Improving the transition, retention and success of regional students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds: a 5Ps approach

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Background

• Student attrition is identified by TEQSA (2017) as a major risk factor for higher education providers.

• The factors identified in studies reviewed by TEQSA (2017) suggest high attrition is associated with student and institutional related factors.
  – Student related factors impacting on attrition include:
    • student academic ability
    • lack of engagement with fellow students and staff
    • family pressures
    • financial pressures
    • poor preparation for higher education study
    • poor choice of course
  – Institutional factors include quality of teaching, quality of student services and facilities, the type of institution and its size, and the disciplines offered.
Background

- The TEQSA report also identified that for cluster 1 institutions (37 public Australian universities and 2 private universities), attrition is likely to be higher when:
  - the university has a larger proportion of external enrolments
  - the EFTSL is smaller
  - the university admits a greater proportion of students on the basis of prior VET qualifications
  - the proportion of senior academic staff in the staff profile is lower, and
  - the proportion of postgraduate enrolments is lower.
What we already know

- We know from decades of research the factors that contribute to attrition (Kuh, 2007, 2001; Kuh et al, 2006; Tinto, 2006-7, 2002; Willcoxon, Cotter & Joy, 2011; Yoke, 2000; Zepke, Leach & Butler, 2010), and

- the importance of strategies to engage first year learners (Harvey, Drew & Smith, 2006; James, 2008; Kennedy et al, 2008; Kift, 2015, 2009; Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010; and also

- students from special equity groups in particular (Devlin & O'Shea, 2011), continue to experience high levels of attrition (‘More to university drop-outs than meets the eye, 2012’; Hobson’s 2014).
Suggested Strategies (Hobsons, 2014)

- Students need to be better prepared for the reality of the first year
- Need better education pre-enrolment on the realities of student life
- Need to assess students’ readiness for the mode of study
- Be open and honest with students investigating online study options
- Universities need to determine if students are ready to study
- Need for more time and money communicating with future students
- Allowing students to defer for longer periods (they suggest up to 5 years) would be more likely to return or not withdraw
- More support for students planning to withdraw
- Students who stated personal reasons as the main factor for changing their study path are not necessarily lost to the institution
Attrition in the News

Nation of dropouts: University completion rates drop to a new low

AUSTRALIA is becoming a nation of dropouts with a third of students failing to graduate, and some unis are worse than others.
Attrition in the News

Nation of dropouts: University completion rates to a new low

AUSTRALIA is becoming a nation of dropouts with a third of students failing to graduate, and some are struggling further and drop out completely. While the numbers steady, dropout rate remains a concern.
Attrition in the News

Nation of dropouts: University completion rate to a new low

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THE EDUCATION WAR ON ATTRITION

The drop out rate at Australian universities may be steady but we need a national debate on where the policy flaws are and who should carry the cost of student attrition.

By Professor Stephen Parker and Julie Hare, University of Melbourne

The release of new university attrition data by the federal government begs the question: should universities be held more accountable for their student outcomes, both in terms of completions and graduate employment?

Peak body Universities Australia took news of 2016 attrition rates as a positive, noting that the average first year dropout rate of just under 13 per cent has barely changed in a decade despite a dramatic increase in domestic student numbers from 374,000 in 2009 to nearly 1.2 million in 2016. But others see a darker side to the narrative.
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While the numbers steady, dropout rate remains a concern

The percentage of students dropping out from uni has barely shifted in more than 10 years and the stubbornly high rate has prompted the Federal Education Minister to put universities on notice.

Nationally 14.37 per cent of uni students dropped out after just one year in 2015, according to data published on Wednesday. This compares to 15 per cent in 2014 and it’s barely budged since the 14.66 per cent recorded for 2005.

Education Minister Simon Birmingham says too many students don’t get the support they need to succeed.

“We should ask universities to account for their performance and get them to take steps to improve the results they achieve and be accountable for the record levels of funding they are receiving,” he said.
New attrition stats: where students stay and where they leave

November 15, 2017

The national figures do not demonstrate the significant differences that exist between institutions;

In NSW, the University of New South Wales had a 4.51 per cent attrition rate in 2015 compared to the University of New England’s 25.12 per cent.

In Victoria, the range was from 3.92 per cent (University of Melbourne) to 23.6 per cent at Swinburne. In Queensland, Bond U (7.81 per cent) and UoQ (8.71 per cent) had the lowest figures and the University of Southern Queensland (23.98 per cent) the highest.

In Western Australia, UWA lost 7.23 per cent of students compared to Edith Cowan where the attrition rate was 21.87 per cent.

