

**Australian Catholic University**

**Response to the Higher Education  
Standards Panel Discussion Paper:  
*Improving Retention, Completion and  
Success in Higher Education***

**July 2017**

**Australian Catholic University (ACU) Response to the Higher Education Standards Panel Discussion Paper: *Improving Retention, Completion and Success in Higher Education***

**Table of Contents**

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....</b>                                    | <b>2</b>  |
| <b>RESPONSE TO THE DISCUSSION PAPER QUESTIONS .....</b>           | <b>4</b>  |
| SETTING EXPECTATIONS OF COMPLETION.....                           | 4         |
| ENHANCING TRANSPARENCY.....                                       | 5         |
| SUPPORTING STUDENTS TO MAKE THE RIGHT CHOICES .....               | 7         |
| SUPPORTING STUDENTS TO COMPLETE THEIR STUDIES.....                | 8         |
| DISSEMINATING BEST PRACTICE .....                                 | 10        |
| REGULATING.....   | 13        |
| <b>ATTACHMENT A - AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY PROFILE.....</b> | <b>14</b> |

## Executive Summary

Australian Catholic University (ACU) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Higher Education Standards Panel Discussion Paper: *Improving Retention, Completion and Success in Higher Education* (June 2017) (Discussion Paper). ACU is encouraged by the informed approach and work of the Higher Education Standards Panel to better understand the factors that relate to student retention, completion and success, and to identify effective strategies that institutions can utilise to improve student outcomes.

As a foundation principle, it is important to recognise that Australian universities operate within a highly accountable and responsive policy and regulatory regime, which continuously drives universities to develop and support initiatives to improve student outcomes. Flowing from this, government, policymakers and the sector should operate from a shared understanding and recognition that:

- There is no ‘crisis’ situation with respect to student attrition. Indeed, student attrition rates have remained broadly stable since the significant expansion of university attendance facilitated through the introduction of the demand driven funding system.
- The appropriate focus of current and ongoing efforts is to: better understand the factors that impact on student performance; identify initiatives and strategies to further improve student outcomes; and support (rather than penalise) the work of universities to maximise student opportunity and success in higher education.
- Expectations should be pragmatic and reflect a sophisticated understanding of student progress and completion.

ACU emphasises these points in light of the Government’s current higher education reform proposals, which threaten to impose significant financial penalties on universities that do not meet student attrition and completion targets.<sup>1</sup> This would likely deter universities from enrolling students who face greater challenges in completing their studies, including disadvantaged students, single parents, and students studying remotely, thereby jeopardising efforts to improve broader participation in higher education and resulting in poorer equity outcomes.

The notion of what constitutes ‘success’ in higher education is complex, particularly in today’s context where many students are concurrently working and studying, have entered university via different pathways, and are navigating study alongside other personal challenges and commitments. There are a multitude of factors and contextual considerations that can have an impact on how individual students view, approach and progress through their studies. The policy environment should avoid viewing student progress and/or success, including time taken for completion, from a simplistic or one dimensional perspective, as there is no uniform narrative with respect to student completion of a university degree.

There are a range of strategies and initiatives that institutions can employ to better assist students to make decisions about higher education. These include:

- Outreach and early intervention programs for prospective students, both to raise aspirations and to support students to transition to university study.
- Comprehensive careers advice.
- Offerings of nested courses and opportunities for students to sample higher education.
- Support for early assessment of students.

---

<sup>1</sup> The reforms propose to introduce a performance-contingent element to the Commonwealth Grant Scheme (CGS), whereby 7.5 per cent of a university’s critical CGS funding would be contingent on the university meeting unknown performance requirements and targets. The Government has indicated that a component of this reform could require universities to meet (unknown) targets with respect to student attrition and completion rates.

- Use of analytical tracking tools – tools that monitor key interactions with students are excellent indicators for assessing the levels of student engagement with university study and risks of attrition.
- Support and accommodation of student diversity.
- Ensuring quality staff.
- Increased information for students on external reporting requirements that can impact on student finances such as Centrelink benefits.
- Provision of personalised support and intervention services.

