Working Together to Make Things Happen: New On-campus Higher Education Opportunities in a Regional Centre

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Abstract

In 2005 a South Australian university inaugurated a new provision of higher education programs in a regional city. Previously, would-be university students in the area had only the options of off-campus study, moving away from home to become internal students, or not pursuing university studies at all. The initiative provided the opportunity to study the effects of the new university presence on its students, university staff and the wider community, and at the same time to learn much that would enable continuous improvement of the methods used in offering these programs. This article reports on the results from focus groups of students and staff, and a survey of the first cohort of students, part of the first stage of a longitudinal study. A combination of effort and collaboration has contributed to meeting community educational needs and aspirations.

Introduction

The introduction of on-campus university education in Mount Gambier, the second largest city in South Australia and administrative centre for the Limestone Coast region, has provided a unique opportunity to study university growth and engagement with the region. This mode of higher education provision was new to the region; previously people who wanted to remain in the region and undertake university studies had only off-campus study options.

Researchers from the Centre for Regional Engagement (CRE), University of South Australia (UniSA), gained CRE funding support to investigate the impact of UniSA's

Mount Gambier Regional Centre (MGRC) on the students, staff and the region. This would identify whether assumptions about possible benefits had been justified. Such envisaged advantages included: increased accessibility to programs; retention of population in the regional area; an increase in the professional skills base of the community; increased local employment in professional roles; high student satisfaction and program completion rates through obviating the need for either external study or living away from home; and "knowledge creation, distribution and facilitation" (Garlick & Pryor, 2002, p. 2).

After providing some background to the new venture and on rural students and higher education, we outline the scope of the research project, a longitudinal study, and then focus on the first phase. This investigates the experiences of students and staff relating to the first year of the new venture, particularly the learning and teaching aspects. We also include other factors that contribute to students' satisfaction with their learning environment. An earlier paper focuses on student and staff perceptions of the impact on the region, as well as input from a stakeholders' focus group, and considers particular links with social capital generation and contribution (Watkinson & Ellis, 2006). A recent conference paper (Sawyer, Ellis, & Watkinson, 2007) includes an overview of the project, insights drawn from telephone interviews with students who have withdrawn, and changes instituted in response to the early feedback. Discussion in the current article focuses on implications for practice drawn from the data concerning student and staff perceptions.

Background

The development on which this study focuses is a completely new way of course delivery in South Australia. Previously Whyalla Campus (the only university campus outside the Adelaide metropolitan area) had pioneered flexible delivery of the first year of the Bachelor of Nursing in 1997, for the first time in Australia, and expanded this to the whole program. A formal agreement with the South East Institute of TAFE enabled UniSA staff visits to conduct intensive workshops, enhancing the external delivery of the program to students in that region. Other courses have been offered externally by UniSA. External courses offered by interstate or overseas universities have provided another option. This new development, however, has given non-metropolitan students an on-campus experience, using existing facilities belonging to cooperating institutions (TAFE SA, with science facilities initially made available by Tenison Woods College). These arrangements involve: local tutors (and now some lecturers), lectures videoconferenced between sites, face-to-face lectures presented by visiting lecturers, library loan arrangements, and shared computer and printing facilities. The new development is also significant in the connections formed between two regional areas located in opposite directions from the capital.

Regional Australia and Higher Education

Non-metropolitan students were identified by the *National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education* (Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission (HREOC), 2000) as less likely than metropolitan students to complete schooling, because of availability and access issues, and subsequent disadvantage with regard to tertiary education prospects. A federal government discussion paper in 1989 had identified rural and isolated people as a higher education "equity group" (National Board of Employment, Education & Training (NBEET)/Department of Employment, Education & Training (DEET), 1990). A later assessment of the extent to which the equity objectives had been met (NBEET, 1996) remarked on the concentration of rural and isolated students in external studies, in which there were lower retention and success rates. Rural under-representation has continued (Callaghan, 2002). Progression to tertiary education is influenced by the inter-related factors of academic achievement, motivation and finances, with students in regional areas likely to be adversely affected by all of these factors (Heaney, 1999). A study of the relationship between regional higher education participation rates and campus proximity and socio-economic status (Stevenson, Evans, Maclachlan, Karmel, & Blakers, 2001) found that socio-economic differences in metropolitan and non-metropolitan participation were important, but that "[m]uch of the difference in participation appears to relate to the way regional communities relate to the education system" (Stevenson et al., p. 17). One contribution to change in this community-education relationship is UniSA's engagement with the Limestone Coast region to plan and implement a higher education presence, responsive to the needs identified by the community, and focusing on the two-way benefits and knowledge/expertise exchanges involved (Pullin & Munn, 2006).

