

**LA TROBE UNIVERSITY RESPONSE TO HESP  
DISCUSSION PAPER, 'IMPROVING RETENTION,  
COMPLETION AND SUCCESS IN HIGHER  
EDUCATION'**

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Response to HESP Discussion Paper on retention, completion and  
success

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## **INTRODUCTION**

La Trobe welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Higher Education Standard Panel's Discussion Paper, *Improving retention, completion and success in higher education*. Along with the Government's admissions transparency agenda, the Discussion Paper signals an increased focus on the factors that influence study outcomes, particularly in the context of a growing higher education sector. The Government is to be commended for this.

La Trobe has long had an interest in the issues raised in the Discussion Paper. We remain committed to giving more students from groups that are traditionally underrepresented in Australian universities the opportunity to undertake a higher education qualification and to maximise their chances of completion. In recent years, La Trobe researchers have produced a number of highly cited reports on factors that influence outcomes relating to retention, success and completion. Our Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research has been established to focus on research into mechanisms that increase participation from underrepresented groups and ensure they are successful in their studies. La Trobe is also an innovator when it comes to developing new pathways for students into higher education, and in terms of program design. The dual-sector enrolment model – established by La Trobe in collaboration with partner TAFE organisations – is an example of this innovation, providing students with a new avenue into a bachelor level study, while also improving their prospects for completion.

The following comments outline La Trobe's response to the 'Questions to guide to discussion' (p.9). La Trobe broadly supports the directions set out in the Discussion Paper, including some of the suggested improvements to student data collection. There are, however, issues not fully articulated in the Discussion Paper, as well as aspects of the Government's recently released sector reform package, that require further consideration.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Setting expectations of completion

- La Trobe recommends that an eight or nine year period be adopted for assessing bachelor level completion rates, consistent with existing practice.

### Enhancing transparency

- La Trobe recommends that the Government promote consistent terminology among institutions for students who temporarily suspend their studies, to ensure that student data accurately reflects study outcomes.
- La Trobe recommends that consideration be given to making available more fine-grained data with respect to students who transfer from one institution to another.
- La Trobe recommends that the Government enhance data collection and reporting on the performance of NUHEPs, particularly given their high attrition rates compared to universities.
- La Trobe opposes the development of a predictive completions tool for prospective students that is based on geo-demographic factors.
- La Trobe opposes the introduction of performance contingent funding as proposed in the Government's higher education reform package.
- La Trobe recommends that if performance based funding is to be adopted, then its implementation be carefully managed to ensure that it does not result in perverse outcomes relating to access and equity.
- La Trobe strongly recommends the linking of the Commonwealth Higher Education Student Support Number and VET sector Unique Student Identifier.

### Supporting students to make the right choices

- La Trobe recommends that Government promote greater careers education in schools, and develop further related resources for prospective students.

### Supporting students to complete their studies

- La Trobe recommends that, beyond the strategies identified in the Discussion Paper, the importance of strategies relating to the quality of academic-student relationships, and to student mental health, be promoted throughout the sector.
- La Trobe recommends that better information be gathered on students who discontinue or suspend their studies.
- La Trobe recommends that the Government consider ways to promote 'nested' undergraduate programs to ensure that students who partially complete a bachelor degree receive formal recognition through a sub-bachelor qualification.

### Disseminating best practice

- La Trobe recommends that the Government establish broad priority research areas around completions and retention to be funded by NPP grants, thus allowing universities to develop autonomous bids that will help build the evidence base around retention and completion.

### Regulating

- La Trobe recommends that improvements to QILT and greater consistency and transparency in terminology are sufficient to drive improvements in institutional performance, and that more stringent

Retention, completion and success  
regulations are therefore not required.

## DISCUSSION

### Setting expectations of completion

#### 1. *What should be the sector's expectations of completion rates (or speed of completion)?*

La Trobe supports using an eight or nine year period for assessing bachelor level completion rates. It is also important that the measures used in an assessment of completion rates are sensitive to the differing pathways taken by various cohorts within the higher education sector. Our own analysis indicates that there are substantial numbers of part-time and mature age students who, while eventually completing their course, often take longer than four years or even six years to do so. A measurement framework that ignores these completions will inevitably result in misleading information about institutional performance, and may undermine public confidence in the higher education sector. It may also disadvantage universities that have a particular commitment to equity cohorts such as regional or low SES students, and whose student body includes above average numbers of students who are mature age or who study part-time.

