

# Submission to the Higher Education Standards Panel: Improving retention, completion and success in higher education, Discussion Paper, June 2017

The University of Notre Dame Australia (Notre Dame) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on issues relating to student retention, completion and success raised by the Discussion Paper. Notre Dame performs well on the four measures of academic progress analysed in the Paper. The adjusted attrition rate for the University is 9.5%. Similarly, Notre Dame's ratings in the *Student Experience Survey* have been pleasing. For the second year in a row, as published on the Government's QILT website, Notre Dame is one of the top two universities nationally for Overall Quality of Education Experience, Teaching Quality, Skills Development, Learning Engagement and Student Support. Notre Dame's score of 89.8% for Overall Quality of Education Experience is well above the national average of 79.9%.

In addressing the discussion points, our submissions seek to provide a context for how Notre Dame ensures students have the best chance of successfully completing their enrolled units, courses and qualifications and identify opportunities for change more broadly. As noted throughout the Paper, the particular characteristics of a provider influences retention, completion and success outcomes. Notre Dame provides a university education within a context of Catholic faith and values. The Objects of the University have the stated aims of the provision of an excellent standard of teaching, scholarship and research; training for the professions; and pastoral care for its students.

## Questions to guide discussion

### Setting expectations of completion

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

Current completion rates measured at nine years allows for life circumstances, whilst ensuring relevancy and to a large extent, currency. An extended timeframe for completion that allows for students to withdraw from studies and then return at a later stage is supported by the analysis of the data in the Discussion Paper (p.20). The speed of completion can be enhanced by offering accelerated modes of study. That is, many students benefit from a shorter period of time in full-time study, as opposed to a longer period of time in part-time or interrupted study. Accelerated modes can include trimesters or the use of intensive weeks in Winter or Summer Terms, additional credit-bearing online modules of study that accumulate towards a unit of study but can be taken flexibly or increasing the amount of overall units taken in one year.

### Enhancing transparency

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

We note that the paper does not distinguish between academic attrition and non-academic attrition (particularly mental health and other social issues). We see these as key differences in terms of an institution's ability to influence attrition. While Notre Dame would support transparency of information for students, any data should be provided in context (e.g. size of provider, student cohorts) and ensure that measures are based on the same calculations.

Methods are needed to accurately capture the reasons for student withdrawal to improve the quality of data collected on student attrition.

- 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?**

In principle, Notre Dame supports the inclusion of more fulsome data on the QILT website, including retention and completion data as proposed, subject to the comments above.

As is noted throughout the Paper, the reasons for student attrition and success are complex and may be hard to communicate through data alone. Potentially students, particularly in at-risk groups, for whom a three year full-time commitment is already difficult, could reasonably be deterred from study by tools such as completions calculators which demonstrate likely extensions of time. Perhaps a broader, more qualitative approach could help students contextualise statistics such as retention, attrition and completion data. For example, many students coming into the tertiary sector are unaware of the kinds of flexibility available once they are in the system. Information that emphasises how flexible university study can be in response to life events is useful.

The actual admission process, also subject to review and change at a national level, is an important part of the decision making process for students. At Notre Dame, the inclusion of an interview as part of the application process provides an opportunity for students to decide whether Notre Dame is a 'right fit' for them, as much as it is about the University selecting students.

- 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)?**

Capacity to track students in tertiary education across VET and higher education studies would be welcome, especially for dual sector providers. It would be beneficial if students who withdrew from higher education studies to pursue vocational training, were measured in the same way as students who switch courses or higher education institutions. Deciding to switch from higher education to skills training should be recognised as part of an adjusted attrition rate.

## **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 note that the Outreach programs described at p. 45 of the discussion paper are Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) funded programmes. The University refers to pp. 57 to 60 of the Discussion Paper and the recent report to the Department of Education and Training ACIL Allen Consulting 2017, *Evaluation of the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program*, Melbourne and the recommendation to continue HEPPP funding, which supports universities equity strategies and the success of low SES student in particular. Similarly, the Higher Education Disability Support Program (DSP) funding supports students with a disability to access their learning on the same basis as other students, thereby improving their success. Both funding programs are only available to Table A universities. Table B

universities are under the same obligations as other universities in relation to the Threshold Standards, and reporting requirements for the Commonwealth Grants Scheme.

