OfLA Project
2018-1-UK01-KA203-048090

O12 – Evaluation of the final cycle of studies

Interventions at Artevelde University of Applied Sciences,

University Medical Centre Utrecht &

Nottingham Trent University

Output 12 – Evaluation of the final cycle of studies: Summary

These reports will map the process of data-informed advice in the final year of the study.

A1. We will confirm with the new study subjects how we will work alongside them. This time however, we will have selected a new group of courses or degree programs to work with, or will be testing a new approach to using institutional data/ learning analytics in the advising and supporting process. This may include group tutorials, different types of alert or early warning, or advising using a particular pedagogical methodology.

A2. We will monitor and project manage the operation of the learning analytics resources.

A3. We will map how data (on each course and/or centralized) is used to firstly spot students at risk, how students are communicated to and how they are supported. Importantly, this year the reports will also include a summary of how we communicated with staff to set up the new round of interventions and challenges associated with the new cycle of interventions.

A4. We will publish the resources to the website.

General introduction

The OfLA project has tested interventions using a three-stage model: prompts, communication and actions. In the trials executed at the 3 institutes, Nottingham Trent University (NTU), Artevelde University of Applied Sciences (AHS) and Univdersity Medical Center Utrecht (UMCU) mainly the stages 'communication' and 'action' were tested. The aim of these trials was to understand the practice of supporting students identified as at risk of failure, study delay or withdrawal.

This Output 12 document is shows summaries of 4 reports which are attached as appendices:

1. NTU: Summer Calling Campaign
2. NTU: Calling Service Trial
3. AHS: Interventions at Arteveldehogeschool
4. UMCU: Learning Analytics at the Graduate School of Life Sciences

This document serves as an executive summary and reading guide of the studies, results, conclusions and recommendations.

Executive Summary

1. NTU: Summer Calling Campaign

Summary

This case study investigates the delivery of a call centre at NTU in the summer term 2020. The team had planned to test a centralised call service in the final year of the OfLA project (2020-2021), however COVID-19 meant that there was a need to offer support to students in the first few months of the pandemic. The call centre was staffed by 30 volunteers who rang students identified by NTU's learning analytics resource as having low engagement in the first few weeks of the pandemic. Students were provided with a coaching style call and some students were referred to specialist support. The calling team attempted to contact all undergraduate full time students who had 'very low' or 'low' average engagement during the period from 23rd March - 3rd April. 'Low' and 'very low' engagement is measured using the NTU Student Dashboard learning analytics resource.

The case study explored student responses to the call and the views of callers, tutors, Student Support Services, senior managers and the call project team. This was a significant undertaking and the case study explored the issues associated with running a large centralised calling process (5,546 calls were made, 2,115 students spoken to and 780 referrals made between 27th April and 7th May 2021). It was not felt appropriate to conduct a quantitative evaluation of the impact due to the difficulty of meaningfully capturing student engagement in the final term, but feedback gathered from surveys and interviews was overwhelmingly positive. Student feedback was very positive: 87% of students valued the call. Staff feedback was sought from personal tutors, senior academics, colleagues in professional services, the callers and the project team. Whilst the emergent nature of the project did cause some problems, overall reaction was highly positive.

Conclusions and recommendations:

- Data from learning analytics was able to accurately identify students who appeared to need further support

- Ringing students was a time consuming and, at times, emotionally draining activity, but overall students appeared to highly value the contact. For most students it offered a reminder that they weren't alone in a time of crisis. For some students it either changed their approach or helped them take the next step to seeking further support

- Running a large centralised call centre requires infrastructure. Ad hoc systems that add a few minutes' work to each intervention become huge when multiplied by the volume of calls made.

- Providing a single point of service that cuts across existing official and unofficial processes is difficult. Providing an institutional infrastructure, that is simple to operate and meets the requirements of local customs and practices is a major challenge.

2. NTU: Calling Service Trial

Summary

This case study reports on the process evaluation of a calling service intervention that took place at Nottingham Trent University (NTU) between October and December 2020 as a follow up on the Summer Calling Campaign. Students that were identified as low engaged based on their interaction with the University were telephoned by a member of a dedicated call centre team. The phone call was a coaching style of conversation that signposted students to further support as appropriate.

