

UNIVERSITIES AUSTRALIA SUBMISSION

SUBMISSION TO HESP ON RETENTION, COMPLETION AND SUCCESS

JULY 2017

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Further inquiries should be made to the Chief Executive:

GPO Box 1142 Canberra ACT 2601
Ph: +61 (0)2 6285 8100
Fax: +61 (0)2 6285 8101
Email: contact@universitiesaustralia.edu.au

UNIVERSITIESAUSTRALIA.EDU.AU

ABN 53 008 502 930

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1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Universities Australia commends the Higher Education Standards Panel (the Panel) for the extensive research it has undertaken in preparing its discussion paper on *Improving Completion, Retention and Success in Higher Education*.

The Panel's findings that, contrary to some public claims, there is no crisis in attrition rates Australian universities is consistent with UA's analysis. Attrition rates have been relatively stable for at least ten years, despite large increases in enrolments.

Nevertheless, we agree with the Panel that we should continue to strive to improve completion rates. It is important to note, however, that a completion can be achieved within a single institution but can also involve a variety of pathways and providers.

Improving completion rates necessitates an understanding of the reasons why students leave. These are many and varied but typically go to financial challenges, work and family responsibilities, health and stress issues. The paper concludes that while the reasons vary for every non-completing student, there is a strong correlation between part-time study and non-completion. Age, low academic achievement, external study, field of education and low socio-economic status are also relevant to higher rates of attrition.

Identifying effective policy responses is less straightforward. The pitfalls of taking an overly simplistic target-based approach—such as the UK's Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)—are many. Not least of these is the potential cost to taxpayers – and universities - of establishing large bureaucracies that achieve little.

The work of the Panel will be highly relevant to the performance-based funding proposal that forms part of the Government's 2017 higher education package. Measures that support improvement in completion are much more likely to deliver outcomes than punitive approaches that can only serve to further weaken the capacity of the institutions that support those in most need.

Blunt, externally imposed metrics and targets are far less likely to improve student success than more sophisticated approaches that acknowledge universities and their students as best placed to identify the most effective strategies and approaches.

The student's best interests must be central to policy objectives. Some students may be better suited to alternative education or work pathways. Universities should not be punished for supporting students in pursuing alternative study/work choices. Where a student makes an informed decision not to continue with university study, but to do something else instead, the result is not only a better match for the student, but also avoids additional, inefficient expenditure – both public and private.

While many of the reasons for withdrawing from university study are outside of a university's ability to influence, there are several relevant areas where universities are working to improve retention:

- The provision of accessible information for prospective students;
- strengthened student support;
- engaging learning environments; and
- ensuring that teaching staff are equipped with the tools and knowledge to identify, monitor and support academically at-risk students.

It is also important to be aware of the need to design policy responses that accommodate the rapid evolution of modes of delivery, pedagogies and higher education structures. In responding to

profound social, technological, economic and industrial changes, higher education policy frameworks must encourage and support, rather than stifle, innovation.

Principles

In formulating its advice to Government, UA recommends the adoption of the following principles:

- Some attrition of students and non-completion of courses will occur for legitimate and sound reasons.
- Prospective students are entitled to sufficient and accessible information to assist them in making study choices.
- Providers should be assessed on those factors over which they have control.
- Policy settings should not serve to constrain innovation in education delivery and provision of student support.
- Measures of provider performance must take account of sector and student diversity.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- Performance funding be removed from the current higher education support legislation amendment so it can be properly considered through a broad-based consultative process before being legislated;
- The Department of Education and Training provide statistics and analysis through data-matching with shorter turn-around times than presently.
- A sector-wide exit survey be developed and deployed to withdrawing students.
- The Department of Education and Training cease publishing 'raw' attrition rates.
- Relevant Federal Government websites that provide information for prospective students be consolidated into a single platform.
- Governments revisit the concept of a single student identifier that can be used to track all school, VET and higher education students.
- The National Career Education Strategy be expanded to ensure that mature-age students have access to appropriate and effective career and education advice.

2 INTRODUCTION

Universities Australia (UA) welcomes the opportunity to provide this response to the Higher Education Standards Panel's (the Panel) discussion paper *Improving Retention, Completion and Success in Higher Education*.

This submission makes some general observations on the issues raised in the discussion paper and responds to the specific questions posed.

This submission should be read in conjunction with other submissions made by our member universities and groups of member universities.

2.1 THERE IS NO CRISIS IN ATTRITION

UA welcomes the Panel's findings that public assertions of a crisis in higher education attrition rates are not supported by the facts.

Overall levels of attrition have been steady for over a decade and compare favourably with levels in previous generations. This stability is a considerable achievement in a time of rapid increase in student numbers and periodic cuts to public investment.

There is no reason for complacency and, while there is no 'right' rate of attrition, institutions—working in partnership with governments—should continue to work to improve completion rates.

Attrition should be as low as it can be without impacting negatively on academic quality or restricting student choice. It must be acknowledged that unless standards drop, not every student will pass. Not every student should be encouraged or pressured to complete when other options would suit them better. Conversely, Government policy should not encourage providers to restrict enrolment to those students 'guaranteed' to pass.

2.2 WHAT IS AN “ACCEPTABLE” ATTRITION RATE?

The HESP discussion paper reinforces the findings of previous studies, concluding that attrition has many causes, and may relate to one or more of the following elements:

- Personal factors (e.g. financial, health, family or social responsibilities);
- Incorrect or inadequate advice or information prior to enrolment;
- Inappropriate or insufficient support services (academic and personal);
- Unwelcoming or unsupportive institutional environments;
- Lack of student engagement; and
- Teaching quality and pedagogies.

Clearly, minimising attrition and maximising retention is a complex interplay between admissions, student support and teaching.

It is vital to acknowledge that even if universities and government implement best practice in all these areas some students will still leave the system and not return. Put simply, life can get in the way.

In the absence of detailed evidence, it is very difficult to estimate how many students will leave for reasons beyond institutional control.

The discussion paper (p.15) notes that the Government may make completion rates (and by implication attrition and retention) a criterion for access to the proposed 7.5 per cent performance based element of the Commonwealth Grant Scheme.