Students from rural backgrounds tend to be more focused on their chosen career than metropolitan students, as identified by a national survey of Australian first-year higher education students (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005). Hence these career aspirations are a strong source of motivation, no less so for students already working in their chosen area and wanting to upgrade qualifications, as is the case with some of the Mount Gambier students.

Research Aims and Significance

The *UniSA comes to Mount Gambier* project aimed to:

- Examine the impact of the introduction of a university to a regional centre where no university campus had previously existed;

- Focus on the first cohort of students in each of the three undergraduate programs (Nursing, Social Work, and Business) and follow them through their university study and into their graduate employment;

- Seek evidence of related engagement with the local region and its service-providers; and,

- Assess educational strategies suitable for small student populations and staff geographically distant from other university cohorts.

The expected educational outcomes of the whole longitudinal study are: improvement in the quality of student experiences at the MGRC; the development of appropriate educational practices and resources aimed at improving the retention rate of students studying at a regional campus; improvement in the teaching and learning practices across the whole CRE (Whyalla Campus and the MGRC); and the provision of a platform for regional academics to improve their teaching experiences and share their practice wisdom.

The first phase of the research explored the perceptions of students at the end of what was for most of them their first year of university study. It aimed to determine:

- The socio-demographic, program progress and retention profiles for the first cohort of students;

- The students' reasons for choosing on-campus study rather than external/online learning, and whether these perspectives had altered over time;

- Students' perspectives on the key issues identified; and,

- Changes in pedagogical strategies that should be recommended.

The significance of the study lies in documenting the impact of this new development on the first student cohort, the staff involved and the community, and in informing ongoing improvements. It also has the potential to provide useful insights for other tertiary institutions engaging in outreach ventures.

Research Design

The study sought both quantitative and qualitative data. Exploratory focus groups with students and staff contributed to identifying relevant issues for investigation through the student survey, which was conducted at the end of the 2005 academic year. A focus group with community members was also conducted, but is not reported on here.

Recruitment

Approval for the research was gained from UniSA's Human Research Ethics Committee. Students responded positively to information sessions held to discuss the project. All 68 first-year students enrolled in 2005 in the three programs at the MGRC were invited by e-mail to participate in the study. Staff involved in teaching the MGRC students were invited by e-mail to take part in a focus group.

Data-gathering

Student focus group participants were asked their reasons for choosing to study with UniSA at the MGRC, their impressions of the impact of the new arrangements on the region and on themselves personally, their suggestions for enhancing the student experience, their perceptions of the collocation with TAFE SA, and the positives and negatives of studying at the MGRC. Staff focus group participants were asked to consider similar questions, the positives and negatives relating to their experiences of working with UniSA's MGRC. Mount Gambier-based academic staff were also asked about their reasons for choosing to work for UniSA.

The online student survey obtained socio-demographic data and relevant educational and regional engagement perspectives. The assigning of code names to each student ensured confidentiality, while still enabling matching of their data with later stages of the project. Questions eliciting demographic details to ensure validity for a longitudinal study (matching of responses), and to establish baseline questions for comparison over time, were followed by questions relating to study status and choices, and employment goals. Other questions sought levels of satisfaction with various aspects of their student lives, both academic and facilities-related. These questions, requiring a response from a Likert-type scale, were each followed by a "Comments on the above" opportunity to elaborate.

Data recording and analysis

Detailed notes of the focus group comments were taken during the sessions, and checked with participants. Student survey input was automatically collated by UniSA's TellUs2 software (http://www.unisa.edu.au/helptellus2/), which graphed the quantitative data and collated the qualitative responses. All data were summarised and analysed by the researchers.

Results

The following results, focusing on teaching and learning aspects, are from the student focus groups and online survey, and from the staff focus groups.

Student focus groups and survey

The combined numbers in the two student focus groups (N_1=7; N_2=10) were 17 female students: Business (2), Nursing (6), and Social Work (9). Only two were school leavers. The majority were mature age students. Ten lived in Mount Gambier, two came from a town 115 kilometres away, and the others were from nearby farming properties and small settlements.

