Student Learning Journey: Supporting student success through the Student Readiness Questionnaire

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Abstract

Students enrolling at university expect to succeed. The Student Learning Journey is a Central Queensland University (CQU) initiative to support students in achieving this goal. This paper explicitly examines an important "first step" in the process where on enrolment it is intended that students complete the Student Readiness Questionnaire (SRQ). This questionnaire was developed following over a thousand hours of interviews with students identified as being "at academic risk", and as part of a working group of the Student Learning Journey. The development and use of this questionnaire as part of CQU's initiative to help all students be successful in their studies are discussed in this paper. The questionnaire will build a student profile in areas including mode of study, age, educational preparedness, lifestyle and cognitive and emotional readiness. These factors tell a powerful story about essential elements of a student's expectations, motivation to succeed and persistence to seek help. From this, personalised learning programs can be designed. By knowing the profile of our student community and what that means in relation to the academic journey, it is possible to identify what particular structural and systemic solutions are required to support further student retention.

Introduction

This paper describes the development of an innovative proposal, the SRQ, which aims to assist commencing CQU students and the university to have a clearer understanding of the preparedness of this group for their student journey. The paper examines the reasons for this proposal and suggests ways of utilising the information gathered through this process.

The purpose of the SRQ is to request students to provide further information about themselves, which, when added to the information already provided through enrolment documentation, will enable the university and the students to make informed decisions regarding appropriate and timely preparation for the tertiary

journey about to be undertaken. An example of draft questions for the SRQ is provided in Appendix 1.

The importance of early intervention during the student journey

There is a plethora of research which has confirmed the value of a positive and purpose designed first year experience for tertiary students which then forms the basis of continuing student success (see for example Krause, 2001; McInnis, 1996; Tinto, 1996). For first year programs to be most effective they are dependent on understanding the teaching, learning and support needs of each cohort of students entering university. Lotkowski, Robbins and Noeth (2004) note the importance of determining "student characteristics and needs" (p. viii) as the first step in designing retention resilient programs. They recommend implementing a process prior to students beginning their study that enables comprehensive profiles to be built and informed decisions made about early intervention programs.

Students experiences of their tertiary journey—the literature

A recent study completed by the University of Western Sydney (Scott, 2005) and involving 14 Australian universities from 2003 to 2005 has particular relevance to this research. The study confirmed that it is students' total experience of university, not just what happens in lectures and tutorials, that shapes their judgement of overall quality and can support retention and engage students in productive learning (Scott, 2005, p. vii). That study also confirms the importance to the social, intellectual and cultural capital of Australia of supporting students to complete a degree successfully (p. vi) as well as of managing student expectations and the support of students in all facets of their studies. The study noted how important it is to be consistently alert to students' expectations right from their first contact with the university, during orientation and in each class as their studies commence. The study also reported that research over 10 years on first year experience identified a mix of key engagement factors that included: orientation to university studies; management of expectations; accurate course advice; course choice; feeling of belonging to the community of the university; a sense of connection to teaching staff; an environment that fosters active student participation; interaction among students out of class; the amount of time devoted to study; university systems to ensure that students do not "fall through the cracks"; and the need to support students in managing other commitments and employment and financial pressures while studying (pp. 7–8).

A study by Yorke and Thomas (2003) identified a positive effect from early engagement, induction and a focus on the first year to support students early in their studies before adverse factors may begin to dominate. That is, it is the total experience that shapes engagement and that influences student retention and thereby overall success (Scott, 2005). Data from a 2005 study (Anonymous, 2005a) reported that 68% of students stayed in a program to completion and that 74% of first year students in a four-year program return for a second year. It is our contention that the target should be as close to 100% retention as is reasonable. Students do not come to university expecting to fail but are generally expecting to succeed (Mupinga, Nora & Yaw, 2006, p. 1). Through the creation of learning environments to support the development of student self-efficacy and self-confidence, student success and retention improves (Hutchinson et al., 2006).

Waggoner and Goldman (2005) suggest that student experiences of university can transform their role from consumers to stakeholders through effective retention strategies that create higher levels of student satisfaction. They note that "this satisfaction provides the foundation for dependency binding and allows the individual to pursue a degree with an efficiency of time, effort and expense" (p. 99). Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld (2005, p. 720) observe that "the presence or lack of social support networks and supportive interactions is a major factor for students in deciding whether or not to stay or leave". At the State University of New York retention programs are designed to meet the specific backgrounds of students such as an orientation program over summer with course credit that addresses their individual needs (Anonymous, 2005b). Additionally there are student advisors who help the students utilise peer mentoring and tutoring services, study groups are available and there are midterm evaluations to guide planning further. From that program it is reported that retention rates have risen from 41% to 68% (Anonymous, 2005b).

