

## **Involvement in extra-curricular activities facilitated by former students encourages intercultural communication, sustains student engagement and promotes positive academic outcomes.**

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*Please note that Wollongong College Australia (WCA) changed its name to UOW College as of July 2011.*

### **Abstract**

*There has been significant interest in Australia and around the world about the importance of the first year university experience as a critical factor influencing first year attrition rates and the performance of students throughout their university studies. This experience includes both in-class and out of class engagement of students with university life.*

*This paper reports an ongoing approach at UOW College, where a group of ex-College students has been employed to facilitate a number of lunchtime activities for current College students. These ex-students engage with new and existing students, both domestic and international, effectively due to their familiarity with their home cultures, languages, and confidence gained through university and life experience in Australia.*

*Qualitative feedback and students' performance data continue to demonstrate the effectiveness of this program. The practical guidelines and results of this initiative will have broad application for most institutions supporting first year university (particularly international) students.*

### **Keywords**

First-year experience, extra-curricular activities, engagement, community

### **Background**

UOW College (formerly Wollongong College Australia) is located on the University of Wollongong (UOW) campus in Wollongong, about a one-hour drive south of Sydney. Wollongong is easily commutable from Sydney via trains, buses and cars.

The College offers a number of English language study programs through its ELICOS programs department. These English language programs are mainly targeted at International students seeking entry into the University of Wollongong undergraduate and post-graduate degree programs. There are a number of different study options for students, from 6-week to one-year programs, depending on their further study goals and level of English upon commencement.

UOW College also offers a number of academic pathway programs for students who have not been able to make direct entry into university. These "second chance" programs are targeted at both international and domestic students. The academic pathway programs include the Special Tertiary Entrance Program (STEP to UOW), Foundation Studies program, Diploma of Business, Diploma of Information Technology and University Access Program (UAP). The STEP program is a Commonwealth-funded foundation program for disadvantaged and low SES students who underperformed in their final year of high school due to factors beyond their control. The UAP program is a bridging course for mature age students who wish to pursue university studies. Depending on

the program and students' performance, students who successfully complete their course at UOW College can achieve direct entry into undergraduate and postgraduate programs, and get up to a first year of credit towards their undergraduate degree at UOW.

Due to the nature of the study programs offered by UOW College and its proximity to Sydney, it attracts large numbers of international students as well as a growing number of domestic students from the Wollongong area, as well as the western and southern suburbs of Sydney. Both the international students and the domestic students have not been able to gain direct entry to the degree programs at UOW, the international students due to their inadequate level of English and the domestic students due to lower academic achievement.

Considering the range of programs offered at UOW College, its proximate location to Sydney and its strategic position on UOW campus, it attracts students from extremely diverse backgrounds – both domestic and international. The majority of new UOW College students are in their first year of higher education studies. In the case of the international students, most would not have experienced any studies in Australia and in many cases independent living away from home. For many of the domestic students, this is their first experience in a tertiary education environment.

Given this background of the UOW College students, it is evident that most of these students may experience lower confidence levels which can affect their ability to perform in their courses, and ultimately affect their ability to complete university studies.

## **Importance of student engagement for the success of first year university students**

There are a number of strategies that can be employed to make the transition to first year into university much more effective for first year students. A number of these include effective classroom, curriculum and teaching practices. At UOW College, as part of the teaching and learning plan, various attempts have been made to ensure that in-class and curriculum processes are in place for successful transition to first-year university (Anand, 2010).

Apart from the in-class approaches to supporting first year transition students, including effective teaching strategies, identification and remedial action for academically 'at-risk' students, extra-curricular activities have been identified to also have a significant impact on the success of first year transition students. Keithia Wilson (2009), in her research, identifies the following initiatives that have an impact on student success:

- **Early student engagement:** It is important to ensure that the higher education institutions are able to connect with new students promptly. Effective orientation programs enable students to immediately feel cared for; however, there are opportunities to connect with the students even before they get to campus.
- **Managed transition/orientation process:** Activities and programs more integrated and targeted to ensure success through the transition process. Wilson (2009) and her colleagues suggest a "life-cycle framework" for student orientation, which includes continuation of the orientation program over the course of the first year of enrolment with targeted intervention programs like study skills etc.
- **Priming student-self regulation:** enabling students to build capacity for self-regulation. A number of studies (Zimmerman, 2000) suggest the importance of self-regulation. There are a number of sub-skills that form self-regulation skills. These include, among others, time and space management, meta-cognition, and help-seeking skills. Appropriate scaffolds can be used to develop such skills.
- **Peer mentoring:** utilising existing or past students to connect with the new students and help them build confidence. Peer mentors also ensure community building with the first year students.
- **Student governance:** establishment of representation of first year students on student councils, where they can voice their collective concerns. Appropriate institutional structures that are capable of responding to students' concerns effectively and demonstrating that their concerns are actually being met effectively.
- **Effective monitoring and feedback:** collecting relevant data from different sources to make informed decisions about the effectiveness of various student support programs and future actions. A number of sources can be used to collect relevant data about the effectiveness of these approaches.

