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Higher Education Standards Panel
C/o: Department of Education and Training
C50MA7
GPO Box 9880
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Via email: highered@education.gov.au

6 July 2017

Dear Higher Education Standards Panel,

Feedback on 'Improving retention, completion and success in higher education' discussion paper

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the recent discussion paper 'Improving retention, completion and success in higher education'. Please see below the responses to questions posed in the discussion paper from The University of Adelaide.

Setting expectations of completion

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

Given the range and nature of factors that contribute to completion rates and speed of completion, it is challenging to set an expectation that could reasonably be applied sector-wide. (Moreover, we believe that measuring institutional performance against completion rates could have undesirable consequences, e.g., in terms of recruitment strategies). Before any expectations could be set, further investigation into variations between institutions would need to be carried out. Individual institutional targets for improved completion rates and speeds would need then to take local factors into account.

Institutions that are achieving higher completion rates and/or speeds should be encouraged to share the strategies that they believe are contributing to this result. This would create a positive, inclusive and collaborative approach to improving completion rates across the sector and help to establish an idea of what can be considered best practice. It is important to acknowledge, however, that just as reasons for low completions can be institution-specific, so can the most effective strategies to address this. What works well at one institution may not have the same impact at another with a different student demographic and a different institutional culture.

Enhancing transparency

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

The main issue with data on student retention, completion and success rates is timing. These rates, in general, are lag indicators. They provide information on how the University is tracking against other institutions, but make it difficult to see the impact of any recent initiatives. Lead indicators complete the picture and focus on short-term performance so pre-emptive actions can be taken, if needed, to improve chances of achieving strategic goals. Advice for higher education institutions and sharing of best practice across the sector on which key lead indicators are currently being used would be beneficial.

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?

Before any changes or additions are made to Government websites, it is critical to understand where and how students choose to access information and what type of information is of value to students. While success, completions, retention and attrition data are important for institutions, and to understand broader trends across the sector, it is not clear that this information has a significant impact on prospective student decision making. Independent research into what information prospective students do want must be carried out before decisions become focused on the content of existing websites.

A predictor of success for prospective students is an interesting idea but must be considered very carefully, including through consultation with students and prospective students, as it may have unintended consequences. It is possible to envisage that results from a completion calculator could deter a student from joining an institution that may have suited them well, or from further study altogether. This may be particularly true of students from low SES, first in family or from Indigenous backgrounds or students lacking confidence in their own abilities. Completion calculators could also be used by current students, potentially reinforcing existing doubts they have about their ability to complete their degree and potentially provoking their withdrawal. Moreover, as noted in the discussion paper, current data explain only a small percentage of differences in success rates so there is risk that a generalised predictor tool could be misleading.

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)?

It would be extremely useful to link the Commonwealth Higher Education Student Support Number and the VET sector Unique Student Identifier. This would mean that the movement and success of all students in higher education could be monitored and reported on. This would provide greater transparency in the sector on movements of students between institutions and ensure all data relating to success and completions is captured, regardless of sector.

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? (A list of strategies that have been suggested in this paper are at p66)

Further work is needed in providing secondary education students with information on what to expect at university as there is often a disconnect between a student's prior expectation and actual experience of higher education. While there have been many important resources created in an attempt to address this (including whats-uni-like.edu.au/ and fyhe.com.au/expectations/), the value and use of such resources by students needs to be evaluated. In line with the response to Question 3, further research

needs to be carried out to determine the most effective ways to communicate with prospective students, both from the perspective of communication methods and content. It is also important to better understand the major influencers on decision making. Often the opinions of friends and family will have just as much, if not more, weight than anything made available by an institution or the sector. Earlier and more frequent contact between schools and universities may also help, particularly through experiences that are offered on campus or that involve interaction with current university students. These experiences help to build familiarity with the university environment from a younger age, supporting a sense of belonging and giving students the confidence to seek information and ask more targeted questions to support their decision making.

Supporting students to complete their studies

6. What identification, intervention and support strategies are most effective in improving student completion? (A list of strategies that have been suggested in this paper are at p66). How could support strategies be better promoted and more utilised by those students who most need them?

