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# ALL taking a lead: Enabling first year persistence and success

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Australian universities, and academic language and learning (ALL) staff, are currently facing the challenges associated with increasing the "participation rate of students from disadvantaged backgrounds to 20% of all undergraduate students by 2020" (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008, p. xiv). Concern about student persistence and success are prompting whole institution approaches to transition support. Sometimes, however, a smaller, more focussed, transition program is required. This paper reports on an early intervention introduced by ALL staff on one campus in one division at the University of South Australia (UniSA) for a cohort that includes many students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. The paper argues that ALL advisers need to ensure that they position themselves to meet these challenges and influence and effect institutional change through communicating the innovative nature of their work and the difference it makes to the experience of students adapting to university study.

**Key Words:** first year experience, retention and success, early intervention, innovation, academic language and learning advisers.

## 1. Introduction

One of the challenges that universities, and their academic language and learning (ALL) staff, face with a projected increase in the "participation rate of students from disadvantaged groups to 20% of all undergraduate students by 2020" (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008, p. xiv) is ensuring that newcomers to higher education enjoy every chance of success (Tinto, 2008). Previous efforts to increase the participation rate of these students have resulted in disappointingly high rates of attrition (Coates & Krause, 2005, p. 39). Too often, students entering university through access programs see themselves as "fish out of water", lacking the cultural capital needed to survive and thrive at university (Tranter, 2003). The risk of increased attrition can be addressed, and vulnerable students encouraged to persist and succeed, if institutions come to grips with the "five dimensions of student engagement: academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student – faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences and a supportive campus environment" (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2005a, as cited in Krause & Coates, 2008, p. 494) with their implications for teaching and learning.

Universities' capacity to respond to the adaptation and learning needs of first year students has increased greatly since concern about the numbers lost through attrition and failure prompted valuable longitudinal studies into the first year experience (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005). Krause's (2005, pp. 62-64) further work in categorising behaviours that characterize "potential dropouts" and "persisters" is particularly useful in identifying and addressing student issues very early in their enrolment. For example non-attendance, which is not confined to any one group of students, is common and can signal low commitment. It can also demonstrate limited student insight into the role that attendance plays in maintaining motivation, building relationships and learning about new teaching and learning practices (Halpern, 2007). This type of naive and counter-productive behaviour

contrasts sharply with the strategic behaviours of students who position themselves to persist (Tinto, 2006). Orientation and transition programs that effectively communicate the value of strategies like attending lectures are needed to encourage all students to more confidently pursue their educational goals (Krause & Coates, 2008, p. 494).

In recent years, a number of institutions with a high intake of non-traditional students have taken on the challenge of improving student persistence and success through a systemic, personalised early support strategy. The Open University (UK), with its non-traditional distance education cohort, operates staff-student interventions in which staff contact students by phone at regular intervals in the early part of the year, when they are vulnerable to withdrawing, to persuade them to persevere, study and succeed (Gibbs, Regan, & Simpson, 2006-07). A similar model operates at both Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and the University of Auckland (AUQA Good Practice Database, 2009; Nelson, Duncan, & Clarke, 2009). The distinguishing difference between them is that the Open University (UK) uses a staff – student approach and the others use teams of trained senior students who contact new students, acknowledging them as fellow students, enquiring about any early adaptation issues and, when necessary, referring them to expert sources of advice and support. Both models break through the sense of anonymity that many new students experience when they commence university, and both foster successful transition. Formal evaluation of these approaches demonstrates a significant improvement in retention, success and student satisfaction. These approaches are recognised as a worthwhile investment of university resources (Gibbs et al., 2006-07; AUQA Good Practice Database, 2009; Nelson et al., 2009). All are driven by non-ALL staff despite the fact that ALL staff have formalised institutional roles and high levels of expertise in the area of transition.

Indeed, as long ago as 1988, Ballard and Clanchy, pioneers in this field, explained that the enculturation of students into disciplinary practice is the core business for ALL staff. O'Regan (2005, p. 136) has described the ALL role as making "the university familiar to newcomers by peeling off its labels and probing its strangeness". Their work with individual students and teaching staff provides ALL staff with a grounded understanding of the language and learning issues affecting students (Chanock, 2007). Moreover, because they develop language and learning resources and provide in-course learning development, ALL staff have a greater insight than most into various program expectations and the academic demands of assessment. This knowledge and experience marks them as critical participants in transition initiatives. A more active role in transition would help to counter the marginalisation of ALL work in supporting successful transition and help redefine the way staff are considered within their institutions, a matter of concern explored at previous ALL conferences (Bartlett, 2005). Therefore, as Australian universities open their doors to new groups of students, they should look more closely at the capacity of their ALL staff to contribute to initiatives that foster academic engagement and success.

