7 July 2017

Professor Peter Shergold
Chair
Higher Education Standards Panel
GPO Box 9880
CANBERRA   ACT 2601

Email: HigherEd@education.gov.au

Dear Professor Shergold

Swinburne University of Technology is pleased to submit a response to the Higher Education Standards Panel's (HESP) discussion paper *Improving Completion, Retention and Success in Higher Education*.

Swinburne aims to provide all students with a tertiary education experience that meets their learning and employment needs. Our online courses in particular provide opportunities for those who would not otherwise have access to university to pursue a tertiary education.

We note the particular importance and timeliness of this discussion paper, given the significant higher education reform package currently being considered by the Australian Parliament. This package contains measures which, if enacted, would tie 7.5% of public university funding to performance on metrics such as attrition rates and graduate employment outcomes.

Swinburne supports the Australian Government's response to the HESPs earlier report on transparency in admissions practices, and agrees that in order to maximise the benefits of public investment in higher education, everything reasonably possible must be done to ensure that students have the best chance of completing their qualifications.

However, while Swinburne is committed to reducing our institutional attrition rate, we concur with the HESP that assertions made in media reports which associate higher attrition rates with poor admissions standards or greater student numbers are not supported by evidence.[1]

Swinburne is committed to attracting and supporting students from diverse backgrounds and geographical locations. Approximately one in five of our students are either non-traditional or may be experiencing educational disadvantage, including low SES, part-time, mature age, indigenous and regional/rural cohorts. Swinburne will continue to offer high quality education programs to all eligible student, including learners from these backgrounds, yet we are cognisant that there are inherent attrition risk factors associated with these student cohorts, as confirmed in a 2014 Education Department analysis.[2]

While both Swinburne and Online Education Services (OES), our partner in Swinburne Online (our online delivery arm) are implementing retention initiatives and analyses of student trends, we are concerned that any performance metric tied to attrition could severely disadvantage and punish Swinburne for being a university of access.

Swinburne offers the following feedback and recommendations on the areas identified for discussion in the paper:

Supporting students

At Swinburne, we have a broad-ranging strategy that seeks to support our diverse student cohorts at each major touch-point in their student lifecycle. This is underpinned by our student-centred ethos and commitment to being a university of access, which has driven the development of innovative practices and support initiatives. These are aimed at providing our students with a tertiary education experience that meets their learning needs, engages them early and throughout their learning journey, and delivers high quality employment outcomes.

A particular focus for Swinburne is the high-touch approach that has been implemented for our students studying in courses delivered through Swinburne Online, where data analytics is used to actively monitor the online engagement of each of our students. We know from extensive research that students who do not engage early with their studies are unlikely to be successful. Early detection allows us to identify potential issues and offer support to students who may be struggling at the on-set. This support framework applies to every student throughout their learning journey. A comprehensive strategy for every Swinburne Online student ensures that our online retention is not only sector-leading, but continually opening new approaches to support through our retention research.

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[1] *Higher Education Standards Panel, Improving Completion, Retention and Success in Higher Education, 2017*
[2] *Department of Education and Training, Completion Rates of Higher Education Students – Cohort Analysis, 2014*

Like-wise, for our on-campus student learners, we have been increasingly employing the use of data and analytics to inform targeted strategies and timely interventions, and to improve existing activities and support services. Below are some examples Swinburne's successful initiatives:

- In 2016 we implemented a University Retention Taskforce, with the aim of analysing student data and implementing a suite of interventions tailored to the specific needs of different student cohorts, particularly those learners experiencing educational disadvantage.

- The Taskforce has already achieved a significant reduction in the attrition rate for our on-campus learners through early interventions, and improved communications, a trend we expect to continue.

- Our Strategies for Success (SFS) program, which is held two weeks prior to the commencement of a semester aims to facilitate students' academic transition to university, while building important social connections among students. The program an integral part of Swinburne's orientation and transition strategy, and is open to all new and current students. It is further targeted towards low SES students or students otherwise at risk of attrition. Our analysis shows that the SFS program has had a demonstrably positive effect on academic performance and retention.

- The Swin-Mentors Program is a peer support program that matches small groups of first year undergraduate (and postgraduate) students with experienced students in the same study areas to act as a source of peer support and guidance, and to help them to navigate the university environment.

- Student mentors are available to all students new to the university. They are provided with training and the opportunity to develop their communication and leadership skills, whilst mentees are able to use this as a platform to build social connections within the university. The program is overseen by a team of Academic Development Advisors whose role is to engage and support students across the university.