ACU does not support the use of predictive statistics, particularly in the suggested form of a completions ‘calculator’, to inform prospective students about higher education. There is a significant risk that such information could mislead students and unduly discourage prospective students from university study. It also runs counter to the many support programs on offer by universities to encourage and assist students to complete their qualification, often in the face of significant adversity. While completion rates can certainly inform decision-making in developing student support initiatives, statistics are limited in their capacity to predict individual student success.

Overall, students should be provided with holistic, accurate and reliable information when making decisions concerning their higher education study. Improvements could be made to support a better flow of information on the range of admission pathways for particular courses. Enhanced tracking of students in tertiary education, by linking CHESSN and USI numbers<sup>2</sup> would assist institutions to better understand student movements between vocational education and training and higher education, and to respond with appropriate support initiatives and pathways.

With respect to maximising student retention, success and completion, ACU would encourage:

- universities to implement a broad suite of identification, intervention and support strategies, to foster student success and completion;
- the government to rethink any policies that would propose to penalise providers who do not achieve attrition or completion ‘targets’;
- any regulatory monitoring, particularly by TEQSA, to support an approach that affords sufficient autonomy and flexibility for institutions to determine appropriate activities to improve student support and retention; and
- greater sharing, across the sector, of strategies to aid student success and completion. There is a facilitative role for TEQSA in this regard.

From an institutional perspective, student success might look different by institution, depending on the particular student cohort and profile. Equally, there are many external factors that fall outside of the control of universities, such as personal circumstances, which can have a significant impact on student attrition. These should be taken into account in any assessment of institutional attrition and completion rates.

---

<sup>2</sup> The Higher Education sector utilises the Commonwealth Higher Education Student Support Number (CHESSN), while the VET sector utilises a Unique Student Identifier (USI), to identify students.

## Response to the Discussion Paper Questions

### SETTING EXPECTATIONS OF COMPLETION

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

The sector's expectations of completion rates should be pragmatic and reflect a sophisticated understanding of student progress and completion. Government, policymakers and universities should operate from a shared understanding and recognition that there is no 'crisis' situation with respect to student attrition.<sup>3</sup> Expectations, and the sector's focus, should centre on encouraging and enabling universities to facilitate initiatives that support and improve student performance and outcomes.

The policy environment would particularly benefit from avoiding a simplistic, one dimensional view and assessment of completion rates, as there is no uniform or 'one-size-fits-all' narrative with respect to student completion of a university degree. Significantly, there are a multitude of factors and contextual considerations that can have an impact on how individual students approach and progress through their studies, and which influence student completion rates. For instance, students approach university education from diverse backgrounds and with varied personal motivations, they enter via different pathways, and many work while undertaking their studies or balance study with other commitments.

Of course, universities do have a set expectation as to the standard time taken to complete a given degree, and this information is available by course and program. Therefore, it may be useful for the sector to consider utilising a scale(s) to track student retention and completions over an extended period, perhaps using appropriately defined intervals extending from one to ten year retention and completion rates. This could encompass looking at: full-time and part-time students separately, in order to provide a more meaningful picture of retention and completion rates; and the number of years taken for completion, corresponding to the standard time the institution expects for completion of the relevant course (or full-time equivalent), for each group. This could assist universities to better target assistance to support student progression and completion. Ultimately, completing a degree is a major personal achievement for many students (some evidently may take longer than others to do so), and this should be acknowledged and celebrated.

While students receive a particular benefit from completing their courses, failing to complete a degree does not negate the entire educational experience. There are deep and comprehensive learning attributes and experiences acquired throughout a degree, which may lead students to enhanced employment opportunities or further education and training even if they do not complete their degrees. Better understanding these pathways would be beneficial.

Significantly, there are many factors that are beyond institutions' and the sector's control, which influence the likelihood of students completing a qualification. This should also be taken into account when assessing completion rates. For instance, students facing personal, physical, mental health, financial or other difficulties that are outside the university's control may be more likely to be non-completers. As the Discussion Paper clearly recognises, expectations must allow for the fact that "not all students will complete their degrees and subsequently there will never be nil attrition".<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> This is acknowledged in the Discussion Paper. The introduction of the demand driven funding system in 2012 (phased-in from 2009) has seen well over 190,000 additional students – from many diverse backgrounds – enter Australian universities, yet student attrition rates have remained broadly steady. See Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 'Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2015 Student Data' (2016). Accessible via <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics>

<sup>4</sup> See page 6 of the Discussion Paper.