Characteristic	Frequencies (N=21)
Study program	Business (4); Nursing (8); Social Work (9)
Study status	Full-time (13); Part-time (8)
Age	25 or under (10); 26-35 (4); 36-45 (4); >45 (3)
Distance travelled to MGRC	<10 km (9); 11-50 km (9); 51-100 km (2); >100 km (1).
Spousal status	Single (7); Partnered (14)
Number of children at home	None (12); One (1); Two (6); Three (2)
Paid employment hours per week	None (6); Up to 10 (3); 11-20 (3); 21-30 (6); >30 (3)
Prior highest level of education	Degree (2); Diploma (3); Certificate (10); High school (6)
Entry pathways	School leaver with TER (6); Special Tertiary Admissions Test (STAT) (6); Bridging/Foundation Program (1); TAFE graduate (7); Transfer from another university (1)

Table 1: Profile of students participating in the survey

Of the 68 students invited to participate in the online survey, 21 responded – a response rate of 31%. This low rate was perhaps influenced by the fact that the survey was conducted after the end of the teaching period. Only one male student took part. Other characteristics are summarised in Table 1.

In general the focus group participants were appreciative of the new study opportunities, serendipitous for many. Reasons given for their initial decision to study included feeling "unfulfilled with work", or it was "the right time personally". One wanted to get the social work qualification that she was assumed to already have because of her work. For most of the survey respondents, the motivation for studying included employment goals, but three were unsure, one wanting "greater skills in general". Career benefits also featured in their views of the personal impact of the introduction of the MGRC. It presented opportunities for themselves, and also for their children, to stay in the area and get qualifications leading to a career: a "great opportunity to gain a qualification without leaving home". Placement experience also gave "a foot in the door" to employment. Additionally they had learned a lot about themselves, gained in confidence, and learned to manage their time to include study.

When asked their reasons for choosing to study with the UniSA MGRC rather than externally or going to another university, focus group participants mentioned the isolation of external study, past negative experience of it, and the difficulty of staying motivated in that study mode. Family and/or work commitments or financial considerations prevented some from moving away to study. The opinion was expressed that some school leavers and other younger students struggle in major cities. Having something available locally was a big incentive to study. Face-to-face teaching, with the ability to ask questions, and feel part of a group, sharing the experience, feeling supported, and knowing that others were experiencing the same difficulties, were valued aspects. One said, "On-campus means you have to do the work and turn up"; this helped students to keep up.

The survey respondents explained the impact that *not* having the MGRC would have had. Without it, 2 participants would have studied on campus elsewhere, 6 would have studied externally, 4 would have done TAFE or other vocational training, and 9 would not have studied at all. Of those who would not have studied on campus elsewhere, the majority (14) gave family commitments as a reason; 12 indicated that they would not have wanted to leave the region, 9 said that they either could not afford to leave the region or had friendships/social reasons for not doing so, and 7 had either work commitments or no desire to live in a larger city. (Some gave multiple reasons.) Regarding reasons for not choosing to study externally, there were 11 responses each for a feeling of isolation, a need to be on campus to remain motivated, and a preference for working as part of a group, with 9 responses citing the perceived lack of feedback.

Focus group participants identified positives of studying at UniSA as: the different entry pathways, peer support, being motivated to keep up-to-date, the quality of the program, good teaching, approachable lecturers, some inspiring ones, continuous assessment, being treated as professionals, encouragement, relevant guest lecturers, the fact that it was local, group and individual development, and increased social interaction. The few negatives included, apart from some very specific things related to assessment tasks, a personal need to cut back on paid work hours, limited course choice, poor attendance by some students, and difference in services compared with those available to metropolitan students. Suggestions for improvements included receiving the course information earlier, and having follow-up workshops after the orientation period to reinforce information received then.

Specific comments about teaching and learning matters by survey respondents included a preference for face-to-face as it allows for more interaction (and a more personal approach to this interaction), makes it easier to ask questions or seek clarification, and promotes in-depth discussion. Some respondents indicated that there was not enough face-to-face contact with lecturers, although tutors "did a great job to fill in the gaps". While one thought that videoconferencing was "a disaster", another thought it was "sufficient", and by another it was considered "better than no uni in the town at all". Students found it difficult to ask questions, because they often felt that they were interrupting the lecturer, or sometimes delays and distractions associated with the videoconferencing meant that the lecturer did not hear their question. Moreover, the students could not "grab the lecturer . . . after class to clarify things". A comment was made that it was like "talking to a TV". Frustration resulted for many when it was hard to hear the lecturer, and when sometimes the line cut out. Similar comments were made in focus groups.

