Toolkit for success: The Griffith Health suite of online student support resources. A Practice Report

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Abstract*

In the current higher education climate, never has it been more imperative to promote early and ongoing student success and retention. Transition theory suggests that taking a coherent, scalable and holistic approach to supporting the student learning experience is the best way to scaffold and enable early success and persistence. Utilising this pedagogical approach, Griffith Health has designed and implemented a range of innovative, online resources to support the needs of undergraduate and postgraduate students as they transition across the student lifecycle. This 'toolkit for success' includes school-specific orientation websites, a targeted writing and referencing online guide, and a 'one-stop-shop' resource where students can quickly and easily connect with all of the support services and resources available across the University. Analytics data show the support resources are being very well accessed and utilised, with staff and student feedback also highlighting their effectiveness and value.

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Introduction

Within the current Australian political and educational context, two highly topical areas demanding significant attention are student success and retention. Successful transition into higher education plays a crucial role in creating a landscape that supports student success and encourages persistence (Hughes & Smail, 2015; Nelson, Smith, & Clarke, 2012; Wilson et al., 2016). As such, finding ways to foster early, and continued, support for student success, engagement, and retention is pivotal. Current transition theory indicates that commencing students must navigate a range of challenging issues in relation to academic, social, and personal aspects of the new student experience (Hughes & Smail, 2015; Kift & Nelson, 2005; Nelson et al., 2012). In order to successfully support students through this often anxiety-provoking process, recent research suggests that educational institutions should take a holistic, systematic approach to facilitating the 'first year experience' (Egea & McKenzie, 2012; Nelson et al., 2012), focusing on embedding scalable and sustainable strategies that enhance the student learning experience and promote academic and social integration, active participation, and academic support (Kift & Nelson, 2005; Maher & Macallister, 2013).

In recognition of this, the transition and success team at Griffith Health (Griffith University) have developed and implemented a suite of innovative, online resources to provide early and ongoing assistance to undergraduate and postgraduate students to support their progression across the student lifecycle. Specifically, the 'toolkit' of resources provides systematic and practical support for students to: (i) enable successful orientation into the University learning environment; (ii) facilitate the development of confident academic writing and referencing skills; and (iii) allow quick, easy, and timely access to relevant support services and resources offered across the University.

Grounded within Lizzio's (2006) *Five Senses of Success* framework, this online suite of support tools has been designed specifically to enable students to connect with and develop their senses of purpose and student identity and become increasingly independent, resourceful, confident, and capable learners. Within a broader context, these initiatives are embedded within a model focused on maximising the student experience by implementing curricular and co-curricular strategies at deliberate points across the student lifecycle to support *orientation and transition*, *connectedness*, *academic confidence and success,* and *employability and career readiness*.

Rationale

In line with Kift (2008), each of the initiatives was designed specifically to provide integrated, coordinated, and intentional support to aid the successful transition and ongoing engagement and academic success of undergraduate and postgraduate students, studying both in the on-campus and online environment. Building on earlier work (e.g. Smyth & Lodge, 2012), they utilise online technologies based on smart design principles to connect students with targeted, 'just-in-time' information, resources, and support. By housing key resources and materials in one place, each initiative alleviates issues related to information overload and unnecessary bureaucratic processes and assists students to feel more confident and prepared to enter the tertiary learning environment. These are important factors to address when taking a strategic approach to supporting student transition and success (Kift, 2008).

Outline of resources

Online orientation websites

Informed by commencing student survey feedback, conducted across the University and within the Health group, the first set of resources in the 'toolkit' are ten school-specific

orientation websites, each containing program-specific information and details of school-based, on-campus orientation events or links to orientation 'Collaborate' sessions for online students. The sites also contain additional resources and tools, such as student stories and Program Director welcome videos and videos to inform students on what to expect in their first few weeks, how to succeed at university, and how to confidently navigate the different online learning environments. Resources to assist with time management and early study skill preparedness are also provided to bolster academic confidence and readiness. In addition, program-specific, career summary documents are supplied to enable informed reflection on career direction and future employability and encourage students to make an early connection with their sense of purpose for being at university. Students gain access to their school-specific online orientation websites via two mechanisms, a button link embedded in the University's main computer management system (myGriffith) and a direct URL link provided via direct SMS/email during pre-orientation outreach.

Writing and referencing guide website

With findings from an internal transition audit indicating that writing and referencing assignment tasks was one of the top five academic challenges reported by commencing Griffith Health students, the *Griffith Health Writing and Referencing Guide[1]* was created to provide a tool to enable ongoing confidence and success in this arena. Specifically, the resource provides comprehensive and accessible guidance for students to assist with academic writing, referencing, and assignment formatting. Tailored modules are included on writing format and structure, editing and proof-reading, using evidence, and academic integrity,

in addition to a comprehensive bank of information and resources on APA format and referencing requirements. Supplementary learning tools, such as e-tutorials, checklists, downloadable annotated exemplars, and self-paced quizzes are also embedded throughout the resource to enrich the learning experience. The site also provides the consistent set of assignment formatting guidelines required for all Griffith Health assignments. Material is provided both in text and audio formats to cater to diverse learning needs. To enable easy access to this academic support resource, a link to the website is provided inside every undergraduate, postgraduate, and offshore Griffith Health Blackboard (LMS) course site.