UA cautions against moving towards a system that relies on blunt, externally-imposed metrics. Policy settings would be better aimed at identifying effective interventions that deliver the best outcomes for students and support a culture of continuous improvement. The twin intent should be:

- For students to have access to the best information they can to help them make the best education decisions; and
- To support universities in areas where they can positively influence retention.

Individual universities could be encouraged to set their own targets informed by experience and knowledge of their student demographics and modes of delivery and, where possible, benchmark these against other, similar institutions.

2.3 THE ROLE OF INNOVATION AND THE NEED FOR POLICY FLEXIBILITY

Policy settings must not unnecessarily constrain innovative practice.

Innovation in higher education can come quickly.

Technological change in coming years will continue to be fast, making flexibility and responsiveness particularly important for universities.

The traditional view of a bachelor degree as three years of study undertaken full-time, on campus and continuously at one institution is changing, and will continue to evolve. This will have profound impacts not only on funding programs and fixed policy structures such as the Australian Qualifications Framework, but also on data collection and analysis, and the nature of teaching.

“Rigidity of funding paradigms in the face of inevitable changes to course structure and qualifications” was nominated by Deputy Vice-Chancellors (Academic) as one of the top three challenges facing teaching and learning in an informal survey carried out by UA earlier in 2017.

We must refrain from implementing policy and funding settings that serve as a straitjacket for evolution and innovation, and resist policy-making that assumes—and reinforces—a static, traditional model of higher education.

Instead governments should work with the sector on policy design and structure that enables universities to build teaching models that are fit for purpose and right for the times including a near-universal system that is based on multiple entry and exit points.

2.4 CURRENT GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

2.4.1 THE IMPORTANCE OF HEPPP

The discussion paper underplays the critical role that the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) has in building aspiration in prospective students and in supporting students to remain in study after they have enrolled.

It is increasingly apparent that the HEPPP has helped drive an historic increase in university participation by people from low SES backgrounds and other under-represented groups.

The evaluation of HEPPP commissioned by Government in 2016 found that:

- all universities, together with the majority of schools and other organisations that have partnered with universities through HEPPP, endorse the program and have seen positive impacts on students' aspirations to, and success in, higher education; and
- since the introduction of HEPPP there has been a strong increase in the number of low SES students enrolling.

HEPPP strongly supports university efforts to help students overcome the reality of systemic disadvantage.

UA supports the Government's proposals to enshrine HEPPP and its funding in legislation. We also support the proposed changes to allocation of HEPPP funding, including the principle of allocating a proportion of the total fund on the basis of the success and retention of low socio-economic students.

Projects funded by the National Priorities Pool component of the HEPPP, though focused on low SES student participation and retention, will have substantial spin-off benefits for retention and success across the whole student cohort.

UA members' submissions to the Panel, and programs listed at Attachment A, provide numerous examples of outstanding HEPPP funded initiatives, and the outcomes that these have achieved.

2.4.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF PATHWAYS AND SUB BACHELOR PROGRAMS

UA supports the proposed extension of the demand-driven funding system to sub-bachelor courses. This is a change that UA has advocated for some time.

Providing more Commonwealth-supported places (CSPs) in associate degree, advanced diploma and diploma courses will improve the availability and diversity of pathways into bachelor degrees, especially for students who may not have performed at school at a level that reflects their abilities.

Provision of more of these places will expand the variety of pathways into higher education, and make it easier for students to enrol in the right course. This should reduce attrition and lead to more successful outcomes for students. It will also help address quality concerns about lower ATAR students by providing an attractive pathway that focuses on providing strong academic preparation for these students.

2.4.3 CURRENT BUDGET PROPOSALS FOR CONDITIONAL PERFORMANCE FUNDING

Universities are concerned that a hastily designed performance funding model, together with reduced public investment, would potentially homogenise education provision and drive it towards a lowest cost, least risk model. It is crucial that any performance funding system should instead be designed to support and encourage institutional, course and delivery diversity.

One of the strongest features of the Australian university system is its diversity. Universities offer different mixes of modes of delivery (on-line, face to face, distance, external); theoretical and practical foci; balances of full-time and part-time. Fields and levels of education also vary greatly among institutions.

Differences in institutions' profiles are known to have an impact on attrition, progress and success rates. Mature age and part-time students are much more likely to withdraw from study, often in response to difficulties juggling work and family responsibilities. However, we would not want to discourage part-time study out of a misplaced policy objective to increase completion.

The design of any performance-funding system must take account of this diversity. It would be inappropriate and unfair—as well as ineffective—to hold all universities to a common, externally imposed standard.

Performance funding must also avoid perverse incentives, such as penalising universities that enrol large numbers of students from groups traditionally under-represented in higher education.

Some forms of performance funding have been introduced in other education systems around the world but with limited success.

In New Zealand, the recently introduced performance funding system holds all universities to a common standard, and penalises universities whose completion, retention and progression rates are below the sector median. The New Zealand Productivity Commission (NZPC), in their 2017 report on *New Models of Tertiary Education*, however, has recommended that this system be abolished.

The NZPC found that the system was stifling innovation in teaching practice and leading to a culture of risk aversion and homogenisation. The system was penalising providers when students left study early for reasons beyond the providers' control.

While performance funding has been widely incorporated in many US state-based higher education systems, it has had limited success and in many cases has been shown to have little positive impact on actual performance. A major study examining data from over 500 institutions observed over an 18-year period shows student outcomes were not enhanced by performance funding policies and outcomes even declined following the adoption of these measures. It found that “at best, these policies are ineffective, and, at worst, they are negatively linked to student performance.”¹

¹ Rutherford, A., & Rabovsky, T. (2014). Evaluating impacts of performance funding policies on student outcomes in higher education. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 655, 185– 208.

In its submission to the Senate Committee on Education and Employment's inquiry into the *Higher Education Support Legislation Amendment (A More Sustainable, Responsive and Transparent Higher Education System) Bill 2017*, UA recommended that the performance funding provisions should be removed in order to allow for a broader consultation process with universities, students, employers and other stakeholders. We reaffirm this recommendation to the Panel.