At the University of South Australia (UniSA), the Learning Advisers, as local ALL staff, have played a key role in developing and delivering a first year experience initiative, "Supporting academic success" (SAS). This first year student support strategy, which has been operating since 2006, is a campus-based early intervention developed in response to divisional concerns about first year retention and success. In this local version of the personal contact model of student intervention, the Learning Advisers in the Learning and Teaching Unit (LTU) work cooperatively with teaching staff in the Division of Information Technology, Engineering and the Environment (ITEE) to identify and advise students in need in core courses. Given the successful experience of ALL staff in SAS, they are currently involved as consultants in the development of a similar university-wide intervention. This study explores the effectiveness of a first year intervention drawing on University trend data on first year retention and success for the division and equity groups, buy-in from staff in the strategy, telephone and online surveys of three groups of participating students, and an analysis of academic success rates for students in one large targeted course over two years. The paper first explains the context for SAS, followed by an outline of the evidence collected about its reception and impact on retention and success. It concludes that involvement in transition initiatives can deliver multiple benefits, including

positioning ALL staff to contribute more effectively to institutional initiatives at this time of widening participation.

## 2. ITEE at Mawson Lakes Campus: Local issues looking for local solutions

When they enter university, most students anticipate enjoying university life and experiencing academic success, but in 2005 the experience for new ITEE students at the Mawson Lakes Campus of UniSA was disappointing in both respects. The ITEE division reported lower than average retention rates and higher levels of dissatisfaction compared to the other three UniSA academic divisions (Smith, 2006). The unsatisfactory success rates of core courses in two of the Schools undermined even the most successful students. In addition, very early withdrawals from programs, before Census date, signalled that from the beginning some new students were choosing to leave rather than stay.

At the time, the orientation program at UniSA was typical of the approach taken at many universities. In the week preceding the start of classes, students were offered a number of information and transition to university sessions and some staged entertainment to encourage socialisation. But with attendance at orientation activities in decline, commencing students were increasingly likely to commence classes completely unprepared for the high level demands of their programs.

The need for a more effective transition program was heightened at the Mawson Lakes Campus by the composition of the first year ITEE cohort (Johnston, Aziz, Kaya, & Quinn, 2008). Divisional statistics show that students were mainly male, local, young and the first in their family to enter university. In 2005, 72% identified with one or more equity groups (Quinn, 2008). Those living locally were likely to have attended disadvantaged secondary schools which share a culture of resistance to higher education (Tranter, 2005). Students going on to university from such schools are likely to be alone and unprepared for the differences they find in a tertiary academic environment (Tranter, 2003). Moreover, unlike other students, they cannot draw on the lived experience of family or friends to support their transition into university. Their engagement and persistence in the program are more likely to rely on access to early and explicit guidance into university study (Tinto, 2008). At the time of the intervention reported here, this was not provided in any systematic way beyond orientation week.

Another significant factor that signalled a need for change at Mawson Lakes Campus is its outer-metropolitan situation, adjacent to a quiet commuter suburb, offering little in the way of a supportive campus environment. In the first few weeks of semester, when students are typically encouraged to develop the friendships that will support them in their study, there were limited local or campus enticements to socialise with classmates or form the sorts of relationships which might provide "a buffer against the stress of feeling alone in a strange environment" (Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005, p. 713). Instead, the day-to-day campus reality tended to mediate against students getting to know classmates or forming a learning community (Tinto, 2006). There was a clear need for a range of strategies that could improve the student experience, retention and success.

## 3. Supporting persistence and success

In late 2005, the ITEE division established the First Year Experience Project (FYEP), a multi-faceted plan to improve students' experience of their campus and programs (Smith, 2006). One of its key objectives was the development of a new student support strategy aimed at improving academic engagement and success. Leadership of this strategy was assigned to ALL staff on the basis of their history of working successfully with ITEE students and staff.

Given the cohort, the nature of the campus, and the need to break down some of the barriers to students making a good start in their program, the FYEP team, including relevant first year teaching teams, agreed to use a personal approach with first year students similar in some respects to that operating at the Open University (UK). Gibbs et al. (2006-07) explain that it is important to contact students before they can recognise, let alone articulate, their own learning

needs, to encourage greater commitment and involvement. This approach seemed especially suited to the Mawson Lakes Campus, where staff regularly reported that students were reluctant to seek assistance. Two contact points were chosen, the first before Census date and the second after the first assessment. Both are known to be critical moments in successful transition.

