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[Re]evaluating practice: measuring what is important, to inform improvements to student outcomes

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Abstract

In recent decades, higher education has undergone dramatic change as the sector grapples with increasingly diverse students in greater numbers, budgetary pressures and ever-growing competition. This paper describes a project undertaken by a global higher education provider that aimed to pilot a 'driver tree' that was devised using data from seventy four data points about students, academics and curriculum for improving the likelihood of retention and success. Observations, interviews and analyses were used to understand the current state and core issues affecting pass rates of identified units. From this, a set of interventions was developed, ranging from 'immediate and direct' to those involving longer term implementation with more stakeholders. The process for selecting and implementing the immediate interventions over one trimester is described. These include the targeted introduction of more scaffolding activities, standards-based assessment rubrics to guide student work, templates and samples of work, along with practice exams. Results are still being collated as the trimester is yet to finish, however early indications are that the interventions have already had positive impact. In one unit, the submission rate of the first assessment task improved by 40% and in another unit the average grade for task one increased by 9%. Final results will be available post- trimester, in April 2018. Comprehensive analysis will require long-term tracking, however directions for policies to embed consistency and quality are already emerging. These are relevant for all higher education providers, along with the processes used to plan, implement and evaluate the interventions.

Keywords: Retention, student success, curriculum transformation.

Introduction

Higher education has undergone dramatic change in recent decades as the sector grapples with increasingly diverse students in greater numbers, with budgetary pressures to offer more scalable education. More information is available for students, academics and management, and yet in many ways education has remained in a paradigm that Sir Ken Robinson (2010) would describe as having been set during the enlightenment to meet the needs of the industrial revolution. Curriculum and delivery largely remain focused on content without adaptation to individual student needs as cohorts change and grow.

The Higher Education Standards Panel (2017) released a sector review titled *Improving Retention, Completion and Success in Higher Education*. It listed a range of key interventions that emerge from a literature review on student success. The interventions related to students' understanding of higher education prior to entry, institutional culture, teaching and learning, support service, and institutional accountability. Much focus has been set on student characteristics, particularly using analytics to identify students at risk (Seidel & Kutieleh, 2017). However, student characteristics only account for 22.55% of the variation in attrition (Higher Education Standards Panel 2017, p. 76). Further, 18.83% is accounted for by the institution they chose. The majority of the variation is yet to be qualified and quantified. Whilst the discussion paper raises 'learning and teaching' as an area which affects attrition, it only points to the sectors' efforts to reward teaching and the development of a culture to share best practice. It does not address specific interventions on the curriculum and assessment.

Navitas delivers to over 80,000 students in 120 colleges across 50 countries and in a range of sectors and regulatory environments. It has a predominance of non-traditional students, therefore improving retention and the likelihood of student success are common priorities across the colleges.

The Retention Driver Tree

The *Retention Driver Tree* project began in 2016 and was led by the Navitas's Learning and Teaching unit in collaboration with divisions, business units and colleges, to:

- Surface and share the many student retention and success initiatives and,
- Identify key student retention drivers.

The project drew on previous initiatives undertaken in individual Navitas colleges, such as analysing student data to determine activity and profile patterns that could influence success. From this analysis, a model of attributes common to students who withdraw from their studies was developed, in order to predict their likelihood of 'churn'. Success in early units and particularly the first assessment tasks in units was found to be a determinant of later success, which highlights the importance of coherent curriculum strategies especially in early units.

The wealth of literature on the first year experience and student success also informed the project. The effort students made in applying themselves to their studies, joining the university community and making friends was strongly influenced by whether they felt this engagement (Trowler and Trowler 2010). Navitas colleges have many students from non-traditional backgrounds, for whom this sense of connection or engagement is especially challenging (Trowler and Trowler 2010, Devlin 2011, Vardi 2015). These students may be the first in family to attend post-secondary study and therefore have less support from their community, family or peers. Studies at Australian universities between 2005 and 2010 highlighted the importance both of the quality and extent of interaction between the student and the institution in the first year, and particularly the first six to eight weeks of a program

(Wylie 2005, Wilcoxson, Manning et al. 2011), therefore activities to help students 'transition in' to the university are critical.

