

7 July 2017

Attention: Higher Education Group

Higher Education Standards Panel
c/- Department of Education and Training
C50MA7
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Via email to: highered@education.gov.au

Dear Panel Members

HESP Discussion Paper, June 2017 – Improving retention, completion and success in higher education

University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Discussion Paper. USC has, since its inception, had an unwavering commitment to a high-quality student experience; this is evidenced by the fact that we have received 5 Stars in the *Good Universities Guide* for Teaching Quality for the past 11 years, 5 Stars for Overall Satisfaction for the past 5 years, and were ranked 2nd nationally amongst the public universities in the most recent aggregated results in the Student Experience Survey, for both Teaching Quality and Overall Satisfaction.

However, student attrition in the commencing student cohort at USC has historically been significantly higher than the sector average. Hence strategies and initiatives to support student retention, completion and success have been a major focus for USC over the past 5 years, as has internal research designed to gain a fuller understanding of the reasons for student attrition in our student cohort, and our leadership and participation in externally funded research to advance sector understanding and practice. As a university which is committed to access and participation for people in our regional community, we have a diverse student cohort, with participation rates for most of the equity groups being higher at USC than the national average. In addition, around 48% of our school leaver student cohort are first in family to attend university. Mature age students (over 21 years of age) comprise 50% of our total number of students. USC has a low proportion of students studying online.

The different contexts and missions in the Australian higher education system mean that there will inevitably be variation in completion rates across the sector, and this needs to be acknowledged. Benchmarking of retention and completion rates is important and should occur both within an institution and between programs at different, but similar, institutions. However, attempting to reach a consensus on what “the sector’s” expectations are of completion rates implies that one figure will fit all institutions – all the evidence and historical data shows that

this is unachievable. Instead, USC would argue that the sector's expectations of completions should be that all capable students should be enabled to complete within a timeframe that aligns with the accepted maximum duration for study within each university. This means identifying those aspects under the control of universities, understanding the diversity of student needs and having sufficient resources to meet those needs.

Cohort completion data indicates that, for students in equity categories and regional students, it is not always possible to maintain a full-time enrolment. At times, less than full-time enrolment may be the only way a student can remain engaged in study. Recent research (see <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/completion-patterns-of-equity-students-in-regional-universities/>) highlights that the differences in completion rates between metropolitan and regional universities are structural, financial, geographical and employment-related. There are issues faced by students in regional communities which inhibit participation, contribute to attrition and delay completion (i.e. there is a "regionality" issue). As an example, poor public transport in a region may result in long travel times for students, which can be debilitating to maintain. Fewer opportunities for part-time employment in regions can also disproportionately affect students on constrained incomes in terms of their opportunity to continue their studies, which is why USC has a particular commitment to study support bursaries.

USC is implementing a broad range of evidence-based strategies to address student attrition (see for example <http://shapingtheregionalstudentexperience.com.au/findings-and-recommendations/>) and we have seen a slow but steady decline in attrition in recent years. Our identification, implementation, support and monitoring strategies are briefly captured below.

- Inclusion of measures and targets in our Strategic Plan and Academic Plan relating to student retention and success.
- Implementation of a whole-of-institution Student Retention and Engagement Blueprint which has four inter-related strategies.
 1. Strengthen the first year experience.
 2. Design and enact high quality curricula.
 3. Promote access, equity and diversity.
 4. Enable support for learning.
- Early identification of at-risk students and targeted intervention strategies.

Each of the Blueprint strategies is underpinned by a number of evidence-based initiatives, all of which have embedded evaluation plans to assess impact on student success. Comprehensive implementation of these strategies requires sufficient resources and, for smaller institutions, this is undoubtedly a challenge. At the sector-wide level, focusing available resources on identified student cohorts or institutions may provide a greater return on investment than generic, one-size-fits-all approaches.

Finally, USC is strongly of the view that approaches to improving retention and reducing attrition should not arbitrarily deny to many capable people the transformational impact of university education.

Yours sincerely



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