The tutorials (all face-to-face) were generally considered "helpful". Students in general found it beneficial to work through problems with their tutor and to ask questions as they arose. They also liked being able to "go up to the tutor at the end of the tutorial and ask a question that may have been irrelevant to the class"; not having to speak up in front of the whole class was often easier. Generally the students liked the interaction and found the tutors understanding, supportive, and capable. The tutorials helped with confidence and provided opportunities to "get to know people working in the field".

With regard to class timetables, students (focus groups and survey respondents) preferred a mix of day and evening classes, full days of classes, on a minimum number of days per week. This helped to reduce travelling and allowed participation in part-time work, whereas classes spread over four days limited the students' ability to work, reducing their finances, and made child care expensive, as did changes to

scheduled lecture times. Classes held out of school hours also caused some child-care difficulties. The availability of an affordable nearby crèche operating in the evenings would have been helpful. A comment was made that the guilt the student felt at coming home late in the evening impacted on study. The students did not like to have large breaks scheduled between lecture and tutorial. Suggestions were made in a focus group that intensives and summer schools be considered as an option.

The academic adviser service was known of by 7 survey participants, who had not needed/chosen to use it, whilst 2 were unaware of the service. Two had used the service and found it easy and useful, while another had not found the experience useful. Three responses indicated that it would be good to have someone always on site at Mount Gambier, as "email just doesn't cut it". This was also expressed in a focus group. However, the few visits by the Whyalla-based adviser had been appreciated by some – "I really benefited from his skills". One "used the resources of the local academic staff and online learning resources instead which were easy . . . to navigate and access".

Assignment feedback was reasonable, according to 8 comments, while 4 believed that more feedback was required. One noted that, compared with school, there was "less information given about what could have been done better or what was good". Two comments related to the need for more timely feedback – "so as to complete another assignment with previous comments in mind". Five believed that feedback was inconsistent – the amount and quality depended upon the lecturer/tutor. A desire for consistent assignment feedback was also mentioned in a focus group.

Qualitative responses to survey questions relating to facilities – library service, computing, printing, and parking – are not detailed here. However, the researchers recognise that such issues, along with social aspects, are important for the students and can impact on their ability to focus on their course learning and influence their general satisfaction with their student experience. Focus group participants included printing and computer access as areas for improvement. They also mentioned difficulties with the library system: not feeling confident about online library use, having to rely on courier deliveries, and not being able to browse shelves, or have access to reserved books on site. Their views of the collocation with TAFE ranged from feeling like outsiders and uncomfortable, to having no problems, and finding the computers, office staff and cafeteria "great".

Survey participant comments on satisfaction with the first year of university at the MGRC included that the students had expected "teething problems" but were confident that operational problems encountered in the first year would be smoothed over in time. However, there were negative comments concerning lack of resources

	ED (%)	VD (%)	MD (%)	N (%)	MS (%)	VS (%)	ES (%)
Lectures (face-to-face)	0	0	0	1 (5)	4 (19)	10 (48)	6 (29)
Lectures (videoconference)	1 (5)	1 (5)	4 (19)	2 (10)	8 (38)	4 (19)	1 (5)
Tutorials (face-to-face)	1 (5)	0	0	0	4 (19)	12 (57)	4 (19)
Class timetables	0	2 (10)	3 (14)	0	9 (43)	4 (19)	3 (14)
Access to academic skills adviser	3 (14)	0	0	10 (48)	3 (14)	2 (10)	2 (10)
Feedback on assessments	1 (5)	0	2 (10)	3 (14)	4 (19)	10 (48)	1 (5)
Library service	3 (14)	3 (14)	2 (10)	5 (24)	4 (19)	1 (5)	3 (14)
Computer access	0	1 (5)	2 (10)	2 (10)	5 (24)	9 (43)	2 (10)
Printing facilities	1 (5)	0	4 (19)	2 (10)	6 (29)	7 (33)	1 (5)
Amount of printing required	2 (10)	1 (5)	5 (24)	2 (10)	4 (19)	5 (24)	2 (10)
Textbook purchases procedure	2 (10)	3 (14)	4 (19)	4 (19)	3 (14)	4 (19)	1 (5)
Cafeteria	0	0	2 (10)	2 (10)	4 (19)	7 (33)	6 (29)
Parking	1 (5)	0	4 (19)	0	10 (48)	4 (19)	2 (10)
Social aspects	0	1 (5)	1 (5)	1 (5)	10 (48)	5 (24)	3 (14)
Family friendliness	1 (5)	2 (10)	1 (5)	5 (24)	4 (19)	5 (24)	3 (14)
Overall satisfaction with the first year of study	0	0	1 (5)	0	4 (19)	11 (52)	5 (24)

