

WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY





Western Sydney University's submission to the Higher Education Standards Panel on the discussion paper: Improving retention, completion and success in higher education.

Submitted electronically: Email
highered@education.gov.au

Further inquiries should be made to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Vice-President Academic.

Locked Bag 1797
PENRITH NSW 2751
Phone: +61 2 9683 8133
Email: dvcacademic@westernsydney.edu.au
Web: www.westernsydney.edu.au
ABN: 53 014 069 881



About Western Sydney University

Western Sydney University is a multi-campus, research led university with integrated sites in major population centres throughout Western Sydney, including Parramatta, Penrith, Campbelltown, Bankstown, Richmond and Blacktown.

The University's nearly 45,000 students represent the most culturally and linguistically diverse cohort in Australia. Around 90% of the University's students are domestic, while international student numbers have been increasing and are projected to continue to grow.

The majority of students at Western Sydney University are the first in their family to undertake university study. Further, almost 50% of the University's students are non-current school leavers.

Western Sydney University's academic offerings encompass a comprehensive range of core and emerging disciplines, including: business, STEM, education, the humanities, medicine, nursing and midwifery, law, health and the social sciences.

The University is focused on impact-driven research with 'five world-standard or better' research institutions committed to realising end-user outcomes and applications of tangible benefit to the region and further afield. Areas of particular specialisation include: urban and living society; health and wellbeing; education and aspirational change; and environmental sustainability.

Western Sydney University ranked in the 'Top 100 Young Universities in the World' and among the 'Top 500 in the World' or 'Top 3 per cent' (THE rankings). It is a university with a commitment to catalysing and driving transformational regional change.

Introduction

Western Sydney University (WSU) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Higher Education Standards Panel concerning its recent discussion paper, *Improving retention, completion and success in higher education*.

While WSU commends the Panel's efforts at clarifying how retention, completion and success might be enhanced across higher and tertiary education, we also highlight a range of concerns that arise in the current context of the federal Higher Education Reform Package. Many of these concerns relate to the proposed integration of performance-based funding measures and their likely impacts across the sector.

As the Panel has emphasised, higher education providers already make significant investments in a range of student support measures at all stages of the student life-cycle. Many of these initiatives are tailored to account for the specific needs of the students whom institutions serve, and WSU urges caution in any measurement approaches that do not take individual student and complex contextual factors into account.

Further, WSU stresses that there is a limited amount of data that institutions currently hold and therefore strongly encourages broader consultation to determine appropriate sector-wide data needs. Consistency of data types, collection approaches, and analysis methodologies will be crucial if any cross-sector, data-driven approach is to be effectively implemented.

This paper addresses the twelve focus questions from the Higher Education Standards Panel's discussion paper in turn. An additional section is provided with comments and possible measures on the proposed interventions the discussion paper presents. WSU believes that many of these measures could be possible if provision is made for higher education providers to develop the systems and expertise that would be required to use the new metrics. However, in the context of competitive performance-based funding measures, WSU questions the extent to which higher education providers will be willing to share strategies informed by these data.

1 Speed of Completion and Sector Expectations

WSU firmly believes that completion of a higher education qualification is a significant achievement for any student committing effort, time and resources to the task. However, there is a need for more data about the goals and motivations of students so that success can be understood from the student perspective. Focussing on completion alone would fail to recognise these goals and motivations, and contribute to a system that focuses on inappropriate indicators. For this reason, WSU remains sceptical of approaches that equate completion of a degree with what an individual student would define as their own success. Further, WSU does not believe that individual-level completions can be extrapolated to sector-wide completion rates in a meaningful sense.

Establishing standardised completion rates or expectations of the speed at which students should complete their qualifications is concerning as such measure assumes that a three-year, linear model of university education is suited to all students at all times. Performance metrics based on this assumption would arguably do more harm than good to both students and to educational innovation. Instead, WSU urges the Higher Education Standards Panel to consider the role that institutional contexts and student profiles play in completion of university qualifications, and how educational innovation to promote completion (rather than completion rates) may be encouraged as an alternative.

WSU's strategic mission prioritises excellence for the people of Western Sydney with 77% of WSU students coming from the region. These students exhibit proportionately lower ATAR achievement and lower socio-economic status than their inner-city university peers. Further, WSU students are more likely to come from non-English speaking backgrounds, more likely to be the first members of their families to attend university, and more likely to be working during their degrees. These factors all point to longer completion times for WSU students as they progressively build skills and knowledge while balancing the complex circumstances of their day-to-day lives.

