



Navigate Me: maximising student potential via online support

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This paper reports on the development of NavigateMe, an online tool currently being trialled at the University of New South Wales. The tool is a student-centred initiative designed to support students in accessing university-wide, faculty-based and external information and support services to improve and enhance their learning and university life. Based on responses provided, an action plan is produced that allows students to reflect on their current situation and be directed to specific services and information according to their individual needs and interest at any point in their student life. The tool was developed through a collaborative and iterative process in consultation with staff, students and faculties. The tool is in the strategic plan approved by the DVC(A) and it has received significant funding from the university.

Keywords: Online tool; student support; student engagement; technology; enabling; reflection

Introduction

Despite an increased focus on student support, there remains a concern that services remain underutilised. For example, Reavley, McCann, & Jorm (2012) found that only 10% of students with mental health problems consulted a student counsellor, and that students born overseas were three times more likely to seek such help than their Australian-born counterparts. Brown, Keppell, Hughes, Hard, & Smith (2013) call this reluctance to admit a need for support a "lone wolf" approach to learning. To some extent, this approach may be symptomatic of the lack of effective pathways to assistance for students with emotional or support needs (Laws & Fiedler, 2013).

Universities offer a range of services in the areas of academic support, career and employment advice, counselling and psychological services, and offer targeted assistance and programs for students with disabilities or those who have experienced disadvantage. There may also be peer support programs and student-led initiatives. However, research suggests that the effectiveness of these services in providing assistance depends to some extent on students' personalities and coping styles (Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007). Moreover, the willingness of students to access services may depend on their attitude toward seeking help or the practices of the support service, such as session time limits (Uffelman & Hardin, 2002).

Coping may be classified into three styles, which have implications for psychological wellbeing (Heppner, Cook, Wright, & Johnson, 1995). These are:

- 1. The reactive style, where emotional and cognitive responses tend to impede more positive methods of coping
- 2. The reflective style, which is characterised as a problem-solving approach
- 3. The suppressive style, which is a tendency to avoid addressing problems or denying them

According to Julal (2012), those who take a reflective style are more likely to seek support from services. Those with the reactive style are less likely to seek help because of their emotional

responses to a perceived difficulty, and those with the suppressive style are prone to denial that support is needed.

The problem for universities, then, is how to engage those students who would benefit from support but are reluctant to seek it. Although university services cannot change students' basic dispositions and increase their willingness to seek support, it may be possible to lower the threshold in terms of the first step—the acknowledgement that a problem exists and that help is available. While investigation of psychological dispositions is beyond the scope of this project, it was postulated that the first step to encouraging help-seeking was to encourage reflection. This assumption is based on the view that task involvement, whereby students retain responsibility for solving their problems, is more likely to encourage help-seeking than a system that simply proposed solutions (Magnusson & Perry, 1992).

In summary, reflection is known to improve academic performance (Morisano, Hirsh, Peterson, Pihl, & Shore, 2010; Potter & Bye, 2014). This approach also provides students with information upon which to act, thus encouraging self-management (Robbins, Oh, Le, & Button, 2009). Thus, Student Life and Learning at UNSW decided to construct an online tool by which students could take an easy first step towards reflecting on their progress and identifying any concerns. The tool would then present them with a list of actions, and they could decide whether to proceed on that basis.

The use of online tools for support services and resources is a logical extension of the modern campus. Online tools are used for teaching (e.g. Lawrence, 2013) or for monitoring student success (e.g. Kokaua, Sopoaga, Zaharic, & Van der Meer, 2014). Many young people use the Internet to request support from peers as well as a source of information (Piper & MacDonald, 2008). While some students are less familiar with the use of online tools, the university where this project is held uses Internet technology for many of its administrative and academic functions, and students soon develop at least basic competence, and this is sufficient to use the NavigateMe tool.

A similar tool has been reported by Smyth & Lodge (2012) for orientation. However, other than in distance education (Brown, et al., 2013; Clark et al., 2015) to the authors' knowledge few web-based tools are available for student engagement with the university community and student support services.

Purpose of the NavigateMe project

The NavigateMe project is intended to provide an online tool to encourage reflection on personal goals and alignment with university study. This paper reports on the development of this tool, which was piloted in 2014 and rolled out in July 2015, with a redesign and change of platform planned for December 2015.

Accessing an online tool is a less threatening step for students than making an appointment with an advisor, counsellor or student service provider. Students are not asked to make a commitment or admit to failings that may be a source of embarrassment. Thus, NavigateMe is intended to be the first step in a journey to support and improved independent learning.

