



Submission to the Department of Education and Training

Improving retention, completion and success in higher education

Higher Education Standards Panel Discussion Paper, June 2017

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission in response to the HESP discussion paper on improving retention, completion and success in higher education. These are pressing issues for regional institutions, students, communities and the regions we serve. Moreover, structural, socio-cultural, economic and demographic factors that powerfully drive trends around retention and completion impact on regional universities very strongly, and in ways that differ from metropolitan institutions.

This RUN submission responds to the broad headings raised in the discussion paper (p.9) and some of the specific questions therein.

Setting expectations of completion

Retention is the outcome of a complex interplay of student factors, institutional factors, and demographic factors, and the measurement of retention needs to reflect that complexity. Drawing on the informing literature, the complexity in the higher education context was theorised by Kahu (2013)¹ and recently revised by Kahu & Nelson (2017)². The different social and demographic contexts in the Australian HE system mean that there will be variation in completion rates across the sector and this needs to be acknowledged. Therefore, benchmarking of retention and completion rates should occur within an institution and between programs within and at different – but similar institutions (based on cohort profile and grouping).

Regional universities not only comprise students with a different demographic mix than their metropolitan counterparts, but also have additional demands and expectations placed upon them because of their social and economic role in their communities. For many regional universities, the social contract with their region makes it important to offer pathways and access to higher education

¹ Ella R. Kahu (2013) Framing student engagement in higher education, *Studies in Higher Education*, 38:5, 758-773, DOI: 10.1080/03075079.2011.598505

² Ella R. Kahu & Karen Nelson (2017) Student engagement in the educational interface: understanding the mechanisms of student success, HERD online <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1344197>

even – or especially – when their previous educational opportunities, demographic background and financial and employment circumstances may indicate that the students’ chance of success is diminished compared with their metropolitan peers.

The Department’s cohort completion analyses indicate that for students in equity categories, regional and remote students, and Indigenous students, it is not always possible to maintain a full-time enrolment. A recent study completed for the NCSEHE³ investigated the influence of sociocultural, structural and economic implications of equity group membership on completion rates, noting these factors are beyond the control of institutions or students. Given these pressures, under-enrolment is often the only way students can continue to participate in their study. Further attention is needed in defining retention and completion to ensure that students in these categories (whose enrolment pattern and progress is intermittent but nevertheless positive) are not inappropriately categorized as unsuccessful or not retained.

In short, the measurement of retention, and the setting of expectations, must take into account the different socio-cultural contexts as well as the demographic and socio-educational backgrounds of students at different universities, and in particular those studying at regional universities.

Enhancing transparency

Cohort completion (or success) rates arise from a complex combination of student, institutional and situational (socio-cultural context) factors and many of these factors are not able to be quantified or included in a predictive model. It is hard to imagine that a reductive data presentation such as QILT would be able to model the complexity of retention information or adequately represent the diverse types of student trajectories typical of a regional university.

RUN strongly urges caution with any device such as a completion calculator or QILT retention score which may mask this complexity. We contend that such a mechanism would act to strengthen rather than lessen socio-cultural incongruity and would reinforce existing paradigms. In fact, such a blunt measure may undermine efforts to widen participation for Indigenous students, equity group and first in family students, as well as students from regional and remote Australia.

Students in regional and remote Australia relatively frequently move between the VET and HE sectors, reflecting the close relationships which often exist for pathways, articulation and infrastructure-sharing between institutions from both sectors in the regions. Linking the CHESN and the VET USI could produce beneficial insights into the success or otherwise of cross-sector student pathways, both formally agreed and as undertaken in practice by students.

Supporting students to make the right choices

Careers advice and outreach activities by universities are crucial in helping students understand their options for post-secondary or further education. The provision of student readiness diagnostics is also a useful tool for allowing students and mentors to assess whether preparatory or bridging courses might be a useful step in preparing students for a successful transition to higher education. Specifically-targeted funding for such outreach and preparation activities should be directed towards rural and

³ Nelson et al (2017) Understanding the Completion Patterns of Equity Students in Regional Universities
<https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/completion-patterns-of-equity-students-in-regional-universities/>

remote students, whose opportunities to access such resources is much less than that of their metropolitan counterparts.

