options, can help to ensure that students have realistic expectations of life at university (Longden, 2006).

To retain students for the institution and improve their chances of success, the policies, actions and strategies implemented by universities must, in addition to addressing student expectations, seek to create a culture in which students feel they belong, both academically and socially. The importance of engaging students and of students feeling involved in the academic and social life of the institution was recognised as early as the 1970s by Tinto (1975), who observed that students are more likely to drop out if they feel alienated from the academic and social life of the community. Although an early idea, this concept of academic engagement and social integration remains particularly valid in the current academic environment. Given the increasingly diverse nature of the student population, this means adapting existing university culture to accommodate the needs of a diverse student body (Braxton, 2000, as cited in Leach & Zepke, 2003). Zimitat (2003) found a close correlation between students’ perceptions of inclusion and their intention to continue study. Students themselves have noted that in the first year, social bonds with fellow students and supportive relationships with academic staff play an important role in their capacity to adjust to study at the tertiary level (Morda, Sonn, Ali, & Ohtsuka, 2007).

In other studies based on course and student satisfaction surveys, Scott (2005) and Scott, Shah, Grebennikov, and Singh (2008) concluded that staff make a significant difference to the degree of student engagement and learning in almost all aspects of a course. In a similar vein, Ali and Lockstone (2006) observed that courses with high levels of staff involvement had lower attrition rates than courses with low staff involvement. For some groups of students, such as mature-age students and post-graduate students, engagement with the university community can be particularly difficult. Ultimately, the sense of isolation and of not belonging to the university can put them at risk of non-completion (McCormack, 2005). Crucial to an inclusive culture, therefore, is the provision of student support via learning development and other student support services, which can help to ensure that students who are enrolled at university complete their courses (Prentice et al., 2009; Scott, 2008). Indeed,

Simpson (2005) even suggests that because teaching is essentially reactive rather than proactive, “the key to retention lies more in effective student support rather than in improvements to teaching” (pp. 42-43).

The response

The pilot project

UC provides education for over 12,000 undergraduate and post-graduate students in the faculties of Applied Science, Arts and Design, Business and Government, Education, Health, Information Sciences and Engineering, and Law, as well as several research centres (UC, 2011). It took its first steps along the road to improved retention and student success with a pilot project initiated at the beginning of 2008. The results of the pilot project were the focus of a previous study by the Academic Skills Centre (ASC) at UC (Prentice et al., 2009). In summary, the project investigated retention in the university’s own context in order to understand the reasons for student withdrawal, improve the success rate of students and increase the retention rate. The ASC implemented semester-long services designed to target students on academic probation and to improve their chances of success. Students on probation as a result of failing 50% or more of their study load, or failing a particular unit more than once, were contacted initially by letter, then later by text message, and offered the opportunity for a consultation with a Learning Advisor. Those who took up the offer had a preliminary interview with a Learning Advisor. Based on a checklist of factors known to influence academic performance, the aim of the interview was to identify those factors that might have contributed to student failure and discuss possible strategies to improve academic performance. Where additional support was deemed appropriate, students were referred to other services involved in a collaborative support network, such as the Library, Learning Resource Centres, Health and Counselling, and Disability Support Services.

Analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data gathered for the pilot project indicated that for the group of students who attended the ASC, as opposed to those who did not attend, the retention rate was higher by more than 15 percentage points and the success rate by more than 10 percentage points. Based on the data it was calculated that 25 students, comprising seven international students and 18 domestic students, were retained by the university as a result of the pilot project in 2008, representing an annual income of approximately \$350,000 to the university (Prentice et al., 2009). These results were encouraging and led to the incorporation of the retention programme into normal university practice. The study by Prentice et al. (2009) recommended further research in this area to establish a longitudinal understanding of retention at the university and identify any further barriers to academic success.

The retention programme

During 2009, the embedded programme continued to monitor the progress of students ‘at risk’ of exclusion using the procedures adopted for the pilot project. However,

analysis of the 2009 data and changes in wider UC policy, including moves towards a blended approach to learning, led to a revision of the methods used to conduct the programme. With ethics approval granted to evaluate the retention programme over a three-year period from 2010, a mixed methodological approach was adopted, using quantitative data from student grades and qualitative data from consultations, a questionnaire and a follow-up interview.