## ENHANCING TRANSPARENCY

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

A more sophisticated approach to data collection and reporting with respect to retention, completion and success rates would be beneficial to provide a clearer, and more contextualised, picture of student progress and outcomes. This could include:

- Incorporating a measure of completion that relates to a ‘reasonable time’ to complete into the data collection and reporting process. For instance, for a 4 year degree, identifying the number who complete their studies in 4 years, 6 years and 8 years, along with a cross-assessment of those students as school leavers and non-school leavers, would provide a better picture of student progress and outcomes.
- Capturing data to identify and track students who have transferred to another institution and/or another course. This would assist the sector to gain a better understanding of the use of one course as a pathway to another, and to measure the ‘change of mind’ factor.

In order to support accurate and well-informed decision-making, data should reflect the composition of particular student cohorts; for example, the number of students studying part-time and/or as mature aged students, who often contend with other obligations such as work and family commitments alongside study. A working parent who completes a degree in 5 years should be celebrated as a triumph, not branded a laggard. Therefore, it would be valuable for data to reflect different measures of success, including by taking into account those who may take longer to complete.

### **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 should be provided with holistic, accurate and reliable information up-front when making decisions concerning higher education study.

Improvements could perhaps be made to support a better flow of information to students on admissions pathways for courses. This could encompass supplementary information on the range of admission pathways for particular courses, including information on how to transfer between courses.

Information and commentary on key data, such as student attrition, should be clearly communicated to ensure that students understand the significance of data and what different rates represent:

- External factors (as the Discussion Paper recognises), such as demographic characteristics and students’ personal circumstances, that evidently fall outside of the control of universities can have a significant impact on student attrition. These factors should not be misconstrued as indicators of (or a lack of) quality learning and teaching at an institution.

- Unadjusted<sup>5</sup> attrition rates should be used with caution. There is a risk that these figures can lead to misunderstanding, particularly amongst the public, if not properly explained or if referenced out of context. A student who leaves one institution to continue their studies at another institution is not lost to the sector.<sup>6</sup> There are many reasons why students choose to move between institutions, such as a decision to change their course, preference for a different study environment or choice of location. The fact that students are afforded the flexibility to do this is one of the great benefits of the demand driven funding system.

More broadly, the Government should continuously work to ensure that success, completion and retention data is updated and released with as little lag as possible, to maintain the currency of statistics and published information.

ACU does not support the use of predictive statistics, particularly in the suggested form of a completions ‘calculator’. There is a significant risk that such information could be misinterpreted and unduly discourage prospective students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, from pursuing university study.

It is important to recognise the limitations of statistical data and tools in predicting individual student success. While statistics can report on results for a given student cohort or be used to observe potential trends in student progress, they cannot accurately account for individual ability and the varied contextual, human and other personal motivational factors that impact on individual student performance, and their ultimate success at university. Therefore, great caution needs to be exercised in developing ‘tools’ such as generic calculators using aggregate statistics, where there is a risk that they could be misunderstood by students. Declaring students to be likely failures or discouraging them from university study based on generic statistics, before they even attempt a qualification, would be reckless. Further, it underestimates the many support programs on offer at universities to encourage and assist students to complete their qualification, often in the face of significant adversity.

#### **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 (CHESSN) and the VET sector Unique Student Identifier (USI))?**

ACU would welcome enhanced tracking of students in tertiary education, particularly through an initiative to track student movements between higher education and vocational education and training (VET). Tracking students by linking CHESSN and USI numbers and the release of this data to institutions would be useful for both the higher education and VET sectors. It would assist institutions to better understand student movements and respond with appropriate support initiatives and pathways. For instance, it would be very useful to measure pathways via TAFEs and other VET providers into universities, to gain a full picture and better understanding of the degree to which particular pathways can lead to student success. Furthermore, it would provide universities with important information that enables a holistic view of student attrition rates, and the paths that students follow to find the courses and education that is best for them.

---

<sup>5</sup> An ‘unadjusted attrition rate’ provides a ‘crude’ attrition rate, which identifies the proportion of students: ...that neither complete a course nor are retained the following year to the same institution. Students who remained at the same institution, but changed course are not counted in the attrition group. Students who changed institution are counted as attrited.

