

Students as advisors in an intervention program for at-risk students: The QUT experience¹

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Abstract

A managed team of discipline-experienced and trained later year students are used as Student Success Advisors (SSAs) in the Student Success Program, an intervention program that manages student engagement by identifying and supporting first year students at-risk of disengaging from learning. This report focuses on the recruitment and training of SSAs and the day-to-day challenges they and their managers face. The Nuts & Bolts session provides participants with opportunities to discuss the applicability to their institutional contexts of the recruitment and training processes and the “solutions” to the challenges used at QUT.

Background

In 2007, Duncan and Nelson (2008) investigated monitoring and contacting first year students at-risk of disengaging from their studies. The outcomes and a gap analysis of the systems, processes and resources required to identify, monitor and provide timely support interventions for such students, led to the piloting of the Student Success Project in 2008 and subsequent implementation as part of the Transitions In Project (TIP) (Nelson, Smith & Clarke, in press) in 2008-2009. It continued post-TIP as the Student Success Program (SSP), a University-wide initiative identifying students at risk of disengaging before they fail units² or drop out of first year university studies.

The SSP is an integral part of the more extensive First Year Experience Program at QUT which is underpinned by three principles:

P1: The first year curriculum must engage new learners in their learning and mediate support for that learning. This is assisted by:

P2: Awareness of and timely access to QUT support services; and

P3: Creating a sense of belonging through involvement, engagement and connectedness with their university experiences.³

The concept and operations of the SSP are based on strong, academic-professional partnerships that transcend functional boundaries.⁴ In this way it is able to support all three principles by providing timely and proactive support through learning-

¹ The authors would like to acknowledge the contribution of Karen Nelson who commented on an earlier draft of this report.

² This is the QUT term for a semester-long teaching activity.

³ For a detailed discussion of the evolution of these principles and subsequent FYE activities at QUT, see Kift, Nelson and Clarke (2010, pp. 3-4).

⁴ The operation of the academic-professional partnership is reflected in the authorship of this report.

focused interventions and in so doing, enhances students' sense of belonging to the university.

The operation, reporting and evaluation of the impact of the SSP are facilitated by a custom-built Contact Management System (CMS) called *Outreach*. At-risk students are identified through a consolidated view of their profile stored on *Outreach* and based on a range of descriptive and academic indicators such as cohort membership, attendance, participation, submission (or not) and passing (or not) of assessment items. The Student Success Advisors (SSAs), who are a managed team of discipline-experienced and trained later year students, then attempt to make highly individualised telephone contact with these students. This report focuses on how best to optimise the recruitment and initial and ongoing training of the SSAs.⁵

Why use students?

There is considerable evidence that academic advising programs, including those offered by peers, provide complementary benefits to both institutional retention and the support of students at risk of disengaging. Campbell and Nutt (2008) contend that “advising students is a way to connect [them] to the campus and help them feel that someone is looking out for them” (¶ 19) while Varney (2007) extends this idea to suggest that “intentional contact with students with the goal of developing a caring and beneficial relationship [can] lead to increased academic motivation and persistence” (¶ 3). In the USA, the practice of academic advising is widespread and it has been conceptualised by the National Academic Advising Association (2006) as having three components: curriculum (what advising deals with), pedagogy (how advising does what it does), and student learning outcomes (the result of academic advising). These assertions are manifestations of the three principles but beg the question of how best to train the people who provide the academic advising programs.

Self (cited in Gordon et al., 2008) claims that the value of using *students* in the role of peer advisor is important in facilitating the success of such programs because “peer advisors may be able to communicate more appropriately and effectively with students on some issues” (p. 274). Further, Self identifies the role of student as peer advisor as “one of the many types of paraprofessional positions for which students are selected and trained to offer services to their peers” (p. 274). As well as providing social-emotional support, they are also able to communicate effectively information necessary for at-risk students to improve their chances of success at University.

It is important to note the difference between “peer mentoring” and the unique paraprofessional “academic advising by peers” role of the SSAs in the SSP at QUT: Through collaboration with key stakeholders and specialist support services, student advisors are able to facilitate informed decision making, increase motivation and enhance academic success (Heisserer & Parette, 2002). The term “paraprofessional” as used by Self is most appropriate for our SSAs as they are operating in a professional context where they support educators in their core business.

⁵ A discussion of the impact of the SSAs on student achievement and retention behaviour is beyond the scope of this report but the success of the SSP is detailed elsewhere (Nelson et al., 2009; Nelson, Quinn, Marrington & Clarke, in press).

What is the role of an SSA and what do they need to do their job properly?

SSAs need to know the range of life and learning support available to students. The issues they deal with are often unique but essentially they are structured around:

- 1.0 Course issues, including skills, course choice and academic preparedness
- 2.0 Life issues, including being first in family
- 3.0 Financial issues
- 4.0 Administrative enquiries
- 5.0 Needs of designated cohorts (for example)
 - 5.1 Students from low SES backgrounds
 - 5.2 Advanced standing commencing students⁶
 - 5.3 Indigenous students
 - 5.4 Students who have English as an additional language (NESB and international)
 - 5.5 Students with Disability.

Therefore, SSAs need to deal with the complex mix of issues that emerge from these areas and tailor advice to individual students' needs. Three disparate examples:

- (a) the types of learning and life support available for a member of a designated cohorts undertaking a particular unit on a particular campus;
- (b) the administrative processes and how they differ among faculties and schools; and
- (c) how to refer, who to refer to and the limits of their ability to refer.

