

## **Symposium: 'Getting to know you': Understanding students' interface with university services to improve the student experience**

**Paper 3:** « Blast from the past »: how tracing student voice and experience in real-time and across sectors allows for a picture that is bigger than the sum of its parts.

21st century universities have to be forward thinking. As resources become more limited, they also have to ensure policy informed decision making. There has been much written about the need to transform universities to better meet the needs of international students (Andres & Finlay, 2004; Montgomery, 2010; Turner & Robson, 2008). There is also emerging scholarship of the experiences of a more diverse student body, including international students (Pope, Reynolds & Mueller, 2004; Stevenson & Willot, 2010). However, before universities begin to transform themselves to meet the needs of « new » students, they need to explore just how well they know how current « local » students navigate the various services of the university during a yearly cycle. The peer regional mentoring at the University of Ottawa (Lamoureux et al, in press) allowed for a first glimpse into the different types of data that was being collected naturally at the university, but not being shared or analysed. The Cohort project aimed to narrow that gap, by integrating the data collected by various university services into a platform, in order to ensure that student voice (Jones, 2010) and experience inform institutional policy and practice all in the while improving the quality of student experience for all students.

Led by a cross-sectorial team, this project integrates existing data from various sources to track students' experience of interactions with university services for a First-year cohort, from May 2012 to April 2013. While only 4 groups (260 students) were targeted for the peer-to-peer mentoring project in 2011-2012, approximately 1800 students participated in the cohort project in 2012-2013, among one of 15 groups, which represents nearly 25% of all First-year, first entry students at the University of Ottawa. During the summer of 2012, students were asked to join a dedicated Facebook page. All interactions with peer mentors were recorded and integrated into an analysis grid developed in relation to students' needs and challenges. Five main themes emerged from the data: student life, technical questions or issues, financial concerns, academic issues and administrative services. In the Fall and Winter sessions, many more university services were integrated into the platform, such as: financial aid, financial services, faculty mentoring programs, the academic secretariat of the faculty of Sciences, and other administrative services. Our objective was to present the students' perspectives in regards to their experience with the University, through the capture and analysis of their interactions with different points of service. By defining problematic areas relying on students' accounts, we could therefore reflect on our institutional challenges.

Throughout the year, various types of reports were prepared, such as weekly updates on the evolution of student's use of services, as well as semester reports, relating to the needs and challenges students were faced with during the transition, integration and retention phases of their

first year. During the summer months, students are preparing their arrival at university: organizing their housing arrangements, choosing their courses, paying their tuition fees, etc. Among others, our analysis showed student preoccupations in regards to housing and the process by which they were being informed of their assigned residence. By analyzing students' comments on their assigned Facebook pages, we were able to determine their needs and concerns, which were then communicated to various instances at the University, in order to improve the students' experience with the housing service.

In the Fall and Winter sessions, we were able to broaden the scope of our analysis, with the integration of various other university services, in addition to the peer-to-peer mentoring program. The captation of student interactions highlighted issues and concerns that were not necessarily being addressed by various university services. For instance, although students were being informed of the possibility of making program changes during the Winter session, our data shows that many students begin to question their program choice much earlier. Thus, we are able to better understand the various needs and challenges relating to the different phases of the students' first year, which have an impact on student persistence and success. The Cohort project therefore enables us to analyse the effectiveness of information provided to students and allows us to readjust for the following years. In addition, we are able to understand more specifically which needs are more prevalent at different periods of time. From these observations, we were able to create visual representations of the temporal evolution of students' needs. We're also starting to look into pattern analysis that might help us personalise our service offer as well as training real-time advisors that could predict certain needs and suggest course of actions to students that fit a specific segment.

This paper will provide an overview of the results of the analysis for the 2012-2013 1<sup>st</sup> year cohort at the University of Ottawa. We will present student needs and challenges in accordance to three specific phases: transition, integration and retention. We will also highlight the benefits of acknowledging the specific nature of each phase, allowing the cross-sectorial research team and its partners to develop adapted solutions to challenges faced by these students (837).

## References

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