Table 2: Student satisfaction levels

Notes: N = 21; ED = Extremely dissatisfied; VD = Very dissatisfied; MD = Moderately dissatisfied; N = Not sure (Neutral); MS = Moderately satisfied; VS = Very satisfied; ES = Extremely satisfied

and support staff at the MGRC. There were comments on their personal development as university students. One reported: "I have had a great year. There have been some hiccups, but they could not have been that bad cos I can't remember them". They appreciated that the survey meant "listening to what we, the students, want, incorporating us in discussions with what is and isn't working", and considered that things were "only going to get bigger and better!" Table 2 summarises the quantitative responses to the survey, expressing the level of satisfaction with specific aspects of their experience. As can be seen, students expressing any level of dissatisfaction are in the minority for all categories.

Staff focus groups

Five of the lecturers/tutors employed at the MGRC and two Whyalla lecturers took part in staff focus groups – 6 females and 1 male; 3 from Business, 2 from Nursing and 2 from Social Work.

Reasons given by MGRC staff for choosing to teach for UniSA included the opportunity to move in a desired direction, as well as being part of a new development for the region. The introduction of the MGRC had meant for them considerable personal and professional development: gaining increased confidence and self-belief; meeting a challenge; learning new skills; and being recognised for this by their other employers. They had learned from the students and experienced satisfaction as the students learned, feeling that they were having a positive impact. Other positives included "fantastic" UniSA administrative staff, good feedback from the students, "making students into professionals I would like to work with", and being able to use their day job experience in teaching. Negatives included the impact on family life of much work in their own time, frustration when students did not apply themselves, and having to defend UniSA. Some minor irritations had arisen from the collocation with TAFE – access complications, tight schedules, and lack of clear signage – but other aspects were highly praised (e.g., canteen and surroundings).

In the opinion of the MGRC staff, the quality of the students' experience could be improved with better provision of administrative information to both staff and students, including an improved orientation to administrative and library matters, and better access to computers, library books and texts for both tutors and students. Earlier recruiting would give new staff more preparation time with the resources. Expectations needed to be made very clear.

For the Whyalla lecturers, teaching through the MGRC had meant learning to use new technologies, such as a new or different videoconferencing system. New teaching approaches all required rapid professional development. There had been restrictions on when leave could be taken, an increased workload, and some apprehension. They

felt that lead-in and training could have been better. (The operation had been set up very quickly, with no infrastructure funding.) There were many inconveniences to begin with, and a "lot of glitches" at first with the videoconferencing technology, so that contingency plans were always necessary. While staff and students had been patient about "teething problems" with the technology and its early limitations, the staff cautioned that later students might not be so tolerant and would expect UniSA to have got it right. The travel to Mount Gambier, involving two flights each way, was tiring and time-consuming. Staff felt that the students had adjusted to the collocation with TAFE; however, it was said that some TAFE students and staff felt that there were negatives for them.

Positives identified included the fact that the new developments were "a lot of fun", they met a different group of students, there was a sense of pioneering – "nerve-wracking, but exciting!" There was also a sense of service and satisfaction in providing something that had not existed previously in that form, in "giving something to some students who didn't have it before". This whole experience of doing something different was revitalising for staff and gave them much professional satisfaction. The Mount Gambier students were enthusiastic, and did not take things for granted. Support staff were highly commended for making it all possible, as were those responsible for the behind-the-scenes relationship-building with the local community and with the group that had "got it off the ground".

The question of how to improve the quality of students' experience drew several negatives from the Whyalla lecturers, echoing some of the student comments. There were problems with the audio capacity of the videoconferencing – the lecturer could be heard, but not the student interaction. The slow delivery of library books necessitated assignment extensions. It was difficult to build relationships with students. Despite telephone or e-mail possibilities, students tended to contact their local tutor rather than the lecturer. There was no flexibility to vary the lecture/tutorial time allocation. The scheduling did not allow for questions and informal chatting before or after lectures. Not having a chance to talk to their lecturer, the usual regional campus advantage, affected students' experience of being at university – which therefore became more like being at a metropolitan campus.