First year university students need to develop comfort with their study environment and self-confidence in order to sustain long term educational success. Lizzio (2006), in his 5 senses of success framework, suggests characteristics which are essential for students' success. A number these are appropriate for outside class support initiatives to engage first year university students. Although all the five senses that he refers to are relevant, the most significant of these for the cohorts of students at UOW College are:

- **Students' success at university depends on their sense of connectedness.**

This refers to how the first year students form good working relationships with other students and staff. There is the opportunity for departments engaged in supporting first year university students to identify and promote programs that enable first year university students to engage more effectively with the university community. A number of studies (Jones, Edwards, & Reid, 2009; Krause, 2009; Skene, Hogan, & Brown, 2006; Taylor, 2008) tried to promote connectedness and engagement of the first year students through different types of initiatives. For example, the "Finding Common Ground" (Arkoudis, et al., 2010) project recommends a number of approaches to enhance the interaction between international and domestic students.

Most first year students, particularly international students often find themselves unable to blend into the local campus life due to cultural differences, the language barrier and various other factors. By promoting interactions between the international and domestic students, it may be possible to make the first year international students feel a lot more at ease with their new environment, while enabling the domestic students to feel confident and form 'buddies' whom they can study with. Through such initiatives, these studies (Ibid.) have shown that students are less likely to drop out of university because they are able to develop their social network.

- **Students' success at university depends on their sense of resourcefulness.**

This refers to the ability of the students to be able to interact effectively with "university life", to navigate through the physical and administrative landscape of university. Students need to develop the confidence to speak up and ask for assistance when needed. A number of international students in particular lack this confidence due to their lack of familiarity and comfort with their new surroundings.

Some of the strategies that can be employed to promote a sense of resourcefulness in international students include providing clear and concise instructions about internal processes and procedures. They would also benefit from explicit information about support services that exist for their benefit, and the procedures involved in seeking relevant help.

Other studies related to this area have suggested the importance of developing communication competencies on the part of international students (Lawrence, 2002; Skene, et al., 2006). This would enable them to be able to seek help when needed, and would help them settle into their new environment.

## **Facilitating Interaction**

All of the first year engagement initiatives discussed above aim to:

- Increase student engagement with the university
- Improve students' academic performance
- Reduce attrition rates
- Improve cultural understanding
- Improve communication skills
- Enhance student confidence

Increasing opportunities for students to interact with each other and the institution is a critical factor to realise these objectives. Institutions must attempt to break down barriers that may prevent such interactions from taking place.

Evidence through research studies (Alesina & Ferrara, 2000; Ludden, 2009) suggests that students (and people generally) are attracted to people who look and act like themselves. Students from a country tend to congregate together; they feel comfortable in the company of other students who share the same linguistic and cultural background. It is important to recognise this natural human tendency to seek comfort amongst people from similar cultural backgrounds. The Good Practice Guide for International students (Ziguras & Harwood, 2010) makes reference to ideas about international students being made welcome by students from their own cultural backgrounds and experienced students passing their ideas and expertise onto new students.

## **UOW College Graduate Qualities**

These are aspirational qualities which students are expected to demonstrate upon successful completion of a UOW College course. They are developed through curriculum, teaching and learning practices and extracurricular activities.

**1. Informed:** have a sound knowledge of an area of study or profession and understand its issues locally and internationally. Know how to apply this knowledge. Understand how an area of study has developed and how it relates to other areas.

**2. Independent Learners:** engage with new ideas and ways of thinking and critically analyse issues. Seek to extend knowledge through ongoing research, enquiry and reflection. Find and evaluate information, using a variety of sources and technologies. Acknowledge the work and ideas of others.

**3. Problem Solvers:** take on challenges and opportunities. Apply creative, logical and critical thinking skills to respond effectively. Make and implement decisions. Be flexible, thorough, innovative, and aim for high standards.

**4. Effective Communicators:** articulate ideas and convey them effectively using a range of media. Work collaboratively and engage with people in different settings. Recognise how culture can shape communication.

**5. Responsible:** understand how decisions can affect others and make ethically informed choices. Appreciate and respect diversity. Act with integrity as part of local, national, global and professional communities.

A number of these make specific reference to the ability of students to act more responsibly and appreciate the diversity of other learners and members of the society in general.