In general terms, we endorse the list of strategies supplied. We agree that a clear student voice is essential to positive institutional cultures and would emphasise the importance (and challenge) of ensuring that student diversity is fully reflected in this. Beyond encouraging student voice through feedback and consultation, we identify benefits of involving students as partners, co-creators and leaders in relevant governance and enhancement initiatives. Research evidence on retention also indicates the importance of institutional cultures, and approaches to learning and teaching, that promote a strong sense of engagement, connection and belonging amongst students.

We would add 'strategies for development, reward and recognition for high quality teaching' as a further important intervention for student success. Through these interventions, institutions demonstrate commitment to, and support of, high teacher quality. We query the suggestion that 'more senior academic staff' is necessarily a key factor in itself. Seniority does not automatically equate with excellent teaching; we believe that it is more important for an institution to commit to providing excellent support for teaching from induction of early career teachers to continuing professional development throughout a teaching career.

We also consider that it would be premature to identify 'willingness to offer nested courses' as a key intervention for student success before the sector has greater understanding of the benefits, and possible drawbacks, of intermediate qualifications.

It can be difficult for targeted student support initiatives to reach their intended audience in a context where communication channels are becoming increasingly diverse and students are often inundated by notifications from institutions. This is especially true when trying to target messages or services in a way that reaches and resonates with those in greatest need without stigmatising or making them feel singled out. Recommendations for institutions on how to manage this aspect of initiatives would be welcomed.

Finally, we would emphasise that it is essential for each institution to understand the needs of its particular cohorts and to ensure that strategies are adapted appropriately to suit local circumstances. A key component of these strategies is regular evaluation. Institutions need to work to ensure rigorous evaluation is undertaken, with results shared across the sector to help establish a common understanding of best practice and to generate new ideas and approaches in both development and execution of student support strategies.

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?

This issue needs careful consideration to avoid unintended outcomes for students, institutions and other stakeholders such as employers. At this stage it is unclear what the value of a partial degree qualification would be, including how it would be received in the workplace, what type of credibility or standing would be attached to it, and possible impact on students' on-going study (lifelong learning). Currently, if students who have withdrawn wish to re-enter study at a later date, they are able to have prior learning recognised, so previous study has not gone to waste even if it has not resulted in a formal award or qualification. It is difficult to determine how much meaning and value either industry or students themselves would attach to a lower level qualification and it could, feasibly, deter students from re-enrolling at a later date if they feel they have already 'completed' their study. Significantly more work is needed to determine both the demand for, and the implications of, such an initiative. At Adelaide, a Working Group has been convened to explore matters relevant to the University's award program architecture and to consider the range of issues that are likely to arise in the context of the requirements of a 21st century education; this is one of those issues.

Disseminating best practice

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

No comment to make on this question.

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

The University of Adelaide sees the international research findings on student success as valuable evidence to inform local initiatives. The UK based Higher Education Academy is one source that The University of Adelaide draws upon regularly to inform the development of strategies.

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

While conferences and journal publications provide a valuable source of information on best practice, it would be useful to have a more central resource. This could be in the form of annual reporting or a central database that institutions could use to source and share information.

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

A holistic approach is key, involving shared 'ownership' and accountabilities among academic units and professional services, robust student consultation and partnership, and adequate resourcing. A focus on engagement, retention and success should be built into award program design and delivery (curriculum design and learning and teaching approaches) as well as into support services' roles and responsibilities.

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?

TEQSA's approach would need to acknowledge, and be sensitive to, differences between institutions in the level and type of support provided. Clause 1.3.5 of the HESF requires that "Trends in rates of retention, progression and completion of student cohorts through courses of study are monitored to enable review and improvement." Given that institutions already are collecting these data, it would be worth reporting to TEQSA on an annual basis institutional examples of evidence-based support strategies for the purpose of identifying and sharing of best practice across the sector through a national web site.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mike Brooks". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Mike" and the last name "Brooks" clearly distinguishable.

PROFESSOR MIKE BROOKS
Interim Vice-Chancellor and President