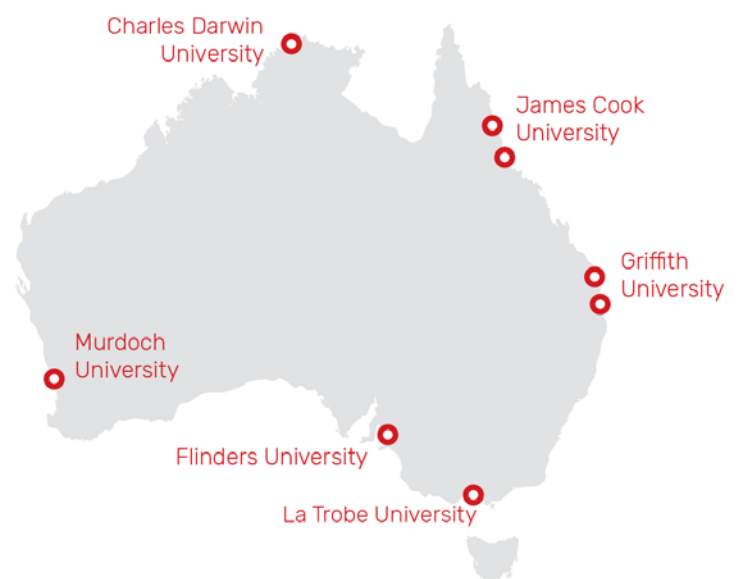# Innovative Research Universities

Student Success: a call for authentic measures and support for collaboration.

The IRU submission on the Higher Education Standards Panel discussion paper: *Improving retention, completion and success in higher education.*

At the constructive centre of higher education and research policy in Australia

Charles Darwin University

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Overview

The Innovative Research Universities (IRU) welcomes the informed perspectives this discussion paper adds to the discussions on student success in higher education and current metrics. IRU members echo statements that the reported "crisis of attrition" is an exaggerated response, yet acknowledge there is more the sector can and should do to support students to complete their studies.

The discussion paper provides commentary on a broad range of approaches to support students to make informed decisions about degree choice, explore their interests and opt out of higher education if it is not for them, or the timing is not right. The key concern moving forward is how universities create a supportive student experience, that enables success while also facilitating those that leave higher education to transition back when and if the time arises.

Redressing attrition remains a strong focus across the IRU, as members work to widen participation and support an above average number of students from diverse backgrounds. However the IRU is considering student success beyond the first year, to effectively respond to the completion gap for Indigenous, mature age and online students that persist across the sector. This focus was a key driver in the creation of the IRU Vice Chancellors' Fellowship, a position that facilitates cross-institutional collaboration and the scaling of best practice across the IRU network to support student and graduate success. It is our view that the average Australian completion of 70% is just that, average, and we should be aspiring for much more.

The IRU has been clear in its opposition to the Government's proposed budget and performance funding, ([Students should not pay more for less](#)). However our members welcome the opportunity to work constructively in reconsidering the ways in which the sector measures success and provides transparent information to students.

Metrics and Transparency

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

As highlighted in the report, the sector's current metrics are weak when applied to predict success. Student success is a multifaceted and individual construct that requires more sophisticated measures and a personalised approach. There is no 'easy' solution to this and it would be a mistake for Australia to implement a series of metrics similar to those underpinning the Tertiary Education Framework (TEF) in the UK. The power of metrics to drive institutional behaviour is real and as such a deeper exploration of the possibility for additional qualitative measure of success is required.

The IRU welcomes the regression models for attrition that account for student distribution proposed in the paper. Despite the limited variation such regression makes to the overall 'rank' of institutions, for the IRU it more clearly represents the demographic diversity of our cohorts. The opportunity to provide metrics of this kind raises an issue in the way in which metrics are labeled. The current terms *Attrition* and *Adjusted Attrition* are not accurate representations of the data and imply that the adjusted rate has undergone the type of regression modeling proposed in the paper. The IRU continues to argue that it would be much clearer and easier for the public to understand the measures if in fact they were titled *'Institution Attrition/Retention'* and *'Sector Attrition/Retention'*. This would allow the regression based attrition measure to then be termed *'Adjusted Attrition'* as it is a true adjustment of the original measure.

The IRU encourages consideration of increased consistency and reporting of data from all providers including NUHEPS. It is imperative that both University and Non-University providers are able to track

the success of students. In relation to *Attrition* data, a year on year report can and does misapply the classify students that intend and do return to study if they time from their studies at the time of reporting. Greater consistency across the sector in the use of the term *Leave of Absence* would facilitate an improvement in the quality of data and more accurately represent the experience of students from diverse backgrounds. In addition to *Attrition* measures the IRU is in support of consistent recording of ATAR for all students that hold a current ATAR, irrespective of offer mode. Attrition may not be strongly correlated with ATAR, however limitations of the data set are significantly skewing the data and capacity for interpretation.

