

## **The University of Newcastle: Wollotuka Institute – response to discussion paper**

### **Improving retention, completion and success in higher education**

Wollotuka's responses to specific questions noted in the discussion paper are outlined below.

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

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

The sector's expectation of completion rates and speed of progression needs to be revised to accommodate the changes to student cohorts in the future. The expectation that some students will take longer to complete due to studying part time around family and work commitments seems to be a growing trend and the calculations need to be adjusted to accommodate and reflect this. Given that the attrition rate has been maintained at 15%<sup>1</sup> (approx.) for some time, it may be unlikely to change in the near future. Different ways of measuring the attrition rate may in fact be the key. In many instances students are still listed as enrolled when they have fact withdrawn, or should be 'on leave'. Improving our tracking of the real-life circumstances of such students will be beneficial to recording more realistic results.

#### **Enhancing transparency**

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

Current data tracking of student progression is retrospective, as in, the pass or fail of a student per semester can only be revealed after their results are published at the end of the semester. An early intervention strategy which includes faculty based staff alerting Indigenous support centres such as the Wollotuka Institute, to students who may be at risk could assist in addressing the issue of Indigenous student retention.

Page 31 of the Discussion Paper notes that "Attrition rates are not closely related to ATAR specific functions". Current reporting data focusses on the result of student achievement in a course, it does not take into consideration the other factors that may inhibit the student ability to progress and complete their study. These 'other' factors are extrapolated on page 45 of the Discussion Paper; factors include: being the first in their family to attend university, coming from a rural or remote location and obligation to existing family commitments.

Of further consideration is the inconsistency of data sets and the lack of access/dissemination by both the university itself and the sector as a whole. This has hampered efforts to provide support to Indigenous students.

*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?*

There are questions surrounding the publications of student success, completions, retention and attrition, specifically that depending on the way it is presented it could give rise to the notion that for certain cohorts of students (Indigenous, low SES, etc) that attrition is inevitable. A concerted effort should be made to ensure that this data is not presented in a deficit model. Some sharing of the idea that it can take several years to complete a degree could be useful for those students who are disheartened because they cannot study full time and therefore feel they will never complete.

Indigenous students may find a list of the numbers of Indigenous graduates from individual universities and VET providers, such as Batchelor Institute, useful. This list or guide would give potential student a clearer picture of individual universities' track record in graduating Indigenous

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<sup>1</sup> As per page 5 of the Discussion Paper

students. For potential Indigenous candidates wishing to study Medicine for example – a comparable list of universities with graduation rates for Indigenous students may inform their decision on where to apply.

Graduate Employment data would need to be linked to the completions calculator. Understanding the journey through University study is one part of the equation. Employability upon graduation, including the likelihood of employment, wage bracket of future earnings, type of employment (full-time/part-time) and likely location of employment could greatly inform a potential students' choice of study. This type of information creates a linkage between the education and employment sectors, for Indigenous Australians it would demonstrate potential study areas with the most likelihood of employment. This may assist Indigenous students to maintain engagement with their study.

Given the diversity of experiences by Indigenous candidates in the tertiary sector, a completions calculator is ultimately unhelpful. Qualitative examples have traditionally been seen as a better means of engaging Indigenous students. One approach that may be beneficial are large-scale case-studies that showcase a range of pathways to university; degree patterns, extended candidature etc. This is an approach could allow prospective applicants to understand the flexibility of entry, educational and vocational journeys and opportunities.

4. *Can we enhance the tracking of students in tertiary education including movement between higher and vocational education (perhaps by linking the Commonwealth Higher Education Student Support Number and the VET sector Unique Student Identifier)?*

Tracking of students through a Unique Student Identifier would potentially contravene privacy rights of individuals. The proposal to create a meta-record for individuals can be compared to the Commonwealth Government's experience in the Health sector in introducing the Personally Controlled E-Health Records (PCEHR)<sup>2</sup> for patients. Take up of PCEHR has been low by both patients and doctors; of note is the Government's commissioning of a privacy impact assessment report<sup>3</sup> prior to the introduction of the PCEHR.

The Discussion Paper cites a higher probability that Indigenous students, as an equity grouping, will consider leaving University<sup>4</sup>. Therefore the availability of an Indigenous individuals' attempts at tertiary study could create a potential bias against the student applying to a new University.

The Wollotuka Institute manages alternative entry admission and enabling course admission to both Wollotuka-delivered degrees such as the Bachelor of Aboriginal Professional Practise and degrees delivered by faculties within the University of Newcastle. General admission processes are handled by the Student Admission Centre who score Indigenous applicants against a matrix system using normative Western standards, which are biased against Indigenous applicants<sup>5</sup>.

### **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?*

*(See suggestions on page 66)*

In terms of the strategies, all are strong recommendations and some have additional merit. For instance, the note that prior to entry there should be more engagement with students and career

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<sup>2</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Personally\\_Controlled\\_Electronic\\_Health\\_Record](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Personally_Controlled_Electronic_Health_Record). Accessed 5 July 2017.

