NavigateMe: A Gateway to Students' Greatest Potential

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Abstract

Online interactivity, late night accessibility and anonymity are key to encouraging students to reflect upon their academic achievements. At UNSW, NavigateMe is an online self-help tool that provides immediate and personalised information based on students' responses. NavigateMe refers users to university services and suggests ways in which they can change their lifestyles or personal habits to improve their university experience. It engages students with university services, encourages them to reflect on personal goals, and assists them to achieve their greatest potential during their studies. Students use NavigateMe for various reasons at different times throughout the academic year, and some students use it on a frequent basis. NavigateMe was developed by Student Life and is continually enhanced through a collaborative and iterative process in consultation with staff, students and faculties, to assist students to improve their university experience.

Introduction

In the wake of recent government initiatives in Australia, there has been increasing discussion of ways to engage students who may be non-traditional in terms of social, cultural and economic factors (Nelson, 2014; White, 2014; Zepke, 2013). Early engagement has been found to be one of the key factors to helping students receive appropriate support and reach their full potential.

When students experience difficulty during their study, a number of support services are available at modern universities. Students are constantly required to seek out a range of services available to support their life at university, both academic and non-academic. McGorry (2003) has recommended that flexibility, responsiveness and interactivity are key to satisfactory and effective student support services, which in turn are critical for enhancing student engagement and success (Yukselturk & Yildirim, 2008). These three aspects can potentially be achieved in the online world. Online tools are widely used for teaching (Lawrence, 2013), monitoring student success (Kokaua, Sopoaga, Zaharic & Van der Meer, 2014), and for orientation (Smyth & Lodge, 2012). However, other than in distance education (Brown et al., 2013; Clark et al., 2015), there appears to be little use of web-based tools to promote student engagement with the wider university and student support services.

While in today's world most university services have a website or page that students can consult, this may not be particularly engaging if it merely displays contact details or a contact form. Another factor to consider is the issue of help-seeking avoidance by students which has been shown to be especially prevalent amongst lower achievers (Karabenick, 2004) and students who are highly distressed (Ryan, Shochet & Stallman, 2010). Many universities, particularly the established traditional institutions, lack clear effective pathways by which students can seek assistance with their emotional or support needs (Laws & Fiedler, 2013). This may impede help-seeking behaviour, which in turn may have an adverse effect on student success (Ryan, Shochet & Stallman, 2010).

This paper argues that a clearer pathway to support can be provided by NavigateMe - an online tool which serves as a first port of call for students who may be in need of support. Together with the anonymity that the online world can offer, an online tool such as NavigateMe can assist students locate and identify opportunities to improve their university experience, avail themselves of

opportunities and seek support when it is needed.

Background

Within the Division of Student Life at the University of New South Wales (UNSW), Sydney staff were concerned that pathways to support services were not always made sufficiently clear to students. Information for students about support services was not necessarily standardised across faculties and schools, resulting in confusion from a student perspective about which pathways were available to resolve issues at the faculty and university support service level. It was apparent to Student Life staff as well as Faculty Advisors, that there was a need to link students more effectively to resources, services and webpages, including faculty-specific information, as well as ensuring that students have sufficient information about the available services. One method to assist students in seeking appropriate services is to encourage students to reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses (Morisano, Hirsh, Peterson, Pihl, & Shore, 2010; Potter & Bye, 2014). For these reasons, NavigateMe was developed at UNSW by Student Life's Project Team to connect students with information about appropriate services according to their needs. Within NavigateMe, various statements are presented to students to encourage reflection. Encouraging students to reflect on and review personal goals, providing them with relevant information upon which to act, can also promote self-management (Robbins, Oh, Le, & Button, 2009).

Corrin and Barba (2015) reported that having immediate and personalised feedback assists students to effectively identify their gaps in performance for future improvements. They further recommend that to assist students to translate the feedback into a course of action for behaviour change, support resources and guidance should be provided alongside the immediate feedback. Based on the responses, a personalised action plan is generated automatically to provide immediate feedback and follow-up. This assists students to discover services within their faculties when needed, empowering them to act with targeted and personalised information related to their individual needs at various stages of their university careers. NavigateMe aims to promote retention of students through behavioural change, leading to more successful study.