3 ANSWERS TO SPECIFIC QUESTIONS IN THE DISCUSSION PAPER

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

In the modern world, where the student demographic is so diverse, we cannot expect that all students should or will complete at the same speed. Some will pursue a traditional pathway of steady annual progression and completion in minimum time at one provider, but many others will have a more complicated journey through higher education, interspersing part-time and full time study, taking leave of absence, moving between providers, and changing to course or mode of study.

UA would oppose any proposed performance metrics which included measures of time to complete.

It is vital that completion metrics should make due allowance for differences in student demographics across the sector. Not all students, nor the external pressures they face, are the same, and they should not be considered so for the sake of simplifying measurement and data reporting.

A mechanism that allows for the comparison of like with like student cohorts attending various institutions (for instance, "mature-age students studying online" or "completion rates of regional students at regional universities") would give more sensible and more useful information that would inform practice and improved service provision.

Institutions could be encouraged to establish their own internal improvement targets that reflect their missions, strategy and student cohort.

We also suggest that exploring some form of a student learning entitlement that does not discourage the pursuit of life-long learning, would be worthwhile.

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

UA has argued for some time that it is unnecessary, unhelpful and misleading to continue the practice of publishing both 'raw' and 'adjusted' attrition rates. Despite frequent statements from government and providers that only the latter reflect the actual situation, the larger, raw, figure is the number most frequently reported. This misrepresents the true picture of attrition and retention. It is the 'adjusted' figure that corresponds to the general understanding – both within and outside the sector – of what 'attrition' means. 'Raw' attrition rates are based on institutional data and do not track students who move between institutions. The Commonwealth Higher Education Student Support Number (CHESSN) is a unique (higher education) student identifier which makes 'raw' attrition rates redundant. Since the CHESSN was introduced in 2005, there is no good reason to continue publishing 'raw' attrition rates in 2017.

Most of the data needed to help us better understand, and target support for, retention, attrition and success is already collected by providers and reported to DET.

More timely delivery of these statistics through the Department's data systems would improve understanding of trends in attrition and retention.

Currently there is a substantial lag – periods longer than 12 months are not uncommon – between delivery of data to the Department, and the provision of resulting reports. Changes to university policy and practice have long lead times and any additional time spent waiting for data reduces the ability of providers to respond with agility and innovation to change.

We note also that data reports based on annual collections are themselves becoming increasingly disrupted by new models of teaching periods and of course delivery. As the academic year changes form, data and analysis needs to follow suit.

More analysis of the available data would also be beneficial. The Department could organise more frequent and higher profile releases of completion data.

As for attrition data, the student demographic is diverse, and this diversity overlaps with differences in mode and intensity of study. A low SES student attending a distance education Bachelor degree program through one university is not comparable to a low SES student studying a sub-bachelor program part time, on-campus at another university.

Simple univariate reporting of data of the sort currently provided – where only the low SES element of the above example is captured – tells an incomplete story around attrition, retention and success. A multivariate approach would offer a more detailed and informative understanding.

The discussion paper and its data appendix is an excellent example of the depth of analysis and level of nuance that can be drawn from the range of information that is already available.

A very helpful addition to the available suite of instruments would be an exit survey of students choosing to withdraw – whether temporarily or permanently. While some universities try to do this, it requires substantial time and effort and the response rates are typically very low, making the overall utility of the exercise less than it could be. UA would support a recommendation from the Panel for a general exit survey. This would have to be implemented and administered at an institutional level due to the difficulty of identifying former students.

How could government websites, such as QILT and Study Assist, be improved to assist students to make the right choices? Would a predictor for prospective students, such as a completions calculator, be useful and where would it best be situated?

The recently released plan to increase the transparency of admissions processes already goes a long way to address this issue. We note in particular the intent to develop a national admissions information platform which should greatly enhance the availability and comparability of information for potential students. We look forward to working with the Department of Education and Training on this project.

Existing government websites, particularly QILT and Study Assist, already offer useful information. However, they are not without problems.

First, the two websites are separate and not clearly linked. A single one-stop shop for information is recommended. This would also provide the opportunity to streamline effort and reduce duplication. How these websites link with the proposed national platform will be critical.

Secondly, the presentation of information, particularly on Study Assist, caters primarily for school leavers intending to study full time. There is little information clearly directed at prospective mature aged students or those from under-represented groups.

The use of data on QILT, while accurate, is perhaps not as useful as it could be. In particular, it reports on field of education rather than by course of study, when the latter is the more relevant search term. Course of study is also consistent with the work done on admissions transparency.

Thirdly, there may be benefit in inviting providers—on a voluntary basis—to include specific information on the services they provide.

Student perspectives and input should be sought as part of the process for designing or altering student-facing websites and information portals.

UA does not support the use of a ‘completion calculator’. This is a very simplistic approach to a very complex matter. A ‘completion calculator’ would simply estimate the average likelihood of completion for a student with similar characteristics to the student submitting the enquiry. Any feasible list of characteristics will be incomplete, in that it will not include factors that are difficult to measure or which are not directly observed. There is no reason to trust that an average for a group, calculated on this basis, can or should be a guide for an individual prospective student.

Further, a calculator is more likely to discourage prospective students, rather than to inform them. Prospective students most likely to use such a mechanism would be those who already have doubts about enrolling and are most likely to be discouraged. Given that attrition rates are known to be higher for low SES and Indigenous students, and for mature age students, there is a real risk that a completions calculator would discourage participation among these groups.

A completions calculator appears to be contrary to the aim of getting students the best and most appropriate pre-enrolment information.

Can we enhance the tracking of students in tertiary education including movements between higher and vocational education (perhaps through linking the CHESN and the VET USI)?

Yes. The ability to track students across providers and across sectors would provide very useful information to assist in better targeting engagement and support arrangements.

However a number of systemic issues would need to be resolved.

The most significant of these is that neither the USI nor CHESN identifies school students. School leavers only gain a tertiary identifier when they enrol at a tertiary provider. This means that the impact of any school outreach activities via HEPPP or otherwise on that student cannot easily be assessed and the student’s entire learning journey cannot be considered as a whole.

