

## Higher Education Standards Panel

Improving retention, completion and success  
in higher education

Discussion Paper

ACPET Submission

July 2017

## Introduction

Established in 1992, ACPET is the national industry association for private providers of tertiary education and training. ACPET members deliver a range of higher education, VET and English language courses across all states and territories and internationally. Around 80 of these members are higher education providers.

ACPET's mission is to enhance quality, choice and innovation in Australian tertiary education and training. Its members include commercial and not-for-profit entities, community groups, industry providers and enterprise-based organisations. ACPET works with governments, industries and other stakeholders to ensure tertiary education and training services are well targeted, accessible and delivered to a high standard.

ACPET welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission on the opportunities to improve retention, completion and retention in higher education.

## Key points

- There is little non-university higher education provider (NUHEP) data available to help understand the factors influencing the attrition and retention of their students.
- The fundamental reform and change occurring in our economy and labour market means there needs to be a re-think of the expectations in relation into attrition and completion rates as measures of success. It's less likely that ever-improving attrition and degree completion can be the future expectation.
- There are a broad range of academic and non-academic factors that contribute to student attrition. Great care needs to be taken in promoting simplistic measures without consideration, understanding and explanation of these factors.
- The available data on student attrition and completion needs to be made available to students through initiatives like QILT and the admissions transparency reforms.
- A common student identifier should be implemented across the higher education and training sector.
- A single repository of higher education and training data should be established with functions like that performed by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER).
- Commonwealth supported places should be extended to students enrolled with eligible NUHEPs and the FEE-HELP administration fee abolished.
- Funding support is required to enable research of the causes of attrition amongst NUHEPs and identification of best practice relevant to them.
- TEQSA should play a greater role in identifying and disseminating good practice that supports student retention and success.

## Context for submission

In responding to the discussion paper, it is worth noting the data cited relates to universities only. Until the recent publication of success and attrition data by the Department of Education and Training (DET), there has been very little detailed data relating to NUHEPs. Similarly, it is only since the recent Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) initiative that NUHEP students and graduate employers have been 'recognised'.

ACPET supports the outcomes of the Higher Education Standard Panel's recommendations to improve transparency of admissions processes. This initiative will not only support students to make better choices but 'open up' for debate and consideration a key aspect of higher education activity.

These initiatives have been welcomed. They have enhanced the opportunity for informed consideration of the sector's achievements and priorities. These reports and data have, for example, supported a greater focus by ACPET on strategies to enhance student transition and outcomes. Most recently this has been reflected in a benchmarking project focusing on student transition.

Greater availability and understanding of key performance indicators is fundamental to improving attrition or other measures of student success. A priority for ACPET arising from this consultation is to ensure the opportunity to build on these initiatives and enable NUHEPs and the sector to better understand and respond to attrition, and completion and other important issues that impact the outcomes for their students.

## Response to Questions

### *Setting expectations of completion*

The discussion paper highlights that attrition rates vary widely across higher education institutions. While the paper identifies a number of factors associated with these variations (like mode of delivery and student age), it is clear they only explain a small proportion of the variation in attrition rates. A range of non-academic factors are also responsible for students' decisions not to continue their studies. So much depends on personal, economic and financial considerations.

The economy and labour market, nationally and internationally, are undergoing fundamental reform and change. There has been a near decade of subdued economic growth following the Global Financial Crisis. The so called 4<sup>th</sup> Industrial Revolution is challenging whole industries, career structures and ways of learning. The rise of MOOCs and learners accessing 'bite-size' knowledge and skills are examples of the impact of this reform and change.

Against this backdrop there needs to be a 'rethink' of the expectations regarding student attrition, completion and success. At a minimum, there needs to be recognition that ever-improving attrition rates and completion of full degrees may not be the measures of success.

To better support the real understanding of student progression and expectations against a backdrop of a very dynamic economy, labour market and tertiary education environment there needs to be other ways to identify and track the various pathways and outcomes that students pursue during their increasingly lifelong learning. Completion of a full higher education degree seems less likely to be the future outcome.

It means the sector shouldn't expect some 'set in stone' attrition and completion rates against which all providers are judged. Great care needs to be taken in making simplistic judgements based on these 'headline' data. As the report emphasises, there are a range of known and unknown factors contribution to student success, many of which are outside the control or influence of providers.

The sector, and the community, should expect that all higher education institutions have a sound understanding of their students' attrition, retention and completion rates and the circumstances contributing to them. They should, as the current Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) require, have appropriate strategies that support transition. Their student outcomes should be assessed in the context of these circumstances and, to the extent possible, that of their peers. Of course, they should be held accountable for these outcomes.

### *Enhancing transparency*

As noted earlier, ACPET has welcomed the work recently undertaken by the Higher Education Standards Panel to promote greater transparency and accountability in admissions processes. This work builds on that of QILT and DET that has, essentially for the first time, detailed the outcomes for some NUHEP students and their providers.

While this data is very welcome it does need to be readily available to students. Data 'sitting in DET' is of little value to students. It needs to be more readily accessible and useable by students. The QILT site and/or the site to be established as part of the admissions transparency reforms should be utilised.