In addition to administrative, personal, academic program and social needs, a new release of NavigateMe will include short tests of mathematical knowledge and English language proficiency, as well as a self-assessment of academic literacy skills. Students can complete these tests and are referred to online resources, university services or other sources of support, or they are provided with suggestions to improve their own knowledge. For example, those concerned about their English proficiency may be referred to the UNSW Learning Centre, to conversation groups, the language exchange program or a variety of online resources with advice on academic writing and grammar. This provides an objective way for students to assess their support needs, given that self-evaluations of academic proficiency are subject to inaccuracy (Pike, 1995).

The tool is made available to students at orientation events, on Facebook pages and in newsletters—pitched at all students rather than just those at risk of attrition. It intended to

improve academic outcomes, rather than necessarily to remedy problems. At UNSW, NavigateMe was originally available to all students studying with the Faculties of Art & Design and the Faculty of Science with extension of the tool to all faculties listed as a priority in the Deputy Vice Chancellor's (Academic) Strategic plan 2014 to 2018, and has received significant funding for development as a result. The NavigateMe tool is now available to all UNSW students, with further revisions scheduled for completion by the end of 2015.

Background

The University of New South Wales launched this online initiative in response to a need to engage students who may be non-traditional in terms of social, cultural and economic factors (Nelson, 2014; White, 2014; Zepke, 2013). The use of an online tool to augment existing services recognises the need for alternative pathways to support. While there is variation in the technological experience and skill of first-year students, university students generally have sufficient access to and familiarity with online technology to access such an online tool (Kregor, Breslin, & Fountain, 2012), and at UNSW many administrative and teaching functions are performed online, so the online environment is familiar to students. Therefore, such a tool is a useful addition to existing services as first step in engaging students in need of support and encouraging them to reflect upon their needs.

Student service staff and faculty advisors report that students usually do minimal initial independent preparation in reflecting on their circumstances prior to face-to-face consultations. Moreover, some students—particularly those from low socioeconomic status (low SES) backgrounds—may lack knowledge of available support or be reluctant to ask for it (White, 2014).

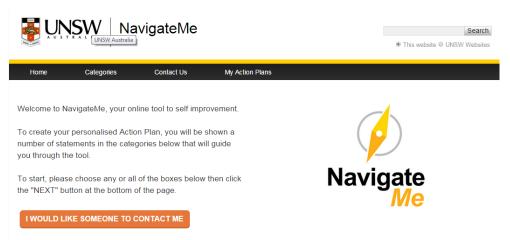
Whilst it was originally planned that the NavigateMe tool would assist students on non-good academic standing, it soon became apparent that such students were already far along in the process of disengagement. What was needed was a preventative approach rather than a remedial measure for students in difficulties. NavigateMe has been piloted with two faculties across two Sydney campuses, with content tailored to available resources and student/staff feedback. The tool was extended to all faculties in 2015, and a revised and improved version on a new platform will be completed by the end of 2015 for launch in early 2016.

It must be emphasised that the purpose of NavigateMe is not to replace traditional face-to-face services such as general advice, personal counselling, disability services or learning support. Rather, it encourages reflection on and analysis of a student's needs and empowers users by offering a mix of assisted and self-accessed resources for support. Respondents and service providers are strongly encouraged to use the action plan as the basis of discussion in face-to-face support. The plan can also be used in discussions with students as a guide or framework with advisors during interviews, especially if new to the role or university.

Description

The NavigateMe tool is accessed as a stand-alone website or via a link on the UNSW website. When students log in they see a menu from which they can select the areas that most concern them. There are five general areas: "admin", "personal life", "course", "program" and/or "uni life" (they can choose any number of these). There is another option of "I would like to talk with someone", which has an email link to student advisors and information about 24/7 services (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Part of the NavigateMe landing page



A list of statements is then displayed in each of the five categories selected by the student. An example item under "Admin" is "I need to withdraw from my course/s". On each category page, a short explanatory video with an animation is presented for clarification. Once selected items are submitted, there is a screen to check selections and the student can then click to generate an action plan.

The action plan appears on the screen, and can be printed or emailed to the student. It consists of advice and links to other sites offering advice. The action plan is organised under four headings: "to read" (links to explanations), "to know" (information to find out about) "to see" (people to consult with, such as administration staff or counsellors depending on the question) and "to do" (advice on practical steps such as "meet other students" followed by links to the web sites of clubs and societies on campus). These categories are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 3 shows the items under one of the categories—in this case "Personal Life". The student selects the items that concern her/him. There is a video that outlines some of the issues listed. Figure 4 shows part of an action plan, which lists actions for the student in terms of people to see or information to read.



Figure 2: The NavigateMe "categories" screen

Figure 3: Some of the "Personal Life Category" items



Figure 4: Part of an action plan

Your responses and actions are listed here for you to consider and act on:



From the outset, it was important to engage students in the development process and ensure that the finished product was inclusive for all students with regards to imagery and practicality of use. With a prototype developed, the tool was trialled with students in the Faculty of Science and the Faculty of Art and Design, and some changes were made to the presentation of the menus and appearance.

