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The secret of excellence in student services - a case example of cross-institution collaboration and cooperation

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Editorial

Welcome to the first edition of the 'new look' JANZSSA! Regular readers will notice the shift from the A5 format to a more contemporary A4 format. We hope that you will approve of the change and find that within its pages, JANZSSA offers as much as ever it did before. We are pleased to include a new section on 'Best Practice' and with the help of your contributions we hope to make it a regular feature. The aim is to encourage the sharing of ideas, programs and innovations that are working well or which highlight aspects of change in contemporary delivery of student services. You will also see the addition of a Book Review. We will be looking for volunteer book reviewers for future editions, so please give this some thought also.

The past few months have been extremely dramatic and challenging ones for many of our colleagues. In New Zealand, so many have been affected by the devastating Christchurch earthquake, which has impacted on students, their families and staff around the country. Also, in Queensland, NSW, Victoria, WA and NT, colleagues have endured floods, cyclones and bushfires. We know that many of our readers are still dealing with the aftermath, supporting students through the crises resulting from these events, as well as dealing with the impact of these challenging natural disasters on their own lives, including serious injury, loss of homes and even worse, the death of loved ones. In recognition of these events, we are dedicating this edition of JANZSSA to all those who have been affected by these natural disasters. Our thoughts go out to those who have suffered, as well as our hopes for better days ahead.

The articles in this edition of JANZSSA are many and diverse. Within the refereed section we have articles that focus on equity issues as well as student mental health. Both are timely topics, with Government driven equity agendas being a major focus for both the Australian and New Zealand tertiary education sectors. The increase in awareness of mental health issues for post-secondary students is very much a fact of life for those working in Student Services across New Zealand and Australia. Continued research on the health and wellbeing of students will enable post-secondary educational institutions to be able to respond effectively and with best practice to the emerging needs of students.

Within the non-refereed section there are several papers that were presented at the NSW/ACT ANZSSA regional conference in December 2010 on various aspects of practice, as well as a thought-provoking paper on the pitfalls of e-learning. Also included are two ANZSSA endorsed reports on Counselling Services in post-secondary education. These will be of particular interest to those who work in or closely with counselling services.

The October edition is planned to focus on the themes of 'recovery and rebuilding'. Submissions on this topic are invited and you are encouraged to share your stories, experiences, strategies and research pertinent to this theme. You are also invited to submit articles on research, programs and initiatives that are examples of emerging or changing practice as well as strategies that have stood the test of time and that remain applicable.

We hope you will enjoy this full and varied edition of JANZSSA.

Cathy Stone
Annie Andrews
Co-editors, JANZSSA

The Secret of Excellence in Student Services – A Case Example of Cross-Institution Collaboration and Cooperation

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With grateful acknowledgement to
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Abstract

This paper presents a case example of one institution helping another in the development of innovative on-line student programs. The story of how this came about is an example of effective cross-institution collaboration and cooperation in Student Services. It is through such examples of sharing ideas and working together that Student Services can continue to support the growth and development of students across different institutions, and hence sustain excellence.

How it all started - hearing about *Back on Track*

www.backontrack.unsw.edu.au

At the ANZSSA 2008 NSW/ACT Regional Conference at Burradoo, Student Services staff from the University of Newcastle (UoN) attended a presentation by Annie Andrews and David Said, from the University of New South Wales (UNSW), about an innovative program, called *Back on Track* (Andrews & Said, 2008). This was being offered through the UNSW Counselling Service to students with the aim of assisting them to enhance their academic success.

At that time, the University of Newcastle had recently established a fledgling "Transition & Retention Unit", and the Student Services staff involved with this, Cathy Stone and Sarah O'Shea, were looking for ways to connect with students on-line, assist with their successful transition to university & improve retention. They were aware that providing opportunities to maximise academic success can be a crucial part of this process. They were therefore very impressed and interested in the *Back on Track* program, which offered students a way of engaging with support services, both academic and personal, through a series of on-line quizzes and information.

Across the university sector, approximately 20% of the total student population leaves before completing their studies and 22.4% leave in the first year (Lukic, Broadbent & Maclachlan, 2004). The *Back on Track* program seemed to offer a new way of reaching out to students before they lose heart and leave. At the University of Newcastle, Cathy had earlier that year been successful in being granted some equity funds for Student Services to run a student exit survey. Both Cathy and Sarah had been closely involved with the development and implementation of this survey, which examined the reasons for students leaving in their first year of study, particularly those students identified by postcode as coming from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds.

The results of this survey indicated that students who left had an awareness of support services, but a limited knowledge of the types of services offered. It also revealed that overall usage of Support Services was low

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across the sample and that few (11.2%) students consulted university staff before departing. With the University of Newcastle having higher than national averages of students from low SES backgrounds, as well as a high proportion of students with disability and of rural students (AUQA Performance Portfolio, 2007) there was a significant need to improve access to support for at-risk students. Given the high numbers of students potentially at-risk, an on-line option was being considered.

Much excited conversation was held following Annie and David's presentation, with Cathy and Sarah eager to pick their brains and to seek collaboration and permission to adapt *Back on Track* to meet the needs of University of Newcastle students. It was directly through the willingness of UNSW staff, Annie Andrews and her team, to collaborate and share ideas that an expanded program called *Connect 2 Success* was subsequently developed and implemented at the University of Newcastle. This on-line self-help program offers a stepped model of support and is particularly targeted at those students who may be academically at risk and / or who may not traditionally engage with student support services.

