Perceptions of successful students: lessons for the first year experience.

Team acknowledgement:

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Background to the project:

- Increased student diversity is insufficiently reflected in institutional policy and practice.
- We know very little about students' perceptions of their later-year learning experiences and how these might translate into resilience and progression.
- We lack an understanding of the diverse ways in which successful students perceive and negotiate their multiple lives, and progress effectively.

The project objectives:

- To document *diverse, successful* students' perceptions of their learning journey in the latter years of their degree and into the workforce.
- To identify the factors which support effective progression, encourage persistence and develop resilience.
- To identify the extent to which diverse student cohorts differ in these factors.

As a result of the project:

- To identify strategies that universities can use to encourage persistence and develop resilience in students throughout their course progression.

- To present to staff, new accounts of successful students' learning experiences.

The project components:

Diverse student cohorts:

- first generation students;
- mature age students;
- international onshore students
- Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islanders;
- students with parental/carer responsibilities;
- students from families of varied levels of parent-education;
- different study modes (full-time/part-time);
- varied disciplines.

The project components:

- A beginning questionnaire for demographic variables and responses to 3 open-ended questions about success and persistence factors (N=1350).
- Focus group discussions and interviews to document students' narratives over two years of "being a student", and over the transition to the workforce (N=70).
- Use of SPSS (quant) and nVivo (qual) to analyse demographics, responses and narrratives for patterns, relationships and themes.
- This presentation: some of the outcomes emerging from the beginning questionnaire.

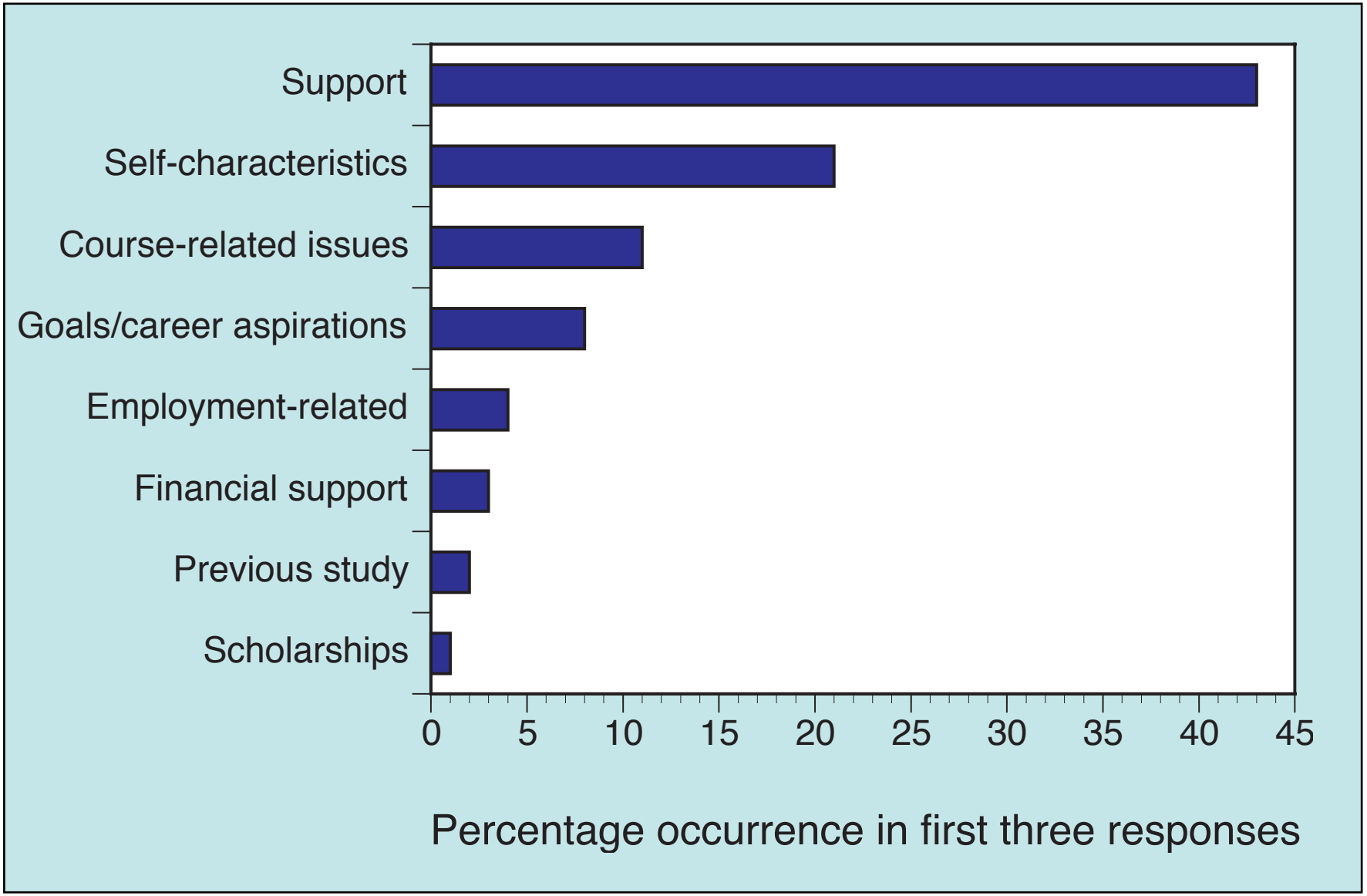
The three questions:

1. Identify up to 5 factors that have helped you progress this far in your studies. How has each of these contributed to your progression?

2. Have you ever considered withdrawing from your ECU studies?

3. If yes, list up to 3 important reasons why you considered withdrawing and why you decided to stay?

Q1. Factors assisting progression:



Peer support:

"We certainly established our own groups and the main advantage I get from that study group, apart from revision at exam time, is actually unpacking the assignments so you get the different interpretations of what we all think the assignment means rather than going off on a tangent. You do see some students they are kind of way off on some obscure tangent because they haven't interpreted and unpacked it with anybody else to get a second opinion."

(Education student)

"We've got the tight knit groups, I've got my own crew. You go out and hang out. When the next semester enrolment comes up, we all go to the Library at the same time, sign in for the same units at the same times and I think it matters a lot that you've got the same people with you throughout so that you can all feel the same thing, go through the same emotions, have someone to help you through those hard times. It's really helpful."

(Education student)

Peer support:

"I don't have support at home that everyone else usually does. I have probably the opposite to that at home so I really rely on my friends here and I've found all the people that I've gotten to know here to be just so friendly and so nice and I couldn't do it……..when I get home I have my little breakdown but when I'm here I'm happier."

(Mature-age student with unsupportive husband and family)

" … people talking like a lot of issues you guys have brought up will resolve themselves naturally just from people talking about it and dealing with the problems together."

(Business student studying after hours)

Self-characteristics:

"I have a planned existence, a timetable on my wall. This is when you can go for a walk with the dog and then you've got this two hours where you must study and then you've got swimming lessons after school. So it's organising your time so that you have enough time to do your study, enough time to do any work that you need, enough time to be a mum and enough time to be a wife.
My husband laughs at me because I've got this timetable on the wall, he says "Where's my time?"

The learning environment:

"We get these PowerPoint slides and we're all quite capable of reading those ourselves. I find I need a lecturer who will interact with the students"

(Psychology student).

"I've also found the staff, lecturers, tutors, everybody are very willing to understand that you have a life apart from university as well so if you have a sick child or a husband who has to go to work and you go to your lecturer and say "I've done this much of my assignment but this has happened in my life", they say "don't worry about it, we'll help you in any way we can" and that has enabled me to keep studying here."