While WSU offers a wide range of pathway programs that can support students to build the skills they will need for university success and completion, these pathways often take students longer to complete than an assumed three-year linear model of university education would permit. It is not uncommon for students engaging in WSU College diplomas to undertake their study part-time. In these circumstances, it may take students up to three years to complete the first-year equivalent of a university degree. WSU does not support the

establishment of any sort of performance criteria that would disadvantage students merely because their learning took longer.

A related concern with completion rates is that these rates entirely ignore the fluid nature of students' lives outside of university. To assume that all students have the capacity to complete a degree in a constrained timeframe does not adequately acknowledge that life circumstances can often require students to change their degree attendance patterns. This may require them to switch between delivery modes, part- or full-time status, or even to take a break for a period. The recent La Trobe study, referenced in the Panel's discussion paper, acknowledges that the majority of these issues are beyond university control. This should be a clear signal that other aspects of our students' lives matter, and rather than imposing completion rate metrics, we should instead be coming up with approaches and mechanisms that support students to balance their changing life circumstances with their educational aspirations.

If performance measures are reflective of the speed of time it takes an educational provider to accelerate a student through a degree program, there are also foreseeable risks to educational quality. Students should be supported to learn in-depth rather than pressured to obtain superficial knowledge through the imposition of time restraints. WSU does not support the integration of metrics that could create an environment where quality of a learning experience is pitted against speed of completion.

Further, if performance-based funding were linked to completion rates, there is the distinct possibility that final year students could be actively targeted by competitor providers. WSU does not support creation of an environment where significant investments in student capacity-building are devalued by aggressive competitors offering final year transfers.

Funding contingent on completion rates is problematic when fully online learning is considered. Many students choose online learning because it better accommodates their unique life circumstances. These circumstances include family, employment, geographical proximity to physical campuses and convenience considerations. Students studying online often take longer to complete and have lower completion rates than other students. While WSU is implementing a range of initiatives to address and support student completions, in situations where students are studying part-time with significant other commitments, comparison with sector-wide completion rates are unlikely to be equivalent. Discouraging these students from study would be detrimental to the development of an inclusive, skilled workforce, and would fail to contribute to the desired future economy and society of Australia.

Further, if sector-wide completion expectations were incentivised, universities may be discouraged from creating online opportunities. Decreasing online options may reduce both innovation and development of new modes of learning in digital spaces and participation opportunities. Overall, this would be a great loss to students facing significant geographical or temporal barriers as well as detrimental to the sector as a whole.

Ongoing innovation is crucial to higher education. With the changing nature of work, not all students will want, or require, a full degree to be successful in their careers. Discussions on the future of work consistently point to the need to look beyond traditional concepts, such as degree completion, to better understand how qualifications provide value to students in a shifting economy. Reliance on completion rates as a performance measure is blind to this dialogue, and may again inhibit the ability of universities to create new models of education to best suit the needs of students, communities and employers.

A final concern relating to completion rates is highlighted in the recent TEQSA report, *Characteristics of Australian higher education providers and their relation to first-year student attrition*. The report emphasises that innovations in delivery modes, models and sessions are disruptive to measures based on annual criteria. While the context of the report focuses on attrition rates, by extension, completion rates should be subject to similar criticisms. The report suggests that a broader discussion on how to redefine these measures should be considered. WSU strongly supports this discussion, as the context of flexible or stacking credentials, nested qualifications, accelerated delivery and alternative exit options all challenge the validity and applicability of traditional annual calculation methodologies.

WSU urges the panel to distinguish between completion rates and learning. It is unreasonable to compare institutions focused on supporting and helping students from high risk populations against those with fiscal, familial and related support measures in place. Focussing on completion rates may incentivise superficial learning approaches that are a disservice to students and uncondusive to maintaining quality in higher education. At the absolute minimum, if rates must be publicised, WSU strongly encourage the sharing of additional information, such as details around study and support options and enrichment activities that give a fuller picture of study at each institution rather than promoting reliance on outdated measures that do not reflect the needs of many students for whom a linear, three-year degree is not a suitable option.

2 Data Collection for Transparency and Accountability

Data can serve as an important identifier of where improvements can be made. However, the effectiveness of data for this purpose is contingent on the timeliness of its collection and dissemination. Delays of two years for sector-wide data comparisons significantly handicap an institution's capacity to take immediate action to address areas of concern. In using and relying on data, WSU also urges caution to ensure that data does not become a one-dimensional concept by which university performance is ranked. There is a need to better understand what is meaningful for students, including what they want to know and when.

WSU understand the importance of providing students with user-friendly data to assist with informed decision making. As noted above, this information should include additional information about enrichment activities, learning options and student support. WSU also strongly suggests these measures should integrate some form of adjustment for known risk factors. Measures should reflect that student retention, completion and success are complex and context-dependent, and therefore not all institutions should be held to the same criteria. Internal measures that take the characteristics of a student body into account are far more likely to allow an institution to demonstrate how its support initiatives are making a difference to the population it serves. Internal performance can be far more effectively monitored at progressive time periods using easily accessible internal data. This would enable universities to be responsive to student needs, to innovate to accommodate change, and to address issues far earlier than any sector-wide approach would allow.