During the time of this large-scale trial the University decided that there was enough evidence to expand the trial to all schools in the following term. This evaluation informed process improvements that were implemented both during the time of this trial and that informed the expansion of the trial in the following term.

The full report in Appendix 2 provides a detailed description of the call process, including improvements implemented during the trial as a result of this evaluation and those that were applied in the expansion of the trial. It reports upon findings of the evaluation with 100 participants that included students, callers, tutors, and the University's student support service.

Conclusions and recommendations:

- A call centre approach is seen as one part of a multi-strategy approach to supporting less engaged students, alongside the continuing role of the personal tutor, particularly for ongoing student cases.

Early scoping of the project needs to:

- Communicate clear objectives of the purpose of the intervention and measures of success to all relevant stakeholders.

- Consider how the call centre will complement, work alongside, or replace existing structures. What are the restrictions in place as a consequence of what is already in place in the organisation?

- Consult and collaborate with key stakeholders such as faculty leaders, tutors, and relevant student support services where appropriate.

- Involve IT infrastructure teams to inform efficient processes such as making and monitoring of calls.

- Ensure adequate resources are available. The resource calculation needs to include:

  - Management: design of the call process (including writing templates and scripts); ongoing communications to all stakeholders; communications to students prior to calls (such as 'opt out' communication); recruitment of callers; training of callers and relevant stakeholders; management of the caller record system, daily co-ordinating of calls once alerts are generated; support for callers (such as pre and post caller meetings, ongoing caller queries, and availability and signposting of pastoral support for callers); and addressing issues as they arise (such as data and student issues).

  - Callers: call time (including leaving messages); follow-up processes (such as recording of calls and contact with tutors/students); pre and post call session meetings.

  - Student support services: administration support and senior level resource to assess whether students should not be contacted, training of callers in safeguarding and student support services provision.

  - Faculty: Lead contact(s) within each faculty.

  - Evaluation: planning and implementation of process and impact evaluation.

Preparation for the calls need to include:

- Preparation of call systems and equipment such as a mailbox specific to the call centre, and an automated message if appropriate.

- Training of call staff and preparation of relevant caller scripts and templates.

- Training of stakeholders where appropriate

Communication with stakeholders needs to include:

- A clear communication plan that informs all stakeholders at key times throughout the process.

- Communication with faculties and students to promote the importance of keeping university contact details up to date.

- The importance of updating university systems with the name of each students' tutor and communications on how to do this.

Key aspects of the call process to include:

- Communication of clear guidelines for all relevant stakeholders about the role and responsibilities of the call team, the tutor, and student support services, particularly for ongoing student cases.

- An opportunity for the tutor and student support services to inform the call centre if a call is not advisable for that student on an individual basis.

- Each student is informed that they will receive a call and the opportunity to 'opt out' of the call.

- Follow up communications to the student and tutor once the call has been attempted or taken place. Streamline these communications where possible whilst retaining the ability for flexibility in communications (such as using adaptable email templates).

- The alignment of the work of the call centre with existing policies on engagement and attendance where appropriate.

- A robust recording system to track each student case over time. Excel has the advantage of being easy to train the callers and was useful due to the quick response needed for this call trial. However, in the longer term a more robust CRM (Customer Relationship Management) system is recommended that can provide appropriate access and sharing of relevant data across the institution. This will require consideration of relevant data sharing legislation and ethics.

- A process and an impact evaluation to inform ongoing process improvements and to gain an understanding of student issues to inform proactive interventions where appropriate. Early identification of measures of success and institutional reporting requirements to inform impact evaluation is essential in order to plan impact evaluation from the start of the process. This will ensure that all relevant data is recorded to allow evaluation to take place and reporting that can support institutional decision-making.

3. AHS: Interventions at Arteveldehogeschool

Summary

The original report reflects the research conducted during the 2019-2020 academic year by Artevelde University of Applied Sciences to understand the practice of supporting students identified as at risk of failure or withdrawal. In this cycle of studies, we responded to the needs of staff members and students to improve the route to help. It was examined (1) how staff members and students perceive the integration of a data system (dashboard) that enables the university of applied sciences to reach out pro-actively to students in need of help in order to provide them with better support, (2) how to best communicate potential risks to students, and (3) how to best increase the accessibility of the institutional support services in order to give students at risk timely and appropriate guidance or help. This information was gathered in different focus groups with staff members (67) and students (747)

and by using online written questionnaires. The responses were analysed both thematically and statistically.

