What works to support students at risk of failure

This brief outlines key findings from an impact evaluation funded through the ACSES Equity Frontiers Program. The full report can be found here, or on the ACSES Trials Registry at www.acses.edu.au/trials-evaluation/trials-registry/.

Why this matters

Evidence from a recent Curtin University trial, *The impact of academically at-risk student management practices on first year students' engagement and success: a randomised controlled trial,* shows how targeted support can help universities use resources more efficiently.

What we evaluated

Curtin University provides an Academically At-Risk Student Management (AARSM) initiative, where the equity team first identifies academically at-risk students as those on a weak academic trajectory in their first year, core units. They identify these students as those who engaged in their specific unit within the Learning Management System (LMS) 15 or fewer times in the initial three weeks. The team then contacted these students and provided proactive advice to them.

What worked

Early detection works. LMS activity (e.g. Blackboard clicks) accurately predicts students at risk of failure.

Students at "moderate risk" benefited from the support. The identification and contact from the equity team helped these students make more informed decisions about their ability to successfully complete the course, leading to greater withdrawals from the unit before costs were incurred.

What it cost

Cost-effective support. The cost for implementing this targeted approach for students identified as being at "moderate risk" was approximately $10 per student, with scope for cost efficiencies through automation and scale. The email and SMS scripts are available in the What Works Evidence Brief for Equity Practitioners.

What did not work

Limited impact on students at "high risk". This support alone was not sufficient to support students with very low, initial LMS activity. Reallocating less effective, non-targeted support may achieve better outcomes for students.

Non-academic advice is not enough. Informational support did not improve student engagement in their unit, assignment submission, or grades. Other support is needed to enable engagement and success within units, such as targeted academic assistance for these at-risk students.

🔑 Key steps for senior management

- Implement **early flagging** using LMS data to identify those students most at risk of failure, and segment them by level of risk.

- Implement **targeted support** for at-risk students prior to academic census.

- Consider **reallocating resources** from untargeted support campaigns.