

## **Submission to the Higher Education Standards Panel**

### **Consultation on Improving Retention, Completion and Success in Higher Education**

The NSW Department of Education welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the consultation on improving retention, completion and success in higher education.

The department has a strong interest in ensuring that students get the most benefit possible out of their higher education experience, both personally and for the State. Critical to this is a strong focus on meaningful qualifications, quality completions, and ensuring that students have equitable access to higher education opportunities.

#### **Equity**

There are a number of factors influencing retention, completion and success in higher education. It is well established that drivers of attrition are linked and often complex. As the paper notes, low socio-economic status (low SES) does not necessarily mean low achieving, however many students who are low SES also share other characteristics associated with poor retention and lower completion rates. Research conducted by ACER<sup>1</sup> in 2015 shows that low SES students are also more likely to be over 25 and studying part time, factors known to be linked to high attrition and low completion rates. These students' completion rates are half those of full time, high SES students aged 19 and under.

To improve equity and quality within higher education, the department acknowledges the interaction between funding and student outcomes. It should be noted, however, universities most dependent on the Commonwealth Grant Scheme enrol more students from equity groups and tend to be regionally-based. It will be important for the Commonwealth to ensure that linking funding and performance outcomes, such as completion, does not provide an incentive for universities to only admit those students who are most likely to complete. The risk of universities lowering their academic standards for coursework to improve student retention, completion and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Completing-University-in-a-Growing-Sector.pdf>

success data may also need to be addressed. Any flow-on impact on alternate entry (non-ATAR pathway) requirements may need to be monitored, in particular for initial teacher education programs.

It is acknowledged that some level of attrition is inevitable and many of the factors leading to attrition are beyond institutional control, including that many students now undertake different patterns of study. However, institutions should continue to prioritise efforts to attract and retain students from low SES backgrounds and ensure they have the support needed to succeed.

## **Data**

Transparency in admission, retention, completion and success data supports both policy makers and students in making informed decisions.

Data relating to attrition, retention and completion is currently publicly available via the Commonwealth's *Higher Education Statistics* collection. It is not in a format easily accessible to future and potential students who are making decisions about their course and institutional preferences.

As noted in the NSW Government's submission to the "Consultation on the Transparency of Higher Education Admissions", an easily accessible single portal that contains all necessary information would provide the best solution for potential students, and their teachers and parents. Such student-facing data needs to be provided at a course level as retention, completion and success data can vary between fields, modes of attendance and institutions.

The lack of clear data around retention and completion further exacerbates the disadvantages experienced by students in equity groups. The discussion paper notes that low SES students are more likely to have "made initial course and career choices that were less informed and therefore subject to change or cessation". Higher quality and more accessible information would contribute towards providing an even playing field for these students.

The paper also considers a "success predictor" to give prospective students an idea of how people with similar characteristics would succeed in a particular higher

education course. The usefulness of a “success predictor” at this stage carries risks and may work against the efforts of universities to encourage and support aspiration amongst equity groups.

Not enough is known about the interrelation of factors driving attrition. As the paper notes, only 22.5% of the historical overall variation in attrition between institutions is explained by measureable student and institutional characteristics. A “success predictor” would be unable to capture the effects of other factors impacting attrition such as motivation and resilience, which cannot be easily measured, and potentially dissuade some capable students from disadvantaged backgrounds from enrolling at university.

In addition to the transparency of retention, completion and success data, the department supports transparency in higher education standards and admissions processes. As noted in the NSW Government’s submission to the “Consultation on The Transparency of Higher Education Admissions”, published cut-off thresholds and entry procedures can have a significant influence on high school students’ course and institution selection and preference. Very high published cut-offs may discourage some students from even applying, when those students might have been admitted under other pathways.

Transparent information on admissions also assists policy makers and government. As part of [Great Teaching, Inspired Learning \(GTIL\) - Blueprint for Action](#), the NSW Government committed to increasing academic standards for initial teacher education admissions as a means to improve student outcomes and job opportunities for graduate teachers.

To plan for future demographic changes, improved transparency around course level admissions would assist the department to develop more robust supply and demand models and better respond to future workforce needs.

### **Pathways and support**

The paper notes “willingness to offer nested courses” as an intervention leading to student success. The department is supportive of nested qualifications where they are meaningful and industry supported.

The department is currently developing and promoting a number of innovative pathway models from schooling to VET and higher education, in conjunction with the NSW Department of Industry and NSW Skills Board. This work goes beyond traditional credit transfer arrangements and explores meaningful vocationally focused pathways that incorporate a number of qualifications with appropriate exit points. It also aims to demonstrate how integrated pathways can benefit students, employers, industry and institutions, while also encouraging institutions to initiate and develop their own pathways in conjunction with industry.

Examples of nested qualifications from the department's pathways work include a new Associate Degree of Integrated Care in Ageing, the integration of an Electrotechnology trade qualification within a Bachelor of Engineering and a pathway from a carpentry apprenticeship to a Bachelor of Construction Management, offered by the Master Builders Association. These pathways were developed after extensive consultation with employers and industry partners. The value of nested qualifications to both student success and industry relevance are where exit points align with meaningful and vocationally recognised qualifications and where there is flexibility in moving between qualifications in both directions.