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NRL Graduates of League @ Western Sydney University: Evaluation Report

Jioji Ravulo

University of Wollongong, jioji@uow.edu.au

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NRL Graduates of League @ Western Sydney University: Evaluation Report

Abstract

Australian culture has long celebrated its sporting heroes as role models and inspirational figures, embodying the hard-work ethic of its people. Given the prowess of some of our top athletes, it is little wonder that many younger players aspire to these same levels of professionalism and athleticism in their own careers. It is also well recognised that one false move can drastically alter an athlete's life, seen perhaps most potently in the experience of Alex McKinnon, where one tragic tackle rendered him paralysed (Connell, July 4, 2015). Although this is an extreme example, such realities have prompted younger and older athletes alike to contemplate what life after sports consists of, with many considering the place of higher education as a required "prudence for the future" (Cosh and Tully, 2014, p.184). Undertaking further education whilst being an elite athlete has become something of an expectation for elite athletes over the past few years (Hickey and Kelly, 2008). Combining the worlds of education and elite athleticism is emotionally, socially, mentally and, of course, physically demanding. It is therefore incumbent upon higher education providers alongside coaches, parents and friends of athletes to encourage integration and provide backing in both fields. For the purposes of this report, National Rugby League (NRL) student-athletes that have taken part in the Graduates of League Program through the Western Sydney University will be discussed. This program seeks to support players from clubs across the National Rugby League in their higher education pursuits in Australian universities and colleges. The program consists of a range of support services for these athletes, including peer mentoring, and social support enhancement between NRL clubs, coaches and players. Data from student-athletes and their peer tutors have been analysed, revealing the effectiveness of the program and areas of perceived need for this unique student population.

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WESTERN SYDNEY
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NRL GRADUATES OF LEAGUE @ WESTERN SYDNEY UNIVERSITY

Evaluation Report

September 2015



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Project Manager & Academic Head:
Dr. Jioji Ravulo
Head Peer Tutor: Matthew Schild
Evaluation Support: Shannon Said
School of Social Sciences & Psychology
WESTERN SYDNEY UNIVERSITY

Welfare & Education Manager:
Paul Heptonstall
Graduate of League Manager: Dr Sam Jebeile
NATIONAL RUGBY LEAGUE

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Introduction

Australian culture has long celebrated its sporting heroes as role models and inspirational figures, embodying the hard-work ethic of its people. Given the prowess of some of our top athletes, it is little wonder that many younger players aspire to these same levels of professionalism and athleticism in their own careers. It is also well recognised that one false move can drastically alter an athlete's life, seen perhaps most potently in the experience of Alex McKinnon, where one tragic tackle rendered him paralysed (Connell, July 4, 2015). Although this is an extreme example, such realities have prompted younger and older athletes alike to contemplate what life after sports consists of, with many considering the place of higher education as a required "prudence for the future" (Cosh and Tully, 2014, p.184). Undertaking further education whilst being an elite athlete has become something of an expectation for elite athletes over the past few years (Hickey and Kelly, 2008). Combining

the worlds of education and elite athleticism is emotionally, socially, mentally and, of course, physically demanding. It is therefore incumbent upon higher education providers alongside coaches, parents and friends of athletes to encourage integration and provide backing in both fields. For the purposes of this report, National Rugby League (NRL) student-athletes that have taken part in the Graduates of League Program through the Western Sydney University will be discussed. This program seeks to support players from clubs across the National Rugby League in their higher education pursuits in Australian universities and colleges. The program consists of a range of support services for these athletes, including peer mentoring, and social support enhancement between NRL clubs, coaches and players. Data from student-athletes and their peer tutors have been analysed, revealing the effectiveness of the program and areas of perceived need for this unique student population.

Literature Review

PROFESSIONALISM, SPORTING CAREERS AND FURTHER EDUCATION

Research undertaken in Australia has emphasised the changing face of sporting professionalism in the Australian Football League (AFL), where the idea of a professional identity demands athletes having a “prudent orientation to the future” (Hickey and Kelly, 2005, p.1, Hickey and Kelly, 2008, p.481) – a means of employment after sporting retirement through further education. This development of ‘prudence’ is not “natural”, but evolves through “professional development”, just as in any other profession (ibid). This phenomenon is considered an important part of self-care for such players, and funding goes towards workshops and other programs to make players aware of the opportunities they have (p.6), in order to promote holistic development of the “Mind, Body, and Soul” (Hickey and Kelly, 2008, p.478).

For young AFL players who have only just been drafted into a team, the unrelenting pressure from coaches to perform at their peak can come at the expense of all other activities – even a meaningful commitment to further education. Coaches expressed the need for players to maintain balanced lives, that is, having other activities aside from football, “anything to counter the ‘Playstation Syndrome’ that witnesses players struggling to fill their days with activities other than training and video games” (2005, p.6). These coaches are not encouraging active participation in education per se, but rather encourage studying for a qualification as it is a *distraction from* football. This lack of positive reinforcement towards players’ studies as *studies* does nothing to prepare them for life after football, and can create a sense of tension and frustration between the expectations of the coach and their own desire to complete further education (pp.8-9). One member of coaching staff stated that the main purpose of the player is, unsurprisingly, to play football, “but if they aren’t getting a kick they’re going to come under pressure... we’re in the business of producing a successful football team and no matter what else we do, it’s the success of our team that is going to judge us” (ibid, pp. 8-9).

This attitude, which ostensibly promotes ‘prudent’ activities for the future, actually inhibits student athletes through the ever-increasing demands placed upon players. As a result, any meaningful attempt at TAFE or university is fraught with difficulty. Hickey and Kelly report that players, especially in their early careers, had a strong desire to take part in further education, though the rigour of training schedules leaves them without any

physical or mental strength to enrol in and maintain their studies (pp.9-10): “So strong was the emphasis [on physical conditioning in the first year of drafting] that many found it very difficult to devote reasonable energy to other pursuits, such as study and relationships” (p.9).

In some contexts, coaches have also been considered a stressor where they did not empathise with the (especially educational) requirements of the student (Cosh and Tully, 2015, p.125). Coaches that did not provide much flexibility and demanded “too great a time commitment” (ibid) from students were perceived to inhibit their ability to do well in their educational pursuits: “Repeatedly, athletes reported their beliefs that the time commitment required by their coaches was too large for them to be able to successfully complete their study requirements” (ibid). Indeed, in some American institutions, coaches were unaware of some of the services that their student-athletes had available to them, making any sort of integration between sporting and academic pursuits implausible (Keim and Strickland, 2004).

