Taking Access and Transition Seriously: University of Newcastle’s Transformation of Transition and Retention

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Abstract

The University of Newcastle has implemented a number of initiatives over the last few years aimed at improving the student experience. We begin 2015 with permanent teams tasked with improving student transition and experience – the first time these teams have been permanent, and the first time the focus is entirely and so openly on student experience.

Introduction

Students continue to commence tertiary education from a range of diverse backgrounds and with differing levels of preparation and support. Universities face increased pressure to ensure they do all they can to prepare them for the transition (James, et al, 2010, p. 72). As this trend continues higher education institutions have begun to realise the need for embedding stronger student experience and transition services into their core business.

The University of Newcastle has committed to improving the student experience consistently across the last five years. In that period of time the Academic Registrar's portfolio has established a dedicated team to transition and retention issues. In a very recent restructure of the entire Academic Registrar’s area, a number of initiatives have been implemented to normalise student experience, retention and transition. As Kift (2009) states, at the core of the strategies promoting first year students’ success and retention is the “imperative to normalise the experience”.

There is now a permanent Access and Transition team as well as a Student Engagement team. Both teams tackle different aspects of the student lifecycle. They share however the common goal of improving student experience and retention. This has firmly embedded transition and retention issues into key performance areas.

Student Experience and Transition at University of Newcastle

The Student Experience and Transition team was established by the University of Newcastle (UoN) in 2011 with one permanent member of staff and a number of contract staff. These contracts were paid through HEPPP and SSAF funding throughout the period of time this team existed. Their core goal was to improve the student experience from orientation through to graduation, concentrating on at risk students. Reviewing literature on transition and retention activities, particularly the study from the University of Northumbria (Round, 2004) which provides a number of recommendations relating to transition and orientation, the team began to implement changes to past practices and inclusion of new initiatives to increase the provision of a quality student experience from commencement to graduation.

A number of initiatives were implemented by this team including review of progress first contact, phone calls to students deemed “at risk”, the MySupport website and triage for support services and the introduction to a centrally coordinated university wide PASS program.
The Student Experience and Transition (SET) team established a program called Friends on Campus which aimed to provide high school students with a contact within the University who could answer all their questions from applying, to offers, to enrolments. This begins with a visit to the school from a team member or more. This is not a marketing exercise and basically explain what the University of Newcastle experience is like, what types of subjects they can study, the support available and more. This differs from other visits that Faculties and our Student Recruitment teams organise that are purely aimed at selling the University itself or specific programs to students.

Following on from those visits, high school students can sign up to be part of the Friends on Campus communications. They receive emails from their contact throughout the application, offer and enrolment period that are aimed at helping them through the jargon and the processes. Various staff members from across the University are contacts for this program. The communications were designed by the SET team for consistency.

The SET team also managed a new initiative that involved calling all students who were identified as at risk through the academic progress process. The funding for this imitative was provided through HEPPP and therefore the focus was on domestic undergraduate students. The phone calls followed a script that helped identify the issues the student was facing that were impacting on their studies and providing options for support or learning opportunities. In many cases, the students were simply not aware of support services such as counselling, careers and others.

As Harvey and Luckman (2014) state, being able to prevent attrition is the ability to predict attrition. Our activities at Newcastle differ by using student characteristic modelling, based on previous cohorts, to shape the student contact lists. Rather than only identifying the students after “alarm bells” are raised, we have tried to predict behaviours based on modelling of previous results. The SET team contact students that are identified outside the academic progress process including those who are first in family, have not logged in to Blackboard (our learning management system) etc. Feedback from students indicates that this proactive contact is generally appreciated and helps raise the profile of many key support areas available to students.

**UoN Student Central**

The recent restructure of the Academic Registrar’s portfolio has resulted in a number of areas that relied on soft funding such as HEPPP and SSAF now being a permanent part of the structure. Competitive pressure and increased budget restraints in higher education have driven many universities to increase the number of students admitted as a means of increasing their income, while the admitted students are regarded as “customers.” (Boonlert Watjatrakul, 2014). This alone requires the institution to look closely at their admissions processes and actions, during the recruitment period especially, but also programs that assist retention. How we communicate and what type of services we offer becomes increasingly more important in our pursuit of reaching our targets and lowering our attrition. UoN Student Central was designed to meet the needs of students entering higher education in 2015.

There are five arms in UoN Student Central – ‘UniAccess’, ‘Campus Life, Careers and Student Life’, ‘Student and Academic Business’, ‘Student Care and Equity’ and ‘Campus Coordination’. UniAccess includes Admissions and the Access & Transition team. The Access & Transition team look after orientation, school liaison, new student engagement and more.
The new Access and Transition team has a focus entirely on ensuring that prospective and new students are provided with information and support to ensure their success. Engaging with High School students from year 10 onwards and continuing to advise and support throughout their first year at University is the team’s main objectives. Concentrating on Orientation being one of the first major stepping stones to an excellent student experience, the Access and Transition team have concentrated on providing a Program (or Course) based orientation experience.