WSU suggests that changes to data collection could potentially be made more comprehensive by comparing both student and cohort data at an internal level. These changes would take unique student characteristics, participation levels, and challenges into account. Institutional level reporting could include an analysis of different learning activities and support mechanisms engaged with by students, giving a fuller understanding of student behaviour in the rich context of initiatives each institution offers. This would also enable progressive improvement of internal programs and engagement. However, for this type of data to be produced, extensive linking of student records across systems will be required, significant investment in software development will be essential, and an adaptive approach to trend analysis will be key. These are all characteristics of a shift from the mere collection of data to better use of the data universities already may be able to access. In much of the international literature, the integrated analysis of student information across interactions with an institution is referred to as learning analytics. WSU supports the strategic development of learning

analytics as a way for universities to provide the individualised support that has been shown to dramatically increase student success in other institutions and across the literature.

While a good deal of investment in learning analytics has occurred in Australia, broader adoption of learning analytics would require further significant investment to develop institutional programs. These programs need some level of predictive capacity derived from statistical analysis of large bodies of student data over time. Learning analytics are not an immediate solution, but they may provide a way forward to generate meaningful institutional data to ensure students are best supported. However, WSU emphasises that learning analytics cannot provide solutions unless teaching staff and institutions know how to intervene based on data insights, and ensure that interventions actually occur. There is a broad requirement to better understand what appropriate interventions consist of, and which interventions work in what circumstances.

The funding arrangements and timelines currently proposed by the Higher Education Reform Package provide disincentives for universities to invest the resources required to develop meaningful learning analytics programs, and WSU would strongly support revisiting these measures if a data-driven approach to transparency and accountability is to be a part of the reform agenda.

Finally, WSU strongly recommends the need for consistency in data definitions, collection procedures, and analysis methodologies across universities. It is crucial to know in advance how data needs to be classified at the level of student, cohort and institution. Formats for sharing information should also be agreed in advance. As noted above, WSU believes there is a need to better understand student motivations and behaviours as a part of data collection requirements for universities, and recommends integrating these types of measures into any future data set requirements. Data collection to increase transparency and accountability will need to allow a reasonable timeframe for new data analysis systems to be developed, and are likely to come at significant costs to universities. Both time and cost should be carefully considered as changes to data management are planned and implemented.

3 Government Website Improvements

WSU reaffirms its support for easily accessible information that allows students to make appropriate decisions about their engagement with higher education. WSU also supports further engagement with prospective students to develop a better understanding about the types of information prospective students want to know. However, WSU urges the need for caution when comparing statistics

across institutions if these statistics do not take contextual student needs into account.

Improvements to QILT and Study Assist have largely failed to acknowledge the circumstances of prospective students who refer to the websites for information. This is a significant concern in terms of decision making because it assumes all prospective students have uniform life circumstances. As a sector, we know this is not the case. These websites do not help students to assess their own fit for a university in comparison to institutional level trends. Any changes to websites should bear this limitation in mind.

For this reason, WSU encourages the government to provide more sophisticated measures of information and analysis on their websites. This could be accomplished by integrating an assessment tool considering both a student's individual circumstances, such as background, financial situation, geographical location, work status, and other life characteristics, as well as a student's expectations for study, such as part- or full-time attendance, online or face-to-face delivery, work-integrated learning expectations, or course. In combination with the more comprehensive approaches to data collection proposed above, such a tool could generate not only quantitative institutional metrics tailored to an individual student's circumstances, but could also provide qualitative information about how a student could be supported in their study through specific institutional initiatives. WSU asserts that these types of information would significantly improve a student's capacity to make informed decisions about their educational future because they will enable a student to assess whether the institution they are choosing suits their individual needs. Reliance on quantitative metrics alone is detrimental to student choice because it fails to illustrate the suite of support available to students, and encourages unrealistic expectations that do not take individual needs into consideration.

4 Student Tracking in Tertiary Education

The inability to track students across educational experiences is a significant impediment to effective student support. WSU would strongly support linking student identifiers to encourage more tailored individual solutions that can better meet student needs and circumstances. This data linkage would allow institutions to respond more appropriately to students and would therefore be conducive to tertiary success.