Following a trial by students with vision impairments, some changes were also made to accommodate students with disabilities so the web page could be used with a screen reader. Changes were also made to the graphics to give the narrator more broad ranging appeal and to alter any images that might appear too depressing or 'dark'.

The tool incorporates icons from the UNSW campus so students will have a sense of familiarity in the online environment. Some changes were also made to the software to make NavigateMe accessible on mobile devices. Subsequently an online survey of users provided feedback on useability and ease of use. This survey showed that approximately a quarter of completions of the tool were on tablets and smartphones. Laptop computers alone accounted for nearly 60% of completions.

Trials of NavigateMe and user feedback

In March 2014, the tool was made available to students in the Faculty of Science and in July to those in the Faculty of Art & Design. There were over 200 completions in the first month, with student action plans generated. Staff, services and academics were consulted during November. Some students returned to use the tool more than once. Faculty involvement was overwhelmingly positive.

During 2014, NavigateMe was offered to students on non-good standing in the Faculty of Science. In 2014, over 1500 students across two faculties completed the tool and generated action plans. Given that there are approximately 12,000 students in the Faculty of Science and 2,500 in the Faculty of Art and Design, this was considered a reasonable response rate, although it remains an open question whether the students most in need of support were reached.

Focus groups were held across both faculties and as a result of student and staff feedback, 36 recommendations were made for changes and additions to items, layout and content. Overall, student reactions were positive. The following comments were typical.

You go to ask somebody at administration or student services or something like that and say, "Okay, I need help." I knew the first thing they ask you is, "What do you need help with?" And there's very rarely an easy answer for that; and I think this app is going to be very useful in that sense; to help someone to break down what is it that they actually need help with... (Art and Design student)

And a few weeks ago when I saw the NavigateMe, I was like, "This is useful", because I was really stuck, "[What] should I do?" I can only do one commerce major, and I was like, "Which one shall I pick?" I knew all this time, since I started uni, that I was going to do accounting or finance, but I had no idea which one. And so I used that program. (Science/commerce student)

In orientation week (O-Week) in July 2015, a revised version of NavigateMe was opened to all students, and promoted to students who attended the Student Life and Learning stall. There were 248 sessions with 206 action plans generated. Of these students, 86% reported that they found it helpful and would recommend it to friends.

The numbers of sessions and users since March 2014 are shown in Table 1. These show an increase in the number of users between 2014 and 2015, reflecting the extension of the tool from two faculties to all eight of the UNSW faculties. However, there was only a "soft launch" of the modified 2015 tool in semester 2: the revised tool, "Release 2" is planned for semester 1 2016.

	6/3/-31/12/2014	1/1- 30/9/2015	Change
Total website visits	2,037	2,266	+ 11%
All multi-session Users (those that logged in and engaged)	1,108	1,244	+ 12%
All pages viewed by all users	11,553	14,791	+ 28%
New unique users	54.3%	54%	+ 12%
Returning (multi-session) users	47.5%	46%	
Avg. Time on Site	05:39	06:32	+ 15%
Action plans created	328	732	+ 123%

Table 1: Website data from Google Analytics 30/09/2015

2015)				
Academic career	Percentage			
Non-Award	12%			
Postgraduate	29%			
Research	2%			
Undergraduate	57%			

Most common issues

One useful product of the NavigateMe tool is data on the numbers of issues that are most commonly selected by people that use the tool. From March 2014 to September 2015, the ten items most commonly clicked are shown in Table 3. Unfortunately this is a crude measure because it is not currently possible to distinguish between action plans generated by staff and those done individually. Moreover, students can return to the tool and may be counted twice. However, the new release of NavigateMe in early 2016 will permit more precise statistics.

Rank	QUESTION
1	I need advice on my career path
2	Who can I talk to about my progress in the course?
3	I procrastinate and struggle to meet deadlines
4	I don't know if I am doing the right courses/subjects
5	I would like to learn how to study for university
6	I feel low and a bit overwhelmed and don't know
	what to do
7	I don't know if I am in the right program/degree
8	Depression and/or anxiety is impacting my study
	and my life
9	I often feel lonely
10	I would like more information on scholarships I may
	be eligible for

 Table 3: Most common issues (since March 2014)

Evaluation

The NavigateMe tool is evaluated on a regular basis and in relation to the academic calendar using several methods. The tool is revised and updated in response to feedback from students.

- From early in the process, student reactions were gauged through focus groups with open questions, and all users were invited to complete a feedback form two weeks after generating an action plan.
- Use of the online component is tracked using web analytics of hits, number of action plans generated, and numbers of new and returning users.
- Use of the tool in face-to-face service encounters is assessed through surveys of faculty and service staff
- Impact on students is assessed using de-identified analyses of subsequent progress

Focus groups

There have been three focus groups, chosen from respondents to an advertisement for participants. The students were offered a \$20 fast food voucher as an inducement.

