



Reducing the attrition of tertiary bridging students studying by distance: A practice report

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Abstract

This paper describes an initiative commenced in Semester 1 2012 in a small rural town in Queensland, Australia, to address the high level of attrition experienced by tertiary bridging students studying by distance in regional areas. It was hypothesised that the attrition was caused by a lack of social and academic integration into the program. The initiative involved the conducting of face-to-face teaching and a study group on a weekly basis at a partner institution. The collaboration between the university, the local partner institution and representatives of local government and community organisations involved in identifying potential students and supporting those students once enrolled is described. The major findings of the initiative to date relate to the high incidence of a change in the circumstances of students, which challenged continued attendance in the bridging program, the difficulties of distance students in relation to the administrative requirements of the university, and the challenges associated with the completion of a high volume of assessment in the early transition weeks of the semester. The primary relevance the initiative has for providers of distance tertiary bridging programs relates to the lack of support that distance students have when experiencing these challenges.

Introduction

The University of Southern Queensland (USQ) has provided a tertiary bridging program entitled the Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP) for over 20 years as an alternative pathway for individuals who are not academically qualified to attend university. The program is offered both on-campus and by distance. High attrition rates have been described in the literature for online courses (Patterson & McFadden, 2009; Youn, 2001), while attrition from tertiary bridging programs has been reported as high as 50 *per cent*, even for face-to-face delivery

(Cooper, Ellis, & Sawyer, 2000). Students studying the TPP by distance at USQ are confronted with the challenges associated with both of these contexts and have traditionally demonstrated attrition rates of up to *75 per cent*, with *30 per cent* of students failing to submit any form of assessment.

This paper will describe an initiative, commenced in Semester 1 2012, which has addressed this issue by the introduction of a blended learning experience for students in the small rural town of Stanthorpe, located some 1.5 hours drive from the primary point of delivery of the program. The aim of the initiative was to improve the engagement of students studying at a distance by increasing the face-to-face support and academic assistance available, which will, in turn, reduce program attrition.

The Tertiary Preparation Program at USQ

USQ has offered the TPP for over 20 years and has a wealth of experience in the delivery of tertiary bridging programs. Study in the TPP may be completed either on-campus or by distance. The minimum requirement of students enrolling in the TPP is the completion of two compulsory courses, the first being a generic study management course, which includes academic writing and communication and skills such as goal setting and study skills, while the second is a mathematics course. A number of levels are available for the mathematics course to cater to the varying levels of mathematics preparedness of students and the different pre-requisite requirements of the undergraduate programs students wish to access. A number of other courses, such as physics, are also available, which students may elect to complete to improve their level of preparedness for university study.

The TPP is conducted in both distance and on-campus modes in Semesters 1 and 2 and by distance only in Semester 3 of each academic year, with each semester being conducted over 15 weeks, which includes a two-week mid-semester recess. Each course is assessed by the completion of a number of assignments, completed during the semester and submitted either by electronic upload or by the mailing of a hard copy, with the final assessment task being an examination completed under supervision.

At USQ over *70 per cent* of all students study using the distance mode of delivery and the institution is recognised as being a leader in this field within the tertiary education sector. However, the TPP has experienced an ongoing challenge with attrition rates for students studying via the online mode, with as few as *25 per cent* of students completing the program.

Online study

While online learning has been demonstrated to be as effective as on-campus study (Russell, 2001), a range of challenges associated with online study and higher attrition rates have been described (see for example Carr, 2000; Patterson & McFadden, 2009; Tyler-Smith, 2006). Muilenburg and Berg (2005) identified the lack of social interaction as the most important barrier in online learning. Factors of lesser importance were administrative/instructor issues, time and support for studies, and learner motivation. Of particular interest in the study was that “respondents rated a lack of technical skills and academic skills as very low obstacles to learning online” (p. 35). The lack of association between dropout in online study and academic variables was also identified by Patterson and McFadden (2009).

Tyler-Smith (2006) in research examining mature-age students undertaking eLearning for the first time argued that “first time eLearners often experience cognitive overload...in the early stages of an online course” (p. 1). This issue was also identified as one possible explanation for attrition during the initial weeks of the course.

Yorke (2004) in a review of literature relating to online study identified that the student experience was the primary factor which influenced the quality of outcomes obtained. In particular he stated that “the development in students of a sense of belonging is particularly challenging in open and distance learning, but matters such as considerate tutoring and supportive formative assessment are widely accepted as components of good pedagogic practice” (p. 30).

