

**IMPROVING RETENTION, COMPLETION**

**AND SUCCESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

**Higher Education Standards Panel Discussion Paper**

**VICTORIA UNIVERSITY SUBMISSION**

## ***VICTORIA UNIVERSITY DETAILS***

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## ***1. ABOUT VICTORIA UNIVERSITY***

Victoria University (VU) was founded in 1916 as Footscray Technical School. After successive mergers with TAFE colleges across Melbourne's western suburbs, Victoria University of Technology was established in 1990, and renamed Victoria University in 2005.

Today, VU is one of the largest and most culturally diverse education institutions in Australia, and one of only five multi-sector universities offering vocational education (TAFE) and higher education courses.

Victoria University now has more than 43,000 enrolled students, which includes almost 14,000 international students studying courses onshore or with our partner institutions offshore. More than 2,000 academics, teaching and professional staff join with the University's students to make VU a great university of the 21st century.

As the 'University of Opportunity and Success', we will be open and excellent, creating exceptional value for any student from any background and uplifting the communities in which we operate.

We will achieve this vision by:

Education - Providing high quality, engaging career-based tertiary education at all levels of vocational and higher education with flexible entry and exit points, appropriate pathways, engaging and rigorous curriculum and contemporary delivery; while maintaining rigorous standards and ensuring that all students are supported to meet those standards.

Research and Engagement - Undertaking high quality and innovative applied and translational research which results in healthier, smarter and sustainable communities in the West of Melbourne and beyond and connecting deeply with industry and the community, in turn enhancing the quality of teaching and learning.

In 2016, VU celebrated a 'Centenary of Opportunity' marking 100 years of delivering high quality, accessible education in the West of Melbourne.

## **2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

As the 'University of Opportunity and Success', VU firmly believes our society should encourage further education at all stages and circumstances of life, with flexible modes of study to facilitate access. The sector, government and broader community should therefore expect that the rates at which students complete university courses will fluctuate. The many different motivations, backgrounds and experiences of students mean that not all attrition is preventable. The different profiles of institutions serving these diverse student groups make it unhelpful to set sector-wide expectations or benchmarks.

Instead, VU believes that it is more useful for each institution to continually work to understand its cohorts, identifying attrition factors that can be addressed and removing barriers to retention and success, so that we strive to improve individual institutional outcomes. VU's submission to the HESP discussion paper, Improving retention, completion and success in higher education, reflects this belief that it is indeed important for institutions and the sector to be held to account for student retention, completion and success, and to always facilitate opportunities to learn from counterparts in Australia and internationally. However, expectations and reporting of student outcomes should be based on measures that acknowledge the sector's diversity, which in turn provide prospective students with real, transparent information to help them make decisions.

## **3. INTRODUCTION**

The HESP discussion paper quotes Catriona Jackson from Universities Australia on a very salient point: the fact that the sector attrition rate has not significantly changed since 2005, despite universities enrolling more students, from more diverse backgrounds, is a testament to universities' commitment. VU does not believe that there is a national 'crisis' in attrition as portrayed by the media, however we acknowledge that attrition varies widely across institutions, fields of study and individual courses and will affect institutions and cohorts to different degrees.

VU also agrees that – for the benefit of universities and individual students alike – we cannot be complacent about attrition and should continually strive to make improvements, understand our students' needs and motivations, and be agile in our response to their changing circumstances. VU's own commitment to improving retention, success and completion is reflected in the following key strategies:

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### **Governance, policy and comprehensive strategy**

- VU has assigned the senior, single point of accountability for retention to the Pro Vice-Chancellor, Learning Innovation and Quality.
- VU's retention strategy is being consolidated in 2017 to move towards a defined, consistent approach which will be activated via annual implementation plans, and centrally monitored and reported.
- Several key policies have been introduced or renewed in recent years, including the Student Retention and Success Policy, Academic Progress Regulations, Student Assessment for Learning Policy and associated procedures.
- Reporting on all aspects of student engagement and retention is to the Academic Board.

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## **Curriculum to support transition and retention**

- Continuous review and improvement cycles are firmly in place, including:
  - o The Learning and Teaching Quality and Standards Framework to guide quality assurance;
  - o Annual Course Monitoring where course teams report to the Academic Board on priorities including student engagement, retention and progression and student learning outcomes. Analysis of these will pinpoint areas of concern and inform appropriate interventions for courses and for students.
- VU is developing a first year undergraduate curriculum as part of a First Year Model which takes a more deliberate approach to supporting transition to university, recognising that many students who come to VU need additional academic and personal support. Features of first year will include teams of expert teaching staff, additional support, more regular and detailed feedback and increased small group interaction.
- A Blended Learning strategy is offering students a more contemporary and flexible curriculum. This work builds on the First Year Champions program, which has been in place in all academic Colleges for the past four years.