To be fair, some student-athletes focussed solely on sport at the expense of their education. Some were initially disappointed with their final school results, but they were willing to make this sacrifice for the opportunity to play at this elite level (Hickey and Kelly, 2005, p.10). The insistent pressure from coaches, however, does nothing to promote a genuine balance between football and other pursuits. This “chance to make it” (ibid, p.11) was therefore esteemed above all else for these athletes, which was heavily exploited by their coaches. Hickey and Kelly further recognise the need for maintaining balance in players’ lives, and that there be specific “education and training programs that are attuned to [players’] needs and interests... [and] the need for a deeper understanding of the reasons why so many players drop out of or fail courses” (2005, p.11).

At the same time, there is a trend for some of these elite athletes to attend universities or further education institutions not because of an innate desire to do so, but because of the expectations and recommendations of clubs, spurred on by “prudence” that is becoming a buzz word in student-athlete discourse (Hickey and Kelly, 2008, p. 478). Professional players’ lives are, by and large, commercial pursuits for media companies, who make impossible players’ anonymity: “Indeed, many of the elite performers in different industries have evolved into celebrities: they exist as images, icons and brands whose every thought, action, change of style or partner

is commodified and consumed (ibid, p.479). These pressures are driven by the need for media organisations to “generate content that will drive sales, increase audience numbers, or lift circulation” (ibid), effectively making each player “a particular sort of brand” (ibid). This sense of exposure can make it difficult for players, particularly those in their early careers, to genuinely engage with higher education (ibid). In a career that maintains an average career lifespan of just 2.9 years of 34 games (p.481), this cripples young athletes’ abilities to create a secure future.

Despite the difficulty of juggling sporting professionalism and further education, there is a recognition that those who learn how to balance them actually perform better in both fields, with one student-athlete stating: “After a couple of years of development football began to make sense in terms of work, preparation and performance – the same with university study...this development meant that he became consistently successful in both areas. His performance on and off the field was enhanced by this successful balancing of different parts of his life” (Hickey and Kelly, 2008, p.490). It is further claimed that 80% of players participate in some form of higher education, though not necessarily sustained (ibid, p.492). This ‘prudence’ is becoming a noticeable trend in many sports, and is shifting the definition of a ‘professional’ sportsman: “Be it AFL, NBA, NFL, Premier League and beyond, the contemporary sports entertainment industry has generated new expectations about the behaviours and activities that serve to identify a person / player as professional (Giulianotti, 2004)” (ibid).

PSYCHOSOCIAL FACTORS FOR STUDENT - ATHLETES

STRESSORS

Several factors contribute to student-athletes experiencing and coping with the stresses that arise from their dual careers. Specific kinds of support networks are deemed necessary for them to progress in their chosen sporting fields whilst maintaining university study (Cosh and Tully, 2015). A balance between sporting and educational pursuits is now requisite for athletes’ futures, and “sacrificing educational achievements... [can] potentially [leave] athletes without clear career paths” (ibid, p.120), which increases financial pressures and anxiety, especially when transitioning to retirement (ibid). The pressures of the sporting field can also intrude upon other areas of a student’s life, as they are exposed to “feelings of isolation, loneliness, and profound fear of failure both in the classroom and on the playing field” (Storch

and Ohlson, 2009, pp.78-79). Other pressures, such as the demands of playing their chosen sport, and pressure from coaches / faculty / fans can also contribute towards “a profound sense of despair and an increasing likelihood of a student athlete becoming overwhelmed” (Storch and Ohlson, 2009, p.79).

Stress has been defined as “a relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as relevant to his or her wellbeing and in which the person’s resources are taxed or exceeded” (Cosh and Tully, 2015, p.120). Cosh and Tully highlight different methods of coping, ranging from “stable coping styles to deal with a range of stresses” (ibid, p.121), to different coping strategies for different situations, and distraction-oriented and avoidance-oriented mechanisms (ibid). Where student-athletes have strong social support services, it has been recognised that they aid players to “buffer... the stressors associated with elite competition” (ibid).

Conversely, the development of resilience in Olympic champions has been shown as one’s ability to overcome significant adversity through inherent character traits, and one’s response to these circumstances as they unfold in one’s environment (Fletcher and Sarkar, 2012, p.669). The ability to manage the stresses of study and sport has been highlighted as “a key characteristic of those who achieve in the highest levels of sportsmanship” (ibid, p.670). The perceptions of stress and what constitutes a stressful situation also determine one’s on-field performance, and in like manner, one’s perception of support services (not simply their reality) also affects one’s performance (p.674). Other factors that have been identified as contributing to athletes’ longevity include abilities to “cope with and control anxiety, sport intelligence, confidence, coachability, mental toughness / resilience, the ability to focus and block out distractions, high levels of dispositional hope, optimism, the ability to set and achieve goals, competitiveness, [and] a hard-work ethic” (Morgan and Giacobbi, 2006, p. 296).

Financial pressures alongside fatigue have also been highlighted as prevalent stressors for student-athletes (Cosh and Tully, 2015, p.123). Fatigue comes not only from physical exhaustion in training sessions, but mental exertion from study and its expectations (ibid, p.129). Also noted is a lack of support for when students fall behind in their studies due to sporting commitments (ibid, p.124). Constant travel for competitions alongside the lack of opportunity to work (due to time constraints) further creates financial pressures

for these students (Cosh and Tully, 2015, ibid, p.126). Career Decision making Self-Efficacy (CDSE), or the ability for student-athletes to decide upon a definite career path post-sport, has also been identified as lacking in some student-athletes, which contributes to the stress of their dual role (Burns, Jasinski, Dunn and Fletcher, 2013). Effective student support services and the perception of their availability can help bolster CDSE, as well as fend off other stressors related to student-athletes.

SUPPORTS

Support systems for students have been described as consisting of four main elements: “emotional (i.e. comfort and security), esteem (i.e., confidence), informational (i.e., advice) and tangible (i.e., resources)” (Morgan and Giacobbi, 2006, p.297). These concepts and their importance are “linked to both sport and non-sport related challenges” (ibid). These social support elements constantly change throughout the different stages of an athlete’s development, especially in terms of overcoming obstacles and coping with adversity.

