

Improving the retention and success of higher education students at a regional university: towards a more personalised approach



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Introduction

This poster reports the interim findings from a study that aimed to identify the factors contributing to the continuing high levels of attrition at regional universities and effective strategies for addressing these challenges. The project, which received Higher Education Participation and Partnerships (HEPPP) funding from 2015-2017, has involved semi-structured interviews conducted with 868 former regional students who discontinued their studies between the years 2010 to 2015.

The findings of the study, including the factors that students believed contributed to their decision to discontinue their studies, strategies that might have helped those students to complete their program and the number of students indicating their interest in returning to study with appropriate supports are reported.

Recommendations arising from the study about the strategies that can be implemented to improve the retention and completion of students from regional backgrounds are proposed.

Background

The lower levels of completion of students from regional and remote locations are well documented (Edwards & McMillan, 2015; Wood et al, 2016). The most recently reported Department of Education and Training data (Australian Government, 2017a) shows that nine years after the 2006 cohort of Table A institution commencing domestic bachelor students enrolled, 73.5% of students had completed a course (p. 6). However, the data also shows that the nine year completion rates for regional universities was considerably lower, ranging from 46.9% to 61.4% (Figure 1).

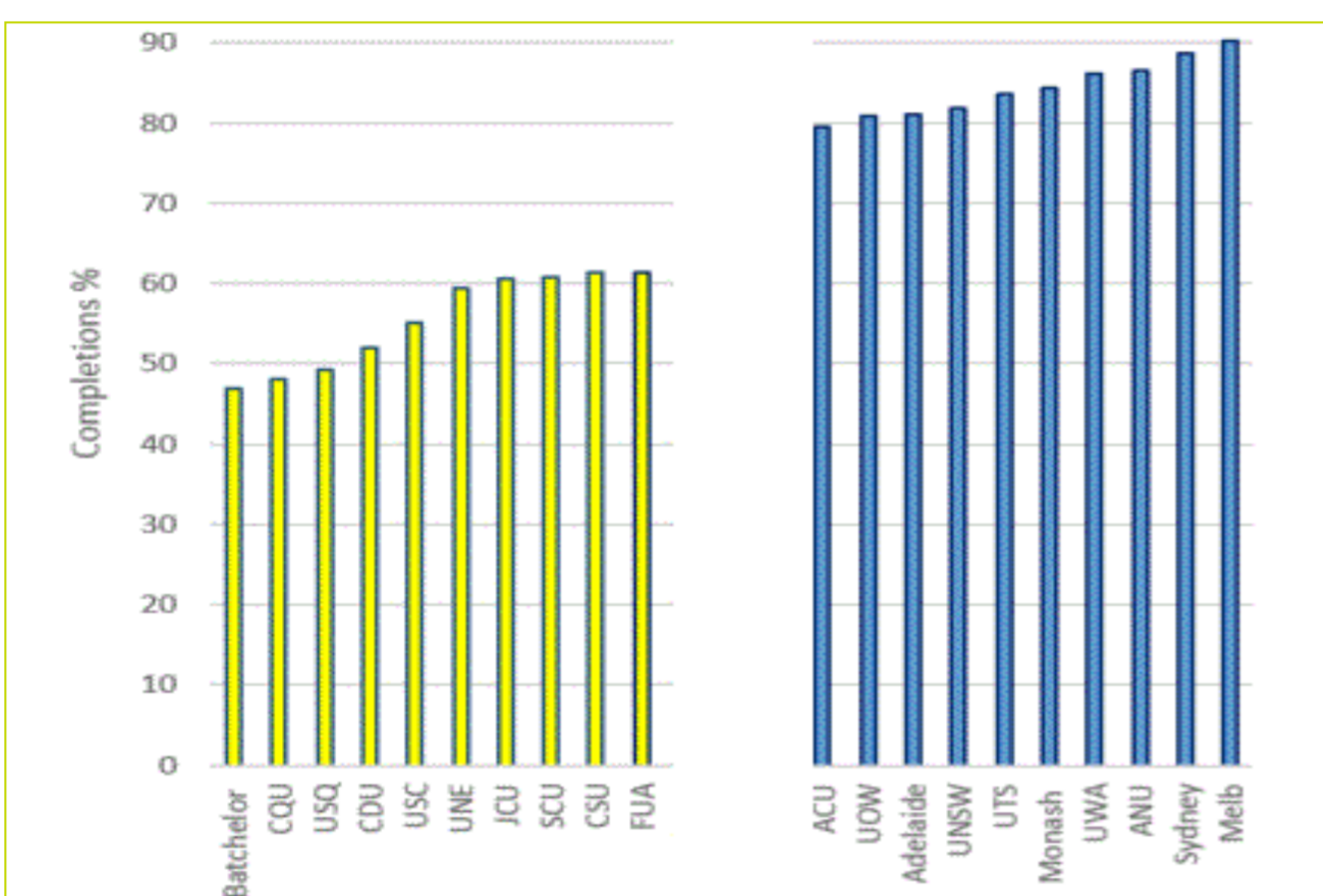


Figure 1. Comparison of lowest and highest nine-year completion rates for domestic students enrolled at Australian universities

A cohort analysis undertaken by the Department of Education and Training (2017a) suggests that as with previous reports, students with lower completion rates were those studying externally, part-time and were older, as well as those admitted to higher education on a basis other than secondary education, those with a lower Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) score, those who were Indigenous, from lower socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds and/or those coming from a regional area of Australia. Completion rates also varied across different fields of education, and as the recently published Australian Higher Education Reform Package (Australian Government, 2017b) reports, there is considerable variation in attrition rates across universities (p. 7).

