Background

A Library project team at Deakin University, Australia is undertaking research to assess potential barriers to information access which may impact on students’ retention and progress in undergraduate degrees.

Funded as part of a new government initiative to increase student diversity and successful participation in Higher Education, this study focuses on students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds studying in off-campus mode (distance education).

This project aims to identify key barriers experienced by students in accessing information and to develop strategies to reduce any negative effect of these barriers. Importantly, the approach has also evidenced potential enabling factors.

As part of a multi-stage research project, the qualitative approach taken in this stage complements quantitative studies of library value which have charted academic library amenity, students’ use of library information resources or other variables against scholarly achievement.

Deakin University Library

Influencing student retention and success

A qualitative assessment of library use by distance education students from low socio-economic backgrounds

Next stages and future practice

This study has revealed important barriers and enablers associated with information access which have implications for practice.

In the future stages of the project we are being undertaken which include the survey and literature review findings.

Definitions:

1. Off-campus: is defined as students who are located in areas grouped in the lowest quartile of the SEIFA Education and Financial Status (SES) indicator. Students from low SES backgrounds usually study using course materials provided. This mode is also called distance learning or distance education.

2. Students from low socio-economic status (SES) background: are students who are located in areas grouped in the lowest quartile of the SEIFA Education and Financial Status (SES) indicator. Students from low SES backgrounds usually study using course materials provided. This mode is also called distance learning or distance education.

Research Methodology

The research methodology is a mixed method approach with a focus on qualitative research. The Stage 1 methodology includes:

- a comprehensive review of student retention literature and the potential contribution of academic libraries to student retention and success
- identification of survey population: courses with high enrolment of students from low SES backgrounds and units offered off-campus
- development of interview questions to solicit students’ existing experience of the topic
- in depth telephone interviews with 26 students who volunteered to participate
- analysis of interview data using NVivo
- identifying themes reflecting students’ experience in accessing information and using the library

Stage 2: library academic partnerships have been developed with a second year Unit Chair in the Social Work Unit which has many students enrolled off-campus and from low SES backgrounds. We have actively piloted embedded services to address common barriers and posted targeted communications at retention trigger points, including:

- the development of a new information source, which was the library. I was able to download research e-journals from the library, and use them in my subject.

Stage 3: the project will review institutional and situational influencers within the Library's responsibility and apply good practice learned from within core units of study where off-campus students from low SES backgrounds are strongly represented.

Benefits for practice

A university library faces a substantial challenge in demonstrating to its institution that it makes a unique contribution to retention. Potential means by which libraries can make a contribution include:

- working in partnership with teachers and students, for example through embedded librarian services that help students to commit to and engage with their academic studies;
- catering for at risk groups when conceiving and providing library resources and services;
- ensuring that the online channels used to provide resources meet the needs of all students;
- identifying, anticipating and responding to retention trigger points within the Library's control to minimise the likelihood of student departure; and
- working with university support areas to ensure integrated support to students at risk of non-completion.

Somehow when I try to search for readings...I can waste 10 minutes. “Because I’m an off-campus student, I’ll be on D50 or D32, every night. And so I’ll be walking from there. So I only ever go to the Library through there.”

Students’ experiences

Barriers

• Lack of awareness of services
• Lack of persistence

Usability issues

• Low result relevance

Institutional impacts

• Institutional Preparedness

Situational impacts

• Student preparedness

Personal impacts

• Personal Preparedness

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