### Recommendation

- La Trobe recommends that an eight or nine year period be adopted for assessing bachelor level completion rates, consistent with existing practice.

### Enhancing transparency

#### 2. *What changes to data collection are necessary to enhance transparency and accountability in relation to student retention, completion and success?*

#### *Consistent terminology*

There is scope to improve consistency in the terminology used to describe students who temporarily suspend their studies. At present, universities employ a range of terms, including 'Leave of Absence', 'Discontinuation of Enrolment', 'Deferral', and 'Absence Without Leave'. Often these terms have different meanings in different universities, and refer to different time spans. Greater consistency in the use of terminology across the sector would increase student awareness and potentially reduce both real attrition and reported attrition rates. La Trobe research has highlighted that many students leave the sector altogether because they are unaware that they could apply for a Leave of Absence.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, greater consistency in terminology would assist in ensuring that student data provides a proper reflection of study outcomes, as currently a significant proportion of students included in an institution's 'attrition rate' return to the sector after a one year absence. Since it is likely that many of these students are on a formally approved Leave of Absence, including them in the attrition rate is misleading. Sector-wide adoption of consistent terminology would allow for such students to be identified.

#### *Adjusted attrition*

Since 2011, the Higher Education Statistics (Appendix 4) have provided 'adjusted' attrition and retention rates for university providers, and these rates exclude those students who enrol at a different higher education provider after their commencing year. Government should consider providing more fine-grained

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<sup>1</sup> See Harvey, Luckman and Szalkowicz (2017), *The re-recruitment of students who have withdrawn from Australian higher education*, Department of Education and Training.

data with respect to the movement of such students. Institutions could better understand patterns of student progress if they had access to detailed information relating to the discipline areas and the destinations of students who move from one institution to another. We understand that the provision of such information may now be possible through the use of the 'Commonwealth Higher Education Student Support Number' (CHESSN) – the unique identifier for all higher education students.

### *NUHEPs*

There is a case for better reporting the study outcomes of students at non-university higher education providers (NUHEPs). Much of the standard reporting on institutional performance – for example, attrition, retention and success rates published in the 'Higher Education Statistics' – is limited to universities. This has impeded the sector's understanding of student behaviour and outcomes in an increasingly important part of the higher education sector. For example, similarly to the above point on sectoral attrition, it is possible that there is a relatively high rate of movement of students who commence at a non-university provider but transfer to a university provider after their first year. It would be helpful if the data allowed for an assessment of this type of trend.

Moreover, the relatively poor performance of NUHEPs is now widely recognised: the recent TEQSA report 'Characteristics of Australian higher education providers and their relation to first-year student attrition' showed that NUHEPs have far higher attrition rates than universities. NUHEPs now enjoy an increasing share of Australian higher education students, and should be included in routine reporting of study outcomes.

### Recommendations

- La Trobe recommends that the Government promote consistent terminology among institutions for students who temporarily suspend their studies, to ensure that student data accurately reflects study outcomes.
- La Trobe recommends that consideration be given to making available more fine-grained data with respect to students who transfer from one institution to another.
- La Trobe recommends that the Government enhance data collection and reporting on the performance of NUHEPs, particularly given their high attrition rates compared to universities.

*3. How could Government websites, such as QILT and Study Assist, be improved to assist students to make the right choices? For instance, how could student success, completions, retention and attrition data be made more accessible? Would a predictor for prospective students, such as a completions calculator, be useful and where would it best be situated?*

La Trobe does not support the development of a predictive tool such as a completions calculator based on geo-demographic factors for use by prospective students. There is a risk that such a tool would encourage stereotyping of some equity groups, and it may be counter-productive to the extent that it dampens expectations among those groups and leads to confirmation bias. There is also a more basic problem because any such tool can only generate predictions based on historical data. In view of the time taken to complete a bachelor program, the lag-time between the input data and the outcomes it aims to predict may be more than ten years. The predictive value of such data is highly questionable.

The proposal to introduce performance based funding raises a related set of issues. In our submission to 'Senate Inquiry into the Higher Education Support Legislation Amendment', La Trobe noted that performance

based funding is likely to have a disproportionate impact on those institutions doing the 'heavy lifting' with regard to equity. The perverse outcomes potentially encouraged by the proposal include distorted admissions processes, where institutions select against students who are seen as less likely to complete, a group which might include Indigenous, remote, and mature age students, as well as those with a disability. In principle, La Trobe is opposed to the proposal to place a portion of an institution's per student funding at risk, but would support establishing a separate funding pool to reward performance in teaching and learning. If performance based funding is to be adopted, however, then careful consideration should be given to ensuring that the framework does not undermine the sector's equity performance.