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## **Timely and targeted student support, engagement and intervention**

- A refreshed Student Welcome to coordinate the academic, administrative and social aspects of students' needs from enrolment through to Week One.
- An increasingly sophisticated approach to using student lifestyle analytics. Characteristics and behaviours that indicate students are at risk of attrition – such as demographic background, engagement with university timetabling and learning management systems, student self-identification, staff observation and results in early assessment – are monitored and analysed to identify students and activate timely interventions. Early indications show that the predictors are accurate, and initiatives like the Retention Strategy and Implementation plans will enable refinement of the interventions and support structures.
- The Student Advising for Success program has been developed to link commencing HE students with a dedicated Student Advisor, create a tailored individual Student Success Plan and connect students with support and resources. New in 2017, the program is being monitored to analyse outcomes.

Considering the broader, sector-wide issues and opportunities, VU responds to most of the guiding questions posed in the HESP discussion paper, on the following pages.

## **4. RESPONSE**

### **Setting expectations of completion**

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

VU – and other, similar institutions – attract a large population of mature age students, a large proportion of whom are also from low SES and other equity backgrounds. Many of these students engage in their studies as part-timers committed to a path of life-long learning. With such variability in student populations across the sector, any rate of “expected” completions should be based on a formula that is sensitive and reflects the diversity of institutions, rather than a sector-wide, one-size-fits-all expectation.

With data available on the impact of age, mode of delivery, SES, ATAR etc on retention/attrition and completion rates, algorithms could be developed to establish an expected attrition/retention rate to reflect different cohort factors. The degree to which each institution exceeds or falls short of its expected retention rate or completion rate is in itself a figure that measures ‘institutional success’ and could be benchmarked. This would also give the basis on which to develop an ‘acceptable’ completion rate.

It is particularly important that institutions not be penalised for longer than expected completion rates if this means that they are making university accessible for students who would otherwise not be able to attend.

### **Enhancing transparency**

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

The HEIMS online system, which contains the official government-reported HE data, has quality issues, is difficult to use and can only be accessed by limited numbers of staff. To make this system an even more valuable tool, it needs to offer the balance of providing complex data in an easily consumable yet meaningful manner. Some ideas for improvement include:

- easier, bulk access to data by more staff (albeit staff who are appropriately qualified, experienced and/or trained to extract and interpret it correctly);
- making specific, technical definitions of all government derived variables more easily available, including the exact filters that are applied and the exact reporting objects used in derivation. This will help institutions to validate their own internal data against HEIMS in order to understand and interpret it.
- an online tool, similar to uCube, that allows easy creation of custom tables from reported data, including data mapped from multiple reporting files.

There also appears to be some inconsistency in definitions of attrition between the HESP discussion paper and in HEIMS. The discussion paper states that:

'The normal attrition rate is calculated from a count of students commencing in courses and institutions in one year then comparing the number who enrol in the same course at the same institution for their second year of study.' However, the HEIMSHHELP Glossary states that 'Students who remained at the same institution, but changed course are not counted in the attrition group'<sup>1</sup>.

So, are students who change courses within institutions considered as attrited, or retained? Are the definitions different for adjusted attrition rates? It is important for the Government to clarify which definition is correct and to make it clear in all reporting platforms, particularly when this information may be used in so many different ways including in media reports, helping prospective students make decisions, or in performance-based funding.

**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?**

A more flexible, interactive data tool that allows staff – and potentially prospective students – to compare universities' retention, success and completion rates directly while also adjusting for parameters such as student profile, institution size and resourcing, would add valuable context to general data. VU and other similar universities have been the object of unfavourable press reports based only on non-adjusted attrition rates. Yet "adjusted attrition rates" shows VU consistently performing on a par with comparable universities (dual sector, multi-campus). There are also questions around the comparability of some of these metrics across the different HE providers and over time. For example, some providers may be basing "completions" reporting around graduations rather than the true completion of course requirements. Administrative transfers to different course codes within providers may be skewing figures relating to "commencing" and "retention" etc.