One of the most meaningful sources of help for student-athletes is the emotional support of parents and coaches (in this regard, coaches who care about the whole person, not just sporting performance) (Cosh and Tully, 2015, p.126). This “entourage” (Romana Caput-Jogunica, Sanja Ćurković and Gordana Bjelić, 2012, p.21) is integral to the ongoing success of student-athletes in both their sporting and academic careers. Parents have identified as one of the main sources of encouragement when student-athletes may not be selected for teams, or if they struggle with university studies (Cosh and Tully, 2015, p.126). Cosh and Tully’s interview data with student-athletes reveals that 90% of respondents stated that parents’ emotional support helped them cope, as well as helping students practically – covering finances, cooking meals and having a place to sleep (pp.127-128). Educational choices are also discussed, with 40% of students interviewed stating that they have changed their study schedules to less intensive courses, or switching from full to part time so that they have a reasonable chance to do well in both fields (p.128).

Despite recognising such powerful stressors that deeply affect student-athletes’ performance, “the interviewees described having very few strategies with which they are able to overcome stress” (Cosh and Tully, 2015, p. 129). Apathy towards one’s grades has been suggested as a coping mechanism for stress in this regard (p.130). Further, “College athletes...appeared to lack exposure to sport

psychology consultants, which is concerning for our field” (Morgan and Giacobbi, 2006, p.311). Student-athletes’ needs can be bolstered through the presence of such professionals. If nothing else, counsellors could encourage student-athletes to “identify and benefit from his or her [extant] social support network” (p.312) – the ‘entourage’ of coaches, family members and friends that can help them navigate the often highly-pressured lives they lead.

STUDENT-ATHLETES’ ATTITUDES TO STUDY AND SPORT

A prevalent issue amongst student-athletes is the attitude taken towards their studies in light of their sporting aspirations. A common perception amongst student-athletes is that they only need to pass in order to secure this “prudence for the future” (Cosh and Tully, 2014). Cosh and Tully (ibid) highlight factors in student-athletes’ lives that contribute to a constant struggle in prioritising study and their sporting careers. Most interviewees stated that time, amongst other factors, was not something they could control due to their sporting commitments, and contributed greatly to their attitude towards their studies and their consequent mediocre academic performance. As a result, these athletes’ personal sense of agency to maintain this balance is rendered passive. There is a clear recognition that students choose to prioritise sport over their studies, but at the same time, there is a need for them to maintain the discourse of “prudence for the future”. A pattern of “externalising agency” (p. 184) shows that some students believed themselves as not truly being in a position to change things: both time restraints and expectations of coaches (ibid) are forces they cannot control. These realities therefore render student-athletes “academically capable, while justifying aiming only to pass” (p.183).

Other students have shown themselves to have more agency in this regard, as they utilise every moment of free time to devote to their studies, even doing readings while on the bike at the gym (Cosh and Tully, 2004, p.187). These are the students who perceive time as something they can control, and do so to achieve a better balance between studies and sport.

The aforementioned attitude of aiming only high enough to pass poses a threat to athletes in their post-sporting careers, as employers are increasingly looking for post-graduate qualifications in potential employees (p. 188), which pass-only GPAs preclude. Cosh and Tully argue that it is therefore requisite upon

universities and other institutions of higher learning to develop workshops and programs that promote skills in time management and effective learning techniques. They also highlight the need for “learning how to learn programs” (p. 188; Cosh and Tully, 2015, pp.130-131) specifically for student-athletes, as a large quantity of time spent on study does not necessarily correlate to successful learning. Instead, knowing *how to learn* can make a big difference between academic success and failure. Further considerations include the need for student-athletes to learn how to develop self-efficacy, enabling them to form more accurate “appraisals of stressful events” (ibid, p.131).

EFFECTIVE LEARNING METHODS

It has been noted that spending copious amounts of time studying does not necessarily result in effective learning (Kember, Ng, Tse, Wong and Pomfret, 1996). Providing distance learning, alongside group study sessions for student-athletes enrolled in similar courses in tertiary institutions, have been recognised as effective methods of learning for these students (Ogden, 2002; Dudley, Johnson and Johnson, 1997). Meeting together with other students to work in a collaborative manner results in “greater effort to achieve, more positive interpersonal relationships, and greater psychological health than do competitive endeavours” (Dudley, Johnson and Johnson, 1997, pp.450-451). Students’ individual interests in the subject matter, referred to as “deep learning” by Kember, Ng, Tse, Wong and Pomfret (1996, p.349) has been shown to promote higher levels of interest and therefore progression in one’s chosen field of study (p.349). This is in contrast to external pressure coercing them to take part in study, which can actually do the opposite.

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF SUPPORT SERVICES

Several factors impact student-athletes’ willingness to utilise support services. Amid the stresses of trying to keep up with studies and their chosen sport, several other factors may inhibit students from using the support services afforded them. Amongst team sports athletes, there is a perception that the good of the team ought to come before their personal needs, and to attend to the latter is to take away from the former (Watson, 2006, p.37). Resilience and self-reliance are expected on the playing field, and this ought to translate to the way one deals with interpersonal issues. Student-athletes resent being perceived as ‘bringing the team down’ or causing their coaches to doubt their athletic ability, even though personal situations may be affecting these areas. “As long as the personal problems do not impact their athletic performance they are content to ignore their existence” (ibid). There is also a very strong social stigma attached to using such services: “In a study of students’ attitudes and expectations about sport psychology (Linder, Pillow & Reno, 1989), male and female undergraduate students rated case study athletes lower in terms of prestige if they were said to be seeking counseling services” (p.37), and further, “elite athletes... reported a reluctance to seek help because they perceived it as an act only for individuals with severe psychological disturbances (citing Martin, 1998 in ibid)”. Suffering such a loss of image and face is perceived a more negative consequence than dealing with interpersonal issues, and therefore students are less inclined to seek help (ibid). This sense of stigma can go so far that students are considered unhealthy or weak if they are to use such services, to the point where “the stigma was greater for seeking treatment than it was for actually being diagnosed with a mental illness” (López and Levy, 2013, p.26).

STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES: GOOD PRACTICE

American and European colleges and universities have been shown to facilitate effective support service models for student athletes. The features of these support services have been identified as those that provide ongoing academic monitoring, consultation with services that are provided university-wide, such as counselling, workshops and special programs which encourage career development, training for academic success and coping and relaxation techniques, amongst others, and an integration between the sporting and non-sporting fields of students’ lives (Jordan and Denson, 1990). Some colleges hire full-time or part-time academic tutors to assist student athletes, while others train existing staff to be able to provide assistance to them (Banbel and Chen, 2014). Other features of inclusive practice include dedicated study rooms for student-athletes, and technology-based integrated support systems that allow students to engage with their studies through Facebook and other social media (ibid). The means by which tutors assist athletes is also important. Storch and Ohlson (2004) reiterate the importance of “intrusive advising” (p.77), where it is the responsibility of the academic advisor and the student to maintain and development academic performance.

NRL Graduates of League Program Overview

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT & PILOT PROGRAM @ UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

Dr. Sam Jebeile, Senior Lecturer in Accounting and Finance at the University of Wollongong, is credited with having created the Graduates of League (GOL) Program at the University in 2012. His report has provided the template for the Graduates of League Program at Western Sydney University, and we acknowledge his tireless efforts to establish this program for NRL student-athletes¹. The rest of this report will focus on how this program has been appropriated by the Western Sydney University, player responses to the program, and the effectiveness of the 'entourage' of support that it affords to student-athletes. In light of the above literature, it has been seen that ongoing support and the bolstering of social networks within a university context are significant contributors to student-athletes performing at their peak throughout their sporting and academic lives. Analysis conducted on their responses to the program reveals important concepts for consideration for Western Sydney University student-athletes and other universities seeking to implement a similar program for their student-athlete populations.

GRADUATES OF LEAGUE @ WESTERN SYDNEY UNIVERSITY

The Graduates of League Program started at Western Sydney University in Semester 2, 2013, with 12 student-athletes from 7 NRL clubs across metropolitan Sydney. Pacific student-athletes were further supported through Pasifika Achievement to Higher Education (PATHE) activities, a student group that offers pastoral and academic support for Pacific students at Western Sydney University². Reports such as this one contribute towards the research output of the University, thereby creating space for the experiences of student-athletes to be considered in a scholarly fashion by the NRL as well as academics in the field.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The key roles assumed in the Western Sydney University GOL Program include the academic head, the head tutor, and peer tutors. Each role and their respective responsibilities are discussed below.

Academic Head (Dr. Jioji Ravulo)

- Coordinates tutoring support with head tutor

- Reviews weekly feedback from tutors and players
- Develops and maintains collaborative working relationships with NRL clubs
- Provides additional academic mediation and support where needed
- Reports to Western Sydney University and NRL Management

Head Tutor (Matthew Schild)

- Provide direct support to tutors
- Develop schedules for tutors to meet with players
- Organise room bookings / spaces
- Collate weekly feedback from players and tutors
- Liaise with NRL Club staff
- Review tutor hours

Matthew has championed the vision of the GOL Program for Western Sydney University students, and is an invaluable member of the team. As a former Western Sydney University student who completed a Bachelor of Business / Commerce (Advanced Business Leadership), Matthew is able to assist students in their academic lives.

PEER TUTORS

Peer tutors are top-performing students (those that have attained a university entrance score or ATAR of 90 or above³) in respective subject areas, drawn from the Western Sydney University initiative, The Academy, a program which seeks to bolster elite students' university experience through academic rigour, personal and professional development, and community engagement⁴. Their roles in the Program are to:

- Provide direct mentoring and peer tutoring support to players
- Liaise with Head Tutor around support needs
- Review possible needs for further academic support
- Highlight any general follow up
- Encourage access to further resources at Western Sydney University and beyond
- Complete weekly feedback forms

Most peer tutors meet one-to-one with their student-athletes, though it is possible to have one tutor to two mentee. Peer tutors liaise with Matthew regarding any needs they may have, alongside completing weekly feedback forms, which have been analysed in the data below.

FUNDING

The NRL contributed a designated amount for each student-athlete enrolled in the Western Sydney University GOL program. As of 2013, Western Sydney University had 35 registered student-athletes supported by the GOL program, the second largest cohort behind Australian Catholic University. Funding received goes towards employing all program staff listed above (except the Academic Head), including additional base hours for the head tutor, who supports players, collates information on the program and acts as mediator between peer tutors and mentees.

WORKING WITH CLUBS

The NRL is an organising body, with respective clubs that run autonomously. NRL regulates the game of rugby league, and each club receives pool funding to employ two key workers. Such funding is to be used to employ an Welfare & Education officer, whose job it is to attend to the general wellbeing of players, and a Careers Coach, whose role is to assist and plan careers advise for players. Each club has two main player divisions – the first grade NRL team, and the under 20s (also known as the National Youth Competition, or NYC). The two employees provide support to these teams. Each club decides how they make use of these positions. A club is able to employ one worker who fulfils both roles (education & welfare officer/careers coach) for each age group. Alternatively, they can employ one worker who is the education officer for both ages groups, and one who is the careers advisor for both age groups. The GOL program then works collaboratively with each respective role to monitor the progress of players involved at Western Sydney University.

WORKING WITH PLAYERS

Prior to commencing the program, Dr. Jioji Ravulo & Matthew Schild coordinates an induction with peer tutors in order to establish the professional and academic expectations of the GOL program. Student-athletes are also briefed on important concepts of the program, namely:

- Respect: Understanding specific needs that impact on retention and course completion, whilst dealing with varied perspectives.
- Confidentiality: Information and matters discussed remains within program.
- Transparency: Creating an impartial approach to providing information and feedback on support provided.

1 See Jebeile, Lewis, Kiggins, and Stewart (2012) in References at the end of this document for full report and template for GOL program.

2 See <http://www.westernsydney.edu.au/pathe> for more information regarding PATHE and its initiatives

3 Out of a possible 99.95.

4 For more information on The Academy, visit http://www.westernsydney.edu.au/theacademy/the_academy

- Encouragement: Creating an understanding towards academic development and goals in completing assessment tasks.