In South Australia attrition at the public providers was; 10.79 per cent at the University of Adelaide, 15.51 per cent at UniSA and 16.42 per cent at Flinders. Private provider Torrens University recorded an inaugural attrition rate of 38 per cent.

The University of Tasmania had a 33.64 per cent rate, while the Northern Territory’s Charles Darwin’s was 26.08 per cent.
Want to reduce university drop-out rates? Try better supporting part-time and external students

The most recent statistics show first-year attrition rates in Australian universities are at 15 per cent.

This has led to Education Minister Simon Birmingham’s call for universities to take “responsibility for the students they enrol.”

Attrition does not mean dropping out. It just means the student did not continue their study in the following year.
RetentionPolicy and Return to Study Project

Aims of the ‘Retention and Return to Study’ project were to:

• identify the factors that contribute to attrition of students from low-SES backgrounds;

• identify strategies informed by an evidence-base of the strategies that can empower students, especially those of low-SES backgrounds, to succeed;

• increase retention, particularly in first year;

• increase participation through flexible re-entry arrangements;

• provide evidence to guide policy development and implementation, staff development and service delivery.
Factors Identified as Contributing to Attrition

- Personal such as health or family responsibilities, work-study-life balance
- Financial
- Being underprepared
- Academic challenges
- Lack of support
- Chose to study at another university

“It doesn’t matter the age of the student it is the level of responsibility that they have that matters.”

“give students insight from previous students in the same situations.”

“More contact and more support - like ask how are you going? Students feel isolated.”
‘5Ps’ Framework

• Based on Kalsbeek’s (2013) work and Wood, Gray-Ganter and Bailey’s (2016) extended 5Ps Framework, the factors found to impact on retention include:
  – The personal characteristics relating to student profile
  – How well prepared students are for high education study
  – The extent to which students’ expectations of the promises made by the university are met
  – Student awareness and ability to engage with university processes
  – Students’ experiences of how well the university monitors and supports their progress
The promises a university makes through its values, mission statement, student recruitment and marketing should align with the student experience.

University promises, processes and strategies for supporting student progress should align with the student profile and be responsive to the diversity of student experiences.

Students need to be adequately prepared for study. They need to understand the inherent and program specific requirements and be supported to make informed decisions.

University processes should align with the student profile and reflect the promises made by the university to support student transition, participation and success.

Universities need to support student progress throughout their studies in a way that is consistent with the student profile and the promises the university makes to prospective students.
Inclusive Approach

- **Pre-enrolment interview**, which maps out inherent and program requirements
- **Identification of aspects of diversity** that might impact on the ability of the prospective student to complete their program of study
- Support for **student to identify what THEY can do** to address the identified challenges
- Discussion about **what university can do** to empower the student to proactively address the potential issues
- Shared discussion about **identified contradictions**
- **Empowering student to make informed decisions** about next steps to address identified contradictions
Trials of inclusive approach in Bachelor of Nursing

Aims:

• Inform new students about the program requirements including inherent requirements specific to their chosen career and also asked a number of questions regarding their preparedness to commence study.

• To support students in making appropriate decisions regarding program choice and ability to meet the requirements before studies commence.

• Identify any concerns related to the student’s physical, emotional, behavioural, cognitive, social, financial, and communication capabilities that are required to progress successfully throughout the program can be identified early so that necessary strategies for success in achieving study and career goals can be implemented.

• If required, provide early career counselling to support transitioning into a more suitable program.
Trials of inclusive approach in Bachelor of Nursing

Findings:

• 124 students were contacted by Census date, which exceeded expectations of contacting approximately 1/3 of the predicted enrolment numbers for T2, 2015. 74 were subsequently followed up, with 38 of these students able to be contacted and interviewed at the end of the term.

• Major issues identified:
  • Study/paid work/life/family balance
  • Written communication skills and academic literacy (particularly with mature age students)
  • Time management
  • Physical ability and emotional wellbeing
  • Lack of understanding about residential school requirements
Trials of inclusive approach in Bachelor of Nursing

Findings:

• The majority of students said the initial pre-commencement phone interview was worthwhile giving a rating of 10 to 7 (on a scale of 1 low to 10 high)

• Students reported the information relating to inherent requirements for nursing “…really good; …had been unsure beforehand…likes to be organised and initial phone call helped and gave her [student] a warm, opening welcome…didn't feel so remote and took tips …that were relevant”.

• Another commented that she “…likes to talk things through and pre-commencement interview gave her [student] that opportunity”.