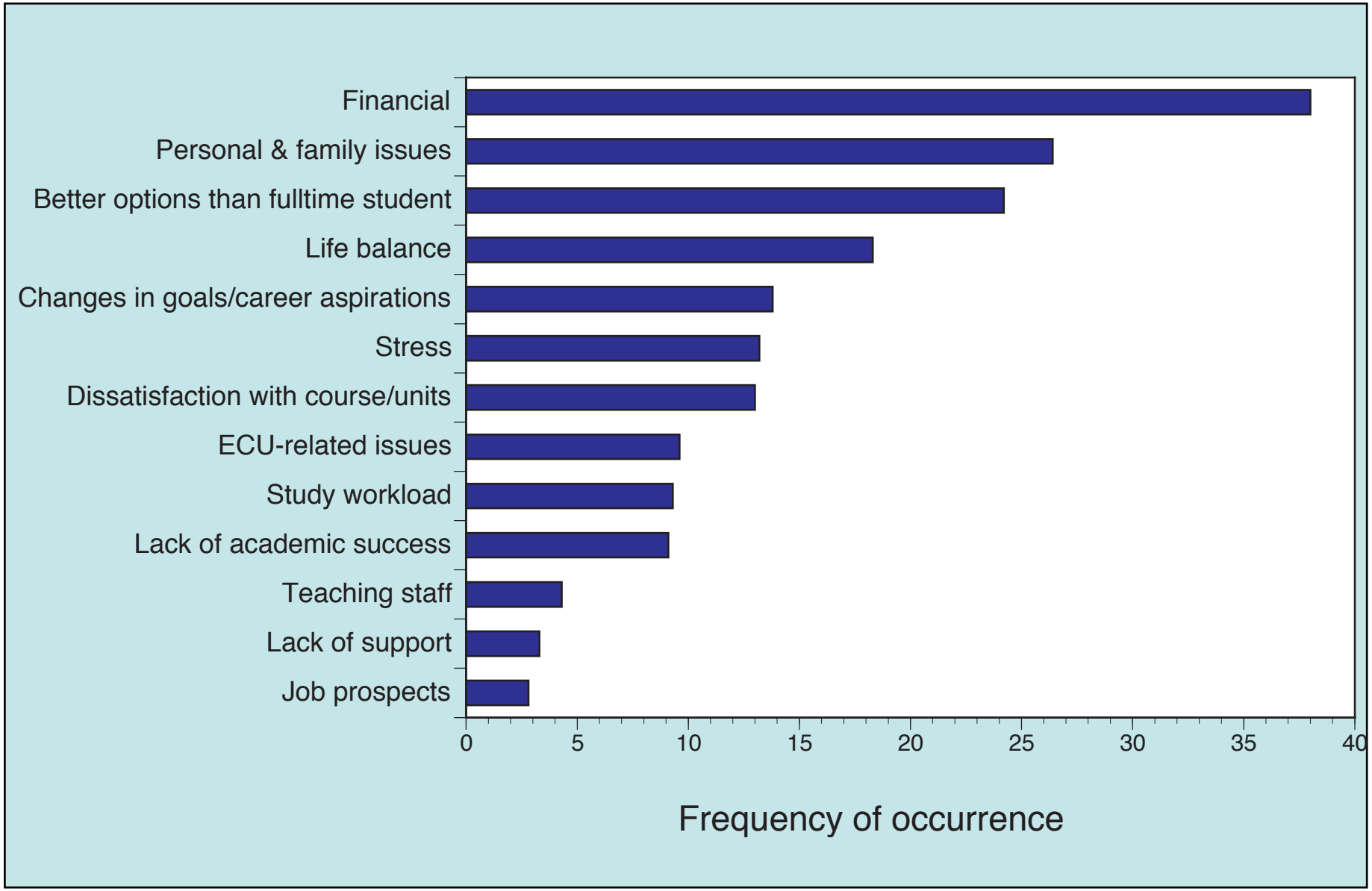
(Mature age education student)

The learning environment?

