



NCSEHE

National Centre for Student
Equity in Higher Education



Curtin University

SUBMISSION TO HIGHER EDUCATION STANDARDS PANEL

Improving retention, completion and success in higher education

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About the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education

The Australian Government Department of Education and Training has established the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE), currently based at Curtin University, with the purpose to inform public policy design, policy implementation and institutional practice in order to improve higher education participation and success for marginalised and disadvantaged people.

In Australia and internationally, the NCSEHE acts as a conduit for discussion and research on issues affecting student equity in higher education policy, practice and analysis. In keeping with its purpose, the NCSEHE attempts to connect student equity policy with the activities of higher education institutions and national equity outcomes, through its input into comparative assessment of institutional strategies, systemic assessments of policy achievements and assessments of national policymaking in view of this evidence. As part of this mission, the NCSEHE strives to 'close the gap' between equity policy, research and practice, conducting activities through three core programs:

- **Equity Policy and Program Evaluation (Evaluation Program)** – providing leadership and support in developing a national approach and resources to evaluate the impact of initiatives to increase participation of people from low socio-economic status (low SES) backgrounds and other equity groups in higher education.
- **Equity Policy and Planning Research (Research Program)** – furthering equity policy and planning in Australia, sharing knowledge and capabilities developed in Australia, and providing evidence on the impact of policy on equity outcomes in the system.
- **Student Equity Data and Analysis (Data and Analysis Program)** – providing analysis and availability of national datasets on student equity in higher education.

Introduction

The response of the NCSEHE to the Higher Education Standards Panel (HESP) discussion paper, *Improving retention, completion and success in higher education* (HESP, 2017), focuses on the challenge of assessing outcomes when students and institutions have different starting points. The NCSEHE is focused on recognised equity groups in Australian higher education which are:

- Students from Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Backgrounds (Low SES students);
- Students with Disability;
- Indigenous Students;
- Students from Rural and Remote Areas; and
- Students from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds (NESB Students).

In addition, there has been public reporting around women in non-traditional areas (WINTA). Around 50% of domestic undergraduates can be classified into at least one of the official equity categories (Pitman et al., 2016, pp. 32-33) with many falling into two or three groups (e.g. Indigenous students from regional areas).

Equity reporting revolves around these definitions for access (equity proportion of entering or new enrolments), participation (equity proportion of total domestic undergraduates or all students) and outcomes (equity proportion of students graduating from the system to enter employment or further study). This reporting is now subject to a major Australian Government review, *Review of Equity Groups* and a number of related projects, including the *HEPPP Review* by ACIL Allen Consulting (2017) and proposed projects to look at equity definitions and reporting.

In this context, consideration of equity students' retention, success and completion is important for three reasons.

First, equity participation has improved in view of recent initiatives to bolster their numbers in higher education student numbers, namely the full introduction of the Demand Driven Funding System (DDFS) in 2012 which increased student numbers, and equity student numbers disproportionately (Koshy, 2016), and the development of the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP), which provided in excess of \$1 billion in funding to universities for outreach and retention programs for low SES students.

As Table 1 shows, undergraduate domestic student enrolments increased by 34.7% between 2008 and 2015 – moving from 532,527 to 717,195. However, all equity groups excluding remote and WINTA saw growth proximate to or greater than this expansion, with low SES student numbers

increasing by 50.4%, with enrolments by Students with Disability (88.6%) and Indigenous students (72.1%) increasing at considerably faster rates.

As the HESP (2017) notes in the *Improving retention, completion and success in higher education* discussion paper, much of the media discussion surrounding retention and completion has focused on the Demand Driven Funding System (DDFS) amidst claims that admission standards have declined and non-completion rates have increased as a consequence.

Table 1: Equity Group Higher Education Participation, 2008 to 2015, Undergraduates, Various Years and Growth Rate from 2008

	2008	2010	2012	2015	Growth (08-14) % ¹
All Students	532,527	580,372	634,434	717,195	34.7%
Low SES	86,581	96,706	109,788	130,246	50.4%
Students with Disability	23,447	28,057	33,220	44,210	88.6%
Indigenous	6,820	7,943	9,005	11,739	72.1%
Women in Non-Traditional Areas (WINTA) ¹	103,120	107,959	114,382	125,241	21.5%
Regional	101,339	110,646	121,476	134,847	33.1%
Remote	5,240	5,532	5,804	6,365	21.5%
NESB	17,222	18,227	21,289	26,647	54.7%

Source: Koshy (2016).

Note: 1. Growth rates are calculated from a base year of 2008.

For this reason, any policy measures directed at addressing such perceived issues will have an impact on equity student enrolments.

