University of South Wales: “Learning analytics is helping us improve the student experience”

At USW a significant proportion of its young, full-time undergraduates from the UK come from backgrounds where participation in higher education has been low (21.1%, compared with a Welsh average of 13.2%).

Sometimes, these students don’t have the right kind of support at home for their learning and they may not know what to expect from university life. USW actively supports every student, but these students are a particular focus – and learning analytics is bolstering work to check they’re on track with their learning.

“Learning analytics is part of a package of measures to improve student success and retention,” says Dr Ben Calvert, vice chancellor and chief executive officer at USW.

“It’s about each student feeling that someone cares to know about how they’re engaging, in a non-judgemental way. Originally, we had an inconsistent approach to engaging with students about their academic progress. Then we built a new student experience plan (SEP) and a personal academic coaching (PAC) system and we wanted this to be informed by data and analytics.”

In at the start

USW is one of several universities and colleges that have been working with us since 2016 to co-design our learning analytics service, shaping and piloting analytics tools for HE and FE. The group is also helping us develop flexible, ongoing support to prepare an institution’s staff, students and digital infrastructure for data analytics and get them ready to implement their own programmes.

Before kicking off its own programme, USW spent a year on technical integration during the academic session 2017/18. At Jisc, we supported the university’s team to put the systems and processes in place and get the student data ready to flow into the learning data hub, the data storage system at the service’s heart.

Then, the university launched its own learning analytics programme in September 2018, gathering attendance data as well as data about VLE use, library loans, reading list access, assessments submitted and Panopto video
use as evidence of engagement. It has been maintaining and developing its service ever since. USW currently uses:

- **The core learning data hub**, a cloud-based storage system that harvests and stores all the relevant data so users can interrogate it effectively.

- **Data explorer**, our web-based data visualisation tool that brings data sources together in dashboards. At USW several main staff groups use data explorer including course and module teaching staff, who use it to assess student engagement and performance at both cohort and individual levels. The dashboards provide them with red, amber, green (RAG) ratings as a basic assessment of student risk. Personal academic coaches (PACs), who act as student mentors, also use data explorer to look at engagement and plan any necessary support.

- **CheckIn**, our attendance recording system that allows students to indicate their attendance, either on site or remotely.

- **Study goal**, an app that provides students with information and feedback about their learning experiences, engagement, performance and learning behaviours.

**Clear, accurate information**

An impact assessment in 2019 showed staff (especially PAC staff) were generally positive about learning analytics although take-up was gradual. It generated some useful feedback:

- “I like knowing my weak points and what I can improve on” (student)

- “I like to see how I’m doing compared to other people” (student)

- “The nature of our learning conversations has changed. We view the data together” (staff member)

- “It allows us to signpost support early enough to make a change” (staff member)

**COVID-19 lockowns and STEAM**

In March 2020 the pandemic pivot changed USW’s learning analytics focus. Urgently, the university needed a way to measure and report on how international students on tier 4 visas were keeping up with their studies, because evidence of physical attendance on campus could no longer be provided. They realised that learning analytics data could form part of a solution. They also saw that developing a new system for tier 4 reporting could support all students working remotely.
In response to this need the university developed the Student Engagement Active Monitoring (STEAM) service. It uses the data collection and monitoring systems within the learning analytics service, supplementing the usual data with new information, including use of Microsoft Teams and a local attendance system that records work placements. All these data points generate a notification of each student’s ‘last date of engagement’ with core digital learning systems. Course leaders receive automatic notifications weekly and, if students on tier 4 visas haven’t engaged for seven days they are contacted by the university’s tier4 administration team. The course leaders are notified of any ‘home’ students who have not engaged for 14 days or more and we ask them to judge whether an intervention is necessary.

Currently running as a pilot for 80 courses, STEAM has proved popular and successful, with anecdotal evidence suggesting that several timely, successful interventions have been made.

“Learning analytics is giving us a really good place to start conversations with students about engagement and wellbeing,” Martin Lynch, head of e-learning, University of South Wales (USW)

Find out more:

Explore our learning analytics service (jisc.ac.uk/learning-analytics) to see how it could help your university or college, and contact your Jisc account manager (jisc.ac.uk/contact/your-account-manager) if you’d like to talk about it in more detail.

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