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Improving Retention, Completion and Success in Higher Education discussion paper

The comments set out below respond to a number of the questions posed in the Australian Government's discussion paper: *Improving Retention, Completion and Success in Higher Education*.

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

It is natural that some students will commence higher education and then decide not to continue – this also happens in VET courses, apprenticeships, and industry. Students will pursue the pathways that best meet their needs, so there will always be some level of attrition from higher education courses.

The four-year completion rate provides incomplete data. Four years is the full-time duration of many bachelor degrees (e.g. teaching, law), and many students study part-time, commence their course during the year, or take an approved break from study. The nine-year completion rate is likely a more useful measure or at least one that should be used in tandem to assess performance.

The paper states that VET students who withdraw from their studies may find a partial qualification useful for employment, but that this does not apply in higher education. It is difficult to see the distinction – most education helps with employability. Study undertaken in either sector is most useful when a qualification is achieved, but completing some units will contribute to improved employment outcomes, and there should be means to provide employers with evidence of all partial study achievements.

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

The existing adjusted figures are preferable to raw numbers, since the former take account of the diversity of providers and their students. Performance funding should be used to drive improvement over time, and be calibrated to the nature of the student population studying at the provider. This will avoid the circumstance in which the rewards go to those with low attrition simply because of the characteristics of their student cohort.

Attrition across the sector has been relatively stable for the past decade, and analysis by Universities Australia has shown that Australian attrition rates compare favourably with countries with a similar higher education system. Improvement is therefore likely to be small, particularly in the short-term and the impact of performance funding will take some time to show, given the lagging nature of the retention indicator. Continued growth in the proportion of part-time and online students is expected, which will further affect attrition rates since these students are more likely to withdraw from study, due to external demands beyond the influence of providers.

It would be useful to add the following data to the Higher Education Student Collection:

- Labour force status – would assist with identifying retention strategies particular to those in the workforce;

- Centrelink access – this is highly correlated with retention;
- Main study reason – student motivation is correlated with retention; and,
- Unit start and end dates – due to variations in census dates across providers and units, this would help with data analysis.

An additional indicator for students who transfer from higher education to the VET sector (to complement the metric on those who leave higher education) would also be useful.

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?*

A strength of the QILT website lies in its simplicity and ease of use. Feature creep may reduce its usefulness over time, so the addition of information must be carefully considered.

ECU does not support the suggested completions calculator. As mentioned in the discussion paper, prospective students are biased towards optimism. Most are likely to disregard the results of a completions calculator, unless it confirms their existing bias. Hence its value is questionable.

Furthermore, this might be expected to influence prospective students from equity groups more than others as they would receive the lowest results. These students face the need to relocate, lack of understanding or support from friends and family, financial or caregiving pressures, disability, or language or cultural differences. A calculator that explicitly tells them they are likely to fail will lower their confidence, and ultimately encourage that outcome.

It is doubtful that a completions calculator would be sophisticated enough to include critical personal attributes like resilience, drive and potential. Overall, individual predictors would be counter-productive, difficult to design, misleading and an ineffective use of resources.

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)?*

It would be beneficial for all students to have a unique identifier, including those who do not access Commonwealth support. Ideally this universal student number would be assigned on first enrolment in primary school and would remain unchanged thereafter.

5. *What strategies would further strengthen outreach and careers advice to assist students making decisions about higher education?*

Earlier careers advice in secondary schools will be beneficial only if focused on raising employment aspirations, rather than encouraging students to make premature decisions regarding their future careers. Lack of understanding about careers choices is often, due to limited life experience or maturity, and understanding of their own strengths and interests, rather than due to scarcity of information.

High school students receive most of their careers advice from teachers, parents, peers and the internet, and many of these sources provide out-of-date or biased information. Careers advisors should teach students how to navigate and filter this information effectively and how to gain experiences that will contribute to better-informed decisions. Providing training and information to other school staff would also improve the advice students receive.

ECU recommends that funds from the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program's National Priorities Pool be used to develop and provide a systematic and more effective approach to careers advice and aspiration-raising in secondary schools.

More flexible degree structures would allow higher education students to pursue new interests as their knowledge and experience increases.

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?*

Universities currently have the capacity to offer intermediate qualifications, although it is unclear whether there is significant demand for these from students or employers.

Student demand for “opt-in” nested courses (i.e. sub-bachelor courses that articulate to bachelor degrees) has been limited due to the up-front costs. The expansion of Commonwealth supported places to sub-bachelor courses may increase demand, and therefore supply, for both “opt-in” and “opt-out” (alternative exit with a lower qualification) nested courses.

Employers desiring shorter qualifications may prefer the practical nature of VET courses, so some effort to assess the true market demand for higher education diplomas would be beneficial to guide adoption.

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?*

To quote the discussion paper, “TEQSA already possesses a clear mandate to oversight student attrition, retention and completion.” ECU cannot comment on non-university higher education providers, but the current level of transparency and regulatory oversight is sufficient for public universities in this regard.

If you would like further information or clarification on matters raised in this letter, please contact me by email: a.omari@ecu.edu.au or by telephone: (08) 6304 2765.

Yours sincerely



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