This analysis of the research and good practice across Navitas also reaffirmed what we already know – that retention is very complex and requires a number of interconnected levers and actions. To illustrate these levers, the Retention Driver Tree was developed, with the *retained student* conceptualised as one who is *'connected'* and *'capable'*. A *'connected'* student has a clear sense of purpose, has meaningful connections with peers, quickly establishes relationships with teaching staff, is guided by a robust support structure, and experiences a successful transition into study. There are plenty of initiatives in the literature with similar goals to ensure a "connected student", e.g. Menzies and Nelson (2012) describe the peer support program at QUT that is designed to create meaningful connection with peers.

In addition to being *'connected'*, a retained student is also academically *'capable'* and in our context with primarily non-traditional students, this is a core part of our mission. Many Navitas students have not been successful in their earlier academic endeavours and the colleges focus on fostering this academic capability, through teaching and the curriculum.

The Retention Driver Tree itself is attached in appendix A and while all components are important to student success, this paper focuses in particular on the drivers that enable students to become *'capable'*. These drivers are described below along with how they were operationalised to meet measurable good practice targets.

Structured and relevant curriculum

Structured and relevant curriculum can be achieved through alignment and a strong narrative which brings out the explicit structure of topic or subject (Biggs, 2003). The content has to be authentic, appropriate and relevant to promote engagement, and that range of curriculum resources and media have to be accessible.

Active and engaging classroom environments

Student engagement in course material is driven by their active engagement with it. When students are 'doing something besides listening' (Ryan & Martens, 1989, p 29), they 'learn more material, more quickly, and retain what they have learned longer' (Ryan & Martens, 1989, p 29). To build an active and engaging classroom environment requires the right classroom space to support collaboration and participation (Oblinger, 2006). It requires teachers building on what students already know, checking student understanding, emphasising depth rather than breadth of coverage and catering to diversity (Biggs, 2003). The measurement of active and engaging classroom environments would be to meet Navitas's internal active learning ratio (>30%) and attendance target (>80%).

Active and engaging online environments

Active and engaging online environments make use of good learning design to sustain connections between students, their peers and teachers (Laurillard, 2002) and provide opportunities for knowledge and skills to be practised and consolidated.

Skilled and supportive teachers

Skilled and supportive teachers have attitudes and behaviours that are central to fostering a sense of connection with students (Betts, 2008; Chickering & Gamson, 1987). Teachers' perceptions of teaching and learning can be established through staff interviews, surveys such as Trigwell & Prosser's Approaches to Teaching Inventory (2004), years of teaching experience and their participation in professional development initiatives.

Well-designed assessments

Well-designed assessments should include formative and summative tasks timed in a strategic way to support student learning. Assessments should have explicit criteria (documented in a rubric), be developmental in sequence (Forster, Mendelovits & Masters, 1994), with the first task being early, low stakes and affirming (Nelson, Creagh, Kift & Clarke, 2014). To ensure students are on the right track, assessments should be started in class and formative feedbacks are given early on (Nicol and Mcfarlane-Dick, 2006). Model answers and exemplars should guide student work (Orsmond et al, 2002).

Feedback for effective learning

To be effective for learning, feedback needs to be timely and personal, constructive, aligned and future-focused (Macquarie University, 2017). Timeliness means that students would receive the feedback of a summative task and have time to make use of the guidance in the subsequent task. In practice that would mean receiving the feedback at least one week before the next task is due.

Integrated skills development

Integrated approaches to developing academic and English skill development emerged as good practice in some of the colleges, where teachers focussed both on the discipline and how to communicate knowledge. Explicit criteria on rubrics can guide students in the demonstration of different types of knowledge and skills.

The Retention and Student Success Project

Once the retention Driver Tree was developed, a pilot was established to trial the initiatives in two colleges. Three 'high impact units' (HIU) were identified from each college to be included in the pilot. These units were typically first trimester subjects studied in the first year. The units chosen had pass rates lower than the Navitas target of 75%, which is a major cause of attrition as students lose confidence in their ability to complete their program of study if they fail the first units. Attendance rates in these units are also mostly lower than the Navitas target of 80%. These units typically had large cohort sizes therefore interventions had the opportunity to positively affect large groups of students.

The first phase of the project involved analysis of the current state. The following data sources were explored:

- Unit outlines
- Student evaluation reports
- Trimester reports (2016 Trimesters 1, 2, 3)

- Attendance data
- Assessment data including student pass rates and grade distribution for individual tasks
- LMS sites for each unit (Moodle)
- Interviews with unit convenors
- One class observation for each of the units (6 in total)
- PD records from L&T Services

The full framework used to prioritise and gather data can be found in Appendix B.

Results of the current state analysis

The current state analysis provided an overview of the units, which is described below.

