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Professor Peter Shergold
AC Chair
Higher Education Standards Panel

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5 July 2017

Dear Professor Shergold

It is with pleasure that I forward to you Deakin University's response to the Discussion Paper, Improving retention, completion and success in higher education.

Deakin University believes the Panel's examination and findings shed light on an important matter for higher education students, institutions and the Australian community.

Improving retention and students' success in higher education is a valuable end in itself but improving all participants' understanding of the reasons underlying students' attrition is as important.

Deakin University is well placed to contribute to this discussion, as we have a program of activities and data collection underway to help us target support more effectively to our large and diverse cohort of students, including our online students.

I commend this response to the Discussion Paper and the advice contained therein to the Higher Education Standards Panel.

Yours sincerely

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Deakin University

Response to Discussion Paper

Improving retention, completion and success in higher education

5 July 2017

Deakin University is pleased to contribute to the Higher Education Standard Panel's Discussion Paper, Improving retention, completion and success in higher education.

Deakin University's research suggests that students discontinue their studies for a range of reasons including one or several of the following:

1. **Costs:** (including future debt, as well as costs of materials, and opportunity cost of earning money in a job) outweigh the perceived return on investment (career commencement, switching or advancement).
2. **Time:** study eats into the time required to care for a family, earn a living, or enjoy oneself (a year off to travel, for example).
3. **Persistence:** a first degree generally requires a sustained three-year, full-time commitment (delaying other activities), or sustained engagement over a long period if part-time study is an option.
4. **Difficulty:** the assessment may be too high or too low; materials may be too difficult to access or understand; learning support may be too little, too late or invisible.
5. **Suitability:** a subject is often better understood after study commences, and the student finds they no longer wish to learn or practice on that field.
6. **No exit or re-entry pathways:** unless there is a clear micro-credential exit point, the learner leaves a degree course with credit which expires after a set period.

We agree with the Discussion Paper's assertion that there is no crisis in attrition: the Paper makes the case carefully and thoroughly. Attrition can be a good outcome, or a disappointment, depending on the circumstances. Even so, it is in the nation's interests that its citizens are educated over their life-span, and that warranted learning is signalled by credentials that are portable and understood by the learner, employers and accrediting bodies, rather than amorphous credit from unfinished courses, and that enable the bearer to realise their life or career goals.

We believe that completion will be more likely if we enable strategies related to the range of reasons listed above:

1. *Better credentials*

Credentials that warrant learning in stages, and enable better pathways into and out of study: the current AQF and its volume of learning requirements are predicated on a former era when a year was a predictable quantum of learning. Many institutions now have semesters, trimesters, shorter study periods, or indeed a Start Anytime mode, meaning students can start a unit, or do an extra unit, at their own pace. A degree credential needs to be tied to levels of achievement, but unhooked from calendar years. The practice of unbundling the first units of a bachelor degree into a diploma, building towards an associate degree, then a bachelor degree, should be encouraged and seen as a success for students who may be required to take time out from studies for a range of reasons. This calls for careful course design and structure, and the re-entry path needs to be made clear to the student. Further to this, micro-credentials can serve as useful signals of prior learning: Deakin University has developed a series of professional practice credentials that warrant achievement at

defined AQF levels, in discipline and employability skills. These are incorporated into Professional Practice degrees at masters level, and we believe they have further potential at undergraduate level, particularly for mature learners.

These credential-related strategies enable institutions to reduce **cost (time and money}-** in a digitally enabled world, learners should be able to navigate learning and achievement pathways with greater ease and transparency. They would also address discontinuance related to **persistence.**

2. *Better information about student goals*

Students are a very varied group- they range from schoolleavers to mature-aged students well into their 30s and 40s with work experiences and demands and caring responsibilities. It is unreasonable to expect all students to behave in a similar fashion. We propose that when students accept a Commonwealth Supported Place, they are asked to indicate whether they plan to complete their studies on a full-time or part-time basis, and over what time frame, and whether they plan to complete all or part of a degree. This would enable tracking of degree completion or progress according to the student's stated ambition at the point of commencement (and updated as change occurs), rather than assuming everyone will be travelling in lock-step. Further, it would be helpful for institutions to know the student's life or career goal so that guidance could be provided from the point of admission. Better tracking of students between institutions and sectors can enable more reliable data and better-informed support of students. This would also address discontinuance related to **suitability.**

3. *Better early information about study requirements and the likelihood of success*

In a time when many universities offer open, free courses, it seems feasible that further to what is already expected by the Higher Education Standards Framework, a short taster course, with a first automated assessment task, would give students a better sense of the subject, the difficulty of assessment, and their likely success. It might also be possible to provide better information on their likelihood of success based on sector-wide information (although usefulness is limited since even sub-cohorts such as schoolleavers are such varied groups), alerting students that, say, if they study part-time they may need to adopt strategies from the outset that will keep them engaged. This would also address discontinuance related to **difficulty and suitability.**

4. *Better analytics*

Support strategies are extremely important but they are also expensive and opt-in- and often not accessed by the very people who need them. Better analytics could assist institutions to be more proactive and strategic in targeting support or check-in mechanisms with their students. This field is developing rapidly but systems require development and sophistication: investment by the government in incentives for institutions which collaborate on building and sharing better analytics systems would stimulate development. This would enable institutions to use their resources more wisely, and students to receive prompts for action at the point of need, rather than general calls to action that may or may not apply, and simply be shrugged off as annoyances.

Less focus on external modes of enrolment

We are concerned by the Discussion Paper's focus on mode of enrolment, particularly "external enrolment." We are amid the digital revolution where consumers, including students, have more choice than ever and can opt in and out of platforms. Students today generally learn in two modes:

- They opt for **blended learning,** coming to a physical place (such as a campus or an industry site} as and when it works for them, and accessing much of their learning online at a place and pace of their choosing;
- They opt for a **fully online** experience, accessing the vast majority of their learning online, but also visiting physical sites including campuses and public libraries, as and when it suits.

Many students move between these modes as they progress through their studies. We are concerned about the focus in the Discussion Paper on the mode of learning, as if these were discrete and unconnected. While the data show that "external" students tend to attrit more, these are by no means all online or distance learners. They are, however, likely to be more mature learners with work and family commitments; and they are very likely to live in a regional or remote area. That they act differently from full-time, enrolled on-campus learners does not mean they are less successful- or less satisfied (in theSES Learner engagement scale, for example}. It generally means they are acting differently- and in a more transactional fashion- based on their goals and commitments, and navigating their pathways amid imperfect degree and institution structures.

We believe that digital education will continue growing, that learners will increasingly demand flexible access to high-quality learning, and that if Australian providers are dis-incentivised deterred from meeting this demand, offshore institutions can and will do so. In the digital world, it is as easy to enrol in an institution on your doorstep, or half a world away, and increasingly at a compelling price point and through an open, free taster course. If the government were to incentivise Australian institutions to expand their fully online offerings for domestic and offshore markets, the sector would more than rise to the challenge and build capacity in the digital education revolution.

Regulating student support

To ensure institutions are providing the support students need, and as set out in the Higher Education Standards Framework, TEQSA could add evidence of this support to its core requirements for registration and re-registration.