Improving First-year Student Retention – A Year-long Intervention for Success

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

This paper draws on findings from an evaluation of the impact of the Academic Success Tutors/Coaches (AST/C) initiative at the University of Bedfordshire, with a particular focus on retention data and course-specific metrics. The study encompasses a multi-faceted analysis, including comparisons with data from previous years. The evaluation is framed in relation to university-wide retention trends, examines variations and identifies potential influences on student continuation. Additionally, a targeted analysis of course-specific metrics, encompassing first assessment submission and pass rates, as well as resit and retake outcomes, is conducted to discern nuanced patterns within specific courses. The findings from this study not only contribute to the broader understanding of the AST/C initiative but also provide data-driven insights that can inform evidence-based decision-making, refine tutoring and coaching strategies, and further enhance the overall academic support structure within the university.

Full paper

Introduction

The implementation of academic coaching and tutoring in higher education institutions is on the rise to address the diverse needs of students. Most higher education institutions established academic support programmes to increase retention (Robinson, 2015). Research (Alzen et al., 2021; Cooper, 2010; Reinheimer & McKenzie, 2011) has shown that students who receive academic tutoring and coaching support tend to perform better academically and are more likely to continue their studies. Tutoring and coaching support is associated with improved success and retention rates compared to students who do not seek such support. Moreover, students who utilize tutoring are more likely to improve their study and organizational skills (Howlett et al., 2021).

Since it is a recently emerged student support initiative, the research on academic coaching and tutoring effectiveness and implementation is scarce. Moreover, the diversity of coaching and tutoring approaches further restricts the depth of research in specific contexts (Alzen et al., 2021; Capsticket al., 2019; Robinson, 2015). Researchers (Bettinger & Baker, 2014; Capstick et al., 2019; Howlett et al., 2021) have called for more empirical studies that examine the effects of academic tutoring and coaching on

student outcomes. Furthermore, much of the empirical research on academic tutoring and coaching is from the USA and the UK-based evidence needs further scrutiny (TASO, n.d.).

Methodology

This study sought to establish the influence of the AST/C intervention on retention rates in targeted courses. It also aimed to capture the perceptions and experiences of tutors, coaches and students during the intervention. It utilises a mixed-method approach where quantitative metrics such as assessment submission/pass rates and retention data will be analysed across the university and within courses in comparison with previous years. Qualitative data which includes student and tutor/coach feedback and interviews will explore insights regarding the AST/C intervention and the student and tutor/coach perceptions of what worked and was viewed as not to work.

Role of the Academic Success Tutor and Coach

The AST/C Programme targeted foundation and first-year students in courses where institutional retention rates were low. AST/Cs have worked to support the early identification of disengaged students (and so at risk of dropout) and then providing targeted one-to-one or small group support and/or arranging a referral to central support services. The AST/Cs have acted as a bridge between faculties and student support teams. Academic Success Tutor responsibilities also included additional teaching and teaching-related activities directed by faculties. Accordingly, this initiative aimed to support the transition to university life, fostering the development of academic and social competencies while supporting retention and active involvement within the academic and campus communities (Crisp et al. 2017).

Initial Findings

Semester 1 exam board data has shown that assessment submission and pass rates for foundation and first-year students and potential resit significantly improved in most of the target courses with more students passing and fewer students requiring potential resit opportunities. On a university level, there are improvements in both markers. This suggests positive progress is being made towards improving retention and ultimately Continuation. Semester 2 exam board data further supported the first submission data where overall the intervention groups and institutional Continuation data improved compared to the previous two years.

Initial student feedback on tutoring and coaching support was overwhelmingly positive with the majority of students indicating their satisfaction with the programme and intention to receive further support. Although tutors and coaches reported some challenges, especially at the start of their role, they felt a strong sense of unity and support within their academic team, which has facilitated problem-solving and ultimately contributed to positive student outcomes. Interviews with students, tutors and coaches will provide in-depth information regarding their experiences of the intervention.

Conclusion

The initial findings of the AST/C Programme are promising. The programme appears to be positively impacting student success, as evidenced by improved assessment submission and pass rates in targeted courses. Positive student and tutor/coach feedback further reinforces this notion. Data from the

summer exam boards will offer a more conclusive picture of the programme's impact on retention rates. Future research should explore the mediating variables of the intervention to better understand the critical success factors, as well as focus on the long-term effects of the AST/C programme on student success and consider expanding it to address the needs of a wider student population. By delving deeper into the programme's effectiveness and refining its approach, the AST/C can continue to be a valuable tool for supporting student transition, academic achievement, and overall university experience.

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