Curriculum

Unit outlines for most units were lengthy and did not communicate relevance for students' future study or alignment between outcomes, topics and assessment. Some units rely heavily on textbooks which teachers commented were not always purchased by students.

Skilled and supportive teachers

The teachers leading the high impact units were committed to student learning, however they were unsure of how to go about planning and implementing improvement strategies. Although more than 14000 PD hours were undertaken by Navitas teaching staff over the previous two years, the teachers leading HIUs had not participated in these programs. While all HIU teachers had more than five years teaching experience, trimester reviews included little reflective practice. Student satisfaction obtained from evaluation surveys was generally lower than other units.

Well-designed assessments

The assessment schedule in the unit outlines was examined, along with student grades for all assessment tasks. Grade distribution was graphed as a frequency polygon. To analyse the baseline of assessment achievements, student results for each assessment task in the previous three trimesters were collected and graphed on a frequency distribution polygon. All assessment tasks for each unit were mapped on the same graph to show relative frequency of grades.

The assessments in the units were not designed to be developmental (Forster, Mendelovits & Masters, 1994), with tasks too close for feedback to inform the next submission and little opportunity for students to practice before exams. In most units, exams are weighted heavily (up to 60%) and consistently reap the worst results. No practice examples were provided to guide student work and rubrics were unavailable for some tasks. In some units, the first task routinely had low submission rates and pass rates.

Active & engaging classroom

Observations indicated low student attendance (<80) and engagement in many classes, with students accessing mobile phones for activities other than study- related. Only one unit met

the target of 70:30 teacher talk ratio (where 30% or more of every hour should be allocated for student activity). One unit had 100% teacher talk.

Timely and affirming feedback

Assessments' due dates in the units did not allow for results to be received before submission of the next task. Students' evaluation of the quality and timeliness of the feedback, through the end-of-unit surveys were generally positive (averaging 3.6-3.8 on a 5-point Likert scale) at one of the colleges. Subject evaluations at the other college do not include items on quality or timeliness of feedback, which will be a policy implication of the project.

Active & engaging online environments

Those units with activities relied on print resources and there was little evidence of alignment between online resources and on campus classes. Most units made use of the Learning Management System (Moodle) for accessing resources, although few activities were available in LMS spaces.

Integrated skills development

Teacher interviews were used to explore the teachers' attitudes towards supporting students developing academic and English skills. Most teachers cited the need for students to develop academic skills and for international students to improve their English communication, however there is little evidence of integrated skills development in the curriculum and none described strategies they included in class.

Planning the interventions

From this, a set of interventions was developed, drawing on the literature and Navitas good practice examples, ranging from *Immediate interventions* (to be actioned in the current trimester, involving the lead teacher), to *longer term interventions* (needing involvement with university partners, policy changes or cultural shifts)

In order to implement the interventions, a member of the L&T Services team was allocated to work closely with unit convenors as a curriculum expert to implement changes that could be implemented immediately. These were: structuring content for clarity and deep learning, developmental activities to build skills for assessment tasks, models and templates to demonstrate requirements, rubrics to guide improvement, and providing practice opportunities prior to the final exam. Other interventions are important, such as possibly reviewing the overall assessment strategies however these would need a longer lead time to implement, and were hence not part of this immediate phase.

The immediate interventions

To implement the immediate interventions, an initial meeting was held in October 2017 with the College Academic Director, the L&T curriculum transformation expert and the unit convenor of the HIU to explain the process and the interventions to be addressed. Weekly meetings between the L&T curriculum transformation expert and the unit convenor were then established. A time commitment of approximately three hours per week was agreed with the

unit convenors for the ten week period of development. Conversations at these meetings focussed on the set of changes as explained below.

Structuring content for clarity and deep learning

Based on the findings from the current state of the HIUs, conversations focussed on clearly aligning learning outcomes, activities and assessments. It was clear that with time pressures, and extensive material to cover, the teaching concentrated on the delivery of vast and dense information to students who lacked an understanding of its relevance or importance.

Staff from both colleges were encouraged to create a stronger unit narrative that resonated with students. Selected content from course material was rapidly re-designed to reduce cognitive load and ensure clarity. A unit narrative was created for each week, with the creation of *before class*, *during class* and *after class* material for students. This material was clearly sign-posted in the LMS. Activity outlines included relevance to the weekly learning material, as well as connections to classroom before, during and after class activities. Activities were chunked, where possible, to reduce cognitive load and increase visual pathways for students to access information.

