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Dear Professor Shergold,

The University of Sydney is pleased to respond to the Higher Education Standards Panel's recent Discussion Paper on Improving Completion, Retention and Success in Higher Education.

We are supportive of the extensive research the HESP has undertaken and the advice that has been sought from highly credible experts in this sphere in Australia. Researchers such as Sally Kift and Karen Nelson, Marcia Devlin and Cathy Stone should continue to be key advisors for the evaluation of the efficacy of outreach and retention, completion and success projects.

We are also broadly supportive of the directions set by this paper, with some caveats, and encourage the government to support universities to further invest in student retention and success initiatives creatively and sustainably.

We understand that the HESP's work to date on admissions transparency, and associated recommendations, will have a significant impact on the allocation of the government's proposed performance-based funding, if the higher education reform package is passed by Senate. We see the potential for HESP's recommendations on student retention, success and completion to have similar importance for the sector, and therefore caution HESP against making recommendations that would see Australia take a blunt approach to the determination of metrics for student success as has been taken by the Teaching Excellence Framework in the United Kingdom. There are lessons to be learned from the UK on the implementation of performance metrics which we hope the HESP will assess in some detail before making recommendations on how the government should approach higher education performance measurement in Australia.

The government's desire to reap maximum benefit from the investment it makes into students in the sector is noted and endorsed, but we also note that despite some recent anomalies, average

student attrition from higher education institutions, particularly universities, across Australia, remains at historically low levels. Closing the final gap to the extent that we are able will depend on a careful analysis of the reasons for student attrition. Only then can we determine the most effective ways to help these students to succeed. A nuanced approach should encourage individual institutions to study the needs of their own student cohorts and take an evidence-based approach to the most prevalent problems these students face.

The data from Appendix C indicates that a large proportion of students considering leaving university are suffering from financial stress. Aside from the specific measures discussed by HESP, and other points made in our submission, we would encourage the Higher Education Standards Panel to advise the government to view a living student wage as an investment in the health of the economy and community into the future, as well as a necessary support for reaping the full benefit into the government's contribution to student fees. Better support for students to meet reasonable living costs translates into less pressure to work while studying and better academic outcomes.

We note that academic standards were only cited by a small number of respondents as a reason for leaving their studies. The academic skills/expectation gap is clearly not a major factor in student attrition. However, there were clear relationships between higher attrition and external mode of study across the sector. Institutions with high external enrolments have a proportionally higher rate of attrition, one of the anomalies in the overall trend in decreasing rates of attrition over the past sixty years.

Institutions with a high proportion of students enrolled in external study face a particular challenge of how to ensure external students benefit from enriched and engaged 'student life' through external study. This new 'internet era' problem of external student engagement and retention clearly deserves further attention from the HESP and from providers with a large proportion of external students. Dr Christie White at USQ has recently completed research on engagement and success of rural, non-traditional and target equity groups and may be a useful contact for the HESP.

Thank you again for the opportunity to comment on this important and timely paper. We hope you find our submission useful in the process of developing any further recommendations to government on the issues of student retention, completion and success, and we look forward to being further involved in the consultation process for any measures to be taken around these issues.

Yours sincerely,



Professor Pip Pattison AO  
Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education)



## University of Sydney submission to the Higher Education Standards Panel's

### Discussion Paper: Improving retention, completion and success in higher education

**6 July 2017**

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The University of Sydney welcomes the opportunity to comment on the HESP's recent discussion paper on improving retention, completion and success in higher education. The paper provides a timely analysis of ten years of relatively static results, with certain exceptions, in improving student retention, completion and success in the sector, in the context of a longer period of trending improvement. It is also a useful analysis of trends in retention, completion and success in the context of the introduction of the demand-driven funding system for higher education in Australia since 2011.

In this submission, we speak to the discussion questions posed by the paper from the point of view of the University of Sydney, but we believe that the points we make will hold true for many other institutions in the sector. We also endorse the comments made by the Go8 and UA. We make some general points urging the HESP to be cautious in the methods it recommends for encouraging further improvements in rates of retention, completion and success for students in higher education. While we fully support the government's desire to reap maximum benefit from the investment it makes into students in the sector, there are certain pitfalls in approach that we believe, if the HESP is aware of, can be avoided.

