CAUL
COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY LIBRARIANS

Response to:

Improving retention, completion and success in higher education, Higher Education Standards Panel Discussion Paper, June 2017

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Overview

The Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) is the peak leadership organisation for university libraries in Australia. CAUL's vision is that society is transformed through the power of research, teaching and learning. University libraries are essential knowledge and information infrastructures that enable student achievement and research excellence.

CAUL makes a significant contribution to higher education strategy, policy and outcomes through a commitment to a shared purpose:

> **To transform how people experience knowledge – how it can be discovered, used and shared.**

CAUL members are the University Librarians or equivalent of the 39 institutions that have representation on Universities Australia. University libraries are diverse institutions and an important piece of knowledge infrastructure. They intersect core university business, and have responsibilities for aspects of research, learning and teaching.

CAUL greatly appreciates the opportunity to provide input to the Higher Education Standards Panel (HESP) on the issues of retention, completion and success in higher education.

This response makes four recommendations:

Recommendation 1: That the higher education sector should cooperatively determine completion targets. Acceptable levels for retention, completion and student success should be set in a similar way to those for enrolment and completion rates by students from low socio-economic status, non-traditional and disadvantaged backgrounds.

Recommendation 2: That if retention, completion and success figures are provided to inform the decision making of prospective students then information about the methods and their limitations must also be made accessible.

Recommendation 3: That the collection and use of student data is a fundamental issue in itself, and that it needs to be addressed before retention, completion and success can be systemically improved. The higher education sector would greatly benefit from a student data framework and appropriate protections to enable the availability and use of student data.

Recommendation 4: That before further regulatory powers are considered, the question of whether TEQSA has sufficient resources to evaluate a provider's compliance with existing standards relating to retention, completion and success should be tested.

Background

The following four sections address questions posed by the HESP Discussion Paper[1] and related issues. The sections are as follows:

- Setting completion rates cooperatively
- Sending the right signals
- Student data
- Regulation

Setting completion rates cooperatively

This section addresses the question 1: ***What should be the sector's expectations of completion rates (or speed of completion)?***

Tertiary students should be given the best possible chances of successfully completing their studies, but responsibility for their success is a shared responsibility. Student success is not simply about completion, but also the capability of students to succeed.

An important task for the sector should be to cooperatively determine what an acceptable level for retention, completion and student success is. Targets should be set in a similar way to those for enrolment and completion rates by students from low socio-economic status, non-traditional and disadvantaged backgrounds. An example is the targets set by Universities Australia's Indigenous Strategy 2017-2020[2] for enrolment and completion rates by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Sending the right signals

This section addresses the question 2: ***What changes to data collection are necessary to enhance transparency and accountability in relation to student retention, completion and success?***

The Discussion Paper (Appendix D) notes that only 22.55% of variation in Australian university student attrition could be explained by an analysis of student characteristics. It admits that this likely indicates that other factors such as student motivation and resilience are relevant.

It does conclude that there is a significant relationship between student attrition and the tertiary institution at which they study. However, it is unclear as to why this is the case. An analysis by TEQSA (2017) looking at the relationship between institutional characteristics and first year student attrition was not able to say whether relationships between certain characteristics and attrition were causal or whether other factors led to the prominence of certain characteristics.

The analysis presented in the Discussion Paper suggests that a greater understanding of attrition and the relevance of different factors is necessary. Since it is not possible to clearly explain why one institution is more successful than another, it would be misleading to encourage prospective students to choose an institution using current measures.

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[1] https://docs.education.gov.au/node/44121, viewed 7/7/2017

[2] https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/Media-and-Events/media-releases/Universities-unveil-indigenous-participation-targets, viewed 7/7/2017

Placing emphasis on completion rates will also send the wrong message to prospective students, by creating unrealistic expectations about their individual chances of succeeding should they choose a particular institution. This in turn will place pressure on institutions to ensure that students succeed, a situation which could translate into adverse behaviour (such as passing unfit students) and a decline in quality outcomes.

More transparency is certainly needed, but not the kind of transparency created by an opaque 'completions calculator'. If retention, completion and success figures are provided to inform decision making then information about the methods and their limitations must also be made accessible.