### Recommendations

- La Trobe opposes the development of a predictive completions tool for prospective students that is based on geo-demographic factors.
- La Trobe opposes the introduction of performance contingent funding as proposed in the Government's higher education reform package.
- La Trobe recommends that if performance based funding is to be adopted, then its implementation be carefully managed to ensure that it does not result in perverse outcomes relating to access and equity.

*4. Can we enhance the tracking of students in tertiary education including movements between higher and vocational education (perhaps by linking the Commonwealth Higher Education Student Support Number and the VET sector Unique Student Identifier)?*

La Trobe strongly supports the proposal to link the Commonwealth Higher Education Student Support Number (CHESSN) and VET sector Unique Student Identifier, which will enable greater collaboration between the two sectors and provide a clearer understanding about the movement of students between the VET and higher education institutions.

In collaboration with partner TAFE institutions, La Trobe has developed a 'dual enrolment' model that involves students enrolling simultaneously in a bachelor program and a VET diploma, with the option of exiting after the first year with the VET qualification. Because VET completions are currently not recognised in the collection of higher education student data, students who take the early exit option are viewed as having 'dropped out' in the Department's 'Higher Education Statistics', thus adversely affecting La Trobe's attrition and retention rates. This amounts to a disincentive for a collaborative model that generates a range of benefits, the most obvious being that it is a proven pathway into bachelor level programs for students who might otherwise not have this opportunity. Note that La Trobe raised this issue in its submission to the recent 'Inquiry into innovation and creativity: workforce for the new economy'. The Committee's final report recommended that 'the Australian Government address the issue of dual enrolled students appearing as a tertiary non-completion where they exit with a vocational diploma'.<sup>2</sup> Linking the CHESSN and VET unique identifiers would allow for this problem to be addressed.

Linking of student data from the two sectors would also increase the evidence base for understanding the various pathways into higher education. There is some confusion, for example, concerning the difference between students who are admitted on the basis of prior VET study, and those who have previously completed a VET qualification but are not admitted on that basis. Better intersectional data is also

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<sup>2</sup> p. 72 (Recommendation 21).

fundamental to increasing the evidence base around the effectiveness of school and other outreach activities.

### Recommendation

- La Trobe strongly recommends the linking of the Commonwealth Higher Education Student Support Number and VET sector Unique Student Identifier, as suggested in the Discussion Paper.

### **Supporting students to make the right choices**

*5. What strategies would further strengthen outreach and careers advice to assist students making decisions about higher education?*

La Trobe welcomes the ongoing support for the HEPPP program that was announced in the Government's sector reform package. The program remains a key enabler of innovation in outreach and careers advice activities.

La Trobe's research indicates that secondary students are confused about ATAR, tertiary admissions centres, educational access schemes, and early offer schemes, and that many school career advisors are overwhelmed by a growing workload and increasing variance in university admission practices. These challenges are associated with rising student participation, and growing complexity in admissions processes, and have been addressed at length in recent research conducted at La Trobe.<sup>3</sup> In broad terms, there is a need for greater focus on transparency, equity, efficiency and predictive validity within university admissions processes. The transparency agenda pursued by HESP is welcome, but further work is required to educate school and other prospective university students about potential careers and study options.

### Recommendation

- La Trobe recommends that Government promote greater careers education in schools, and develop further related resources for prospective students.

### **Supporting students to complete their studies**

*6. What identification, intervention and support strategies are most effective in improving student completion? How could support strategies be better promoted and more utilised by those students who most need them?*

The strategies identified in the Discussion Paper (p.66) – relating to student understanding and aspiration prior to entry, institutional culture, teaching and learning, support services, and institutional accountability – should form part of the sector response to improving rates of completion. There are, however, two important areas of strategy that are not mentioned: academic-student relationships, and student mental health. The experience internationally has shown that relationships between academics and students are crucial to improving levels of student engagement and retention. Similarly, a recent La Trobe research survey indicated that student mental health is a bigger driver of attrition than academic difficulties. It is important that institutions develop strategies that deal with both of these issues.

