



## The Commencing Student Success Project (CSSP)

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**Domain:** Student Engagement & Support

**Challenge Area:** Inclusive and Accessible Support Systems

**Status:** Established Best Practice (validated and replicable practices)

**Implementation Complexity:** High

Online tertiary students are at increased risk of attrition and disengagement when adequate academic and wellbeing supports are not embedded within teaching practices. Since 2020, the Commencing Student Success Project (CSSP) has worked collaboratively with over 120 academic staff to embed 14 evidence-based pedagogical strategies into more than 350 Education units spanning AQF Levels 100–500 at the University of New England (UNE).

Grounded in the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework, CSSP supported a sustained shift in academic mindset away from punitive and inflexible practices toward a more facilitative, compassionate, and student-centred approach. Due to demonstrated improvements in student engagement, retention, and success, the CSSP model underpinned a university-wide initiative, Project Uplift, launched across all 3,500+ UNE units.

### Practical Implementation

The CSSP commenced in Trimester 2, 2020 following UNE ethics approval (HR#20-083). Seven first-year Unit Coordinators (UCs) voluntarily participated in the initial phase, which ran from July to December 2020 and employed an action research methodology (Stringer, 2008).

UCs completed an online professional learning program hosted in Moodle, supported by two synchronous Zoom workshops of approximately three hours each. Data were collected using a mixed-methods approach (Axinn & Pearce, 2006), combining Moodle analytics, UC surveys, and qualitative survey responses.

Following training, UCs were supported by IT staff to embed the CSSP 14 evidence-based “Basic Elements” (BEs) into their units. Student involvement occurred three weeks after the end of each teaching trimester (July and November), when students were invited to participate in a Qualtrics survey with informed consent.

Students evaluated:

Overall challenge and engagement related to:

1. Understanding subject matter
2. Learning online
3. Navigating Moodle
4. Communicating with the UC
5. Communicating with peers

The perceived importance of each of the 14 Basic Elements, rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Not important at all; 7 = Very important):

1. UC introductory videos
2. Flexible assessment submission portals
3. Grouped assessments
4. Removal of exams
5. Video explanations of assessments
6. Examples of assessment expectations
7. Post-assessment task evaluations
8. Assessment pitched at student level
9. Collective feedback to all students
10. UC presence and approachability
11. Consistent Moodle presentation
12. Module reflection points and clear learning goals
13. Clearly defined assessment rubrics
14. Embedded links to UNE Academic Skills Office

Student responses from Trimesters 1 and 2 were ranked by popularity to identify the top five preferred strategies in each cohort.

Impact Indicator	Enablers
<p>Data from Trimester 1, 2021 to Trimester 2, 2022 (N = 268) were analysed using Friedman’s Test to compare mean rankings of the 14 Basic Elements. Results indicated a statistically significant difference across elements (<math>\chi^2 = 466.481</math>, <math>df = 13</math>, <math>p &lt; 0.001</math>).</p> <p>Highest-ranked strategies included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing examples of assessment expectations (Mean Rank 9.12)</li> <li>• Flexible assessment submission portals (8.65)</li> <li>• Clearly defined assessment rubrics (8.56)</li> <li>• Video explanations of assessments (8.54)</li> <li>• UC presence and approachability (8.20)</li> </ul> <p>Across three years, the average consensus to retain the Basic Elements was 91% among students and UCs. UNE Business Intelligence comparisons (2018–2022) demonstrate substantial improvements in unit completion and retention.</p> <p>Case example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early Childhood unit reduced withdrawal rates from 11.34% to 1.28%</li> <li>• Pass rates increased from 81.44% to 91.03%</li> </ul> <p>Qualitative student feedback consistently confirmed positive impacts on learning experience, sense of belonging, and persistence.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework</li> <li>• Action research methodology (Stringer, 2008)</li> <li>• Mixed-methods evaluation approach (Axinn &amp; Pearce, 2006)</li> <li>• Embedded professional learning for Unit Coordinators via Moodle and synchronous workshops</li> <li>• Collaboration between academic staff, IT, learning designers, and institutional leadership</li> <li>• Ethics-approved longitudinal data collection (UNE HR#20-083)</li> <li>• Strong institutional leadership enabling scale-up to Project Uplift</li> <li>• Alignment with university-wide learning and teaching strategy</li> </ul>