IMPROVING RETENTION, COMPLETION AND SUCCESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: HIGHER EDUCATION STANDARDS PANEL DISCUSSION PAPER JUNE 2017

Response from the University of Canberra

The University of Canberra (UC) is grateful to the Higher Education Standards Panel (HESP) for its rigorous discussion paper on improving retention, completion and success. The university congratulates the panel on a balanced paper that explores many of the complexities in identifying and reporting on this issue. It supports the panel's determination that there is no crisis of attrition in Australian universities, as claimed in some sensational reporting on the issue. Claims of significant reductions in retention are unfounded. The university applauds the panel's explicit repudiation of any link between the demand-driven system and attrition.

The University of Canberra

The University is incorporated under the *University of Canberra Act 1989* of the Australian Capital Territory. It is committed to serving its communities through professional education and applied research.

UC is ranked in the top four per cent of universities globally by both Times Higher Education and QS World University Rankings, and is one of the top 100 universities under the age of 50. Its purpose is to provide education which offers high-quality transformative experiences to everyone suitably qualified; to engage in research which makes an early and important difference to the world around us; and to contribute to the building of just, prosperous, healthy and sustainable communities.

The 'questions to guide discussion' contained in the paper have been used for the following discussion and recommendations from the University of Canberra.

UC's position on student retention, completion and success

The university challenges the assumption that student attrition or slow progression is always undesirable. In contemporary Australia, a university degree is seldom seen as an end in itself (Hurt, 2012). Students enter university study for a variety of reasons, many of them linked to employment outcomes, such as an initial job, a promotion or a salary rise (Ballo, Paulie & Worrell, 2017). Students achieving these goals, then choosing to delay or cease their university studies, should not be considered negatively. Indeed, some students may specifically wish to develop a certain set of skills that can be achieved through partial completion of a study program.

The university believes that institutions should be judged in their performance within factors over which they have control. The discussion paper describes the array of reasons why students may cease or slow their study at university, many of which are beyond the control of the institution. It cites the importance of financial, personal and health-related factors in this choice (particularly for low-SES students) and the impact of being first-in-family and mature age. The paper 'Characteristics of Australian higher education providers

and their relation to first year attrition – June 2017' (TEQSA, 2017) also documented attrition factors over which an institution has limited, if any, control. UC contends that measurement and reporting of retention, completion and success rates should only be made once these factors are statistically controlled.

The impact of economic conditions on attrition and completion rates are not explored in the discussion paper (nor by TEQSA, 2017), yet student participation in higher education is known to be counter-cyclical (Sakellaris, 2000), rising as economic conditions worsen and *vice versa.* Improving employment conditions are likely to see reduced enrolments, rising attrition or slowing completion, as students find employment or work longer hours. Additionally, economic conditions are not uniform across the nation, leading to variable effects of the economy on the attrition rates of different institutions.

The complexity of identifying a student's true reason for ceasing study, be it personal or institutional-related, and the absence of a mechanism to gather and report on such data, is acknowledged. The university recommends the government pursue the development of such a measure (in Australia or through best-practice oversees) before any expansion of the reporting or use of attrition rates, especially if it proposes to use attrition rates as part of any performance-based funding regime.

Recommendation 1

That the government pursue the development of an instrument to capture the real reasons for students ceasing study before graduation, and that this be completed and thoroughly tested before any expansion of the use of attrition rates in reporting or funding mechanisms.

Although there are several factors that influence student retention over which the institution has control, such as the learning environment, teaching ability, student engagement, staff-student ratios and student support, the situation is further complicated by differential attrition rates for specific cohorts, such as low-SES students. Universities have varying degrees of control in overcoming inherent biases to higher attrition within these cohorts, and this needs to be taken into account when considering retention rates. One way to reflect this is to report attrition against an average on a cohort basis, based on factors that have a strong association with retention.

Recommendation 2

That publication and use of retention data should take into account the average attrition in specific cohorts of students known to have lower retention rates.

Setting expectations of completion

The discussion paper seeks the sector's views on expectations of completion rates or speed of completion.

In line with the above discussion, UC believes that attrition and speed of completion are affected by too many factors to provide a meaningful baseline for comparison. Student choices and institutional factors are all in play, affecting completion rates in different ways across institutions and over time. The university therefore recommends that no benchmark on completion rates be set or used.

Recommendation 3

That the government does not set an expectation for completion rates, and does not use such a standard in publications or performance-based funding.

Enhanced Transparency

The paper seeks suggestions for changes to data collection and publication that could improve the understanding of retention, completion and success by students and government.