Development of NavigateMe

The UNSW NavigateMe tool is a new initiative that uses technology incorporating mobile devices, in the online space, to assist in the provision of support with personalised information to students. NavigateMe was originally conceived as an alternative response to students identified as “without good academic standing”. Students who fail more than fifty percent of their courses in a semester receive a category of “without good academic standing” and, given the number of these students, the cost of face-to-face service delivery to them alone is high. The development of NavigateMe, was seen as being potentially more effective to assist these students. However it became apparent that many of these students were already in the process of disengaging from their studies, hence it was decided to make NavigateMe available to all students as a preventative rather than remedial measure.

The purpose of NavigateMe therefore changed to one of offering support and making relevant information available to all students, rather than only targeting students already in difficulties, some of whom may have already disengaged from university services. It was also made available to prospective students as a form of early engagement, to prepare and assist them in transitioning into university by helping them understand and explore the support and development opportunities available.

It must be emphasised that the purpose of NavigateMe is not to replace traditional face-to-face services such as general advice, personal counselling, disability services or learning support. Rather, it encourages reflection on and analysis of a student's needs and empowers users by offering a mix

of assisted and self-accessed resources for support. The personalised action plan which NavigateMe develops for the student may be used as the basis of discussion in face-to-face support or as a personal agenda for them to action all the items.

From the outset, it was considered important to engage students in the development process and ensure that the finished product was inclusive for all students, in terms of imagery and practicality of use. With a prototype developed, NavigateMe was first trialled with students in two faculties of UNSW - the Faculty of Science and the Faculty of Art and Design.

Academic staff, professional staff and students have continued to be consulted in relation to any changes made to the presentation and content of the webpage at which NavigateMe is housed. NavigateMe is also currently listed as a priority in the Strategic Plan 2014-2018 of the Deputy Vice Chancellor, Academic (DVCA) and has received significant internal and external funding such as HEPP funding, for continual development and enhancement. The recognition that NavigateMe has received from the DVCA, aligning it with the 2025 digital strategy, demonstrates how essential it is regarded for students.

Following a trial by students with vision impairments, some changes were made to accommodate students with disabilities in 2016 which allows NavigateMe to be used with a screen reader. It incorporates icons from the UNSW campus, so students have a sense of familiarity in the online environment. Some changes were also made to the software to make NavigateMe accessible on mobile devices. Subsequently, an online survey which was held amongst its users in 2016 provided feedback on useability and ease of use. This survey showed that approximately a quarter of completions of NavigateMe was on tablets and smartphones. Laptop computers alone accounted for nearly 60% of completions.

As previously mentioned, NavigateMe is available to current and prospective UNSW students. In September 2016, following a meeting with student support staff from different areas across the university, guest log-ons were created. A complete, redeveloped platform was launched in July 2017 based on the 2016 survey conclusions.

NavigateMe: How it works

NavigateMe is accessed via a link on the UNSW website, and is also featured on UNSW webpages with key information on academic performance. It is highlighted in email correspondence with students at key points for various purposes, for example: when enrolment opens; in mid-semester when major assignments are due; and when students fail more than 50% of their enrolled courses. It is presented to incoming postgraduates at information evenings and orientation week(s). Users log in using their university identification (ID) and password just as they do for all other university webpages. Alternatively, for those who are still waiting to enrol, NavigateMe has a guest log-in to help new students to become familiar with UNSW services. They are asked to select a faculty and academic career to obtain specific information in their area of studies. They are then presented with an interface containing a menu from which they can select the areas that most concern them. There are five general areas: “My Personal Life”, “My Life at Uni”, “My Career”, “My Study at Uni” and “My Uni Procedure” (they can choose any number of these). There is always an option of “Get in Touch” at the top of the website, which links to a contact form if students desire more personal support, in which case a response will be provided to the student within one business day. See Figure 1.

