



Improving retention, completion and success in higher education

A response by EPHEA to the *Higher Education Standards Panel Discussion Paper, June 2017*

To: Higher Education Standards Panel
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The Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia (EPHEA) is pleased to comment on *Improving retention, completion and success in higher education*. While the document has reflected on a range of issues it has failed to consider the work already going on in the sector and a number of factors outside the control of higher education institutions in stemming attrition.

Using the questions posed in the discussion paper EPHEA has highlighted some issues below for consideration.

About EPHEA

As the national body of equity practitioners in the higher education sector we wish to ensure the continued essential work being undertaken by our members to support access and participation of disadvantaged groups into higher education. Our membership includes equity practitioners from all of Australia's public universities supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; people from low socioeconomic status backgrounds (LSES); people from regional and remote areas; people with disabilities; people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds; and women in non-traditional areas.

Response to questions in discussion paper

Setting expectations of completion

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

EPHEA is concerned about narrow definitions of success and how completions are measured within this definition. Equity Practitioners in the access and widening participation area have worked hard over many decades to build and support the aspiration of students from disadvantaged backgrounds through school-based engagement with prospective students, parents and communities; work with schools to improve preparedness and provide pathways to higher education; significant programming to support equity groups once enrolled is also central to the work of Equity Practitioners, student services areas and learning and teaching areas. Additional funding through HEPPP has only been available in the last 7 – 8 years with funding being used in both the outreach and retention space.

For equity students, and all students, the chance to enrol and explore the option of tertiary education is success and deciding not to pursue a degree is not necessarily a failure. Often for students, especially some equity students, the pathway is not always linear and that the completion doesn't always occur in the timeframe expected. For many reasons students from all walks of life do not

complete. Education is about lifelong learning and so completion as the only end game or speed of completion is a problematic concept.

Of course higher education providers can always do better to retain students – strategies and interventions such as widening participation activities in both outreach and retention spaces; enabling programs which support increased preparedness; innovative activity in the teaching and learning space as well as in transition out initiatives are all necessary and currently exist.

Despite this good work there are some public policy settings that impact the ability to support students completing. In particular:

- continued changes to Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) which enables Equity Practitioners and institutions to address the needs of equity groups in areas of access, participation and success
- continued changes to funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students which has reduced the capacity to effectively enable and support this cohort
- continued changes to Commonwealth Scholarships which has narrowed the opportunities for students from regional areas to be provided with financial support and the restructure of the Start-up Scholarship to a HECS-HELP style loans thus reducing access to LSES students
- limited funding for universities to adequately support students with disabilities through the Disability Support Program
- changes to HECS-HELP program over time which impact debt-averse students, especially those from LSES backgrounds
- lags in data provided by the Department of Education, lack of interrogation about why students don't complete, and lack of evaluation frameworks to assess impact beyond crude measures of success
- poor management of the Vocational Education sector including poor funding at state level for TAFE institutes and some disreputable private providers within the system
- further proposed reductions to university funding in the latest Budget
- proposed changes in the budget to enabling courses which would make them more expensive for students who are under-prepared

Higher education providers already give students a 10 year maximum completion, to limit it beyond that is not necessary. Students do not need the additional pressure of completion in a shorter timeframe and higher education institutions already have policies in place to ensure the integrity of programs so that extended gaps away from study do not diminish the integrity of the qualification being sought. Additional consideration does need to be in place to support students with disabilities who may need additional time to complete.

Universities are very much about lifelong learning so providing options for students to return to study is vital. Having said that one way to improve the options for students to exit early is greater emphasis on nested programs or credentialing where students can still exit from a Bachelor degree with a Diploma or Associate Degree. This would provide students with a formal qualification that has relevance to industry and potentially allows the student to come back to complete further studies.

Enhancing transparency

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

From an equity perspective better definitions for students from LSES backgrounds have always been problematic and so better ways to identify LSES and other equity backgrounds should continue to be a priority. Locational definitions (postcode, SA1 etc) have been problematic. The

correlation of this data with parental occupation and with Centrelink benefits or financial documentation has also been difficult. A definition that is easy to substantiate and reflects need is crucial.

EPHEA is supportive of National Priorities Pool (NPP) projects aimed at addressing this. In addition, deeper understanding of why students don't complete is recommended. A discussion between university planning and statistical departments about better ways to interrogate this data would be welcomed. There is a solid evidence base to show the reasons why students don't complete that should be utilized to improve retention.

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?

Students don't always make decisions about which university on data such as QILT. Often students are making choices not on the quality of teaching gleaned from surveys or even about rates of completion. Rather they are making decisions on proximity to their home, access to transport, affordability, whether a family member has been to the university, proximity and access to paid part-time work, and family commitments.

