14/07/2017

Higher Education Standards Panel
C/o: Department of Education and Training
C50MA7
GPO Box 9880
Canberra ACT 2601

Dear Higher Education Group,

The Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the 'Improving retention, completion and success in higher education' discussion paper, June 2017.

The ATN is a national collaborative group of five major universities including Queensland University of Technology, University of Technology Sydney, RMIT University, University of South Australia and Curtin University. ATN Universities are all young, innovative, and have genuine linkages to industry as an inherent part of both our teaching and research. Students are at the core of everything we do.

The ATN would like to note that individual ATN universities may submit their own responses to the discussion paper, highlighting in greater detail the programs that they implement to improve the retention, completion and success of their students across the student life cycle.

Further, the ATN notes the detailed analysis contained within the paper and is pleased to see the analysis being distributed widely. The ATN commends the discussion paper, noting the finding in regards to attrition. The findings of the paper are consistent with internal analysis conducted by ATN universities which found that student retention rates are highest among full-time students, enrolled in internal/on-campus programs. Our universities have also observed that external factors, such as the changing economy, and individual financial, social, family and extra-curricular commitments for students, impact strongly on overall attrition.

Setting expectations of completion

The idea of fixed completion rates is unrealistic with student cohorts across the university sector ranging in diversity from institution to institution. As such, care should be taken in setting any national targets for retention and completion without ample consideration to an institution's yearly cohort. As outlined in the discussion paper, reviews have noted a variety of factors contributing to student success. As such comparisons between institutions is therefore difficult, if not impossible. Universities which have sought wider access to higher education by enrolling a more diverse range of students should not be penalised because of lower retention rates that are often associated with a diverse student intake. Additionally, it is important to note the impact that external factors, those factors which are beyond a university's control, have on completion rates. These external factors would need to be considered on a university by university basis, taking into account the communities in which each university operates, for example local employment markets.

Enhancing transparency

While the ATN supports increased data collection and in particular strengthened data reporting to government, this needs to be considered against the impost this would cause for employees both at Universities and the Department. A strong starting point would be to increase the transparency in terms and definitions. Transparency could be increased by ensuring consistency across the sector, especially between government Departments and Agencies.

Increased access to data through websites such as QILT and Study Assist for students, while improving transparency could equally lead to more confusion unless there are consistent and clearly defined. Terms such as "attrition", "retention" and "success" are commonly misunderstood within the sector and as such there would need to be clear definitions which are easily understood and consistently adopted by universities, prospective students, and by the wider public.

Likewise, a completions calculator could potentially create more confusion. While, in principle, the idea has merit the risk for decreasing transparency is large, as broad averages can be misleading. Instead of a completions calculator, a more practical solution may be to highlight support services that universities offer to students. Such a section will not only increase awareness of university specific programs to prospective students, but, through the use of short case studies, allow prospect students who identify with particular cohorts and experiences, to better understand that there are mechanisms at universities to support them throughout the course of their studies.

The ATN supports the notion of tracking students within tertiary education, linking a student's CHESSN with their VET Unique Student Identifier as this will enable greater transparency of student movement between levels of tertiary study and provide a greater evidence based (de-identified) data set for policy makers.

Supporting students to make the right choices

The ATN believes that strategies that encourage students to gain confidence and skills to succeed post-high school, prior to higher education are critical. Further, raising aspirations of prospective students through outreach and early intervention and providing informed career advice as early as possible, particularly for students of disadvantage, will yield benefits. The advice to students should be high quality and unbiased, tailored to the skills, interests and abilities of the prospective student. This advice should improve their chances of course completion.

For the non-school cohort, we note that university outreach programs, at present, cannot meet the demand for individual assistance. As a result, it is conceivable that less informed initial study and career advice influences the high attrition rates for mature-age students. An approach to further inform this cohort may yield improved attrition results.

