Submission to the Higher Education Standards Panel

Discussion Paper – Improving Retention, Completion and Success in Higher Education

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The Australian Secondary Principals’ Association (ASPA) is a professional body that represents the interests of principals, deputy principals and assistant principals from government secondary schools across Australia. ASPA works with the profession to shape a paradigm of leadership and learning in order to create a better, preferred future for all students in Australia’s government secondary schools.

We are committed to ensuring that high quality government secondary education is provided to young people no matter what their geographic, social or personal circumstances.

Introduction:

Australia’s social and economic development depends on improvement of life choices for every child. It is past time for the nation to consider educational provision (and other social provision) as an holistic imperative.

We must develop a narrative for each child which includes a wholly integrated, identifiable, and supported pathway through education and training. At each stage – pre-school, primary, secondary, post secondary training and tertiary – our institutions must be looking forward to make transitions as seamless, natural and engaging as possible.

At the same time, all institutions must be a real, meaningful and truly engaging presence in each stage of the child’s schooling. All Australians must be enculturated in positive orientation to learning and aspire to their very best levels of achievement.
All Australians must be willing to accept the joyful, rewarding, enriching responsibility to guide, support and engage our young in learning and the opening of minds to the opportunities of life.

Poor engagement and low school attainment result in poor educational and social outcomes including increased risk of mental illness. A lack of education results in diminished employment opportunities and the social issues and impacts of unemployment. School retention reduces youth unemployment, which improves outcomes and contributes to the national productivity.

The discussion paper (page 8) states that “issues of retention, completion and success are not new. There have been countless reports and reviews conducted by government, research agencies, individual institutions and academics. Many providers have processes and strategies in place to assist students to complete their qualifications. These can include detailed and resource intensive interventions designed to identify students at risk of attrition or non-completion and provide the support necessary to assess their risks. Retention – the flipside of attrition – is a key element of those strategies”.

The conversation pertaining to “improving retention, completion and success in higher education” should not be considered without first reflecting on how secondary students access and transition into higher education and the economic and labour market model into which tertiary graduates will move. Is the use of an ATAR helping or hindering the retention, completion and success of students in higher education?

1. Whilst the ATAR is an efficiency for universities, the prevailing view amongst secondary principals is that a ranking score does not correlate well to a student’s capacity to be placed in the most appropriate tertiary course and to their aptitude to complete and succeed in higher education.

What would help? Imagine if there was a General Capabilities “through-line” running between the Australian curriculum and higher education. In such a scenario, students, their secondary teachers and their university lecturers and tutors would share a common language and framework for understanding one’s development of skills and attitudes. Because the General Capabilities can be understood through the knowledge and application demands made by engaging in subject disciplines and coursework of varying complexities, they provide a dynamic “through-line” through the primary, secondary and tertiary years. The degree to which the General Capabilities are emphasised within a higher education course could be both an attraction for students navigating the path from secondary education to tertiary education and an additional instrument for matching the right student to the right course.
2. Is the current higher education paradigm contemporary enough to meet the nation’s economic and labour market needs 2030 and beyond?

This is the larger question that needs to be addressed. Are higher education institutions actually meeting the needs of their students and the emerging needs of our workforce into the future?

There is a myriad of issues that influence a decision to go to university and stay at university including understanding university pathways and managing the costs. ASPA has prepared its response based on the summary points on page 66 of the discussion paper.

**Prior to entry**

- Raise the aspirations of prospective students through outreach and early intervention - It needs to go further than this for students in low SEI areas and those with families with welfare dependency. We must raise the aspirations of parents, families and carers – and dare we say it, educators as well - so that student feel it is OK to perform well and aim high. It is never too early to work on aspiration and inspiration – it adds relevance to learning and engagement and buy in from students.
- Raise aspirations ensuring a transition strategy of outreach complemented by campus engagement.
- Educate parents /family; their understanding of career pathways is essential as a support for a student.
- Provide informed career advice from as early as primary school – this is critical, to inform not just about career possibilities but pathways to get there. For example, remote and regional students need aspirational and inspirational information. This sort of advice and preparation is crucial not just for higher education but for life goals in general. “The conversation needs to move from asking schools to churn out young adults with certain levels of maths and science to acknowledging that it is important that students can think critically, solve problems, communicate well with others and more broadly become well-rounded individuals who reflect the General Capabilities”. We must have a broad inquiry based learning grounding. Literacy, numeracy and STEM engagement should be measured through the General Capabilities. Only then will young people have the skill set they need to be successful in any future endeavour.
• Career advice is essential, but must be delivered by appropriately trained professionals or educators.

• Ensure consistent, comparable information allows prospective students to make informed decisions - this is very important however it also needs to be timely. Information should be made available throughout a child’s education and assuming that the students have developed the essential skills to make informed decisions information this information will better inform upper school subject selection. Year 12 is too late when students are making choices in years 9 and 10. Information must be in accessible language so parents, students and school staff can unpick it easily. Constantly changing information is confusing, set the bar and stick to it.

• There is a place for higher education institutions to interact more closely with schools and build rapport. Defence services do this well for example.

• Use a range of communication strategies that are easy to find, simple, presented in plain language and provide consistent information.