Developmental activities to build skills for assessment tasks

In 5 out of the 6 classes observed, the active learning ratio (30% per hour) was not achieved. Hence conversations focussed on activities that teachers could use to ensure a teacher talk/student activity ratio of no more than 70:30 for every hour.
Early formative and summative tasks by week 4, with prompt affirming feedback were also planned. Examples of activities include in-class quizzes as comprehension checkpoints, a Moodle glossary of terms which students contribute to, HTML block with live share market prices for a Finance unit, and interactive content developed using H5P particularly to practice assessments.

Models and templates to demonstrate requirements

For all assessment tasks, a model of a past examples with commentary to describe the components to students, or a template for them to follow in development were recommended. For example, in one assignment, students submitted written essay type responses to 3 questions. A practice assessment was created using H5P documentation tool, which allowed students to complete the practice question with clearly defined and chunked sub-sections, and discussion with their peers was held as a classroom activity.

In another unit, students complete a timed multiple choice quiz (MCQ) on the LMS site. Previous quiz practice was completed on paper via a PDF upload. Leveraging developmental assessment design (Forster et al, 1994) and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978, p 86), a practice quiz was created on the LMS site which simulated the MCQ conditions, providing students with the opportunity to tangibly engage with the assessment type and problem solve under guidance. Students were also able to access and trial the quiz interface prior to completing the quiz.

Rubrics to guide improvement

Rubrics for all assessment tasks, available beforehand to guide improvement and enable students to understand assessment requirements were clearly articulated. All assessments were started in class, with explanation of the rubric. In one unit, a maths based calculation general rubric was created for the second assessment, along with a detailed marking guide for the teaching staff to improve consistency in marking.

Practice exams prior to final

Two practice exam opportunities: one whole class activity to demonstrate the process (two weeks out from end of trimester); one with students working in pairs, and then using the marking guide to mark another pair's work (one week out from final exam) were prescribed.

Early Indicators

The immediate interventions, implemented in a rapid ten week period, have shown a positive impact on engagement and assessment results. An indirect impact has also been in the staff response to the change process itself. In this section, preliminary data is presented, in an attempt to extrapolate early indicators for retention and success.

Assessment results

Initial indications of assessment results as the semester progresses are positive. Following the practice opportunity in one unit, staff noted that student submissions for assessment one were 'unusually good - 47/49 students submitted (2 with approved extensions). Previously only 60% or so submit at this point'.

Results for the assessment which had the MCQ practice test introduced have subsequently improved, with the average grade increasing by 9%. The percentage of students achieving 91-100% in this assessment increased from 3.0% to 23.2%. Another teacher noted the quality of student submissions has improved with addition of rubrics and scaffolded instructions. In this case, the average mark for assessment one increased from 10.6/30 to 21.13/30.

Overall, the final results for the units gathered so far show a significant increase in pass rates, with one unit reporting an increase in pass rates of 25%. The average across the units was 12%.

Changing teacher perspectives

As the pilots are still underway, it is too early to make any definitive statements however there are positive signs that the intervention process has had a positive effect on teacher attitudes. For example, the learning about curriculum alignment and active learning is being applied by the teachers into other courses they deliver. One teacher commented that once she reflected on the notion of 'teacher talk time', she adapted all her classes to include more interaction. Teachers have noted that the retention levers have provided them with targeted areas to improve practice. As 'academic developers' this is the sought-after alchemy of learning and will lead to improved engagement and outcomes for countless students to come.

Conclusion

Teaching is a complex endeavour and teachers are the 'face' of Navitas for our students, so bring them along on the journey toward curriculum change is essential. Challenges regarding staff capacity, engagement and deployment in large scale transformation projects that address pedagogical and technological change have been articulated in other institutions (Paul, 2017). A key aspect of the project was substantial hours working with the unit convenors on explaining the interventions, unpacking how they would apply to the specific curriculum context and redesigning activities and strategies to reflect the changes.

Early indicators suggest that assessments provide substantial opportunity for interventions, requiring clarity of design, opportunities for practice and specified feedback, guidance and templates. Preliminary results show that actions such as engaging activities, assessment rubrics, and 'good practice' examples have already yielded positive outcomes. Final results will be available post-trimester in April 2018. Comprehensive results analysis will require long-term tracking and measurement in order to substantively link the pilot outcomes and overall impact on student retention, however directions for policies to embed consistency and quality are already emerging.