As a local, unfunded strategy, SAS had to work within certain constraints. In 2006 this meant operating only in the first half of each semester; only in the two Schools of Computer and Information Science (CIS) and Electrical and Information Engineering (EIE); and only in the most difficult or challenging core first year courses. The two student behaviours used to select students for intervention were poor attendance and unsatisfactory academic performance. Any student referred from a course on this basis would be considered for contact. Despite the constraints, this approach monitored most first year students in those Schools because the nominated target courses were commencing core courses in degree programs.

The FYEP and first year teaching teams agreed that Learning Advisers would contact students given their particular expertise in facilitating student transition and working with teaching staff. Learning Advisers brought the added advantage of a good knowledge of other student services, with most co-located in the LTU. This meant they were well placed to encourage students to adopt a strategic and productive approach to their study, liaise with teaching staff, and refer students to alternative sources of support as needed.

The success of the new intervention depended on two groups of staff: the LTU Learning Advisers and Course Coordinators. Within the LTU, as FYEP and SAS work was exclusive to the Mawson Lakes Campus, it was categorised and approved as project work in the annual Service Contract between the Division and the LTU. This was important initially as it involved the Learning Advisers in work practices that were not replicated at any other campus. In subsequent years the SAS work became routine, but still campus-specific. In the beginning it was also agreed that the involvement of relevant course coordinators would be voluntary but encouraged, both within the division and by the Learning Adviser coordinating the SAS strategy.

## 3.1. The process

The SAS strategy has continued to run each semester since 2006. Generally SAS operates in four to six courses each semester. The SAS coordinator starts the process and then manages it through to reporting to divisional stakeholders and LTU management. Other ALL staff are involved only at student contact points. The full process (see Figure 1) for the Mawson Lakes Campus intervention strategy has been described previously in Johnston et al. (2008).
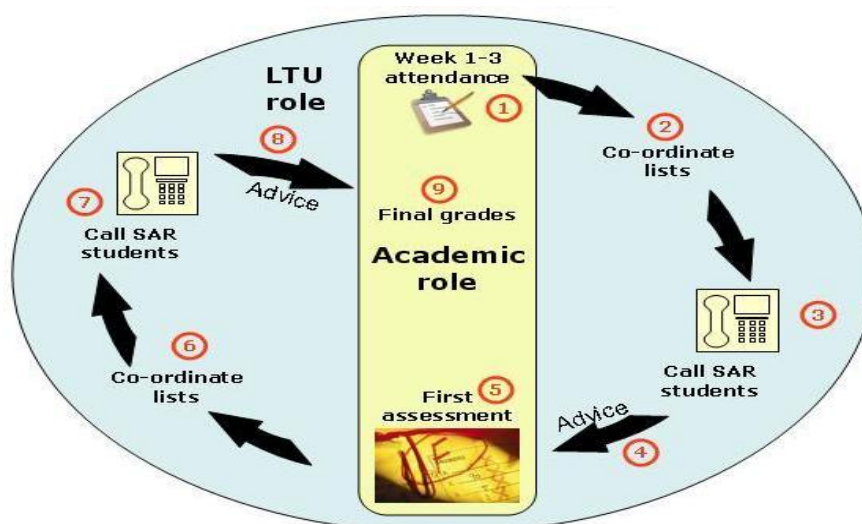


**Figure 1.** Supporting academic success (SAS) (Johnston et al., 2008, p. 30).

In Stage One (steps 1-4), student attendance is monitored in early weeks across several selected courses and non-attending students are identified, contacted and provided with advice. In Stage Two (steps 5-9), students who failed early assessments are identified, contacted and provided with advice.

In this process a significant effort is made to ensure that SAS operates effectively. All course referral lists are audited prior to SAS staff phoning or emailing students, to ensure that students referred from the two courses are contacted only once, and to remove names of students no longer enrolled. Records of "successful contacts" are kept only for those for whom there is a record of response. The number of successful contacts varies substantially across courses. For example, in Stage One (Figure 1) in the first half of 2009, the response rate in one course was 70% (41/58 students contacted) and in another it was 60% (9/15 students contacted). These data are reported to course coordinators and senior divisional staff such as the Dean: Teaching and Learning. From the start, managing and reporting on SAS processes and outcomes has been essential to the program's visibility and acceptance.