Figure 1: Screenshot of NavigateMe

Students are then directed to a list of sub-categories, which they can skip if they feel the area is less relevant. Under each sub-category is a maximum of ten statements which appear one at a time to assist students reflect on their current situation. Image 1 above shows a statement under sub-category “My Health” within category “My Personal Life”. A progress bar is available at the bottom of the webpage to help students navigate through the statements. An example statement in this sub-category is “I have a short term medical condition/injury that is currently affecting my ability to study”.

A personalised action plan is then generated based on statements selected. The action plan appears on the screen, and can be printed or emailed to the student. It consists of advice and links to other sites offering advice, which are sorted under two headings: “to read” (links to explanations); and “to see” (people to consult, such as administration staff or counsellors, depending on the problem).

All action plans created are saved under the personal profile of the student. The action plans can be named accordingly in case the student creates several different plans. Students also have the ability to set individual deadlines per item within the action plan to ensure that they will follow through. The action plan aims to facilitate the first step in seeking support; students are encouraged to take action and to seek further support from staff if required. They can log on to NavigateMe at a later date and tick the “Completed” checkbox under each suggestion offered in the action plan to track their actions. Their action plan progress is displayed through the dashboard, which provides the student with a simple yet interactive overview. Moreover, it allows them to set their own deadlines to ensure that they manage their own schedule accordingly.

Evaluation

NavigateMe is evaluated on an ongoing basis and at specific points in the academic calendar using several methods. NavigateMe is revised and updated in response to feedback from users.

- From early in the process, users’ reactions have been gauged through focus groups with open questions and a survey form sent after they have used NavigateMe.

- Use of the online component is tracked using Google Analytics, Google Tag Manager and web analytics on hits, number of action plans generated, and clicks on links to further resources.
- Use of NavigateMe and issues sought by students are analysed using web analytics at different points in time. User log-ins enable differentiation of staff and student use.
- Impact on students is assessed using de-identified analyses of subsequent progress.

NavigateMe usage and user feedback

Ongoing evaluation provides useful feedback on web usage and service planning. From this, it can be seen that the peak times of usage are at noon, and also after seven o'clock in the evening, when no support services are available. The online self-help aspect of NavigateMe is a key feature; students are connected with support as soon as the student sees a need. Higher usage can be seen during key university events, and key student concerns and user demographics differ over time.

Web analytics show that students are always seeking ways to improve their academic standing. They may be preparing for the start of semester, catching up on course materials or preparing for the next semester after realising the need to improve. Personal issues in relation to stress and loneliness appear as exams approach and during semester breaks. Networking opportunities are sought during semesters, while career-related topics are most popular at the start or the end of the semester.

Figure 2: Table of top statements selected by students by month (star = most often selected; 5 = least often selected)

More personal information, such as in relation to sexual health concerns and disability are occasionally sought by students. Some of the students who sought information on disability services have never disclosed through the UNSW systems and never registered with the university disability support service. NavigateMe is a secure platform for students to seek sensitive information anonymously with minimal perceived threats to self-esteem.

NavigateMe engages with new students early in the start of the semester, with up to 30% more new students using this service during the first month of a semester compared with other months. These students are exploring services available, familiarising themselves with the university processes and finding opportunities to develop their future career in their area of studies. It also connects with students in need; after release of results until the start of the semester, approximately 20% more users were “without good academic standing” compared with other months. These students were seeking tips and support for improvement in the next semester. See Figure 2.

Staff, services and academics are consulted on an ongoing basis. Some students use NavigateMe on a frequent basis. Faculty involvement has been responsive and overwhelmingly enthusiastic. Focus groups have been held once every few months across both faculties in which NavigateMe is available. As a result of student and staff feedback during 2015, 36 recommendations were made for changes and additions to items, layout and content. These were implemented in January 2016; the subsequent feedback session held in October 2016 showed student reactions to be positive. The following comments from this feedback session indicated that students were able to reflect and self-manage actions for future improvements.

