Thanks, Alf. And thanks also to Chris and Glen for wrangling me into this. I’m going to – I want to do two things today. I want to talk first about a relatively humble innovation in our school around tracking attendance, and around making attendance data work for us and making it work for teaching teams and have an impact for students. The other provocation I want to make is something that I’m not going to be able to address fully in a few minutes, but I want to plant some seeds in this provocation. And this is around the role of big data, not only for – in the traditional sense of big data for scientists, but also for educators and how we can navigate big data, how we can make sense of big data and so on.

So I was [00:42] so my name is Brady, I’m from the School of Humanities, and I teach into sociology with a particular focus on big first year introductory sociology courses. Part of what I’m going to speak about today is built on some work Wendy and I – who was the first-year advisor – last year in the School of Humanities we did some work around retention especially in terms of tracking attendance in the first four weeks of the semester and following up those students. So it’s very much linked to what I hope [Keithie 01:10] is going to talk about with Operation Student Success and those early markers.

So. I guess we’re building a little bit on Alf’s work here specifically and we are led very much by Keithie’s mentoring work in the School of Humanities through the Enhancement and Retention Initiatives. And we’re building on this ideas of – or Alf’s idea of these five senses: of capability, of connectedness, of purpose, of resourcefulness and of academic culture. And our specific context, our specific challenge is around this point on purpose. And the study in Griffith data that Glen mentioned earlier has really indicated that we are a bit behind in this measure of the sense of purpose compared to the rest of the university. Whereas there is about an 84% satisfaction rate in terms of purpose and capability across the university, the Bachelor of Arts is lagging about 20% behind – 65%. So one of our biggest challenges is writing into our students experiences of the Bachelor of Arts a sense of purpose, and encouraging them to build their own narrative of purpose. Because we have a very diverse range of students as we’ve heard today, and a lot of our students come to the BA specifically without really knowing what they want to get out of it. And that’s a structural problem we have to encounter. Not necessarily a problem, I mean, it can be seen as a really useful place from which to begin, and not knowing where to go. So we have to help out our students, especially in that first year, if we are worried about retention, which we are, building a sense of purpose into their first-year experience.
So how do we do that? There’s a whole array of strategies that we’re working on in our school in relation to it, especially the stuff that Keithie and Alf are doing across the university. But one of the things – to take you a little step back – is, we need to have students in classrooms, bums on seats, for this sense of purpose initiative to actually work. So I’m going to talk a little bit today about how we are tracking attendance, and how we are following up on attendance and trying to encourage attendance, using a technology that we are all very much familiar with.

So our challenge is tracking students for attendance and relating to the student through the institution, amidst what I’m going to refer to as this era of big data. And Boyd and Crawford have set up a really interesting provocation – a set of provocations – around what big data means for us in this era. And they talk about – social scientists – about all different kinds of traces that we leave, social media presences, we can think about our own context has been really important here. So how do we educators navigate this era of big data, spreadsheets of marks, spreadsheets of sets and sets, spreadsheets of emails – thousands of emails, Learning at Griffith, Studying at Griffith data, and so on and so forth – how do we make sense of this and how do we make this useful for our students? So as educators juggling these data sets, how do we more effectively collect this information is what we’re interested in, in terms of attendance, and how we make sense of it.

So our innovation, and as Alf had said earlier, some of the best ideas are some of the most basic ideas, hopefully. So this is a very humble idea. And essentially what we’ve done is, we’ve used Grade Centre to track attendance. And we’ve added these columns in, attendance columns, for all of our first-year courses. And then we’ve hidden the columns from the students, so we’ve asked all of the tutors to record attendance in their classes and then translate those class lists onto Learning at Griffith; so that not only we can access the data as first-year advisers and as other people in the school that want to look at this data, but some of the teaching teams themselves can have some sense of exactly where the students are going. We know that there are a lot of ad-hoc movements between tutorials even when we discouraged students from moving to tutorials that they are not technically enrolled in. We know that that happens. So how can we make sense of that? How can we track that movement? So the teachers went in, and in each week added a one in the column where the students were attending, and then a little tick appeared. So from a very early point we were able to go in and say, “Okay, these students haven’t gone to class in the first two weeks, let’s shoot them a quick email.” So what’s happening? From Sue Spencer’s email earlier about the student who had the timetable issue we could identify that from a very early point. And so if there is a problem with your timetable, we can pick it up here and we can say maybe, “Come and see your first-year adviser, or speak to your course convenor about what this problem is.”

So it’s a relatively humble innovation, but here are some impact points. It allowed us to use an existing system, Grade Centre that we’re all familiar with, that we all have to use on a day-to-day basis often, to make attendance data collection almost seamless. So we move from a system where a first-year tutors were giving the first-year advisor reams and reams of hand-scrolled notes, or where students were asked to write their names on pieces of paper, and we moved this to a more streamlined online system using an existing
system. So most staff were familiar with it, and those that weren’t familiar with the exact Grade Centre specifics were able to be brought up to speed relatively quickly. We were able to contact non-attending students very quickly using the in-Grade Centre function of emailing. So we just clicked – selected the students that weren’t attending and did a mass email to those in particular courses, reminding them of drop-in times for convenors, reminding them who their first-year advisor was, and so on and so forth. Our records enabled cross-referencing between courses, so within the Bachelor of Arts, Communications and Journalism we have a lot of students that are taking up courses as electives, so we were able to highlight those students and focus specifically on our first-year first-semester students in some cases and not perhaps focus as much on third-year students that were just there to get that 10 credit points to finish off their degree. So we had a bit of a hierarchy of risk, I guess.

The unintended impact that we had which we thought was quite useful, was that teaching teams were able to track and coordinate ad-hoc student movement between tutorials. And this is something that we didn’t think a lot about, but the feedback from the tutors and the convenors in fact was, “Wow, we can actually see which students are coming where and when. Why is it that I’ve got this essay from a student whom I’ve never met, but – oh, wait, I can see that they’ve been to so-and-so’s tutorial for the whole semester.” So some of our convenors have actually decided to run this attendance tracking system across the whole semester rather than just the first four weeks. So we’ve found this a useful if humble innovation.

Thanks.

End of recording