The second and related issue and critical consideration is that such impacts are likely to be detrimental if they are not accompanied by a sound evidence base and considerations of the heterogeneity of the undergraduate domestic student population in Australia. This can be seen most clearly in relation to degree completion, the primary measure of participation outcomes in Australia. The ongoing analysis of the starting cohorts in 2005 and 2006, most recently reported on by the Australian Government Department of Education and Training (2017), reveals a wide distribution in completion patterns across domestic undergraduates. These data show a negligible shift in nine year completion rates between 2005 and 2006 of 73.6% to 73.5%. Importantly the study highlights reduced outcomes for various equity groups, including for the 2005 cohort: Low SES (68.9 per cent), Indigenous (46.7 per cent) and Regional (69.8 per cent) and Remote (59.5 per cent) students – results which are reflected in NCSEHE-funded reports by Lim (2014) and Edwards and McMillan (2014). Among designated equity groups, only NESB students, at 78.7 per cent show greater levels of progress than the general population.

Table 2: Completion Rates – Cohort Analysis: 2005-2013 and 2006-2014 Cohorts,
Total Domestic Undergraduates and Equity Groups, Completion within Nine Years.

Domestic Undergraduate Groups	Rate of Completion 2005	Rate of Completion 2006
Total domestic completions	73.6%	73.5%
Full time students	78.8%	78.3%
Part time students	49.2%	49.0%
Internal students	76.6%	76.3%
Multi-modal students	70.6%	70.1%
External students	46.6%	46.3%
High SES students	77.7%	77.8%
Medium SES students	72.6%	72.3%
Low SES students	68.9%	67.9%
Indigenous students	46.7%	47.3%
Non-Indigenous students	73.9%	73.9%
Metropolitan students	75.0%	74.7%
Regional students	69.8%	69.0%
Remote students	59.5%	60.1%
NESB students	78.7%	78.3%
English speaking background	73.4%	73.3%
Secondary education admission	78.7%	78.8%
Other basis of admission	69.4%	68.6%
19 and under	80.3%	80.0%
20-24	70.3%	69.3%
25 and older	58.5%	58.1%
ATAR – 50-59	56.1%	53.4%
ATAR – 60-69	65.4%	65.0%
ATAR – 70-79	73.5%	75.1%
ATAR – 80-89	82.8%	83.2%
ATAR – 90-94	89.8%	90.8%
ATAR – 95-100	94.5%	94.9%
ATAR – not provided or not required	69.3%	69.0%

Source: Australian Government Department of Education and Training (2017).

The third reason for a focus on equity groups is that the underlying reasons for the divergence in outcomes between the general population and equity students is complicated and reflect compounding disadvantages which limit students' ability to navigate the Australian higher education landscape as easily as non-equity students. Equity students are over-represented National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, July 2017

among part-time, external and low ATAR students, all groups with observable risks for non-completion in the cohort study. Performance measures need to account for these extenuating factors, as do policy responses such as the linking of HEPPP funding to performance measurement and program evaluation initiatives.

Response to Questions from the HESP Discussion Paper

The NCSEHE's responses to the HESP Discussion Paper address these issues in direct response to the 12 questions raised. These responses are collected under five key headings outlined by HEPPP:

- **Setting expectations of completion**
- **Enhancing transparency**
- **Supporting students to make the right choices**
- **Supporting students to complete their studies**
- **Disseminating best practice**
- **Regulating**

Setting Expectations of Completion

HESP Question 1

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

Studies of student completion rates, such as Li and Carroll (2017), indicate that a student's characteristics plays an important role in explaining completion patterns, due to socioeconomic background or regional status, or via the nature of their engagement with the higher education sector: e.g., external, part-time and/or mature age participation.

HESP's reported empirical work in the *Improving retention, completion and success in higher education* Discussion Paper identifies the importance of adjusted reported rates of engagement (in this instance attrition rates) to ascertain true levels of engagement across the sector, as measured by attrition or completion rates.

While these factors drive observed completion rates, they do so in conjunction with a range of other influences, including subject choice and the level of support afforded to students. A relatively simple question, such as "Are there (dis)economies of scale in the provision of services to low SES students in higher education?" may have significant implications for what a reasonable completion rate should be at a given institution.

In their broad examination of equity performance reporting, Pitman and Koshy (2015), recommended that expectations or even targets in relation to performance need to be informed by reporting which occurs at the aggregate level but also looks at disaggregated effects. Expectations in relation to completion rates should thus be shaped in view of student-specific factors but also the enrolling context of the student (e.g. part-time/full-time; internal/external) as well as the institution.

Seemingly poorly performing institutions could be penalised due to student-specific factors which are observable across the sector or institutional pressures from addressing disadvantage which are not recognised or funded. A disaggregated measurement of completion rates, coupled with controls for factors affecting completion, provides policymakers and institutions with a flexible, evidence-based, set of measures from which assessments can be made – in other words, a checklist for completion outcomes rather than a common measure subject to uniform expectations across the sector.

