

New kids on the Block: Results of a First Year College initiative.

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Abstract

This paper outlines the progress and results of a strategic initiative, implemented at Victoria University (VU) in Melbourne. The First Year Model aimed to transform the experience of VU's first-year students on a scale never seen before in Australia. This unique model re-conceptualised the design, structure and pedagogy of first year units of study in order to deliver a program that deliberately focused on students' pedagogical, transition and work/life balance needs. Following a year in operation, indicators are that the VU First Year Model is producing successful student outcomes by increasing pass rates and retaining students. This paper builds on an emerging issues paper presented at STARS 2018, by the same authors "Rebuilding the First-Year Experience, One Block at a Time"

Background

In 2018 Victoria University introduced a unique, Australian first, model of course design and student engagement known as the VU First Year Model. A First Year College was established with the overarching purpose of improving the experience and engagement of first-year students. This increased engagement was expected to lead to increased retention, increased student success and to enable all first-year students to excel in their studies. First year students at VU now undertake their courses one unit at a time over a four week period, known as a 'block', before progressing to the next unit (McCluskey et al., 2019). This enables them to complete four units of study sequentially over a semester as opposed to juggling four units concurrently. They complete each unit of study in a small class supported and facilitated by a key academic staff member who creates a supportive learning community (Tinto, 1997) where members get to know each other and support each other's learning. This model alleviates the need for students to juggle multiple competing demands and deadlines associated with the traditional model. Students benefit from having a fixed timetable which only requires them to attend three regular periods, over three days, each week, allowing them to accommodate other commitments such as work and family. The design of student learning in the First Year Model was carefully underpinned by the six interconnected principles of Transition Pedagogy: Transition; Design; Diversity; Engagement; Assessment; Evaluation and Monitoring (Nelson et al., 2012) Although this model is new to Australia, similar models of teaching and learning have proved successful for many years in educational institutes in Canada, the US, and Scandinavia.

Outcomes

The VU Data Insights team has provided nuanced data snapshots and graphs showing the impact of the FYM on student success. The student outcomes for 2018 have been analysed and

compared to students' results in equivalent units in 2017. The 2018 results detailed below relate to domestic, Commonwealth Supported Places (CSP) students and comprise over 32,000 student results from over 4000 EFTSL. The large number of results means that in all cases where improvements are noted, these improvements are statistically significant.

Retention

There are a number of different ways in which student retention can be measured and evaluated. Whilst the Government defined Retention is measured from census date in year 1 to census date in year 2, this data is not yet available. In this report two alternative definitions have been used.

Peak Load Retention is measured as the decrease in FYC EFTSL from peak load to end of year load for 2018 and is shown in Figure 1. For comparison purposes EFTSL in the equivalent FYC units for 2017 is shown.

Whilst the peak load in 2018 is lower than the peak in 2017, the final EFTSL is higher. The peak load in 2018 also occurred later in the academic year than in 2017. In 2017 attrition was significantly higher and the mid-year intake for 2017 was insufficient to cover the Semester 1 loss in EFTSL. In 2018 due to lower attrition rates in Semester 1, the mid-year intake increased the total EFTSL so that the peak load occurred in Semester 2. The peak load in 2018 was 94 EFTSL lower than in 2017, however the final load in 2018 was 231 EFTSL higher at year end. Whilst a similar trend was also seen for international students, there are significantly fewer international students in the FYC.

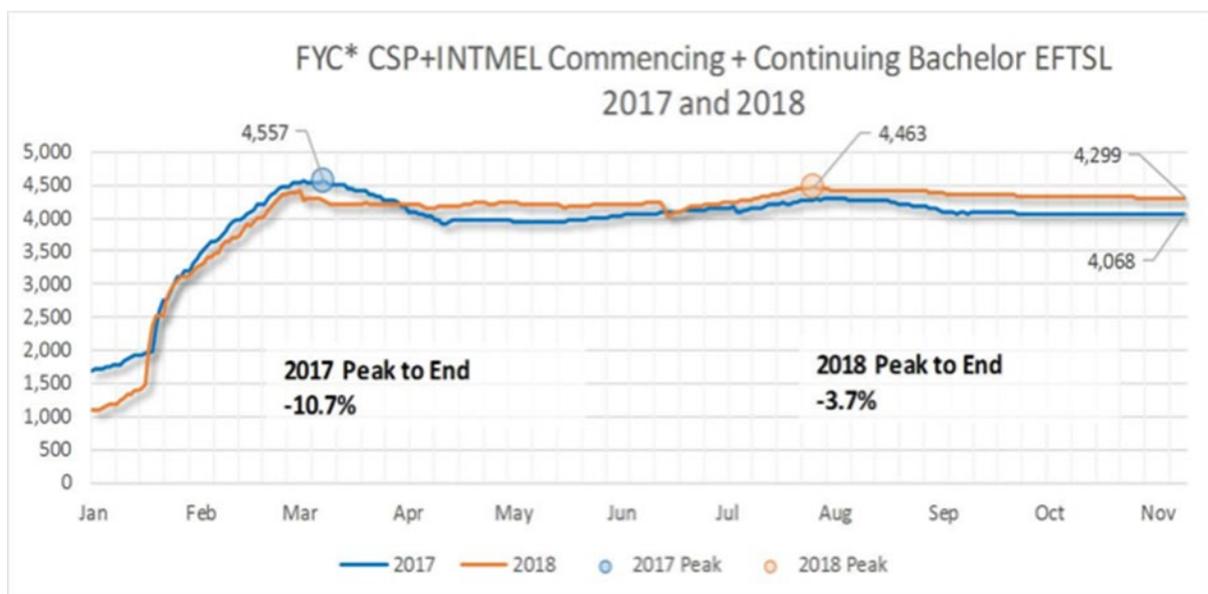


Figure 1: FYC EFTSL retention from peak load to end of year load

Semester Retention measures the continuation of a student from semester 1 to Semester 2 and is defined as a Domestic Bachelor student commencing in a SEM-1 or a SEM-1 block who consumed reportable load from an FYC comparable unit AND consumed any HE reportable load in SEM-2 or a SEM-2 block.