Any calculators or other tools would need to be used with caution and carefully explained. While transparency is generally positive and gives students more information, the HESP paper discusses the complex interplay of multiple factors leading to attrition or non-completion, including individual circumstances, motivation, resilience and commitment, which would be challenging to account for in a predictor. The average prospective student may not necessarily consider such nuances. To prevent misunderstanding and confusion, clear information should be provided about what the data means and how different audiences can most usefully apply it.

As an example of a nuance that could be better reported: VU is an enabling university that provides a point of entry for a large student body of non-school leavers and students in equity categories. As a university of opportunity, a considerable number of students use their VU first year experience as a stepping-stone to move to universities or courses closer to home, or higher on their preference list. Completions therefore is a raw indicator of success that if taken literally would penalise VU for what is essentially a job well done of helping students reach their ultimate goal. Measures of student progression and unit completion could instead be used as a more appropriate tool to measure the quality of the student's experience and success. These sorts of differences need to be transparent and explanations proffered.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://heimshelp.education.gov.au/sites/heimshelp/resources/glossary/pages/glossaryterm?title=Attrition%20Rate>



**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)?**

As a dual sector university, linking the Commonwealth Higher Education Student Support Number and the VET sector Unique Student Identifier would be useful in allowing us to see and address potential challenges and issues for pathway students, and provide opportunities for proactive responses to increasing participation and retention across the sectors. The inclusion of this data would also build the effectiveness of our predictive analytics work and inform our interventions.

Enhanced tracking may also require assistance from state tertiary admissions centres. In Victoria, for instance, the de-identification of student data in the VTAC Master File makes modelling of student progression, and targeted provision of student services, more difficult.

### **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?**

### **Course and career advice: pre-university**

The availability of career advising resources throughout secondary school is important, whether this be at school or via other community services, and we note the Government's commitment to the National Career Education Strategy. The discussion paper highlighted research on the inadequate levels of careers education provided to students in some secondary schools. Students who may already be at risk of attrition are potentially further disadvantaged by lack of access to resources to help them make informed decisions. Investment in additional careers services in disadvantaged schools is therefore likely to lead to better retention outcomes. VU hopes that the Career Education Strategy will aim to improve access regardless of where students live or attend school.

While much has been written about whether ATAR is a predictor of student success at university, we less often note that the lower the ATAR, the less likely that a student will receive an offer for their most preferred course. To reduce attrition related to students changing course or leaving due to lack of intrinsic interest in the course, quality, tailored advice is particularly important for students who are likely to achieve a lower ATAR and need alternative pathways. There is much to be gained from tertiary career personnel working with school careers practitioners to build knowledge of courses and options in a quickly changing educational environment. A better supported, collaborative arrangement would benefit students moving from one sector to another.

Given that mature age students are one of the groups at greatest risk of attrition, but do not have access to the advice services offered in schools, additional thought could be given to how universities collectively, with support of government and community services, could provide this group with the most useful information and advice.

### **Course and career advice: at university**

At an institutional level, career orientation and choices, together with professional identity issues, should be inbuilt in the design of key core first units.

In professionally accredited courses, an expectation of industry involvement in the provision of placements and reporting of students' progress should be further developed into minimum standards of partnership (numbers of placements, mentoring opportunities, involvement on course evaluations etc). This should also apply, with adjustments, to organisations that increasingly recruit tertiary degree holders.

## **Information on the costs and benefits of higher education**

In addition, the transparency of the data collection process needs to be matched by comparable student information about real costs and employment outcomes of attending university. Websites comparing courses could provide students with a sample invoice detailing approximate costs of studies for their preferred course, including the students' own contribution via HECS and the Governments' own contribution. This can be balanced by return on investment figures, ie employment rates based on released figures for field of study.

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

**6. What identification, intervention and support strategies are most effective in improving student completion?**

## **Recognising the need for long-term, stable and sustained investment in support services**

As a sector, we already know a lot about what works to support student success. Most of the strategies listed on page 66 of "Improving Retention" have evidence of success and been implemented or are in the process of further refinement and implementation at Victoria University. All require a sustained, long-term investment, which is challenging to plan for in a climate of funding reductions and policy changes.

Performance-based funding (on as-yet-unspecified measures) and efficiency dividends will inevitably put pressure on staff, programs and support for students. University support services are often so stretched that, even if they were to mount additional campaigns to ensure all students know about them, they would struggle to meet increases in demand. HEPPP provides welcome funding that goes some way to address gaps, but not all attrition is of students from backgrounds who might be eligible to benefit from HEPPP-funded activity. Universities would welcome government policy with a commitment to increasing retention and success, matched by reliable funding for the programs and resources needed to make those improvements.