WSU encourages extension of this data linkage beyond the higher and tertiary sectors to include school level information. Currently, it is not possible for universities to assess the needs of students in this comprehensive way. The inability to engage with a student's educational journey from an early stage presents significant barriers for institutions such as WSU that offer extensive

aspirational and capacity building programs to primary and high school students. Linking student identifiers across the educational experience would enable universities to better understand and support students from an early stage, and would contribute to better outcomes for individual students and student cohorts by ensuring their university experience is best tailored to their circumstances. Further, if performance-based funding has potential to be linked to outreach or capacity building programs, it will be important for institutions to assess the effectiveness of these programs by tracking student outcomes from the point of intervention through to enrolment and participation in higher education environments.

5 Outreach and Career Advice for Students

Universities currently lack sufficient capacity to assess whether institutional outreach activities are successful because student identifiers are not linked across sectors, as noted above. Better data linkage across school, tertiary and higher education would support more comprehensive outreach and engagement activities. Universities could then be rewarded for outreach activities in instances where students go on to higher education, even if the students they supported did not end up at their institution for a degree. However, this is currently not possible. Despite this challenge, WSU remains committed to providing outreach and careers advice activities that can raise the aspirations of students, and currently offers an extensive suite of programs to this effect. While some of these programs are funded by HEPPP, many are internally funded through our Widening Participation programs and our student services and careers advice offerings. WSU would strongly support a sector-wide approach to provide more comprehensive support and advice to all students, both prospective and current.

Noting that outreach and careers advice activities regularly involve primary and high schools, WSU also encourages sector-wide discussion of how to provide more consistent, higher quality careers advice in schools. In many cases, there is a need to better inform school staff who counsel students about university options, as well as to ensure there are adequate resources to support this approach.

Possible strategies to strengthen outreach and advice activities include: sector-wide collaborative opportunities for teacher professional development around careers, higher education options, and pathways; sector-wide collaborative approaches that enable students to access numerous outreach activities, enhancing capacity-building and reducing duplication or gaps; and developing stronger collaborative approaches to university-level skill building earlier in a student's educational experience. This work would likely be most effectively carried out in partnership with schools and VET providers where relevant.

WSU notes that these collaborative propositions are unlikely to obtain sector-wide support without resources. In a context where significant levels of university funding are at risk due to performance-based criteria, competition between providers will force institutions to scrutinise expenditures. Institutions may question the benefit of investing in outreach and careers advice activities if students prepared through these programs attend a university elsewhere. Competitive environments create significant risk for outreach activities and WSU urges caution in performance-based metrics for outreach and careers advice activities.

One approach to reduce competition may be to integrate collaborative incentives into outreach and careers advice activities. These incentives would need to take different institutional contributions to joined-up initiatives into account. They would also need to be highly sensitive to context and the challenges that different students face in building their capacity and skills for higher education. Capacity-building requirements will not be the same for all prospective students, and WSU would strongly support recognition of this fact.

6 Identification, Intervention and Support Strategies

WSU strongly encourages strategies that identify and support students to complete higher education. Internally, we offer a broad range of contact points and services, including mentoring, counselling, study support, academic skill-building courses, and on-site service support. Additionally, we regularly contact students to ensure their needs are being met. WSU has had great success with a proactive, direct approach to intervention, as well as with the offer of a broad range of pathway options that progressively build the capacity individual students need for academic success. Training teaching staff in not only their subject area but also in educational practice has also resulted in better outcomes for students, particularly in the early stages of their educational journey.

Additional suggestions which may promote the uptake of support services include: working closely with high schools from an earlier stage to develop literacies required in higher education; building internal networks of staff and students who can promote support services and encourage students to seek help; and developing a culture that promotes earlier engagement with student support and services. These strategies would reduce the need for more intensive support at later stages of study and would encourage students to seek out more help when and as they need it. However, adding metrics to these strategies would present significant challenges, particularly in an environment where university resources will be subject to additional restrictions.

If institutions are to more effectively connect with students early, the capacity for learning analytics may also need to be enhanced across the sector. While some questions have been raised about whether embedded instruction or stand-alone programs are preferable, WSU strongly supports further discussions that would

clarify a way forward in the Australian higher education context. WSU also emphasises the need for learning analytics initiatives to be linked across the sector and resourced with appropriate finance and expertise.

7 Intermediate and Nested Qualifications

WSU strongly supports further development of intermediate and nested qualification offerings. While nested courses add a level of complexity to student management, there is nothing that prevents higher education providers from offering intermediate or nested qualifications and this should remain an option for higher education institutions.

WSU offers a range of intermediate qualifications and pathways in and out of degrees. Not only do these pathways promote greater accessibility for students, they also encourage lifelong learning by creating options to dip in and out of qualifications as student career and life circumstances demand. Further, these approaches allow students to develop the skills they need without having to drop out of a full degree program. There is evidence to suggest that micro-credential frameworks better align with the world of work, and WSU supports further investigation of these approaches.