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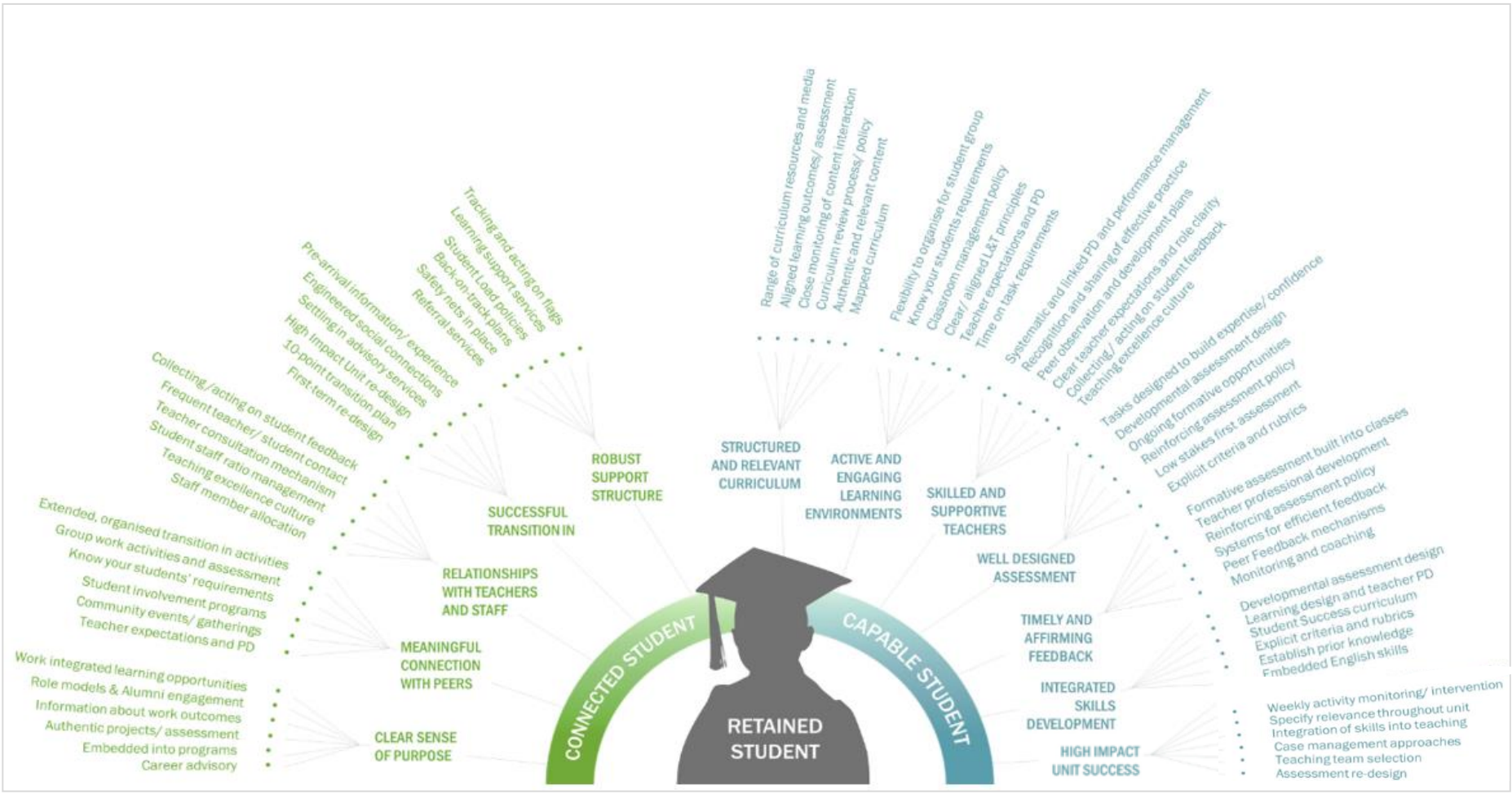
Appendix A: Retention Driver Tree