#### **Discussion questions**

##### **Setting expectations of completion**

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

HESP's historical summary in this discussion paper indicates an overall positive trend in completion over the course of the period of time since Federal government has been contributing towards the cost of university education for students. We agree with the HESP that attrition of students from higher education represents a loss of the government's financial investment, as well as a financial and time-investment by the student, opportunities for social mobility and knowledge-based careers for students, and the further impact these losses might have on the overall economy. Striving for improved completion rates is therefore something we endorse, whether this is 'straight line' completions, completion with a nested qualification, or a student returning to complete study with credit from an earlier withdrawal.

Given that the attrition rate at Table A and Table B providers is already relatively low, we believe it would be inappropriate for targets to be set from outside our sector, including by the government, HESP or TEQSA. The dangers of externally-imposed continuous improvement targets have been recently demonstrated by certain results in the first round of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in the UK. To achieve a 'positive flag', institutions were required to improve their benchmark target for student attrition rates by two percent. This target sounds reasonable until a case such as Southampton University's is considered: Southampton failed to achieve a positive flag on this measure because it was



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unable to reduce its attrition rate by 2.0% from a starting rate of just 4.5%.<sup>1</sup> That a high-performing

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/tef-meaningless-results-devoid-credibility-says-v-c>

institution could be penalized on this measure demonstrates a dangerous lack of nuance in the application of the metrics.

We would suggest that institutions be encouraged to have reasonable improvement targets of their own as determined by their individual strategic planning timeframes, and that the university sector as a whole, perhaps through UA, develop an improved shared average goal towards which all institutions can work over an agreed timeframe. This latter, however, should have no legal or funding implications or individual institutions. It is clear from HESP's data that improved management of attrition of externally enrolled students at providers with an increasingly large proportion of these students would go a long way towards improving the university average.

At the University of Sydney, our retention targets are as follows:

	Strategic period						
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Student Retention: Percentage of students enrolled in the base year (e.g. 2015) who have re-enrolled in the following year (e.g. 2016) and not completed their degree in the base year				Target			
				88.48%	88.99%	89.49%	90.00%
			Achieved				
			87.97%	TBC (by Q2 2017)*			

\*Not calculated until Semester 1 census, i.e. 31st March 2017

In the context of our already high rates of students retention, we believe that our targets will allow us to use best-practice and evidence-based approaches to student retention that will be suitable for, and sustainable for our particular institution in the long run.

Speed of completion is perhaps a trickier issue. It is clear from HESP research that the students most likely to leave their course of education are those who are facing more external pressures such as paid work and family and other responsibilities outside their studies. If, as HESP recommends, these students are able to make improved decisions at the beginning of their course about suitable career paths, it may not be of any benefit to aim for faster completions. In some cases students might even be encouraged to consider their higher education degree as an even longer term project in order to decrease the pressure of the course, reduce the possibility of attrition, and gain full benefit from the learnings of the course. For other students, a faster-paced course that can be completed quickly might be more suitable. Provider flexibility, and student career education and access to information about the demands of each course, are therefore crucial elements in improving retention for part-time, mature aged students as well as those from low SES backgrounds.

### Enhancing transparency

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

The University of Sydney would endorse the development of an exit survey for students who have decided to discontinue their course of education.



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?*

Individual institutional data could be provided on the QILT website, however, we stress that each institution should only have to provide data once to a single central government source, from which it should be taken for other uses. We do believe it would be useful for students to make an assessment of their chance of completing a particular course, and this may be particularly useful for courses with high rates of attrition.