The administrative process is recorded manually, although a data management system like the Case Management System (CMS) at QUT (Nelson et al., 2009) would greatly assist implement-ation, evaluation and reporting. In SAS, student lists and reports are managed through Microsoft SharePoint (*Microsoft Office SharePoint, 2007*). This enables an open process and provides key stakeholders with continuing access to summaries and reports.

## 4. Determining the value of SAS

Although early intervention contact models are widely considered to be effective (Gibbs et al., 2006-2007; AUQA Good Practice Database, 2009; Nelson et al., 2009), the modified approach described here has not been subject to comprehensive evaluation. In general, evaluation of small-scale, unfunded and intermittent interventions like SAS are complicated by the fact that like many student services, it is only one factor, and often a minor one, influencing student success (McKinnon, Walker, & Davis, 2000). Various data are examined here to indicate the impact of SAS.

### 4.1. Trend data and staff support as measures of success

Since the FYEP began in 2006, UniSA trend data[1] used to monitor student retention and success within equity groups in ITEE show a gradual improvement until standard progression rates are reached (Figure 2). This result supports similar findings regarding student retention and success in other studies (Gibbs et al., 2006 - 07; AUQA Good Practice Database, 2009; Nelson et al., 2009). Trend data reveal a marked improvement in student retention and success following the implementation FYEP initiatives such as SAS. In particular, the success and retention of students from equity groups improved markedly in 2006-07, before plateauing at a level that compares satisfactorily with standard University progression rates (see Figure 2). SAS, with its focus on encouraging and advising potentially vulnerable students, is attributed with influencing this improvement.

The confidence and ongoing support of divisional staff in SAS is another indicator of the value of the strategy. From its inception, the intervention has enjoyed staff support. Initially the division agreed that SAS would operate in two ITEE Schools, with a reach of approximately 280 students (200 in Computer and Information Science and 80 in Electrical and Information Engineering). From 2008, staff agreed to extend the brief of SAS to include all students in the new First Year Engineering Program (including Electrical & Information Engineering, Civil Engineering and Mechanical and Manufacturing Engineering students), over 400 students. Course coordinators in the nominated courses, particularly at the time of the major intake in the first half of the year, referred up to 50% of students in their courses. Based on available data, Figure 3 illustrates consistent buy-in by academic staff.

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[1] These data use processes outlined by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), and are based on post-Census enrolment data.
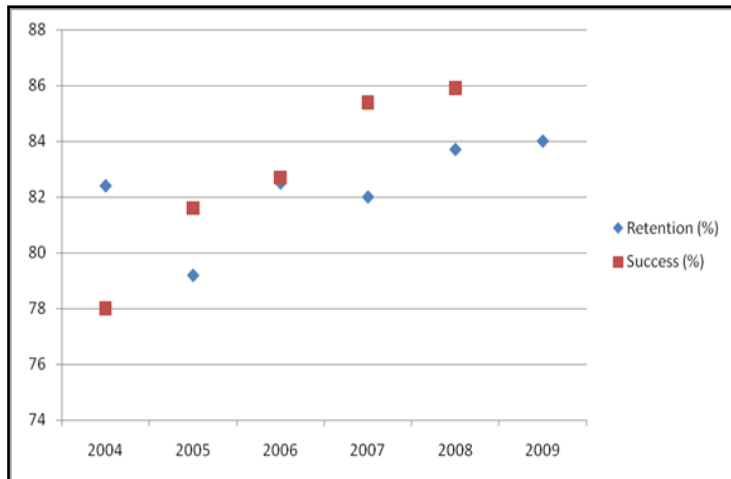
**Figure 2.** Trend of retention and success rates for ITEE students classified in an Australian Government (DEEWR) equity category.
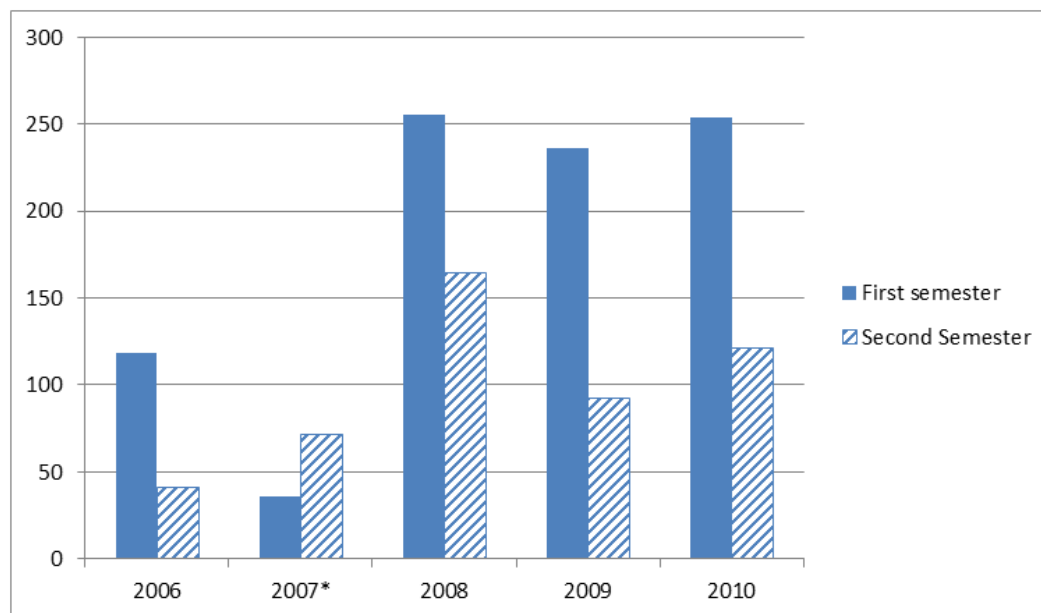