UA recommends further exploration of the concept of a universal student identifier. This has been mooted in the past but was not pursued largely due to inter-jurisdictional issues (as schools and TAFEs are State-funded while higher education is supported by the Commonwealth). These obstacles are not insurmountable and the benefit of having a single student identifier for life will greatly increase the transparency of the entire education system, allowing for a clearer picture of the student study journey and better targeted support programs.

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

The Australian tertiary education sector is diverse, with many providers offering a variety of courses, modes of delivery, educational foci and learning environments. Students overall will do better in tertiary education if they can find their ‘best fit’ course from amongst the available options. Access to sufficient, well-presented information helps students make well-informed choices. In turn this will support improvements in retention and completion rates.

Careers advice is not solely the responsibility of universities and other higher education providers. The wider community, including schools, business and professional groups, government, the vocational education sector, family and friends and of course the prospective students themselves, all have responsibility to ensure that adequate information and relevant advice is available and accessible.

UA supports the intent behind the National Career Education Strategy (NCES) for school students, but it is easy to fall into the trap of assuming that all prospective higher education students come from school. Mature-age students also have a need for accurate career advice, and of course they do not have access to school careers services. As mature age students are one of the more at-risk cohorts for attrition, good careers advice for this group is particularly important. The assistance that universities provide should be supplemented by a coordinated, all-of-community expansion of the NCES.

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

The discussion paper correctly points to the importance of further development and use of detailed learning analytic tools in assisting universities in the early identification of at-risk students and for targeted intervention and support. All universities are investing heavily in these systems and it is expected that they will demonstrate effective results over time as universities and their staff become more familiar with their use and capability.

However, these are unlikely to completely replace personal or face-to-face support that is provided by universities. Approachable staff, dedicated support units (such as Indigenous support units) and building support networks between students (both academic and extra-curricular) contribute to a sense of inclusion and support.

UA notes that there are increasing numbers of third-party providers that offer student support services, either indirectly via encouragement and aspiration building (such as the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience) or directly through study assistance (such as YourTutor). These organisations are increasingly entering into formal partnerships with universities but, importantly, they also offer their services directly to students.

As the discussion paper notes, one of the most significant personal factors driving attrition is financial hardship. The need for students to earn liveable wages also factors into decisions to study part-time or externally, which in turn influences the speed of completion.

This year UA is undertaking its periodic survey and analysis of student financial circumstances. This will give an indication of the scale of hardship faced by today's students. The previous survey (2011) indicated that financial hardship was most prevalent in underrepresented student groups and those with the highest attrition rates (especially Indigenous and regional students).

Results from this study, and others, should inform a reconsideration of the level and targeting of Government student financial support. Better targeted student support to those who need it most should translate into improvements in retention and completion rates and will help guarantee the Government's investment in these students through the Commonwealth Grant Scheme and HELP.

At Attachment A is a long list of programs and strategies, and the outcomes achieved, employed by our members to support student success. These should assist the Panel in better understanding the level of commitment that universities have in supporting their students to succeed and in providing an insight into program effectiveness.

What more could be done to encourage institutions to offer intermediate qualifications? Should providers 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?

Many universities already offer nested qualifications and appropriate exit (and entry) points within course structures both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. UA notes that nested qualifications are sufficiently widespread that a guidance note on the subject has been developed by TEQSA.

There are, however, limitations to their expansion across the qualifications spectrum. Many of the more technical, vocationally-oriented courses, in particular, would have difficulty in nesting lower level qualifications within degree structures.

There are possible policy and funding implications that would also need to be thought through for nested qualifications to become more widespread. These include:

- the potential for funding models offering perverse incentives to enrol students in inappropriate level courses;
- impacts on the Australian Qualifications Framework (due for review in 2017); and
- greater homogeneity of course offerings in response to increased student mobility driving demand for the full recognition of prior learning of qualifications awarded by other institutions.

What new and innovative approaches do you believe are improving student completion at individual higher education providers?

UA members have provided many examples of activities and strategies used to improve student completion rates, provided at Attachment A. We note that while many of these have been funded through HEPPP many others have been funded by universities directly, reflecting their commitment to retention and success.

UA also wishes to emphasise its own work in seeking to increase the success and participation rates of Indigenous students. As well as the expected benefit it will have for this under-represented group, the Indigenous Strategy also provides a very useful example of how universities work together towards common goals when funding or policy settings do not drive more competitive behaviour.

What can we learn about enhancing student success from the international experience?

UUK Social Mobility Report

Universities UK produced a report in late 2016 on improving social mobility through higher education.² While not purely focused on attrition, retention and success, the report makes many recommendations that are relevant to attrition and completion. These include:

- The creation of a basket of indicators shared across the sector to measure disadvantage in applicants and students, using both population-based and individual indicators.

² <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2016/working-in-partnership-final.pdf>

- There should be better sharing of data between schools, colleges, universities and educational charities, to enable each sector to understand the trajectories of students and to facilitate better targeting and coordination of widening participation activities.
- The range of flexible pathways and transitions between schools, colleges, alternative providers and universities should be explored with better data to articulate the transition at each stage.
- UCAS [the UK Tertiary Admission Centre] should work with the sector to devise a consent statement that would enable students engaged in outreach programmes across the UK to share their progress.
- That employers and universities collaborate and coordinate outreach activities, including the promotion of sector-specific collaborative models and the provision of careers advice.

UA commends this work to the HESP.

Productivity Commission of New Zealand report on New Models of Tertiary Education

The NZ Productivity Commission released its report on new models of tertiary education in March 2017. This report³ is a root-and-branch analysis of the existing structure of NZ tertiary sector. As with the UK report there are many elements of this report that are relevant to the Australian experience.

Of particular interest is the commentary on the recent policy settings around providing Performance-Linked Funding based on sector-wide median retention, progression and completion rates.⁴ The NZPC recommended the abolition of this program, stating that it is a blunt instrument that does not drive positive provider behaviour or lead to better student outcomes (Recommendation 15.10).

The NZPC also recommended that existing government data collection on completion and retention become more nuanced and take more account of students' prior achievement and other factors (Recommendation 13.4).

American research into higher education performance funding programs

Large scale longitudinal studies of American higher education providers have found that performance funding programs intended to improve college success rates and student outcomes have actually had neutral or even negative effects.⁵

These studies suggest that if performance funding schemes are to work they need to use metrics that are clearly aligned with individual institutional profiles and missions, measure changes over longer time scales and be backed with funding and technical support for providers.