Appendix B: Current State Analysis Framework

Retention Driver	Lever	Statement of Good Practice	Data Points
1. Structured and relevant curriculum	Aligned learning outcomes, activities & assessments	Learning outcomes, activities and assessments are clearly aligned	Alignment of outcomes, activities and assessments
	Coherent content and structure	Teaching explicitly brings out the structure of the topic or subject	Flow & developmental sequence of topics, clear narrative in each class
	Authentic, appropriate and relevant content	Relevance of the unit to the students' work and study goals are explained Volume of work is applicable for context	Explanation of relevance Amount of content and activity to be covered each week.
	Range of curriculum resources and media	Textbooks and other resources are accessible to students	All students have access to textbook and resources
2. Active and engaging classroom environment	Attendance	Attendance meets the Navitas target of > 80%	Class size, Attendance rates
	Time on Task requirements	Active learning ratio of >30% per hour spent on student activity	Active learning ratio
	Know your student requirements	Teaching builds on what students already know Teacher uses strategies such as concept checking & checking student understanding of tasks	Opportunities for students to articulate their conceptions and check their understanding
	Classroom strategies for inclusivity	Tasks cater for international students Depth of learning, rather than breadth of coverage is emphasised	Cultural/ ability mix International students performances compared to local students performances Depth of discussion in class and online
	Classroom spaces	Teaching spaces are engaging & foster collaboration and participation	Room configuration
3. Active and engaging online environment	Learning design	The online unit should be an active space where students engage with course content, with their teacher, & with other students.	Online unit checklist
	Student engagement	Students engage with the unit regularly in the online space Analytics are embedded in QA processes	IS Analytics: How often students logon? How long do they spend? What do they do when they are online (passive or active uses?)
4. Skilled and Supportive Teachers	Clear teacher expectations and role clarity	Teachers are clear about their role & expectations Alignment of teachers' approaches & practices with College L&T principles Role & performance expectations are clear and understood	Position descriptions Peer review Teacher attitudes about their students & their own priorities in teaching Teacher activity in LMS

		Teachers' assumption of students & teachers' roles are positive and contemporary	
	Recruitment and selection	Teacher has at least 5 years' experience teaching undergrad, international students & in the discipline.	Years of experience Teaching undergraduate and international students
	Ongoing development and reflective practice	Evidence is available that teacher has engaged in PD, reflected & improved their practice.	Evidence of reflective practice (portfolio) and in trimester reviews
	Academic performance management processes	Performance plans & management strategies are embedded into college processes, with a focus on student outcomes & success	Engagement in PD programs
5. Well-Designed Assessment	Student results Pain points	Student pass rates should meet Navitas target of > 75% Challenging assessment tasks are acknowledged & scaffolded	Student pass rates Tasks where average grade < 50% are identified & prioritised for review
	Low stake first assessment	The first assessment task is early in semester, low stakes & affirming.	Weighting for first task Grades for first task
	Tasks designed to build expertise/ confidence	Assessment tasks are started in class & formative feedback are given to ensure students are on the right track to succeed	Assessments are started in class Formative feedback given in class
	Developmental assessment design	Assessments are sequenced such that they scaffold students' skills development	Developmental assessment tasks Timing of the assessment tasks across the semester Mix & weighting of tasks across the semester
	Explicit criteria and rubrics	Students are clear on the requirements of each assessment & how to succeed	Rubrics explicitly encourage students to demonstrate relational understanding Examples / models of assessments available for students
6. Timely and Affirming Feedback	Quality of feedback	Personalised, Constructive, Aligned & Future Focused (Macquarie University, 2017)	Feedback quality – sample feedback for high, mid & low performing students
	Formative assessment built into class	Classroom culture is positive, where students can make mistakes and learn from them (Biggs 2003)	Teachers provide formative feedback on activities in class
	Timeliness	Feedback received at least one week before the next task is due so there is time for incorporation	Feedback schedule
7. Integrated Skills Development	Embedded English and Academic Skills	Activities are designed to scaffold English & academic skills development Improvement on academic skills is demonstrated across tasks in the trimester	English and academic skills explicitly embedded into the curriculum Explicit criteria on skills in rubric Track student performance in skills
8. Policy and process to support good practice	Policy and procedures	College policy and process supports good practice, eg Attendance is tracked, monitored and followed up Policies support the implementation of improvement informed by student results & feedback Assessment policy is adhered to & guides good practice in monitoring & improving student results	Policies and procedures are available & embedded in practice

		Policies guide the amount of class time, student activity in class time	
9. College culture	Culture experienced by students and staff at the college	Culture at the college is supportive of student engagement & learning. There is a culture of continuous improvement & a focus on academic outcomes.	The environment at the college Tone observed in transactions between students & staff
10. Academic leadership	Senior and mid-level leadership	Leadership at the college is active & cooperative, guiding practice & managing performance There are clear roles & appropriate workload for course/ program coordinators.	Evidence of performance management to guide practice