Student mobility may impact universities if broader uptake of intermediate or nested qualifications is promoted. There is potential that some providers may choose to adopt first- or final-year offerings in a competitive market. This may create additional burdens for students, and therefore WSU recommends that measures should be put in place to ensure that pathways to a full qualification exist when an institution offers a nested or intermediate qualification.

WSU also strongly supports better linkage of student records across the sector. Better linkage would ensure that the contributions that institutions make to a full qualification via a nested or intermediate offering are recognised if students transfer between providers to complete their degrees. This linkage is particularly important where significant efforts have been made to increase the capacity and skills of students who later transfer institutions in a performance-based funding environment. Currently there is no way to know if interventions occurring at one institution contribute to student retention, success or completion post-transfer.

8 Innovations Supporting Student Completion

WSU strongly supports approaches that enable students to complete their degrees. The discussion paper highlights that strategies to promote connection and re-engagement with students who need to take time out from higher education would benefit from development and further investigation. WSU believes this investigation should be encouraged.

WSU also advocates for more individualised support for students in higher education. There is a need for further research into adaptive learning platforms and other emergent learning science concepts that personalise student learning pathways. Better understanding of the individual circumstances of students would also enable earlier identification, intervention and support according to a student's specific needs, and this is likely to result in better student outcomes across the sector. WSU is opposed to the use of approaches that fail to take individual and complex contextual factors into account.

9 International Examples of Enhancing Student Success

Work in the United States, notably at Arizona State University, has shown the efficacy of differentiated models supporting student engagement and completion. Adaptive learning environments allied to comprehensive student support, where academic support and personal support are separately addressed by staff with specific expertise in each area, have also exhibited significant success. WSU strongly suggests that these measures should be benchmarked and pilots should be encouraged here in Australia.

Tinto was referenced in the discussion paper and WSU acknowledges the value of this work. WSU also suggests the work on mindsets by Carol Dweck, and the work on materials development and learning science by those such as Dick Clark and Bror Saxburg, could provide useful lessons for the Australian higher education sector. Derek Bok's views on the challenges and opportunities in higher education would also be worth reviewing.

Consideration should also be given to recent commentary on the use of ratings under the British Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). TEF ratings classify universities into gold, silver and bronze categories based on their relative performance on six metrics. The measures adjust based on benchmarks for student demographics and program offerings. The TEF has been criticised as single university ratings are not representative of discipline-level teaching quality. The TEF has also been criticised for its use of metrics that describe teaching outcomes but fail to consider the quality of classroom experiences. However, support has been found for TEF's ability to highlight good teaching environments for certain groups of students at institutions that are often not represented in metrics-based international hierarchies. As the pilot develops, TEF may provide additional lessons relevant to the Australian context.

The College Scorecard in the United States provides another international example from which Australia might learn. The Scorecard was established under the Obama administration and initially sought to link funding to performance. Extensive data limitations and sector objections led to the abandonment of performance-based funding aims for the scorecard, and it is now used to share information only.

10 Sharing Best Practice

While the achievement of any final state of 'best practice' seems an unlikely prospect, WSU strongly supports sharing continuous improvements in higher education practice across the sector. Conferences, associations such as the National Association of Enabling Educators Australia, research papers, seminars, workshops, and traditional face-to-face approaches to sharing information remain effective communication channels. While there may be benefits in developing a formal case study service or portal, the feasibility of doing so in an environment of restricted resources would require further evaluation and sector commitment. While it may become less commonplace to share strategies as the higher education environment becomes more competitive, WSU remains committed to discussing additional sharing mechanisms with the sector as a whole.

11 Embedding Strategies into Practice

In addition to sharing strategies across the sector, WSU suggests a range of strategies that could be implemented within institutions to support student completion. These strategies are crucial to avoid a deficit-oriented view of students, and to ensure that universities incorporate inclusive practice into their learning and teaching activities. There is significant evidence to demonstrate that inclusive practice is more effective at improving student performance in higher education than imposing additional requirements onto students. For this reason, WSU has already invested heavily in a range of strategies to support students in their educational endeavours, and plans to continue this investment.

Currently, WSU provides extensive academic staff training, particularly in the use of new technologies and delivery approaches required for online units of study and flipped class delivery. This training is important given the central role curriculum design plays to help students achieve learning outcomes.

Additionally, WSU provides substantial student support initiatives detailed in section six above, and these initiatives are deeply embedded in practice across the institution. Further, WSU has established a Learning Futures strategy to develop innovative new learning approaches that support student completion. Finally, at a school level, a range of service positions have been established to provide situated academic advice and referrals to students who may need additional academic support to complete their degrees. Other higher education providers are also likely to be engaged in similar activities.