<sup>3</sup>[http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Community\\_Affairs/eHealth/Report/c02](http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/eHealth/Report/c02). Accessed 5 July 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Page 45 citing Li, I and Carroll, D 2017 *Factors Influencing University Student Satisfaction, Dropout and Academic Performance*, The University of Western Australia.

<sup>5</sup> <http://theconversation.com/nothing-has-changed-since-indigenous-higher-ed-review-41354>. Accessed 5 July 2017.

advice should be provided from primary school is consistent with the Wollotuka Institutes' interactions with potential and incoming students. In both career advice and outreach services these are clear areas that require improvement. In our experience, few Indigenous secondary students are knowledgeable about what subjects to take for their chosen career and are indeed limited by the curricula options at their schools. The Wollotuka Institutes' *iBelieve Program* has been successful in engaging with primary and secondary Indigenous students from our catchment area, and assisting them in choosing pathways. This program sees Institute staff engaging with schools to develop student's understandings of the breadth of possible careers available and the pathways to accessing and developing into these careers. Students "can't be what they can't see" and more explicit teaching of options and pathways could be integrated into this area.

*S2U* is another schools program run by the Wollotuka Institute that engages with, and provides, further understanding of opportunities and pathways available to Indigenous students transitioning from secondary study to tertiary education. *S2U* identifies a base level of key attributes for secondary students that are valuable at a tertiary level, these include academic, social, emotional and cultural aspects.

The Wollotuka Institute's Community Engagement Team commence their work with students in Years 7 and 8 under the *iBelieve Program* which plants the seed of ambition for students to begin thinking of their future in a culturally safe space through talking circles, interactive activities and traditional Indigenous games. The program then moves to *Year 10 Insight Days* which aims to familiarise students with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Entry Program process into the University through to *UAC Talks* for Years 11 and 12 to inform students of their tertiary options whether they are taking ATAR or non-ATAR subjects. Students gain information on the University's alternative entry pathways to university such as the Yapug Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Enabling Program and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Entry Program as well as UAC admission.

A recent study<sup>6</sup> by led Professor Jenny Gore at the University of Newcastle identified that many high-achieving Indigenous primary and secondary students are not considering tertiary study as an option in the future. The results of this study may be useful to inform future initiatives for addressing Indigenous student retention and attrition.

### **Supporting students to complete their studies**

6. *What identification, intervention and support strategies are most effective in improving student completion? How could support strategies be better promoted and more utilised by those students who most need them?*

Use of the learning analytics to determine which students are not interacting with the material or their lecturer/tutor should be included when compiling a list of students that require intervention. These reports are easily generated via 'Blackboard' type sites and should be the first point of access to ascertain if students are struggling with their degree. Some basic outreach by the lecturer/tutor should be the first level, then followed by an 'engagement officer' or similar if there is a low score on an early assessment (which should be set prior to census) to ensure students have the opportunity to withdraw without penalty or change to another course without incurring fees.

The cooperation of an Indigenous Student Portfolio Representative to act as a peer mentor and buddy is an additional support strategy. A peer may be able to gather further information if a student is experiencing distress with better insight than a lecturer/tutor or professional staff member.

Access to tutoring for individual subjects via the Indigenous Tutorial Support program is another strategy that is employed for Indigenous students at the University of Newcastle. In 2017 the

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<sup>6</sup><http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0004944117710841>. Accessed 5 July 2017.

Wollotuka Institute is offered two delivery modes of tutoring for students – small group-based tutoring and individual tutoring. It is anticipated that students will be able gain greater access to tutoring support based on their preferred method of delivery.

Uptake of tutoring support in previous years has not been as great as it could have been; this was perhaps due to the previous scaled order of priority for tutoring being available to students on ‘show cause’ notice in the first instance, followed by those identified as ‘at risk’ then the general Indigenous student population. The University itself offers programs and initiatives such as Peer Assisted Tutoring and drop-in sessions run by Centre for Teaching and Learning and the Library.

Indigenous students report anecdotally that the pressure to work and earn income to fund their living costs during their degrees impacts upon their availability to access ITAES.

Indigenous students have responded that the provision of scholarships greatly assist their ability to complete. At the time of response to this Discussion Paper, the University of Newcastle has 258 Indigenous scholarship holders from a total of approx. 995 Indigenous student enrolments across the University. Student Central division at the University of Newcastle report that the minimum mean Grade Point Average of the Indigenous scholarship cohort is 5 (credit). This is a significant result over such a large sample size of Indigenous students.

Scholarships for Indigenous students are currently restricted to those enrolled on a full-time basis only, and excludes the majority of Indigenous student who are enrolled on a part-time basis. The University is currently unable to award at least 2 Donor scholarships designated for Indigenous students due to the condition that applicants be enrolled on a full-time basis.

The quarantining of ISSP funds by Government to universities for specific use on Indigenous programs and initiatives is another factor likely to garner immediate results in the delivery of service to Indigenous students.

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’ degrees courses? How much impact would there be on institutions who chose to offer such courses?*

Sub-bachelor degrees or similar diplomas etc should be provided and would encourage students to accumulate fixed achievement points, i.e. 10 credits points, towards a degree. This approach may assist in retention and achievement; students who require an early exit would be provided with a qualification and may potentially be more likely to return as they have received recognition for completing part of the program. This approach may provide a solution to the higher attrition rates in cohorts such as mature-aged students juggling family and work commitments alongside study, as well as students studying externally (not campus-based) and students enrolled on a part-time basis.