**Figure 3.** Summary of Supporting Academic Success referrals in ITEE 2006-2010 by number of students referred. *2007 Semester One data incomplete.

## 4.2. Student perceptions of the value of the intervention

SAS records of student responses from early 2006, and anecdotal staff feedback, consistently indicate that the majority of students who respond to the phone call or email value being contacted and offered encouragement and advice. The student response was explored further through targeted qualitative surveys: a telephone survey of "successfully contacted" students at the end of 2008 using a guided interview, and two online surveys of all students contacted in the first and second semesters of 2009. The online surveys, using the UniSA survey instrument TellUs2, were approved by the UniSA Ethics Committee.

All surveys had low response rates. The 2008 guided telephone interview contacted 9 students in one course. The two online surveys were emailed to all students on the final contact lists at the end of the first and second semesters in 2009, after the release of results. In each case the response rate was very low (10/172 in June 2009; 8/136 in Dec 2009). However, a low response rate is not unusual for online surveys (Anderson, Brown, & Spaeth, 2006). In this case the poor response may have been aggravated by "survey fatigue" in students and the length of time

between SAS contact with students and the surveys. In all there was a mix of positive, negative and ambivalent responses about SAS.

Although the data were limited, survey results correlate with staff feedback that most students were pleased to be contacted and offered advice that would improve their chances of succeeding. The few comments indicating that students were less happy about being contacted were mainly about the lecturers' impression of them, the possible inaccuracy of class attendance records, or the need to attend class. Eighty percent of respondents in each survey made changes to their study approach. The most common change was taking a more active role in their learning by talking more to lecturers and tutors and working more with other students. In general, these student responses support national findings that first year students, often coming from more supported educational environments, want to be recognised and acknowledged by university staff (Krause et al., 2005).

The following were typical responses to SAS contact:

> *..., i was attending the wrong practical class. I was attending the classes i simply wasn't being marked on the attendance sheet. However i did find it encouraging that if i ever did need help it would be available to me (student response, August 2009).*

> *I felt a human touch that had been sadly lacking with other education institutions I have attended, whose names I wont[sic] mention (X, Y SC!!!!!) (student response, December 2009).*

The majority of respondents in all three surveys students considered SAS a good initiative, and worth continuing:

> *Just encourage the SAS for being helpful to students (student response, July 2009).*

> *I believe it is a very good program and any help new students can get is good help (student response, December 2009).*

## 4.3. Impact on students' academic performance

In 2008, when the intervention began to service all new first year engineering students, a new course, Mathematical Methods for Engineers (MME1), was nominated as one of the two engineering target courses because it was expected to prove difficult for many students. A small research team of divisional and LTU staff was formed to monitor SAS in MME1 and, although aware that SAS was only one of the factors influencing student performance, they hoped that analysing the final grades of the successfully contacted students might provide insights into the new course and suggest the SAS impact on students.