The semester retention of different cohorts of students has also been analysed. There has been a significant increase in the retention of students living in the western suburbs from 2017 to 2018, and no difference in retention for other students. The FYM is clearly assisting VU in its mission to serve the communities of the west of Melbourne and improve the Higher Education (HE) outcomes of the region.

The comparison of the semester retention rates for students entering their course from different educational backgrounds is provided in Figure 2.

The biggest increase in retention between 2017/18 is seen in students who entered after secondary education or from a HE sub-degree, whilst the highest decrease was seen in students who had previously completed HE Bachelor or PG courses.

The FYM was designed to assist students with the difficult transition into HE, especially students entering directly from Secondary Education. It is encouraging therefore to see this is where the biggest impact has occurred. Students who have had previous experience with the HE sector and who have studied under the Semester model, may have had preconceived ideas around the HE experience, resulting in a more difficult transition to the Block model. Many students with previous HE qualifications are also returning to study and are often studying part-time. Student feedback has indicated that the First Year model is more challenging for part-time students than the traditional Semester model.

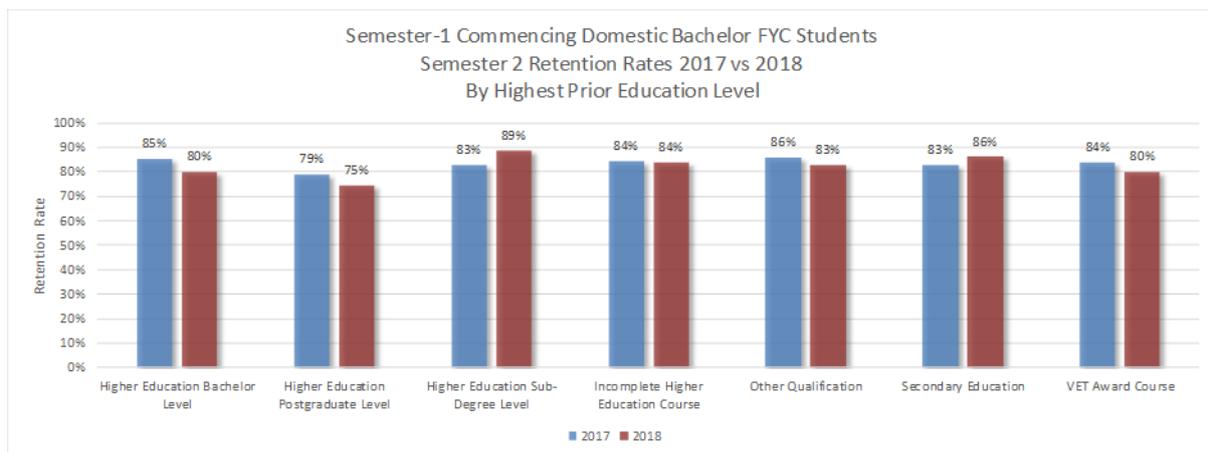


Figure 2: Semester retention for 2017/2018 based on previous educational experience

The comparison of semester retention rates for different age categories is shown in Figure 3. Whilst the biggest increase is noted in students in the lowest age group, older students have shown a decrease. It is clear, that the FYM has had the biggest effect on the transitioning student cohort it was designed for. As mentioned previously, students studying part-time have had the most difficulty with the Block scheduling. The decrease in retention in older students may reflect this.