WEEKLY MEETINGS WITH PLAYERS

Western Sydney University comprises of a University and a College, The College being a form of alternate entry for hundreds of students each year⁵. The University calendar is based on two 14 week semesters, and the College calendar is based on a trimester system of three 12 weeks terms per year. Student-athletes who participate in the GOL Program and are completing a university degree receive one hour tutorial sessions across 14 weeks, while College students receive fortnightly tutorial assistance, as their study calendar year is longer. These sessions comprise of topics that holistically address student-athletes' university experience:

- General pastoral care ("How are things going?")
- Unpacking concepts, reviewing study skills and study goals
- Vocational experience and aspirations
- Timetabling for current and future units
- Majors and sub-major being undertaken
- Accessing and submitting forms
- Confidence and motivation: Decreased / the same / some improvement / major improvement
- Accessing additional resources, and seeking further academic support

The head tutor always communicates with peer tutors via Western Sydney University student email. The dress code for these sessions is smart casual.

LOGISTICS

Peer Tutors meet with student-athlete on respective Western Sydney University Campuses (including Western Sydney University The College), at the NRL Clubhouse, at student-athlete's or tutor's houses, at local public libraries and by telephone and email correspondence. A total of 14 hours is assigned to each peer tutor and player (one hour per semester week). This can occur in block mode if the player / tutor is not available every week. Incidental contact can occur outside of the formal tutoring sessions, in which peer tutors and their players meet, for example through email follow up of a tutoring session. Western Sydney University Casual Employment Authority forms are established for all peer tutors under the Western Sydney University School of Social Sciences & Psychology. Proactively, peer tutors are paired based on their similar subject area / degree as the student-athletes.

⁵ For more information on The College and the courses offered, visit <http://www.westernsydney.edu.au/thecollege>

Evaluation & Review of GOL @ Western Sydney University

DATA ANALYSIS

The data used in this report have come from peer tutors completing session feedback forms from Semester 2, 2013 through to Semester 1, 2015, with a total of 195 responses which represents a total of 43 players from seven clubs⁶ that took part in the program over this time. These surveys were completed through a Survey Monkey URL⁷, which were completed after each weekly session, and included successes in submitting assignments / grades awarded, challenges accessing resources, or the need for further information, areas covered in lecture and tutorial content, course progression, class timetabling and study schedule, and follow up: access to resources / additional support.

The main areas that the evaluation form was initially developed, came from Western Sydney University's Top 5 Key anticipated outcomes for the program in 2013; 1) Enhanced study skills 2) Tracking progress and building connections with others, 3) Seeking further academic support, 4) Exploring theoretical concepts in more detail and 5) Accessing additional resources. There was also a focus on the confidence and motivation levels of student-athletes. The surveys asked a series of questions

that students responded to. The below data represents students' detailed responses.

LOCATION OF SESSION

Of the 195 responses that were submitted, the following locations were recorded, where n = number of sessions that took place at each location. A total of 12 locations were recorded. 'Other' refers to Western Sydney University Parramatta City Campus, Western Sydney University College campuses, player's houses, tutor's houses, local libraries and email / telephone meetings. With almost 20% of sessions taking place outside of Western Sydney University campuses (as the 'other' comprises of a small number of non-listed Western Sydney University campuses), the flexibility and determination of both the peer tutors and student-athletes to attend these sessions shows a desire of all parties to achieve success for those seeking support through the GOL program.

Please see figure 1 (below).

DURATION OF SESSIONS

Of the 195 responses received, most sessions (49%, 96 sessions) were held for one hour, covering a range of issues. Extra time was afforded to participants when deemed

necessary, with a total of 43% (83 sessions) going for 1.5 to more than 2 hours. There were occasions where peer tutors were notified of a cancelled meeting 30 minutes before it was due to start, which were recorded on the feedback form.

Please see figure 2 (below).

ACADEMIC WEEK OF SESSIONS

Each session took place over 14 weeks of the university semesters, unless the student-athlete was enrolled in Western Sydney University College (as stated above). As can be expected, the fewest sessions (1.5%, or 3 sessions over the three semesters) took place from pre-semester to week 2 of each semester. The most common times for meetings occurred from weeks 4 to 11 (73.3%, or 143 sessions), especially between weeks 9 and 11, where pre-exam assessments are typically due (31.8% or 62 sessions). Weeks 12 to 14 had strong attendance leading into exam periods (19.5%, or 38 sessions), though not many sessions occurred during the exam period, with the pre-exam and exam weeks' total attendance totalling 5.7% or 11 sessions. No post-semester sessions were recorded over this three-semester period.

Please see figure 3 (below).

FIGURE 1: Location of GOL sessions

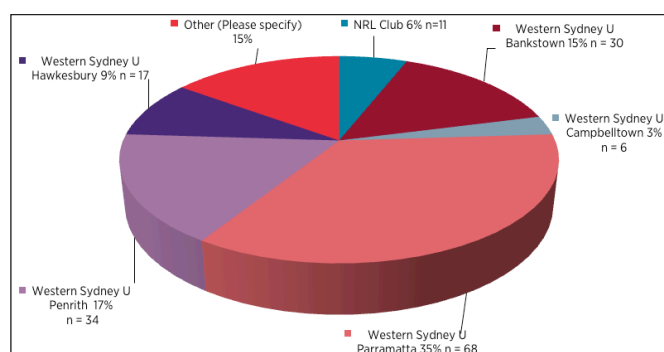


FIGURE 2: Duration of sessions

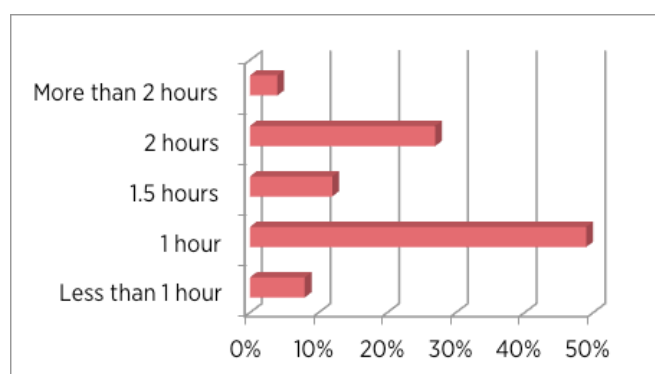
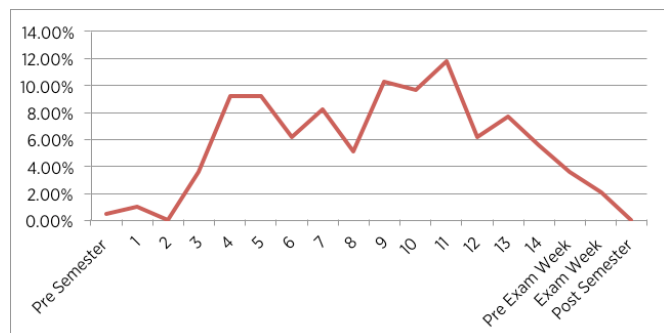