MME1 was expected to prove at least as difficult as the EIE antecedent mathematics course which had been targeted for SAS in 2006-2007. The Academic Director of First Year Engineering and Mathematics staff was concerned that the broadening of the engineering program to include more students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds would increase the number of students under-prepared for engineering mathematics. Consequently, the new curriculum had been broadened, strengthened, and more clearly aligned to assessment (Gibbs & Simpson, 2005). These changes heightened the need for students to attend class and complete all assessment tasks if they were to establish the required mathematical foundations for this course. Staff hoped that SAS would support classroom efforts to encourage new students to associate attendance and assessment, including weekly quizzes, with a successful final grade.

The research group decided to review the final grades of students who had been successfully contacted in MME1 by the stage of contact to see what effect, if any, SAS had on student progress and success. In 2008, the first year of delivery, 105 students were referred to SAS, i.e. over 50% of the enrolment. The first analysis of the grades for the 76 students who had been successfully contacted revealed that most failed the course (58/76). The implication of this, that SAS had no value to students, conflicted with the course coordinator's impression that SAS had encouraged some of the successful students.

This apparent contradiction prompted a re-examination of the data and reconsideration of the decision that SAS would monitor all students in the target courses, even those not in their first year of enrolment. Students were divided into two sub-sets, new enrolees in 2008 and continuing students, and then by the stage of contact (see Table 1). Data on students referred and contacted twice were also analysed separately. This demonstrated more clearly that the majority of those who passed were new students (12/18). Moreover, most of the students who passed were only contacted at Stage One, not Stage Two. In fact only 7 of the 24 students contacted for the first time at Stage Two were successful and the majority of those referred at both stages, failed (16/18). The new approach also revealed that 25 of the students who were contacted were not first year students, therefore not in transition. Most of these continuing students failed, regardless of the time at which they were contacted.

**Table 1.** SAS Semester 1, 2008: Pass/Fail outcomes for contacted Mathematical Methods for Engineers 1 students by type of student enrolment and stage of contact (adapted from Johnston et al., 2008).

| Point of contact | On Stage 1 list | | On Stage 2 list | | On both lists | | Totals |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Grades | New | Cont. | New | Cont. | New | Cont. | |
| PASS | 9 | 0 | 3 | 4 | 0 | 2 | 18 |
| FAIL | 4 | 4 | 28 | 6 | 7 | 9 | 58 |
| Totals | 13 | 4 | 31 | 10 | 7 | 11 | 76 |

This second analysis of the data seemed to indicate that the time of referral was influential and SAS in MME1 had more value to new students than continuing students. It had limited impact on anyone referred for the first time at mid-semester. In fact by the time students had completed and failed the first assignment they had little chance of recovering academically and passing, which appeared to question the value of the second stage of referrals.

Although it is difficult to establish a causal link between the contact and the individual student success in the courses, the course coordinator remained confident in SAS, considering the apparent SAS impact as reflective of the overall experience of the course that semester. The overall success rate was very low (55%) and across the course almost every student who failed the first assignment failed the course (C.Y. Kaya, August 22, 2008, personal communication). The course coordinator valued SAS for its apparent impact on its primary target group: new students. Indeed teaching staff considered that even a minor improvement in success was worthwhile.

At the end of Semester One 2009, the outcomes for MME1 students contacted through SAS were reviewed again, using a slightly modified approach (see Table 2). Divisional staff had decided to retain continuing students in the SAS referral process so referral lists remained a mix of new and continuing students. This time students who did not complete the course (i.e. who had chosen an option such as withdrawal) were considered separately because, although they had neither passed nor failed, they had persisted with their enrolment.

Once again the findings seemed inconclusive in that only 30/61 of the successfully contacted students passed the course. However, there was an improvement in the range of grades achieved by new students and in the percentage of students (78%) who either passed or avoided failure by taking leave from the program or withdrawing. The grade range in 2009 also revealed that, in contrast to the previous year when the highest grade in the group was a P1, some of the first year students were very successful. This suggested that early SAS contact was influential in focussing some students on their academic work. Overall, it seemed that SAS had a minor impact and it may have prevented some attrition. That was considered to be a positive outcome as even a minor impact on attrition allows several students to persist and succeed (Nelson et al., 2009).

In 2009 it was clear that establishing the success of SAS was extremely difficult using the methods adopted. In light of these difficulties, an alternative approach to reviewing impact on students was sought. Staff working in the Student Success Project (SSP) at QUT were consulted and they recommended an alternative approach, comparing the final grades of referred but unresponsive students with those successfully contacted (John Clarke, 7 July 2010, personal communication). This approach has been considered carefully and will be trialled at UniSA in 2012.