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

Completion is an important component of success and the IRU welcomes focus on this measure. In relation to the most appropriate measure of time to completion, the variation in undergraduate program length across the sector prohibits the use of the 3-year metric. The fact that students also switch between part time and full time study and transition out of higher education to later return and complete suggests it would be more appropriate to consider 9-year completions. This rate however will not facilitate an accurate measure of completions for those students studying part-time (a large proportion of which are external), and as a result it would be worth exploring a longer measure for this cohort. Additional adjustment may need to be applied to draw out completions for part time students studying internally and externally, as this will provide useful information to support practice.

Can we enhance the tracking of students in tertiary education including movements between higher and vocational education?

Enhancing the capacity to more accurately track students between the HE and VET sectors and support the proposal for the linkage of the Commonwealth Higher Education Student Support Number and the Unique Student Identifier is desirable and beneficial.

Would a predictor for prospective students, such as a completions calculator, be useful and where would it best be situated?

The IRU strongly opposes the proposition of a 'prediction calculator' that draws upon demographic metrics. The provision of this kind of predictive score comes with a significant risk of perpetuating community stereotypes about success and will undo the work of the sector to raise aspirations for tertiary education.

The IRU opposes such predictors for two reasons:

- Firstly, the data currently available to inform the design of a predication calculator lacks the capacity to accurately account for a sufficient level of variability when predicting success. This was identified in the discussion paper in relation to the regression models of attrition and also through the work the study by La Trobe University[1].

- Secondly, students require encouragement to engage with higher education and support and guidance on how to succeed, not a measure of how likely they may be to do poorly based on their demographic characteristics. This was highlighted in the paper (p54) when describing our understandings of the complexities of success for students of low socioeconomic status,[2,3,4] particularly, that incoming measures may not necessarily reflect performance once at

[1] Harvey, A et al 2017, *The re-recruitment of students who have withdrawn from Australian higher education*, La Trobe University.

[2] Thomas, G 2014, *Closing the policy-practice gap for low SES students in higher education*, Higher Education Research & Development, 33(4).

[3] Edwards, D and McMillan, J *2015 Completing university in a growing sector: Is equity an issue?*

[4] Department of Education and Training 2016, Final Report of the *Interdepartmental Committee on Access to Higher Education for Regional and Remote Students*, Canberra.

university. Associate Professor Sarah O'Shea's work with first in family students would further reinforce this message and the importance of supporting students and their families to understand the benefits and challenges of engaging in HE. The IRU supports an approach that considers demographic difference as a strength, rather than as a deficit.

Supporting students to make the right choices

What strategies would further strengthen outreach and careers advice to assist students making decisions about higher education?

The data presented on the high utilisation of the Study Assist website, confirms the usefulness of it as a starting point for students to explore study options. The IRU supports a continued focus on how this resource can be enhanced to provide greater information with increased usability to students. Currently the *Study Assist* site provides very mechanistic information for students about financing study and the support available from the Government. The engagement of students in the provision of feedback, review and design of the site would provide a more authentic voice to the website.

The discussion paper highlights a number of websites that have been designed to support students to make more informed study choices (*QILT, Study Assist, Preparing Secondary Students for Work*). Each of these sites offer valuable information, however there would be potential to combine the sites to present a more coherent set of information and incorporate additional resources to support students to 'get ready' for university drawing upon the substantial student success literature. Such a site would have the potential to be a valuable resource in assisting students to make informed decisions about their studies, the associated administrative requirements, information to support well being[5] and would provide a key tool to assist school guidance officers.

The IRU agrees that school guidance officers require additional resources and training if they are to begin engaging students earlier in their studies and welcomes the National Career Education Strategy. IRU members work actively with schools and guidance officers through a number of HEPPP funded initiatives and as part of outreach activities to raise the aspirations for students from diverse backgrounds.

Supporting students to complete their studies

What identification, intervention and support strategies are most effective in improving completion?

There are a number of examples across the sector and within the IRU of institutions drawing upon demographic measures to generate algorithms to predict 'risk of attrition' and inform proactive advising. Retention analytics have their place in the identification and support of students, however, as argued earlier, demographic factors do not account for a sufficient level of variance to be considered comprehensive. The embedding of early assessment measures and diagnostic assessments provides another layer of data to inform our risk metrics and there are a number of examples of this practice embedded in curriculum across our members, that facilitates more targeted approaches. As student engagement directly correlates with subject success, learning analytics offer a level of real-time information that may contribute to the identification of students requiring support before they fail and provide valuable information to academics for curriculum renewal.