FIGURE 3: Academic Week of Sessions



⁶ Canterbury Bulldogs, Cronulla Sharks, Manly Sea Eagles, Penrith Panthers, Parramatta Eels, West Tigers, and Sydney Roosters

⁷ <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/NRLGOLUWS2014>

AREAS DISCUSSED

Each meeting covered a variety of topics, ranging from pastoral care concerns ("How things are going generally?") to specific information sharing around assignment preparation, study goals and administrative forms processing and consultation with academics. As can be expected, more than one topic was addressed per meeting, and as such, the below data reflected 771 categories that were responded to. The most common areas of discussion for these meetings were general support for the student-athletes (21%, or 162 responses), exploring effective study skills (18%, or 142 responses), understanding theoretical concepts (17%, or 128 responses) and study goals (13%, or 100 responses). Discussing vocational aspirations was among the least discussed topics (4%, or 28 responses) alongside seeking further academic support (3%, or 20 responses) and vocational experience (2%, or 18 responses). It would seem that these are areas that student-athletes ought to be considering, in light of the above literature, and it may promote an orientation of 'prudence for the future' if such issues became a more specific focus for future sessions of the GOL program.

Please see figure 4 (below).

SUCCESSSES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Peer tutors wrote their reflections after each session via the Survey Monkey URL, highlighting areas of strength and achievement. From 195 responses shared, peer tutors perceived very different levels of engagement and interaction with their mentees. As can be assumed with such a program, where students had their own sense of determination and desire to make use of this support, it was of great benefit to them. A key element in these responses is identifying and exploring effective means of approaches to study and the best way to negotiate the constant challenges that student-athletes face with time management. Another factor that has emerged from these entries is the increase in confidence in students when they engage with the material and study concepts presented by their peer tutor. Key areas that were highlighted by peer tutors are as follows:

- Developing consistent engagement of student-athletes
- Effective study techniques to maximise learning
- Noting useful resources for assessments
- Clarifying of key concepts & theories
- Improvement in ability to approach and structure assessment tasks
- Academic goals and plans for semester
- Identifying gaps in knowledge
- Practicing past exam papers, preparing conscientiously for open-book exams
- Degree progression

- Strategies for study / appropriate study and exam preparation techniques
- Issues with / confidence towards referencing
- Active communication with unit coordinators / other academics
- Understanding marking criteria / rubric / unit outlines for more detailed understanding of expectations for assessments
- Concept breakdown
- Utilising other student services within university - PASS⁸ and counselling services
- University administration processes
- Post-uni employment processes

Peer tutors' written reflections on successes and achievements are also telling:

"[Student-athlete] was engaged... taking notes and asking questions... and we spoke about study techniques he could use to maximise his learning." (8th November 2013)

"[Student-athlete] took notes of... useful resources for his assessments. He asked good questions to clarify any concepts or points he didn't understand, [and] made some good progress on key points we discussed in our last session." (8th November 2013)

"[We] identified gaps in notes and added relevant information... and set out tasks to complete before next mentoring session." (25th November 2013)

"Did an entire past exam paper, identified gaps in notes and created the final copy of notes for [student-athlete] to take in with him [for open book exam]." (25th November 2013)

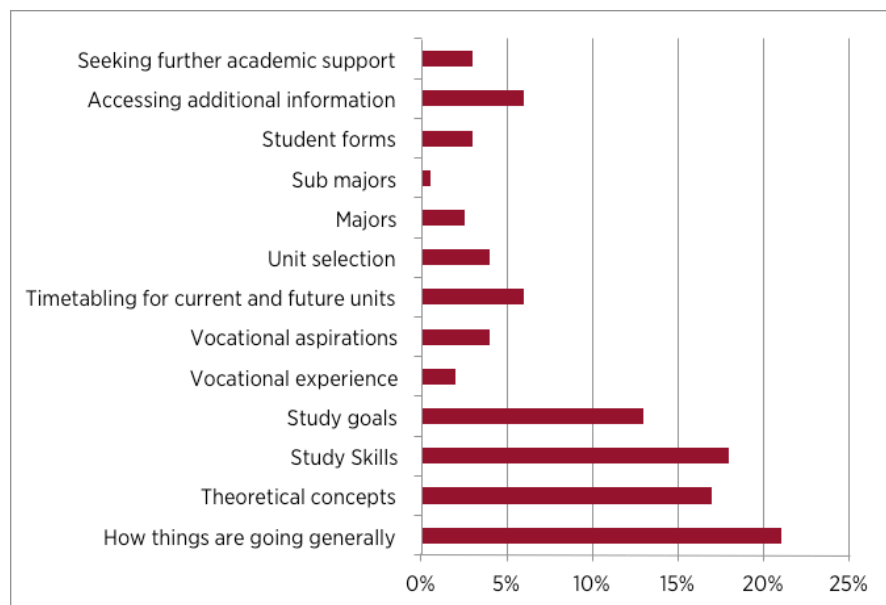
"He has derived some goals for the future in terms of studying full time next year and only playing part time football so he can move forward into a Masters of Teaching." (11th September 2014)

"Did well in assessment task and increased confidence with referencing." (19th September 2014)

"[Student-athlete] took notes on advice I gave him today for the first time which was important...[he] is now listening to his online lectures and doing his readings, which resulted in him feeling confident about the quiz he just completed." (21st September 2014)

"He is keeping in good communication with his unit coordinators in terms of assessment adjustments due to surgery." (9th October 2014)

FIGURE 4: Areas Discussed



⁸ Peer-Assisted Study Sessions, offered for most Western Sydney University units by a student-tutor who are elected by academics due to their strong academic performance in the unit. PASS sessions are also available electronically at Western Sydney University (called e-PASS). More information available from http://www.westernsydney.edu.au/currentstudents/current_students/services_and_facilities/study_and_life_skills_workshops/pass_-_peer_assisted_study_sessions

"Provide planners weekly and semester, to be emailed; planning success brochure from counselling services; uni (sic) parking services ph (sic) and web address for permits." (23rd March, 2015)

A broad range of issues were discussed in these meetings, and the general support provided by peer tutors as well as the specific study-related areas addressed assisted GOL participants to integrate more successfully into university life.

CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS

One of the greatest challenges repeatedly mentioned was the prioritising of time to complete assignments and consistency in doing weekly readings and attending class. As highlighted in the above literature, time management skills are perhaps the most difficult ones to develop for student-athletes, as their competing priorities require constant and skilful negotiation of one's resources and energy. Some of the comments below reflect these realities, and how it has shaped peer tutors' perceptions of their mentees. As a result of a lack of time management, some students settled for pass marks where tutors believed they could do much better. The key areas identified are as follows:

- When GOL started at Western Sydney University, peer tutors were predominately sourced from the same degree (e.g. Bachelor of Business and Commerce), and may not be able to assist student-athletes in other specific major / sub major units.
- Time management and its effect on submitting assignments of a good standard vs. mediocre standard / leaving them to the last minute.
- Convincing student-athletes that they are capable of more than "just passing".
- Moving to Sydney from another area, adjusting to new city alongside other challenges.
- Missing classes, impact on overall understanding of topics.
- Organisational skills / general understanding of university life, which peer tutors have had to make clear – setback to focussing exclusively on studies.
- Difficulties related to undertaking surgery and attempting to complete semester workload at the same time
- Academic writing skills development
- Referencing, including in-text citation / word count
- Attitudes towards study, particularly after being selected for squad
- Using NRL community work for Recognition of Prior Learning; for some degrees this can be more difficult than others

- Not asking for help, acting as though everything is under control when it isn't.
- Attending GOL sessions is not the same as actually engaging with and understanding concepts that are presented
- Access to technology / rapid communication needs between student-athletes and academics.
- Too many commitments in one's life, which makes it difficult to be a successful student.

Once again, peer tutors' perspectives reflect the tensions felt for student-athletes' time management and other challenges:

"[Student-athlete] seems busy with work and football responsibilities. I hope he can work hard over the next week to ensure his exam results reflect the effort he has put into his subjects this semester." (8th November 2013)

"[Student-athlete] may not have left himself enough time to complete his assessments to the standard he would like." (8th November 2013)

"[Student-athlete] struggled last week to finish his assessment tasks, I think we need to focus more on getting him to start these earlier and work on some time management skills." (8th November 2013)

"With appropriate time management techniques I am sure [student-athlete] will be able to achieve." (8th November 2013)

"[Student-athlete] is mainly focussed on just passing the unit, and it is difficult to convince him that he is capable of more than just a pass." (25th November 2013)

"Organisation – i.e. assessments and homework. Staying motivated, especially because he is completely new to Sydney." (3rd April 2014)

"The main concern is that he won't catch up on the missed uni (sic) work which will impact on his understanding of the content." (9th April 2014)

"Getting assessments done on time – partly due to not understanding a lot of general things about uni (sic) until tutoring begun half way through the term. Makes it a bit hard to catch up now." (12th April 2014)

"Never took notes during lectures or did any of the readings so has left all preparation to the last minute. – As [student-athlete] has made the NRL squad, he feels less obligated to focus on his studies seriously because the NRL doesn't follow up on his progress." (21st May 2014)

"Concerns were raised about his use of technology, which he is working on. Student [athlete] also raised concerns as he sometimes sends emails seeking clarification on tasks in the morning, but does not receive replies until the afternoon, when he has ceased his studies for the day. I suggested an alternative if he needs faster responses." (28th August 2014)

"He said he was doing fine in an assignment, and then after it was due said he did a terrible job and had no idea what to do and didn't even make the page limit requirements – I do not feel he is trying as hard as he could in his assessments. He has the opportunity to ask for help but I think he is only aiming to pass units rather than do well in them. – Not listening to lectures online or completing the readings, and thus not knowing the answers to quizzes." (11th September, 2014)

"How will he keep up with his studies while he is in hospital for his shoulder operation, - Whether he will use all the feedback and suggestions I gave him to improve on his next assessment to achieve better than a 50% grade, and really strive for a higher mark." (9th October, 2014)

"Still not turning up to sessions. He says he is keen. But fails to cancel, prioritise or organise any changes to time for the session ahead of schedule." (4th July 2015)

"[Student-athlete] needs to apply himself a little more to his studies and not leave things to the last minute, I do feel with his three jobs, football career and part-time uni (sic) that he is simply doing too much." (13th July, 2015)

"[Student-athlete's]...assessment ...has not yet been submitted. We had gone through it last week in the mentoring sessions and he was on track, but it wasn't finished. We went through and finished the assessment in today's assessment but he has lost 60% of the marks available." (13th May, 2015)

These perspectives reiterate the fact that for those students that actively engaged with the program, GOL helped them adjust to university life and more easily maintain a balance between sporting and academic pressures. As seen in some of the above comments, when students were not as responsive to the program, peer tutors perceived this as an intentional attitude, though it may have something more to do with issues of fatigue, difficulties in time management, and / or trying to cope with stressors through an apparent lack of concern or communication with the peer tutors and the program itself.