**Table 2.** SAS Semester 1, 2009: Final outcomes for contacted Mathematical Methods for Engineers 1 students by type of student enrolment**.**

| Type of student | Student Outcomes (Grades) | | | | | | | | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | HD | D | C | P1 | P2 | CP | F1 | F2 | Other* | |
| New | 1 | 1 | 1 | 7 | 13 | 1 | 3 | 11 | 4 | 42 |
| Cont. | - | - | - | 4 | 2 | - | 1 | 3 | 9 | 19 |
| Totals | 1 | 1 | 1 | 11 | 15 | 1 | 4 | 14 | 13 | 61 |

* Other: Withdrawal, approved Leave of Absence. Withdraw/Fail

The MME1 reviews of student outcomes highlighted poor results and recurrent student failure amongst the continuing students in this course. It is generally assumed that continuing students have adapted to the demands of university study and do not require the support provided for first years. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) suggest that passing first year is a good indicator that students will continue to graduation. The MME1 data point to the different experience for some continuing students who seemed unaccepting of SAS transition advice, yet very likely to fail (see Tables 1 and 2). Overton (2010) conducted a review of the results of continuing students in a number of SAS courses and found that "over 80% of repeating students failed on the subsequent attempt at a course" (p. 13). It seems there is very little research on recurrent student failure and that the challenges facing these students need further investigation.

## 4.4. Impact on the development of classroom teaching

In its design, SAS intended to provide course coordinators with a summary analysis of student feedback data which could be used to develop further insight into their students' experience of courses, or to improve the courses. The data was collected by callers from telephone or email responses at each stage of contact and analysed, usually once each semester. Through this process SAS has been able to affect course design and delivery, and thereby influence course and student success more broadly. MME1 is an example of a course coordinator using SAS feedback data to improve that course's success rate (Johnston et al., 2008).

In 2008, the first set of responses was summarised and this qualitative data shared with the course coordinator. The first set of data confirmed that some students were anxious about their background mathematics (e.g. limited content knowledge), or inability to understand lectures. Students also reported having no textbook and not accessing the recommended resources, including the Maths Help Centre and staff. Others referred to organisational issues and their inability to prioritise study over other commitments, particularly their paid work. Most of these reported behaviours are seen to indicate a "risk of dropping out" (Krause, 2005, pp.64-65). In fact, more responses referred to behaviours that seem to indicate risk (31/52) than the more strategic behaviours that typify persistence (21/52). It seemed that many students, as anticipated, did not understand how to approach university study. At this and each point of contact, SAS advice focussed on academic adjustment, passing on the course coordinator's advice to students.

The second set of qualitative data was collected at Stage Two from students who recorded a fail grade in the first assignment. It revealed a positive shift in students' understanding of requirements. This time, after several more weeks at university, there were more responses

representing potential to persist (28/53) than those suggesting a propensity to drop out (25/53). More responses focussed on inadequate skills and knowledge, and more reflected negative impressions of the quality of teaching, such as a lack of clarity about expectations. This seemed to indicate a growth in students' understanding of expectations and better insight into requirements, including better organisational skills and more strategic use of staff and peers than previously.

The course coordinator considered that both MME1 summary analyses of student feedback data affirmed the value of the intervention and its timing. The SAS data, when reviewed with other program and course-based feedback, pointed to practical ways in which course delivery might be adjusted. For example, students referred to their lack of background knowledge, and the course coordinator responded with a series of voluntary early morning "brush-up classes" which were offered at each subsequent iteration of the course to approximately 30 students (C.Y. Kaya, June 8, 2009, personal communication). Other adjustments included extended practical classes, modifications to course delivery such as more demonstrations of problem-solving, slower content delivery, and modified learning resources to better suit student needs. These changes benefitted all MME1 students and the quality of the course.

The use of SAS feedback in ITEE varies across courses, but it is valued. The Academic Director: First Year Engineering (S. M. Aziz, June 8, 2009, personal communication) sees SAS feedback as providing new insights into students experience because the students seem more open, in SAS responses, to commenting on their concerns and experiences than in course-based feedback. In his view this richer feedback supports staff in reviewing the curriculum, teaching and learning. It complements in-course feedback. For this reason, SAS reports, with summaries of student responses, are discussed with staff in forums like the First Year Engineering Team meetings where the nomination of target courses for the following year is agreed.

The ITEE Dean: Teaching and Learning has encouraged divisional staff to work collaboratively with the LTU academics, both Learning Advisers and Academic Developers, on various teaching and learning initiatives. The rate of collaboration and number of joint publications have increased, with many linked to early FYEP work. In 2008, the work of the FYEP team in ITEE was recognised by a *UniSA Enhancing Learning Award*.