³ <http://www.productivity.govt.nz/inquiry-content/2683?stage=4>

⁴ Under this program, 5 per cent of NZ's equivalent of the CGS is at risk. Government sets upper and lower performance thresholds. Providers performing above the upper threshold gain the full amount of reserved funding. For those providers below the lower threshold, all of the reserved funding is withheld. A portion of the reserved funding is withheld for providers whose performance scores fall between the upper and lower thresholds.

⁵ Tandberg, D and Hillman, N (2013). State Performance Funding for Higher Education: Silver Bullet or Red Herring? (WISCAPE POLICY BRIEF). Madison, WI.

Rutherford, A. and Rabovsky, T. (2014). Evaluating impacts of performance funding policies on student outcomes in higher education. The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences, 655, 185-208

What are the most effective ways for providers to share best practice?

There is a need for increased sharing of qualitative data to provide context to the quantitative data currently available and to report on experience and results from specific activities.

It should be noted that universities already share good practices across a range of areas. The IRU network, for instance, has initiated a portal for posting case studies and examples from its members and other interested institutions.⁶

The 2017 Federal Budget allocated to UA the responsibility for hosting the repository of Office for Learning and Teaching resources, and for running the annual University Teaching Awards. These two processes are valuable for ensuring that experiential research and recognition of teaching are supported.

However, the Commonwealth Government should retain responsibility for the mechanisms necessary to achieve these policy objectives. The decision to abolish the Office for Learning and Teaching, in this context, is regrettable.

How can successful completion strategies be embedded into provider practice?

Teaching and support staff need to be equipped with the skills and tools to support the success of all capable students, especially those deemed to be 'at risk'. Mention has been made previously of learning analytics, but these must supplement, not replace, traditional features such as pedagogical skill and enthusiasm, curricula and assessment that is inclusive of diverse cultural and social backgrounds, and communication between student and staff (and student to student).

Professional development and increased teaching professionalism is important in this regard. UA notes that several initiatives have emerged in Australia in recent years. The UK Higher Education Academy has set up an Australasian branch and now has over 1000 fellows in Australia and NZ, while the Australian University Teaching Criteria and Standards (the result of an OLT project) are being used by a number of universities.

Universities (and other providers) are ultimately responsible for identifying the practices that will work best for them and their particular student demographic and community, communicating these to their staff and encouraging their use.

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?

TEQSA has sufficient powers. Its normal processes, focusing on risk, necessity and proportionality, are adequate to identify any provider that has an upward trend in, or sustained high levels of, unexplained attrition. The agency has appropriate powers of intervention to address any instance that may arise.

Should TEQSA's monitoring of general sectoral trends identify any broader increase in attrition rates, this question could be revisited.

⁶ <http://app.iru.edu.au/national-innovation-case-study-collection/>

4 NOTES ON THE SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS ON PAGE 66 OF THE DISCUSSION PAPER

The discussion paper (p.66) provides a list of suggested strategies and interventions that research and experience suggests may have a positive impact on retention, completion and success.

Many of the topics canvassed in this list are addressed above. We make some additional comments on these suggestions below.

Prior to entry

This topic is extensively canvassed above.

Attrition of students who have found themselves in a course or provider that is not a right fit for them can be minimised if prospective students are equipped with appropriate information prior to enrolment and know what to expect of the course, the provider and the possible outcomes post-graduation.

While seeking to increase primary school students' educational aspirations is a worthy aim that should be pursued, UA expresses caution about targeting primary school students with career advice. We know that in the unfolding era of digital disruption many of today's jobs will not survive and many of tomorrow's jobs are as yet unknown.

A culture of diversity

Students from all walks of life should be made to feel that they belong on any university campus in Australia. Feelings of alienation increase stress, which is one of the leading causes of attrition.

Universities need to tailor programs for students of different backgrounds and ensure that support staff and academics are given appropriate training or information to interact with all students with respect and understanding.

UA notes that in our Indigenous Strategy 2017-2020 cultural competency training for staff and non-Indigenous students is a priority.

Institutional policies to support student success

In this submission UA has noted that universities and government should put the needs of the student first in all policies and activities targeting attrition and completion.

Universities must be allowed to develop their own culture of student success, but elements they might consider include:

- Institutional targets for retention, completion and success;
- KPIs for senior staff;
- Promotion policies that reward quality teaching;
- Investment in learning analytic tools and professional development for teaching staff;
- Interaction with and input from community leaders, especially from under-represented groups;
- Maintaining contact with students who are taking breaks from study; and

- Providing flexibility on study hours, modes of delivery and assessment tasks.

Teaching and learning

Academic seniority does not necessarily equate with teaching quality. We contest TEQSA's finding that more senior academic staff somehow correlates to increased student success.

Instead, we argue that the number of well trained teaching staff given access to ongoing professional development and provided the analytic tools and techniques to improve classroom performance is a more powerful correlation.

Of course, ongoing training of teaching staff – including the sessional staff who have much of the teaching workload – is resource intensive, and the ability of universities to undertake this work is threatened by cuts to university funding.

Support services

Ideally, student support will be available to all and tailored according to need, whether a student is on-campus or external, Indigenous or International, first in family or from a long line of graduates.

Learning analytics and information gained through the tracking of students' entire learning experience, as suggested above, will be very useful in this regard, but its success also depends greatly on the skill of support and academic staff and the financial ability of universities to provide the services required.

Students need to be regularly canvassed on the service provision of their university, so provision can be constantly updated.

Accountability

UA reinforces its statements above that, while universities are ultimately responsible for their own attrition and retention rates, the issue is complex. It would be counterproductive to assess all universities' performance against a Platonic ideal of success. Each university has a unique set of circumstances and unique student footprint that must be taken into account.

ATTACHMENT A: EXAMPLES OF INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICE

UA called for members to provide examples of their institutional policies or programs that are focussed on retention, completion and success. Universities will also have provided examples in their own submissions, and we commend these to the Panel.