This data is not only useful to students but also for providers to understand their performance. There needs to be greater efforts to actively communicate this data to providers, many of whom may not have the resources to readily access and interpret what can be complex data sets.

The growing diversity of tertiary education and training pathways and options means a clearer interpretation of the outcomes for students can only be understood from a broader tertiary education and training perspective. The separate higher education and VET student identification arrangements, Commonwealth Higher Education Student Support Number (CHESSN) and Unique Student Identifier (USI) respectively, do not support this.

It is understood the original proposal was for the USI to track students though all their learning - education, VET and higher education. With the USI now in place across VET, it is time to revisit this proposal to enable a better understanding of student pathways, outcomes and success across the tertiary education and training sector.

A single or common identifier would assist a better understanding of the 'adjusted' attrition rate where students move between the sectors. It would be welcomed by dual sector providers.

There should also be a single repository for higher education and training data with a remit like that of the NCVET. That is, one that seeks to not only record and publish the data but also to interpret, explain and undertake research.

### *Supporting students to make right decisions*

A key to students making the right study choices is, as the paper indicates, making better information available. The very recent work of the Admissions Transparency Implementation Working Group has had a focus on consistent, comparable admissions information. It is understood that attrition and completion data is not part of the admissions information sets. Once these reforms are approved and 'bedded down', there would be merit in considering provider attrition and completion data in the information sets.

It is acknowledged there are issues in seeking to compare this data at the institutional level given some real differences in student and course profiles and limited student numbers for some NUHEPs.

There would also be value in distributing more widely some of the key factors identified in the discussion paper that are associated with greater attrition so that students are better able to understand the academic and non-academic (institutional transfer, financial, employment and personal/family related) factors that can have a significant impact on success and decisions to withdraw from a course or an institution.

Of course, one of the significant barriers to success identified in the report is financial pressures, particularly for students from a low SES background.

The current higher education funding system largely restricts demand driven funding to domestic students enrolled in eligible bachelor degrees at public universities. Students at other providers essentially are required to meet the full costs of their study. This means, for example, a student completing a performing arts degree with a NUHEP can face tuition fees \$38,000 more than their university counterpart. This simply penalises students whose study and career aspirations are best addressed by enrolling with a private university or NUHEP. They either must forego their preferred course or incur the full costs of their study and significantly greater debt. This adds to the financial pressures faced by these students.

The proposed extension of Commonwealth supported places (CSPs) to sub-degree programs for public university students only reinforces the financial pressures faced by NUHEP students.

The extension of CSPs to NUHEP students and abolition of the 25% FEE-HELP administration fee would ease the financial barriers faced by these students.

Of course, more consistent and integrated tertiary education and training government funding that enabled students to choose the course that best meets their needs, VET or higher education, would also assist.

At a more practical level members have indicated that 'taster' workshops are useful in forming potential students about courses and careers, particularly for school students where the existing careers guidance is seen to be fragmented and outdated.

Several members have highlighted the value of interviewing each student as part of the admissions process. This provides an opportunity to identify and tease out potential academic and non-academic barriers.

### *Supporting students to complete their studies*

Advice from ACPET members suggests early engagement is a key to retaining and completing students. This early engagement provides an opportunity to not only test student suitability and commitment (through various learning analytics) but also to respond to potential barriers like language, literacy and numeracy issues.

Notwithstanding these efforts, members also advise there is often little warning of a student's decision to withdraw from their course of study, and equally, limited ability to follow-up students to ascertain their circumstances or support a return to study.

The overriding message is 'there is only so much' providers can do or influence to address the diverse personal, social and economic factors impacting attrition and completion.

### *Disseminating best practice*

The discussion paper highlights the important role of the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) in supporting good practice and the Government's aspirations for the program as articulated in the 2017-18 Budget. A key element of the HEPPP is to support the research and identification and sharing of practice that assists the retention and completion of students.

Unfortunately, the HEPPP cannot be accessed by NUHEPs. As with CSPs, funding is available to public universities.

The discussion paper reinforces the sharing of practice across universities and non-universities is an important element in improving student success and retention. NUHEP access to the National Priorities Pool of the HEPPP could support projects that enable a greater understanding and sharing of the factors contributing to success for their students.

### *Regulating*

Whilst TEQSA must apply sanctions where there is clear evidence of poor outcomes caused by a failure to provide appropriate support for students, there would be value also in greater guidance to providers, based on its experience and exposure to the full range of strategies employed by higher education institutions. Strategies should focus primarily on academic support and interventions to reduce attrition.

There is opportunity for TEQSA to showcase good practice examples impacting on attrition rates through mechanisms including:

- TEQSA newsletters,
- Dedicated seminars/conference presentations that showcase initiatives such as curriculum design, teaching and learning interventions, and the student voice;
- Publishing initiatives that have been validated through assessment by TEQSA; and
- Provision of guidance notes that take into account provider scale and scope.

ACPET considers that TEQSA has a sufficient mandate and powers to regulate compliance against the broad range of threshold standards that contribute to student success.