Educational transition

The incidence of students withdrawing from tertiary study within a very short time of commencement has previously been identified by other researchers, with attrition being highest within the first six weeks of the semester (Blanc, DeBuhr, & Martin, 1983) and “prior to the first grading period...In some cases, departure of this sort is temporary rather than permanent. Some persons need time to regain their confidence and stability” (Tinto, 1993, p. 46). The increased incidence of attrition during the transition period into university has been identified in more recent studies in both England (Trotter & Roberts, 2006) and Australia (McMillan, 2005; Wylie, 2004). Tinto describes the act of separating from the past as a stressful process and, for some, the pain “may be so severe that they constrain persistence in college” (Tinto, 1988, p. 443). Students transitioning into a tertiary bridging program, many of whom have experienced negative experiences and outcomes in secondary school (R. Whannell, Allen,

& Lynch, 2010), would be expected to be particularly vulnerable during this period.

The role of academic and administrative staff in the transition of new students involves inducting students so that they may come “to terms with themselves as participants within Academe, and the way in which their role is perceived” (Green & Latham, 2000, p. 44). In the process of transition to university, a student’s peers may act as a challenge where “the impact of the peer group in terms of how the new culture is read and what rituals are adopted, is often a competing force, as students seek to find their way through the next passage” (Green & Latham, 2000, p. 44). Another challenge, which is apparent in the rite of passage from one cultural situation to another for the new student, involves “the cultural baggage that we carry with us from place to place, which includes our prior experiences, belief systems but also our ways of knowing and of behaving” (Green & Latham, 2000, p. 46).

Elkins, Braxton and James (2000), in a U.S. study, examined student departure in the first and second semester of college with specific reference to the separation stage of the transition process. The study concluded that “the factor of rejection of attitudes and values is important in the separation process and ultimately in the persistence/departure decision” (p. 263). However, “the factor of support had the greatest influence on the persistence/departure decision” (p. 262). Of interest in the study was that it was identified that the level of support was influenced by the level of student academic achievement at secondary school. “Perhaps the parents, friends, and family members of low-achieving students question the likelihood of these students remaining in college” (p. 263).

The initiative

The literature reviewed in relation to students engaged in online study and in the transition into a tertiary bridging program indicated an important role for the quality of the student experience, particularly in relation to the quality of the support that the student experienced. It was hypothesised that one possible reason for the high level of attrition in students commencing the TPP via an online mode of delivery was the lack of support from and engagement with academic staff involved in the delivery of courses and with fellow students.

The primary objectives of the initiative were:

- to increase the level of personal interaction between students and staff at the institution;
- to provide regular face-to-face teaching of course content;

- to provide prompt and personal feedback in relation to assessment; and
- to ensure that the administrative processes of the university were managed in a supportive and timely manner.

The site chosen to host the initiative was Stanthorpe, located in the Granite Belt in southern Queensland, about 1.5 hours drive from the primary USQ campus. Stanthorpe has a population of about 3,000 people and is also the site of the Queensland College of Wine Tourism (QCWT), where USQ was currently delivering courses related to wine and tourism. A dedicated staff member was allocated to operate from the QCWT initially for three days per week, which was increased to four days per week in August 2012.

Following an initial trial period in Semester 1 2012, where the advertising and program delivery aspects were tested, the initiative was delivered in Semester 2 2012. The principal components of the initiative in order of delivery were as described below.

Marketing

About one month prior to the start of the semester, advertisements were placed in the local newspapers which serviced Stanthorpe and surrounding areas. A3-sized flyers were also placed in many of the local businesses. The USQ staff member also networked with a variety of people from local government, community organisations and businesses who were considered to provide a potential source of students. One open day was also advertised and conducted in Stanthorpe at the QCWT and at the Warwick library, located 35 minutes drive from Stanthorpe.

The result of the short marketing program was that 21 students were enrolled in the program through the QCWT for study in Semester 2. The students ranged in age from 18 to 58, with seven males and 14 females.

Orientation

Appropriate orientation programs have been demonstrated to aid students in their social and academic integration (Krause, Hartley, James, & Mcinnis, 2005) and it was considered that students should be given the opportunity to engage in such a program. This opportunity was provided with a one-day orientation program at the QCWT conducted in the week prior to commencement of the semester. The orientation program included a presentation from the director of the centre and a free social activity during the morning-tea period. Eleven students attended the orientation session.