## 5. Impact of SAS on promotion of ALL staff in the Division

Apart from attempts to determine the value of SAS to students, it was also important to look at other valued outcomes. ALL staff in Australia have long been pro-active in providing multiple pathways to early information and resources about how to successfully transition into university learning (Stevenson & Kokkinn, 2007). Although often appointed to provide individual tuition, they quickly recognised the limitations of this approach and sought effective means of reaching whole cohorts. First year initiatives like SAS offer another alternative: leadership of transition initiatives which draw on ALL insights and experience. SAS at the Mawson Lakes Campus has enhanced Learning Advisers' and the LTU's reach and impact at Divisional level, and it has enriched the campus approach to its new students.

SAS has effectively increased the reach of ALL staff in ITEE. Prior to 2006, not only did the Mawson Lakes Campus Learning Advisers have more limited student contact than provided at other campuses  and in other Divisions (University of South Australia [UniSA], 2009), but the overall demand for their resources and embedded classes was less than elsewhere. SAS has enabled staff to reach many more students. Overall, student contact has increased significantly. For example in the first half of 2009, 92 CIS and engineering students referred to SAS were contacted by phone and email. Seventy five of these students either talked to a Learning Adviser or exchanged emails with staff. Since 2008, with first year enrolment in CIS and the first Year Engineering Program increased to approximately 350, staff have been contacting approximately 200 students each year. Moreover, with the support of casual staff provided by the ITEE Dean: Teaching and Learning, this has been achieved without seriously decreasing ALL availability to other students. Most importantly, ALL influence amongst first year students has increased at the

time when many of them need advice that a casual approach to academic work will limit their success.

Involvement in SAS has led to new staff partnerships of the kind essential to ALL and first year experience work (Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010). In the last five years, academic staff in the LTU have developed much closer working relationships with divisional and professional staff through their shared interest in promoting student success. Flow-on referrals from SAS to professional and teaching staff have enabled many students to persist at university. For example, when students report issues such as medical conditions or family matters that seriously affect their ability to study, it is standard practice to request permission to refer them to more expert sources of support such as the Program Director, a Disability Adviser or Counsellor. This strategic use of staff crosses boundaries between areas of expertise and allows more effective responses to students at risk. In this way SAS has enabled ALL staff to play an important role in building a more supportive campus, and increasing staff-student interactions, both essential to student engagement (Krause & Coates, 2008). This is a significant improvement on the 2005 situation and has raised the profile of ALL staff in the division

## 6. UniSA improving the first year experience

When ALL staff at Mawson Lakes Campus became involved in FYEP and the new first year support strategy, it was an opportunity to effect better academic outcomes for Mawson Lakes students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Since then, interest in improving first year transition has been reinvigorated by the Bradley Report (Bradley et al., 2008). Momentum for a university-wide initiative was accelerated by QUT's report on the Student Support Program (Nelson et al., 2010) and recognition of SAS work in ITEE (UniSA, 2011a, p. 4). Since late 2010, the SAS coordinator has been integral to the development and implementation of UniSA's new systemic first year intervention, "Enhancing student academic potential" (ESAP) (UniSA, 2011a), a key element in UniSA's Teaching and Learning Strategic Plan 2012-2015 (UniSA, 2011b).

The new intervention will differ in many respects from SAS. The most significant from an ALL perspective is that ESAP will make use of trained Student Advisers instead of ALL staff. There are several reasons for this, but the most notable is a strengthened team orientation to English language development. ESAP will also focus exclusively on first year students. Another difference will be its underpinning by Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software, which will be invaluable to its administrative and reporting functions. The link with ALL staff continues, with the coordinator of SAS playing a key consultancy role in maintaining the focus on academic engagement and success, selecting and training Student Advisers, and developing the CRM.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper has argued for ALL staff placing themselves at the centre of developments like the ITEE early intervention at Mawson Lakes Campus where the Learning Advisers have made a positive contribution to student learning outcomes. The paper has explored a range of data sources, each of which indicates, in different ways, that the SAS intervention is considered effective in improving retention and success, either directly through its student contacts or indirectly through improving affected courses. At Mawson Lakes Campus the Learning Advisers' involvement in this first year experience initiative has extended their student reach and impact, and strengthened their relationships with divisional academics and professional colleagues. Involvement in such interventions raises the visibility and respect of ALL work and can lead to its more formalised incorporation in the university's strategic planning.

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