And a few weeks ago when I saw NavigateMe, I was like, "This is useful", because I was really stuck, "Should I do" - I can only do one commerce major, and I was like, "Which one shall I pick?" I knew all this time, since I started uni, that I was going to do accounting or finance, but I had no idea which one. And so I used that program. (Science/commerce student)

... extremely helpful tool to encourage reflection and making the most of uni life through taking ownership and seeking support with a very efficient and helpful Action Plan. It offers simple advice, a lot of which you wouldn't have thought you needed, but which will really allow you to get a grip on what kinds of services and opportunities through faculty and services you can access, especially if you need help. (Law and Criminology student)

Totally, it was actually one of the things I preferred about UNSW to other universities, as it showed recognition that sometimes people need extra help and understood that talking to someone can be uncomfortable. I found that in using NavigateMe I was able to work out exactly what wasn't going right for me and make some changes. (UNSW student)

Further improvements to a personalised experience

Based on the feedback collected from students, staff and web analytics over 2016 and 2017, further enhancements will be implemented in 2018 after a new iteration was launched in 2017. Enhancements are mostly focusing on presentation, usability, notifications, instructions and other aspects.

However, it is impossible to know the extent to which students can translate the feedback to courses of action at this stage. With evidence from learning analytics' studies pointing to the success of personalised dashboards in assisting students to reflect and identify actions needed for behavioural change (Corrin & Barba, 2015), a personalised student dashboard was included to provide a more personalised experience for the user. To enable students to self-manage their actions and succeed, a personalised dashboard with reminder settings and visualised progress of student actions was included in 2017. It is hypothesised that this personalised dashboard will help students realise what future improvements are required and thus make them more likely to act (Corrin & Barba, 2015). This aims to assist students to realise and understand gaps in performance and empower them to

implement the action plan that is created. The dashboard includes methods for prioritisation and reminder settings such as deadlines, workshops, or social events. Student progress is visualised and presented on the dashboard, which shows actions completed and actions to be done.

Conclusion

NavigateMe combines student services and faculty information interlaced with questions to guide students towards the outcome — a comprehensive action plan for them to implement, in addition to key face-to-face contacts.

Previous research (Klem & Connell, 2004), emphasises that student engagement with the university community and services is a strong predictor of academic success. However, many students do not seek support, either because they are unaware of the options available or are reluctant to use it. This paper argues that the flexibility, anonymity and immediacy offered by NavigateMe are appropriate as a first step in seeking support.

The key to the effectiveness of NavigateMe is the collaborative and iterative process of development; feedback from staff and students ensures collaboration between faculties and student services, ensuring it will continue to provide optimum value for users. Moreover, NavigateMe can be adapted for specific campuses and faculties to provide program-related and personal advice.

NavigateMe represents an innovative approach to offering support for university students. Rather than a response to failure or poor grades, NavigateMe is a proactive and pre-emptive approach for both higher and lower achievers, addressing various student related categories in an accessible format. It encourages students to consider their lifestyle and approach to study, while they seek further development opportunities and support in a timely manner.

The strengths of NavigateMe are that it encourages reflection on personal goals and offers practical suggestions for students on ways to improve their own university experience, either by accessing available services or simply by making positive changes to their lives without needing to use student services. It is thus both empowering and informative, and perhaps even potentially life changing. In addition, continuous analysis, including ongoing focus groups with staff and students, is being conducted to improve the long-term impact of NavigateMe on student success.

Further enhancements and various concept designs are in development for a 2018 release. They are aimed at shortening the current process of receiving answers (Pedregal & Bhansali, 2016) and providing easier access to their selected content. In addition, the platform will also be made more customisable by providing the features of a digital diary, where students can turn NavigateMe into a digital assistant (Coulby et al., 2011). The final goal is that NavigateMe will be the first platform that every UNSW student will utilise to assist them in assessing their needs and where they should go next to enhance their student experience.

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