The Grattan Institute's 'completion calculator', may be counter-productive for certain groups of students. While some prospective students may be overly optimistic about their chances of successfully completing a course of study, for other prospective students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, a negative response on the 'completion calculator' is likely feed into an already-present negative internal view of the self as a potential student. Many of these students have faced explicit and implicit messaging around not succeeding from the commencement of their schooling, and are in need of support and encouragement specific to their situation rather than an impersonal instrument that potentially reinforces the message that they are unlikely to succeed.

A more nuanced tool that measures some of the learning gaps or needs students may have in transitioning to University would be useful and may provide an advanced understanding of students' socio-cultural and academic requirements prior to commencement. It could be used as a self-initiated learning tool, to encourage the development of independent learning essential for success at university.

More important, we would suggest, are the other measures such as improved access to quality career advice for low SES and mature-aged students. The Study Assist website could usefully be expanded to include the most up to date information on career transitions and career suitability, and tools for prospective students to assess their own suitability for a certain career and field of study. Institutions could be involved in the development of these tools in order to help bridge the gap between the prospective students' vision of themselves in a particular career, and the course of study required to get there – in other words, creating a more realistic understanding of the rigours and requirements of each particular course of study, including both the academic requirements and the financial implications of the time needed for study and the place where they will be living to undertake their study.

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)?*

Yes. It would be useful to have data on students who leave a course of study in one institution or sector but are able to succeed in the other, even if years later. These data could then feed into the quality of information and build a picture of the likelihood of success long-term, of students with various background skills and personal qualities across the two sectors.



### 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)*

We endorse the suggestions made by the Panel on p 66 as well as potential expansion of the Study Assist website. One area on which the government might focus more resources, as well as on lower SES students, is career transitions by mature aged students. We believe that there is a lack of data on the success of later-in-life career transitions, and a relative lack of consideration given to these students' decision-making compared with recent school leavers. 30-50 year olds lack access to traditional high school career counseling or other advice pathways, and a section of the Study Assist website or other advice directed specifically at this group, could make a difference in improving the retention, success and completion of part-time mature-aged students.

We also believe that there should be improvements within schools to assist students in course and unit of study selection at the HSC. Too many students are attempting to enter tertiary study with inadequate course selections and preparation at high school. This is particularly relevant for students in regional or remote high schools with limited subject choice, including limits on their ability to study higher-level maths, advanced English and science subjects. This limits student skills and their confidence in their academic abilities, and restricts their course choices on entering school. Government investment in STEM teaching particularly in regional and rural schools, would do much to improve this situation, as would better course selection and advice at the Year 9 and 10 decision points. As well as better resourcing of teaching and career advice at the high school level, we would also like to see a substantial program of professional development of careers advisors in schools. There could be specific professional development on equity and merit based schemes which target under-represented students.

At the University of Sydney we have developed two pre-tertiary outreach apps<sup>2</sup>, Subject Selector (year 10) and Career Finder (year 7-10), both of which aim to link students' interests with careers and key learning area's (KLA's) and with university degrees. A University Admission Centre (UAC) pathway app, and a Scholarship app would be very helpful for students in summarising and comparing what's on offer. Overall, UAC could be simplified and embedded with more detailed information that exists on sites such as Make Your Mark (MYM.) Students would also benefit from a simplification of pathway programs across universities and management of these programs through UAC rather than as separate stand-alone processes undertaken at individual universities. It is currently difficult for careers advisors and students to navigate the various schemes on offer and compare packages. There could also be improved linkages through UAC with Commonwealth supported programs such as Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) and State Government programs to ensure greater access for schools and their communities to funded national priorities.

### 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?*

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<sup>2</sup> <http://astar.tv/subjectfinder/> and <http://astar.tv/careerfinder/>



As we have noted, and as HESP report details, many of the factors contributing to student attrition are present before students enroll in a course of study. One key factor not already mentioned that can make a great difference in improving student retention is providing a component of services/experiences to students in year 12 as part of an extended transition to a University program. This creates a more seamless package of support for students who were the most at risk of not succeeding in their first year.

