Navigate Me: An online tool to help students achieve their greatest potential

Rita Kusevskis-Hayes, Jessica Andreacchio, Colin Clark, Jessie Lui, Shauna Perry, Ethan Taylor

UNSW Australia

Abstract

NavigateMe is an online tool utilised 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. The tool refers users to university services and suggests ways in which they can change their lifestyles or personal habits to improve their university experience. The tool was developed through a collaborative and iterative process in consultation with staff, students and faculties. The tool has received significant funding from the university and is listed as a priority under the DVC(A) Strategic Plan.

Introduction

In the wake of recent government initiatives in Australia, there has been increasing discussion of ways to engage students who may be non-traditional in terms of social, cultural and economic factors (Nelson, 2014; White, 2014; Zepke, 2013). Another point with significance for student engagement is that students in their late teens and early twenties tend to be “digital natives” (Piper & MacDonald, 2008) in their use of technology.

When students experience difficulty in study, a number of support services are available at modern universities. However, to seek help from such a service requires students to have a clear idea of which service(s) can help, and to have considered what outcome they seek. This may discourage use of services. In a study of students with mental health problems, Reavley, McCann, & Jorm (2012) found that only 10% sought help from a student counsellor, and that those not born in Australia were three times more likely to seek such help than their locally born counterparts. Many students appear to adopt what Brown, Keppell, Hughes, Hard, & Smith (2013) refer to as a “lone wolf” approach to their learning.

Many universities—particularly the established traditional institutions—simply lack clear effective pathways by which students can seek assistance with their emotional or support needs (Laws & Fiedler, 2013).

A clear need exists for an online tool for students to locate and identify opportunities to improve their university experience, avail themselves of opportunities and seek support when it is needed. Given the familiarity of modern university students with the Internet and the use of online tools, it makes sense to employ such a tool as the first step in providing support. Many online tools are used for teaching (e.g. Lawrence, 2013) or for monitoring student success (e.g. Kokaua, Sopoaga, Zaharic, & Van der Meer, 2014). 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) there appears to be less effort dedicated to the development of web-based tools to promote student engagement with the wider university and student support services.

Navigate Me: An online tool An online tool to help students achieve their greatest potential—New Ideas and Initiatives
For these reasons, the NavigateMe tool was developed at UNSW to serve as a first online port of call for students who may be in need of support. From the student perspective, an online tool is a non-confronting and non-judgmental first step in seeking support. The strength of an online tool is that it encourages reflection on and review of personal goals and alignment with university study. Reflection on personal goals 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).

The purpose of the tool is to offer this support at an early stage and make relevant information available to all students, rather than targeting students already in difficulties who may already have disengaged from university services. At UNSW, NavigateMe was originally available to students studying with the Faculties of Art & Design and the Faculty of Science, but has now been extended to all faculties. NavigateMe is 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 being made available to all UNSW students at its Sydney campuses of Kensington and Paddington.

**Background**

Students are required to seek out a range of services available to support their life at university, both academic and non-academic, from information available on their personalised action plan after working through a number of key areas. Links to resources and webpages, including faculty-specific information, are key to this action plan. In addition, students seeking support services often have not sufficiently reflected on their student life. 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.

While this tool was originally planned to assist students on non-good academic standing, it soon became apparent that such students were already too far along the process of disengagement. It was necessary to make it available to all students as a preventative rather than remedial measure for students in difficulties. NavigateMe has been piloted with two faculties across different campuses, with content tailored according to available resources and student/staff feedback on trial versions. It is planned to make customised versions of the tool available to all other UNSW faculties by the end of 2015.

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. Use of the action plan as the basis of discussion in face-to-face support is strongly encouraged. The plan can also be used in discussions with students as a guide or framework with advisors during interviews, especially if the advisors are new to the role or university.

**Description**

Navigate Me: An online tool An online tool to help students achieve their greatest potential—New Ideas and Initiatives
The NavigateMe tool is accessed as a stand-alone website via a link on the UNSW website. Students log in via a link on the school web site, where they see an interface with a menu from which they can select the areas that most concern them. There are five general areas: “admin”, “personal life”, “course”, “program” 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 for student advisors and information about 24/7 services.

A list of questions 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. Once items are selected and submitted, there is a screen to check selections (with space for feedback and an email link, if needed) and the student can then click to generate an action plan to be emailed.

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 the headings “to read” (links to explanations), “to know” (information) “to see” (people to consult, such as administration staff or counsellors depending on the problem) 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).

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 open 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 again and again. Faculty involvement was responsive and overwhelmingly enthusiastic.

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 common from respondents.

*Navigate Me: An online tool An online tool to help students achieve their greatest potential—New Ideas and Initiatives*
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 Navigate Me, 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)

Most common issues

One useful product of the NavigateMe tool is a data count of which issues are most commonly named by students as sources of concern. From March 2014 to August 2015, the ten most common items clicked by students were as follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question / Issue</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I need advice on my career path</td>
<td>3,029</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who can I talk to about my progress in the course?</td>
<td>2,692</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I procrastinate and struggle to meet deadlines</td>
<td>2,671</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like to learn how to study for university</td>
<td>2,295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t know if I am doing the right courses/subjects</td>
<td>2,239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel low and a bit overwhelmed and don’t know what to do</td>
<td>2,124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression and/or anxiety is impacting my study and my life</td>
<td>2,012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing relationships with people I care about is impacting my study</td>
<td>1,890</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I'd like to have enough money to cover costs</td>
<td>1,861</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t know if I am in the right program/degree</td>
<td>1,787</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Evaluation

The NavigateMe tool is evaluated on a regular basis 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
- Two weeks after generating an action plan, all users are asked to complete a feedback form.
- Use of the online component is tracked using web analytics of hits, number of action plans generated, and clicks on links to further resources.
- 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.

NavigateMe has grown from strength to strength. During 2014 NavigateMe was initially 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 good response rate (Table 1). Students from across all enrolments at UNSW are able to access NavigateMe (Table 2). More than half of all users include those who return at key times during the academic year reinforcing the effectiveness of NavigateMe as an online tool and student support strategy across services and Faculties (Table 1).

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Sessions</td>
<td>2,037</td>
<td>2,261</td>
<td>+ 10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Users</td>
<td>1,106</td>
<td>1,242</td>
<td>+ 13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Page views (Number of pages viewed)</td>
<td>11,553</td>
<td>14,780</td>
<td>+ 28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New vs Returning users</td>
<td>New: 45.7%</td>
<td>Returning: 54.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>New: 48%</td>
<td>Returning: 54%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Sessions (Percentage of first time visits)</td>
<td>54.25%</td>
<td>54.05%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2: Proportions of NavigateMe users by academic career (Semester 2, 2015)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic career</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-Award</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NavigateMe: An online tool An online tool to help students achieve their greatest potential—New Ideas and Initiatives
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 who are “digital natives” 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 preemptive 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 it leads them to make better informed choices.

References


Piper, F., & MacDonald, B. (2008). ‘Sometimes it’s harder to speak out things’: How first year New Zealand tertiary students use informal online communication to help solve
significant problems. *Australian e-Journal for the Advancement of Mental Health, 7*(3), 135-142. doi: 10.5172/jamh.7.3.135