Given the poorer participation rates for students from the regions (see <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/completion-patterns-of-equity-students-in-regional-universities/>) additional funding should be directly available to disadvantaged students to enable them to participate equitably in higher education. This study highlights that the differences in completion rates between metropolitan and regional universities are attributable to structural, financial, geographical (e.g. time and cost of distance travel) and employment-related factors faced by regional students that inhibit their participation, and contribute to attrition and delays in apparent completion rates.

Supporting students to complete their studies

The expansion of participation in higher education in Australia over the last twenty-five years has been impressive. Higher education enrolments have effectively doubled since 2000. In many ways this expansion represents a democratisation of higher education opportunity, with many students now participating in HE who would have previously have been regarded by institutions – or have regarded themselves – as unqualified, under- or ill-prepared for university education. Many of these students fall into the category Tinto refers to as educationally, economically and socially under-served. However, many structural, institutional, curricula assumptions and pedagogical methods have remained essentially unchanged, and are not optimal in supporting this new cohort to study successfully.

The findings and recommendations of the recently completed study involving all RUN universities and CSU and JCU, *Shaping the 21st Century Student Experience at Regional Universities*⁴ identified the five mechanisms required for student success and made a series of recommendations for institutions and the sector. These included:

Recommendations for institutions

1. Design and enact administrative practices, including admissions pathways, to ensure all students are able to participate fully in the university's formal and informal activities.
2. Intentionally design all curricula and co-curricular activities to activate student motivation, build academic skills, promote discipline and student identity, and develop students' self-efficacy.
3. Design and universally implement curricula and co-curricular interventions to ensure that previous disadvantage and structural risk factors are mitigated through systematic institutional practices that privilege behavioural, cognitive and affective student engagement.
4. Assure quality in learning, teaching and student experience practices, measured by positive student learning outcomes and achievement, and high levels of student satisfaction and well-being.
5. Focus, within discipline curricula, on developing future-proof employability skills, including advanced digital literacy, enterprise skills and entrepreneurship.
6. Minimise the socio-cultural incongruence between communities and higher education institutions, through sustained attention to cultural, structural and practical organisational change.

⁴ <http://shapingtheregionalstudentexperience.com.au/findings-and-recommendations/>

Advice for the sector

1. Provide access to information about students' movements, over time and among institutions.
2. Review the learner engagement scale in the Student Experience Survey (SES) to ensure the collection of data is aligned with contemporary understandings of student engagement.
3. Review indicators in student and graduate surveys, to ensure the collection of information about students' engagement, experience and skills is aligned with the key findings of this study.

RUN universities are conscious of implementing pedagogical and curriculum reforms, which have been shown to enhance student success and the completion of an award. These include:

- Careful design of the first year, crucial in establishing the foundations for success in higher education, including the development of contemporary academic literacies, ensuring threshold skills are developed, and bridging gaps in subject knowledge;
- Peer-assisted learning establishing genuine academic and social support networks for students;
- Pathways through the curriculum that allow successful completion of sub-degree awards;
- Diagnostic learning analytics allowing tailored support to be quickly provided to students at risk of disengaging;
- Mentoring and academic advising programs linked with assessment;
- A focus on employability skills within discipline context, links with industry, professional mentoring, authentic pedagogies and assessment, work integrated learning, cadet and internships as a required part of all higher education programs (attracts credit).

In addition there are a number of non-academic support measures that facilitate successful completion, especially for regional and remote students:

- Enabling education for communities that are under-represented in higher education;
- Fee remission for students who successfully articulate into a degree program;
- High speed broadband wireless connections – to regional and remote Australia.

Disseminating best practice

Sharing good practice is best done through a variety of formal and informal mechanisms. Collaborative networks, conferences, and sector-wide initiatives that foster good practice should be directly subsidised by Government.

Sharing best practice is an area that could be considered for funding from the government – three examples (OLT library of resources, STARS conference and Student Success Journal) were given in the report but there are others. It would be a very positive move if UA (via HES) continued to grow opportunities for professional and collegial sharing in an effort to reduce the impact of very expensive corporate conferences that regularly use the intellectual work of sector leaders to attract participants. Government-funded work is a regular feature of these conferences, the cost of which is prohibitive to many universities.

Regulating

RUN does not recommend a role for TEQSA in monitoring or enforcing compliance with retention targets. Given that the majority of factors impacting retention are demographic factors beyond the control of institutions and outside the scope of the Higher Education Standards Framework, such a role would be unrealistic.