How do we get them?

Student advisors are recruited through QUT's online job listing service, CareerHub, (see <http://www.careers.qut.edu.au/student/hub.jsp>) or are referred by faculty staff. They are selected for their communication skills and a demonstrated understanding of the challenges facing first year students transitioning to university.

How do we train them?

QUT's first year policy and principles and student development and transition are a starting point for the intensive initial training program and ongoing sessions. The training summary in Table 1 (below) will form the basis of the discussion session.

Session outline (30 minutes)

Introduction (2 minutes). Participants will be introduced to a graphical representation indicating the activities of SSAs and their relationship with the relevant elements of the SSP. The representation will not be discussed in detail but will be referred to during the interactive discussion which will take up the bulk of the session.

Interactive session (25 minutes). The presenters will facilitate a discussion based on

(a) the processes involving SSAs and our approach to those processes.

Participants can assess if the approaches are adaptable to their own setting and will be encouraged to question the QUT approaches. The processes (and potential questions) focus on:

- Recruitment (How do participants recruit peers academic advisers [or similar] at their institutions?)
- Training (What approaches to training or training programs do participants use and are seen as valuable and relevant within their institutions?)
- Partnerships (Who is required to support the day-to-day operations of academic advisors?)

(b) the challenges facing the SSAs and our attempts at solving those challenges.

⁶ New students who have been given credit for prior study who are not commencing in a traditional first year unit or program.

Challenges facing SSAs and those responsible for the SSAs include:

- Being a paraprofessional: responsibilities; support structures; burnout;
- Continuity of SSAs: limited lifespan of SSAs; cyclic approach;
- Coping with a multi-faceted role: relations with stakeholders in faculties and support services.

Questions for discussion that would apply to all of these challenges are:

Would the participants face the same challenge in their own institution?

Would the QUT “solution” be adaptable to their own setting? If not, how they would deal with the challenge?

If time permits, participants will be given the opportunity to identify and discuss challenges they feel are unique to their institution.

Table 1 *Summary of the training program*

Coordinated, managed and organised by the Manager, SSP	
Operational knowledge and skills	Interpersonal knowledge and skills
Presented by the Manager, SSP, FYE Coordinator and QUT academic and professional staff as required	Presented by the QUT Counsellor allocated to the FYE and Retention activities.
<u>Rationale:</u> Students present a complex set of issues and circumstances that cannot all be specifically addressed in training. The SSAs are trained to refer students to the expertise that exists in the university and to locate the appropriate referral point.	<u>Rationale:</u> All peer-to-peer contact in the university requires that students attend four training modules and the students employed as SSAs are required to attend these.
Initial training	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Privacy and the ethical use of confidential student information. 2. An overview of the types of campaigns⁷ we conduct and the aims of each. 3. Support services for students: administrative, technical, social, financial, academic. 4. Outreach database: how to locate and record calls 5. Wiki-based resources and tools: Task allocation, scripts, email templates, contacts, unit information, specific support for students in units and faculties, stakeholder agreements and schedules, knowledge base. 6. QUT Website: how to find course/unit information, administrative forms, etc. 5. Communication: Features of a good call 6. Referral procedures: How and when to refer 7. Housekeeping: Rosters, getting paid 8. Work Place Health and Safety 9. Phones and headsets, SSP email 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Role and responsibilities of peer leaders. This module includes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • what is a peer leader; • why peer-to-peer interaction is a useful adjunct to orientation, transition and ongoing support; • attributes of a peer leader; and • a review of expectations and assumptions about the role. 2. Relationship building and communication skill development. This module looks at the context of the relationship <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • code of conduct; • confidentiality issues; and • other characteristics of the peer-to-peer interaction. 3. Interactive exercises are used to look at basic communication skills. There is also some focus on interacting with emotional people and phone technique. 3. Know your university: when and where to refer on. 4. Cross cultural training in partnership with International Student Services.

⁷ Detailed discussion of all of the current campaigns is beyond the scope of this report but details are available in Nelson, Quinn et al. (in press). Some examples: *Campaign 1*: Pre-semester. Students who delay in accepting QUT’s offer of a place (and have not accepted elsewhere) or do accept but do not enrol correctly or in a timely manner; and *Campaign 3*: During semester. Aims to improve learning engagement (see Nelson et al., 2009).

<u>Ongoing training</u>	
<p>Representatives from the following conduct workshops on the services they provide to students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counselling Services • Careers and Employment • Library and Academic Skills Advisors • International Student Services • Oodgeroo Unit • Equity section • Pathways programs coordinator <p>Opportunities to share experiences, successes and challenges and discuss improvements.</p>	<p>Counsellors who are designated to receive referrals from the SSAs meet with them regularly. These meetings have two goals</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To debrief about particular clients: Giving information about ongoing contact, within the boundaries of confidentiality, gives the SSAs feedback about clients who have concerned them; and 2. To support the SSAs with issues they may face with certain students: This ongoing debriefing enables skill development to increase with experience.

The future (3 minutes). We believe that we have a *long* way to go before we have adequate recruitment and training procedures as the SSP continues to expand but we will continue to use discipline-experienced later year students as SSAs. Our intention is to formalise the initial and ongoing training program, to produce improved training materials (e.g. on-line modules) and to explore the integration of the recruitment process with other peer-related activities across QUT. An area of interest to us is the impact of the SSAs' experience on their future careers and processes are being put in place to explore that.

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