In reporting on British universities, Christie, Munro and Fisher (2004, p. 619) observed that "non-completion has gone from being a private issue to one of public worry for British higher education". Reasons for attrition cited in that study included parental commitments with young children, financial difficulties with more students coming from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, alienation from the university atmosphere, lack of involvement in university life, health issues, problems with housing, and personal and familial issues. These researchers noted that once students began to experience problems they did not tend to seek professional help within or outside the university. It is interesting too that Christie, Munro and Fisher found that students who dropped out retained a strong commitment to higher education, felt that the program was within their capabilities and hoped to return to university in the future. They also encouraged the development of "an institutional habitus that is more open and welcoming to a diversity of students" (p. 623) to support student retention.

Lawnham (2004) in an Australian study found that one in seven students will "drop out" in their first year and one in three will fail or leave before the completion of their degree. The ability to hold students in their programs until successful completion is of social, financial and reputational interest to any university. For students, and those around them such as their families, this is also a crucial issue. The decision to pursue higher education is usually one that is taken after much thought about various implications, not the least of which are financial and personal. Achieving a university degree has the real potential to contribute to a more prosperous future for a student.

The student journey at CQU

From the literature, the causes of student attrition identified are similar to those identified over the past two years at CQU and revealed through the 1100 interviews conducted with students who were failing and consequently not maintaining satisfactory academic progress (described below). The literature also clearly indicates that it is important to know the characteristics of the commencing student community and to take measured interventions to support student retention and success early in their student journey.

Student success: A shared responsibility

Building a readiness profile as CQU is proposing may also assist CQU to locate the responsibility of student failure as a shared responsibility between student and institution rather than, as is more commonly done, attribute the responsibility to the student. In a comprehensive study of 2,995 higher education institutions, completed by Habley and McClanahan (2004), it was found that institutions were far more likely to attribute attrition to "student characteristics than they are to attribute attrition to institutional characteristics" (p. 6). Placing responsibility on the student robs institutions of the motivation to be innovative in their teaching and learning responses. We are suggesting that factual data which present a dynamic student life profile will militate against this institutional behaviour and assist both student and university staff to engage in the learning process (McInnis, 1996).

Background to the SRQ early intervention proposal

The SRQ proposal is the result of a working party group formed under the auspices of the CQU Student Learning Journey reference group. The Student Learning Journey was developed in 2005 to symbolise the interconnectedness of a variety of CQU areas which pave the way for students to move through their tertiary study program. The Student Learning Journey framework provided a vehicle for the continuous improvement of all aspects of student life at CQU and a way for CQU staff to focus their professional development in student-centred ways. The Student Learning Journey reference group comprises faculty and divisional representatives who share a keen interest in promoting teaching and learning best practice. Part of the brief of the Student Learning Journey reference group continues to be to address the unsatisfactory academic progress rate of students, to promote retention and to recommend strategies which will enhance the academic achievement of all students. The reference group examined a variety of literature, university programs and data from relevant projects as they worked towards developing retention strategies. The literature identifies a number of issues that cause university students to fail in their studies and some intervention strategies to support students to succeed. In addition to the literature and experience, there were two key CQU data sources that informed the development of the SRQ: "Monitoring Academic Progress" interviews; and "Staying at Uni" telephone interviews. The following two subsections examine these and how the feedback from these formed the basis for the SRQ.

"Monitoring Academic Progress" interviews

In March 2004, CQU Student Services began a three year research project entitled "Formal monitoring and development of intervention strategies to assist academically at risk students towards satisfactory progress: A structured interview approach assisting the student to identify reasons for academic failure and formulate a plan to succeed". The interviews are linked to CQU's "Monitoring Academic Progress Policy: Unsatisfactory Academic Progress". Students who fall into the unsatisfactory academic progress category are identified by Student Administration at the end of every term. Letters are then sent to students inviting them to attend a structured interview with Student Services staff where the reasons for fail grades are discussed, a support plan developed and referrals arranged. Each interview is guided by a set questionnaire which gathers demographic, financial, personal, social, educational and other related data to assist the student and the interviewer to ascertain what influenced the student to fail. At the end of the interview period, the questionnaire data are collated and analysed.

To date 1100 interviews have been completed with students not making satisfactory academic progress and who have been enrolled for one, two or three terms. Interview stories continue to remain quite consistent. In brief, major outcomes reveal that: flex (off-campus) students are the most highly represented in the "fail" group; however, the data also show that "failure" is a complex issue and that it is difficult to predict a typical fail student profile. Students reported a plethora of personal reasons that impacted negatively on the ability to succeed. However, they were also clearly stating that they believed that they had the capacity to succeed at university, that they were determined to complete their degree and that the content of their study program was not too difficult for them. Consistent themes throughout the interviews were:

- Motivation. This was a huge issue and any negative contact with the university had a significant impact on motivation.
- Unrealistic expectations. The majority of students interviewed had very unrealistic expectations about tertiary study. More than half the students interviewed worked at least 30 hours per week, were studying by flex and were enrolled in at least three courses per term.
- Reluctance to seek help. The majority of students interviewed were reluctant to seek help or to persist in seeking help. Only 12% of students stated that they sought help once they were aware that they had a problem or had failed.

