



Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations

Improving retention, completion and success in
higher education: Response to Higher Education
Standards Panel Discussion Paper

July 2017



Compiled with the assistance of the staff and office bearers
of the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA)
and its affiliated member organisations.

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Improving retention, completion and success in higher education Council or Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) Response to Higher Education Standards Panel Discussion Paper, June 2017

Below are the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations' (CAPA) responses and recommendations relating to the *Higher Education Standards Panel Discussion Paper on Improving Retention, Completion and Success in Higher Education*. The Discussion Paper lists 12 questions to guide discussion (p. 9) that we have addressed in turn.

Theme 1: Setting expectations of completion

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

Rather than setting specific targets for students' completion rates, CAPA recommends an approach that focuses on eliminating known inequalities in completion rates between different groups of students. As the Discussion Paper acknowledges, certain groups are less likely to complete their degrees. This includes students studying externally, those coming from rural/regional areas, as well as part-time, mature-aged, Indigenous, and lower SES students (DET 2017; Devlin & McKay 2017).

We propose that far greater resources be dedicated to minimising the impact of what the Discussion Paper identifies as 'personal issues' impacting students' completions (p. 6). Students' dropping out often cite caring responsibilities, physical and mental health issues, and financial difficulties as their reasons for doing so. While these issues may be experienced at the 'personal' level, both structural changes and targeted federal and institutional funding can do a great deal to minimise their impact.

For instance, research undertaken in both Australia and internationally finds that university students are increasingly experiencing mental health issues. A survey of over 5,000 students at an Australian university found that students' ratings on the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scales (DASS-21) were substantially higher than those in the general community, but matched the levels found among other Australian and international university students (Larcombe et al. 2016). Ratings indicating high levels of depression, anxiety, and stress were associated with some fields of study, greater hours of study per week, and more hours caring for family members (Larcombe et al. 2016). A recent study undertaken by the National Union of Students and Headspace found that nearly 70 percent of Australian students felt their mental health was poor or fair, and two thirds reported high or very high levels of psychological distress in the past 12 months (Headspace 2017).

CAPA welcomes the increased funding of programs providing support and guidance to university students with the ultimate aim of improving completion rates: for instance, resources supporting students' mental health and career decisions. Yet more needs to be done to reduce inequalities that lead to high levels of stress and poor mental health among certain students. Poor mental health is linked to many of the factors also associated with student attrition: Indigenous, rural, and low SES status, as well as financial hardship (Orygen 2017).

A 2013 Universities Australia report found that most students are living below the poverty line and that levels of student debt are rising significantly (Bexley et al. 2013). Two thirds of undergraduates are worried about their financial situations and students experiencing financial stress are over two times as likely to report mental illnesses (Bexley et al. 2013).

Only targeted programs, better aimed at reducing the disadvantages experienced by certain groups of university students, can reverse the inequalities found in current university completion rates. This includes scholarships, rather than loans, to reduce vulnerable students' financial hardship and debt; improved provisions for carers and those requiring parental leave or childcare assistance; and, for postgraduate students, an increase in research scholarships so that students earn *above the* national minimum wage.

Theme 2: Enhancing transparency

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

While there has been a great deal of research and discussion around students' attrition, retention, completion, and success in higher education, Australian studies and Department of Education and Training (2017) figures have reported largely on domestic undergraduate students. Surprisingly little research has been undertaken on Australian postgraduates enrolled in either research or coursework degrees. These students' decisions to complete their degrees or to drop out are very poorly understood. The collection, reporting, and analysis of postgraduate data is crucial, as it can point to the continued relevance (or irrelevance) of factors impacting undergraduates, such as whether students study externally, come from rural/regional areas, or are part-time, mature-aged, Indigenous, and lower SES.

Research into postgraduate completions can also highlight the importance of contextual factors, such as the impact of universities' support programs, staff, and learning environments. Studies so far suggest that relationships with academics and support staff, peers, and supervisors (in the case of research degrees) are key, as is engagement with one's research or area of study, self-perceptions of competence, financial factors, health issues, and family support or responsibilities (Crane et al. 2016; Litalien & Guay 2015).

In order to minimise barriers to postgraduate completion, it is crucial that national data be made available on postgraduate attrition, retention, completion, and success. Yet the methods and measurements applied to undergraduates need to be adjusted. For instance, postgraduate research degrees are often longer than undergraduate degrees, and data collection methods need to take this into account, extending measures beyond the 'nine year outcomes' used to understand undergraduate completions.

In addition, more in depth data needs to be gathered, in order to explain when and why students drop out of higher education. At present, very little information is collected by universities, and the details sought from students vary substantially from institution to institution. While universities generally require that students complete forms when withdrawing or suspending, students' responses are often limited to loose categories (e.g., 'personal reasons'), and only some include spaces for written explanations, which are generally kept brief. This becomes particularly problematic when looking at postgraduates' reasons for dropping out, as there is also no systematic collection of data at the national level.

As the Discussion Paper notes, only 22.55 percent of variation in Australian university student attrition is accounted for by current models. More systematic and detailed data needs to be gathered by universities when their undergraduates and postgraduates drop out. At the institutional level, this could include exit interviews and other qualitative data collections. CAPA also suggests targeted funding of research and initiatives aimed at exploring and addressing student drop outs, and particularly postgraduate drop outs, about whom little is known.