The methods and modes of study, alongside the ‘average’ student profile, has changed dramatically over the past sixty years in Australia since the Government first began funding universities<sup>7</sup>.

An examination of the expectations around progression and completions, and reasonable adjustments to these expectations could result in a higher completions rate. This may be predicated on the structuring of degrees attainable through a series of study ‘stages’, as in diploma to advanced diploma etc, rather than 3-4 year full-time study mode for a degree completion. An adjustment of this nature would affect the current funding model for Indigenous student participation which is based on the Equivalent Full-Time Student Load (EFTSL) only.

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<sup>7</sup> Pages 10-13 of the Discussion Paper.

## 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 Newcastle, we are experiencing the enrolment, progression and graduation of a second generation<sup>8</sup> of Indigenous students whose parents have previously studied and/or completed degrees through the university; and are on the cusp of the third generation commencing enrolment.

An approach which has been undertaken by Indigenous staff at the university is the enactment of a 'Stickiness' principle. This involves creating opportunities for students to take on roles within the university other than the assigned one as 'student', and expanding their participation at the university and within the Wollotuka Institute. On a basic level this could be a student who is in their third year of study being asked to take on the responsibility of a Student Portfolio Representative. The Portfolio Reps work alongside the Indigenous Student Engagement Officers to provide support to other Indigenous students studying within their faculty. They are seen as ambassadors for the Wollotuka Institute who liaise with the faculties and provide an early warning to the Indigenous Student Engagement Officers about students within their faculty who may be experiencing difficulties. Of limited success to date is the employment of final year students as Indigenous Tutorial Support tutors, due to the demands of their own study. Where possible, the employment of graduates and alumni as tutors, professional staff and academics assist in drawing Indigenous people (back) to the University and contributing after their study has completed.

A survey of exiting students, as mentioned on page 41 of the Discussion Paper, is highly useful to understand where changes and different approaches need to be taken by the University. The Wollotuka Institute will shortly initiate a survey of current Indigenous students to ascertain their satisfaction with our services, particularly in the area of Student Engagement. This is a pre-emptive measure designed to gain an understanding of what currently 'is' as opposed to what 'should be', with the intent to capture dissatisfaction before it leads to a student withdrawing or dropping out.

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

Historically, the Wollotuka Institute has sought engagement with other Indigenous peoples based at or within universities and higher education providers around the world. Anecdotally, issues such as high attrition rates of Indigenous students are comparable to those experienced by these providers also. Our capacity to extend beyond peer-to-peer discussion is limited.

The Wollotuka Institute holds Memoranda of Understandings (MOU's) with the University of British Columbia (Canada), Te Whare Wananga o Awanuiarangi (New Zealand), as well as accreditation from the World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium (WINHEWC). A strategy to build and extend upon these agreements could potentially be of great value to our Indigenous students.

In previous years, academic staff at the Wollotuka Institute have attended and participated at the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association (NAISA)<sup>9</sup> forum, a leading forum for Indigenous scholarship within the Academy, and the World Indigenous Peoples Conference on Education<sup>10</sup>.

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

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Consortium (NATSIHEC) has proven to be a valuable space for Indigenous higher education staff, both academic and

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-05-02/dr-mark-wenitong-reggae-musician-indigenous-health-leader/7368094>. Accessed 5 July 2017.

<sup>9</sup> [www.naisa.org](http://www.naisa.org)

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.wipce2017.com/>

professional, to share their experiences and ideas. It is a space for cross-institutional staff to discuss and debate issues of importance that affect the work of their sector.

Indigenous participant feedback for the 'Accelerating Indigenous Higher Education' project was gathered at the most recent NATSIHEC forum. During the course of undertaking the interviews, a number of participants commented that they could not share their experiences of working in the higher education sector in any other forum. An autonomous space which is identified for Indigenous matters and discussion to take place is important.

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

As mentioned in 6. – quarantining of ISSP funds to be expended on Indigenous student support.

Giving effect to a 'whole-of-university' approach regarding Indigenous priorities such as retention, progression and completions.

Acknowledging that financial stress is a factor of the majority of Indigenous students experiences at university, the University of Newcastle is exploring the idea of 'Reward' scholarships to recognise Indigenous students who have achieved above average GPA's for consecutive semesters, and awarding those who graduate with a High Distinction or Distinction GPA average over the course of their studies.

### **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?*

There should be additional powers to ensure compliance with the frameworks. The employment of Indigenous staff within universities themselves needs to be addressed. This could include the identification of steps to be undertaken in ensuring that Indigenous tutors and lecturers are being attracted to employment within the sector with appropriate training to undertake the work. This should be a cost worn by the university and not the Indigenous units out of their budget lines.

At the University of Newcastle, deeper engagement between the faculties and the Wollotuka Institute could take place. There is little reporting required from the faculties to track the type and/or level of support they are currently providing to Indigenous students.

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