See Australian Government Department of Education and Training, ‘Attrition Rate’, at <http://heimshelp.education.gov.au/sites/heimshelp/resources/glossary/pages/glossaryterm?title=Attrition%20Rate>

<sup>6</sup> Student transfer to another institution is not a failure of the system, and affording students the ability to transfer and obtain credit for prior learning is a centrepiece of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF).



## 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?

ACU recommends the following strategies to strengthen outreach and careers advice to students in addition to those listed in the Discussion Paper (page 66).

- Offer comprehensive careers advice - Careers advice should introduce students to the broad range of careers different degrees can lead to. Advice (appropriately adapted) should extend to the early years of schooling, namely primary school students, and not just to the high school level.
- Support and accommodate student diversity - Institutions need to support student diversity and work flexibly. For example, offering courses in a part-time evening mode could help many students achieve their goals. However the cost of that delivery can mean that the flexible options are reduced. Use of improving educational technologies can help resolve some of these issues.
- Ensure quality staff – The staff that interact with and teach students must be engaging. High teacher quality and ability are key factors in student retention.
- Support early assessment – Having early, low value assessment or reviews of academic performance and progress in place early on in students' study can be a good predictor of success.
- Utilise analytical tracking tools – Tools that monitor key interactions with students are excellent indicators for assessing levels of student engagement with university study and potential risks of attrition.
- Facilitate nested courses and opportunities to sample higher education – Nested courses and the capacity for sub-bachelor degrees allow students to take small 'bites' of study that can encourage students to take up further study. More support through Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs) for sub-bachelor courses would provide students with key introductory study, which is helpful for students to progress, and also to leave if that is as far as they can or wish to progress.
- Increase information flow with respect to external financial reporting requirements and implications – The implications of external reporting requirements for students, such as to access Centrelink benefits, need to be carefully considered and communicated by government, and through institutions where appropriate, as students can be disadvantaged if they concentrate more of their study load in one part of the year than in another part. ACU reports on a half-yearly basis to assist with this. However, a student can still be negatively affected if they undertake a winter unit which counts towards their first half-year study and consequently has less study that falls under the second half-year. Where the latter classifies them as a part-time (rather than full-time) student in the second half-year period, this can have an impact on their benefit entitlements.
- Provide personalised support and intervention – Personalised and/or targeted support for students can improve student outcomes. Examples of this include peer assisted study sessions, academic skills support, and follow up emails and telephone calls to students; particularly for those in their first year, or identified as potentially needing more support such as students undertaking distance education, under 18 years of age, or admitted under a pathways program. While personalised support and intervention initiatives are expensive, they are often effective in supporting student retention and success.

ACU particularly endorses the use of outreach and early intervention programs for prospective students, to both raise aspirations and to support students to transition to university study.



## SUPPORTING STUDENTS TO COMPLETE THEIR STUDIES

### 6. What identification, intervention and support strategies are most effective in improving student completion? How could support strategies be better promoted and more utilised by those students who most need them?

Implementation of a suite of identification, intervention and support strategies, including those outlined in the Discussion Paper, would serve to create a positive environment for student success and completion. As the Discussion Paper acknowledges, empirical evidence as to the level of impact of distinctive programs is weak so it is challenging to single out the most effective strategies.

ACU is currently undertaking similar programs to those listed in the Discussion Paper (on page 66), and this experience informs the following feedback.

Overall, proactive strategies work better than reactive ones. Furthermore, strategies that require students to self-identify for assistance do not always reach the students most in need of support. To illustrate, while such strategies may attract diligent or proactive students who want to improve their marks, they can fail to reach the students who are most at risk. Data analytics, particularly in this regard, is valuable for universities and can often be the best way to identify students at risk and contact them directly to extend support. For instance, data analytics can assist to identify students with known or potential risk factors, such as a particular student profile (e.g. part-time students, mature-aged and/or regional students), the level of engagement with online learning materials, attendance at lectures, participation in campus activities etc. It can assist universities to monitor risk factors amongst the student cohort, and to reach out to and/or provide personalised support to identified students.

#### **Strategies and Interventions**

**Prior to entry** – ACU actively works to raise awareness about the benefits of higher education and the aspirations of prospective students, through outreach and intervention programs. These programs need to commence in late primary school (not just high school) to be truly effective. ACU has been working successfully with over 200 partner schools in four states and a territory in this regard.

