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***Mentoring through technology - Bridging the tyranny of distance.***

**by**

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**Abstract**

This paper will provide general information on operating a peer mentoring programme, for distance education university students, using available technology. The information given will be of a practical, operational nature whilst raising more complex issues such as integration, after-marketing, value-adding and future challenges.

## **Introduction**

The use of telecommunications to provide mentors and personal contact from a teaching institution, for distance education (DE) students, is not a new concept. However, at Charles Sturt University (CSU) in New South Wales, we are moving towards viewing telementoring as an integral part of our overall quality service to distance education students (who represent more than two-thirds of enrolled students).

The dynamic higher education environment, with its considerably-reduced funding, and the changing demographics of current and prospective students, has brought about a growing interest in the benefits of telementoring. (Telementoring is mentoring through the use of telecommunication, which may include telephoning, e-mail, online forums, online chat groups and targeted listservs.)

## **Opportunity Benefits**

("Opportunity Benefits", is coining a new phrase that provides a counter concept to the Economic term "Opportunity Cost")

There are three beneficiaries when an education institution chooses to provide mentoring services, particularly, telementoring services: the mentees, the mentors, and the institution. The focus of most institutions in the past, has primarily been on the benefits gained by those students being mentored.

What all education institutions need to be seriously looking at now, given the funding cuts and the increasingly-competitive nature of the operating environment, are the additional benefits telementoring brings to the institution. The rapid evolution of higher education in Australia would dictate that we can't afford to ignore the add-on benefits and excellent opportunities that successful telementoring offers us.

This paper will provide an overview of the operational logistics of delivering a telementoring programme to distance education students; and, through this process, will expand on the benefits and opportunities available to the institution. It is hoped that this paper will enable you to conceptualise new or expanded opportunities for your institution.

Paul Worsfold, during 1999, was the Manager of the pilot Peer Mentoring Programme at Charles Sturt University, and I give full acknowledgment to his knowledge, level of expertise in this area, and considerable contribution to this paper.

## **The Current Programme Outlined**

It must be stressed that this mentoring programme is not an academic support programme, rather it is a peer support link for DE students with the University. It is to assist the DE students to feel connected to the University, and to initiate a shift from being a passive student to becoming actively involved in the education process.

Peer mentoring requires the experience of senior internal students who have successfully completed the same subjects that are to be studied by a targeted cohort of first-year students. A mentoring programme is arranged in consultation with a Course and/or Subject Coordinator who provides the names/class lists of senior students who could be approached to become mentors as well as the distance education students to be targeted. Mentors are selected on the basis of set criteria for the mentoring task, the recommendation of their School and their academic standing. Credit level passes in all applicable first-year subjects are normally required. Key responsibilities among participants are then determined, ie. supervision, training, mentor development, staff liaison, reporting, feedback procedures and evaluation.

Targeted are those students from courses with high attrition rates among first-year DE students. The evaluation of the initial programme, in the first half of 1999, indicated four telephone contacts with each DE student over one teaching session was achievable, and would be set as the minimum rate. However, to do so the student-to-mentor ratio of 30:1 would also need to be set as the maximum number of student contacts allowable under the programme.

Present factors working against a maximum of 30 contacts being achieved include: the lead time for the programme using the method of 'cold calling', which takes time when explaining the programme, gaining interest, agreement; and, the number of wrong numbers, phones disconnected, people not contactable (answering machines and messages). This means that gathering a group of 30 within the first four weeks can for some mentors be difficult. Also, the mentors commonly experience some timetabling adjustment with their study needs as they settle into regularly supporting the programme, eg. taking time out to finish an assignment.

The recruitment, selection and training of new mentors would occur before the end of the preceding teaching session; and, telephoning DE students would commence no later than week two of the new teaching session.

The Student Services Unit serves as a type of 'call centre' for the mentoring programme. Some mentors do work from their own homes, but only after initial training and supervision on campus. As a distance education 'outreach' programme mentor-to-mentee interaction occurs via the telephone, e-mail and even on-line chat sessions where some, or perhaps all of these communication mediums are available to the mentees.