Students who were interviewed expressed relief and appreciation that this intervention was occurring.

The following vignette (adapted from McKavanagh, Agar-Wilson & Clifford, 2005) provides a very realistic story of a student attempting his study journey:

> *I am a male student in my mid 30s. I have been enrolled in three courses per term for three terms and have passed less than 50% of these in each term. The flexible mode did not suit my learning style. I worked about 34 hours per week and tried to spend about 10 hours per week on study—I do not see my work hours necessarily as disadvantaging my ability to succeed at study. I did have difficulty linking theory to the practice and this affected my being able to write assignments properly. I consider that I was reasonably prepared for university—I had attended a short prep course at TAFE. The study program wasn't often harder than expected and I am fairly confident in my ability to succeed with tertiary study. I did have difficulty contacting staff at the university which made it harder for me to get help with the theory questions I had. I didn't take action when I first realised that fails were imminent—though I did speak to another student I knew doing the course. I've decided to withdraw at the moment and reconsider next year.*

This student accepted referrals to a course advisor and careers counsellor.

"Staying at Uni" telephone interviews

After three terms of interviewing students who had failed and the subsequent analysis of interview data, Student Services staff hypothesised that if the structured interview intervention occurred as students commenced university it may assist in addressing the three themes which students were noting were reasons for their failing grades. Another observation that interviewers wished to test was that, once students had begun to fail significantly (as 50% or more fails represented), it appeared to be more difficult to turn this around. Staff were interested to test interventions at an earlier stage of the student journey prior to problems emerging. That is, preventative measures were considered to be more appropriate than attempting cures after the event.

A commencing student target group based on the findings from the "fail" interviews was chosen to reflect those who may potentially be unrealistic about what they could achieve—that is, students newly enrolled who were studying in the off-campus mode and enrolled in three or more courses. Questions were structured to test further the aspects of unrealistic expectations (for example, the number of hours worked), the ability to maintain motivation and the perceived readiness to seek help. During Weeks 2 and 3 of Terms One and Two 2005, the "Staying At Uni" project progressed, with telephone interviews conducted with 329 new students fitting the criteria of studying in the off-campus mode and enrolled in three or more courses. As noted, this group represented those believed to be likely to have the most difficulty in achieving satisfactory academic progress.

During the "Staying at Uni" telephone interviews with the 329 target group students, Student Services staff were able to troubleshoot a whole range of issues at an early stage. These issues included formalising referrals to the faculty, prompting students to build a support plan into their everyday lives and assessing which students with whom to remain in formal contact during their first term. While Student Services instigated the telephone contact, all the interviews were voluntary. All students with whom contact was made greeted the structured contact very positively and welcomed the links to faculty and other support areas that were established for them. These students reported that the early intervention helped them to have a more relaxed and positive attitude as they began at university, as well as assisting them to prepare for a successful academic outcome (Mallory, Munro & McKavanagh, 2006).

The preliminary results of the "Staying at Uni" calls

Student Services continued to monitor the progress of this group of students throughout 2005 and 2006. Results compared very favourably with the outcomes of the "Monitoring Academic Progress" students who had been interviewed and supported once failure had already occurred. For example, compared with the students interviewed after they had failed, a greater percentage of this early intervention group changed their decision about the number of courses that they would take per term; a greater percentage took constructive actions before census date; and a greater percentage remained in contact with the university or pursued the referral prompted during the interview (for example, a referral to learning support). A greater percentage of the early intervention group also flagged that, after the interview discussion, they intended to adjust work/other commitment hours and be more rigorous in timetabling study. These comments have not been re-evaluated; however, interviewers found it interesting that it was more difficult to gain this intended commitment from the students interviewed after fails had occurred. The more persistent and long-term the fails, the more difficult it seemed to be for students to turn this around and the more resource intensive it is for the university to respond.

Developing and using the SRQ

The interview data from students outlined above provided rich background information for the Student Journey Reference group and the related working party as it considered ways in which to assist students early in their student journey. The working party worked closely with staff in Student Services and drew upon their extensive experience and expertise with regard to identifying students at risk of not making satisfactory progress and ways to support these students. Drawing particularly upon the lessons from the analysis of the interview data outlined above, it was determined that knowing more about students upon enrolment would provide early information to facilitate interventions.