Discussion

Limitations of the study

While the 31% response rate for the survey was lower than expected, useful descriptive data were obtained, adequate for matching individuals' responses with those from the later phases of this study. Learning from the first survey, the timing of

the second survey was planned to maximise the likelihood of a higher response. It is also possible that the favourable response to the invitation to be involved in focus groups may have meant that some of those participants felt that they had already been heard and so ignored the subsequent survey.

Compared with the total cohort, males were under-represented in the survey (4% compared with 13%), full-time students were over-represented (62% compared with 53%), and while the proportion of business students was the same as for the total cohort, nursing students were slightly under-represented (38% compared with 44%) and social work students over-represented (43% compared with 36%). To validate this research it is hoped that students will remain as study subjects for the entire five years, but this is not guaranteed.

Developing practice in response to what has been learned

The data provide some indications of areas for action or improvement, some of which have since been addressed. These relate to issues with resources, personnel, feedback, and information flow.

Working towards full equality of staffing and resources with those of Whyalla and metropolitan campuses is an ongoing process. While financial realities do not allow the provision at the MGRC of every single service provided elsewhere, the aim is to provide as far as possible an equivalent on-campus experience. Improvement in administrative arrangements is a start, but professional and academic staff all need to be continually responsive to emerging needs or difficulties. Whether or not it is possible to supply further support at the MGRC, it is essential that all students be fully aware of the facilities and resource people that *are* available. For example, there is a need to ensure that the role of the academic skills adviser is explained in greater depth and that the orientation information is repeated part-way into the study period, given that students are often inundated with details, and some things may be misunderstood or forgotten. It is important for academic skills development to be integrated into courses wherever possible, a good practice even when there is more support available, and for more than distance education courses (Hicks, Reid, & George, 1999).

First-year university students are learning not only the content of their courses, but also the university/discipline culture and how to be students within it. They come with a diversity of backgrounds, preferred learning styles, previous experience of life and study, and goals for the future. Hence, appropriate, ongoing orientation is essential. Orientation sessions are often of a generalist nature; however, inculcating academic skills and strategies is most effective when "seen as an integral part of the language and scholarship of the discipline content" (Zeegers & Martin, 2001, p. 36). It is worth noting, however, that transition to university sessions can also achieve

psychosocial outcomes. By getting to know one another, students can form links for formal or informal study groups, which can enhance "study, self-motivation and general enjoyment of university life" (Peat, Dalziel, & Grant, 2001, p. 199). In fact, the social aspects of the transition may be crucial to settling in to university study (Kantanis, 2000), and facilitating collaborative learning (Bruffee, 1993). On the other hand, inadequate preparation for the year ahead can be detrimental to successful study outcomes (Yorke, 2000).

Constructive feedback is acknowledged as essential (Yorke, 2001); feedback on formative assessment tasks can be seen as a dialogue between lecturer and student that will better equip the student "to deal with the challenges of future study" (Yorke, p. 117), as strengths are affirmed and weaknesses identified for further attention. The University assessment policy now requires that each course have staged assignments, using criterion-based marking tools to ensure timely and frequent feedback to students. Marking workshops have been developed for sessional and newly employed staff. Since the data collection, more moderation of marking has occurred to ensure consistency, not just between Whyalla and Mount Gambier, but also with colleagues in Adelaide. These strategies should address the issue of inconsistent marking. In addition, students need to be shown explicitly how to learn from the feedback they receive, as well as their options if this feedback is inadequate or unclear to them. Support that is "both highly embedded in the primary delivery . . . and highly consistent with the content and processes of the [course] provides quality learning opportunities" (Hicks et al., 1999, p. 9). Because study strategies are influenced by learning context and assessment tasks (de la Harpe & Radloff, 2006), the implication is that careful choice of the range and type of assessments is necessary. Assessment in undergraduate programs was a priority focus throughout UniSA in 2006 – feedback is fundamental to maximising the learning opportunities in assessment tasks, as in other areas such as tutorial participation. It is also important to respond appropriately to student feedback, and to take this into account in preparing future classes. Assuming that students and teachers have shared understandings of the feedback provided (MacDonald, 1991), feedback has an important role to play in developing effective, committed tertiary learners, who will be learners for their whole lives. Lifelong learning is one of UniSA's graduate qualities (UniSA, 2006b), and lecturers need to plan a learning environment that is conducive to fostering these habits.