Where the mentor programme is conducted from a Student Services Unit, this occurs over three evenings per week, currently operating between 6pm and 9pm. The first hour is dedicated to training of the mentors. Telephone calls to the mentees commences after 7pm to coincide with the cheaper rates available on STD calls. It is usual that a different group of mentors attends each evening of the programme's operation. This provides for smaller numbers at each of the evening training sessions and also means the sessions have to be repeated on each of the nights. Which evenings, or the number of evenings that the mentors work is determined chiefly by the mentees, that is, they say which is the best night and time to call.

The supervisor arrives earlier than the mentors to set up for the training session. The supervisor ensures that each of the mentors' files is ready, and logs into each of the on-line mentor forums, checks for e-mail, and, in general prepares the work environment.

During each session the supervisor monitors the evening's activities, keeps watch for messages on the on-line forums and serves as back-up for inevitable enquiries raised through contacting so many students. The staff officer selected to supervise the programme must have a thorough knowledge and understanding of all student services, along with a good working knowledge of the University and its overall support to students. This is because an evening mentor programme becomes a defacto student services operation, yet without the same availability of specialised staff.

The supervisor and the mentors must be ready to manage student enquiries in ways which do not detract from the quality of support and services that are found during normal business hours. This quality assurance aspect then becomes a necessary part of the evaluation and challenge. The challenge to the institution is to ensure that quality student services are provided by the para-professional mentors. The mentors are operating within an area of genuine, under-served need, and at a time of day which is guaranteed to produce extra demands upon the University. The University is now considering what operating hours are required for student service areas. The normal operating hours (ie. 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday) largely meet the needs of internal students, however, the operating hours contribute little to the needs of the distance education students.

### **Reflections on the Current Programme**

Overall, with comparison to other mentor programmes at other universities, it appears the CSU programme is less extensive and perhaps more controlled. However, without the present level of supervision and attention to competency-based training of the mentors, I do wonder at the qualitative aspects of, for example, at least one Australian university planning to mentor all its DE students in 2000 with training and monitoring by teleconferences.

Future recommendations for the mentoring programme would be to advise/invite controlled numbers of targeted students to participate in the programme via the process of them receiving their offer to study, or their re-enrolment. They would have a deadline to meet to express their interest for participating, after that any 'vacancies' could be filled by subsequent smaller mail outs, again with controlled numbers. Expressions of interest would be made by the DE students calling the University at set times, at a cost to them; using several published phone lines the 'ready and waiting' mentors will take their calls. The mail costs would be slightly up, phone costs more markedly down, and the initial call from the student to the 'ready and waiting' mentor, would be considered one of the four calls set as the minimum rate.

### **Mentoring Forms/Documentation**

Much of the quality control and continuous improvement of the mentoring programme is monitored through the documentation gathered by the mentors during the programme. Most of the newly-developed forms have information and instructions for their use printed on them. (Some of these forms are attached.)

- **Opening Statement Checklist**

Developed with the indemnity/liability issues in mind, re: student advising, the opening statement checklist was devised and developed to ensure the 'cold calling' of mentees was as prepared and precisely crafted as possible. It is important to note that an introductory letter, backing up the mentor's initial telephone contact is sent where a student expresses interest in continuing with the programme. The letter mirrors very closely the opening statement checklist. The checklist proved very worthwhile for making cognisant as well as reinforcing the pertinent issues/responsibilities of the programme.

- **Mentor Diary [Page]**

Introduced following the earlier trial, after mentors requested notepaper for making their own, personal contact records. The diary pages have proven very valuable where the mentors are each managing notes/information for between eight and 24 mentees. Observation of the 'diary' in use has shown it to aid the development of rapport/empathy with the mentees, as the mentors are able to refer to notes of study/personal situations/circumstances from previous contacts.

- **Mentor Programme Job Request/Referral/Message Form**

The credibility of the mentor programme also depends on the administration/completion of jobs/tasks which it offers, or is asked to complete on behalf of the mentees. Most mentors have required regular reminding to complete/activate job requests in conjunction with their recording of mentee's needs. (Incidentally, the revised documentation/procedures are working more effectively and thoroughly, on behalf of the programme and the mentees, where the mentor is in their second stage/session.)

Owing to the volume of job requests arising from the programme, along with lecturer liaison and on-line forum management, this style of mentoring programme to distance education students represents a defacto Call Centre for the University.