Recommendation 1: Expectations of completion rates in higher education need to draw on measures of performance which are multi-dimensional and which can be shaped to individual institutional reporting requirements.

Enhancing transparency

HESP Question 2

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

HESP Question 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?

HESP Question 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 and the VET sector Unique Student Identifier)?

Following from Recommendation 1 above, there is the potential for changes to reporting of retention, completion and success in Australian higher education.

Data Collection and Further Student Tracking

Presently, data collection takes the form of student equity reporting by the Department of Education and Training at its 'Student Statistics' page (see for instance Department of Education and Training 2016). These statistics are collected via the Higher Education Information Management System (HEIMS) in the form of student unit record data. Retention (attrition) and success statistics are reported at the institutional level in aggregate as well as by equity group in Appendix A of this report. Reporting of completion statistics occurs via the cohort studies, with disaggregation at the equity group level. This level of data collection is suitable for future reporting.

Reporting could be enhanced by including measures for retention, success and completion (5 year rates, as a trailing measure) with reported disaggregation by equity group and major disaggregated classes, as shown in Table 1 from the cohort study. This could be done at the institutional level, with the Department of Education and Training also releasing analytical measures to provide a truer picture of institutional performance, as reported in the OLS- and logit-adjusted measures in the Appendix to the cohort study (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2017).

In addition, there is potential for extensions to such reporting using student tracking. For instance, critical factors in student performance and completion include prior achievement, for instance, school and VET performance in relevant subjects, and student financial support, including direct assistance (Centrelink data) and information on work commitments (a student census). Such collections would rely on either generating primary data from student questionnaires or through linking the Commonwealth Higher Education Student Support Number (CHESSN) to the current VET sector Unique Student Identifier (USI) and school academic records via tertiary admissions centre (TAC) records.

Reporting

QILT represents the best platform for releasing 'average' aggregate outcomes data for student performance and these outcomes measures would be complementary to existing reporting on graduate outcomes and salaries from the Graduate Outcomes Survey (GOS) on the current platform (QILT, 2017).

However, for reporting at the finer level of definition (mode of study; part/full time; equity status) this represents a relatively static approach, with individual students are unable to compare their prospects in a course to those of comparable students already in the system. A system whereby students could provide their unique details and generate estimates for their chances of completion would be more individualised, although it would risk reinforcing stereotypes about equity student performance and reposition discussion about their engagement in the system in terms of 'deficits' rather than ability and potential. The challenge is to look at equity students from a positive aspect as O'Shea (2017) research does that seeks to give voice to actual student experience assists understanding about the higher education sector from a disadvantaged person's perspective. For this reason, reporting beyond that associated with simple aggregates is problematic.

Recommendation 2: Reporting can be enhanced to include reports on completion in addition to that for attrition (retention) and success, with potential to report at the aggregate level in QILT. Further reporting, including disaggregated estimates for equity groups, and individual level reporting, *such as a 'completions calculator' would be very problematic and unlikely to provide useful information to inform prospective students' choices.*

Supporting students to make the right choices

HESP Question 5

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

In the HESP's call for submissions on its options paper as part of the *Consultation on the Transparency of Higher Education Admissions Processes*, the NCSEHE in its submission stressed the importance of administrative support in outreach and careers advice for encouraging students from equity backgrounds to enter higher education (NCSEHE, 2016a, p. 7). The ultimate effect of an outreach program depends upon the ability of participants to perpetuate their engagement with the higher education, first through enhanced 'aspiration', but also through the provision of advice to students in course selection and navigating the higher education system, thus building 'expectation' (Koshy, Dockery and Seymour, 2017).

Initial student outreach is key. Gore et al. (2015) find that university aspirants are more likely to use a wider variety of sources of information in their decision to enter university compared with non-aspirants. As we know that non-aspirants come from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds (Gemici et al., 2015; Dockery, Seymour and Koshy, 2016), this makes access to sources of information on courses and institutions all the more important in widening participation among school students, especially those in equity groups.

In response to which strategies 'strengthen outreach and career advice', it is very much the case that Australia requires a systematic approach to program evaluation in order to independently and robustly ascertain which program approaches and delivery mechanisms are suitable in a given context. Preliminary work for this project has been undertaken by the NCSEHE in its publications collating and listing outreach programs across Australia (see NCSEHE, 2013; 2014). This work could be extended with a structured review of evidence on outreach programs. This view is endorsed by the recent review of HEPPP by ACIL Allen Consulting (2017) and the Department of Education and Training will initiate preliminary work this year (from September) on the proposed *HEPPP Evaluation Framework Project*, to be funded by the National Priority Pool (NPP). This project will include the development of a register of outreach programs.