Course delivery and support

A number of aspects were considered to be necessary in supporting the students with the academic components of their courses. Previous research (P. Whannell, Whannell, & Allen, 2012) has identified that tertiary bridging students have substantial issues engaging with assessment, particularly examinations. The courses provided in the TPP have a substantial assessment requirement with assessment being due in the first week of the semester. The requirement for assessment to be due so early in the semester indicated that the skills associated with the completion of assessment should be delivered at the earliest opportunity.

To facilitate the delivery of course content and to assist students to prepare for the assessment tasks, one full day, Wednesday, was allocated. Time was allocated to allow for content delivery, assessment preparation and for individual work on learning tasks and assessment.

The requirement for students to engage with and support each other was also included by the allocation of time each Tuesday afternoon for a group study session at QCWT. While the staff member acted to facilitate the session, the primary goal was to have students act and support each other independently.

While students were able to obtain support outside of these times through the online learning management system (Moodle), Facebook was also utilised. A Facebook site was created and maintained which allowed students to make entries and remain in contact with other students and the staff member. This open form of communication was considered to have substantial benefit for all users as many of the issues which were raised on the site by a single student were subsequently endorsed by other students at the next face-to-face session.

Challenges to study

A number of common themes were identified in relation to the factors which challenged students in their attempts to study. The first challenges that occurred were administrative issues relating to students enrolment and their receiving of the study materials. The majority of students had not received their study materials prior to the commencement of the semester. Those who had received the study materials in CD format found them difficult to use and manage, and subsequently requested hard-copy versions which did not arrive for a number of weeks. Students are able to request hard-copy versions of the materials if, following enrolment, they complete the appropriate request form declaring that internet access is not available. In this case, the hard-copy books are usually not available for a number of weeks. Considering that assessment was due in

week 1 of the academic management course and week 2 for the mathematics course, this presented a substantial stressor for many students as they were unable to adequately prepare for and engage with the tasks.

A substantial administrative issue was also encountered in week 6 of the semester, where the enrolments of four actively engaged students were cancelled by Student Administration. Enquiries by the USQ staff member established that the students had not returned a required confirmation of enrolment form, which resulted in their withdrawal. Action was subsequently taken by the staff member, with the willing support of Student Administration, which resulted in their re-instatement in the course. Considering that this has occurred independently for four students, which represents 19 *per cent* of the attending students, this issue presents as a real challenge for the institution in respect of managing the administrative requirements of atypical students such as those in the TPP.

The ability of the students to act on their own initiative and remedy the type of administrative situations described is considered questionable and presents the role of the local academic as being important in supporting students in this regard. Administrative issues as a stressor for students studying online has previously been described (Mullenburg & Berge, 2005).

A number of students also experienced changes in personal circumstances which acted to reduce, or even prevent, their continued engagement with the program. This situation was considered to apply to seven students. The extent of this problem has been previously described (Bedford, 2009; R. Whannell, 2012). Examples of the changes were partners moving to another regional location, loss of employment and change in work commitments. While it was the case that all of these students dropped out of the program, the USQ staff member was able to support their departures and provide the best opportunity for a return to study at a later time.

A major challenge experienced by all students was the timing and quantity of assessment in both compulsory courses. The academic management course required assessment to be completed and submitted in week 1 of the semester, while the mathematics course required the first task to be submitted in week 2. Students appeared very underprepared to meet this challenge and substantial support was provided to facilitate the meeting of these assessment requirements. The compulsory academic management course required the submission of some form of assessment in most weeks of the semester. Due to this, much of the time of the face-to-face session on the Wednesday of

each week was allocated to supporting the students in the requirements of the assessment tasks. Little opportunity existed to engage in learning activities outside of the immediate scope of the assessment. While it could be argued that the assessment involved was not of a high academic standard, students, particularly those with poor computer skills, were still substantially challenged by the experience.

The challenge of assessment in relation to the development of academic identity in tertiary bridging students has been previously described (Debenham & May, 2005; R. Whannell, Whannell, & Chambers, 2011). Another issue associated with the requirement to submit assessment in most weeks of the semester was encountered by students who experienced some form of personal challenge which involved an interruption to their studies. Even an interruption of one week caused students to fall behind in their assessment completion and submission requirements. Even in week 14 of the semester, students were still being substantially challenged by the quantity of assessment.