- **Proposed New Forms**

An overall records sheet (contact/phone call details: date, time, duration, etc.) has been trialed and is recommended for the any future programmes. Presently the new forms are only being trialed by the 'home' mentor, due mainly to the fact that they must differentiate between their own personal calls and University business calls in order to claim reimbursement of expenses.

### **Mentoring Outcomes - The Three Beneficiaries**

Benefits to the **mentees**: (see attached chart)

- Mentoring provides to the student (the mentee), personal and direct communication. The interaction is supportive. Referrals are made if appropriate, and collaborative problem-solving is a particularly positive feature.
- Mentoring assists with the management of student expectations (reality checking) of themselves, their subjects and the University.
- The contact is affirming and motivating. At the same time it engages students by prompting increased self-management of their own study needs. The mentoring interaction encourages students to be more active and less passive, ie. accepting what they are given or told, not what else they could request or contest as students. For example, if a mentor 'cold' calls a mentee who requests information and/or action regarding their study; it can be claimed, that had the mentor not called at that particular time, the student's need would most likely have remained unknown and unmet. Alternatively, the need may have surfaced at some later time when it may have been more difficult to successfully address. In summary, as an intervention technique the phone call from the mentor:
  - identified an immediate student need;
  - serviced the need at the earliest, most opportune moment;
  - satisfied the need (thereby increasing satisfaction with the Course and the University);
  - owing to this positive service experience the mentor had demonstrated/patterned the actions/behaviours for the mentee to follow should needs arise again;
  - the mentee is likely to relate this positive service experience to family and friends, and also to prospective students. (There is a consequent increase in the University's public standing and reputation.)
- Another important point to note is that quite a large part of the mentoring role is the continuous orientation of students. Continuous orientation is much more than 'getting to know the ropes', who to contact, or where to find the best resources. From a recent competency check of a mentor's communication skills, during an actual phone call to a mentee, it was observed that the mentor provided useful comparisons between subjects the mentee was currently studying, and subjects they would encounter in their next study session. While on the one hand, affirming the mentee's positive efforts in the current subjects. They were also being introduced (orientated) very subtly to the expectations and experiences of their continuing course. It was also noteworthy that while the mentee was exclaiming some concerns over their current grades, again the

normalised their achievements in order that they remain positive with what they had achieved so far. All these points can be grouped under the heading of good communication skills, and also continuous orientation to the experiences and challenges of study.

- Mentoring provides one of the most vital success factors in the First Year Experience philosophy - 'connectedness' to the institution. The First Year Experience approach is to achieve 'connectedness' as early as possible through positive personal contact. With distance education students this is far harder to achieve, as they rarely attend classes on campus, and rarely see the face of their lecturer. It is likely, that many distance education students do not speak directly to a member of staff during their first year of study. Isolation from, and disconnectedness with, the teaching institution is a fact of life for the first-year distance education student. Mentoring bridges the tyranny of distance in these situations.
- CSU's present mentoring programme for distance education students meets their lifestyle needs and is flexible in the way it is provided ie. at night and in the student's home.

**Benefits to the mentors:** (see attached chart)

- The mentoring programme provides the mentors with a high standard of teaching (by the supervisor and other qualified personnel on staff, as and when required) in the areas of personal and mentoring skills. The mentoring skills, in particular, add significantly to the mentor's future employability. The competency training they receive includes aspects such as:
  - liability issues, confidentiality provisions, programme objectives, programme administration, telephone techniques, managing 'customer' expectations;
  - knowledge-base development: academic regulations, knowledge of resources, supports and services available; and,
  - on-line navigation of: communication skills, mentoring theory, mentoring skills, coaching models, student needs, motivation and new skills, and maintaining the independence of the mentee, in addition to problem-solving skills.
- Through the training and the mentoring programme, the mentors broaden their social horizons through interaction with the distance education students. They learn about other lifestyles, culture and value the diversity in the student population.
- There are financial benefits to the mentors (although quite limited), but the greatest rewards they refer to, if asked, are the development of their skills and the intrinsic rewards of being a mentor.