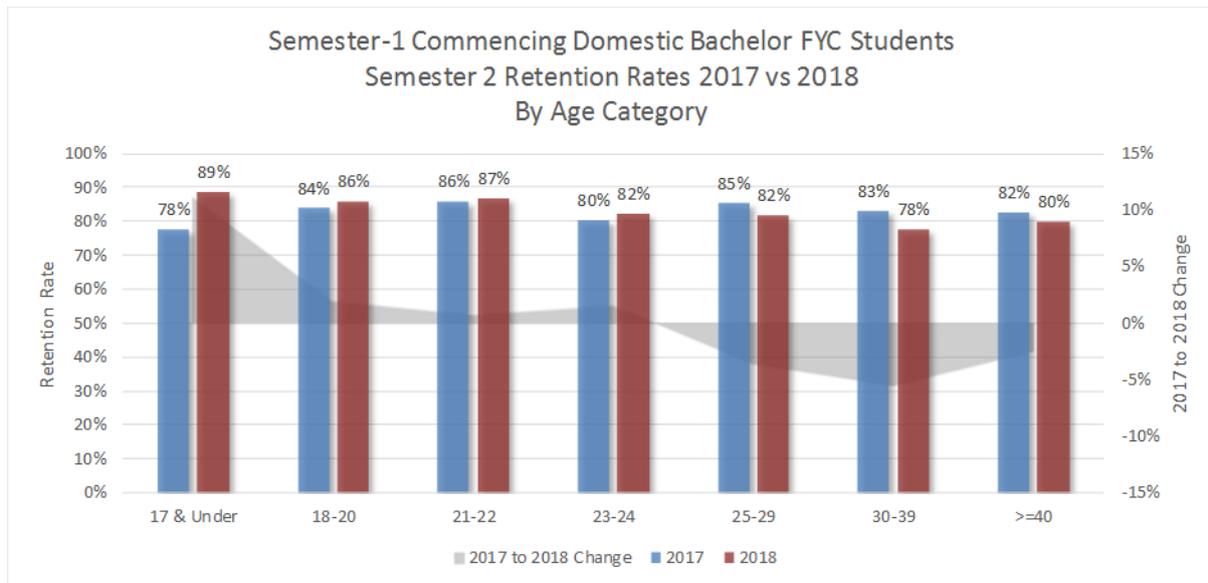


Figure 3: Semester retention for 2017/2017 based on age category

The comparison for semester retention rates by College is shown in Figure 4.

Only the College of Law and Justice saw a decrease in retention from 2017 to 2018. The reason for the difference is not clear, however it may be that there are a greater proportion of older students, part-time students or students with previous HE qualifications in the College of Law and Justice and this decrease reflects the decrease shown in these cohorts.

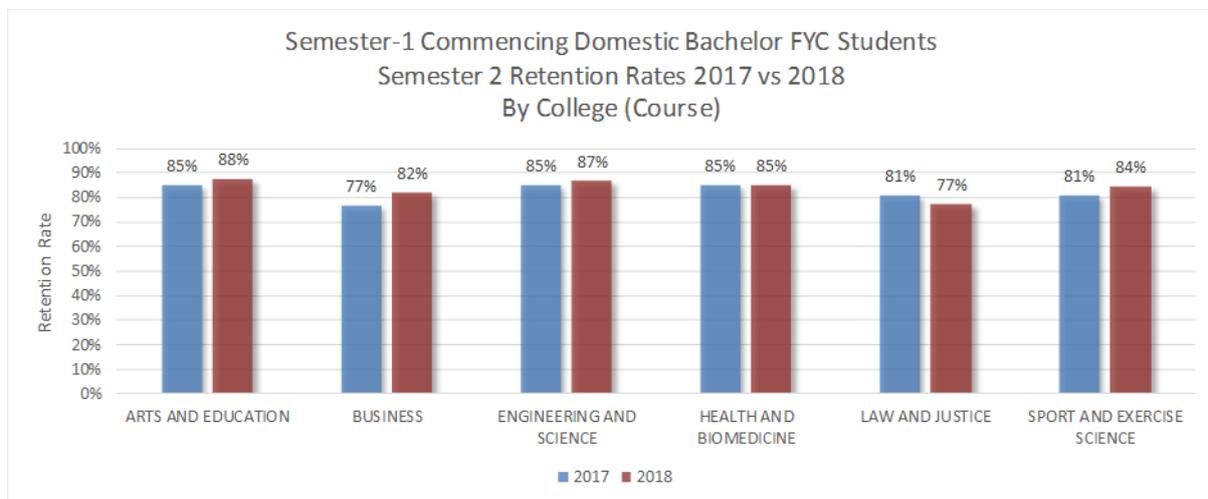


Figure 4: Semester retention for 2017/18 by College

Pass Rates

The pass rates and grade distribution for all students in FYC units (or equivalent to those offered in 2017) are shown in Figure 5.

The results are shown as a percentage of the total number of student grades (>32,000) in each year. As can be seen, there is a significant decrease in fail grades in 2018 and an increase in the number of Distinctions and High Distinctions. The L grades for 2018 are due to students undertaking placements over the summer period. The FYC was set up to provide students with

the best opportunity to succeed and excel in their studies. The student results for 2018 clearly indicate that more students have, not only passed their unit, but also achieved higher grades than in 2017.