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ATN universities operate a variety of strategies to deliver quality outreach and careers advice to students to assist them in making their decisions about tertiary level study. For example, QUT has released a MOOC called, "Kick Start your Career" that was designed to help students to conceptualise their career development journey into university, without incurring a financial burden. The goal of the MOOC is to ensure that all students conceptualise career development as a core component of their university experience and have the skills and mindsets to set themselves up for future success. Over 2,000 students have enrolled in the MOOC, with 70.8 per cent of participants who provided feedback, rating the course as either excellent or good. As a result of undertaking the course, 71 per cent of respondents felt they had a stronger sense of what they wanted to study and had increased awareness about the challenges of university study.

Meanwhile, Curtin University has developed a program called Curtin AHEAD. Curtin AHEAD is a collaborative and innovative outreach program that provides a range of skills-building, self-confidence and career development activities that help people discover their potential to pursue higher education. The program also exposes participants to university life. Curtin AHEAD initiatives are designed for people to access higher education regardless of their background, location or circumstance, including people from regional and remote areas and people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent. Curtin AHEAD also works with regional and remote communities, including the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Youth Development in the Kimberley and Youth Development in the Wheatbelt. Since 2014, Curtin AHEAD has supported over 1,000 students into higher education, with nearly 60 per cent enrolling at Curtin University.

The University of Technology Sydney, runs their U@Uni Schools Outreach program. The program aims to increase the number of students from under-represented communities successfully completing university study. Outreach activities include U@Uni Summer School program for Year 11 students from U@Uni partner schools to participate in two week intensive workshops in areas such as media production, business, engineering and IT. Such programs have contributed to UTS increasing its number of commencing domestic undergraduate students with a low SES background by 40 per cent over the 2011-2015 period.

Supporting students to complete their studies

ATN universities are committed to supporting students to complete their studies. ATN universities utilise a variety of strategies to identify at risk students, and supply them with appropriate support strategies. ATN universities have either implemented or are in the process of implementing data analytic platforms which enable identifying at risk students, and improved learning experiences for students.

The University of South Australia has a suite of both student and staff facing dashboards. These dashboards utilise learning analytics, and are obtained through the University's learning management system. Academic staff use the dashboards as a means of identifying students who are considered to be academically 'at risk' early in a course, or within a program. The analytics help staff recognise where there are individual students who are consistently not accessing the system, or not engaging with the course learning materials, or where a student's pattern of engagement has varied over a course. This enables tailored support to be put in

place to enhance students' success. Early intervention can result in students being supported to complete, rather than withdrawing.

ATN universities also run a range of programs to improve student success and retention. These programs provided support and advice to students at all stages of the student life cycle. An example of this is RMIT's Connect for Success program. This program includes three phases, a broad communication campaign, an engagement campaign and a performance campaign. The campaigns occur at set intervals during the semester, and become more targeted as the semester progresses. The week 3 communication campaign informs students about the learning assistance resources at RMIT. The week 5 and week 7 campaigns are specifically targeted at students who have been identified as struggling with early semester assessment. The Connect for Success program has seen contacted students obtain success rates that are on average 10 per cent higher than those of students who have not responded to the programs contact requests.

Disseminating best practice

The ATN believes that disseminating best practice among the sector will yield improved outcomes for all involved. There are numerous methods to disseminate best practice among the higher education community. For example, there is the potential to investigate a centralised repository for sharing data and project outcomes. Lessons for implementation would need to build upon past efforts and overseas examples. To that end, implementation of evidence-based interventions using a targeted approach with data analytics will be increasingly important. Being able to share that data analytics across the sector will allow universities to learn from each other.

Regulating

The ATN believes that TEQSA's current strategy of a risk-based approach to ensuring compliance without increasing undue regulatory burden on provides has been successful and should continue. There is no evidence provided in the Discussion Paper that TEQSA requires increased powers or an expanded remit.

Please do not hesitate to contact the ATN Directorate on (02) 5105 6740 or via e-mail at renee.hindmarsh@atn.edu.au to discuss any elements of the submission further.

Yours sincerely,

Renee Hindmarsh

ATN Executive Director

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Curtin University   UTS UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY SYDNEY   QUT   University of South Australia   RMIT UNIVERSITY