**Benefits to the Institution:** (see attached chart)

As mentioned at the introduction of this paper, a focus would be to highlight the *Opportunity Benefits* of telementoring services for distance education students, to the institution. *Opportunity Benefits* are a counter concept to Opportunity Costs, which we are all aware of in Economics, whereby, we give up something to acquire something else. In such situations, we make a choice and what we forgo is

paper, there appears to be an abundance of *Opportunity Benefits*, ie. the benefits of mentoring students provide the opportunities for further benefits, particularly to the institution.

- One of the most valuable benefits that mentoring provides to the organisation is an opportunity to receive feedback from its customers. This information, if used appropriately, provides opportunities for quality assurance and continuous improvement of the institution's education products. The present mentoring programme is set up to capture 'student feedback', eg. students' complaints, praise, needs, wants, concerns and fears. Collated with other information collected throughout the University, student feedback, which is basically customer-service information, has the potential to highlight causal factors, or factors which may well contribute to student attrition unless otherwise attended to. Without directly soliciting feedback from the student, all of the mentors are trained and equipped to:
  - (i) identify important information for the betterment of the University in regard to courses, services, teaching, resources, and other aspects;
  - (ii) gain permission from the student to record and pass on their comments/thoughts/opinions etc. , which can be recorded without taking the student's name; and
  - (iii) this information is then forwarded to the programme supervisor who collates and acts on the information received. Student feedback is acknowledged, wherever possible, to confirm for students that their comments are both valuable and welcomed.
- Due to the variety of questions the mentors handle, refer on, and give information on, to the students, the mentoring programme has created a de facto Call Centre operating from the Student Services Unit on the nights the programme operates.
- The mentors, through the process of the mentoring activities, provide a low-key, low-cost troubleshooter service for both the students and the institution.
- Charles Sturt University, has clearly indicated an intention to use the internet as a primary source of transference of information to and from students. Some students, due to factors associated with age, levels of education, financial situation, infrastructure access, and understanding of the technology involved, are a little reluctant to use this form of communication. The telementoring programme motivates students to become internet 'connected', thus adding to the University's vision for the future.
- Telemarketing and after-marketing opportunities arise as a natural consequence of the mentoring process. For example, students are interested in other services, short Summer Session subjects, enabling and bridging subjects, overseas exchanges, future studies, and maintaining the 'connectedness' with the University. They become interested in their University and what it has to offer to them, and to their family and friends.

- Charles Sturt University has a strong commitment to distance education students which is reflected in the University's Mission Statement and Strategic Plan. Mentoring assists in meeting the quality service obligations the University has undertaken to provide to the distance education students. Mentoring provides a personal service, direct contact and 'connectedness' with the University, as well as individual assistance to the student to enable them to succeed in their chosen field of study.
- Orientation to the University and ensuring a positive first-year experience, can be difficult to provide to the distance education students at the same level as is provided to the internal students. Mentoring provides this link with the University and does offer an ongoing orientation service to the distance education students. This could be further developed if required.

### **Retention expectations**

Retention expectations are worth mentioning separately, as this subject appears to be surrounded by myths, mists, and mirrors. Much is expected of mentoring in terms of improving student retention, yet I suspect 'how this is achieved' is not precisely known. Firstly, to consider mentoring as a support intervention for staving off student attrition singularly is a nonsense. There are many variable pre-study conditions and personal circumstances during study which work against student success.

Mentoring must be as valued for the other contributions it makes to students and the institution, as well as the students it potentially does 'save'. Secondly, mentoring has a broader and more influential role with respect to maintaining and improving student retention over subsequent years. Mentoring can teach students the skills to problem-solve, gain confidence in the support networks of the institution; and, for distance education students, mentoring can reduce the isolation factor.

Mentoring programmes should be considered a part of an overall institution-wide response to maintaining and increasing retention rates. Mentoring, alone, is neither the salvation nor the cure to the challenges of retention. However, if mentoring is embedded in the First Year Experience Programme, it will value-add the learning product and benefit the student and the institution for the remainder of the student's studies.

### **Costings**

Like many other mentoring programmes, the Charles Sturt University programme costs included: (i) honoraria for the mentors, (ii) telephone charges (excluding rental), (iii) wages plus wage on-costs for the supervisor (in this instance HEW Level 7), (iv) photocopying (forms and reference materials, eg. subject outlines), (v) postage (preliminary letters of introduction to all targeted students, and mailing of study packages), and (vi) consumables, printing, etc., (eg. training materials, certificates and stationery).

