

Increasing Retention Through Innovative ICT Platforms

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Abstract: This 'Nuts and Bolts' session will look at four retention initiatives introduced in the Faculty of Arts, Education and Human Development at Victoria University (Melbourne) in 2008. These are an interactive multimedia game staged during 'O' Day, a free USB stick containing a student 'Toolbox', a dedicated transition website and the appointment of a transition and retention lecturer/student advisor. The session will discuss these initiatives as well as further enhancements planned for the Faculty's Transition programme.

The Faculty of Arts, Education and Human Development at Victoria University had around 2200 students commencing in semester 1 this year. First year students at Victoria University have a range of characteristics which particularly predispose them for attrition, namely:

- They are less ready to choose a university course on leaving school
- They have a lower academic orientation
- They have relatively high levels of dissatisfaction with course and unit choices, and with their teachers
- They are given lower levels of help and advice from both family and friends and support staff
- They have high levels of engagement in full time work
- They have little or no financial support or savings (Krause, 2004)

Yet VU students have exhibited a high level of ICT use. In Krause's 2004 data, Victoria University students were shown to have a comparatively high level use of email, in particular, to contact staff (27% use it daily for this purpose compared to 19% at other universities) and friends on their course (31% of VU students as opposed to 22% nationally). The use of mobile phones is high amongst the VU student cohort – particularly for sending SMS messages. Their use of online discussion groups is almost identical (at 15%) to those at other universities (Krause, 2004).

This was the context in which the Faculty developed and this year introduced four retention initiatives designed to utilize our students' comparative expertise in the use of communication technologies:

1. Use of an interactive multimedia event during orientation
2. Student toolbox embedded in free 1 gig USB stick
3. A dedicated transition website www.firstclasstalk.com.au
4. Appointment of a transition and retention lecturer/ student advisor

1. ‘Scoot’ and Orientation

We used a high-quality interactive hybrid game during Orientation Day (across two of our campuses) which blurs the edges between the digital and physical realms designed to assist students to transition and adapt to VU. The aim was to provide students with an activity which assisted them to forge relationships with others from their course, to understand their campus layout and for the experience to be very enjoyable:

- The game was adapted for our purposes by its designer Deb Polson from the Queensland University of Technology and Newishmedia. The overall plot of the game is that a group of feral ‘carnies’ are attempting to overtake VU and the players’ mission – as part of the Class of 2008 – is to save the university.
- *Scoot* was played in teams of four and was intended to bring about two immediate results for first year students – they meet their peers, spend enough time with them to form a relationship, and they are given a thorough orientation to their campus. This comes about through a hunt where they are asked to go to key parts of the campus, complete a task on a multimedia installation, submit their answer via SMS, at which point they receive a new clue.
- It increased students’ engagement in the histories and activities of the university and the communities of others.
- It included the virtual world - multiplayer chat, avatar customisation (players collect virtual disguises as they play the game on-site), a dynamic SMS pathway (where players seek out both local historic and game narrative information), and installations.
- The game generated social cohesion amongst student groups as they worked and solved clues together, increased their understanding of the university campuses and their environs.

2. Student ‘Toolbox’

Each first year student was provided with a free 1 gig USB stick at enrolment. This contains a student ‘Toolbox’ which supports them in navigating around the VU website and links to such things as:

- VU student page
- Faculty website
- Free software and online resources
- Blackboard
- Timetables
- Student Learning Services
- Student Email
- Library
- MyVU
- Student discussion board
- Key forms

The hope was that this would be of help in their transition to university life, particularly to assist students in finding answers to questions and, prosaically, in having a branded USB stick on which to store material. We found that within twenty-four hours of distribution, some students were already using the discussion board and the general feedback has been excellent.

3. Transition website (www.firstclasstalk.com.au)

This was developed by senior multimedia students under the supervision of an academic staff member and overseen by the Associate Dean (Teaching and Learning).

It is a highly interactive site which strongly encourages students to post. Again, one of its aims is information gathering for students but this is supplemented by high-quality footage of students filmed around campus and other ephemeral material (including weekly competitions) which increases the social networking capacity of the site. It also houses content about transition such as what to expect from university life, introduction to their Course Co-ordinators, and information on who to contact for administrative assistance and enrolment timelines.

4. Transition and retention lecturer/ student advisor

The fourth innovation was the appointment of a Lecture: Transition and Retention who is responsible for a number of duties linked to the needs of new students.

These include:

- Offering both face to face and online academic advice
- Development and maintenance of the First Class Talk website and moderating the 'first class talk' discussion board
- Monitoring and recording the progress of students within first year units
- Offering informal counselling to transitioning students experiencing difficulties in their adjustment to university life and
- Providing assistance to students in accessing the university's support services where appropriate.

The aim was to provide vulnerable students with a fairly high level of independent support and help them overcome the stumbling points which otherwise might have become unsolvable. Students are invited to meet informally to look at any issues that they might be struggling with and to direct them to the support services (both academic and pastoral) available within the university.

This 'Nuts and Bolts' session will explore these retention strategies and demonstrate the SCOOT game, transition website and student 'Toolbox'. It will also look at student response to these initiatives as well as enhancements to the Faculty Transition program that are currently under consideration.

Reference

Krause *et al* (2005) *The First Year Experience in Australian Universities: Findings from a Decade of National Studies*, Dept. of Education Science and Training, Canberra.