Case study 7

University of New England (UNE)  
Early Alert Program

Context and purpose

The University of New England’s (UNE) Early Alert Program is the foundation of student engagement and retention activities at UNE. Around 70 per cent of UNE’s students are enrolled externally, 40% of students overall come from rural and remote locations and 4% are from isolated areas. In total, more than 50% of UNE students identify as part of low socio-economic groups. Monitoring student learning engagement, therefore, requires a proactive approach to create a sense of community amongst the dispersed students and staff.

Early Alert uses multiple data sources to highlight students who may be at risk of attrition supporting these students in a case-by-case managed basis to actively improve retention at the institution. A key purpose of this program is that targeted interventions with students will positively highlight the student experience and promote attitudes of perseverance amongst identified students.

Scale of the activity

The Early Alert Program was developed by the Student Support Team within the institution’s Student Centre. Early Alert commenced in March 2011 and followed the successful Emoticons\(^\text{13}\) identification activity embedded in the online UNE student portal trialled in 2008. The emoticons activity allowed students to post emoticons along with comments to summarise their emotional reaction to an individual unit or subject of study. In 2010 UNE developed and trialled an Automated Wellness Engine (AWE) built by Atlis Consulting.

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\(^{13}\) Emoticons are a pictorial representation of a facial expression using punctuation marks and letters, usually written to express a person’s mood (Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emoticon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emoticon)). UNE uses coloured pictorial representation of emoticons: Happy, Neutral, Unhappy, Very Unhappy.
Organisational process

Early Alert uses contemporary technology to collate data and identify students who may be at risk of disengagement and attrition. AWE is a purpose-built system based on a data warehouse that extracts student-related information from eight separate UNE systems and analyses this data against 34 different triggers representing different behaviours which the institution deems as indicating the student may be at risk. Part of the data is self-reported - such as emoticons in the MyUNE portal, a Unit Discontinuation Poll and an interactive online feedback mechanism presented in a word cloud known as The Vibe. ¹⁴ Other data comes from reported activity from unit and subject co-ordinators.

The Student Support Team consists of three staff members who actively monitor data ‘wellness’ reports. The team make contact with students via phone, email and/or social media tools and the student is given the option of opting in or out of further support. Communication with students is based on a suite of different media but all are based on the principle of ‘closing the feedback loop’.

Information offered by students through the Insider’s Guide blog, Facebook, Twitter or the Vibe provide the theme for daily communication, either directly to individual students or collectively to the wider student population. Communication is timely, personalised and responsive to the identified student need. A Daily Wellness Report from AWE identifies individual students potentially at risk and the team send the student an email offering support. This provides the invitation to the student to access case management. Subsequent individual contact is delivered via the student’s preferred medium. A Weekly Wellness Report identifies any trends across schools or units allowing the team to give feedback to a particular school in a timely manner.

Outcomes and evaluation

- In 2009-10 the AWE project, while in its early stages, received an Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) Commendation because it was considered to be potentially transferable and to be of benefit to other organisational settings (AUQA 2009). ¹⁵ Specifically AUQA commended UNE’s Retention Project (Early Alert), and the use of the e-Motion indicators, for early intervention with students who may be at risk of disengagement and attrition. This recognition continued in 2011 by:

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¹⁴ A swirling word cloud that allows students to collectively share their thoughts about their studies, thereby minimising the isolation often experienced by distributed communities of learners — please see ‘Artefacts’ for more information and a detailed representation.

• **Australian Learning and Teaching Council Citation** (one of six received by UNE in 2011) recognises the value of this innovative program.

• **Australian Learning and Teaching Award — Award for Programs that Enhance Learning — Recipient 2011** recognised the significance of this program in supporting students.

• In 2012 **Campus Review Awards ‘Highly Commended’ for Innovation in Higher Education.** The citation states: ‘The UNE Early Alert Innovation is a highly creative use of available social media and other technologies, using student-relevant communication formats and tools such as emoticons and vibe, to help at risk students. This pastoral care system uses an amazingly large number of indicators allowing students to self report their satisfaction or happiness) levels. Every student who reports an unhappy or very unhappy is contacted personally within 24 hours’.

• Evaluation of the success of this model is measured from a progression perspective and a student engagement perspective. Unit attrition is the core measure of success from a progression perspective and in each teaching period since this model has been deployed, unit attrition for case managed students has been significantly lower than for the general student population. Student engagement with the model is measured by direct student feedback. Each individual case management period is evaluated by student feedback.