12 Implications for TEQSA

As the quality and standards authority, TEQSA has the power to request additional information from institutions if student completion is identified as an

area of concern. TEQSA may wish to consider requesting information about support provided to students if this information could provide a fuller picture of how higher education providers were actively implementing strategies to support student retention, success and completion.

Similarly, WSU suggests it may be useful for TEQSA to establish threshold standards that reflect quality provision of student support by higher education providers. This approach would ensure that minimum levels of support would be provided across institutions, and that quality would meet a baseline standard across the sector.

13 Proposed Interventions for Student Success

WSU notes that the current lack of data linkage across school, tertiary and higher education providers may impede measurement of the success of initiatives that occur at various stages of a student’s educational journey. Without more fully integrated data sets, it is difficult to determine how university initiatives contribute to student retention, success and completion. Additionally, the emphasis placed on data should be balanced with caution. The collection and use of extensive amounts of data may intrude into students’ lives. For these reasons, WSU asserts that policies on data and learning analytics are absolutely necessary. In the table below we offer comments on the proposed interventions for student success noted in the discussion paper.

Table 1 - Comments on Proposed Interventions for Student Success

Proposed Intervention		Comments
Prior to entry	Raise the aspirations of prospective students through outreach and early intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WSU has an extensive suite of programs focussed on forging strong relationships with students in the region from an early age to raise aspirations and make university more accessible • For pathway students, this is about achieving the goal of entering university through an alternate approach • Providing students and families with the right level of information to make good decisions about their future education and pathways matters • Possible measures might include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Students involved in outreach that continue to university education, either with the outreach provider or another provider ○ Pathway students who progress to degree programs from intermediate qualifications ○ Pre- and post- intervention aspiration measures, but these would be difficult to establish/control
	Provide informed career advice from as	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A range of careers explored early may help raise higher education aspirations

Proposed Intervention		Comments
	early as primary school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This content would need to be carefully developed to engage primary students • A mix of interactive, hands-on activities, such as those used in WSU's First Foot Forward program, may be useful (see www.westernsydney.edu.au/fff) • Possible measures might include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Surveying teachers, parents, and other stakeholders on program impact (increased awareness of higher education, sense of belonging, improvements in self-confidence and/or self-efficacy, improvements in perceptions of higher education, development of teamwork and other skills to assist with further learning) ○ Students involved in programs that continue to university education, either with the advice provider or another provider ○ Correlation of any early awareness activities with retention in enrolled field of higher educational study
	Ensure consistent, comparable information allows prospective students to make informed decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As noted in our discussion above, WSU supports access to clear, comparable information to assist informed decision making • A mix of quantitative and qualitative information is strongly encouraged • A focus on student self-assessment and linking support options with student needs would greatly enhance the information available to prospective students • Possible measures might include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Relationship between information access and university preferences ○ Satisfaction with university post-enrolment, in relation to information access and decision-making
Institutional culture	A healthy university culture that embraces diversity and flexibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WSU already has an exceptionally diverse student cohort, but imposition of diversity measures may be difficult to meet for other institutions • It is important to recognise the inverse relationship between diversity and retention and how this affects institutional performance more broadly • Diversity metrics need to be carefully aligned to admissions criteria to ensure students are being enrolled because it is believed they will be successful, not only because they help achieve diversity targets • Programs that are tailored to support staff and students from different backgrounds should be considered in any diversity measures

Proposed Intervention	Comments
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possible measures include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Diversity program access and participation, and its relationship to individual staff / student performance ○ Relationship between participation rates and diversity of the community (including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation and low SES participation)
<p>A supportive university learning environment that puts the student first</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WSU strongly supports this intervention and engages in extensive student-centred activities as detailed in section six • Additionally, this intervention is highlighted as crucial for pathways students entering university by alternate mechanisms • Mentoring, small class sizes, and a specific approach to teaching and learning have been found particularly successful to assist pathways student transitions to higher education • Possible measures include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Student participation in support activities ○ Relationship between student participation in support activities and student learning outcomes ○ Progression from pathways courses to degree programs, and subsequent completions
<p>A culture that reinforces the importance of student success</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As noted, WSU is strongly committed to student success – our first goal in our strategic plan is to be a distinctively student-centred university • This strategic goal permeates all aspects of our academic activities for both staff and students • Possible measures include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Relationship between participation rates and diversity of the community ○ Student satisfaction with teaching, courses, facilities and overall experience ○ Internal enrolment, retention, progression and completion rates ○ Graduate outcomes based on employment and further study ○ Extent of student engagement in consultation with, and participation on, decision-making bodies across the university ○ Number of work-integrated learning experiences available to students ○ Number of available internships and student placements