More broadly, and following a key recommendation to HESP's paper on admissions transparency, we endorse the transparent and accessible provision of information on entry requirements to prospective students. Equity students in particular, are inhibited from either initially applying (see

Gemici e al., 2015) or changing their course preferences (Cardak, Bowden, and Bahtsevanoglou, 2015) due to the complexity of existing arrangements in the DDFS (Harvey et al., 2016).

Recommendation 3: That HESP contact researchers in the *HEPPP Evaluation Framework Project* to address the need to identify and compile a register of strategies for outreach and careers advice, in addition to developing systems for evaluating such options.

Recommendation 4: That the reporting of courses, institutional offerings and entry requirements be undertaken in a manner that is publicly transparent and accessible, in view of the importance of this information to students from disadvantaged backgrounds, that is, those students who don't benefit from strongly supportive household, parental and peer relationships that provide information on enrolling in higher education courses.

Supporting students to complete their studies

HESP Question 6

What identification, intervention and support strategies are most effective in improving student completion? (A list of strategies that have been suggested in this paper are at p. 66). How could support strategies be better promoted and more utilised by those students who most need them?

HESP Question 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?

In response to HESP Question 5, the NCSEHE reiterates the need for a systematic review of current Australian practice and evidence from overseas studies in relation to student engagement – in this case, completion. This would include a study of identification, intervention and support strategies of the type listed in the HESP Discussion Paper (HESP, 2017, p.66). It is conceivable that such a project should have prominence as a commissioned project or as a consideration in the next round of NPP funding.

Intermediate qualifications provide opportunities for students to either exit a degree or articulate to full completion (Pitman et al., 2016). This option could be studied as part of an evaluation of completion identification, intervention and support programs for student completion.

Recommendation 5: That HESP recommend to the Department of Education and Training that a commissioned project or project in the forthcoming NPP project round (in 2018) undertake an evaluation of student completion programs and responses, including curriculum development options such as sub-bachelor qualifications.

Disseminating best practice

HESP Question 8

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

HESP Question 9

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

HESP Question 10

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

HESP Question 11

How can successful completion strategies be embedded into provider practice?

Studies of completion in Australia have tended to be focused on student administrative data collections (e.g. Edwards and McMillan, 2015) rather than on looking at program-based intervention data. The NCSEHE emphasises the importance of Recommendation 5 above as a source of both information on completion intervention programs and for the development of frameworks for evaluating such interventions.

Dissemination of information on projects, be it through a register or in a comparative presentation of findings, needs a central repository in Australia. This would be along the lines proposed in the 2017 NPP project, *Publication of National Priorities Pool Research*, which has been commissioned to the NCSEHE whereby information and findings from NPP projects will be stored and categorised for ease of access. A similar project for completion programs could be initiated.

Recommendation 6: That HESP recommend to the Department of Education and Training that a commissioned project or project in the forthcoming NPP project round (in 2018) is funded to undertake the compilation and presentation of a register of student completion programs, in similar vein to the current *Publication of National Priorities Pool Research* project.

Regulating

HESP Question 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?

Given the complexity of identifying the 'level of support necessary to ensure student success', it may be more realistic for TEQSA to examine course and institutions with 'red flags' in terms of completion performance, relative to outcomes elsewhere. This would use information from a reporting system of the kind sketched out in the 'Enhancing transparency' section above, with further detailed program analysis taking place thereafter.

Recommendation 7: That TEQSA work with the Department of Education and Training to ensure that the final specifications on retention and completion reporting enable policymakers and regulators to ensure that compliance with the Higher Education Standards Framework occurs.

Summary of Recommendations

This submission makes the following recommendations on improving retention, completion and success in higher education:

Recommendation 1: Expectations of completion rates in higher education need to draw on measures of performance which are multi-dimensional and which can be shaped to individual institutional reporting requirements.

Recommendation 2: Reporting can be enhanced to include reports on completion in addition to that for attrition (retention) and success, with potential to report at the aggregate level in QILT. Further reporting, including disaggregated estimates for equity groups, and individual level reporting, *such as a 'completions calculator' would be very problematic and unlikely to provide useful information to inform prospective students' choices.*

Recommendation 3: That HESP contact researchers in the *HEPPP Evaluation Framework Project* to address the need to identify and compile a register of strategies for outreach and careers advice, in addition to developing systems for evaluating such options.

Recommendation 4: That the reporting of courses, institutional offerings and entry requirements be undertaken in a manner that is publicly transparent and accessible, in view of the importance of this information to students from disadvantaged backgrounds that is those students who don't benefit from strongly supportive household, parental and peer relationships that provide information on enrolling in higher education courses.

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