**Informed and integrated career advice** – It is important that school students are provided with comprehensive career advice; again, this should be from as early as primary school. ACU has developed online tools and included career advice in its HEPPP-funded<sup>7</sup> outreach programs for schools, however, career advice should primarily be a role for the schools themselves to provide. ACU would prefer universities support the development of school careers advisers in order to assist them in fulfilling this role, rather than delivering career advice directly to school students.

**Institutional culture** - In addition to the strategies and interventions identified in the Discussion Paper, ACU highlights the importance of a clearly articulated university mission to help define the culture of a university.

ACU's mission very clearly and strongly shapes students' curricular and co-curricular experiences, which includes the development of identified graduate attributes.<sup>8</sup> The mission also informs a strategic plan that includes student retention targets, and cultivates a culture reinforcing the importance of student success.

---

<sup>7</sup> Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP).

<sup>8</sup> For instance, see Australian Catholic University, 'Graduate Attributes', via

[http://www.acu.edu.au/about\\_acu/our\\_university/for\\_employers/employ\\_acu\\_students/graduate\\_attributes](http://www.acu.edu.au/about_acu/our_university/for_employers/employ_acu_students/graduate_attributes)

The strategic plan also enables the work of the Taskforce for Student Achievement and Retention. This is a university group which operates across the university to monitor key data, and to sponsor projects and initiatives within faculties and student service domains, to support the strategic plan's retention and completion objectives.

**Teaching and learning** – Facilitating and ensuring quality learning is fundamental to supporting student retention, completion, and success.

ACU is working to ensure it models best practice in this regard. The University has invested heavily in the development and implementation of a six-year Learning and Teaching Framework, Learning for Life, and introduced a requirement for all academic staff on a teaching focussed pathway to complete ACU's Graduate Certificate in Higher Education.

ACU has also reviewed its assessment policy and practices to ensure that assessment is:

- 1) authentic and aligned with both course requirements and ACU graduate attributes; and
- 2) structured to provide teachers with early 'flags' regarding students at risk, to enable early and well targeted intervention.

**Support services** - Well targeted, well-communicated, and high quality student support services are essential to facilitate student success. Support services need to be easily accessible for all students, whether full-time or part-time, on campus or off campus, and especially for students at higher risk of failing or withdrawing.

ACU has adopted a strengths based model of services, which aims to equip students with resilience and graduate attributes that will contribute to their employability and life skills. Counselling services consist of online resources, workshops and one-on-one appointments. One-on-one appointments have been of significant value in assisting students who were considering withdrawing from study to continue studying.

ACU has found it is particularly effective to work with faculties to embed support programs in the curriculum or as part of the 'hurdle' activities students complete. ACU has had successes in this regard, for example through academic skills, career development, and library and literacy skills services.

ACU has also trended well above the sector with respect to success, for students with disabilities. Students work with a disability adviser to develop an Education Inclusion Plan (EIP), which students then share with their lecturers and tutors.

A Student Jobs on Campus service has also successfully placed many students in employment on campus, improving their financial stability and future employability.

**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?**

Sub-bachelor programs can assist students to develop the skills and knowledge to better identify which bachelor programs and/or professional qualifications would best match their aspirations and abilities. The current difficulty is that there is limited financial support for students undertaking sub-bachelor degrees, which means that students face significant upfront costs if they decide to attempt partial degrees. The Government's proposed reforms could potentially assist

and alleviate (at least in part) some of this difficulty through extending CSPs to identified sub-bachelor courses.

Nested degrees could potentially work as exit points or as pathways. These are particularly useful in professional degrees as they can recognise that students have achieved some learning, even though it might not be at the level of practising their profession. Nested courses are well established at the postgraduate level and therefore it should be reasonably straightforward to expand (currently limited) offerings at the undergraduate level.

There is some risk that intermediate qualifications, diplomas or ‘nested’ degree courses may be confusing to future employers trying to assess the level of an applicant’s qualifications. There are already multiple levels of post-secondary qualification, which may not benefit from further credentialing. However, recognition of partial completion of a degree could be helpful to universities in awarding credit for prior academic study, and to students who transfer between institutions or resume study after a period of leave.