Proposed Intervention		Comments
	A strategic plan that includes retention targets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WSU's strategic plan includes retention as a measure of success • Retention targets may be difficult to improve upon • WSU has a Student Transition, Retention and Success (STaRS) team working to provide institutional leadership and oversight to planning and implementation of transition, retention and success initiatives https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/learning_future/home/ct/curriculum/academic_transition/stars • Possible measures include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Relationship between retention and other student characteristics ○ Relationship between retention and reasons for not continuing with study, particularly as these relate to circumstances the university has capacity to influence ○ Relationship between retention, support of discontinuing students, and re-engagement based on university initiatives
	An institutional retention strategy which includes procedures for the re-engagement of students who have withdrawn from higher education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WSU is not opposed to developing procedures for re-engagement of students • As noted, WSU is already working on a range of procedures through its STaRS program • Resourcing may be any issue for some institutions if procedures are particularly labour-intensive • Possible measures parallel those described immediately above
	A clear student voice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WSU runs a student voice project to ensure student feedback informs institutional priorities • Student participation in university decision-making is also a strategic measure of success at WSU • Possible measures include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Student satisfaction with teaching, courses, facilities and overall experience ○ Extent of student engagement in consultation with, and participation on, decision-making bodies across the university
Teaching and learning	More senior academic staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We note seniority does not guarantee teaching quality • Academic staff development may be an alternative approach to a seniority focus, particularly if this development were to focus on effective educational delivery to encourage student achievement of learning outcomes • It may also be worthwhile explicitly linking teaching performance to promotions criteria to ensure senior academic staff demonstrate teaching excellence

Proposed Intervention	Comments
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possible measures include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Student satisfaction with teaching, courses, facilities and overall experience ○ Internal enrolment, retention, progression and completion rates ○ Staff participation in, and satisfaction with, development activities ○ Relationship between student satisfaction and staff development
High teacher quality and teacher ability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As noted, academic staff development is crucial to continuous improvement of teaching quality and ability, and focus on training in education is essential to teacher development • Possible measures parallel those described immediately above
A focus on effective learning and teaching strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WSU strongly supports a focus on effective learning and teaching strategies • Possible measures parallel those described above
An early assessment task prior to the student withdrawal census date	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WSU supports strategies that enable students to self-assess their capacity to engage with a unit prior to census, however, we also note that the reasons for bringing in early assessment should be clearly articulated if this intervention is to be adopted • We highlight that allowing time for feedback turnaround may create a high assessment workload in early weeks of a semester if not effectively planned • Higher education providers may wish to consider how assessment maps over the course of a semester or a degree to shift the focus to achievement of learning outcomes rather than completion of assessment tasks • Possible measures include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Relationship between early assessment and rates of failure for non-participation or non-submission (where students have not officially unenrolled from a unit)
Sharing best practice across the sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WSU notes that sharing of best practice is likely to be difficult in a performance-based funding context • This may raise concerns about quality of information or strategies shared across the sector and innovation may be hampered as a result • Measures might be restricted to participation in this context, but collaboration could be incentivised if thought was given to appropriate approaches • Possible measures include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Participation in peak body activities ○ Collaborative initiatives contributed to, and outcomes of those initiatives

Proposed Intervention		Comments
	A willingness to offer nested courses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WSU highlights that many higher education providers already offer a range of nested courses, particularly in pathways contexts, postgraduate programs and via a number of exit degrees • There is space for significant development in this area • Possible measures include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Availability of nested courses across degree programs ○ Uptake of nested courses in relationship to degree programs ○ Popularity of nested course options to new markets / additional learners ○ Evaluations and employment outcomes for those completing nested courses, particularly in relation to those who do not complete nested courses ○ Industry participation in nested course development
Support services	Use data generated at enrolment and through learning analytics to make effective interventions to support at risk students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WSU supports this measure but strongly recommends a consistent approach to learning analytics be determined in consultation with the sector • Additionally, the need for cross-sector data linkage is emphasised as important to meaningful results • Data pre-enrolment and post-completion would also inform this approach • Possible measures include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Suitability of interventions proposed by analytics – possibly measured by uptake of interventions, but also requiring consideration of changes to long-term learning outcomes / student evaluations ○ Institutional retention / completion rates, at varying levels of analysis (student, cohort, etc.)
	High quality student support services (personal, financial, academic)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WSU notes the importance of student support to all students, but particularly emphasises the need for effective pathway and online student support • Possible measures include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Engagement with support services, including mentoring, advising and counselling ○ Relationship of engagement to student performance and evaluations ○ Relationship between individual and/or cohort statistics and engagement with support ○ Student awareness of and ratings of support service effectiveness and quality