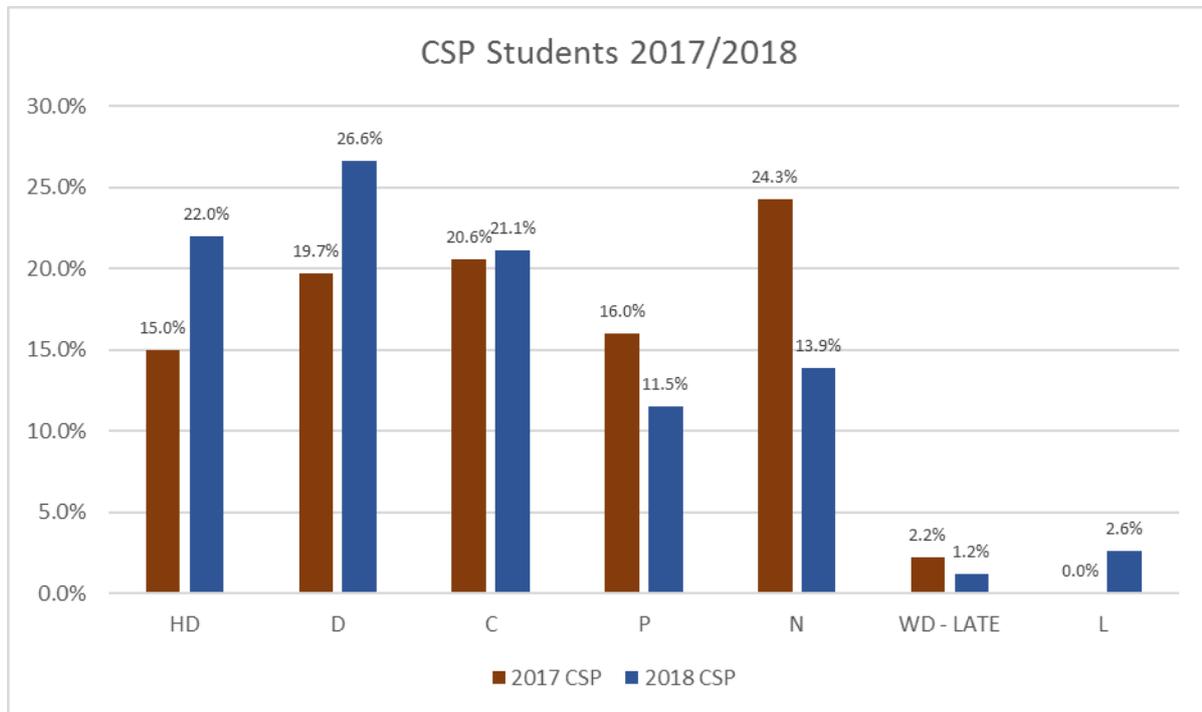


Figure 5: Comparison of pass rates for domestic students in FYC units in 2017/18

A similar trend is also apparent for the international students as shown in Figure 6.

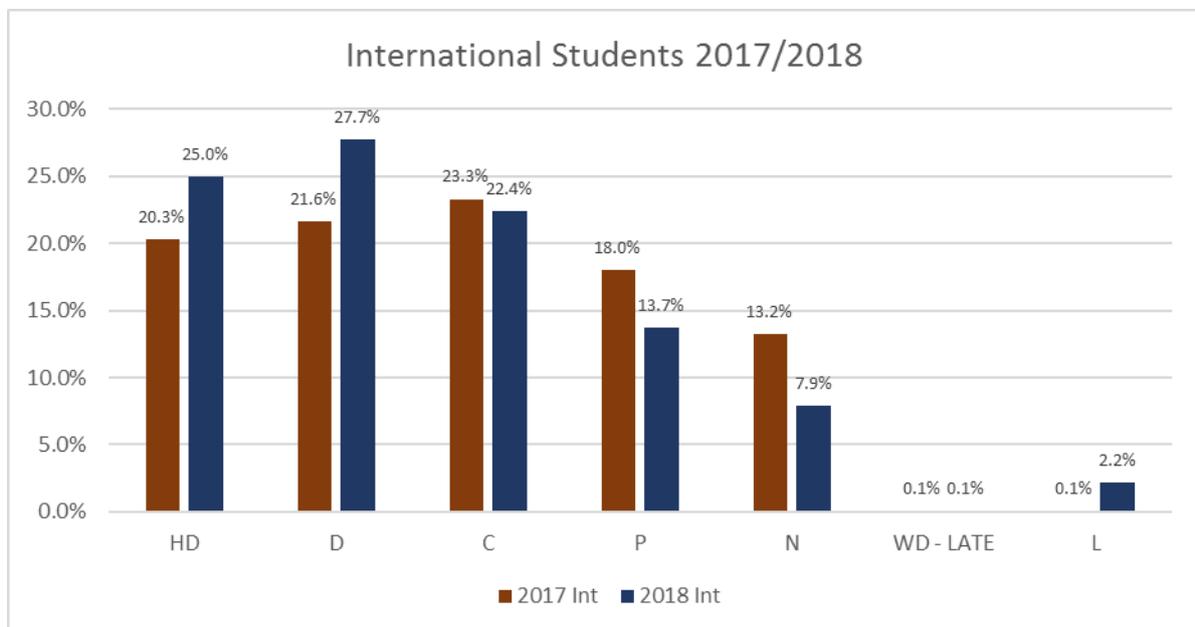


Figure 6: Comparison of pass rates for International students in FYC units in 2017/18

The pass rates for students admitted to VU with an ATAR score are shown in Figure 7.

The biggest increase in pass rates was noted in students who entered with an ATAR of 31-40, although a large increase in pass rates was observed for all students with an ATAR less than

50. Students who achieved ATARs in this range have struggled for many reasons in the secondary education system and often enter Higher Education at a disadvantage. These results indicate that the FYM is able to work with these students and enable them to succeed at a similar rate to the high achieving secondary school leavers. Pleasingly, the FYM is also able to engage with the high achievers (ATAR >80) and improve their first-year outcomes.