Previous studies have noted the complex combination of student characteristics, external pressures as well as institutional factors impacting on student retention, suggesting that persistence is related to student satisfaction and prior expectations (Harvey, Drew & Smith, 2006). Other authors have highlighted the complexity of causes leading to first-year attrition reflecting the diversity of student lives (Yorke and Longden, 2008), and Yorke (2000) suggests that institutions need to cater for student diversity by optimising the chances of individual success.

David Kalsbeek's (2013) '4Ps' Retention Framework suggests that to improve retention, universities need to target their services to meet the needs of their student demographic (*profile*); ensure that the promises made by universities (for example through marketing) match the reality of the student experience (*promise*); have adequate systems and processes that support students (*process*); and monitor student progression towards completion (*progress*). Extending on Kalsbeek's (2013) work, Wood, Gray-Ganter and Bailey (2016) identified a '5th P', *preparedness*, as a critical factor impacting on the likelihood of students successfully completing their studies.

Against this backdrop, CQUniversity, a regional comprehensive university with continuing high levels of attrition, embarked on a three-year 'Retention and Return to Study' project in 2015 to identify the factors contributing to students' decisions to discontinue their studies and the strategies that would have encouraged them to remain. The findings are considered through the lens of the '5Ps' Retention Framework.

Research Design

The aims of the 'Retention and Return to Study' project were to:

- identify the factors that contribute to attrition particularly in the first-year;
- identify strategies informed by an evidence-base of the strategies that can empower students, especially those of low SES background to succeed;
- increase retention, particularly in first year;
- increase participation through flexible re-entry arrangements;
- provide evidence to guide policy development and implementation, staff development and service delivery.

Following approval from the university's human research ethics committee, all undergraduate students whose enrolments had lapsed between 2010 and 2015 were attempted to be contacted by telephone. Over 3,000 contacts were made, from which 868 former students who agreed to participate in the study have been interviewed to date using a semi-structured format addressing five major themes based on Kalsbeek's (2013) retention framework and Wood et al's (2016) extended version of this framework, namely:

- the personal characteristics relating to student profile;
- how well prepared students were for high education study;
- the extent to which students' expectations of the promises made by the student were met;
- university processes; and
- students' experiences of how well the university monitored and supported their progress.

The other component of the 'Retention and Return to Study' project was to determine via the phone interview how many former students would like to return to complete their studies. Students who requested follow-up have been supported to return to study with follow-up interviews conducted regularly to determine how they are progressing.

Results

The findings from semi-structured interviews conducted to date with 868 former students (Figure 2) confirm that the major factors contributing to high levels of student attrition are: personal such as health or family responsibilities (29%); work-study balance (21.5%); academic (14.5%); lack of support university (11%); now studying at another university (10%); financial (5%); and other (9%).