In our view there is not a major issue with students lacking awareness about available services, but unfortunately access to services can be an issue when the ratio of staff to students in student services in Australia is generally lower than international program ratios and best practice guidelines. Further funding cuts proposed by the federal government, and unresolved policy and funding issues such as the true cost of teaching in many disciplines and for research, create structural funding problems for institutions that restrict their capacity to invest in support student support services. In the complex web of policy and funding, therefore, the government's withdrawal of support in one area of critical importance to a higher education institution can undermine the financial investment government has made in some other area that may seem unrelated.

The data from Appendix C indicates that a large proportion of students considering leaving university are suffering from financial stress. Aside from the specific measures discussed by HESP, and other points made in our submission, we would encourage the Higher Education Standards Panel to advise the government to view a living student wage as an investment in the health of the economy and community into the future, as well as a necessary support for reaping the full benefit into the government's contribution to student fees. Better support for students to meet reasonable living costs translates into less pressure to work while studying and better academic outcomes.

Living costs in Australia are high and in cities like Sydney and Melbourne are acknowledged as amongst the highest in the world. A student living away from home needs around \$1500 a month to meet basic living costs in Sydney today. The poverty line for a single adult with no dependents is currently around \$430 a week or \$1,850 a month, yet a student in receipt of maximum Youth Allowance and \$100 a fortnight in Rent Assistance would have a disposable income of around \$1,075 a month – putting university study in this city beyond them unless they work long hours or study part time.

Our student income support system was last reviewed more 5 years ago. It needs holistic revision in the face of our very constrained budget environment to determine how policy can be improved, and scarce available government funds targeted most effectively, to boost not only participation but also retention and success of under-represented groups. One simple example would be the provision of additional support for students with carer responsibilities. Current eligibility requirements prevent students from accessing carer's payments if also in full time study.

- 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?*

Institutions should have the flexibility to offer nested qualifications, particularly at the undergraduate level where such an approach is a newer one. Changes to the VET sector and the possible introduction of demand-driven sub-bachelor CSP places for universities may make this change more feasible. Institutions and students choosing such pathways should not be penalised by factors in the HECS-HELP loan scheme or in government funding, and should receive, without penalty, the full benefit of any portion of a degree that they are able to complete.



Further measures could allow institutions better opportunities to reengage with students who are on leave or withdrawn to re-enter the sector. There would be a benefit in formalising and expanding on information on credit for completed study across institutions on government websites, providing that institutions are able to provide this information through a central portal to government.

### **Disseminating best practice**

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

At the University of Sydney, a 2016 analysis of factors influencing ATSI (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) student retention and success found that both retention and success were directly attributable to hours of participation in the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) as well as accommodation provided on campus. Both of these programs have received additional funding from the University in 2017.

An innovative 'Student Hubs' program in the UK promotes student engagement in volunteer activities within their local community. Activities can be accredited within the degree structure, and participation validates for students the benefits of completing the degree as well as increasing their confidence in the development of professional skills. The program, which has a high proportion of low SES students, legitimises student coursework as a viable access to a particular career pathway, and strengthens links between the institution and the community.<sup>3</sup>

We strongly support the focus on student support in the new Higher Education Standards Framework, but as suggested above, we are concerned about the sector's ability to broadly meet the higher standards in a constrained government funding environment.

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

Looking internationally, the University of Kent has a detailed plan with clear measures for how they will work to improve the student experience holistically.<sup>4</sup> Specifically of interest is the notion of a 'Learning Community'. Associated with this is a commitment to bringing all students into their Learning Community to enhance their engagement and providing clear and personalized feedback to help students improve their performance. Much of what they are discussing focuses on general health and wellbeing to support student success alongside the academic support and commitment to both academic and professional staff being egged in ensuring a high quality educational experience. The idea of a learning community can be usefully translated to students externally enrolled in a course of study, and developing such a community for external students may be one of the keys to their success and retention.

In Australia, there are differences in how we manage our international student cohort that may be usefully translated into improved support for the domestic student cohort. International students receive more pre-

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.studenthubs.org/story/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.kent.ac.uk/about/plan/downloads/education-and-student-experience-strategy-2016-2020.pdf>

departure information and surveys show that this information is held in high regard. School leavers could potentially benefit from similar pre-commencement programs that would provide them with relevant information and instruction to ensure their commencement is as smooth as possible.