Contrary to the findings reported by Muilenburg and Berg (2005), the students appeared to be seriously challenged by a lack of computer skills, particularly in the initial weeks of the semester. The assessment in the compulsory academic management course required the ability to create word-processed documents with relatively advanced formatting, including headers and footers, tables and custom margin settings. The TPP program does not include any computer literacy components and the requirement to complete assessment which involved these relatively advanced computer skills was beyond the ability of a number of students. Substantial support and teaching in computer skills was required before these students were able to complete and submit the assessment successfully.

The challenges experienced by the students are evidenced by the relatively low number of students who remained actively engaged with the program as the semester progressed. Fifteen (71%) students were actively attending QCWT and submitting assessment in week 7. This number had dropped to 7 (33%) at week 14. Even at this late stage, when it was hoped that students had reached the stage of being independent and self-motivated, a substantial amount of time was required in the support of students in these areas.

The need for stakeholder collaboration

One of the primary challenges identified for students was the lack of specialist support that was available. Students studying in regional locations do not have access to the administrative and social support services that are available on-

campus. The initial networking completed by the USQ staff member included visits to community organisations such as Mission Australia, which are involved in the training and placement of unemployed individuals. As a consequence, a small number of students were enrolled in the program who required assistance which was beyond the professional expertise of the USQ staff member. In these cases, the services available within the local community were utilised, particularly those from the referring organisation.

This aspect presents a substantial challenge to institutions who offer tertiary bridging programs by distance, even in situations where some form of local support is provided such as in this initiative. Should this initiative be continued and, perhaps expanded, clear guidelines would be necessary in relation to the role of academic staff in relation to students with substantial personal or social problems. The requirement for additional specialist support options must be available to ensure the safety of students. The requirement to collaborate with local providers to facilitate the provision of specialist services when required is considered essential.

Conclusion

While the outcomes achieved by the initiative in regards of program completion were not markedly better than that traditionally achieved in the TPP, the experience of engaging closely with students in a blended learning environment has allowed for a number of issues to be identified which, if targeted appropriately, may result in improved outcomes in future semesters. The literature reviewed indicated that the amount and quality of support provided to tertiary bridging students studying by distance would be the primary aspect that would act to reduce attrition. This initiative provides strong support for this stance. The role of the USQ staff member was primarily directed towards supporting the students in respect of administrative challenges, changing life circumstances and in the preparation and submission of assessment. Extensive support and training in the use of computers was also required. Similar to other research in online and tertiary bridging contexts (Mullenburg & Berge, 2005; R. Whannell, 2010), academic challenges did not appear as a significant stressor for students. Rather, issues associated with administrative and basic academic skills appear as more relevant.

A primary conclusion, which may provide immediate results, would be the modification of the approach taken to assessment. The existing literature (Debenham & May, 2005; R. Whannell, *et al.*, 2011) and the findings from this study indicate that a substantial reduction in the quantity of assessment,

particularly during the first half of the semester, may assist in reducing stress associated with the transition into study and improving completion outcomes. While it may be argued that early success with academic non-challenging assessment may motivate students, this study does not support this stance. The challenges associated with assessment for very academically underprepared students with inadequate computer skills should not be underestimated.

The principle implication that the initiative has for practice for institutions that provide distance tertiary bridging programs is that strategies to reduce attrition through increasing the amount of direct support provided to students have the potential to reduce attrition substantially. However, while positive outcomes have been achieved, a note of caution is necessary. Having academic staff members operating on a face-to-face basis with tertiary bridging students in a regional location without the support services that are taken for granted on-campus presents some challenges. The experiences of atypical students who enrol in tertiary bridging programs indicate that the academic personnel who are chosen to conduct such programs must be appropriately qualified and experienced to undertake the task. A local support network with local service providers must also be available to provide the support services which the academic is not equipped to provide.

This initiative was conducted at the QCWT, which presents a sizable and established educational environment within the local community. The potential exists for further research to be conducted to determine the extent to which tertiary bridging students studying by distance in small regional locations are able to be provided with direct face-to-face support where no such institution exists. In these circumstances, the institution may need to partner with local education providers, such as secondary schools, in order to use existing infrastructure to deliver the program.

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