As in the pilot project, students who had failed more than 50% of their study load or failed one unit twice in Semester 2, 2009 were identified as ‘at risk’, and were contacted by letter and text message and offered the opportunity of a consultation in Semester 1, 2010. Of the 684 students placed on probation at the end of Semester 2, 2009, a total of 169 students responded, with 116 students attending the ASC for a consultation (see Figure 1). As the findings in Figure 1 reveal, the number of students who responded to the letter and text, as well as those who had attended the initial consultation, fluctuated over the period 2008-2009, but increased in 2010.

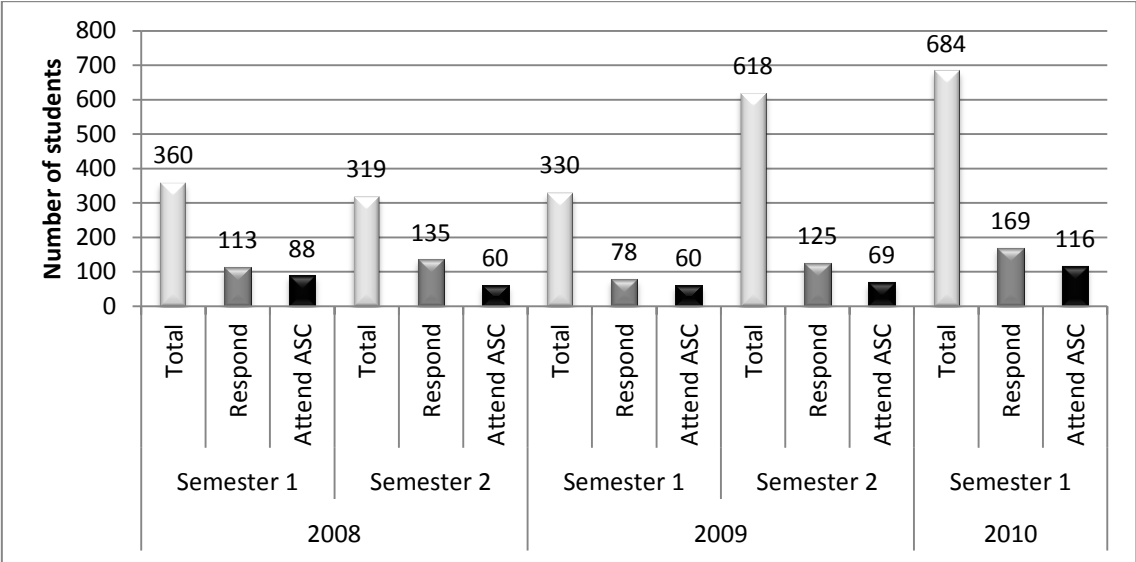


Figure 1. Student engagement with the retention programme

Programme findings

Factors affecting study

Of those students who attended the initial consultation, more than 60% consistently identified content, time management and work/study balance as the major contributing factors for their probationary status. Other problems associated with health and wellbeing, motivation, and adjustment to study and learning skills were also perceived by students to be factors impeding success. These results were consistent with data obtained from the pilot project (Prentice et al., 2009). Following the consultation, some students made further appointments with the ASC, and/or were referred to other university services, as in the pilot project (Prentice et al., 2009). Importantly, it emerged from the study that lack of understanding of the university culture and a feeling of not belonging to the university community, as well as a perception that the university ‘didn’t care’, were also potential impediments to student success (Prentice et al., 2009). The sense of belonging and of social inclusion in the life of the university is clearly an important factor in the minds of these students.

Retention

The statistics below (see Figure 2) suggest that intervention by the ASC has had a significant impact on the retention rate, with an average increase of 16% since the beginning of the pilot project in 2008. For example, in Semester 1, 2010, the retention rate across the whole cohort of students who took up the offer to attend the ASC for a consultation was 79.1%, compared with a retention rate of 68.9% for those who did not attend.