### Extracurricular Student Engagement Approaches at UOW College

Given the background of UOW College students, the need for extracurricular activities and support systems has always been recognised. Up until mid-2010, extracurricular initiatives at the College consisted of individual staff members taking the initiative to organise activities and excursions. One particular Student Advisor took it upon himself to raise funds through selling confectionary to organise activities on his own time. He also promoted events being run at the University such as Unimovies etc. These initiatives, while enjoyed by the lucky students who happened to be involved, failed to constitute anything approaching a successful, structured activities program (Wilson, 2009). Student satisfaction surveys repeatedly highlighted this area as one where the College underperformed.

In 2009 a small working group was formed to consider how the College could improve the service it provided to its students. It had been noted that different nationality groups had very different needs and expectations to be addressed. This group came up with the idea that superior customer service might be achieved by looking to cater to the individual needs of the College's different student cohorts: 'segmenting the customer base'. It was suggested that students might be grouped along nationality/geographical/linguistic lines, and that 'Student Relations Coordinators' would be appointed to act as contact points to provide support to their relevant cohort of students. This idea gained support with management within the College, and in mid-2010, when it was decided that a more structured approach was needed to engage students outside of the classroom, funding was made available for the development and implementation of this concept.

The following model was developed:

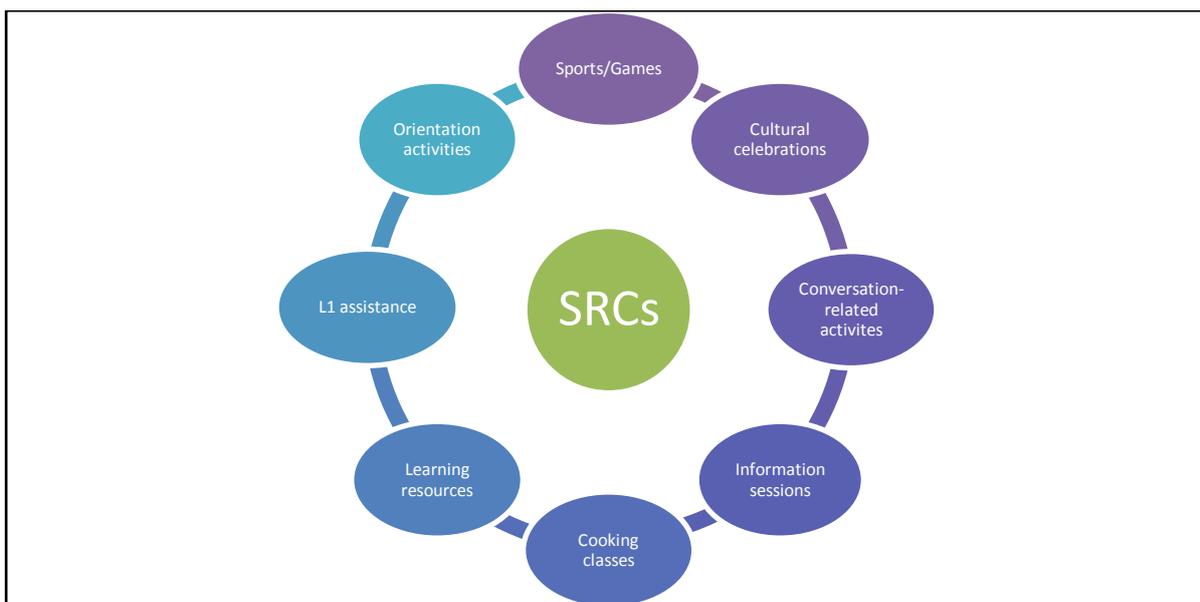


Figure 1: SRC-driven Activities

The Student Relations Coordinators (SRCs) would:

- be ex-students of the College, now studying at the University of Wollongong (this would ensure they had familiarity both with the College and the University and would be able to bring their experiences to bear in the role).
- represent key nationality and/or language groups at the College (enabling students to identify with them (Alesina & Ferrara, 2000) and allowing for L1 support).
- organise activities for students at the College.
- have a comprehensive knowledge of the workings and support systems available in the College.
- be available to offer limited counselling and advice to students.

One of the College's front counter staff who had previously demonstrated a desire to get involved with the promotion of student activities at the College was assigned an extra day to dedicate to the coordination of this project.

The SRC positions were advertised around the University and more than 30 applications received. Interviews of more than a dozen candidates resulted in the appointment of 5 SRCs - two from China, one from Syria, one from Vietnam and one from Colombia. These nationalities ensured representation of the major language groups and geographical regions of most of the students in the College.

The project was slow to start with the odd volleyball game, cricket game and BBQ marking key occasions at the College. The SRCs also assisted with tours of the University for new students and some basic assistance for students in L1. There was only spasmodic participation by students and staff during the initial weeks. This was due to the SRCs having a low profile among students and staff and the fact that they were indistinguishable from the other students at the College.