It is widely understood that the first year of university does not begin at enrolment but much sooner as the students' aspirations are shaped throughout their schooling. We aim to reach those students through our outreach programs, but there is potentially a gap between being accepted for the university and enrolment that could be bridged with tailored pre-commencement activities.

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

There is currently strong professional development, partnership, learning innovation and dissemination of practice through professional bodies such as ANZSSA (the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association), ISANA (the International Education Association) and EPHEA (Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia). Government could engage more effectively with these coordinating bodies to extract and reflect current practice and to engage practitioners innovating in the field.

ANZSSA is the primary repository for industry standards and guidelines around orientation and transition, peer mentoring programs, student advising, and the provision of counselling services. ANZSSA also holds reciprocal recognition and conference exchange with leading international student affairs organisations in the US, UK and Canada, and the international student affairs organisation ISANA. ANZSSA holds an annual conference for student affairs professionals, where best practice and emerging practice is discussed.

JANZSSA is the journal of ANZSSA and should be promoted to providers and professional practitioners as a long running peer reviewed journal with international standing in the professional services and student support/student development arena. We would encourage HESP to engage with ANZSSA as key link to professionals working in student services and support.<sup>5</sup> Other important means of developing and sharing best practice are through the funded research undertaken by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education and the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education.<sup>6</sup>

We endorse the panel's reference to best practice and emerging practice in the work of the Australian researchers Devlin, Kift, Nelson, and Stone. The work of these researchers in particular has consistently tracked and measured personal factors for students in higher education that do not typically appear in institutions' demographic data, such as proportion of time in paid or unpaid work, distance to travel to campus, disability status and carer responsibilities.

We also support the improved use of analytics to identify cohorts who might benefit from proactive outreach and engagement mechanisms. Importantly, identification of the student should lead to them being connected with a person to discuss options and to receive tailored and contextualised advice – keeping the individual in the centre of the analytics.

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

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<sup>5</sup> [www.anzssa.com](http://www.anzssa.com)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.newcastle.edu.au/research-and-innovation/centre/ceehe/about-us>



Successful completion strategies will be different for each institution depending on the make-up of their student population and modes of delivery. The government must strike a balance between demanding high standards of institutions – as students and governments have a right to expect – and allowing institutions the flexibility to improve practice in a way best suited to institutional needs. How strategies are to be embedded into provider practice is really a question that depends on the operations of each institution.

At the University of Sydney, we embed successful strategies through the implementation of our institutional Strategic Plan. Our portfolios work together to set targets and deliver a range of strategies, depending on the area of responsibility, that together offer a suite of measures to improve retention, completion and success. The incremental improvement that we strive for will be the result of an institutional culture that supports evidence-based coordinated effort and a certain degree of experimentation in strategy, with a willingness to provide continuing support for those strategies that are proven to be successful.

*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?*

Compliance with the Higher Education Standards Framework is a legal obligation of higher education providers in Australia, with TEQSA's role being to monitor and assess compliance with the standards and take action if compliance is found to be breached. TEQSA requires no further powers in ensuring provider compliance with the HESF.

We note that the government's higher education reform package includes a proposal to make 7.5% of each provider's Commonwealth Grant Scheme funding performance-contingent, and that student retention, completion and success might form part of the metrics included in the allocation of this funding. As noted earlier, we urge extreme caution in the use of continuous improvement targets as we believe there is a high risk of perverse outcomes in this kind of uniform approach.

If part of the proposed performance funding is indeed to be dependent on these metrics, we would suggest the government take an approach of (a) performance targets agreed for each institution and (b) analysis and performance funding based on an institution's performance against its own targets. If this suggestion is to be adopted, the harder work will be assessing the appropriateness of an institutional target, which is an area where TEQSA might have some role. Once a target is adopted, an institution may receive full or part funding depending on how it measures up to its own targets.