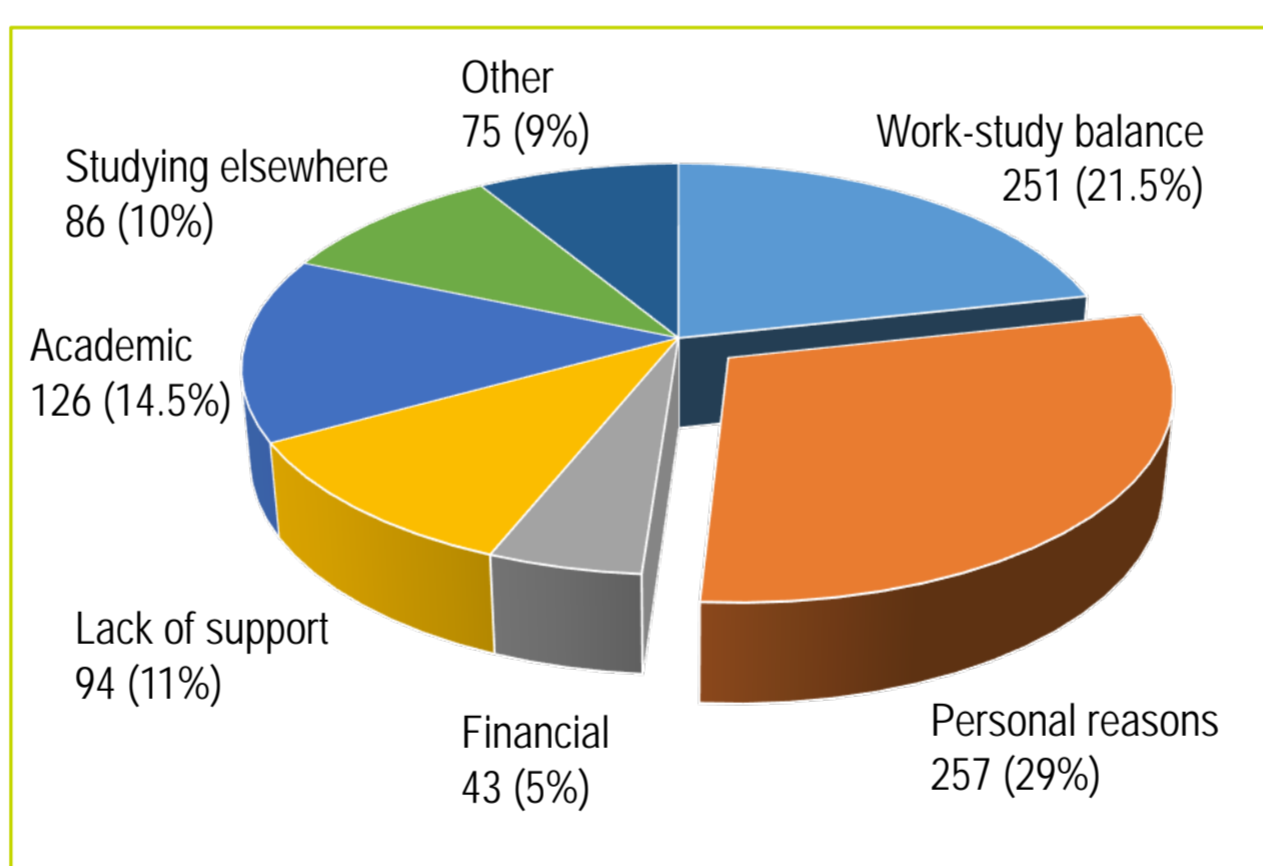


Figure 2: Reasons students discontinued their studies

Of those interviewed, 352 students suggested ways that CQUniversity could have assisted them to stay and complete their studies. Of those students, 161 (45.7%) suggested more support, follow up and/or phone calls and 153 (43.5%) proposed academic related solutions (for example improving teaching, better RPL processes and improved group work assessment processes).

Table 1 shows the number and percentage of former students interviewed by year of withdrawal who requested follow-up with the view to returning to study and the number who plan to return.

Table 1: Number of former students requesting follow-up

Year withdrew	Number for follow-up	% for follow-up	Returning to study	% returning
2010	19	32%	20	33%
2011	29	41%	30	36%
2012	12	25%	13	27%
2013	41	50%	40	48%
2014	83	24%	105 *	31%
2015	67	36%	78	41%
Total	251	29%	286	33%

As Table 1 shows, to date 251 (29%) of former students have requested follow up and 286 plan to return to study (*35 former students were planning to return regardless of follow-up support).

Discussion

As the findings from this study show, the major factors derailing students' studies have been identified as personal and challenges managing work-life-study balance. Although personal and financial factors may be outside the university's control, a personalised approach can better support students during difficult times.

The findings from the 'Retention and Return to Study' suggest that a more personalised approach could improve student retention and success. As noted in the previous section, 161 of 868 former students interviewed recommended more personalised communication such as phone calls would have made a difference to their decision to leave. Moreover, the study also demonstrated that even after students have left the university, a phone call to connect with former students and encourage them to return to complete their studies can improve completions. Of the 868 former students interviewed to date, 251 (29%) have requested follow up with the view to returning to study to complete their program. Of those, 46 returned to study in Term 1, 2017 and 22 are planning to enrol in T2, 2017, with the remainder planning to return in 2018 or when their situation improves

The findings from this study add to evidence gathered by Wood, Gray-Ganter and Bailey (2016) in a previous study, which demonstrated the benefits of personalised pre-enrolment interviews in helping to mitigate the risk of students attriting as a result of enrolling in too many units when working full-time or part-time and identifying potential challenges students may experience with academic expectations early enough to be able to refer them to appropriate support services.

Conclusion

The findings from the 'Retention and Return to Study' project when viewed through the '5Ps' Retention Framework, suggest that improving retention and the success of students who are at-risk requires:

- Ensuring that the promises made by a university align with the reality of the students' experiences of university services.
- Engaging with prospective students by phone prior to enrolment to help them to be better prepared for the transition into higher education.
- Tailoring services to the profile of students, particularly those who are from low-SES backgrounds and located in regional locations requires a more personalised approach to create a greater sense of belonging and a stronger link between supporting students' individual circumstances and their academic study.
- Providing support for students who are challenged by university processes. Students who are new to distance study and/or first-in-family are often challenged by the online systems and processes required to navigate the range of services and resources available online.
- Monitoring student progress, particularly in following up those students who fail to re-enrol; this is a lost opportunity for re-engaging with students at the point at which they are most likely to attrite.

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