



**Submission to the Department of Education and Training**  
Improving retention, completion and success in higher education  
Higher Education Standards Panel Discussion Paper, June 2017

VCD17/1273

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The University of New England (UNE) welcomes to the opportunity to respond to the submission.

UNE has a long history of catering for students from a variety of backgrounds through the use of flexible delivery models, alternative entry pathways, and access to personalized student support. UNE's model of outreach, support and engagement with distance students has been integral to its success in this area and has set the standard for many universities which have followed. Much of this experience has led UNE to a rich and evidence-based perspective of the complexity of issues which impact retention, completion and success, and to an equally rich understanding of the measures and support structures which are effective in helping students to remain engaged learners.

UNE wishes to highlight six key points in response to the discussion paper:

- 1) *Retention is a complex interplay of student factors, institutional factors, and demographic factors, and the measurement of retention needs to reflect that complexity.*

Regional universities like UNE not only comprise students with a different demographic mix from their metropolitan counterparts, but also they have additional expectations placed upon them because of their social and economic role in their communities. For many regional universities, the social contract with their region makes it important to offer the opportunity for study to students even – or especially – when their previous educational opportunities, demographic background and financial and employment circumstances would all indicate that the students' chance of success is diminished.

The main focus of the paper is attrition that results in students leaving higher education altogether, the proposed metrics measure only levels of success rather than activity undertaken to improve retention. It may be more valuable for Universities to be measured on their individual success (and improvements by cohort) and retention rates than against sector norms. This would involve the use of more detailed and sophisticated attrition metrics that recognize the different study patterns, behaviours, and needs of different cohorts of students.

Dissemination of best practice in retention activities would be valuable and UNE is working with RUN sharing retention related projects that inform practice improvement, however the impact of contingent performance based funding is not likely to encourage this.

We know from recent studies that those students at most risk of deferring studies, dipping into and out of higher education or dropping out completely are low SES, Aboriginal, mature age, part time or regional students – precisely the demographic mix that is distinctive about the UNE cohort as compared with typical metropolitan universities. Application of performance contingent

funding driven by blunt retention targets has the potential to drive universities to exclude students in these “at risk” categories, thus exacerbating pre-existing educational disadvantage.

It is important that performance metrics encourage continuing enrolment from at risk groups. The use of raw retention data or the creation of retention “league tables” will have the opposite effect. Sophisticated and nuanced measures are required especially for Universities like UNE where the majority of students are mature age, external and from rural and regional areas.

- 2) *Student retention, completion and success while at university is strongly linked to their level of preparedness. Policy on measures to support success must therefore encompass preparatory and enabling programs.*

Preparatory and enabling courses, that seek to set up student success prior to the commencement of their degree, are important measures to improve student success rates. For instance, UNE’s Pathways Enabling course and TRACKS enabling course continue to provide for students whose educational background does not provide them with the requisite preparation for admission. When the pass rate for all students entering via an Enabling Pathway is compared with the overall population they perform substantially better, achieving an 85.78% pass rate in T1 2016 compared with 77.78% for all commencing domestic Bachelor-Pass students.

- 3) *Curricula and pedagogy designed to maximise student success while maintaining academic standards are essential to systemically address retention and completion issues.*

The expansion of participation in higher education in Australia over the last twenty-five years has been impressive. Higher education enrolments have effectively doubled since 2000. In many ways this expansion of participation represents a democratisation of higher education opportunity, with many students now participating in HE who might previously have been regarded by institutions – or have regarded themselves – as unfit for or unprepared for university education. However, many of the curricula assumptions and pedagogical methods have remained essentially unchanged, and are not optimal in supporting this new cohort to study successfully.

In particular, the students’ experience and approaches to learning in their first year is crucial in establishing the foundations for success in higher education. Explicit attention needs to be given to the design of pathways through the curriculum that suit particular cohorts. For instance the UNE Bachelor of Scientific Studies is a recently-introduced program which is suitable for students who do not have an educational background in Sciences. The first year of study provides academic foundation knowledge and skills and achievement at introductory level. Students are able to exit with a Diploma in Science on completion of the first year and may articulate into other Science-based Bachelor degrees. The design of such pathways is instrumental in converting a potentially unsuccessful student journey into a completion.

- 4) *Support for students at risk of non-completion should be focused through institutional and sectoral analytics.*

Methods for targeting at risk students, providing them with the most appropriate support at the right time, become integral to supporting student success. The collection and analysis of data from all aspects of a students’ engagement with an institution informs predictive analytics to

provide more refined and targeted support programs. Government-sponsored research into the validity and effectiveness of learner analytics would be a welcome contribution as currently each institution is exploring the use of predicative data energetically but separately.

The collection of student readiness diagnostics at the start of a student's studies is useful in targeting support. A national Student Readiness Questionnaire could provide valuable diagnostic information to institutions about students' individual needs, while also serving as a set of baseline data to inform meaningful evaluation of raw retention. Such an instrument might cover:

- prior educational experience;
- prior work experience and transferable skills;
- career and learning aspirations ;
- reasons and motivation for choice of course and institution;
- reasons for choice of attendance mode;
- self-identification of learning needs and weaknesses;
- expectations of support.

5) *Support programs should be framed to avoid a "deficit model" of learning support.*

Support needs to be provided within a model that avoids the rhetoric of deficit. There is actually little direct evidence that remedial programs developing students' traditional academic skills are effective in reducing attrition.

Instead, programs to support students should focus on the development on the holistic skills we know lead to successful student outcomes. Such skills include psychological wellbeing (grit and resilience); modern academic literacies such as digital and multimedia literacies, coding, (programming) and design-thinking; as well more traditional cognitive skills, such as communication, problem solving, and analytical skills.

Importantly, programs that embed work-integrated learning and develop authentic work-ready skills in higher education students reduce levels of student disengagement.

6) *The most important causes of student disengagement are not academic.*

We know from several recent studies included in the discussion paper that some of the most significant causes of student withdrawal from study have nothing to do with their academic capability and progress.

Financial factors, work stress, ill-health, and other personal factors are the most significant contributors to students' decisions to discontinue study. These factors contribute in particular to attrition among part-time and external students, who are already juggling busy lives outside of study. Such students are disproportionately represented at regional universities such as UNE.

Increasingly importantly, the availability of IT infrastructure including high-quality broadband internet becomes a limiting factor in students successfully completing their studies.

Measures that increase social opportunity in the regions and decrease regional social inequity will have an automatic flow-on effect to regional student retention and success.