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# Universal Design for Learning: A Pilot Study on Improving Student Success Rates.

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# Acknowledgement of Country

We would like to acknowledge the Wiradjuri, Ngunawal, Gundungarra and Biripai (or Biripi) peoples of Australia, who are the traditional owners and custodians of the lands on which Charles Sturt's campuses are located and pay respect to their Elders both past and present.

# Charles Sturt University Context

Regional university, six main campuses located throughout regional New South Wales Subject/Course

Of our undergraduate students, 56% are from regional, rural and remote (RRR) areas, 24% are from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, 7% of students are living with a disability and 4% of students identify as First Nations.

Each year approximately 24,000 students are enrolled online and 10,500 students' study on campus and approximately 70% of students study part-time

Image. A map of the east coast of Australia showing that Charles Sturt University has campuses in Port Macquarie, Dubbo, Orange, Bathurst, Wagga Wagga and Albury-Wodonga

# Supporting diverse student cohorts

* Well-developed, institution-wide transition pedagogy (Kift et al., 2010)
* Universal Design for Learning framework (Rogers-Shaw et al., 2018)
* Pedagogy of kindness (Teakel et al., 2024)
* Intentional curriculum design
* 'What works'
* Well-designed curriculum provides the foundation for student wellbeing

# Diverse student cohorts

Image: on the left, a picture of a parent and 2 children each standing on a box watching a baseball game. The youngest child cannot see over the fence. The youngest child cannot see over the fence. The middle image is the youngest child standing on 2 boxes, now able to see over the fence. The image on the right is a see-through fence so the family can see the game without standing on boxes.

The aim of this initiative was to improve course level student success by developing and implementing a consistent set of guidelines for subject development to inform intentional and inclusive design.

How can we remove institutional barriers to enhance student success**?**

# Approach

In 2023 and 2024, 17 subjects with an average number of 304 enrolled students from Bachelors of Nursing, Business and Education. All subjects had low pass rates (67%). A team of academic, professional and leadership staff worked together on subject level development, with a course level lensEthics approval (HREC Protocol No H21170)

# Thorough subject analysis

* Enrolment patterns
* Student demographics
* Subject and QUILT evaluation
* Assessment submission data
* Student focus groups
  + Pizza lunch or group Zoom sessions
  + What did they like, what could be improved across the first year?

# Who are our students 1?

**Many students work a lot.** Almost all the on-campus students we spoke with work more than 20 hours a week, with a number working close to full time.

**The importance of consistency and clarity**. Finding information can be difficult and overwhelming for a commencing student. Students can have difficulty finding lecture notes, readings and assessment instructions if they are not placed in a sensible and consistent location.

# Who are our students 2?

**Real-world examples**. Students valued classes where academics were able to share relevant real-world examples and industry experiences, making strong connections between what they were learning in the subject and their application in their profession.

# Who are our students 3?

**Catching up.** Students who missed a lecture or workshop found it difficult to catch up if recordings were not made available. Having this flexibility very important.

**Feedback.** The importance of quality feedback was mentioned regularly. Two students described an example where the feedback provided was so helpful, they did considerably better on the following assessment item.

# What did they love?

**Automatic 7-day extension.** Without prompting, students from all sessions reported how much they liked the automatic 7-day extension.

**Embedded tutors**. Without prompting, the embedded tutor program was regularly mentioned as being incredibly helpful in skill-building and increasing student confidence.

# What should be available in a first-year subject?

There was a lack of consistency in the experience students receive across their enrolment.

A set of principles were developed and tested with exemplars and templates

Minimum Expectations – what should be available in a first-year subject

* Scaffolding of content
* Delivery
* Assessment for learning

# Scaffolding of content

* The volume of weekly learning.
* A weekly checklist
* Consistent sequencing of learning content and learning activities
* Pre-recorded concept lectures
* Alignment to the subject learning outcomes and assessment tasks
* Learning activities are available throughout the content
* Embedded support, guidance on how to use technology
* Accessibility requirements

# Delivery

* Welcome announcement
* Weekly announcements
* Consistent synchronous learning sessions
* Active and collaborative learning opportunities
* All recordings and resources are provided to students

# Assessment

* Logically sequenced and scaffolded
* Clear task descriptions
* Take a course level view
* Opportunities for students to clarify
* Feedback must be provided on all tasks
* Avoid unnecessary hurdles

# Average pass rate increased from 67% to 85%.

Image: Graph showing the success rate of students before and after the subject development. The bar on the left has a success rate of 67% and the bar on the right has a success rate of 85%

# Grade distribution changes

Image: a graph showing the change in grades after subject development as a percentage. The number of zero fail grades reduced by 40%, the number of failing grades reduced by 49% and passing grades by 27%. The number of credits increased buy 31% , distinctions by 71% and high distinctions by 121%

# Conclusion

* We should aim for consistency in the experience students receive across their enrolment.
* By incorporating the principles of Universal Design for Learning all students benefit from the experience
* Developing minimum expectations can help to guide academics towards best practice

# Additional data….

703 part-time university students from across Australia completed a survey.

When asked how important are each of the following in the design of your subjects/units/courses?

The % of students who selected “very important” are shown below

1. Well spaced out assessments (74%)
2. Flexible assessment due dates/automatic extensions (69%)
3. Consistent subject/unit site layout (68%)
4. Learning content available early (66%)

# Additional data continued….

1. Clear distinctions between key and additional content (63%)
2. Pre recorded lectures (60%)
3. A variety of ways to interact with the learning content (55%)
4. A weekly announcement clearly stating what needs to be completed next week (54%)
5. University support (40%)
6. Different assessment types (38%)
7. Early assessment item due before census (21%)

# I would like to thank my collaborators

Dr Noelia Roman and Dr Sarah Teakel for their help on this project.