UC has already recommended the development of an instrument to more accurately identify the reasons for students ceasing study (recommendation 1) and the reporting of attrition rates by cohort (recommendation 2), but further improvements in the data could be made. The TEQSA definition of attrition (TEQSA, 2017) does not allow for students who take a leave of absence in their second year of study; this should be addressed. Furthermore, publication of attrition rates should acknowledge that the data are lagged, with the results reflecting cohorts of students at least two-years prior to publication.

The paper also seeks feedback about a common student identifier for students transitioning from higher education to VET study.

Attrition should be based on students ceasing study. The university therefore argues in favour of the creation of a common identifier. Specifically, UC argues that attrition data should always be adjusted to reflected movement of students between institutions. Whilst the CHESSN was designed in part to do this, it has not been successful. A separate identifier needs to be developed or the CHESSN improved through consultation with the sector.

Recommendation 4

In addition to recommendations 1 and 2 above, the value and transparency of attrition and success data should be improved by:

- excluding students on leave of absence in attrition data;
- acknowledging in all publications the commencement date of the student cohort being surveyed;
- creating a common student identifier; and
- excluding students moving between institutions (including HE to VET) from attrition data.

The discussion paper seeks responses to a proposal to produce a predictive model for potential students. UC argues strongly against this proposal. Such a model cannot take into account the individual circumstances of the student or the institution. Given the lag nature of the data, it cannot include recently improved services that will positively impact on student completion. Publication of such a model will lead to potential students having inaccurate expectations of their likely success.

Recommendation 5

That government does not create or publish a predictive model for potential student completion and success.

Supporting students to make the right choices.
Supporting students to complete their studies.

The university supports the strategies identified in the paper to support students' retention and success. Additional strategies may include those that focus on the orientation of students, the development of expectations around university study, and improvement of social aspects to increase student engagement.

It should be noted that these processes require significant resources to implement properly. This cannot be done in an environment of decreasing government support for universities. Furthermore, allocations of funding to improve teaching through grants, fellowships and awards has decreased in recent times. The university recommends the proposed and actual funding cuts be reversed.

Recommendation 6

That the government remove the decreases in university funding from the current budget and reverse reduction in funding to university teaching grants, fellowships and awards, in order to provide resources for universities to improve student retention and success.

The paper requests input on the use of intermediate qualifications. UC recognises the value of intermediate qualifications as additional support and recognised program exits for some students. In the latter case, the knowledge that it is possible to exit prior to completion of a bachelor degree can encourage students to commence or continue with study. Awarding intermediate degrees can also improve the process of credit upon return to study. The university therefore supports the government's plan to fund sub-bachelor degrees.

UC concurs with the Australian Qualifications Framework that all awards should be coherent and lead to outcomes of employment or further study. Students should not be graduated on the basis of random study, but awarded intermediate degrees where their knowledge, skills and application of knowledge and skills meet defined award learning outcomes.

Recommendation 7

The university supports the expansion of intermediate qualifications and the government's plan to fund sub-bachelor degree places.

Additional strategies and dissemination of best practice

Student retention can be improved through the use of student data analytics. UC has developed its own algorithm for the identification of students at risk of non-completion in particular subjects, using learning behaviour (such as online usage patterns), assessment data and demographics of students. Subject conveners and students are alerted to risk factors, and support activities are recommended.

A second retention strategy relates to assessment methodology. UC has successfully implemented interventions in high failure subjects through specific, early assessment pieces with fast, supportive feedback. Such an approach increases retention and success of students in these subjects, but requires significant resourcing for the development of online technologies and educational design expertise.

Universities are already strong in the development and dissemination of new strategies. To strengthen this, the government should re-invest in teaching grants, fellowships and awards. These provide excellent avenues for new strategies to be tested and the results disseminated through the sector.

Recommendation 6 is thus relevant here.

Regulation

UC does not believe that increased regulation or powers for TEQSA is a solution to the issues of retention and completion rates.

The activities of universities in relation to student support services and other aspects of improving student retention or success are already guided by the publication of data, the current Higher Education Threshold Standards, and TEQSA re-registration processes.

References

Balloo, K., Pauli, R. & Worrell, M. (2017). Undergraduates' personal circumstances, expectations and reasons for attending university. *Studies in Higher Education, 42*(8), 1373-1384.

Hurt, E. (2012). The marketization of higher education. *College Literature, 39*(2), 121-132.

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

Response from the University of Canberra

Sakellaris, P. (2000). Business cycles and investment in human capital: international evidence on higher education. *Carnegie-Rochester Conference Series on Public Policy, 52*, 221-256.

Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency. (2017). *Characteristics of Australian higher education providers and their relation to first year attrition – June 2017.* Canberra, Australia.