This section displays the strength and range of sector effort to improve completion, retention and success rates. The diversity of the programs amply illustrates the need to allow flexibility of approaches, to suit different types of institutions and student circumstances.

LA TROBE UNIVERSITY

- The Succeed Program: an early warning identification programme supporting at risk students.
- Student Development Advisors: provision of face-to-face and online advice to students seeking support as they progress through university life.
- Orientation course welcome sessions that offer students comprehensive information about their course and university expectations.
- Connect student leaders and volunteer programme.
- Gold Ticket event: Pre-orientation activity targeting undergraduate science students to facilitate cohort building and foster a sense of connection.

UNIVERSITY OF THE SUNSHINE COAST (USC)

- USC Strategic Plan contains corporate KPIs and targets for reducing attrition.
- USC Academic Plan includes objectives relating to student success, student engagement and student experience.
- USC Student Engagement and Retention Blueprint has four inter-related strategies:
 - Strengthen the first year experience.
 - Design and enact high quality curricula.
 - Promote access, equity and diversity.
 - Enable support for learning.
- Implementation of principles-based curriculum design approach that foreground academic knowledge fields in the context of student learning experience, expressed as four principles and four institutional priorities.
 - Four principles: USC curriculum is learning-centred, constructively aligned, standards based, career and future focused.
 - Four curriculum priorities: blended learning, first year experience, work integrated learning and employability, embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives in the curriculum.
- Design and accreditation processes focus on collaboration and quality rather than compliance.
- First Year Experience (FYE) - Enabling Plan 2017–2020.

- Curriculum enhancement program.
- Supported by the FYE Reference Group, and endorsed by University Learning & Teaching Committee and Academic Board.
- Supports school-based first year leads, who are supported by a distributed leadership professional development program, and a community of practice.
- Centrally coordinated by a university-wide FYE Coordinator
- Blended Learning Strategy 2.0
 - Supported by Blended Learning Strategy Steering Group and Working Party.
 - Focus on strengthening, supporting and enriching learning for all USC students.
 - Utilising the right technologies to create high quality learning experiences in physical and virtual learning spaces.
 - Investing in future focused models of learning and teaching in the 21st century.
 - Making curriculum more accessible and learning more engaging, framed by the curriculum design principles.
 - Minimum standards for learning and teaching in the online environment.
 - Support focused at year level or program.
 - Centrally coordinated and supported operationally with blended learning academic leads at the school level.
- A framework for embedding Aboriginal knowledges and perspectives and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives in curriculum at USC
 - Framework developed through a two-year collaboration between staff, students and community members.
 - Strengths-based approach, based on seven guiding principles, that allows a bespoke response from each program as to how they will achieve the aims set out in the framework over five years.
- Students as partners:
 - In student evaluation of teaching – pilot project.
 - In governance and decision making – student representative committees, liaison committees.
- Early identification of at-risk students and intervention strategies
 - Early course intervention: System information and academic contact are the main ways in which students are identified.
 - Student cohort identification: There are specific activities (e.g. our priority course project) that occur to make sure we intervene as early as possible with students in these courses.
 - MAPE process: The other major identification process is when results are released. The results are filtered through our systems to identify students that are at the various stages of the MAPE process.
- Three main areas within student services and engagement follow-up with students.
 - The Student Success team: This team has a specific role in contacting students potentially at risk.
 - Student Central: This team is primarily in-bound and handles telephone, email and face-to-face interactions by the students.

- Student Wellbeing: As some students are stressed or unwell, it is common for students at risk to go directly to Student Wellbeing for counselling and/or disability support.

MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY

- Learning and teaching strategic framework builds on current activities to drive increased student engagement, student academic support, support of at risk students, teaching quality, and teaching engagement with students, and ensuring students are well matched to programs at the appropriate level.
- Student as co-creator approach extends to innovative learning spaces, program delivery of online and flipped classrooms which focuses on high student involvement in the content of programs, innovative learning programs such as incubator-based and student focused PACE (external engagement or internship) units for all students and specialist mentoring programs (NITV, SBS).
- Two additional key student support and engagement frameworks were also developed and launched in 2016, the Indigenous strategic 10 year plan, and the Widening and Access strategic framework.
- Academic language and literacy workshops support students in their transition to university and with the acquisition of key academic skills and habits necessary to succeed at university.
- Online academic literacy support is provided to all commencing students via two large online resources: StudyWISE and the Academic Integrity Module.
- KickStart helps students familiarise themselves with teaching staff and the unit content before sessions start.
- 101 faculty units are online units in each faculty providing students with collated faculty-related tools and information to assist them in their learning journey.
- Week 1 Tutorials. Recognising that large-scale lectures are often impersonal and overwhelming, week 1 tutorials is an early engagement initiative providing a face-to-face opportunity for cohort building with dedicated time for students and tutors to get to know each other.
- PASS/PAL units is a long-standing engagement program in which senior students run subject-specific study sessions for junior students.
- Mentors programs are run in a number of areas, to increase student engagement with peers and academic colleagues.
- Increasing exit points for new specialist degrees to ensure students are rewarded for study successfully completed.
- Rollout of online marking frameworks, for greater consistency and transparency for students.
- Identification of students at risk
 - The new Academic Progression Policy and framework is an early intervention model that supports students who may be struggling with their studies. This model helps to identify students sooner, and provide them with more consistent and targeted support to get them back on track.
 - WriteWISE extends the availability of writing support at Macquarie by connecting students at risk in 100-level (first year) “partner units” with trained peer writing leaders.
 - StudyWISE Intensive is being introduced to complement our current on campus modules. This is a new learning management scheme-based module to support at-risk students within its academic progression procedure.

