

Tutors on tap

An online system that connects tutors with school students is helping universities make connections with schools. By Julie Hare

An ingenious concept that links school students with tutors online is being used by two Australian universities to value-add to their equity activities in low-SES schools.

The service, Your Tutor, works in real time, addressing real student issues, using an army of postgraduate students as the tutors. School students simply sign in, are linked with a suitable tutor, and off they go – conversing via instant messaging.

The computer screen morphs into a whiteboard on which the student and tutor can draw, write and share information. They can also share websites and files.

For instance, an English essay can be uploaded, which the tutor will read and provide immediate commentary and feedback.

Importantly, tutors never provide answers.

“The whole premise is that the tutor will highlight key areas and give suggestions, but they won’t rewrite or give solutions,” says Jack Goodman, CEO of Your Tutor.

“The key to each session is that resolution of a problem is reached.”

The average session is about 20 minutes, but can go as long as an hour.”

Goodman says Edith Cowan University and the University of Western Sydney are sponsoring the service in local schools as part of their equity programs.

“This is engagement at a really fundamental and tangible level,” Goodman says. “It provides a way for universities to reach students from as young as Year 4. Importantly, its not just about raising aspirations, like a lot of university engagement programs. It also makes a very real difference to academic ability.”

UWS co-sponsors the service in the public libraries of the five council areas where its campuses are located. ECU sponsors it in four local councils and four local high schools.

The universities leverage their investment via co-branding on the site.

It also provides a vehicle to become fully engaged with certain schools, as Professor Ron Oliver, ECU’s pro-vice-chancellor (teaching and learning) explained.

“The attraction to us was that it suits the ethos of ECU. We are here to help people reach their potential and we’re looking at a way of becoming prominent in our catchment area,” says Oliver.

“Recognising that leaving it until Year 12 is often too late, we wanted to put our name behind an activity that was helping kids in schools to think about getting good results and doing something positive to achieve results they may not otherwise have got. It’s also good for us from a marketing perspective and good for the kids.”

Oliver said many of the kids in the schools in which ECU is sponsoring the service would never be able to afford a private tutor.

“This offers an opportunity to get an educational boost that they might not otherwise be able to afford,” he says.

UWS is also using the service, and has recently also put it into UWS College, which runs foundation and

pathways programs, for which Your Tutor created a program specifically for the college's 700 students. Goodman says early indications reveal the majority of students are repeat users of the service, which he says is particularly useful for NESB students because they can control the pace of the conversation.

Your Tutor was originally sold into public libraries, the purchase price of which is dependent on how many people use the services. Students log in, usually from home, using their library card number.

Currently, 45 per cent of sessions are maths-based, 18 per cent English and 18 per cent science. The balance is made up of sessions involving research and study skills.

The service has subsequently been extended to schools, which receive additional services designed to help teachers reinforce key concepts.

"It's a lovely way to strengthen your relationship with schools in your feeder area or which you are trying to promote your university around," says Oliver.

"It's obviously a bigger advantage for kids in low-SES schools than for others. We are interested to see how it will be used and what benefits flow from it. Your level of success is really the level of uptake among the students."

The results speak for themselves. Goodman says a recent survey of users found that more than 93 per cent rated the service as 'excellent', 'very good' or 'good'; 96 per cent say it helps to improve their marks and 95 per cent say the service has improved their academic confidence.