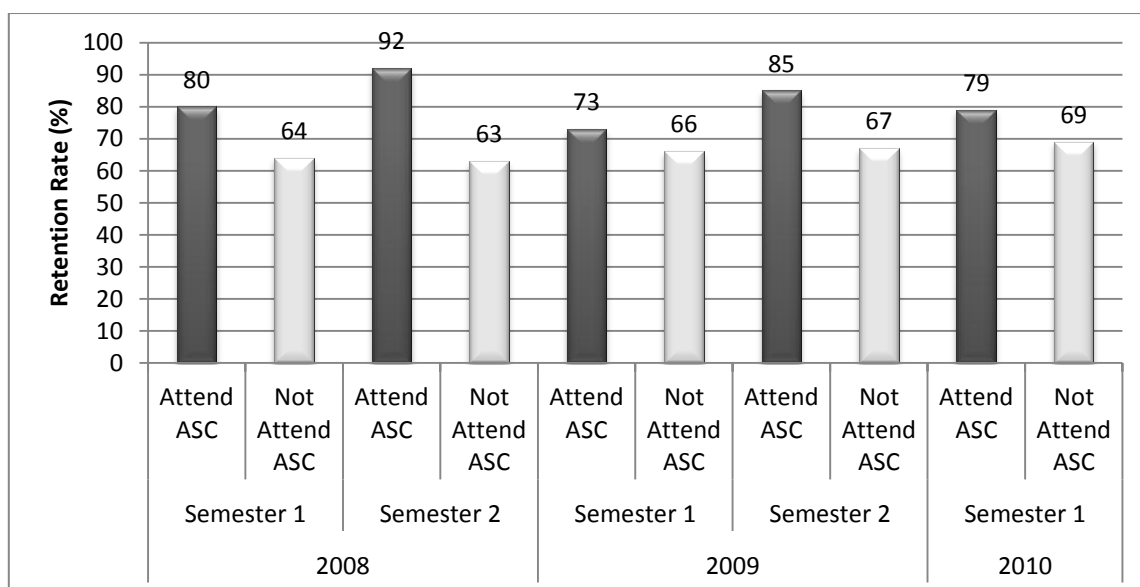


Figure 2. Retention rate of students on academic probation

As Table 1 suggests, both Australian and international students benefited greatly from the retention programme. There was no significant difference in the results for Australian and international students for Semester 2, 2009 and Semester 1, 2010.

Currently, the retention figures for Semester 1, 2010 suggest that a total of 16 students (including 3 international students and 13 domestic students) were retained by the university as a result of the retention programme in Semester 1, 2010. If a student is estimated to bring in \$12,000 per year, this increase in retention would represent a potential annual income to the university for the semester of \$192,000.

Table 1. *Retention rate of international and Australian students*

	Retention Rate	
	Semester 2, 2009	Semester 1, 2010
All ASC attendees	85.19%	79.12%
All non attendees	66.79%	68.91%
Australian ASC attendees	79.41%	77.33%
Australian ASC non-attendees	63.43%	66.32%
International ASC attendees	94.74%	87.50%
International ASC non-attendees	80.70%	78.13%

Despite the success rate of students who attended the ASC for consultations during the pilot project being higher than that of students who did not take up the offer of support, longitudinal quantitative data show that in 2009 neither Australian students nor international students improved their success rate significantly as a result of the intervention by the ASC (see Figure 3). In fact, Figure 3 suggests that in Semester 1, 2009, the improvement in the success rate from the prior semester to the semester immediately following was 20.62% for those who attended the ASC and 30.13% for those who did not attend the ASC. In Semester 2, 2009, the improvement in the success rate increased to 27.64% for those who attended the ASC compared to 36.32% for those who did not attend. In the case of the international students, additional data suggest the improvement in the success rate for those who attended the ASC was 60.98% in Semester 2, 2009, compared with 50% for those who did not attend. In Semester 1, 2010, the improvement in the success rate for those who attended the ASC was 58.06% and 61.31% for those who did not attend. According to the statistics, therefore, those who chose not to engage with the ASC in 2009/10 performed better than those who did attend.