**Critical success factors**

- Relationships with all key student support staff such as first year advisors in faculties
- The student experience is made visible via social media tools
- The dynamic feedback and monitoring of the student experience provides immediate opportunities for intervention.

**Challenges**

- Acceptance of the use of ‘social media’ as a legitimate platform for student learning engagement
- Support for a centralised approach to identification of student need
- Ability to create a sense of community for distributed learners
- Acceptance of the role of data intelligence to drive student support activities.

**Websites**


**Contact**

Ms Rhonda Leece, Associate Director Student Services.

**Key resources**

- Student Email generated by Early Alert
- Early Alert — case study video
- Insiders’ Guide @ UNE (http://blog.une.edu.au/studentexperience)
- Early Alert mobile app.
Good Practice Guide: Safeguarding Student Learning Engagement

Dissemination

The Early Alert team have received requests to present and or collaborate from Edith Cowan University, University of Sydney, Macquarie University, University of Technology Sydney, Monash University, Victoria University, the University of Technology Sydney, Queensland University of Technology, Newcastle University and Auckland University of Technology. These institutions have commented that UNE is at the forefront of this type MSLE initiative and they are seeking to replicate aspects of this model within their own institutions.

Artefact G

Type: Engagement tool
Early Alert — The Vibe

UNE’s Student Support Team utilises a variety of methods to engage and communicate with its predominantly distance education students. One method is via The Vibe (pictured below), a floating word cloud. Students are able to log into the student portal ‘myUNE’ and input words in an area that asks ‘what’s on your mind today?’. The size of the words in the cloud indicates how many students are saying the same thing. The Student Support Team keeps an eye on what students are saying and the words help the Team decide what to post on the UNE Insiders’ Guide (a blog site dedicated to supporting students). Student data is kept confidential and the only people who see exactly what students are posting are the Student Support Team members.

The Vibe is an interactive feedback mechanism in a word cloud.
- Students are encouraged to share their thoughts on a daily basis.
- The cloud updates with input every 10 minutes.
- The size of the words reflect the number of students who share the same opinion.
- The Vibe provides information on general issues and informs the content of daily communications with students via the Insider’s Guide.

Key benefits:
- Normalises students’ experiences. the larger the word, the greater the number of students who are experiencing the same thing
- Ensures that content of outbound communication and support is directly relevant to current student concerns and interests
- Reinforces a sense and respond approach to supporting the student experience.

More information on UNE’s The Vibe:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=QWBcdfWDDj0#
 Alignment to the Social Justice Principles

This resource exemplifies the social justice principles Equity, Access and particularly Self-determination whereby the support is determined by the key themes expressed via the Vibe.

To access more information about The Vibe please visit [https://safeguardingstudentlearning.net/?page_id=448](https://safeguardingstudentlearning.net/?page_id=448)

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### Institutional profile*

The University of New England (UNE) was the first public university to be established outside of an Australian capital city. UNE was first established in 1938 and became a university in 1954. The university has one campus in Armidale, New South Wales.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total student enrolment</th>
<th>18,189</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>11,484</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>5,726</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic+</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International+</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Student demographics

- Indigenous: 2% this is high compared to other institutions
- Regional/remote students+: 46.9%
- Low SES+: 20.2%
- Non-English speaking background+: 0.8%
- Mature age (over 25 years) undergraduates: 59% this is high compared to other institutions

### Student study options

- Undergraduate part-time: 55% this is very high compared to other institutions
- Undergraduate external or mixed mode: 77% this is very high compared to other institutions
- Postgraduate part-time: 79% this is average compared to other institutions
- Postgraduate external or mixed mode: 89% this is high compared to other institutions

### Student entry details

- School-leavers: 7% this is low compared to other institutions
- Prior TAFE credits: 9% this is average compared to other institutions
- International undergraduates: 419 this is an average number compared to other institutions
- International postgraduates: 682 this is small number compared to other institutions

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#Currently in Australia the SES of higher education students is determined by the geographic area or postcode of the student’s home. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) Index of Education and Occupation (IEO) is used to rank postcodes. The postcodes that comprise the bottom 25% of the population aged between 15 to 64 years at the date of the latest census, based on this ranking, are considered low SES postcodes. Students who have home locations in these low SES postcodes are counted as ‘low SES’ students.