Online Education Services (OES) have similarly invested heavily in student retention initiatives for Swinburne students studying through Swinburne Online, and in mid-2016, introduced a dedicated retention team tasked with implementing initiatives and analysing student trends. Swinburne Online initiatives to date have included:

- Student Coaches with counselling and positive psychology experience were introduced for Swinburne students studying through Swinburne Online in 2014. Coaches conduct welcome calls, workshops on time management, motivation and study skills and operationalise pro-active interventions with students who are identified as at risk by propensity models built from our data warehouse. Students are also able to book an appointment with a student coach to gain advice on issues such as time management, motivation and goal setting.

- Invested in Canvas, a learning management system that allows for capture and analysis of student data to target support and teaching interventions, and to inform learning design to improve the online student experience. This is supported by an app for student mobile access and a social platform to provide further opportunities for student interaction and support.

- Introduced the Persistence Plus Network in 2015. It is an SMS based service used to improve retention of new Swinburne students studying through Swinburne Online by delivering personalised short text "nudges" based on behavioural and motivational research. Students receive messages focusing on self-reflection and goal setting. Persistence Plus allows further reach to students that are not responding to other channels of support. All new students are provided with this service for two teaching periods, with the option to 'opt-out' at any time. In 2016 Persistence Plus was taken up by 85%-90% of new Swinburne students studying through Swinburne Online, and the level of usage of the service appears to be a predictor of retention.

- Swinburne Online also actively monitors the online engagement of each of student. We know from experience that students who do not engage early with their studies are unlikely to be successful, therefore, those that do not interact with learning materials before the census date are automatically unenrolled. Further, this practice ensures that students do not incur financial penalties for units they are unlikely to complete.

- Swinburne Online also employs a team which contacts at-risk students with additional support as they begin their studies, and offers on-demand assignment assistance and a support line that operates seven days a week.

Reporting and assessment

- Swinburne commends the HESP for its use of regression analysis, specifically the Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) and Logit techniques, to modify institutional attrition rates for student cohort distribution. We concur with the HESP that this analysis places providers on a level playing field.[3]

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[3] *Higher Education Standards Panel, Improving Completion, Retention and Success in Higher Education, 2017*

- We believe that this new analysis represents a significant step towards properly and fairly assessing the performance of universities such as Swinburne, which provide access to larger than average cohorts of learners who are may be experiencing educational disadvantage or are studying externally.

- Our university has long maintained that providers which deliver to disadvantaged or non-traditional learners should not be punished for doing so. Similarly, the performance of institutions with more privileged student cohorts should be assessed relative to the expected performance of these learners.

  Swinburne recommends that for all official purposes institutions be assessed on either the OLS or Logit modified attrition rates, including Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Authority (TEQSA) or QILT and any future performance measurements.

Sector expectations and performance incentives

- Swinburne believes that while the use of modified attrition rates (OLS or Logit) would provide useful benchmarks for providers, the creation of an arbitrary threshold for attrition or retention rates could have a perverse effect on the diversity of admissions and the integrity of student assessments.

- We are in agreement with your recent observations in The Australian that any attrition indicators tied to funding could persuade universities to pass more students[4] or dissuade universities from enrolling at-risk students[5].

- Swinburne supports TEQSAs monitoring of (modified) attrition data through annual risk assessments and regular engagement with case managers. However, overly punitive interventions would likely be less effective in driving performance than the innate incentive for positive employment outcomes that funding driven by student demand creates.

Transparency

- Swinburne believes there is merit in enhancing the tracking of students in tertiary education, including movements between higher and vocational education. However, we believe that any such data must differentiate by mode of delivery and location, as student cohorts in these modes can vary significantly in their previous study backgrounds and admission profiles.

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[4] *Peter Shergold, The Australian, June 14 2017*

[5] *Ibid*

Recommendations

Recommendation 1 – Supporting students

Swinburne supports providers regularly sharing and disseminating their evidence based measures used to arrest attrition rates and improve student retention.

Recommendation 2 – Use of modified attrition data for future assessments

Swinburne recommends that both TEQSA and the Education Department employ either the OLS or Logit modified attrition rates as the meaningful benchmark in future assessments.

Recommendation 3 – Sector expectations

Swinburne recommends that both TEQSA and the Department of Education and Training continue to closely monitor student success indicators, provided that modified data is used to place providers on a level playing field.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback to the discussion paper and for the high level of consultation on these matters to date. Should you require further clarification on anything raised in this submission, please contact Professor Chris Pilgrim, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education and Quality) at cpilgrim@swin.edu.au or 03 9214 5231.

Yours sincerely

Professor Duncan Bentley
Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic)
Swinburne University of Technology