- Individual departments have introduced "Temperature Check" quizzes at Masters level for flipped units that essentially ask if students are okay. Staff touch base to provide feedback to students which is often sufficient to keep a student on track.
- Learning analytics are being developed by faculties to identify when a student has stopped engaging with iLearn or specific tasks to enable close follow up and support for the student.
- MUIC currently conducts diagnostic testing for maths at the beginning of the term, with at risk students enrolled in maths remedial workshops at no additional cost. In 2018, maths and English diagnostic testing will be introduced for all Diploma students which will recommend students for up to two of three x non-credit bearing intervention modules free of charge, to assist students' in their maths and English credit bearing Diploma units.
- Increasing teaching quality
 - Blended teaching - All faculties have leaders in blended teaching and learning approaches, including flipped classrooms.
 - Casual academic staff essentials training module provides all staff – both new to teaching or staff who want to explore aspects of learning and teaching practice – with the knowledge and skills to enable them to operate as effective teachers.
 - Foundations in Learning and Teaching is a professional learning program that provides a succinct, engaging and thought-provoking overview of key theories and research in higher education learning and teaching.
 - Teaching Induction Program is a blended professional learning experience, developed and delivered in partnership by faculty learning and teaching teams and Learning Innovation Hub staff. It comprises approximately 8 hours of developmental activity and professional learning for staff beginning to teach at Macquarie.
 - Macquarie conducted 88 learning and teaching sessions for staff during semester 1 2017 to support teaching quality and student engagement.
 - Peer review development and engagement in the Higher Education Academy to ensure systematic peer review of teaching and curriculum and to encourage a culture of collaboration and sharing of ideas and expertise in teaching and curriculum that will both build our capacity in these areas and enhance student learning.
 - Macquarie's developing digital strategy is to ensure support and an equitable framework for all modes of delivery, guided by student's needs.
- Student engagement tools for teaching staff
 - A revised toolkit is in development with the aim of addressing a variety of teaching and learning issues that regularly arise in tutorials, lectures and online including engaging presentation and delivery, active learning and inclusive teaching.
 - Staff-driven Teche Blog website providing a platform for all staff – academic and professional – to share ideas and best practice across the institution, and to support staff in better engaging with students.
 - Many academic led projects are developing active learning tools, such as digital stories and gaming-based tools for better learning engagement by students.

CQUNIVERSITY

- A recent research project has found that major factors contributing to student attrition tend to be personal (such as health or family responsibilities) or work-study balance.

- Attrition was also affected by academic processes and availability of study support, along with financial means, movement among institutions, and other factors.
- The study demonstrated that, even after students have left the university, a phone call to connect and encourage them to return to complete their studies can improve completions.
- The study suggests that alignment of promises made by a university with the reality of students' experience of university services is important. This involves tailored, personal communication prior to enrolment to assist transition into higher education.
- This is especially true for students who are new to distance study and/or are the first in their family to attend university, who are often challenged by the online systems and processes required to navigate the range of services and resources available online.
- It also recommended monitoring student progress, particularly in following up those students who fail to re-enrol.
- The final stage of the project, due to conclude at the end of 2017, will involve final analysis of the findings, development of the case studies and preparation of good practice guidelines for academics, and final reporting.

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY

- Early Uni Pathways transition programs for high school students.
- Preparing commencing students for university study.
- Student Advising for Success linking commencing students with a dedicated student advisor, in order to create an individual student success plan which will connect students to support services and resources.
- The Student Link Retention Program is a whole-of-university effort to increase student retention. It involves the use of predictive analytics, student self-selection, discipline college-level intelligence and assessment information, to identify students at risk of attrition. Characteristics of primary intervention include:
 - engagement as a pre-emptive approach to attrition.
 - a targeted pre-census engagement approach in order to address high student loss in this period.
 - use of an engagement model rather than one that reacts to failure.
 - use of proven peer-peer capacity to successfully engage with students.
 - The program uses a range of student peer mentoring approaches as intervention and pre-emptive engagement.
- Student transition mentors work across multiple university departments and within discipline colleges to support first-year and commencing students' transition into university.
- A suite of student supporting student learning (SSSL) programs where a statistical analysis of results, enrolment and attendance data demonstrates that students using SSSL programs have a higher retention rate than their peers.
- The Victoria University Employability Strategy was endorsed late in 2016 to provide all students with timely career development, work integrated learning and entrepreneurship learning activities embedded within the curriculum. These were designed to enhance the overall student experience.
- Undergraduate Readiness and Expectations Survey is a tailored survey instrument administered at orientation and also available online. It seeks to understand student levels of academic readiness by taking into consideration work, family, financial and other factors that may impact on their success.

- Appointment of First Year Champions in each of the colleges focusing on the needs of commencing students and working with peers to better support students within the college.

QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

- **Learner Profiles:** Emerging from a program of research, the seven learner profiles segment the student population according to different sets of core characteristics. This segmentation allows for a better understanding of what motivates students to study, what factors may contribute to their success and what services they may need access to during their time at university. An understanding of the characteristics of learner profiles enhances QUT's ability to design support services that meet students' varied needs.
- **Student as partner:** A core priority to improve student success over the last two years has been forging active partnerships between students and academic staff to improve the learning and engagement of QUT students.
- **Kickstart your career:** This MOOC was co-designed with career development professionals and academic staff to support the transition to university of high school students. The goal of the MOOC is to ensure that all students conceptualise career development as a core component of their university experience and have the skills and mindsets to set themselves up for future success.
- **STIMulate:** This award winning program supports students by providing assistance with skills in maths, science and IT. The program is designed and delivered in partnership with students and academic staff and works closely with course leaders to ensure that support is timely, accessible and tailored to meet the unique needs to learners.
- **Peer Programs:** The peer programs strategy is a university wide initiative to enhance peer to peer engagement and learning in the curriculum. The strategy focuses on building the capability of staff and students to facilitate and lead peer to peer learning, and on developing a QUT wide culture of peer engagement.
- **Student Success Program:** A well-established university-wide student engagement and retention initiative that focuses on the early identification of students who may be at-risk of disengaging from their studies. It provides support before they lose confidence, stop participating, fail assessment, or leave.
- A Graduate Certificate in Academic Practice (GCAP) – an AQF Level 8 qualification – has been undertaken by all early career academics since 2011 (with early career academics appointed through a special recruitment process). Workload allocation for this study is included in their appointment package.
- A comprehensive Sessional Success Program (SSP) is recognised as sector leading, having received an AAUT Program Award and three BLASST Institutional Awards. Its framework is based on the three requisites of student success identified by Tinto (2009) – engaging students; timely access to support; and a sense of belonging – and adds a fourth: recognition.
- QUT also enables sharing good practices, both within GCAP assessment presentations, a range of staff showcases (both face-to-face and online) and, for sessional teachers, the annual Sessional Teaching and Reflection Showcase (ST★RS) which promotes, recognises and celebrates good practices in engaging students in learning, fostering a sense of belonging, and support for learning within their teaching context.