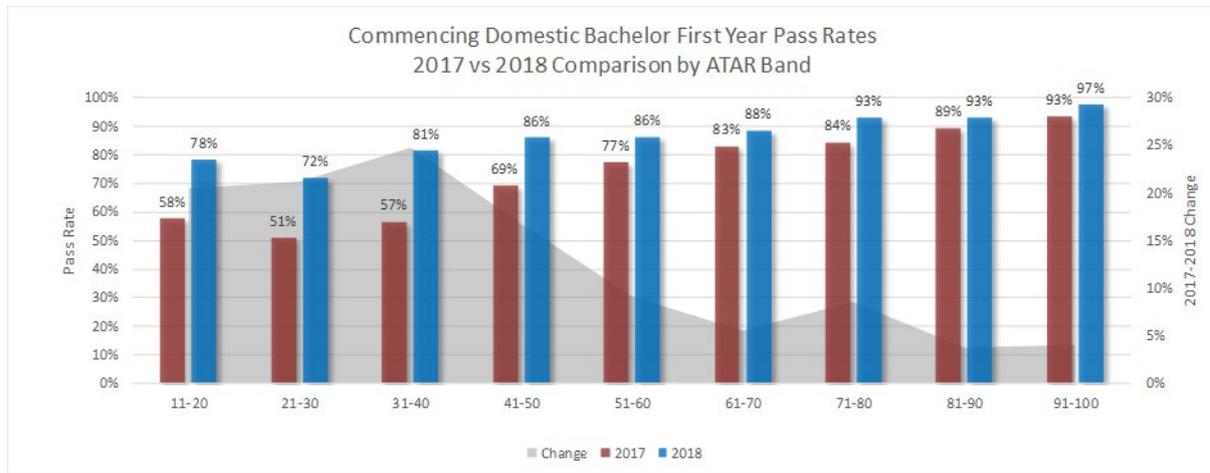


Figure 7: Comparison of pass rates based on student ATAR band

Pass rates for students entering with different levels of previous study are shown in Figure 8. VU has students entering the first-year of Bachelor degrees with a whole range of educational achievements, ranging from little to no educational achievements to students with previous HE PG qualifications. Analysis of the pass rates based upon education experience again indicates that all students have achieved better outcomes in the FYM than previously. However, the biggest gains have been for students with the least prior educational achievements. Interestingly, students who have entered with a previous HE PG qualification, also saw a large improvement in success, indicating that the FYM is assisting these students transition back into HE studies.

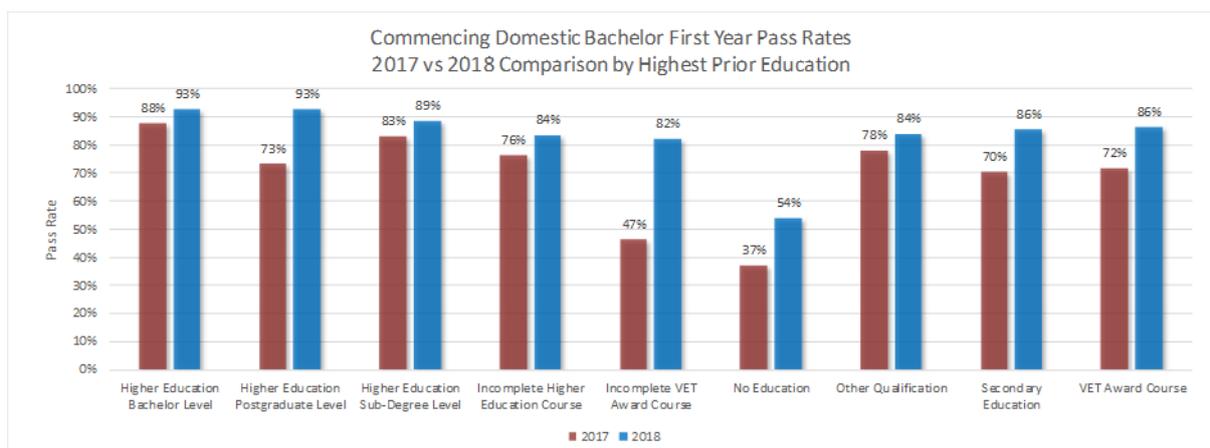


Figure 8: Comparison of pass rates for students based on their previous educational experience

The comparison of pass rates for students based on a number of social parameters such as Socioeconomic status (Figure 9), non-English speaking background (Figure 10), first in family

(Figure 11), Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (Figure 12) and gender (Figure 13) have all been monitored.

These results clearly indicate that the FYM has improved the success rate for students in all categories, but has had the biggest impact on students from backgrounds that have traditionally had poorer outcomes in their introduction to Higher Education studies.

