



POWER OF ONE: IMPROVING STUDENT RETENTION IN ONLINE COURSES

A case study by LINC Education Services

ONLINE LEARNING IN AUSTRALIA IS GROWING 4X FASTER THAN CAMPUS-BASED. HOWEVER, STUDENT ATTRITION REMAINS A BIG CHALLENGE AND COURSE COMPLETION RATES OFTEN FALL BELOW 20%. LINC EDUCATION PARTNERED WITH A LARGE NSW UNIVERSITY TO IMPLEMENT A 1-1 ACADEMIC SUPPORT PROGRAM FOR ITS ONLINE MBA STUDENTS, LEADING TO A 50% REDUCTION IN DROP-OUT RATES.

Premise

Online education forms a key segment for Australian universities which now have ~365K students using this mode. This segment has grown at over 9% p.a. as compared to 1.3% p.a. for domestic on-campus students making it the fastest growing market after international students¹. A number of universities, including many in partnership with specialist providers, now run bespoke online courses targeted at undergraduate and postgraduate learners using the latest in technology.

Regardless of the growth, student attrition continues to be a big risk for universities. From the traditional days of distance learning to today's online era, our institutions have struggled to rein in student dropout rates and increase completion rates. TEQSA's latest attrition report² suggests a strong correlation between online (external) student enrolment and attrition levels in Australian universities. Universities with average first year attrition rate above 20% typically have large external student populations. For the government and universities, the concern over attrition may largely be centered around financial and reputational issues. But the issue is of considerable significance for the students themselves - wasted time, larger personal debt and a great opportunity cost.

So what might be the issue? More than 70% of online students are working professionals over 25 years old³. This community has a different mindset - it seeks convenience and flexibility while pursuing its need for up skilling. Therefore, the same principle should be applied to academic support - make it convenient, flexible and customised to each student's need. This can only be achieved by adopting a 1-1 approach.

CASE STUDY: 1-1 APPROACH TO IMPROVING RETENTION

To address attrition related challenges posed by online students, a large NSW-based public university partnered with LINC Education. The university offers online postgraduate programs to domestic students (MBA, Master of Health, etc.). Its courses are custom designed for online learners and delivered using content specifically built for online learning. Students are supported by online facilitators and student success advisors. This is already more than what many universities are currently doing for their online students. However, the institution identified sufficient scope for improving attrition.

The Challenge - Introductory Accounting

"Accounting for Managers", a core MBA unit with ~150 students was chosen for the LINC program. It had previously seen pre-census drop rates of 16% and above. The number was twice as high amongst students who were starting the course with this unit.

Support Design & Implementation

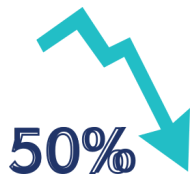
Each student was assigned one LINC Fellow, an experienced accounting academic, who they could reach via email or SMS and hold telephone conversations with. LINC Fellows were most active post 5 pm and available all seven days. LINC's support incorporated three unique differentiators when compared to other support services:

1. Proactive Support: Emphasis on 1-1 proactive support with no limit on how much time is spent with students.
2. Use of Technology: LINC's proprietary "intelligent" student engagement system used analytics, to customise, automate, monitor, control and report all interactions.

1. uCube, Department of Education and Training, Australia

2. TEQSA Attrition Report 2017

3. LINC survey of Australian PG students (n=2000)



50%

reduction in pre-census
drop out



reduction in
failure rate



increase in student
lifetime revenues

"It was very comforting to know that there is an almost instant source of support available during odd hours that I tend to study. I'm very appreciative of the opportunity to work with a LINC Fellow and this has been a wonderful introduction to the course"

- Commencing Student, Online MBA

3. Alignment to Class Content: LINC Fellows operated as an extension of the teaching team and had access to all unit content. They had on-going consultations with the teaching team to make the support relevant to students.

OUTCOMES, INSIGHTS AND LEARNINGS

The program delivered substantial improvements, across key dimensions:

Student Retention:

Pre-census drop rates improved from 16% to 8%, while new student drop rates fell from 33% to 13%. These improvements led to immediate uplift to unit economics and student lifetime revenue.

Academic Outcomes:

Failure rate came down from 14% to 8%. This was the lowest rate observed in this unit since it was offered.

Student Engagement:

Over the course of the 6 week teaching term, LINC Fellows exchanged >4500 emails with students and had ~150 hours of telephonic conversations across >600 interactions. 90%+ students engaged during the course of the term, with week-on-week engagement in excess of 70%.

LINC's 1:1 approach delivered tangible benefits by

1. Enabling a 1-1 relationship: Academic and learning-related issues that lead to drop out / failure are often not raised in public forums and can only be addressed in individual setting like that provided by LINC.
2. Activating "passive students": LINC engaged over 90% of students as compared to ~30% that are typically active on discussion forums. This deepened the reach of support into a broader group of students and provided an additional avenue to connect them with the university.
3. Providing prompt support: Given constrained time windows and availability of working students, LINC's support was aligned to the student's learning preferences.

LINC is now working with a significantly larger group of students (200+) in the next study period.

To conclude, online education gives universities the perfect opportunity to personalise the learning experience for the student rather than reduce it to digitalized distribution of content. It is this personalisation of education that will drive retention and student satisfaction.