What is more important is for students to be able to get good quality, affordable or free career advice and information on their preparedness for study so they can make the most informed choices prior to enrolling. Online tools which help students to narrow down career areas, or course choice can be helpful but students also need the option of quality career advisors to assist first-in-family students to navigate the options. The [MyFuture website](#) is one such tool which has been exceptional in supporting students but recent funding cuts mean that it does not offer the same support to prospective students in its current form. Other resources include many HEPPP, OLT, NPP and Department of Education funded resources to assist students:

- www.firstinfamily.com.au
- www.youtouni.com.au/
- www.makeyourmark.edu.au/
- www.leap.vic.edu.au/
- www.whats-uni-like.edu.au/
- www.thinkyourway.edu.au/
- www.bridgetostudy.com.au/
- www.joboutlook.gov.au/careerquiz.aspx
- Tertiary Admissions Centres (TACs)

Students also need tools to help them consider preparedness and learning styles with options for free or affordable pre-tertiary preparation or enabling programs to assist with their preparation for tertiary study. Proposed changes to enabling courses in the latest Higher Education Reform Package will not assist students towards greater preparedness. It is worth further consultation with a group such as the [National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia \(NAEEA\)](#) in this regard.

Again online tools or analytics that can help students make predictions about their preparedness and universities use data to identify potential 'at-risk' factors or students such as interaction with orientation, engagement with learning platforms, submission of assessment etc. However, these tools can often inappropriately identify 'at-risk' students and should be used with caution. The same can also be said of using ATARs as a predictor of academic success. Inappropriate use of such

indicators is always problematic. Ensuring a holistic approach to student success which takes into account the intersection between academic and personal factors is the most appropriate way to support student success. Properly resourced student support services, financial support and specialised support for equity cohorts is essential.

There is a wealth of academic research and practice going on in this space through the National Centre for Student Equity (NCSEHE), the STARS Conference and Network, EPHEA, ATEND (Australian Tertiary Education Network on Disability) and the (NAEEA). Strategic partnerships with these networks and organisations is vital.

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)?*

Yes. This has been a very sought after request by EPHEA, tertiary institutions and TACs and would provide a greater understanding of the mobility of students from admissions through VET and onto undergraduate and postgraduate study. In addition, the way to bridge the identification from schooling to tertiary education would also be useful.

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)*

All the strategies mentioned on p66 of the discussion paper and in this submission are already in play. Many are encoded in HEPPP funding, National Priorities Pool research and practice, the work of the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE), the work of networks such as the [STARS Conference and Network](#), and by individual institutions. However, such strategies require stable and sustained funding. The current Budget and Higher Education Reform Packages wants the sector to do more with less and so careful consideration by the Government is needed to make appropriate funding and policy settings which won't impede the ability of institutions to progress the Government's goals around improved retention, success and completion.

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?*

Again, the Government must allow universities to continue to put in place appropriate strategies which are institution-specific, and which meet the needs of their diverse cohorts. The Higher Education Standards Framework already sets minimum standards for universities to meet in relation to participation and attainment, and teaching and learning including consideration of the specific needs of equity cohorts. TEQSA has a responsibility to monitor this and universities are well aware of their need to comply. No further frameworks are required rather, public policy settings and funding which allow universities to meet these threshold standards are required.

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?

Universities would need to be funded appropriately to be able to develop a suite of degree programs which could be offered at intermediate levels (diploma and associated degrees nested within bachelor degree programs, credentialing etc) which also meet the needs of industry and employment. Many universities already have a strong footprint in this arena and others are exploring this arena.

Universities are very much about lifelong learning so to provide options for students to undertake nested programs which they can opt in and out of over time allows them more mobility, flexibility and engagement with both education and employment. It is particularly useful for equity groups, adult learners and people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

These nested programs need to be reasonably-priced for students from LSES and other equity backgrounds and suitably-funded for higher education providers.

Disseminating best practice

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

All the strategies mentioned on p66 of the discussion paper and in this submission are already in play. Many are encoded in HEPPP funding, National Priorities Pool research, the work of the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE), the work of EPHEA, the [STARS Conference and Network](#), and by individual institutions. However, such strategies require stable and sustained funding. The current Budget and Higher Education Reform Packages wants the sector to do more with less and so careful consideration by the Government is needed to make appropriate funding and policy settings which won't impede the ability of institutions to progress the Government's goals around improved retention, success and completion.

TEQSA and the Department of Education could have an increased role in facilitating activity which harnesses opportunities to share and disseminate information amongst these key stakeholders.

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

Again higher education providers and associated organisations already mentioned above are drawing on the wealth of knowledge from the international experience. However, there are some particular public policy settings and a unique educational landscape within Australia that needs local interrogation. When comparing ourselves to other OECD countries there is room for improvement. Strong practice sharing and benchmarking through existing networks is recommended.

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

Existing opportunities exist for research and practitioners to share information, knowledge and experience but better engagement by the Department of Education and TEQSA with groups such as ours is always welcomed.

11. How can successful completion strategies be embedded into provider practice?

See Question 8



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 Higher Education Standards Framework is a sound basis on which to audit higher education providers.

Broader Reference Group participation which includes an equity focus with representation by such groups as the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education and/or EPHEA and/or ATEND would cast a useful lens on the review of providers around issues of diversity and equity.

The auditing process should be regular, thorough and transparent and TEQSA should have the opportunity to work with institutions to reduce high attrition rates (taking into account public policy issues, local context, the integrity of the data and so forth). Additional powers are not necessary.

We welcome the opportunity to be involved in discussions over the coming months to discuss many of the issues above that are of concern to our members. Please do not hesitate to contact us for further information.

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