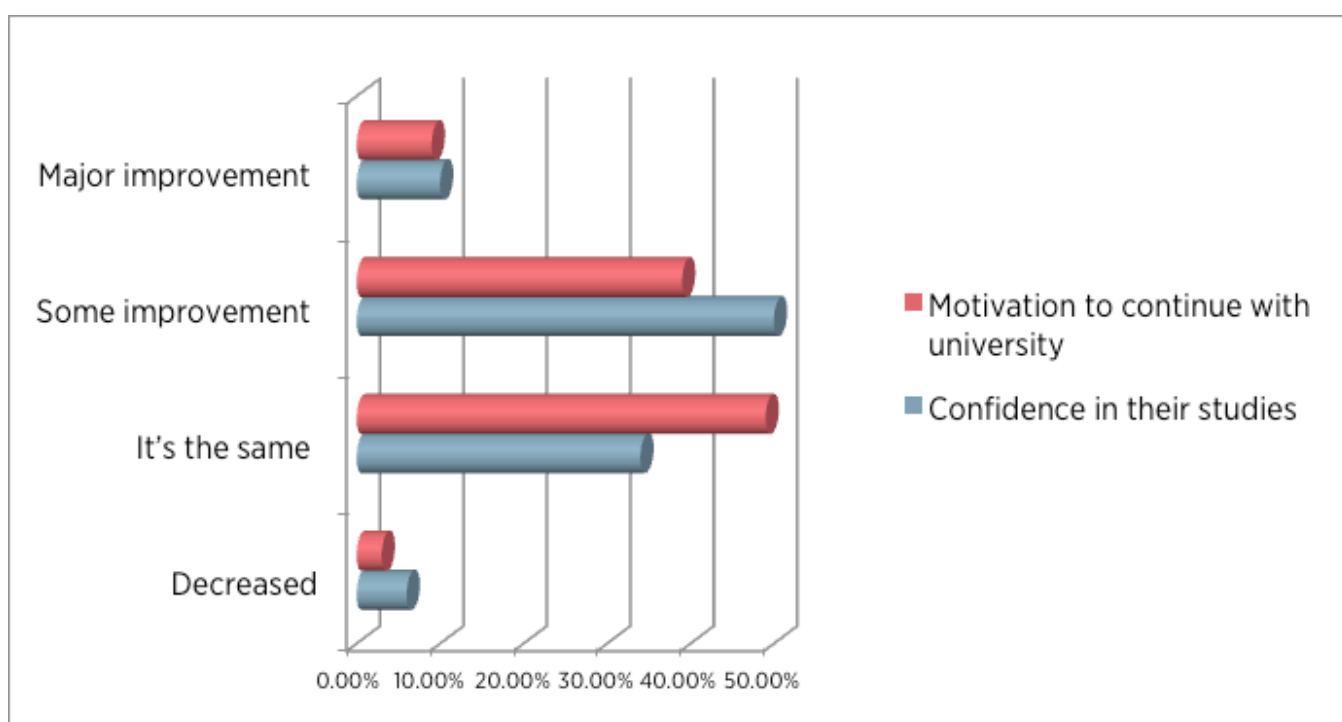
REFLECTION ON PROGRESS

Perhaps the most significant measure in this report is the way student-athletes have perceived their progression and development as a result of taking part in it. The below data represents two areas assessed by the NRL players: confidence in their studies (total of 192 responses) and motivation to continue with university (total 191 responses). They rated their responses as 'decreased, it's the same, some improvement or major improvement'. Confidence in their studies has notably increased, with 60% (116 respondents) stating that there has been some level of improvement, and 48% (91 respondents) noting an improvement in motivation. It is interesting to note that more than half of students were no more motivated as a result of the program. It may be that the expectations of the peer tutors,

especially their belief in the student-athlete to perform better than they did in a given semester, created a sense of disappointment and thereby demotivated student-athletes in consequent sessions. Providing workshops on time management and general university life alongside support services may affect this trend. There is also a perceived need that student-athletes ought to engage more actively with their peer tutors and the GOL sessions themselves. It may be worthwhile to organise more meetings pre and post semester to facilitate stronger rapport and to discuss the expectations of student-athletes towards peer tutors and vice versa, whilst having feedback sessions after semester results have been received; to ensure that student motivation is maintained and sustained as much as possible.

Please see figure 5 (below).

FIGURE 5: Reflection on Progress



Discussion

The Graduates of League program at Western Sydney University has been showed to be an effective program that has, overall, seen an improvement in some participants' levels of motivation to continue with university, as well as a noticeable increase in their confidence to continue and complete their studies. An important element of the success of the program is the efforts of the head tutor and peer tutor, their expertise in the chosen subjects, and the program's flexibility regarding the location of meetings and the diligence of both the tutors and their assigned student-athlete.

Where student-athletes engage with their peer tutors' advice, the program has proven to bolster their academic performance and, therefore, their preparedness and confidence in university life. Where student-athletes were not prepared or slow to engage with the content of the peer mentoring sessions, the tutors have understandably expressed concern towards the academic progress of their mentees.

One of the most reported issues facing student-athletes is their management (or mismanagement) of time, and how placing too much emphasis on their sporting careers alone can lead to a sense of disorientation and discouragement in their studies. Despite persistent efforts with the student-athletes, some tutors reported feelings of apathy from their mentees, which may not be completely warranted, given the physical and mental levels of exhaustion to which they are pushed as athletes and tertiary students. Arising out of these tendencies is a perception that to 'just pass' is enough to secure completion of degrees, though this can preclude players from postgraduate study and therefore undermines a definite sense of 'prudence for the future', which has been heavily emphasised in current literature around elite student-athletes' futures.

Recommendations & Conclusion

As a result of the considerations of the peer tutors and student-athlete responses, the following recommendations emerge from this report:

- Providing pre-semester workshops around effective time management with specific reference to student-athletes' unique workload and lifestyle, drawing on other GOL participants who have performed well in both their academic and sporting careers
- A pre-semester orientation program that is provided specifically for NRL / other student-athletes that makes them aware of the Western Sydney University student services offered to them apart from the GOL program
- Pre-semester meetings with their peer tutors to establish initial rapport and confirm the most effective place, time and means of meetings, so that a sense of regularity can be established early in semester
- Post-semester follow-up to ensure that student-athletes' levels of motivation are maintained, and also provides an important element of debrief to ensure that they stay motivated for the following semester.

The GOL program has been and continues to be a successful program to support NRL student-athletes insofar as they actively engage with the services offered to them. Moving forward, the implementation of the above recommendations will further solidify the transition to university life for this unique student population and do more to aid their successful admission and retention in university, and therefore provide a sound orientation of 'prudence' for the future. These recommendations also seek to promote a sense of continuity for student-athletes' motivation and confidence in their studies, which will encourage a deeper sense of integration between their sporting and academic worlds.

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Contact information

Dr Jioji Ravulo
+61 2 9772 6482
j.ravulo@westernsydney.edu.au

Western Sydney University
Locked Bag 1797
Penrith NSW 2751 Australia



WESTERNSYDNEY.EDU.AU