In the opinion of the presenter of this paper, education institutions should have accepted by now, that mentoring is just one of the many tools that makes up the education package being offered. This paper shows that mentoring has far-reaching benefits for all concerned. There is no doubt that it aids in the development of learning skills, in 'connectedness' with the institution, academic motivation and orientation for the mentees. It rewards the mentors, and provides a positive profile of the institution, in addition to many, as yet, untapped benefits such as after-marketing, quality assurance and value-adding opportunities.

Mentoring should be as integral to the operation of the institution, as the many other services we have come to accept as essential in the provision of learning products, eg. learning skills services, counselling services, administrative services, and promotional and marketing services, to name a few. To this end, the mentoring budget should no longer be an annual 'cap-in-hand' event, but rather a set budgetary item.

### **The Future**

What does the future hold? As I speak, our perceptions of the future are already changing. This conference will make you review what you have been doing in the field of tutoring and mentoring, and it will also bring you new and challenging approaches to the subject.

In the Year 2000, I can see Australia's education institutions providing telementoring to students when on practicums in their final year of study, or when they are in professional placements for their first six to twelve months. Teachers and nurses immediately spring to mind. Technical, moral and practical support could be provided, in addition to reducing the sense of isolation of country service teachers, and bridging the tyranny of distance. A number of such programmes are operated in the United States, particularly for beginning teachers (see Odell, 1990).

I can see telementoring options as a standard part of the distance education students' education package. I believe that mentoring will be tailored to the individual student's needs, and the mentors will be selected not only on their skills but also other attributes that will enhance the mentee-mentor relationship.

Technology will continue to play a vital role in providing mentoring services to students studying off campus. It will also bring about operational changes in institutions to enable them to provide flexible delivery that fits into the lifestyle needs of the students, particularly the needs of different cohorts, for example mature-age people, parents of small children, and shift workers. Mentoring will bridge the tyranny of distance, and overcome environmental as well as geographical isolation for many students.

In the future, I believe the Opportunity Benefits of mentoring to the three beneficiaries will continue to grow as our skills in mentoring increase and the value-adding of the programmes have a flow-on multiplier effect for the students (the mentee), the mentors, and the institution.

## **Bibliography**

Odell, S.J. (1990). *Mentor teacher programmes: What research says to the teacher*. Washington DC: National Education Association.



**Student Satisfaction: Feedback and Comments**

This form is to be used by the peer mentor where a student they are contacting both requests and gives permission for their feedback and/or comments -

***on their subject teaching and/or organisation, course of study, student support, student services, or the University generally***

- to be recorded and acted upon by the Manager Peer Mentoring so that a situation may be improved or acknowledged as a service to a specific student and/or student groups.

Utilising this form will allow the University to benefit from aspects of 'customer satisfaction' and 'customer service' , and any student comment is received as something positive. Students may comment anonymously if they wish, and at all times the student commenting must be supported in the view that their feedback and/or comments will never be detrimental to them personally. This latter point is very often a concern among Distance Education students, although unwarranted owing to the University's good record on these matters.

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**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Peer Mentor:**  
\_\_\_\_\_

***Student's name optional***  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Setting Up For Peer Mentoring

Dear Peer Mentors

Your task is an interesting one because, as well as the training and supervision you will receive, the size of the task you may now take upon yourself depends very much upon you, ie how big you grow your peer mentoring contacts with DE students is your own decision.

However, you are limited by the following:

- 30 DE students as mentees is the maximum set for this trial
- There is no minimum. You must build your peer mentoring support of DE students carefully. If six DE students is enough, six it has to be!
- Wherever we do come close to the maximum of 30 DE students the objectives of the Peer Mentoring Programme become more economical, ie CSU will more likely consider the costs reasonable. However, this may result in too brief a phone call to be of any use to the DE students.
- Phone calls need to be friendly, building rapport. However, support more than conversation is the major objective after the first two calls perhaps. You need to judge your task from your own values and objectives, and balance the DE student's needs and CSU needs along the way.
- Where a DE student has e-mail access, use that method if that is acceptable/available.
- DE students with electronic access to CSU can be helped via a peer mentoring forum or chat room which I can set up for your DE students, ie., more DE students supported than may be possible by phone.
- Many DE students only have the telephone (let's not make them feel left out); these are the very students we want to call by phone.
- Set expectations you WILL honour, ie four telephone calls over the session is the maximum I can pay for (again, e-mail etc. is cheaper and we can do more via these other electronic media).
- 30 DE students maximum with four telephone calls each – Plan a strategy to set up your peer mentoring.
- Part of the strategy must be to look at the Subject Outline(s) of the subject(s) the DE students are studying (or ask them) and consider by what date (eg before the HECS census date or first assignment) should you have made ALL of your first contacts.