Institutional culture

• A healthy university culture that embraces diversity and flexibility
• A supportive university learning environment that puts the student first
• A culture that reinforces the importance of student success
• A strategic plan that includes retention targets
• An institutional retention strategy which includes procedures for the re-engagement of students who have withdrawn from higher education
• A clear student voice

We acknowledge that all the above is important but students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds need to feel supported, included and be known to key people. If they have no personal connection they are easily lost to the system; fall through the cracks. There also needs to be a realisation that disadvantaged kids need flexibility around work, parenting, family obligations, health and other issues. In our experience, although higher education providers “talk the talk” in the majority of cases they don’t enact the culture that they espouse.

If higher education providers are to focus on raising revenue through attraction of international high fee paying students, then this revenue, or at least part of it, should be channelled back into supporting disadvantaged students to complete courses. This could be explored across several areas – direct fee support, living support, tutors, mentors (peer and professional) etc.

Teaching and learning

• More senior academic staff
• High teacher quality and teacher ability
• A focus on effective learning and teaching strategies
• An early assessment task prior to the student withdrawal census date
• Sharing best practice across the sector
• A willingness to offer nested courses
We acknowledge that the interventions could have some positive effect if they are implemented effectively. A focus on more senior academic staff does not necessarily equate to high quality teaching and learning; expert practitioners are often the best source of knowledge and practical applications and engage students better. It many cases it appears the more senior the staff the more focus they have on other priorities such as research and supervising doctoral candidates. Has much really changed in the teaching and learning space in higher education institutions? What is needed are academic staff with skills to differentiate approaches to learning for diverse student cohorts in a contemporary form. Higher education institutions need to have a very clear vision of the skills required of their graduates so the courses are targeted and relevant.

For many 18 year old - 20 year old undergraduates, specialisation is a challenge. The initial 1-2 academic years could be better used to establish a generalised academic foundation to allow adaptive graduate pathways.

Much can be learned from the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) Report with regards to making courses relevant and real. As an example, for teacher training students more emphasis needs to be placed on the time spent learning in schools – being part of a school community, learning the expectations of the school as a workplace, working in different contexts and settings (including more emphasis on rural, low SEI, high proportion of disadvantage). It is never okay to just do practicums in so called ‘good schools’ as it sets graduates up to fail in challenging first placements.

The Initial Teacher Education: Selection Criteria for Teacher Education Candidate discussion paper prepared by: The Australian Secondary Principals’ Association on behalf of the peak national principal associations in June 2015 recommended that “Universities should review what makes a good university lecturer - they influence what the end product is”. This seems particularly relevant here.

**Support services**

- Use data generated at enrolment and through learning analytics to make effective interventions to support at risk students
- High quality student support services (personal, financial, academic)
- Targeted and well communicated student support strategies
- Online support services
- Peer mentoring.

Whilst we agree with these points, it is important not to rely on the message of the rhetoric of the dot points defining the culture of an institution. Higher education provision for pastoral care support is essential and must be targeted to individual students.

- The data sets will identify non-attendance, completion of assessment, financial duress, poor health, etc. Higher education providers should establish pastoral care officer roles to analyse the data and monitor students.
- 18-year-old – 20-year-old students have recent experience with high levels of pastoral and social support. Dislocation from this requires renewal at respective higher education campuses.
- Mentoring capacity needs to be significant.
- Financial support including housing, health and food are critical in a full-service provision model.
Accountability

- Collect exit data on why students have withdrawn from study and use it to inform practice! If there are issues outside of the Higher Education Institutions sphere of influence – such as financial – then lobby government to change policy on fees and financial support for students.
- Hold institutions to account for entry standards and student outcomes. The TEMAG Report specifically talks about addressing entry standards, course standards and accountability around student outcomes. This must be more than “bums on seats”.
- If higher education providers are to focus on raising revenue through attraction of international high fee paying students, then this revenue, or at least part of it, should be channelled back into supporting disadvantaged students to complete courses. This could be explored across several areas – direct fee support, living support, tutors, mentors (peer and professional) etc.

Concluding comments:

What is currently in place is not working and the economic and social costs of not addressing these issues is enormous. It is almost a linear problem – if you improve retention you will most likely improve completion and success in Higher Education but the solutions don’t lie in the practices of today. What we teach and how we teach must be relevant to the individual and the appropriate supports must be in place to ensure each student feels safe and valued.

A recent article from ACER; When higher education is possible but not desirable: Widening participation and the aspirations of Australian Indigenous school students; Australian Journal of Education; 0(0) provides observations around indigenous students that may be relevant in this discussion particularly around students from regional and remote areas and students from low socio economic areas. In the article it highlighted that:

- Higher education institutions must pay more attention to the aspirations of students in the early years and how those aspirations are formed in relation to existing social, cultural, economic, and racial divides.
- Higher education institutions need to reconceptualise their outreach strategies targeting students.
- Fundamentally, it is not just about making higher education possible, but rather, making university a place where young people will want to pursue and attain their occupational aspirations.

Finally, the social imperative that retention, completion and success in higher education presents cannot be overstated. For our young people and the nation’s future these issues are too important to politicise and need to be prioritised.