Theme 3: Examination of postgraduate completion

***Question 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?*

Rather than focus on enabling students to identify themselves as ‘at risk’ or not—or particular institutions as suitable for study or not—we suggest that this website could instead identify potential risks factors and help students to address them. This would include providing students with up-to-date information and resources, such as details on relevant university or government grants and scholarships.

To provide an example, simply informing students that ‘part-time candidature’ is linked to lower completion could lead students to conclude that they should simply enrol full-time. This ignores the reasons why part-time students may in fact be at greater risk: greater family and caring commitments, a lack of financial support, and the need to work while they study. In cases such as these, enrolling full-time would likely place added stress on students. Any website needs to emphasise that factors like part-time enrolment do not *cause* lower completion rates, but are instead linked to other factors that make completion more difficult.

Comparisons of universities’ completion rates should be avoided until it is clearly understood what the reasons for non-completion are. No two universities are the same with some specializing in different areas or have different demographics of students. If, for example, a university has a high proportion of off-campus students and off-campus students are less likely to complete it would need to be explained in any comparison. Without making demographic data part of the comparison it is possible that such a website could unfairly target universities with regional campuses, or a regional focus.

***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)?*

As discussed in relation to Question Two, it is important for postgraduate students to be effectively tracked and publicly reported on, alongside undergraduate students. Here, the linking of individual students to their scholarships, rather than institutions to scholarships, can make this cohort and their movements far easier to record and understand.

Theme 4: Supporting students to make the right choices

***Question 5:** What strategies would further strengthen outreach and careers advice to assist students making decisions about higher education? (A list of strategies that have been suggested in this paper are at p.66)*

CAPA is supportive of the strategies for outreach and careers advice put forward in this Discussion Paper. To the list of interventions proposed on p. 66 we add the following:

- The Discussion Paper notes that ‘empirical evidence is weak’ when it comes to student completions. CAPA proposes that national-level research on completions be initiated and supported, through more rigorous data collection (qualitative and quantitative) and the provision of targeted research grants. Postgraduate students require particular attention, as far less is known about when and why they drop out.
- While support services are important, improving financial and practical support for students is crucial. As we noted in our response to Question One, such support directly addresses the inequalities that are reflected in student completion rates. Examples of support include providing scholarships to reduce vulnerable students’ financial hardship and debt; improved provisions for carers and those requiring parental leave or childcare assistance; and an increase in postgraduate research scholarships so that students earn above the national minimum wage.
- The report highlights the need for more senior academic staff, which TEQSA (2017) recently found is associated with lower attrition rates. CAPA wholeheartedly agrees, and proposes that both universities and government adopt strategies for employing more academic staff at higher levels, and reducing reliance on casual employees (often students themselves, who report high levels of dissatisfaction with their work (Edwards et al. 2011)).

Supporting students to complete their studies

***Question 6:** What identification, intervention and support strategies are most effective in improving student completion? (A list of strategies that have been suggested in this paper are at p66). How could support strategies be better promoted and more utilised by those students who most need them?*

As discussed in detail in our above responses, CAPA advocates for an approach that provides targeted practical and financial support for students at the national level, alongside the provision university-based student support services. We support the creation of a national website aimed at improving access to and awareness of these resources and services.

***Question 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?*

No response.

Theme 5: Disseminating best practice

Question 8: *What new and innovative approaches do evaluations suggest are improving student completion at individual higher education providers?*

As the Discussion Paper notes, only 22.55 percent of variation in student attrition is accounted for by current models. More systematic and detailed data needs to be gathered in order to create effective strategies for improving student completion, especially at the postgraduate level. Some research tentatively points to the importance of the institutional context (Crane et al. 2016; Litalien & Guay 2015). Qualitative research needs to be supported and carried out in order to examine the impact of things like relationships with academics and support staff, peers, and supervisors; engagement with one's research or area of study; self-perceptions of competence; financial factors; health issues; and family support or responsibilities.

Question 9: *What can we learn about enhancing student success from the international experience?*

No response.

Question 10: *What are the most effective ways for providers to share best practice?*

CAPA supports the creation and maintenance of a national website aimed at improving access to and awareness of resources and services for improving completion. This website could include 'university staff' and 'student initiatives' platforms, summarising the latest research and promoting best practice among staff and students. Research indicating that high levels of student peer engagement is linked to higher completions, for instance, could be presented alongside strategies for forming connections and social groups on campus. Such social support is particularly crucial for postgraduates, who are generally older, have more family and caring responsibilities, and often need to work, factors all leading to lesser engagement with their peers (Litalien & Guay 2015).

Question 11: *How can successful completion strategies be embedded into provider practice?*

No response.

Theme 6: Regulating

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?*

Rather than focusing on institutional-level compliance, CAPA proposes an approach focused on student-level research, support, and targeted resourcing. While attrition remains poorly understood—with only 22.55 percent of variation in student attrition accounted for by current models—it is inappropriate to implement compliance standards, strategies, and completion targets that may omit a significant part of the picture of student non-completions. We instead advocate an approach that aims to eliminate the impact of particular demographic factors—residence, age, Indigenous status, personal finances, and SES—on students' completion or non-completion. As we have stated throughout this response, support for further research into completions is also crucial.

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