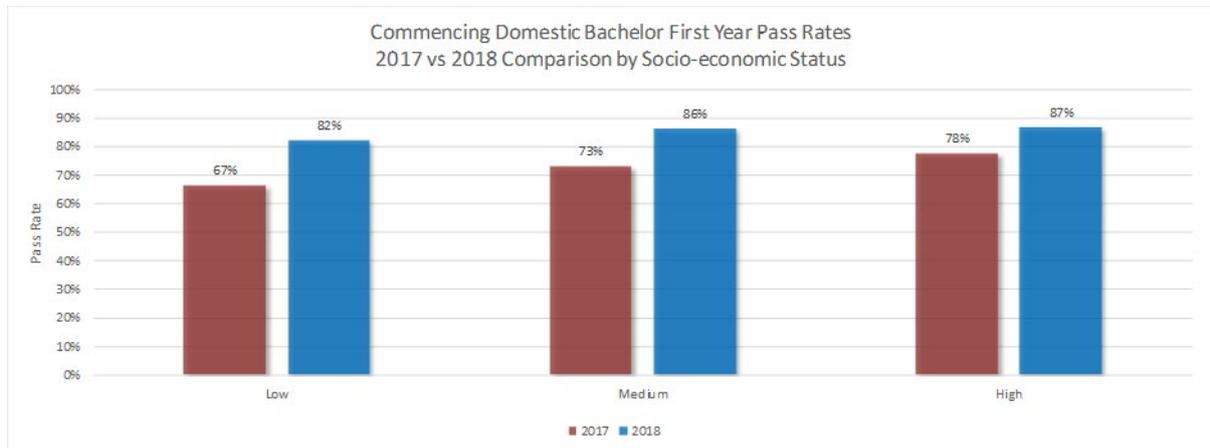


Figure 9: Pass rates for students based on their Socio-economic status

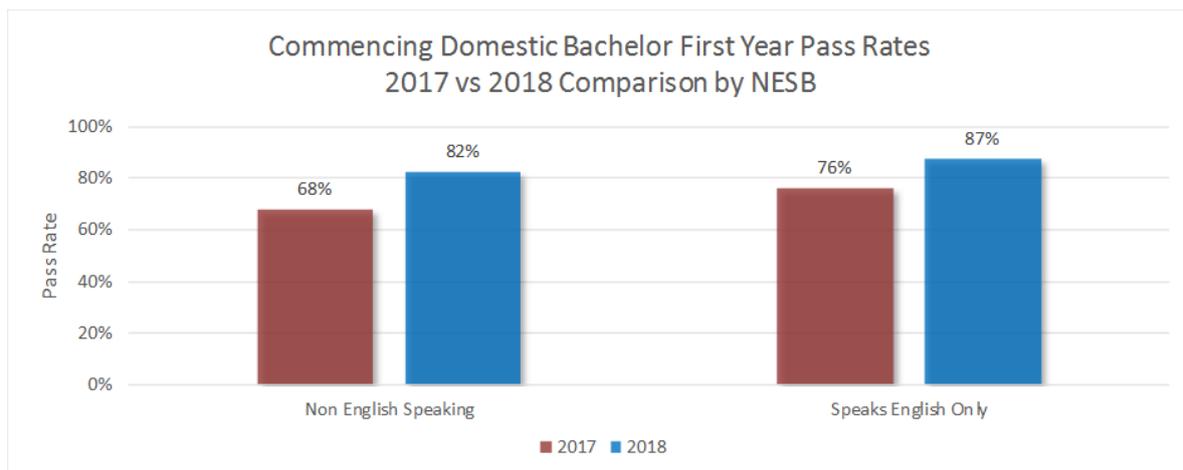


Figure 10: Pass rates for students based on non-English speaking background

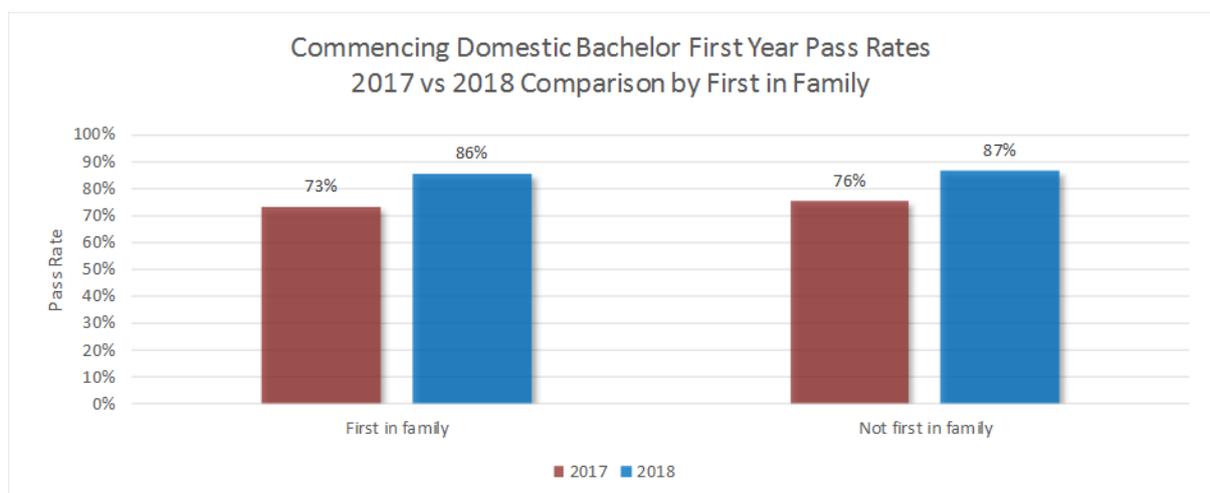


Figure 11: Pass rates for students based on first in family

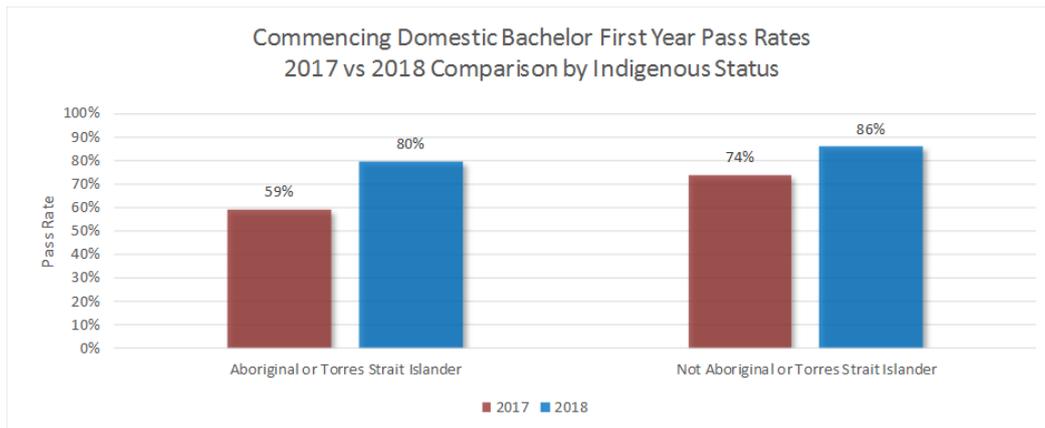


Figure 12: Pass rates for students based on their indigenous status

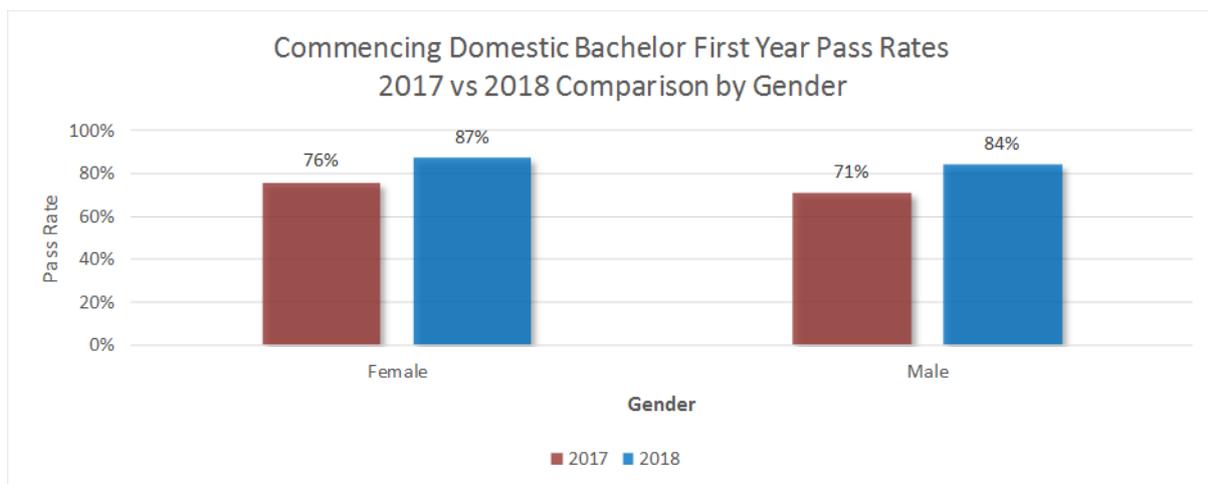


Figure 13: Pass rates for students based on their gender

The fail rate for students in the FYC in 2018 was significantly less than in 2017, with about 16% of all students results a fail grade. An analysis of these fail grades for each block is shown in Figure 14.

By far the biggest category of fail grades are students who scored 0 for a unit. These results contribute to half of all of the fail grades. Clearly these students never intended to engage with these units and did not withdraw, presumably for a range of reasons. This is an issue for VU and for the students who have incurred a HECS debt for a unit they had no intention of studying. Despite numerous attempts to contact these students, they did not withdraw from the unit. The number of students in this category remained reasonably consistent across all blocks.

Students who withdrew after the census date, and are thus counted as a fail grade, and students who scored 1-11% in the unit, made up a further 2% of the total fails. These students were clearly poorly engaged with the unit and should have been encouraged to withdraw (so-called ‘positive attrition’) before census date to prevent them incurring a debt for the unit, and from VU incurring higher than necessary reportable attrition metrics.

In 2018 the assessment policy was changed and students in the FYC were no longer given the opportunity to undertake supplementary assessment if they scored between 45-49% in a unit. As can be seen from the analysis of the fail grades, the number of students who fell into this category was very low, <1% of all student grades. This analysis clearly demonstrates that

students who engaged with the unit had a high likelihood of success and by far the biggest cohort of fail results were due to students who were poorly engaged with the unit.