## DISSEMINATING BEST PRACTICE

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

ACU is having some success in fostering student retention, completion and success through an integrated suite of programs and initiatives that include the following:

- **‘Success at ACU’** is an ACU initiative to support student retention, success, and engagement with university life.<sup>9</sup> The initiative supports students who have certain risk attributes (e.g. distance education students, students under 18 years of age, students admitted under a pathways program, Indigenous students etc.) in their first semester of university life. The initiative is a one-to-one service where students are contacted by the University at key points in the academic calendar. Students’ progress is tracked, along with their need for particular interventions, whether they be academic, social, health, administrative, or other. Students are provided with assistance or referred to relevant services as appropriate. Where a referral to another service is made, there is a follow up process to monitor the action taken and determine satisfaction with the resolution. Communication is via electronic direct mail, email, telephone and SMS. To date, the cohorts in the program have progressed to the next semester at around the same level as the full intake of students.
- **Supporting more flexibility in learning through technology:** For example, recorded lectures are helping students to utilise alternate means of learning, and this also allows them to repeat sections that they find challenging.
- **Orientation:** Student attendance at university orientation initiatives are important to encourage student engagement with the university, which contributes to the propensity to stay and complete a course of study. ACU has reviewed and enhanced its student orientation over the past two years and continues to make improvements. Feedback received from students indicates increased satisfaction with orientation and how it supports them in their transition to university life.

---

<sup>9</sup> For instance, see Australian Catholic University, ‘Student Success at ACU’ (7 June 2016) via [http://www.acu.edu.au/staff/our\\_university/newsroom/new\\_archive/student\\_success\\_at\\_acu](http://www.acu.edu.au/staff/our_university/newsroom/new_archive/student_success_at_acu)

- **Peer Assisted Student Sessions (PASS):** This is a highly effective strategy which engages successful peer leaders with students in their first semester at university, to study units traditionally considered challenging. Peer leaders run study sessions around material covered in weekly lectures and exam study sessions. These sessions are voluntary and attract both students who are struggling and students who want to excel. Unit results show better pass rates for students who attend PASS and markedly higher grades for students who attend four or more sessions.
- **Taskforce for Student Achievement and Retention:** This is a senior level forum where faculties and other stakeholders such as the ACU Learning and Teaching Centre, student services and student administration units collaborate on strategies to monitor and sponsor the development and delivery of projects and programs to support student retention, completion and success.
- **A Students, Learning and Teaching Conference** has been introduced in alternate years at ACU. The objective of the conference is to showcase and explore, with faculty, co-curricular and other staff-student engagement strategies and ACU initiatives that support student retention, completion and success.

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

Studies and strategies adopted in the United States provide some examples of promising practices that could promote retention, completion and success, particularly through student engagement, in Australia. These include:

- Early Intervention System to identify underperforming students - Purdue University implemented the Signals early intervention system to identify students who are underperforming, and represent the information in a dashboard view for faculty and academic advisors. The program has resulted in improved success rates.<sup>10</sup>
- Text message intervention – This intervention has been used in the US to improve matriculation and avoid issues of “summer melt”<sup>11</sup>, essentially to increase the likelihood that students who have accepted a university place actually arrive on campus at the start of the first semester.<sup>12</sup> This simple intervention could have broader application in the Australian context to ensure that students return, semester after semester, and complete their degree.
- Better financial information and assistance linked to taxes – A study<sup>13</sup> of initiatives adopted in the US to integrate free tax-preparation services to assist low-income families

<sup>10</sup> For instance see: Mathewson, T. C., ‘Analytics programs show ‘remarkable’ results – and it’s only the beginning’ *EducationDIVE* (21 August 2015), accessible via <http://www.educationdive.com/news/analytics-programs-show-remarkable-results-and-its-only-the-beginning/404266/> ; Ellucian, *Ellucian Course Signals* (2013), accessible via <http://www.ellucian.com/Solution-Sheets/Ellucian-Course-Signals/>

<sup>11</sup> ‘Summer melt’ in the United States context encompasses situations where high school graduates, who have been accepted to college and have decided where to enrol upon graduation, fail to matriculate anywhere in the semester following high school completion. For instance, see Castleman, B. L., and Page, L. C., ‘Can Text Messages Mitigate Summer Melt’ (6 May 2013), at <http://www.nebhe.org/thejournal/can-text-messages-mitigate-summer-melt/>