Alison Poot (2015, p3) notes that one of the principles of orientation best practice is acknowledging that “Orientation is a process, not an event. Orientation should extend from enrolment through to at least the first 6 weeks of semester.” University of Newcastle would argue that Orientation is a process that extends from the time an application is submitted to the end of the first semester as a minimum.

One of the areas of the new structure that is pivotal to successful student engagement and therefore student success, is the increased dedication to student and staff communication. In the past this has been delivered by two staff members who were on contract and who had to fit in our communication requests between their other work responsibilities. Very little was planned in advance nor with a consistent approach across the division, with many units opting to do their own communication due to unavailability of the staff involved. Student Central has dedicated a large percentage of its available workforce to ensuring this is now a reliable service.

New students were all greeted with a HTML email, followed by a phone call to those who had not as yet actioned their offer to answer questions and to encourage them to accept their offer. The communication strategy provided key information at important parts in the commencing student journey. Our earliest offers were released in October 2014 and enrolments occurred in the first week of February. Our challenge was to keep these students engaged with the University for this period of time. An improvement in early acceptance of offers was seen as a direct result of the new communication strategy however data from the commencing student survey is expected to show an increased awareness of services available, and improved experience of orientation and enrolment.

Within the Campus Life, Careers and Student Life portfolio there is a Student Engagement team that coordinates student experience activities such as the PASS program. This team works closely with the Events team and are involved in the student consultative process. This area is tasked with student engagement past the orientation period and will also be involved in direct contact with students who are identified as at risk whether through the academic progress process or other means.

Impact of Initiatives

Although it is very early in the life of Student Central and the new units, we are starting to see the impact on both staff and students from this restructure and realignment of delivery areas. Most of these are positive but some negative issues as well, which we can all learn from. Some of the impact issues are:

Positive

- Collaborative approach across all units in the delivery of Orientation and Graduation
  - Over 100 staff helping out at these events replacing the need for employment of casual staff
- A more students centred focus on staff’s delivery of support and services
  - Dedicated Student Advisers appointed to case manager student issues
• An improved focus on serving Faculties and aligning Student Central’s KPI’s with the University’s overall strategic plan
  o Associate Directors assigned to Faculties to lead discussion and align Student Central objectives with the Faculties

Negative

• Delayed start to new positions and staff movements unstable due to ongoing recruitment issues
• Role clarity unclear in some cases causing issues with process improvement

The Future

The aim of Student Central is to provide a positive experience to all potential students, current students and graduates throughout their student lifecycle. The restructure has been designed to be as fluid as possible to allow for key areas to be bolstered with staff during the key periods such as Admission & Orientation. Key performance indicators for UniAccess will include establishing new pathways to university, increasing awareness of those pathways, improving the transition of all new students, and increasing the level of engagement all new students feel for their first of university.

This will be achieved through:

• continued engagement with high schools in our catchment area to identify new secondary teaching practices and alternatives to the ATAR.
• Increased presence at high schools through our Friends on Campus program
• Increased information for non current school leavers
• Seamless communication plans from potential students including preference holders to first year enrolled students
• Increased understanding of why people reject their offer

Clarity of the point of handover of students from the Access & Transition team to the Student Engagement team is still required to ensure that students continue to experience positive engagement with and from the institution. However the new structure is already resulting in improved feedback from students who have received the early engagement communications at the point of offer, through orientation, enrolment and semester one. As the structure is more fully realised, further new initiatives will be implemented to continue proactive communication and engagement with both our potential students and current students.

Conclusion

The University of Newcastle has now established student transition and experience as core business. The implementation of a number of strategies during the past few years such as Friends on Campus, at risk student communications, and a changing orientation have all led the University to provide well-grounded experiences for first year students that put their engagement at the forefront.

Aligning admissions and transition activities within one portfolio increases the potential for future student engagement that flows seamlessly into current student engagement. Conversations with Faculties are now focused on the experience of potential students moving through admissions and enrolment processes into the first year experience.
The continuation of the proactive approach to identifying at risk students is crucial to the student experience and will remain a key performance area. Student Central is fully committed to improving the first year student experience through the initiatives outlined. Student Central intends to be market leaders in student transition, retention and engagement through proactive communications, targeted messaging on support services available, the use of emerging technologies and the alignment of these activities with traditional student administration areas to increase the visibility and understanding of the importance of these activities.

References


Key Discussion Questions

- What team/s is/are responsible for transition and retention activities in institutions?
- What are considered the key responsibility areas for transition vs retention?
- Are there any issues that we may need to consider with the alignment of admissions and transition?
- Proactive communication with at risk students takes the form of phone calls at UoN, does anyone else use other communication tools?