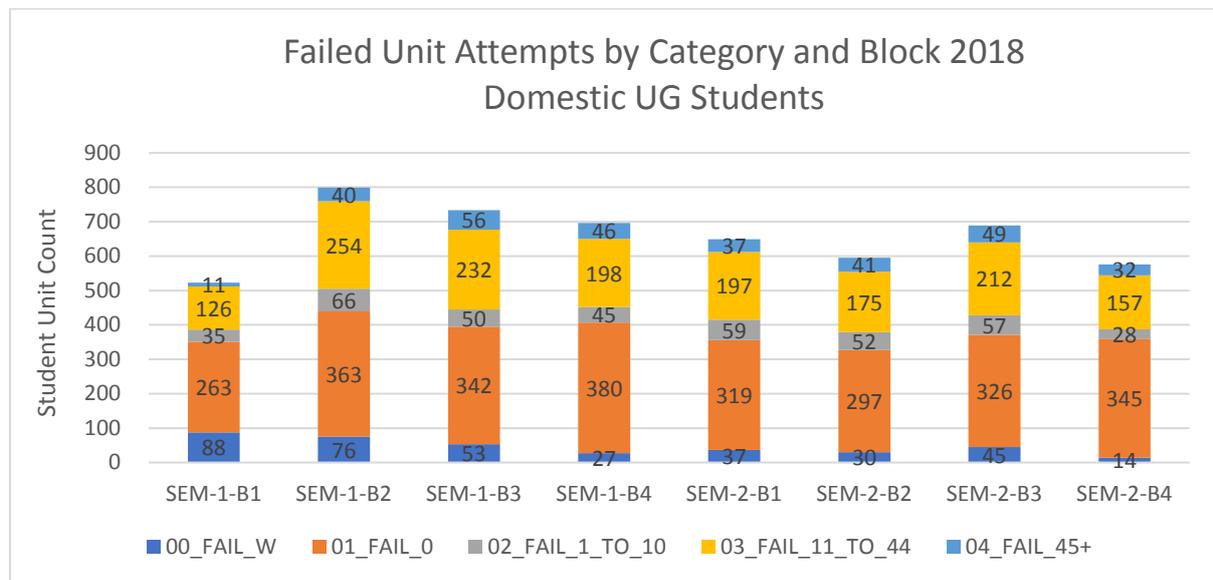


Figure 14: Analysis of the fail grades for students in the FYC

Whilst the lack of student engagement is clearly evident when the student scored 0, in the past it has not been easy to measure exactly how engaged a student was. The Data Insight team is now able to correlate a number of student engagement factors with student success. One such factor is use of the LMS, VU Collaborate, which is a critical component of teaching in the FYC. The correlation between engagement with VU Collaborate and student success is shown in Figure 15.

This clearly demonstrates that the more regularly a student uses VU Collaborate in the first week of a Block, the higher their success rate. Other measures of student engagement show similar correlations with student success.

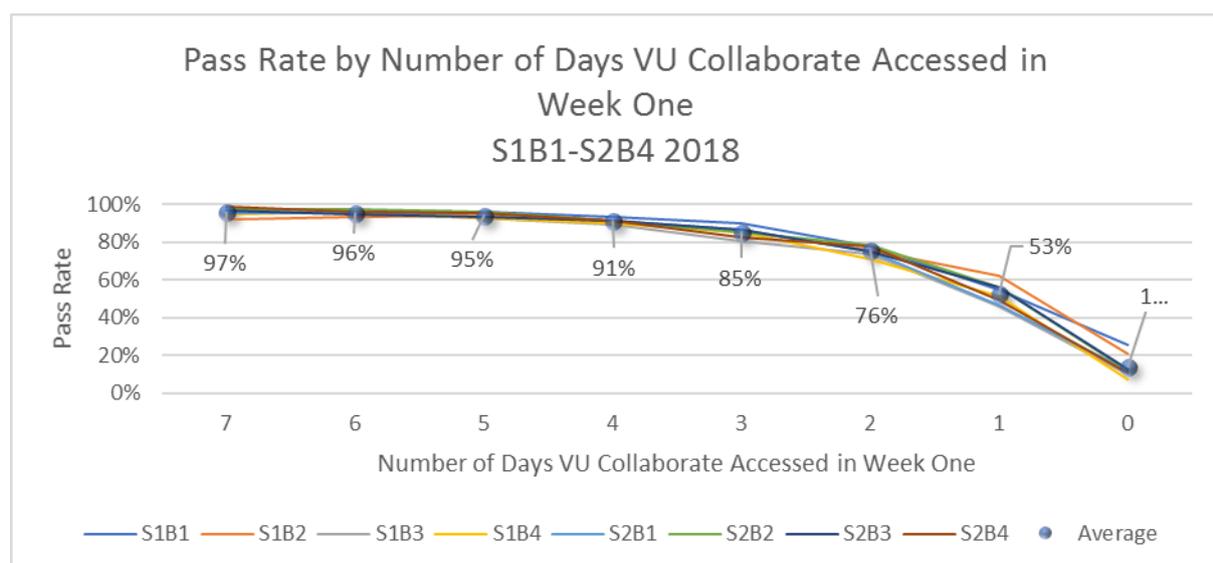


Figure 15: Analysis of the relationship between interaction with VU Collaborate and pass rate.

Conclusion

Whilst it is acknowledged that in the first iteration of the FYC (McCluskey et al., 2019) not all the 160 units that were developed, produced the same level of student engagement, satisfaction or success, the FYC has clearly demonstrated that the transition and learning pedagogies that were imbedded in the FYM have had a positive impact on student retention and student success.

Importantly, a significant amount has been learned about teaching and designing learning activities using the FYM pedagogies in a Block. This, and the feedback provided by our students, is being used to comprehensively review each of the FYC units in preparation for delivery in 2019.

Our student cohort is one of the most diverse in the Australian HE sector. Students are admitted to VU from a wide range of social and educational backgrounds as befits VU's mission to be the University of Opportunity and Success. The role of the FYC is to take these students and provide them with every opportunity to succeed and excel in their chosen course.

The results from 2018 clearly show that all students are able to achieve the same level of success, irrespective of their background or prior educational achievements. Most of the significant differences in student outcomes that were evident in 2017 have been removed, and in most cases, there is no significant difference in student success, in 2018, based on any of the factors analysed. All students can now enter the second year of their course on an even playing field and continue to succeed and excel.

References

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