Development of Connect 2 Success

www.connect2success@newcastle.edu.au

It has to be said that the development of *Connect 2 Success* was made so much easier and more effective by a huge stroke of coincidence and good fortune for the University of Newcastle. This was the fact that David Said, the counsellor involved with *Back on Track*, happened to be moving to Newcastle to undertake postgraduate studies. Not only that, but he was willing to work part-time with Sarah O'Shea in the Transition & Retention Unit, helping to adapt *Back on Track* in order to create a similar program. This in itself of course meant that the collaboration between UNSW and UoN in the development of the program was virtually seamless.

Funding

One initial obstacle to employing David and getting the ball rolling was, of course, funding – or lack of! However, on the strength of the findings from the Student Exit Survey, the UoN Student Support Unit was able to apply for further equity funding, through the Higher Education Equity Support Program (HEESP) that operated at that time. Fortunately this was approved, and sufficient funds were granted to enable the Transition & Retention Unit to employ additional staff on contract to undertake two projects.

The first project was to examine ways to support the transition of university students from the identified equity group of low SES, hence improving the retention rate and academic progress of these students. The second related project was to improve the early identification of students academically 'at risk'; and to adapt and implement an intervention program (*Connect to Success*) over a trial period of the 2009 academic year, to assist such students.

It was through these project funds that David was employed, as well as two other part-time staff members to work on the broader aspects of the projects. As a result, the successful gestation and birth of *Connect 2 Success* at UoN – inspired by and based on *Back on Track* at UNSW – was realised.

Connect 2 Success Program – what is it?

Connect 2 Success (C2S) is now in its third year of operation. It utilises an interactive website to engage students in help-seeking behaviour to improve their academic results. The program is designed to target students at academic risk but remains open to all students of the University of Newcastle. Students can peruse the C2S website, take part in interactive quizzes which focus on common problem areas faced by students, or request further support from the C2S Program. Students requesting support can join a mailing list for fortnightly motivational emails or engage with a C2S student advisor via email, telephone or face to face. It aims to engage students who don't traditionally use support services, provides a stepped care model of support and utilises both web and email technology. The tone of the website language is friendly, relaxed and engaging. Through close liaison with Student Administration staff it also targets specific groups of students, including those deemed academically at-risk as well as those who may not be officially at-risk but who have perhaps failed a subject, missed classes and so on. Via this targeting, early identification and intervention emails are sent with the aim of engaging the student before these difficulties become too great.

Various levels of engagement with students include:

- Online self help – website links and information
- Online request for support
- Online personalised feedback via email
- Ongoing fortnightly motivational emails
- Appointment with a *Connect 2 Success* advisor, via telephone or face to face

Connect 2 Success advisors are student assistants who have previously been student mentors within the University of Newcastle's SOS Program (Stone, 2000). They are competitively selected and appointed to the role and undergo a training program covering topics such as their role; boundaries; engagement; communication skills; ethics; and referral processes.

The program is actively marketed to students, academics and administrative/professional staff through such means as post-it notes (for academics to stick onto assignments etc), bookmarks, presentations to lecturers and tutors at Faculty and School meetings, as well as specially printed lunch-bags and drink coasters at the canteens and other food/bar outlets on campus. The latest marketing is even venturing into Twitter.

At this stage, the *Connect 2 Success* website receives several thousand visits per month, while over 500 students have signed up for the fortnightly motivational emails, which include topics such as goal setting, planning, writing tips, acknowledging achievements and so on. They are designed to be short, succinct, and to contain links to services and other information.

A recent online survey seeking student feedback about *Connect 2 Success* achieved a 30% participation rate (thanks to a gift voucher prize for participating). Feedback was very positive, with 92% of respondents reporting *Connect 2 Success* as helpful. 52% of respondents were from the low SES cohort, and there was a significant number of international students who responded.

Collaboration continues

The opportunity to do a joint presentation between UNSW staff and UoN staff at the ANZSSA 2010 Regional NSW/ACT conference at Burradoo, brought the wheel full circle. Some of the original people involved – Cathy, Sarah, David – had moved on to other places and new staff had taken up responsibility for the two programs. Melissa Moore was now responsible for *Connect 2 Success* at UoN, and Allison Cahill responsible for *Back on Track* at UNSW. This joint presentation enabled all involved, both past and present, to review and reflect upon what had occurred, how it had occurred, where both programs were at now and where the relevant staff wished to try to take them. It also provided the opportunity to consider ways of continuing to collaborate, to learn from each others' experiences and to share knowledge and skills.

Back on Track has set itself some specific goals, which include shifting the focus towards enhancing academic performance, rather than counselling, in order to reduce any potential stigma and encourage more students to participate. Other goals include improving ways to:

- assist students to identify barriers to academic success and develop plans to overcome these barriers
- provide supportive motivation
- help to normalise difficulties
- point students in the right direction for assistance

Some of the planned strategies to achieve these goals, funding permitting, include expanding the program; increasing the number of participants; further developing the website and the resources; introducing an interactive website; and offering a weekly support group.

Connect 2 Success plans to seek ways in which to attract more males to the program (respondents to the survey were mainly females) as well as to assess students' grade point average pre and post involvement with the program. For both programs, ways to achieve ongoing and adequate funding is something that constantly needs to be considered.

Collaboration between the key players, across both institutions, will undoubtedly continue in order to achieve the goals towards which both services are aiming. While this is just one case study of two separate yet related programs, ultimately there is a lesson to be learnt from this story. It illustrates that, through the process of cross-institution collaboration and cooperation, achieving and sustaining excellence in Student Services can indeed become a more achievable reality.

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