As a result, a draft SRQ of about 20 questions was developed using some of the questions from the structured questionnaire from the interviews described above. Sample questions are listed in Appendix 1. A student's response to each question is given a weighting so that a total score can be determined. The higher the score, the more at risk of possible academic failure a student will possibly be. The draft SRQ underwent several iterations as a result of feedback from the working party and the Student Learning Journey reference group. The revised questionnaire was then presented to that reference group where there has been general support for its implementation. It is intended to use the SRQ with all commencing students as they complete their enrolment. The first trial of the use of the SRQ is proposed for Term 2 2007.

Once the data from the SRQ are available, it is critical to use that information effectively to support students in their learning journey. The focus becomes on how to use the data effectively to inform decisions about particular intervention strategies to support student learning. The data from the SRQ will be provided to relevant areas in the university, including faculties and support areas. This will then inform the various intervention strategies that will be used to support students in their learning. Strategies will include a number of existing ones such as learning skills support, mentoring and study groups (face-to-face and virtual as necessary), as well as new ones such as specific modules that students can complete when they confirm their enrolment, designed to develop their knowledge and skills in areas of identified need (for example, in information literacy, science literacy and writing in an academic genre). It will be important for the various areas of the university to use the data in informed ways and take specific steps to intervene early to support student success in their studies. As noted previously, the focus is on prevention in addition to cure.

Conclusion

The literature and the interview data indicate that early intervention in a student's learning journey at university supports more successful academic outcomes. In the monitoring of students at risk project, it was found that students who were identified as potentially at risk of failing and assisted to be more realistic about how they could balance study and other life commitments, for example by changing or reducing courses and/or remaining in contact with their allocated support person, were more successful. Rather than waiting until students fail courses and then attempting to intervene, the SRQ data will be used to profile students and make early interventions to support academic success. The results of the early structured interviews showed that that cohort of students acted on the discussion and recommendations provided. For example, they remained in contact with university staff and they adjusted their number of enrolled courses to realistic working loads. The SRQ should add greatly to the information that the university normally collects about students when they enrol. Its targeted profiling of each student's preparedness for university studies will mean that we have a great deal more information that can inform decisions about interventions to support student learning and success in their university studies. Future research will examine the extent to which the SRQ is useful in providing appropriate information about the profiles of beginning students that can inform various intervention strategies.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix 1: Student readiness questionnaire example questions

Intended Program of study ………………………………………………..

1. **How long is it since you last studied?**

   1–2yrs ☐   **3–4yrs** ☐

   5–7yrs ☐   **8–10yrs** ☐

   Over 10yrs ☐

2. **Have you participated in any preparatory program/other bridging program to assist you to prepare for university study?**

   Y ☐   **N** ☐

   If yes please indicate which program you participated in.

   TAFE ☐

   WIST ☐

   STEPS ☐

   TEP ☐

   OTHER (Please state)

   ....

3. **How many courses (subjects) do you intend to enrol in during your first term at university?**

   1 ☐   **2** ☐   **3** ☐   **4** ☐   **5** ☐

4. **How many hours a week do you intend to devote to study for <u>each subject</u> you will be undertaking?**

   1–4 ☐   **5–9** ☐   **10–14** ☐   **15 or more** ☐

5. **Do you have adequate access to the Internet for your studies?**

   Y ☐   **N** ☐

6. **How would you rate your basic computer skills?**

Word processing	**poor**	☐	**reasonable**	☐	**good**	☐
Email	**poor**	☐	**reasonable**	☐	**good**	☐
Internet	**poor**	☐	**reasonable**	☐	**good**	☐

7. **Have you put things in place to ensure that your study is given priority?**

   Y ☐   **N** ☐

   What sort of measures or actions have you put in place?

   …………………………………………………………………….…………….

   …………………………………………………………………….……………..

   …………………………………………………………………………………..

8. **If you intend to undertake part-time or full-time paid work whilst being a student, please indicate the number of hours you will be working per week.**

0–5	☐	**6–10**	☐
11–15	☐	**16–20**	☐
21–25	☐	**26–30**	☐
31–35	☐	**36–40**	☐
		Over 40	☐

9. **Will purchasing your textbooks/other study material be a financial strain for you?**

   Considerable strain ☐

   Moderate strain ☐

   Minor strain ☐

   No strain

10. **Will you need to change addresses or move towns in order to undertake your study at CQU?**

    Y ☐   **N** ☐

11. With reference to your intended study, please indicate by ticking the relevant boxes <u>any</u> of the following areas where you may require support or assistance.

Essay/Assignment writing	☐
English skills	☐
Referencing for assignments	☐
Maths based skills	☐
Computer literacy and information technology skills	☐
Science based skills	☐
Exam anxiety	☐
Library search skills	☐
Time management	☐
Study skills	☐

Other support needs—please specify

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