• Still other students indicated that the pre-commencement interviews were useful in advising students about CQUniversity processes and supports, noting “…yes definitely a help; …need to do this to let students know what resources are available because students don’t know what would be relevant at that time”.

• Another recurring theme related to the sense of connection established through the pre-commencement interview process.
Aims of the 5Ps NPP Funded Initiative

- Investigate the strategies universities have in place to support regional, students from low-SES backgrounds
- Explore the extent to which students from low-SES backgrounds are prepared for, and have a realistic understanding of, the requirements of the higher education program/course into which they are enrolling
- Identify the factors that contribute to regional students from low-SES backgrounds being unable to meet the requirements of their higher education program/course
- Advise students of the appropriate steps they can follow to meet their program/course requirements
- Develop a framework and online system that enables students to self-assess their readiness for undertaking study in their chosen program, prepare for study, and access the services available to help them meet the requirements of their chosen program/course
- Inform institutional policy and the implementation of the approach at Australian higher education institutions
Approach

• Review of existing policies and procedures, and evidence of the efficacy of retention strategies as well as working with teaching teams to map the inherent and program/course requirements across partner institutions.

• Semi-structured phone interviews conducted with a purposive sample of up to 12 first-year regional, students of low-SES backgrounds from each of the programs/courses across partner institutions to identify the extent to which those students felt prepared for their studies, understood the inherent requirements and were supported during their transition into university and during their first year.

• Commencing regional, low-SES students (up to 12 per program/course) at each partner institution contacted prior to census date and invited to participate in the second stage of the project, involving semi-structured interviews during which the students were made aware of the inherent requirements and supported to make informed decisions regarding their ability to meet those requirements. Students were referred to appropriate student support services in situations where they were identified as at risk of not being able to meet the requirements.
Approach

• Follow-up of students up at the end of term to identify the extent to which they felt prepared for their studies, the advice they received had been useful and to determine how many have re-enrolled to continue their studies into the next term.

• Based on the evidence from these first two stages, develop a framework and online system designed to guide students through their transition into university.

• Drawing on this combined evidence, develop a set of guidelines and recommendations about how the findings can inform policy, practice and implementation, and through an engaged dissemination approach, ensure that the findings are relevant, accessible and transferrable to other university contexts.
Participants

Interviews conducted with first year regional undergraduate students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University Partners</th>
<th>Interviews No pre-commencement</th>
<th>Interviews Pre-commencement</th>
<th>Interviews Follow-up</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CQU University</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor of Business</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor of Education (Primary)</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federation University Australia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bachelor of Engineering (Honours)</td>
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<td>No mid-year intake</td>
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<td>James Cook University</td>
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<td>Diploma of Higher Education</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Charles Sturt University</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bachelor of Social Work</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bachelor of Business</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>University of the Sunshine Coast</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bachelor of Social Work</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>49</td>
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Mapping Services

Service Aligned Against Student Journey

Pre-admission
- Widening participation through:
  - Headstart
  - Early Offer Guarantee
  - Indigenous Direct Entry Access Scheme
  - Tertiary Preparation Pathway Program

Offer / Pre-semester
- Targeted communications
- Getting Started Sessions and Guide
- Support for Learning workshops
- Orientation – including program information sessions and peer led activities
- Starting@USC toolkit
- Welcome calls and 1:1 meetings

First Year
- Your First Year (BB)
- Support for learning workshops/appts/resources – customised for courses
- Targeted intervention campaigns
- Peer-led study support
- Cohort identity building & targeted support

Progression
- Monitoring Academic Performance
- Program advice
- Support for learning
- Careers advice
- Student News / Student Newsletter

CQUniversity AUSTRALIA

BE WHAT YOU WANT TO BE
## Analysis Against 5Ps Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Profile</th>
<th>Commenced Students Interview responses aligned with the 5P’s</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Enrolled in Semester Two</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Full-time study</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Mature age</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Working part-time</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Identified financial strain</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>More than 45-minute drive from campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Rely on walking/bus/lifts</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Caring responsibilities</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Attending remote campus</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Identified mental health condition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Identified disability</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Identified South Sea Islander</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Working full-time</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Part-time study</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Male</td>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Issues with parking and textbook expenses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Timetable issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Issue with course not being offered in full at remote campus</td>
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<tr>
<th>Progress</th>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Concerns with academic skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Anxiety about doing presentations</td>
</tr>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Concerns about group work</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Exam nerves</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Promise</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Timetabling issues, students were unaware upon enrolment that class days/times would be limited</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preparedness</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Advised a pre-commencement interview would have been advantageous</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Time management was a challenge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>If the student had understood the volume of work involved, he may not have commenced due to work commitments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Student Comments

• Promises
  “I’m concerned when I do pracs as there will be less income and I’m wondering what I could do – what help is available.”