We consider the Table B universities should not be excluded from these funding arrangements that have demonstrated effectiveness in supporting the retention and success of particular cohorts of students. Table B universities should be able to participate in these funding arrangements, at least to the extent that they participate in the Commonwealth Grants Scheme and provide tertiary education to regional and remote communities. Notre Dame's Broome Campus continues to be a key part of the University's mission to increase participation of students from the Kimberley region in post-secondary education, thereby enabling improved participation in the workforce. As the only dual sector provider (VET and Higher Education) physically situated north of the Western Australian 26th parallel, the University provides educational opportunities for students in the Kimberley by delivering courses and pathways across the education spectrum.

Access for Table B universities to HEPPP and DSP funding is in keeping with the principles of widening access to, and successful participation in higher education for students who have experienced educational disadvantage or require additional levels of support to facilitate completion. There is precedent for this with the recent inclusion of Table B providers by the Commonwealth in the Indigenous Student Support Program. The University would welcome the opportunity to be able to augment the support of our students through HEPPP and DSP funding and is consistent with Recommendation 3 in the above-mentioned Allen Consulting report.

## **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?**

The strategies listed at p. 66 (section 1.3 of the Threshold Standards, Orientation and Progression) are employed at Notre Dame. Some of the aspects unique to Notre Dame are described below.

The quality of the relationship between the teacher and the student within a culture of a commitment to pastoral care by all staff and the provision of excellence in teaching and scholarship remains fundamental to student success. Tangible evidence of pastoral care at Notre Dame can be seen from the personalised approach to admissions, small class sizes, one-on-one contact with academic staff, individualised academic and counselling support programs, welcoming liturgies and faith opportunities, sporting and cultural activities. Centralised support and strategies employed at all universities exist at Notre Dame. Dedicated Student Services and Academic Support Centres exist to support all aspects of student life, including appointments with Learning Advisors for the creation of individualised learning plans, workshops, Peer Mentoring programs, Careers and Campus Ministry. These services are communicated to students in a variety of ways and through multiple channels, including SMS, social media and the Student Association. Greater research into the links between mental health, student wellbeing and student success to inform the provision of student services would contribute to better outcomes and targeted, effective services.

Intentional, whole of institution approaches to curriculum design that support transition is known to improve student success (Kift, S, Transition Pedagogy website, <http://transitionpedagogy.com/>, viewed 22 June 2017). Notre Dame's Learning and Teaching Office, responsible for academic continuing professional learning has focused on the First Year Experience (FYE), hosting forums which has led to the formation of a working group whose goal is to develop an institutional framework for the FYE including a resource for academics framed around the work of Kift. Courses and units of study are designed to provide students with opportunities for early feedback, and the creation of strategies that identify students at risk or in need of support. Of note in the design of courses at Notre Dame is our commitment to excellence in training for the professions. One aspect of this that inherently supports retention and success is the integration of early practicum. For example, in the Bachelor of Nursing, students are placed on their first practicum after their first semester. Students can assess early on their suitability for their chosen profession. Students also undertake 28 weeks of clinical practice, substantially more than other providers. This experience also heightens students' affinity with the professions and graduate work-readiness.

Recently, changes to embed academic support into first year curriculum has proven successful for both academic integrity and the identification of students in need of support for literacy. An example is the Post Entry Literacy Assessment (PELA), which is contextualised for each discipline and embedded into a first year communication unit. Each School in the University has a slightly different PELA, but with the common goal of supporting students as they make the transition from school or work to studying in their chosen discipline at university. Wellbeing programs are purposefully embedded into the curriculum in most Schools across the University, including the School of Medicine, School of Law and School of Business. The connection of centralised support with first year subjects and academic staff has raised the profile and uptake of students using this support in a timely manner.

Curriculum design at Notre Dame reflects the Catholic intellectual tradition and all students study a "Core Curriculum" drawn from the disciplines of ethics, philosophy and theology. These Core Curriculum studies aim to prepare students for thinking through their own core beliefs and choices, now and in the future. Notre Dame's Core Curriculum brings all of its students together under one banner. The Core places the life of the mind (often called the "intellectual life") at the fore in every degree course. The University believes that the Core Curriculum is an experience particular to Notre Dame that helps makes life, study and work more meaningful and richer in potential. This particular approach to intellectual development supports student success and engagement.