Two focus groups were held in 2014; one with Faculty of Science students (nine students) and one with students studying Art and Design (10 students). The purpose of these groups was to gauge reactions to site content and obtain feedback on common problems that students may wish to include in the tool. From the 2014 groups, 39 changes were made, for example wording of items, personalisation of action plan and modifications for tablet and smartphone access.

Another group in 2015 (six students) considered the extensive redesign and the mock-ups proposed for Release 2 in December 2015.

Surveys

Students who complete NavigateMe and generate an action plan receive an automated email with a link to a survey (on surveymonkey.net). There was also a survey of selected staff members during the pilot phase in early 2014. To date, two versions of the student survey have been used, the first in semester 2 2014 for the pilot version (49 respondents) and the second from July 2015 (30 respondents).

When the pilot version of NavigateMe was created, staff members in support roles (in faculties or administration) were asked to comment on it. Feedback from 18 staff members who had not previously seen the tool was requested on the style of animations, functionality, ease of use, and suggested improvements. As a result of this feedback, some changes to animations and wording were made, and several additions to the actions recommended in action plans.

Student survey 1 focused on the use of the tool—which devices it was used on and its helpfulness as a point of referral. Most students had accessed the tool through a laptop (51%) or desktop (27%) computer with tablets (19%) and smartphones (8%) making up the remainder (note that some students had accessed the tool more than once, on different devices). Of the 36 students that responded to the question "Did the tool allow you to identify issues that were relevant to you?" 29 (81%) reported that it was "useful" or "very useful". Further comments on the website layout, wording of questions and layout of the site and action plan have been considered in the 2015 redevelopment.

Table 3 shows responses to the question "Did the tool allow you to learn about services on campus that you were previously unaware of? If so, which? These responses indicate that the tool fulfilled its function as a source of information and referral.

Service	%	of	No.
	respondents		
Science Faculty Student Centre	14.81%		4
School Student Centre	11.11%		3
Academic Advisors (faculty-based advisors)	37.04%		10
Educational Support Advisors (part of Student Life and Learning)	44.44%		12
Student Central (administrative services)	11.11%		3
Careers and Employment	37.04%		10
Student Development International (services for international	14.81%		4
students)			
Counselling and Psychological Services	14.81%		4
Student Equity and Disability Unit	11.11%		3
The Learning Centre (academic support)	33.33%		9
Student Conduct and Appeals Officer	14.81%		4
Total Respondents: 27			

 Table 3: Services that respondents to survey 1 learned about via NavigateMe

Student survey 2, created in July 2015 for use in the orientation week (O-Week), received 30 responses. Of these 30, 29 students found the tool easy to use, and 29 reported that the tool had identified issues that were very or somewhat relevant to them. The action plan was useful to 83% of students (on a yes/no scale). Moreover, 28 students found the information clear and very/somewhat concise. Twenty six students (87%) reported that they would recommend the site to others. All but one of the 30 respondents found it easy to use.

Overall, the surveys indicate that NavigateMe provides information on support services and achieves its purpose of encouraging reflection on goals and need for support.

Future directions

NavigateMe is a useful gateway to support services at UNSW. Nonetheless, there are areas where the tool may be further developed and its use extended. The tool was recently accepted as part of the UNSW Advantage program, whereby students who volunteer to manage or market the program for 20 hours can gain credit for their work on their Australian Higher Education Graduate Statement (AHEGS). This is an important step in reducing ongoing costs, improving stability and maintaining relevance to the intended student audience. For the volunteers, this will be an important opportunity to learn about digital marketing, project management, coding and social media. Moreover, there should be regular updating of existing content for the sake of the 44% of users who return.

As for the tool itself, further extensions to the range of self-test materials are planned, with content specifically tailored for individual faculties, in terms of subjects covered, genres of

communication/assessment and assistance offered. It has been proposed that the testing component be extended to include aptitude tests and adapt aspects of the tool for prospective students and their parents, to guide their choices of course and career.

Conclusion

NavigateMe blends student services and faculty information with questions to guide students towards the outcome, a comprehensive action plan able to be used as an online service mixed with key face-to-face contacts. We argue that for millennial students enrolled in a university that uses online technology extensively for administrative and educational purposes it is appropriate to offer an online tool as a first step in seeking support.

This online tool encourages reflection on personal goals and offers practical suggestions for students to improve their own university experience either by accessing available services or simply by positive making changes to their lives outside official student services. Moreover, the tool can be adapted for specific campuses and faculties to provide program as well as personal advice.

Rather than a response to failure or poor grades, NavigateMe is a proactive and pre-emptive approach to addressing student needs in an accessible format that encourages students to consider their lifestyle and approach to study while seeking further support in a timely manner and leading them towards better informed choices.

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