<sup>12</sup> Castleman, B. L., and Page, L. C., ‘Can Text Messages Mitigate Summer Melt’ *The New England Journal of Higher Education* (6 May 2013), at <http://www.nebhe.org/thejournal/can-text-messages-mitigate-summer-melt/>

<sup>13</sup> Daun-Barnett, N., and Mabry, B., ‘Integrating Tax Preparation with FAFSA Completion: Three Case Models 42(3) *Journal of Student Financial Aid* 25 (2012). Accessible via <http://publications.nasfaa.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1007&context=jsfa>

to complete their applications for student aid showed that tax preparation was an integral part of completing these applications. A key message from this study is that simplifying information about financial assistance, and making it readily available to students and families, greatly improved the likelihood that students would apply to university. As financial difficulties are frequently cited as a reason students do not persist with higher education, streamlining information about scholarships, student jobs on campus, and other financial support may help students to continue their studies.

- Work-study jobs – The US Federal Work-Study<sup>14</sup> grant program works to facilitate the employment of students with financial need, to assist them to alleviate some of their financial concerns. The program encourages employment in work related to students' courses of study and/or work performed in the public interest.

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

Providers often benefit from forums and opportunities that allow institutions to exchange ideas and examples of best practice; for instance through conference presentations, workshops and webinars. However, while formal forums, conferences and workshops are useful, they are time consuming to prepare, and the dissemination of information is often limited by the agenda and to those that have the opportunity to attend.

In addition to the examples cited in the Discussion Paper,<sup>15</sup> an effective and efficient way to share best practice is to establish a readily available, and easy to access, avenue whereby staff working at the 'coalface' can reach out to colleagues at another institution. This could be achieved through leveraging online technologies.

There may also be benefit in coordinating a national forum, informed by the 'student voice', given the many student-oriented factors that impact on attrition. TEQSA is perhaps well placed to host a platform for the exchange of best practice information across the sector, alongside individual institutions. ACU's Office for Learning and Teaching provided the impetus for cross-sectoral sharing in the past, which could be of benefit to future efforts in this regard. ACU found it helpful to have a funded, cross-sectional group, to enable collaboration and small action research projects.

ACU notes that the major cuts proposed to university funding under the Government's current higher education reform package are likely to have an adverse impact on the quality of support services and information sharing across and within universities - particularly with respect to supporting equity groups and at-risk students.

While universities are generally successful in delivering support services for students, they utilise funding received under the Commonwealth Grant Scheme (CGS) to assist with providing such support. Therefore, a reduction in CGS funding would result in a reduction in the support services that universities are able to offer to students. The universities that would be more acutely impacted by the Government's proposed reforms are those that cater for a wider student cohort, namely students from diverse and regional backgrounds. The implementation of funding cuts would be likely to diminish the overall student experience and lead to increased attrition.

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

ACU would encourage the promotion of collegial sharing, across the sector, of strategies to aid student success and completion. This would encourage universities to identify and embed good

---

<sup>14</sup> See Federal Student Aid – U.S. Department of Education, 'Federal Work-Study', via <https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/types/work-study>

<sup>15</sup> See, in particular, page 51 of the Discussion Paper.



practice in their operations. Institutional sharing of best practices to support student completion would be particularly beneficial with respect to student first year experiences. ACU would strongly discourage an approach that would penalise providers who do not adopt successful completion strategies (i.e. achieve completion ‘targets’), as this would be both counterproductive and counterintuitive to creating an environment which facilitates, and supports institutions, to support student success.

## 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?**

TEQSA, as the regulator of the Australian higher education sector, has significant powers under the existing legislation. Higher education providers are required to meet a comprehensive suite of standards with regard to student participation and attainment. These standards also extend to diversity and equity, including creating opportunities for academic success regardless of students’ backgrounds. Within this framework, TEQSA has a role to play in maintaining a general regulatory watch over the sector, and monitoring to ensure that institutions have a strategy to support student success.

It is important to recognise that there are several different ways to measure ‘success’, and that student success might look different by institution, depending on the student cohort and profile. TEQSA, in any regulatory processes, should support an approach that affords sufficient autonomy and flexibility for institutions to define and demonstrate their activities around student support and retention. The considerations that govern and inform monitoring activities may not be comparable across institutions, given the diversity and contextual differences amongst and within institutions’ student cohorts. Over time, general monitoring could assist to identify if any individual institutions require attention or additional support.