For example, currently the QILT website makes student satisfaction data available, but very little can be inferred from the data itself. It is not possible to ask relational questions such as whether the high satisfaction score in the quality of library resources and facilities is related to other measures of satisfaction. There is no disclaimer accompanying the figures presented on the website. More work could be undertaken to make existing student satisfaction data more useful before new kinds of data are added.

Student data

This section addresses the theme of student data, and the related question 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)?***

When students interact with a university they leave behind a digital foot print. Increasingly this data is being used by institutions to improve learning and teaching outcomes.

Data comes from a variety of institutional sources, such as the virtual learning environment, transaction processing systems and institutional data warehouses. It may include student demographic information, admissions data, online activity, services data (such as engagement with library systems), assessment data and academic progress data (Jantti and Heath, 2016).

These data are used in the evaluation of student success and the assessment of risk by institutions through approaches such as learning analytics.

Jisc[3] anticipates that emerging learning analytics techniques will be used by higher education institutions in four significant ways:

- For quality assurance and quality improvement
- For boosting retention rates
- For assessing and acting upon differential outcomes among the student population, and
- As an enabler for the development and introduction of adaptive learning

To be effective, techniques like learning analytics depend on the collection of quality student data. The Discussion Paper identifies several difficulties in the collection of student data and other reports such as the 2015 Review of Australia's Research Training System[4] by ACOLA have also identified significant gaps in the collection of student data. The collection of data used in national figures begins at an institutional level, but currently there is no shared framework or approach between institutions.

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[3] https://www.jisc.ac.uk/reports/learning-analytics-in-higher-education, viewed 7/7/2017

[4] https://www.education.gov.au/review-australia-s-research-training-system, viewed 7/7/2017

In a study examining the role of library data in learning analytics, Jantti & Heath (2016) point out that many kinds of institutional data are not collected by enterprise reporting systems or data warehouses, such as library systems data. Jantti and Heath (2016) note that this data is often omitted from learning analytics by default. Through an analysis of student engagement with library information resources the study shows that there was a positive and persistent correlation between student use of library information resources at the University of Wollongong and improved academic performance outcomes. The paper also identifies challenges in data collection, such as the lag in student data collection which prevents timely intervention in student underperformance, failure or attrition.

The collection of student data is clearly an important issue underpinning our understanding and ability to address retention, completion and student success. In this context the Discussion Paper asks whether a national student identifier for tracking students in tertiary education has merit. But this question touches on bigger issues about student data, such as data linkage and ownership.

The Productivity Commission's (2017) report into data availability and use is relevant here. As the sector's dependency on quality, connected data increases, so too does the need for an up-to-date data framework and protections (Productivity Commission, 2017).

We recommend that the collection and use of student data is a fundamental issue in itself, and that it needs to be addressed before retention, completion and success can be systemically improved. The higher education sector would greatly benefit from a student data framework and appropriate protections to enable the availability and use of student data.

Regulation

This section addresses the question 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?***

Given the broad range of factors that influence retention, completion and student success, many sections of the HESF 2015 have a role to play. For example analysing student engagement with library information resources is a useful tool for improving student success. It suggests that maintaining high quality library systems and information resources may be an important precursor to reduced attrition and greater retention of students.

Specifically identifying and evaluating these kinds of institutional strategies and approaches towards retention, completion and success could be a useful evaluation exercise for TEQSA to undertake. Another strategy could be to investigate the development of standards for the collection and use of student data.

Before further regulatory powers are considered, the question of whether TEQSA has sufficient resources to evaluate a provider's compliance with existing standards relating to retention, completion and success should be tested. This is particularly important given the increasing number of prospective providers is likely to stretch TEQSA's capacity[5].

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[5] http://www.teqsa.gov.au/media-publications/prospective-higher-education-providers-report-januarymarch-2017, viewed 7/7/2017

References

1. Jantti, M., & Heath, J. (2016). What role for libraries in learning analytics? Performance Measurement and Metrics, 17(2), 203-210. <http://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/abs/10.1108/PMM-04-2016-0020>

2. Productivity Commission (2017). Data Availability and Use, Report No. 82, Canberra. <http://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/data-access/report>

3. TEQSA (2017). Characteristics of Australian higher education providers and their relation to first-year student attrition, Melbourne. <http://www.teqsa.gov.au/media-publications/characteristics-australian-higher-education-providers-and-their-relation-first>.