FLINDERS UNIVERSITY

- Early intervention clustering analysis – using learning analytics to identify students in large first year topics who display particular patterns indicating they are at-risk.
- First Year Support Strategies Portal – for academic staff to provide resources and guidance based on research into strategies for designing and teaching first years.
- New in Law Orientation and Transition Program – a discipline-specific orientation program.
- Psychology of Surviving and Thriving – an elective subject which provides any student an understanding of surviving and thriving, which can be applied to their own university studies.
- Student Success Program – learning analytics used to model which students across the university are at most risk of attriting, with a phone-based peer intervention.

RMIT UNIVERSITY

- The Belonging Project is an innovative approach for enhancing the student experience and engendering a sense of belonging among all students, and after its recent successful implementation within a school, is now being rolled out across the university.
- Pre-enrolment initiatives to build aspiration and awareness:
 - I Belong is a program of on-campus experiences for selected students from RMIT's Schools Network Access Program partner secondary schools. I Belong is designed to increase aspiration for tertiary education and create visible pathways for students from discipline exploration, to application and enrolment to RMIT or other tertiary institutions according to students' preferences.

SOUTHERN CROSS UNIVERSITY (SCU)

- New to SCU website to support transition to university.
- Extensive UniMentor program in the first year with data to support that participation in the program improves the percentage of students who continue by around nine per cent.
- Unit Warm-up initiative to encourage early engagement with learning material which demonstrates reduced anxiety, improved understanding, motivation and preparedness.
- The Pulse feedback 24/7 system which allows the university to 'nip issues in the bud' and get solutions in place faster.
- Big data driven system, Maximus, which allows us to identify students at-risk and then to follow-up in a number of ways including peer-to-peer calling (by trained student advisors).

FEDERATION UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA

- The Student Futures Program is a suite of initiatives that prepare students for study and support them in study, contributing retention and success. The component parts include:
 - FedReady, FedReady Online, and FedReady Self-paced preparatory programs for students new to university, including online study;
 - Mentoring and online mentoring, where every university student in their first year of study is automatically allocated a student mentor for their first six weeks, or if they are studying online, for the whole semester;
 - The Peer Assisted Study Sessions Program, where students with strong academic records provide proactive study sessions in subjects with historically high failure rates;

- The Academic Skills and Knowledge Program, where students can ask any question via various media and be provided with primary study skills and referral advice from other students; and
- YourTutor, an after-hours online study support service available from 3pm to 12pm six nights a week and provides draft essay feedback within 24 hours.

SWINBURNE UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

- Broad-ranging strategy that seeks to support our diverse student cohorts at each major touch point in their student lifecycle, underpinned by our student-centred ethos and commitment to being a university of access.
- High-touch approach has been implemented for students studying in courses delivered through Swinburne Online, where data analytics is used to actively monitor the online engagement of each of our students.
- Early detection allows identification of potential issues and offers support to students who may be struggling at the onset.
- Increasing use of data and analytics to inform targeted strategies and timely interventions for on-campus students, and to improve existing activities and support services.
- Strategies for Success program facilitates students' academic transition to university, introducing students to key support services in the university as well as build important social connections among students. The program is open to all new and current students, with targeted attendance by low SES and 'at risk' students.
- Retention Taskforce analyses student data and implements a suite of interventions tailored to the specific needs of different student cohorts, particularly those learners experiencing educational disadvantage.
- Swin-Mentors Program is a peer support program that matches small groups of first year undergraduate (and postgraduate) students with experienced students in the same study areas to act as a source of peer support and guidance, and to help them to navigate the university environment.
- Swinburne Academic Literacy Needs Assessment is designed for undergraduate and sub-bachelor degree students, to help ease transition to tertiary education and introduce students to key aspects of study and writing. Students undertake a 15-20 minute quiz to assess their academic and language skills, and receive instant feedback on strengths and areas that could be developed further, as well as recommendations for Swinburne services and resources that can offer support.
- Academic study support drop-in centres designed to provide maths, statistics and physics support to students who may have questions/require help with their studies.
 - Mathematics and Statistics Help Centre, is a drop in centre and learning space for students studying in the Faculty of Science, Engineering and Technology who want to ask questions/seek one-on-one help about the maths and stats in their course.
 - Learning and Academic Skills Centre is accessible for both higher education and vocational education students to seek help from a learning advisor on numeracy, basic maths, stats and physics as well as Word, Excel and PowerPoint skills.
- MyLEAD (Leadership in Engagement and Academic Development) is a voluntary student survey that collects information about each student's approach and attitude to learning, and attributes associated with their well-being.
- New practice-based engineering degree has been co-designed with multiple industry partners to ensure that future graduates will be prepared to go into an existing company or create their own.

- Quitch Mobile App is an international award winning educational app developed at Swinburne that uses gamification principles and interactivity to connect students with their lecturers and engage them in their university subjects.
- The mobile-compatible Test Tool in Blackboard measures student attendance and engagement.
- MathsLink Bridging Program is a six week program designed to help prospective students who have not studied Mathematical Models as part of their VCE to meet the prerequisite for entry into their chosen course.
- Alternative Entry Program is currently being piloted with a local high school to assist students in their preparation for higher education by providing tertiary study experiences in the final years of their schooling. There are two streams offered through the ATEP:
 - Project Stream. Students undertake an extended research project, jointly supervised by the school and university.
 - Curriculum Stream. Students enrol in single Swinburne first year units in Semesters 1 and 2. Upon successful completion of ATEP requirements (which also include successful completion of VCE English 3/4), students are granted entry to a relevant Swinburne program (Higher Education Pathways, PAVE).
- Swinburne Early Leaders Program is aimed at building academic and employability skills among secondary students (and linked with the ATEP). The program is offered as an additional component to students' studies at Year 11 and 12 levels. Students complete a range of online modules that help them to develop and document skills relevant to their post-secondary futures.