

Submission to the Higher Education Standards Panel: Improving retention, completion and success in higher education.

Griffith University welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this review. The Discussion Paper sets out very clear findings and a series of sensible questions to guide further development of measures of success, strategies and policies.

It is clear that the rates of attrition in Australian Universities are around the international average, although they are well below those from countries with similar education systems, notably New Zealand and to a lesser extent, the UK. This would indicate that there is potential to improve student outcomes, notwithstanding the relatively static retention rates seen over the last decade that correspond with the significant expansion of the tertiary system.

In addition, the increasing proportion of students studying fully online or part-time, or who come from low SES backgrounds, means that attrition rates may rise as these students are at greater risk of leaving tertiary study.

There is reasonable data that allows some prediction of which students are likely to attrite, although risk factors discussed in the paper only account for a small proportion of the overall risk. However, there is much less evidence to inform the types of interventions that will encourage at risk students to stay at University and complete their studies. An imperative for the sector must be to rigorously and systematically evaluate interventions, and share evidence-based good practice. The current proposed changes to HEPPP funding will encourage a more evidence-based approach at least for low SES and Indigenous students. This approach must be extended to better understand how to address student retention, completion and success for all students, in a scalable and sustainable manner.

Setting expectations of completion

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

The increasing proportion of students studying part-time, or taking time off from study, inevitably means that less than half of students complete a standard bachelor's degree within 4 years. At a minimum, completion rates should be measured as the length of the standard degree plus 3 years.

Enhancing transparency

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

It is important that retention rates reflect retention in education (the adjusted attrition rate), rather than whether students have been retained within their initial degree program. Students move for positive reasons that should be encouraged- students who do not initially meet entry requirements for their degree of choice may enrol in another degree and subsequently upgrade, or students recognise that their initial choice was ill-informed and they move to another degree that better reflects their talents and interests. These students have not been lost to higher education and should not be counted as such.

It is useful to be able to account for different cohort mixes between universities, such that those institutions who choose to take on more students from higher risk backgrounds are not unduly penalised.

The ability to evaluate which interventions are most effective for specific student subgroups is essential in moving towards an evidence-based framework to inform interventions.

A more systematic approach to collecting data from students on why they leave their course of study (exit interview/survey) would improve primary data in relation to 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?**

Griffith strongly opposes the introduction of a completions calculator. At this point in time, data around what makes a successful student is rudimentary and does not have a high level of predictability, as acknowledged in the report. It is not helpful to discourage students from undertaking a course of study on the basis of incomplete data.

Far more helpful would be to provide students with richer information about the types of skills and attributes (academic and personal) that employers are looking for in particular industries. This would assist students in choosing the right degree, and evaluating what skills they may need to develop in the course of their studies to be successful in their chosen industry.

Griffith is currently implementing an ePortfolio platform for every student to be able to collect and curate personal skills and experiences outside of their academic programs that will add to their employability, and provide evidence to future employers that they have developed relevant skills.

- 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)?**

Griffith supports this initiative. Cross-sectorial student tracking is highly relevant and valuable in its potential to provide rich longitudinal data about patterns of study in the student life/learning journey.

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)**

Griffith has recently conducted an evaluation of its outreach activities in the light of evidence of successful engagement strategies outlined in the literature. Very few rigorous studies of the impact of outreach and careers advice have been carried out that could inform good practice. Early and frequent engagement seems to be a predictor of later higher education engagement, but the most effective types of engagement are unclear.

The tertiary sector faces capacity constraints in servicing a large number of schools, particularly if engagement is extended to primary school. Griffith is currently exploring the development of a schools portal which will provide a rich source of careers information and experiences for students, as well as resource material for teachers. It will evaluate the effectiveness of the portal in extending its reach to regional and remote Queensland Schools. It also achieves scale through ongoing workshops, and extensive Professional Development opportunities with teachers and guidance officers.

The Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre *My Path* initiative will provide enhanced guidance to secondary students (from Year 10) about subject selection options and career advice linked to Queensland university program recommendations. This will provide a rich data source for

Queensland secondary and tertiary educators about student subject and career choices, preferences, pathways and academic achievement levels.

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?**

While supportive interventions are important, attention should be paid to the significance of structured flexibility to support students moving in and out of study as their life circumstances change. This has been well applied at Griffith through the implementation of trimesters facilitating acceleration as well as deceleration of study, flexible Leave of Absence policies and applicant choice of multiple trimester entry points in which to commence study in an academic year.

Attrition is not always a problem to be remediated; it is a reflection of the complexity and tensions in balancing work/personal/study commitments which require flexibility in curriculum, pedagogy, and academic and administrative policy design.

- 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?**

Griffith supports the proposal that universities should be able to offer diplomas or associate degrees as an exit point for students who do not wish to or are unable to continue to a full degree with the proviso that these qualifications are recognised for students who return to complete their degrees at a later date.

The influence of curriculum and pedagogy as factors underpinning student persistence and success are worthy of deeper research and evaluation. The 3 year contiguous undergraduate degree model is under pressure in the face of a growing array of digital learning products, offered by a huge range of national and international providers and employers. Nested qualifications are an excellent step in enhancing the flexibility and accessibility of tertiary-level certification, as is micro-credentialling. Griffith has been a pioneer in developing a future focussed approach to credit for prior learning where we identify and recognise formal, informal and non-formal learning for both admission and credit, codified through documented credit precedents. Flexible policies and certification frameworks that enable students to move into and out of formal study seamlessly—combined with innovative curriculum and pedagogy—will be increasingly significant in scaffolding life-long learning and supporting student persistence and underlining value to the learner.

Disseminating best practice

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

Griffith has embarked on a number of new initiatives aimed at improving student completion rates. Firstly, in 2017, the University introduced trimesters giving students flexibility to vary their study load. Interestingly, students enrolled in trimester 1 have a lower study load than students enrolled in semester 1 2016, indicating an increasing preference for students to spread out their study. This

reduced load is consistent with national trends. Students also have the opportunity to repeat failed courses in trimester three, and therefore remain with their cohort the following year.

The University has been assisting students to find part-time and casual work through its Unitemps franchise. Supporting students financially and facilitating work experience opportunities is a key retention strategy. Gaining access to meaningful employment supports students and when done well through effective work-integrated learning, demonstrates the practical application of their study in the workplace. This enhances the value proposition of the University, the relevance of the program of study which can underpin student persistence.

Griffith has also introduced a common foundation year into many of its larger degree programs, meaning delaying choice of specialisations until second year.

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

The international studies outlined in the report offer some promising leads, but many have not quantified the effect on student success. The impressive completion rates in New Zealand are worthy of further study.

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

The IRU network has established a Vice Chancellor's fellowship, with Associate Professor Jessica Vanderlelie currently in the role. This role has been pivotal in facilitating exchange of best practice between the IRU members. In the absence of the OLT, such fellowships could be a means of collaborating between institutions.

The proposed reporting requirements for HEPPP projects should ensure that evaluations of HEPPP funded student success projects are publically available.

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

Successful completion strategies necessarily include input through academic programs as well as through support services. Griffith is introducing course/unit based analytics to alert academics to students in their classes who may need additional support to progress through their studies. These will be trialled and evaluated in the second half of 2017 with the expectation that they will be rolled out progressively from 2018.

Such insights into student success and progression are critical to be able to scale interventions that positively affect outcomes. Academic staff development will play an increasingly important role in ensuring effective practices are disseminated. Griffith has moved from a traditional performance management framework to an annual appraisal that focusses on career development and continuing professional development, recognising the central role of academic staff in delivering high quality student centred programs.

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?

Griffith does not believe TEQSA requires further powers to ensure universities provide adequate support to students.