#### *Proposed Reforms to Higher Education Funding*

If the Government’s proposed higher education reforms are implemented, it will be necessary to test these policies against both the higher education standards and the objects of the TEQSA Act<sup>16</sup>, to ensure a coherent higher education sector policy environment.

Notably, the objects of the TEQSA Act include a provision to “encourage and promote a higher education system that is appropriate to meet Australia’s social and economic needs for a highly educated and skilled population.”<sup>17</sup> The promotion by the Government of policies that penalise<sup>18</sup> institutions that do not improve student retention rates is in discord with the established policy framework, which encourages and supports institutions to engage in initiatives that facilitate student retention, success and completion.

---

<sup>16</sup> *Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act 2011* (Cth).

<sup>17</sup> *Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act 2011* (Cth), s 3(d).

<sup>18</sup> The Government’s reforms to higher education funding propose to impose a significant financial penalty on universities that do not meet their targets with respect to student attrition. This is likely to deter universities from enrolling students who face greater challenges in completing their studies. Such students include students from disadvantaged or non-English speaking backgrounds, single parents and regional students studying remotely.

## ATTACHMENT A - Australian Catholic University Profile

Australian Catholic University (ACU) is a publicly funded Catholic university, open to people of all faiths and of none and with teaching, learning and research inspired by 2,000 years of Catholic intellectual tradition. ACU operates as a multi-jurisdictional university with eight campuses, across four states, one territory, and overseas. ACU campuses are located in North Sydney (NSW), Strathfield (NSW), Canberra (ACT), Melbourne (Victoria), Ballarat (Victoria), Brisbane (QLD), Adelaide (SA), and Rome (Italy).

ACU is the largest Catholic university in the English speaking world. Today, ACU has over 33,000 students and 2,000 staff.<sup>19</sup>

ACU graduates demonstrate high standards of professional excellence and are also socially responsible, highly employable and committed to active and responsive learning.

ACU has built its reputation in the areas of Health and Education. ACU produces more nursing and teaching graduates than any other university in Australia, serving to meet significant workforce needs in these areas.<sup>20</sup> Under the demand driven system, ACU has sought to focus and build on these strengths.

ACU has four faculties: Health Services; Education and Arts; Law and Business; and Theology and Philosophy. This consolidation of ACU's previous six faculties in 2014 has created a more efficient and competitive structure focused on the needs of industry and employment partners. ACU has also moved towards the adoption of a shared services model where suitable, to improve efficiencies, internal processes and better allocate resources.

ACU is committed to targeted and quality research. ACU's strategic plan focuses on areas that align with ACU's mission and reflect most of its learning and teaching: Education; Health and Wellbeing; Theology and Philosophy; and Social Justice and the Common Good. To underpin its research intensification efforts, ACU has appointed high profile leaders to assume the directorships, and work with high calibre members, in its research institutes.<sup>21</sup>

In the last three years the quality of ACU's research has improved dramatically. In the 2015 Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) assessment ACU received high scores in the fields of research identified as strategic priorities and in which it has concentrated investment in order to achieve the highest levels of excellence. These include selected areas of Health, as well as Education, Psychology, Theology, and Philosophy.

ACU's research in Psychology, Human Movement and Sports Science, Nursing, Public Health and Health Services is rated in the top category under ERA of being "well above world standard". ACU's research in Specialist Studies in Education, Philosophy, and Religion and Religious Studies is in the next ERA category as being above world standard, while ACU's research in Education Studies in Human Society, Law and Legal Studies, History and Archaeology Education Systems, Curriculum and Pedagogy, Business and Management, Political Science, Sociology, Law, Applied Ethics and Historical Studies is at world standard.

---

<sup>19</sup> As at January 2017. Student numbers refer to headcount figures while staff numbers refer to full-time equivalent (FTE).

<sup>20</sup> Department of Education and Training, '2015 Special Courses' in *Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2015 Student Data* (2016). Accessible via <https://www.education.gov.au/selected-higher-education-statistics-2015-student-data>.

<sup>21</sup> See Australian Catholic University, 'Research' via <http://www.acu.edu.au/>.