	Proposed Intervention	Comments
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Extent of support provision across student body ○ Student feedback and improvement mechanisms used by an institution, and any improvements to other measures based on acting on student feedback
	Targeted and well communicated student support strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Student support strategies need to be available to all students, but there may be some tailoring required to best meet the needs of specific cohorts ● A specific example arises in terms of culturally appropriate support, such as WSU's Badanami program for Indigenous students ● Possible measures are likely quite similar to those described immediately above
	Online support services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● WSU notes that online students should receive the same types of support as students who take classes face to face, but careful thought needs to be given to how these services are adapted to be accessible in online contexts ● Possible measures are likely quite similar to those noted for quality of student support above, but may be slightly easier to track given technological platform use
	Peer mentoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● WSU notes it already invests heavily in a range of mentoring initiatives, including general mentoring programs, culturally specific mentoring programs, peer-assisted study support, and mentoring programs for high school students such as the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Program ● Possible measures include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Uptake and participation in mentoring by both mentees and mentors ○ Conversion rates – how many mentees later become mentors ○ Relationships between mentoring program participation and student performance and/or evaluations
Accountability	Collect exit data on why students have withdrawn from study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Comprehensive exit data collection will require significant investment by the sector as it is not only labour intensive, but will require specialised staff training ● Survey data collection may be possible, but response rates are likely to be low and data is likely to be of limited quality ● Options and pathways for re-engagement should be established early, and follow up contacts may need to be scheduled – intervals should be discussed ● This will need to be closely related to student support initiatives and quality

Proposed Intervention		Comments
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possible measures include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Reasons for withdrawal / suspension, and relationship to other measures above ○ Evaluation of educational experience to date and relationship to individual goals / motivations ○ Re-engagement rates ○ Alternative pathway uptake and/or completion
	Hold institutions to account for entry standards and student outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WSU notes that different types of institutions, different programs and different students will all have different requirements and expectations for entry standards and student outcomes • Minimum thresholds should be developed in consultation with the sector if they are required • There is a need to be careful that approaches are inclusive and do not devalue certain students, or characterise them as low-performers • Instead, empowering and supportive strategies should be used • Pathways should also be developed to build capacity to meet any minimum standards required • Possible measures are not suggested for this intervention, other than engagement with pathways and the corresponding relationship between pathway participation and longer term student performance / evaluations

14 Conclusion

To summarise the key points of this submission, Western Sydney University:

- stresses the significant investment universities and higher education providers are already making to support the students whom they serve;
- emphasises that the competitive, performance-based funding model proposed by the Higher Education Reform Package is highly likely to limit provider willingness to share strategies that improve student outcomes;
- notes that a reduction in sharing strategies may hamper innovation and is likely to negatively affect students, institutions and the sector as a whole;
- highlights the significant gaps in existing data, particularly across institutional boundaries, the VET sector, and school-level education;
- argues that individual student motivations and goals need to be better understood, and that complex contextual circumstances need to be taken into account in any sector-wide approach to improving student outcomes;
- asserts that the traditional three-year degree is not suited to the aspirations and circumstances of all students;
- stresses that changing economic circumstances and educational requirements result in a need to re-evaluate current performance metrics, and new measures should be developed via sustained, in-depth consultation with the sector;
- points out that improving internal institutional performance will likely be more efficient and effective than sector-wide approaches could be;
- suggests a range of possible metrics in relation to proposed interventions, but notes these metrics will require significant investments of time, financial resources, and expertise to effectively implement;
- reiterates concerns raised about the usefulness of sector-wide institutional comparisons that do not integrate relevant qualitative data about actual learning experiences at specific institutions; and
- suggests that the responsibility for addressing retention and success extends beyond just the higher education sector, especially in relation to pre-enrolment advice and preparation for students.

WSU would welcome the opportunity to engage in further discussion on any topic raised in this submission, and looks forward to participating in the additional consultation the Higher Education Standards Panel has proposed.



References

Australian Government 2017, *Characteristics of Australian higher education providers and their relation to first-year student attrition: June 2017*, Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, viewed 3 July 2017, http://www.teqsa.gov.au/sites/default/files/AttritionReport_V2_Jun17.pdf.

Australian Government 2017, *Improving retention, completion and success in higher education: Higher Education Standards Panel Discussion Paper, June 2017*, Department of Education and Training, viewed 3 July 2017, https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/final_discussion_paper.pdf.

Harvey, A, Szalkowicz, G, & Luckman, M 2017, *The re-recruitment of students who have withdrawn from Australian higher education*, La Trobe University, viewed 3 July 2017, http://www.latrobe.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/784028/La-Trobe-NPP-Re-recruitment-Research-Report-24-February-2017.pdf.