Student success is enhanced by connectedness and a sense of purpose and meaning. The University is committed to providing students with opportunities to be actively engaged in the local, national and international community, by acknowledging at all times that we are a university "in the world" and "for the world" and always to act in ways which are in full concord with our obligations to civil society. These opportunities are many and varied, and are means by which students are involved with, and connected to the Notre Dame community. Examples include the

integration into curriculum through Service Learning teaching,<sup>1</sup> volunteering (see [Helping Hands](#)), immersion programmes in Aboriginal communities and internationally, including Study Abroad opportunities.

The reasons for strong retention and completion rates are diverse and interconnected, however it appears that the characteristics of the provider, its values and approach to intellectual and personal development, embedded in the University as part of the “institutional architecture” can positively influence retention, attrition, completion and success.<sup>2</sup>

**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?**

Integrated and intermediate qualifications are of particular interest for dual sector providers and provide an opportunity to work towards a more integrated system across the two sectors in tertiary education. The recent request by the NSW Department of Education for Proposals Higher Apprenticeships and Tertiary Pathways is an example of an innovative approach to tertiary pathways to overcome barriers and provide better outcomes for students. Nested programs are one way of achieving a structured but more flexible pathway with discrete outcomes. Equally, these structures can be replicated at the Post Graduate level with nested Graduate Certificate/Diploma and Masters courses. There is also the potential of dual sectors offering recognised skill sets within a higher education program and promotion of reverse pathways from Higher Education to VET, especially for students who are struggling academically (e.g. Bachelor of Nursing to Diploma of Nursing). Increased collaboration between providers to fast track qualification and/or co-badge mixed awards, could create greater flexibility for students and reduce overall attrition. This can also enhance regional offerings.

We note that the expansion of demand driven sub-bachelor funding will assist with the provision of intermediate qualifications and ‘exit awards’ for students at different stages of their educational journey. Again, the budget reform package does not include Table B providers in Commonwealth Supported places for sub-bachelor places. Students at all universities who are unsure of their ability or commitment for a 3-year course, or who need to build further academic skills, should be able to enrol into a shorter course and build aspiration to articulate into the higher course.

## **Disseminating best practice**

8. [What new and innovative approaches do evaluations suggest are improving student completion at individual higher education providers?](#)
9. [What can we learn about enhancing student success from the international experience?](#)

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<sup>1</sup> Improving preservice teachers development and skills (Lavery, S. D., & Coffey, A. (2016). Service-learning: promoting the development of the graduate professional standards in pre-service secondary teachers. Teaching and Learning Forum 2016). In 2015, Notre Dame Fremantle hosted the inaugural [Service Learning Conference](#).

<sup>2</sup> Maher, M., & Macallister, H. (2013). Retention and Attrition of Students in Higher Education: Challenges in Modern Times to What Works. Higher Education Studies 3(2), 62 – 73. doi.org/10.5539/hes.v3n2p62

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

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

Notre Dame has established the Learning and Teaching Office as a centralised department of experts in learning and teaching in higher education who can work in a consistent way with academics and professional staff, taking into account specific discipline needs, to ensure an institutional approach to matters that influence the quality of teaching and in this context, student attrition, retention, success and completion. There are many aspects to this, including, although not limited to, convening and supporting First Year Coordinators in each School; being actively involved in assessment design, curriculum review and the moderation cycle; and the development of policy and resources to support excellence in teaching and the student experience, most recently with academic integrity.

## 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?

We consider that TEQSA has sufficient mandate and powers to regulate compliance against the broad range of threshold standards in the HE Standards Framework that contribute to student success.

Some of the transparency funding referred to at p. 65 of the Discussion Paper might be spent by TEQSA to work with providers to develop methods to accurately capture the reasons for student withdrawal in order to enhance the quality of data collected on student attrition and to support a clear and accepted definition of student success.

There is opportunity for TEQSA to showcase good practice examples impacting on attrition rates such as through mechanisms including:

- TEQSA newsletters/circular citing specific examples in the Student Success Journal;
- Dedicated seminars/conference presentations that showcase international practices, such as in curriculum design, teaching and learning interventions, and also showcase the student voice;
- Publishing examples of good practice initiatives (at institutional, discipline and individual student level) that have been validated through assessment by TEQSA (such as through a dedicated good practice portal on TEQSA's website); and
- Provision of guidance notes that take into account provider scale and scope.

It is suggested that strategies should focus primarily on academic support and interventions to reduce attrition.