Student support health resources bank

Enabling students to identify and engage with appropriate, 'just-in-time' support is essential to facilitating ongoing student success. With feedback highlighting that students (and staff) find navigating the university online systems complex and often discouraging, the need for an interface to assist students to investigate and connect with appropriate support services and resources was recognised. This prompted the development of the third resource for the 'toolkit', the *Student Support Health Resources Bank*. Based on the outcomes of a university-wide audit, all sources of student support and referral across the group and University were identified. A student-friendly, visually dynamic design interface was then created to enable fast connection with every resource available in relation to academic, personal, social, employability, financial, administrative, cultural, and technical support. The site enables users to access all aspects of a support service in one place, with connections to all aspects associated with each support resource designed to be 'one click away' (e.g., making an online

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[1] Griffith Health Writing and Referencing Guide https://sites.google.com/a/griffith.edu.au/griffith-health-writing-and-referencing-guide/

booking with a counsellor or library learning specialist, connecting directly with a 24/7 online tutoring service, or downloading free software). A link to the tool is now embedded inside all Griffith Health Blackboard course sites, with a navigation video also distributed to showcase the resource to both staff and students.

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Outcomes

Analytics data and student and staff feedback on each resource show demonstrated evidence of their success. For example, current admissions data and website analytics for the School of Nursing and Midwifery Orientation website suggest that as of mid-January 2018, up to 60% of commencing students entering nursing and midwifery programs in Trimester 1, 2018 had accessed the site since major round offers commenced prior to December 2017, with 'Getting Ready for Week 1' resources being the most widely accessed by students. By the commencement of classes approximately one month later, the School of Nursing and Midwifery Orientation website had logged 1581 new users, 3056 sessions and 10,603-page views, with an average session duration of 3:24 minutes. Qualitative feedback from students on the orientation websites has also been positive: *"website is great", "very clear and straight forward", "great step by step guide", "website well-structured and easy to navigate", "not overcrowded with information"* and *"a helpful, informative and fun website".*

Since being implemented in mid-2016, the *Griffith Health Writing and Referencing Guide* has been extremely successful and widely utilised, with current analytics showing 94,918 sessions, 29,385 users, 397,105-page views, and an average session duration of 5:42 minutes. The site is freely available and accessible and is now utilised by partner institutions and other universities around Australia. Analytics also indicate that the site is being widely accessed by external users from across the globe.

Early analytics data on the newest toolkit resource, the *Student Support Health Resources Bank*, show the site is being well utilised, with 2343 new users, 2716 sessions, and 4422-page views since going 'live' inside Blackboard course sites in November 2017. Unsolicited feedback from staff has also been extremely positive, *"Just had to send a quick email to say I*

think the resource is fantastic. Navigation is so easy and for a student, it must be so much easier to have all of the support information in one place". With the recent release of the new video showcasing this resource (which has already had 619 views as of March 2018) and active promotion by staff across the group and University, utilisation of the resource is predicted to increase significantly.

Analytics data and staff and student feedback will continue to be collected to assess the utilisation and impact of the toolkit of resources.

Implications for Practice

While the data shows that students are engaging with the toolkit resources, closer scrutiny of student access and usage patterns does reveal some important lessons. Analytics clearly indicate that the *Griffith Health Writing and Referencing Guide* is the most widely and repeatedly used support resource. While it must be stated that this resource has been available for the longest period of time, a sharp increase in popularity and access was observed when the homepage of the website was redesigned so that all modules and topics contained in each of the sections of the site were clearly displayed and accessible on the homepage (rather than having to click into a module link to view and access the specific topic resources contained within). Having this resource easily accessible in every Blackboard course site was also central to its success. Regular patterns of use at 'assessment heavy' points in the trimester were also evident, showing that once students knew about the resource (and where they could find it), they were accessing it at predictable times each trimester.

It was also evident that regular promotion of the toolkit resources is crucial, preferably at just-in-time points in the lifecycle, to maximise connection with each support. This is particularly important for new resources, such as the *Student Support Health Resources Bank*, with analytics showing that once regular advertisements to students and staff ceased (after the start of trimester), access to the site showed a steep decline. It also takes time to 'get the word out', so a deliberate, ongoing, and multi-faceted marketing strategy is necessary to promote the utility and value of each resource as well as demonstrate how and where it can be accessed.

The orientation websites were the hardest for students (and staff) to easily access, as they were a 'point-in-time' resource and as such, were deliberately not embedded as a permanent link in Blackboard course sites. As such, connecting students with these resources relied heavily on students either accessing the link embedded in their student portal and/or engaging with the link sent by their school during their pre-orientation outreach process. Again, analytics data and student feedback indicated that students accessed and engaged most in the orientation websites for schools who engaged in a dedicated strategy of planned and repeated outreach to students to link them with their school-based orientation website.

In Australia, the recently published Higher Education Standards Panel Final Report (2018) on improving retention, completion, and success has recommended that every institution, as part of a comprehensive retention strategy, offer students a suite of support services. The need to reflect on these implications to inform future practice to better enable connection and engagement with the Toolkit resources has therefore never been more imperative.

Conclusion

Within the current context of higher education, student success and retention are two priority areas receiving increasing attention. As such, embedding initiatives to bolster these important indicators is crucial. Taking a holistic

approach, Griffith Health has created a comprehensive 'toolkit' of resources to support the early and ongoing transition and success of students. Analytics data and qualitative feedback show these support resources to be widely utilised and well received by University stakeholders. Ongoing evaluation is planned to assess the continued impact of the toolkit resources as effective enablers of student success and persistence.

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