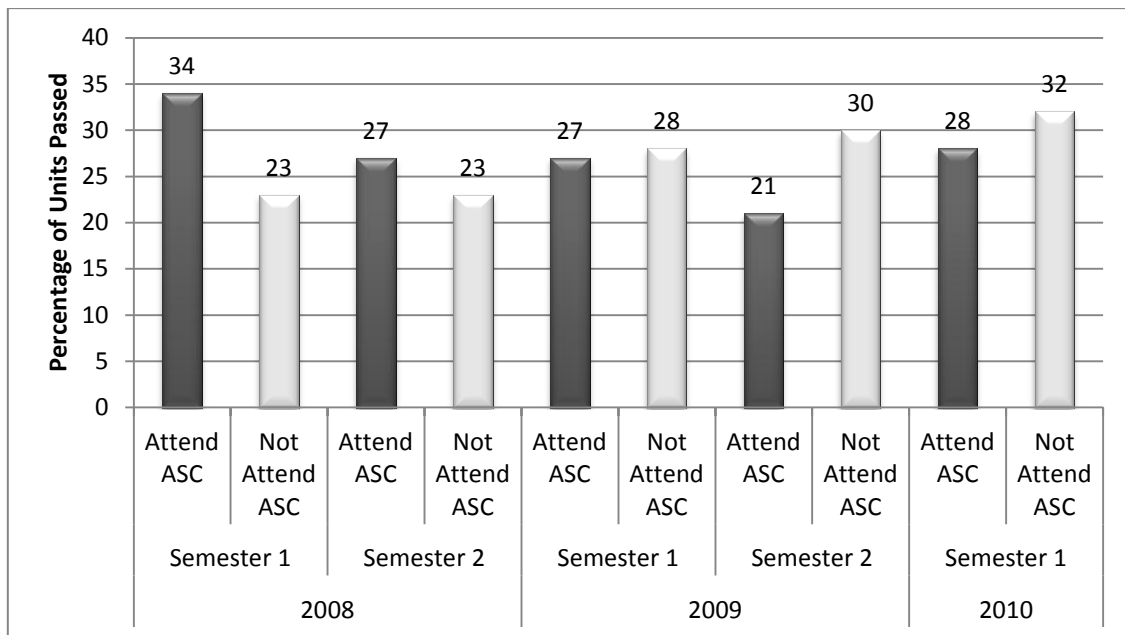


Figure 3. Improvement in the success rate of students on probation

Student Responses

Following the pilot project, interviews were conducted at the end of Semester 1, 2010 with volunteer participants. The representative sample included students with a disability, as well as mature-age and international students, and school leavers. Qualitative data from interviews provided the university with necessary information to evaluate and improve the retention programme. The semi-guided open-type questions focusing on the student experience elicited favourable responses from all the participants. This is consistent with the responses gained from the pilot project (Prentice et al., 2009). For example, in response to an opening question regarding her feelings on receiving a letter/text message, one mature-age student expressed relief at the support offered by the ASC. She observed that the ASC's initiative had made her life:

... so much easier and [took] that stress off. Like I've never been on academic probation before and it's kind of a little scary when you get that letter. And, you know when you get another letter saying that we're here to help, it's like, thank you. ... I think that is a brilliant idea.

This same student also commented positively on the referral services offered by the ASC during the initial consultation:

They made me aware of all the other services available to me, which was good because I didn't know they were here previously.

Another interviewee continued to attend ASC consultations and, although she was not able to get assistance with statistics, improvements in her results were attributed to the

series of consultations with the ASC as part of the retention programme. In response to a question regarding the effect of the consultations on her studies, this student commented:

I went [to the ASC] and just made sure I was on the right track. . . . I really wanted to do well so that's why I thought I might as well come to these consultations.

Responding to a question on the effect of the consultations with the ASC on his decision to persist with his studies, one student with a disability remarked:

It made my job and life a lot easier. I have got a unique disability and it has actually helped quite a lot as well. And the pressure has gone right off.

