

CHANGING THE GAME: THE SMARTHINKING EXPERIENCE

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INTRODUCTION

Primarily as a result of the massification of higher education, and therefore increasing student diversity and access, universities throughout the Western world are struggling with student retention and thus successful completion of degree programs [1]. The ways in which teaching and learning innovation manifest in the academy reflect who the game changers are and send signals as to how it must continue to change in order to meet the needs of a key player; an increasingly disparate student demographic. One form of educational technology, the offshore online tutor (OFOT), possibly heralds a different way of thinking about teaching and learning support as a means of retaining students.

As student diversity has increased, and most recently in light of the Bradley Review [1], Australian universities have had to review service levels within the context of teaching and learning priorities. Griffith University, Australia is attempting to address these priorities in terms of academic literacy and discipline specific learning support through a trial of an OFOT provider; SMARTHINKING. SMARTHINKING, an online academic tutoring service based in Washington DC, aims to 'increase student achievement and enhance learning' [2] through synchronous and asynchronous tutoring provision. These include online real time tutoring (content and writing queries), submission of draft scripts for critique and editing, submission of questions and submissions to the English as a Second Language e-structors.

The students' journey is a complex one and there exists a range of constants which influence how students perceive their studies. These include an expectation of a readily available suite of comprehensive services which enhance academic learning experiences and help to bring about grade success. This is especially evident in the first year of study where, in concert with the acquisition of adequate discipline knowledge, students traditionally require ongoing assistance with research related activity [1] in the context of accessing their learning experience. Moreover, they are increasingly demanding of tutor time in expecting greater depth and clarity in feedback on written submissions [2]. Thus the need for the student to develop transferable academic literacy skills is critical to both satisfactory progress and retention. Additionally, the student as 'client is increasingly seeking 'the flexibility of round-the-clock availability right in the student's home' [3] which provides the time-poor with the opportunity to work on skill development and consolidation of content without having to go on campus. Leveraging technology to facilitate anywhere, anytime academic support can then be viewed as central to lifting student achievement and SMARTHINKING is a game changer in this respect. This presentation paper will report on the effects of SMARTHINKING across a set of semester two courses with on campus students at Griffith University.

THE PROBLEM

Student retention is considered a significant indicator of quality teaching and learning. Student dissatisfaction with teaching and learning manifests in a variety of ways all of which can have a bearing on whether or not the student stays, plays or gives it away [4]. Furthermore, poor or infrequent communication between students and academic staff can frustrate students and at times even cause them to abandon finding solutions to vexing academic difficulties. The inability of some students to access timely and relevant information, coupled with a myriad of other pressures they experience, are contributing factors for them in leaving courses [1] and whilst universities do address these issues, albeit in varying degrees, Long, Ferrier and Heagney [4] conclude that student retention can be improved where a variety of both general learning and discipline support services are not only present and available but also sustained. Griffith University has commenced investigating whether or not an OFOT provider can be a satisfactory adjunct to existing services in improving retention by means of the sustained provision of these services by an external agency.

THE STUDY

Griffith University enrolls a diverse student demographic across five campuses. Following on from previous research which tested the use of SMARTHINKING as an aid to collaboration between students, university tutor and SMARTHINKING e-structors at Open Universities Australia [5] and the utilisation of the SMARTHINKING virtual tutor to improve the student learning experience at the University of New England [6], Griffith has sought to influence grade success and retention by promoting SMARTHINKING as a supplement to existing content and academic literacy skill services. This was undertaken through a trial and pilot in 2010. The trial was active across semester one for two targeted high attrition courses and the pilot was run across semester two with seven targeted courses (TC), two of which were also trialled in semester one. A second group of students, identified through the University's Widening Participation (WP) strategy, had access to SMARTHINKING during semester two. The study reports only on data gathered in semester two.

THE METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted utilising a mixed method approach. Quantitative data was gathered through an online student survey comprised of 22 questions. The analysis considered a number of factors including teaching and learning effectiveness, correlations between SMARTHINKING usage and grade success, significance of courses studied to usefulness of SMARTHINKING and usage by high need learners such as international students. Qualitative data which evaluated how well or otherwise SMARTHINKING supported teaching and learning was gathered through focus group interviews with students, academic and professional staff.

THE INSTRUMENTS

The online survey instrument was developed through LimeSurvey, an open source web based tool endorsed by Griffith. It was comprised 22 questions spread across six categories; teaching and learning, communication, satisfaction, primary use, technology, and demographics. To enable an easy break down of user activity, exactly the same survey was used with each of the two distinct groups of users (TC and WP students). In addition, a number of differentiating questions were asked and also included general demographic questions to determine status such as whether the student from the international cohort; which of Griffith's five campuses did they study; student residential locations outside of semester time; what course(s) students accessed Smarthinking for; through to more specific questions to determine; their views on the consistency of the advice from the SMARTHINKING e-structor when compared with that of their university tutor; did students access other learning support services; and how did they rate the quality of the final essay submission after input from the SMARTHINKING tutor? The survey itself was run for a period of five weeks at end Semester 2, 2010 including a two week teaching period, one exam preparation week and two exam weeks.

Focus group interviews with students (WP students by invitation) and staff (academic and professional) were conducted during the exam period. These interviews formed a key part of the researchers' ability to gauge perception of the OFOT in relation to grade success and retention. It was considered that the student, academic and professional staff perceptions of whether or not SMARTHINKING supports teaching and learning were an integral outcome of this study.

SAMPLE

The TCs and student groups were a reflection of the differing student demographic with representations across wide age ranges, international and non fluent speakers of English, alternative pathway groupings and a number of year levels. The TC group [n=2,735] include first year students from Griffith Business School [n=1,050], third year students from the School of Education [n=999] and second year students from the School of Nursing [n=696]. A very small number of students in a Masters program was enrolled in a third year education course [n=10]. The WP group [n=2,665] represented a wide range of degree programs, a significant number of courses and alternative pathway students.

RESULTS & CONCLUSIONS

Of 2,171 students who registered to use SMARTHINKING, about 23% used the services frequently. 85% of SMARTHINKING users perceived that the services made at least some positive difference to overall performance in their course work, and 72% of survey respondents agreed they would use SMARTHINKING again given the opportunity. The Online Writing Lab proved exceptionally popular, although the ESL Essay Centre was ranked 1 (most useful) by 40% of all SMARTHINKING users.

If average marks in 2009 (SMARTHINKING not available) are compared to average marks in 2010 (SMARTHINKING available), there is little difference overall. When grades for SMARTHINKING users in 2010 are compared with students in the same courses who did not use SMARTHINKING, medium to strong effect sizes were observed. The trial raised awareness of legitimate online academic tutoring possibilities, and it appears, statistically and anecdotally, to have raised the grade levels of SMARTHINKING users as opposed to non-users in most targeted courses. SMARTHINKING not only assisted students to write better scripts and consolidate discipline-specific knowledge (e.g. Economics) but provided students with a level of confidence when better grades were attained.

SMARTHINKING provides 24 hour x 7 days per week service. Flexibility in accessing online resources is especially critical for students who have family, career, health, social, economic, or work pressures. Griffith's 2010 trial of SMARTHINKING has gone some way to demonstrating that offshore online tutoring service providers can be a satisfactory adjunct to existing services, but this comes at a price and the cost of SMARTHINKING as a commercial service provider needs to be included as an integral component of any future usage.

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