Conclusions and recommendations:

- Staff and students consider dashboard systems to be interesting tools to make students aware of their study situation and to encourage them to act when needed. The emphasize that the system is used with caution and complemented by a personal approach.
    - The ideal dashboard for staff members focuses on dynamic data about the student's education and support – such as advices, referrals, and action plans – rather than engagement data.
    - Staff members feel more reluctant to sent automated notifications by the dashboard systems to students. Staff are concerned about the autonomy and self-direction of students, stigmatisation, privacy of students and the potential overload in communication.
- It is crucial to include an indication that a student might be at risk in communications. However, face-to-face conversations remain key in nudging students into changing their study behaviour. Nevertheless, these conversations do not make the initial communication redundant.
    - Students who received a warning via email or via an administrative platform indicated they gained more from their conversation with the study coach, because they knew their strengths and challenges. Students felt more competent /prepared when they received more information during that initial communication, for example, through an email including hints and tips that could help them boost their performance.
    - Communication about data should be adapted to the requirements of different study programmes. An approach should be tailored to the needs, the identity, and the desires of the students who are in those specific programmes.
- Students consult all types of institutional media to communicate its support services although students prefered a personal approach (face-to-face meetings or personal email).
- Referral is important for students and particularly effective for students with psychological needs. As this group of students tends to postpone their request for help.
- Students in need of financial support postponed the appointment less.
- Students primarily respond to referrals because someone helped them to take the first step.

4. UMCU: Learning Analytics at the Graduate School of Life Sciences

Summary

At UMCU, it was investigated what alerts could be generated to identify students at risk for delay in their studies. Progress data was used to identify students showing a delay in their research internship. A delay in internships is likely to result in overall study delay, which is not beneficial for the student themselves. Moreover, internships exceeding deadlines have a consequence for the total capacity of internship spots, and thereby could affect the progress of future students, because their spots are occupied longer.

The research internships are the major element of Masters' education at UMCU. Some students experience a delay in their internship either because they decide to participate in theoretical courses without notifying the university about the postponed deadline of the project or because they try to gather additional data before writing their report. However, some students may encounter a delay in their projects due to various other reasons. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, students seemed to encounter more delay in their projects. In some cases, this is due to the research institutes closing temporarily, but in many other cases students experience personal issues that prevent them from finishing the project in time.

Based on the information in the learning management system, we send an informative surbey via email to students that exceeded the deadline for their project by 3 months or more. In January 2021, we identified 109 students that were showing a delay in their project. The list with names was first shared with the academic counsellor to exclude names of students that have already contacted them for help and therefore do not need to be bothered with additional stimuli to complete the project. The remaining 99 students were sent the informative survey, to make them aware that their project is overrunning and to advise them to complete the project. In the survey students were asked to indicate the main reason for their delay. In return, students are informed about the advised actions they should take for each situation and what support is available.

Conclusions and recommendations:

- The response rate was 62% after sending one reminder. In total, 25 students indicated that they had finished their project, but were waiting for the examiner to grade the project, 11 students indicated that they would finish their project within a week, and 22 indicated to need more time. Of these 22 students, 11 did other educational activities in the meantime, 9 had personal reasons for a delay, 2 experienced a slower development or delay in the project.
- All respondents were provided with information on how to handle the situation, i.e., contact research project coordinator to request an extension of the project, contact academic counsellor for advice, or discuss with the examiner the necessary steps to complete the project as soon as possible. At least 24 students contacted the research project coordinator, and 7 other students contacted the academic counsellor in response to the survey.

- Determine a smart but fair threshold for the identification of students based on existing policy and procedures (in this case three months' time exceeding expected deadline of project).
- Involve support staff, i.e. academic counsellor/tutor/mentor, to determine if identified students need additional stimulus (or to exclude them from the intervention to prevent them to get overwhelmed).
- The informative survey included automated feedback and / or explanations for rules and decisions describe in policy. Providing this information makes students aware of the policy and restriction they need to consider.
- When reaching out to students that were identified to have an issue (in this case study delay) provide general advice to contact support staff and include contact details of these staff members to reduce the threshold for students to do so.
- When gathering information (via a survey), send a reminder. A reminder to complete the survey after two weeks of data collection worked well.