



NUS Comments To Higher Education Standards Panel

On

***Improving retention, completion and success in
higher education***

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NUS Comments To Higher Education Standards Panel Discussion Paper *Improving retention, completion and success*

NUS is generally supportive of the approach taken by the Standards Panel Discussion paper and the variety of institutional initiatives outlined in the discussion paper.

A limitation is that the discussion paper only peripherally deals with the main factors behind student attrition. The long running *First Year Experience Surveys* (five yearly, the most recent one in 2014) found that there has been a huge rise in proportion of students citing emotional health behind considering deferring. Almost three quarters of first year students who were considering deferring cited emotional health as an important reason¹. Financial reasons also continue to be an important factor alongside fear of failure.

Student Reasons For Considering Deferring ²

	Survey	Not Relevant	Neutral	Important/ Very Important
Emotional Health	1999	42	12	46
	2004	32	12	52
	2009	35	10	56
	2014	19	9	72
I wanted To Change Courses	1999	47	11	42
	2004	45	13	42
	2009	50	13	42
	2014	47	12	41
Financial Reasons	1999	55	11	34
	2004	46	15	39
	2009	47	13	40
	2014	46	10	44
I Thought I Might fail	1999	48	15	37
	2004	51	13	36
	2009	44	15	41
	2014	35	15	50
University Wasn't What I Expected	1999	45	19	36

¹ Baik C et al, *The First Year Experience in Australian Universities: Finding From Two Decades, 1994-2014*, Centre for Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne, 2015, pg 91

² Baik C et al, *The First Year Experience in Australian Universities: Finding From Two Decades, 1994-2014*, Centre for Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne, 2015, pg 29

	2004	48	24	28
	2009	43	23	34
	2014	42	20	38
Physical Health	1999	64	10	26
	2004	62	11	27
	2009	59	11	30
	2014	53	11	36
Paid Work Commitments	1999	71	8	21
	2004	78	10	12
	2009	74	8	18
	2014	72	11	17
Family Commitments	1999	75	9	16
	2004	73	10	17
	2009	65	10	25
	2014	63	11	26
I found employment	1999	82	8	11
	2004	83	7	10
	2009	76	7	17
	2014	74	13	13

The variables looked in the discussion paper are student characteristics such as age group, attendance mode, equity group, institution of enrolment and leads to quite different conclusions that institution, type and mode of education, age and basis of admission are the main drivers of student attrition. We do appreciate that the HESP discussion paper is aimed at institutions, rather than for instance Commonwealth student financial assistance policies, but we don't get the sense that the paper is weighted towards the principle causes of student attrition.

The HESP discussion paper correctly identifies that the remote and regional/rural equity groups are the areas where participation rates are worsening. The First Year Experience Survey again puts the weight on financial factors behind the attrition rates. 44% of students from regional and remote areas reported that their financial situations were frequently a source of stress compared to a 24% rate for their peers, that work commitments severely interfered with their study (12% compared to 6%), and that they often or frequently had to miss class in order to work. This led to these students having higher rates of seriously considering withdrawing from their studies.

Indigenous students are only peripherally dealt with in the HESP discussion paper. For Indigenous students the Australian Centre for Educational Research (using Department of Education data covering 2005- 2013 students) found that Indigenous students had a much lower completion rate (completing within 9 years of commencing a bachelor degree) than non-Indigenous students – 46.7%

compared to 73.6%.³ The study also found that more than one in five Indigenous students dropped out before second year and that characteristics such as being part-time, older, from a low socioeconomic background or from a regional/remote area, were correlated to lower completion rates. The most common reasons for dropping out were financial, caring responsibilities and issues associated with 'getting by'.

The First Year Experience survey found that emotional health, fear of failing and financial stress were the most commonly reported reasons for Indigenous students considering withdrawing (along with non-Indigenous students) but also family commitments.⁴ On a positive note a high percentage of Indigenous students reported that a university outreach program had been very influential on their decision to enrol (39% compared to 16% for non-Indigenous students).⁵

As well as the masses of data in HESP report on the institutional retention, completion and success rates (including the some worrying trends at a few specific universities and higher education providers) there are some general recommendations that NUS wishes to comment on:

- We share the panel's view that there may be merits in using 'first in family' category as a way of identifying students at risk of non-completion (pg 45) notwithstanding the issues associated with systematically collecting the data on enrolment;
- We support the proposal for the Student Experience Survey that for students who indicated that they are considering leaving, whether or not actually they did is determined, and the reasons for their departure;
- Nested qualifications (pg 59), we do see some merit in the promotion of nested qualifications (diploma and associate degrees within a bachelor degree) for students who do not complete a bachelor degree but can get something out of completed years;
- Better enrolment information for students on options for deferring, obtaining recognition for prior learning, credit for former higher education study and taking leave (pg59), we concur that there needs to be clearer and more transparent on-line information for students on these matters ;
- There are a wide range of student support services that are run by student organisations, they not reported in the examples given in the HESP discussion paper as they do not report to the Department of Education, possibly NUS could prepare a descriptive report on this to

³ ACER, *Indigenous Education Update*: Vol 5: Issue 5, Article 1. Oct 2016, <http://research.acer.edu.au/indigupd/vol5/iss5/1>

⁴ Baik C et al, *The First Year Experience in Australian Universities: Finding From Two Decades, 1994-2014*, Centre for Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne, 2015, pg 76

⁵ Baik C et al, *The First Year Experience in Australian Universities: Finding From Two Decades, 1994-2014*, Centre for Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne, 2015, pg 76

bring some light on this partnership between institutions and their student organisations⁶