• Preparedness: Benefits of pre-commencement interview
  “I have been feeling quite anxious about starting at USC, but you really put me at ease and explained things really easily (USC016).”

• Processes
  “Online orientation you don't know if you are finished or not right at the end it doesn't say anything” (CQUBUS03).”
Findings

• Participating students were positive about the interview process timed prior to commencement of study.
• It was evident that the interview discussion raised questions for participants about their actual understanding of all aspects of the requirement of their degree.
• Addressing the inherent requirements and essential attributes of the student’s degree program in the interview were key elements for the participants.
• Participants indicated that the discussion had made things clearer, helped them understand the expectations of university life and study and how prepared they were to undertake study.
Outcomes

• Demonstrated efficacy of the '5Ps' approach to ensuring that universities are responsive to the particular needs of regional students of low-SES background during transition and throughout the student journey.

• Improved capacity of institutions and the sector to apply different strategies in practice.

• Building the evidence of the efficacy of the approach in different contexts that can inform recommendations for other higher education institutions to guide future policy and practice.
Deliverables

- Evidence of the efficacy of the approach drawn from the findings conducted across the five partner universities in five disciplinary areas.
- Case studies of how different institutions adopt the approach within their own institutional contexts.
- Guidelines developed by the partners reflecting on the approaches employed by each partner institution, which can guide other institutions in applying similar approaches to their practices within their own contexts.
- An online system that enables students to self-assess their readiness for undertaking university study, prepare for their studies, and access the services to help them meet the requirements of their chosen program/course.
Deliverables

• Six webinars based on the trials of the approach in each of the disciplinary areas in which each partner shares their practices enabling members of the wider sector to participate and contribute to the discussions.

• A national forum hosted by the lead institution in which the partners share their experiences of applying their strategies in practice. The forum provided participants with the opportunity to provide feedback on the guidelines prior to final revisions and publication of the good-practice guide to the project website.

• Final report submitted to the funding body and published to the project website.

Minimum of three peer reviewed publications.
Guidelines

• Engage with prospective students prior to enrolment to help them to be better prepared for the transition into higher education.

• Tailor services to the profile of students, particularly those who are from low-SES backgrounds, located in regional locations, first-in-family, mature-aged and studying at a distance.

• Ensure the promises made by the university align with the student experience.

• Provide support for students who are challenged by university processes.
Guidelines

• Monitor student progress in a timely and supportive manner, rather than a punitive approach. Ensure students who fail to re-enrol are contacted and supported.

• Provide opportunities for commencing students to self-assess their readiness for university study via an online tool has the potential to provide a scalable solution as an adjunct to the personalised approach.

• Such a tool can help students prepare for study in a timely manner, alert them to the specific requirements of their program/course, while also linking them with the services they may require to help them succeed.
The Business Case at CQUniversity

• Why it matters (university values, external context and financial implications)
• Overarching 5Ps Framework
• External context
• Evidence drawn from retention and return to study project and trials in Bachelor of Nursing
• Description of proposal
• Return on Investment (conversions, retention & completions)
• Link to Strategic, Corporate Plan and Operational Plans
The Business Case at CQUUniversity

• Risk mitigation (risk of not doing anything far greater)
• Scope of project and project plan
• Anticipated outcomes
• Cost benefit analysis & other benefits (measurable KPIs)
• Funding sources
• Payback period
• Stakeholders
• Resource details
• Evaluation strategy
Recommendations

- Universities should provide students with clear information about the program/course and university expectations prior to commencement.
- The promises a university makes to commencing students must match the reality of their experience.
- Universities need to ensure that the processes they have in place to support students during transition to university helps prepare them for their studies and assists their progression in a way that aligns with their needs.
- The personalised approach to supporting commencing students should be adopted to better prepare students in transition.
Recommendations

• Consideration should be given to implementing an online tool that provides a scalable approach to assisting students self-assess their readiness for study and inform them of the services available to help them to succeed.

• Universities should ensure that the strategies they adopt to improve transition, retention and success is culturally appropriate and that staff implementing personalised support have appropriate skills and knowledge to meet the needs of students from diverse backgrounds.

• Strategies implemented to help students prepare and succeed at university should be rigorously evaluated and the findings used to inform future decisions concerning policies and processes.
References


References


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References

- York, UK: The Higher Education Academy.
THANK YOU
DISCUSSION & QUESTIONS