Improved processes around academic progression are also required, along with better information collection on students who discontinue their studies, through exit interviews and university follow-up with those

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<sup>3</sup> Harvey, A., Brett, M., Cardak, B., Sheridan, A., Stratford, J., Tootell, N., McAllister, R. & Spicer, R. (2016). *The Adaptation of Tertiary Admissions Practices to Growth and Diversity*, Report for the Australian Government Department of Education and Training, Melbourne, Access and Achievement Research Unit, La Trobe University

students. Around 50 per cent of students who withdraw return to the sector within eight years, suggesting that others may be enticed to return with greater effort.

### Recommendations

- La Trobe recommends that, beyond the strategies identified in the Discussion Paper, the importance of strategies relating to the quality of academic-student relationships, and to student mental health, be promoted throughout the sector.
- La Trobe recommends that better information be gathered on students who discontinue or suspend their studies.

7. What more could be done to encourage institutions to offer intermediate qualifications? Should universities or NUHEPs recognise partial completion of a degree through the award of a diploma, perhaps by using 'nested' degree courses? How much impact would there be on institutions who chose to offer such courses?

There are many thousands of Australians who have partially completed a higher education qualification, but who are viewed as simply as having failed to finish their program of study. The skills acquired by those students are not recognised by way of a formal qualification, nor in the data intended to reflect overall student outcomes. Promoting institutions' capacity to develop nested undergraduate degrees is central to addressing this problem, as it allows partial completers to claim formal recognition through sub-degree qualifications. Similarly, the 'Win-Win' and 'Credit When It's Due' programs in the US have targeted employers to assist their employees who are close to finishing a qualification to return to university to complete that qualification. Similar initiatives could be considered in Australia, given the likely high number of people who have left the sector having completed most (but not all) of a degree.

The proposed extension of demand driven funding to include sub-bachelor programs will encourage universities to expand their nested degree offerings, which are themselves a recognition of non-linear student pathways. One challenge will be for universities to work with employers to ensure the relevance and employability of sub-bachelor qualifications. Given the nature and power of professional bodies, and current employer approaches to qualifications, increasing nested degrees is unlikely to result in reduced demand for Bachelor level qualifications, but would promote student mobility and choice.

### Recommendation

- La Trobe recommends that the Government consider ways to promote 'nested' undergraduate programs to ensure that students who partially complete a bachelor degree receive formal recognition through a sub-bachelor qualification.

### **Disseminating best practice**

8. What new and innovative approaches do evaluations suggest are improving student completion at individual higher education providers?

9. What can we learn about enhancing student success from the international experience?

10. What are the most effective ways for providers to share best practice?

11. How can successful completion strategies be embedded into provider practice?

Beyond the strategies already outlined in the Discussion Paper, earlier in this submission, and in our related research report, there is a clear need for further research and development of good practice models that are disseminated across the sector. The HEPPP National Priorities Pool program could be an effective way of promoting dissemination and research. Unfortunately, however, none of the projects identified in the latest NPP round has a particular focus on completions and retention. Consideration should be given to establishing

broad priority areas of research to be funded by NPP grants, and then allowing universities to develop autonomous bids on these topics. Such activity would contribute to the evidence base around retention and completions. We note that the La Trobe research report commonly cited in the Discussion Paper was funded from an (open) NPP grant.<sup>4</sup>

- La Trobe recommends that the Government establish broad priority research areas around completions and retention to be funded by NPP grants, thus allowing universities to develop autonomous bids that will help build the evidence base around retention and completion.

### Regulating

12. What strategies should TEQSA employ to ensure compliance with the Higher Education Standards Framework which requires higher education providers to offer the level of support necessary to ensure student success? Does TEQSA require further powers in this regard?

As stated above, La Trobe believes that TEQSA should give greater attention to the performance of NUHEPs, given their relatively poor retention levels compared to university providers.

Beyond this, we note that there are already significant incentives for universities to improve their performance on retention and completion. Improved provision of public information through activity such as continued development of the QILT site, along with greater consistency and transparency of terminology, will highlight institutional differences and is likely to drive student choice, without any requirement for more stringent regulation.

### Recommendation

- La Trobe recommends that improvements to QILT and greater consistency and transparency in terminology are sufficient to drive improvements in institutional performance, and that there is therefore no need for more stringent regulations.

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<sup>4</sup> Harvey, A. et al (2017), *The re-recruitment of students who have withdrawn from Australian higher education*, La Trobe University.