As to whether the ASC consultations had any effect on his studies, the same student went on to observe that:

Trying to put words into simple English for people to actually read [is] my biggest hurdle at the moment. And it's not always easy. . . . Like the ASC has actually broken that down a little bit more as well.

Responses to the questionnaire and the ASC database records from the retention programme reveal quite clearly that students who came to consultations appreciated the concern shown by the university. In particular, students remarked on their increased skills and ability to manage their studies. Students noted marked improvements in the following areas: time management, critical thinking, essay writing, academic language and literacy, referencing, study management strategies, health management strategies, unit and course selection and, understanding the university culture, including communication with lecturers, key dates and student grievance procedures.

Discussion

The dramatic increase in the number of students considered 'at risk', and therefore contacted by the ASC in Semester 2, 2009 and Semester 1, 2010, was initially disturbing. However, there are possible explanations for this sudden rise compared with the numbers of students considered at risk in previous semesters. First, the findings may reflect the identification and definitions of categories of students considered to be at risk as a result of changes in university policy. Secondly, for Semester 2, 2009, the university admitted students with a lower Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR) than in previous semesters. Also a concern was the apparent lack of engagement suggested by the low participation rate by students in the retention programme. As indicated in Figure 1, the average response rate to the initial offer of a consultation during the period 2008-2010 was 28% and the average attendance rate was 18%. This seems to reflect low involvement by students.

Despite the continuing and encouraging improvement in the retention rate, the success rates of students are a concern. As shown in Figure 3, the data collected during 2008, the period of the pilot project, indicate that the improvement in the success rates of the students who attended the ASC for consultation was higher than that of the students who did not attend (Prentice et al., 2009). However, the data for 2009 and for Semester 1, 2010 suggest that the intervention by the ASC had no impact on success. In fact, from the data, it seems that the students who did not participate in the retention programme fared better than those who did. At this stage, the implications of these findings are not clear. However, evaluation of future data collected for the retention programme may shed light on what is possibly a rogue result. Presently, the findings appear to suggest that an improved retention rate is not necessarily linked to an improved success rate. The findings may further suggest that some students who fail may still persist with their studies. Notwithstanding, the cost of failure to individual students is likely to be high, both financially and psychologically, particularly in terms of social and academic engagement, confidence, motivation and self-esteem.

In the new higher education environment heralded by the Bradley Review (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008), which reflects the government philosophy that potential students should not be precluded from access to higher education on the grounds of socio-economic background, gender, disability, or geography (Gillard, 2008), a significant rise in the number of students from non-traditional backgrounds can be expected. The obvious implication is that growing numbers of students are likely to be under-prepared or ill-equipped for university study. In the light of the recent data, the ASC has responded by placing an increased emphasis on the retention programme for improving the success of individual students, replacing the original 30-minute consultation for students on probation with an hour-long consultation, and by closer and more persistent monitoring of students' progress. The results of the pilot project also prompted the ASC to implement other new or expanded programmes, all designed to address the question of student retention by providing additional support for students. These included the implementation of a Peer Assisted Learning Scheme (PALS), systematic delivery of indiscipline academic literacy tutorials and an extended orientation programme (Smart Study Passport) for first-year students. In addition, through the initiative of an enabling programme for potential new entrants from regional areas, the university plans to prepare students early for the academic and social culture of the university.

Conclusion

The university remains committed to improving both the success rate and the retention rate of its students. Since the initial tentative steps of the pilot project, ongoing efforts of the ASC and, more widely, the university, have concentrated on improving the student experience via a range of measures. The ASC continues to identify important factors influencing academic engagement and social inclusion and to monitor students' progress. In addition, the ASC remains responsive to research evidence gathered as part of the retention programme and more broadly. Realistically, however, although

the university is committed to improvements in retention and success, it cannot achieve these goals alone. Ultimately, it is a shared responsibility which also rests on the shoulders of the students who have to travel the road to success and juggle the demands of study with other conflicting priorities of family, health, finance and work.

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