The following initiatives were then adopted to promote the program:

- Purchase of T-shirts for the SRCs, with "Can I help you?" printed on the back in their native tongue (E.g. 需要帮助? 请找我! Toi co the lam gi de giup ban khong etc.) helped students and staff identify who the SRCs were and increased their profile at the College.
- Involvement in orientation programs increased the SRCs' profile with all new students.
- A monthly calendar of daily lunchtime activities was introduced and advertised to the students via notice boards, the College web site and the foyer television.
- A Facebook page was created exclusively for student activities.

Activities cater to the needs of existing and new students and participation by the student body keeps on growing. Some of the SRCs have moved on and the current contingent includes ex-students from France, Australia, China, South East Asia and the Middle East.

Activities organised by the SRCs include:

- BBQs marking key events and cultural celebrations such as new student welcome BBQs and the celebration of Eid-al-Fitr
- Information sessions on living in Australia and Wollongong
- Tutorials on using the Student Online Systems
- Computer skills drop-in sessions
- Cooking classes
- Sports: volleyball, cricket, soccer etc.
- Wii sports
- Card games
- International food sharing
- Jewellery making
- Mahjong
- English conversation groups
- etc.

A staff versus soccer match has also become a popular weekly event with staff from student services, admin, teaching staff and management involved. In this way the program is also helping to break down barriers across multiple strata within the College and reduce siloisation.

In addition to these activities, some of the more experienced SRCs are playing an increasingly important role in assisting with counselling students who are at risk of failing their courses. They have been attending weekly focus groups led by Student Advisors where students on intervention strategies come together to check in with

the Advisor and talk about any problems they are having and share experiences. The SRCs sometimes help with translation and also, as they are students, tend to get different details from the students who see them more as peers than staff. The success of this initiative is currently being evaluated and early results have been extremely positive.

A new initiative which the SRCs have been involved with is the development of a Smart Phone app for student services at the College. This App – which covers all relevant areas at the College and more - has a user base which is growing exponentially week to week.

## Results

The College collects feedback from students through the following mechanisms:

- Student satisfaction surveys of ELICOS and Academic programs
- Student Representatives
- Student feedback forms
- Industry surveys such as ACPET

Prior to the introduction of the program, feedback from students consistently indicated poor satisfaction with activities provided by the College. This contrasted with other areas of student services in the College where satisfaction levels were generally very high.

Since this program's inception, students have commented that they enjoy these activities and that participating in them enhances their confidence when interacting with their teachers and peers. Furthermore, since these activities are organised by the SRCs, students are more willing to join in. Student satisfaction levels with extracurricular activities run at the College have jumped by more than 10%, while those students who were dissatisfied with this area have dropped from around 20% to almost nil.

Staff members have commented on the positive influence these activities have had on students' in-class activities and noticeable changes in their confidence and help seeking abilities:

“I have seen how participating in the lunchtime activities really improves the international students' confidence when they are required to participate in class discussions etc. They are more comfortable taking a stand and are happy to work with students from different backgrounds”.- Teacher comment

“It's terrific. It has improved engagement. It's fun and enjoyment for students and probably helps them in their class work as well.” – Program Manager.

The number of students getting involved in these activities is consistently increasing, indicating the positive 'buzz' that is being created on campus. For example, at the beginning of the program there were typically 2 – 5 students per activity. This has now increased to anywhere between 10 and 75 per activity.

Further anecdotal examples which demonstrate the effectiveness of this program:

One student from China was involved in a classroom incident with his teacher which had the potential to ruin his future studies at the College. He was counselled regarding the incident and it was strongly recommended to him that he get involved in the activities program, which he did. His demeanour, classroom behaviour and academic performance all improved markedly subsequently.

A Vietnamese student had extremely poor attendance in his English language course. He started joining the regular soccer match, where it was discovered that he had a lot of ability as a goal keeper. He has been playing soccer every week and his class attendance has more than doubled over the same time period.

The College has a quite a large cohort of students from Kuwait, most of whom are young males. A few of these students have been regularly involved with the activities program since they arrived. Those students who have had the greatest involvement have been progressing in their studies and attending class as well as any students in this cohort.

There is also increasing interest from the UOW student and staff community as slowly more UOW students are now also participating in these activities. Being on the UOW campus, UOW College students derive benefit as these interactions help to break down barriers of perceived inequality between College and UOW students. These initiatives are helping to increase the exposure of programs being run at the College as it is now playing an important part in outside of class student engagement, which is part of the wider UOW social inclusion agenda.

## Conclusion

The extra-curricular activities program organised through the SRCs at UOW College has brought about a number of benefits for the students of the College. This program, the result of student and staff feedback - and backed by management, is indicative of an institutional commitment to address the needs of all students. Championed by the College's Campus Director, this approach recognises the significant and varying challenges faced by College students during their transition to university and seeks to support the students through this process. Initial results are extremely encouraging with genuine, tangible benefits for the students.

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