

## **TEQSA response to *Improving retention, completion and success in higher education: Higher Education Standards Panel Discussion Paper***

In TEQSA's risk assessments, attrition is associated with more high and moderate risk ratings than any other indicator. As such, TEQSA has an interest in developing as complete an understanding of student attrition as possible, and welcomes the Higher Education Standard Panel (HESP) discussion paper—*Improving retention, completion and success in higher education*—as a further perspective on the topic. As noted in HESP's discussion paper, TEQSA also recently published a paper on first-year student attrition titled *Characteristics of Australian higher education providers and their relation to first-year student attrition*. The two papers are complementary, considering the problem of student attrition from different perspectives—with TEQSA's paper taking a single higher education provider as the unit of study, and HESP's paper taking the individual student as the unit of study.

In common with HESP's paper, TEQSA's paper found that: (1) although there has been significant media coverage suggesting a connection between the demand-driven system and higher attrition, these are not major drivers of attrition; (2) some student-centred factors expected to contribute to attrition do not appear substantially to explain attrition outcomes—for example, ATAR; and (3) much of attrition appears to be related to the circumstances of individual students and, as a result, many of the identifiable factors that influence the likelihood of student success remain weak explainers. HESP's paper identified the provider with which a student studies as the strongest explainer of attrition outcomes at the individual student level, which lends support to TEQSA's provider-level analysis—it is notable in general that the HESP and TEQSA papers are mutually supportive despite fundamental differences in approach.

HESP has asked that contributions to discussion following its paper are coordinated around a set of questions. In TEQSA's view, higher education providers are far better placed to contribute to discussion in relation to the majority of these questions. However, TEQSA does have a perspective to share in relation to four of the questions—in particular, questions 1, 2, 3, 4 and 12.

**Question 1** asks what sector expectations should be in relation to completion rates, or to speed of completion. TEQSA considers that completion times for qualifications should, for full time students, be reasonably closely related to the expected completion time for full-time students—in this context, 80 per cent of students completing in n+2 years is a good benchmark. However, TEQSA also appreciates that broad community access to higher education is important, and that for a range of reasons out of the control of providers, not all students who begin study in a qualification can be expected to graduate.

**Question 2** asks what changes might be made to data collection “to enhance transparency and accountability in relation to student retention, completion and success”. This is a question that exercises TEQSA significantly as, in addition to sector transparency, it also goes to TEQSA's ability to interpret accurately the sector it regulates. In response to this question, TEQSA notes the following:

- Higher education data collection contains a number of gaps—particularly in relation to onshore and offshore international students, and to higher education providers focusing on international students. These gaps limited the scope of TEQSA's and HESP's reports, and continue to limit TEQSA's ability to interpret the sector it regulates. TEQSA believes that transparency and accountability should apply to outcomes across all student cohorts and all

providers, and that for this reason, equivalent and comparable data should be collected from all providers in relation to all students.

- The current definition of attrition assumes that students progress through well-structured courses of study packaged as annual tranches of learning, whereas in fact the structure of the academic year is continuing to evolve away from this assumption. For this reason, there may be value in DET reviewing its definition of attrition to more readily include non-standard or evolving models of course delivery.
- At present, variables like attrition are not calculated at campus-level. For multi-campus providers—and particularly in relation to providers delivering courses of study through third party arrangements—per-campus data would reveal more clearly how differences in delivery may be associated with differences in student performance and student outcomes.
- Analysis of provider attrition in relation to student performance variables such as grade point average (GPA) would enable a more nuanced understanding of attrition—intuitively, GPA would appear to connect with both student and provider characteristics and its inclusion may enable development of a statistical model that explains a greater proportion of variation in attrition at both student and provider level—however, at present this relationship remains unanalysed. Assuming appropriate privacy protection measures are in place to protect individual student results, access to information about student academic performance, such as GPA data, would enable TEQSA to more accurately interpret the meaning of attrition within the context of a given provider.

**Question 3** asks about how Government websites might be improved to help students make good choices about their study. TEQSA is committed to improving the transparency of higher education information available to students, and recognises the key role that Government and provider websites have in ensuring students have access to the information they need to make the best choices about their study. To this end, TEQSA is working with QILT and others on projects to enhance the availability to students of provider performance information, and is in the process of refreshing its website after consultation with students and other interested groups. While TEQSA does not have a view on specific improvements that might be made to websites such as QILT and Study Assist, in line with TEQSA's broad commitment to greater transparency of information for students, TEQSA is generally supportive of efforts to enhance the visibility of provider performance measures relevant to student decision-making.

**Question 4** asks about how tracking of student movements through the VET and higher education sector may be enhanced. TEQSA noted in its own attrition report that, due to a lack of data in relation to the movements of international students between providers, TEQSA was unable to use adjusted attrition values in its analysis without excluding this cohort. Given the strong focus on international students of many of the non-university providers TEQSA regulates, this was considered a necessary compromise. Development of a common student identifier across VET and higher education, and including both local and international students, would enable tracking of all students through the course of their engagement in Australian higher education. It would shed greater light on the role of individual providers in the life-cycle of international students, and potentially enable greater insight to be gained from analysis of student attrition and other provider performance measures. This additional insight may in some cases enable TEQSA to reduce risk ratings for providers that at present rate as a high risk for attrition—conversely, in relation to other providers it

may allow TEQSA to be more confident where those providers continue to show a high risk with respect to attrition.

**Question 12** asks for comment on strategies TEQSA might employ to ensure compliance with Higher Education Standards Framework requirements around student support, and asks whether TEQSA requires further powers in relation to this. TEQSA believes its powers in relation to provider compliance with the Higher Education Standards Framework are appropriate. On the other hand, TEQSA believes that greater authority to access primary source data in the HEIMS data collection would enable TEQSA to more effectively meet the objects of its Act. At present, TEQSA has access only to data already structured by a layer of abstraction—this means that the ways in which TEQSA might query the data are limited by the assumptions underpinning the initial abstraction. Access to source data would greatly enhance TEQSA’s ability to use data already collected from the sector, and would enable TEQSA to undertake analyses of the data perhaps not previously envisaged.