University of Newcastle – response to discussion paper

Improving retention, completion and success in higher education

The University of Newcastle (UON) welcomes this discussion paper as a well-executed in-depth analysis of university attrition and success factors. The paper employs sound methodology and examines important literature in the area from Australia and international research. Of note is the way in which the discussion paper highlights the complexity of the concept of student success. The clarity of the outcomes help to demystify the factors leading to attrition and the important differences between normal and adjusted attrition.

UON has recently completed its own internal analysis of success, retention and success factors. We are pleased to note that the outcomes of the Discussion Paper show strong alignment with our own. It may be of interest to the Higher Education Standards Panel to note that our research has additionally highlighted the importance of high school Maths. This has, over the last three years of our analysis, consistently rated as a top-10 predictor for potential attrition. The discussion paper notes the 'missed opportunity' of not conducting interviews for students who withdraw during the early stages of their degree. UON has conducted such interview for several years. The results indicate the top three reasons (accounting a high proportion of the student responses) were due to:

1) health or other family issues

2) students taking a leave of absence (including those with study patterns being disrupted due to course failure(s), time out for a placement, childcare, or periods abroad

3) re-location or study at another institution

While welcoming the discussion paper UON requests that one recommendation is taken forward cautiously. On page 41 the discussion paper indicates 'if students were better informed about the likelihood of success for the completion of their preferred course at their preferred provider, it might influence their choice of study'. UON urges caution on this matter. While noting the benefit such analysis brings in driving institutional performance, if such data is to be student facing, then care needs to taken to ensure students interpret the outcomes appropriately. For instance, a student may well conclude that selecting the institution with the highest completion rate in their chosen discipline would increase their chance of success. However, the discussion paper's analysis indicates that this would not be the case if a student chose instead to study on-line or part-time (such as to pay for accommodation costs) due to the distance between the chosen institution and the students home. Thus, if such data is to be student facing, students should be encouraged to only compare equivalent type and mode of attendance. UON's response to specific questions noted in the discussion paper are detailed blow.

Setting expectations of completion

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

attrition is to be expected, and as noted in the Discussion Paper retention is to some degree is influenced by an institution's cohort. TEQSA sets expectations for completion of a program, it therefore seems appropriate that students are provided with the scope to complete within that time. Over time students have been reducing their study load, or studying part-time and this is for a variety of reasons that typically relate to health, family or financial issues. UON is thus keen that the students or their institutions are not penalised for adopting a study pattern that, without such flexibility, may otherwise prevent them from accessing higher education. Thus, if benchmarking is to occur, then it needs to be approached in a sensitive manner respecting the needs of an institution's cohort.

Enhancing transparency

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

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?*

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)?*

UON supports an approach whereby students can be tracked between tertiary education providers. As nested qualifications become more common, and there in increasing recognition of the currency of each other's qualifications, accurately assessing adjusted attrition will be increasingly important.

UON agrees students should have access to accurate and transparent data, however, note that attrition and completion are technical concepts that could easily be misinterpreted. Thus UON request our comments above regarding the student facing data presentation interface for attrition and completion data be carefully constructed to ensure that students make appropriate interpretations.

Supporting students to make the right choices

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 p66)*

Higher education presents a complex tension between education and training; the degree to which any institution leans towards one or the other to some degree is an aspect of its differentiation. However, for many students, and particularly those first in family to enter higher education, this presents a confusing picture of their future employment opportunities. UON welcomes the proposal to expand career education in schools if that provision is nuanced to highlight how a degree can facilitate access to a wide range of career opportunities rather than specific programs being view as leading to only a specific career outcome. UON notes the value of school, higher education and alumni partnerships to achieve this.

Further, as nested degrees become more common within tertiary education, the design of the lower qualification needs to be considered so that it does not limit the choice of these students who wish to progress.

Supporting students to complete their studies

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?*

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?*

UON employs two strategies for supporting students at risk of attrition. Both strategies are data led. Firstly, UON uses pre-admission data to assess those who, based on our detailed prior analysis have a number of risk factors, have an increased risk of attrition. These at risk factors include being first in family, applying through non-traditional entry routes, and living a distance of two or more hours

from their campus of study. These students receive additional support prior to entry. Once students enter the institution, factors are updated based on their study and engagement patterns. These factors include failure to attend orientation, not-logging on to the institutional Virtual Learning Enviornment regularly and failure of an early assessment. These students are contacted using a variety of methods and providing advice regarding their support needs. The contact process is essentially a triage point to ensure that students have access to the services they require which typically include counselling and other forms of health and welfare support, learning development and program / career advice.

Currently CSP support for sub-bachelor programs is limited. Using these qualifications as an exit qualification impacts and institutions attrition and completion rate. A Bologna style qualification approach where degrees are comprised of a set of nested qualification and where the exit point equals successful completion of a program of study at that level, would resolve this issue and encourage student opportunity to progress at their own pace. This would facilitate students using the successful completion of a lower level qualification as an entry qualification to another at either the existing or a new institution and at a point of their choosing.

Disseminating best practice

> 8. *What new and innovative approaches do evaluations suggest are improving student completion at individual higher education providers?*
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> 9. *What can we learn about enhancing student success from the international experience?*
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> 10. *What are the most effective ways for providers to share best practice?*
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> 11. *How can successful completion strategies be embedded into provider practice?*

Note responses to question 8, 9 and 11 are indicated in the responses above.

There are a host of conferences that indicate institutional practice at a range of institutions. However, many of these are privately run and are expensive. OLT reports have, in the past, been a rich source of best practice and leadership in the area. Case studies described by a team responsible for the delivery of the innovation invariable offer the best source of advice especially if some form of follow up with the team members is possible.

Regulating

> 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?*

The Discussion Paper notes how institutional difference influences student success and highlights how this is not fully explained by student demographics alone. It is not unreasonable that some form of scrutiny be applied to student success rates to ensure that students and the Government contributions represent value for money. But of upmost importance is that institutions and TEQSA uphold Australia's educational standards. Thus, TEQSA needs to design evaluation strategies that ensure institutions offer the right level of appropriate support so that students *can* be successful. However, as noted in the paper interpretation of data needs careful reflection to ensure that access to higher education is equitable and that an institution or their students are not penalised for inspiring those non-traditional learners to enter higher education.

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7 July 2017