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[5] https://www.beyondblue.org.au/healthy-places/secondary-schools-and-tertiary

The IRU is extending our work with analytics to take a "students as partners" approach to the development of student facing analytics. Student facing dashboards have the power to encourage students to take agency over their learning and improve success. The IRU is collaboratively exploring not only the types of data students consider supportive of their learning, but also the associated moral, ethical and data transparency issues that remain a grey area in the field.

How could support strategies be better promoted and utilised by those students?

IRU members agree that universities have more work to do in supporting students to wade through the vast array of information relevant to their studies and enrolment particularly in relation to information such as leave of absence, deferral, and recognition of prior learning. The creation of student portals and comprehensive app interfaces are strategies that IRU members (Griffith and La Trobe) have taken in this regard. Academic and professional staff have a role to play in assisting students to access support services and across all IRU members retention has for a considerable period of time been considered 'everybody's business'.

What more could be done to encourage institutions to offer intermediate qualifications?

The IRU supports the Panel's cautiousness in relation to nested qualifications and agree that design factors are a key consideration. Offering a credited exit point is a useful provision that should be further explored in higher education. Qualifications of this nature will not be possible for a significant proportion of disciplines, however, if designed carefully would offer a 'successful' exit point for students that have a change in professional focus. Key considerations for the approach would be that students are able to transition back to university and complete their degree should circumstances change, and that the potential overlap between universities and VET providers be considered to keep the sector sustainable.

Disseminating best practice

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

In a sector that is redefining leadership in Learning and Teaching after the disestablishment of the Office of Learning and Teaching, there is a requirement for high-level leadership and investment in supporting student success. The IRU encourages investment in a pan-sector role to lead the sector in improving student success and facilitating collaboration across institutional boundaries.

The Australian Learning and Teaching Fellows Network have contributed significantly to progressing the evidence base across a comprehensive range of learning and teaching themes and this network should be facilitated to continue its important leadership and contribution to sector discussion and policy development. Conferences like STARS have been fundamental in providing a scholarly platform to inspire practice and build capacity for professional and academic staff to collaborate in the development of evidenced-based approaches to student success.

The IRU is working collaboratively to share good practice through the development of the National Innovation Case Study Collection http://app.iru.edu.au/national-innovation-case-study-collection/. This publically available digital repository profiles over 100 exemplars of innovative practices supporting student and graduate success. Currently the collection profiles work from within the IRU, and has been developed to facilitate cross sector collaboration and welcomes contributions from all institutions.

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

The Universities Innovation Alliance (UIA) is a consortium of eleven universities from the United States that are actively collaborating to support student success, with a particular emphasis on improving completions (http://www.theuia.org/). The UIA have a number of very effective examples of improving completions particularly for students from non-traditional backgrounds, by drawing upon learning analytics (Purdue), creating a supportive learning community (Iowa State), completion scholarships and academic advising (Georgia State).

How can successful completion strategies be embedded into provider practice?

In order to embed success strategies into practice, the curriculum is vitally important. To leverage the power of the curriculum, academic staff require continual professional development to support the development of curricula that is authentic to the discipline whilst also supporting students to develop the academic skills, agency and employability capabilities that will improve completions and success. The work of Emeritus Professor Denise Chalmers provides a solid framework for the sector to consider approaching life-long academic professional development and supportive criteria and standards for educators. With Graduate Certificates being reimagined, and many institutions moving to the Higher Education Academy, now is the time to consider an Australian contextualised approach.

Summary

In summary, to the questions posed by the Panel the IRU:

- Urges that consideration be given to the development of more effective metrics of success and the possibility for additional qualitative measures to provide more accurate information of performance in supporting student success;
- Strongly opposes the proposition of a 'prediction calculator' that draws upon demographic metrics;
- Proposes that the terms *Attrition* and *Adjusted Attrition* and should be retitled *'Institution Attrition/Retention'* and *'Sector Attrition/Retention'* to more accurately reflect the data*;*
- Welcomes regression models for adjusted attrition that account for student distribution;
- Proposes that consideration be given to widening of the timeframes for attrition reporting, increasing consistency in leave of absence definitions and the recording of ATAR for all students entering with a current rank regardless of offer type;
- Supports the proposal for the linkage of the Commonwealth Higher Education Student Support Number and the Unique Student Identifier;
- Supports the Panel's cautiousness in relation to nested qualifications and agree that design factors are a key consideration; and
- Encourages investment in a pan-sector role to lead collaboration across institutional boundaries.