*Only For Peer Mentors Working From Home*

- Present your telephone bills with all calls to DE students highlighted. These will be paid as soon as possible. You will need to attach a summary of DE student names, student numbers and their phone numbers to the photocopied page of the bill you present.
- Please establish a monthly billing procedure with your telephone company.
- A review of phone costs must be undertaken before proceeding beyond four weeks. There is no authorisation of phone costs being recouped unless this is achieved. Should this present any difficulties, ie a monthly account, please

discuss as I am sure a method of sampling the costs of your calls can be worked out.

- Referrals/tasks to be carried out for those DE students you contact must be prompt. Should you find yourself in a difficult situation:

(List all relevant contact people and phone numbers)

## Opening Statement Checklist

Student's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Student Number: \_\_\_\_\_

**Please use the attached form letter to assist in the preparation of your opening statements/introduction. You will also need to script a brief message for any answering machine, one that does not alarm the students as to why CSU is calling after 7 pm.**

- Who am I? “Hello, Michael, my name is ..... , I’m calling from Charles..... Do you have a few moments to speak.....” The introduction of yourself more fully, etc., and so on....
- How did I get your name?  
The Manager Peer Mentoring Programmes has provided me with student names from among the list of all students currently enrolled in WEL107, those who have not studied a previous social welfare course.
- Mentor’s study status with regard to WEL107
- Mentees about to withdraw, possibly failed etc.  
“I’m sorry to hear that. Would my supervisor be able to assist you with the formalities of withdrawing, taking leave for example...”
- The purpose of peer mentoring...
- This *programme/I does not/do not* take the place of the normal opportunities for student-to-lecturer consultations. I am not qualified to give any academic advice, but I can share my experiences of study.
- This is essentially a student-to-student programme that has the approval of the your Course Coordinator and WEL107 Subject Coordinator.
- Would you like to be contacted again? I anticipate I would be able to call about four times during the current teaching session, or possibly more contact if you are on-line, ie you have computer access, an e-mail address...
- Mentee’s e-mail address is...(record separately on diary page)
- [XXXXXXXX@XXXXX.XXXX.XXX](mailto:XXXXXXXX@XXXXX.XXXX.XXX) is a generic e-mail address that can be used right now for contacting a peer mentor. It belongs to the programme and is monitored by the supervisor. (Discuss with Supervisor first) Mentors are able to provide their direct e-mail address when it becomes available.

OR

- To telephone you, I expect to be working either (circle one or more) Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday evenings, which day would be best, to telephone between 7 pm and 9 pm?  
[If not compatible days, register their interest and we can pass onto another mentor on a different night if they are willing.]
- Conversations and comments shared with me are maintained as both private and confidential.
- Do you have any questions? My supervisor will write and confirm arrangements in a few days. His/her name is XXXXX and his/her work number is XXXXX

**Barbara Lawrence**, Senior Programme Coordinator, Division of Student Services, Charles Sturt University, has worked in Student Service areas of higher education for the past ten years, and has recently moved from the University of New England in Armidale, New South Wales, to Charles Sturt University in Wagga Wagga, New South Wales. Barbara has edited seven books relating to equity issues for students in higher education, and has an abiding commitment to the provision of quality education services to rural and isolated students.

**Paul Worsfold**, Manager, Peer Mentoring Programme, Division of Student Services, Charles Sturt University, commenced work at CSU after six years of teaching in the Riverina Region of NSW. Initially contracted to arrange student support services for international programmes, Paul developed a 'service' reputation and standing which provided him the opportunity to manage the Student Services Unit at Wagga Wagga for eleven years. Paul has experience in all student service areas and is currently merging that experience with the new support technologies being introduced into higher education.

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