Practical matters to do with the library, textbooks, computer facilities and printing obviously have an impact on students. Issues raised by the study participants have also been highlighted in UniSA's biennial Student Experiences Questionnaires (SEQ): not only are feedback and lecture facilities a source of negative comments if they are inadequate, access to cafeteria menus and computer services and facilities are also

sources of possible dissatisfaction (Tranter, Murdoch, & Circelli, 2003). Improvements in some areas have occurred since 2005: a computer pool and faster printer have been provided, and some facilities have been expanded or enhanced. The relationship with TAFE SA, with regard to the shared facilities, needs continuing work to ensure that it remains productive and harmonious.

Since 2005, lecturers have participated in professional development sessions on videoconferencing pedagogy, increasing their confidence with this mode of delivery. While some of the earlier technological challenges have been rectified and videoconferencing is proceeding more smoothly, there are still associated challenges.

Creating a welcoming study environment where MGRC students feel that they belong depends on many factors: personnel, facilities, convenience, and attractive surroundings. In order to produce this, the diversity of the student group must be kept in mind. Importantly, staff and students need to be aware of their rights and responsibilities as outlined in institutional policies, such as UniSA's Children in the Workplace policy (UniSA, 2006a). A comprehensive handbook is assisting in this regard. Timetabling issues highlighted by students may not be simple matters to address, but must be recognised as playing a part in the extent to which the MGRC is seen as family-friendly.

The fact that students' overall satisfaction is positive confirms one of the findings of a report on the first year university experience (based on a 2004 survey of 25% of first-year students at nine Australian universities): "[t]he students from rural backgrounds are more positive about the teaching, express fewer concerns about their workload, and show greater signs of engagement and overall satisfaction" (Krause et al., 2005, p. 70). Intrinsic study motivations were identified by some of the participants; for them, the study experience itself was valuable, not just as a means to an end. Learners who are strongly motivated, for whatever reason, find it easier to focus on their studies, particularly when they are able to build on their past learning and experience in a meaningful way (Ausubel, 2000). Satisfied students are more likely to continue to graduation, and will also convey their satisfaction to prospective students (Sanders & Burton, 1996).

Conclusion

The insights gained from this project have allowed the review of pedagogical strategies adopted or adapted to meet the situation, providing each academic unit with meaningful feedback to inform refinements in practice. Socio-demographic, program progress and retention data for the first student cohorts provide a basis for focusing efforts to improve the student learning experience and successful

undergraduate journey. This longitudinal study has been conceived of as an action research project: as insights are gained from the research and from ongoing experience, measures are put in place to reinforce the positives and eliminate or minimise the negatives. An across-unit withdrawal policy is being developed and will be revised each year as new data emerge. A forum to share data and provide opportunities to share pedagogies has been developed. The researchers have had the opportunity to bring issues arising from the project to the CRE's Teaching and Learning Working Party for discussion. This group has been established to: monitor the quality of teaching and learning in both locations; implement strategies for improvement; identify needs and consider strategies to support teaching staff in achieving good practice; improve retention and success rates for all student cohorts in their first year of study; and implement Indigenous student academic support and mentoring across programs. The effect of introduced changes will be gauged in the second student survey to be conducted in the latter part of 2007.

The full project will enable UniSA and regional partners to identify the achievements and limitations of this innovation, thereby informing future regional higher education strategies and engagement with regional communities. This first stage has shown that the MGRC has been successful in providing new higher education opportunities for a growing group of people in the Limestone Coast Region. The study participants revealed their need or preference for doing university studies in their own area because of their family and/or work commitments, and their reluctance to study externally because of perceived disadvantages of that study mode. The fact that almost half of the survey respondents would not have studied at all without the establishment of the MGRC, and others would not have done university studies, emphasises the importance of these new opportunities. Not only have staff involved been invigorated by participating in making the new venture work, the first students have proved to be enthusiastic pioneers, as is shown by their suggestions for marketing initiatives to ensure that others in the region have access to the same opportunities.

While a new higher education presence is not a panacea that will automatically increase higher education participation rates and community development for the whole region, it can only serve to increase the options for learning and development for local residents.

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