## **Financial support for students**

Financial pressures are often cited by students who leave university: we know that the increasing cost of living, particularly in the capital cities where most universities are located, leads to students either leaving to work, or undertaking more paid work alongside study. This can ultimately lead to students either dropping out, or studying part time and taking longer to complete. Scholarships are few and the bars to income support can be high. As universities and as a society, we either need to accept that increasing cost of living pressure may lead to longer completion times, or do something more active to provide financial support to all students who need it. Investing in more comprehensive student income support may lead to increased retention and shorter completion times.

## Agility and policy support for curriculum reform

Victoria University is currently embarking on the complete redesign of the student first year experience with the introduction in 2018 of a First Year Model that incorporates transition pedagogies and fourth generation retention principles into the redesign of its first year experience. This is a fulsome response to most of the strategies listed in the document under the headings “institutional culture”, “teaching and learning” and “support services”. This change is conceptually radical and geared towards a fully supported student experience. VU hopes that any future changes to higher education policy and regulation will still allow the flexibility to make such changes.

## Incentives for student engagement

Although universities can create and offer a range of support services, enhancements and challenges for students, and even target these to students through success plans, not all students take up these opportunities. Only some students are intrinsically motivated and take up the options offered to them because of the long term learning gain of doing so. Others need to be incentivised. Often these students are the ones who need them most.

To address this, universities are looking to offer records of students’ co-curricular activities to include a range of activities that line up under such criteria as graduate capabilities. If such a co-curricular testimonial could be given higher status from government (eg including adding to formal academic testamur), it would create an external motivation for students to undertake beneficial interventions to support their own retention. This would also attest to a range of attributes that employers are requesting and valuing.

**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?**

Victoria University already offers a range of diplomas and clearly defined exit points for students who do not wish to complete a degree, or are seeking pathways into degrees. This strategy enables students to depart with a qualification, leaving the option open to return to higher studies at a later date. However, a student exiting a course before completing the degree they initially enrolled in is still recorded as attrition and affects completion rates. For this strategy to make a difference to attrition rates, reporting requirements would need to be adjusted. Enabling institutions to report differently on partial completion may address some of the media and public alarm over attrition rates, to address concerns about ‘wasting taxpayers’ money’.

## Disseminating best practice

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

The international experience has provided many valuable lessons and ideas, and staff in Australian institutions are well-connected with international peers, via conferences and communities of practice, to continue learning more. However, it is salient to note that funding per capita places Australia at the bottom rung of OECD countries. Decoupling this from the consideration of how to enhance the student experience would not be a realistic comparison with an Australian setting which in accordance with “Improving retention” has seen large increases in student-staff ratios, etc largely as a result of reduction of funding per capita.

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

Support for professional conferences (STARS, HERDSA, ALL) should be maintained or enhanced, but some process of internal evaluation and trend tracking might be necessary to allow for organisers and participants to see themselves in a historical continuum. Sharing of best practice may require a reconceptualization of evidence-based approaches that last as long as the funding attached to them. Outcomes from publically funded projects, some nearing the one million dollar tag, including products and artefacts derived from them, are rarely shared beyond a limited circle. Independent evaluations of impact of those major projects are even rarer.

The former Office for Learning and Teaching was a platform for sharing such outcomes, artefacts and evaluations but it has not been replaced since its closure. Student retention and success were practice areas regularly benefitting from projects and fellowships funded by this office, and many universities today still refer to those resources for best practice. It is no longer clear how government plays an active role in improving teaching and student support, beyond regulation. It would be welcomed if one of the outcomes from this consultation was a renewed commitment to funding a similar resource, or at least a national clearinghouse as a repository for sharing material between institutions.

## **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?**

Universities already have a keen interest in supporting student success: attrition is costly to institutions and affects reputation, so institutions are motivated to offer what level of support they can. Assuming that retention, success and completion are likely to be part of the performance measures to be developed as part of the Higher Education Reform package, there will be even further incentives for institutions to meet the standards. We recommend government support for the strategies discussed above, with consideration of the potential impacts of policy changes and funding reductions on retention and completion, in preference to further regulatory powers.

## **5. CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Victoria University thanks the Higher Education Standards Panel for the opportunity to provide feedback and responses on the *Improving retention, completion and success in higher education* discussion paper and looks forward to receiving advice on the outcome of this consultation process.