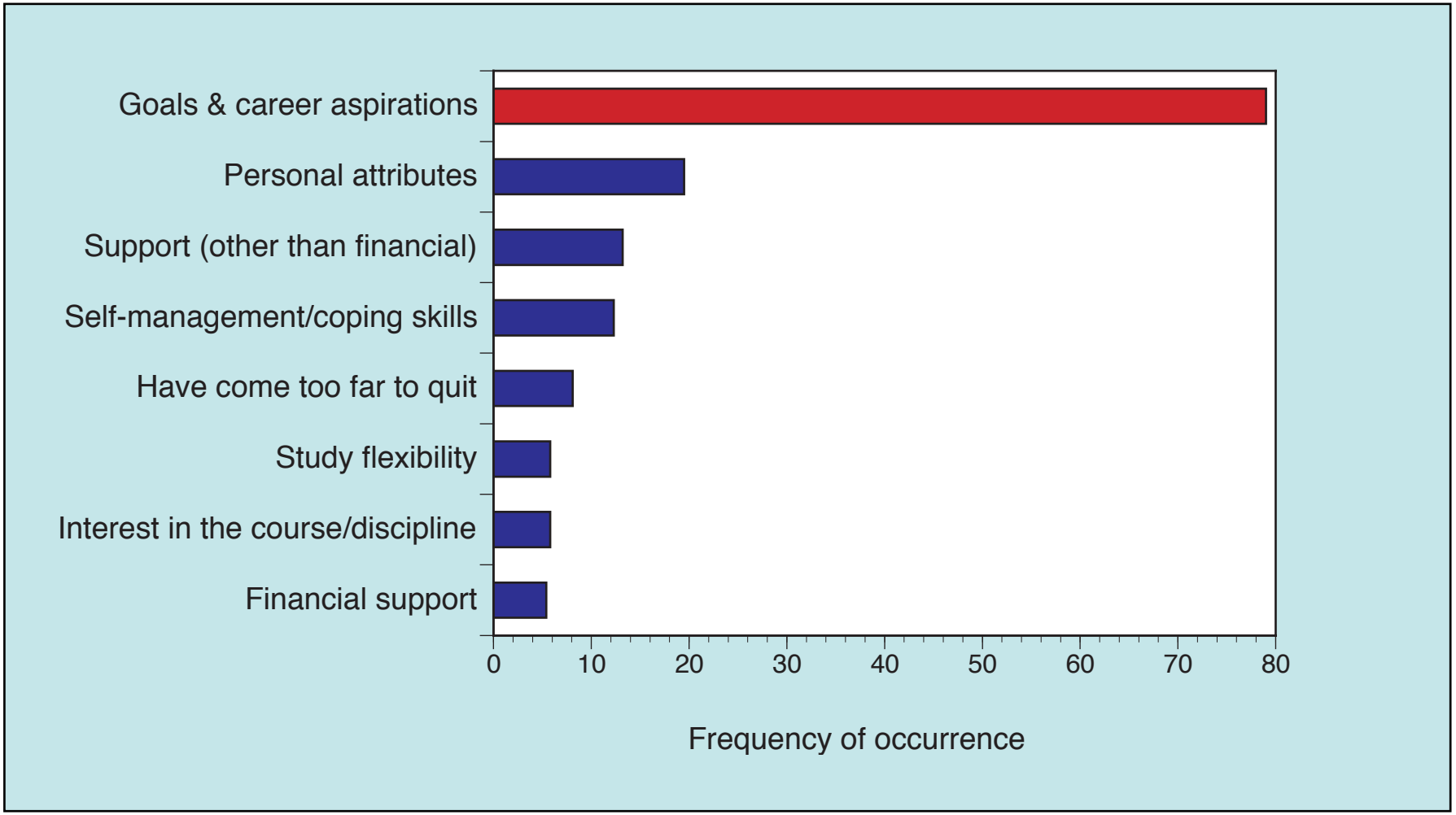
"You've got Mr Academic up there who is so passionate about his subject but he doesn't remember that you're actually a human being and you haven't been doing it for the last forty years, it's really hard."

(Nursing student)

Q2. Reasons for considering withdrawal:



Q3. Reasons for persisting:



Differences between cohorts:

These were seen in

- the relative importance of intrinsic factors (personal characteristics, goals & aspirations) indicative of self-reliance versus extrinsic factors of support and coursework, and

- the profiles of support sources, indicating shifts in the importance of particular support sources.

International onshore students:

- Indicated greater self-reliance for continued progression;
- Support (particularly from peers) was less ‘important’ for them;
- Consideration of withdrawal (rare in these students) tended to be triggered most by personal/family issues and institution-related issues.

Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islanders:

- Relied more on their personal characteristics and goals to both progress and persist with their studies, and much less on peer support.

- Issues associated with life balance and the university were the most ‘important’ in prompting consideration of withdrawal.

Students with children:

- Family and peer support was particularly ‘important’ to these students for success in studies.
- Life balance and workload issues were particularly frequent catalysts for prompting withdrawal considerations.

Mature-age students:

- With increasing age, self-reliance became more ‘important’ and support from family and friends less important for success.
- Peer support remained frequently cited as a factor contributing to success regardless of age.
- In older students, personal/family issues and life balance issues were more important in prompting consideration of withdrawal.

Students in paid employment:

- Our students work substantial hours in paid work; over 25% work >20 hours per week.
- As the hours in paid work increase, students rely more on parent support, and flexibility in their course and employment contexts for continued success in their studies.
- As hours of paid work increase, the percentage of students gaining high distinctions more than halves.

Conclusions:

- Having one or more stable support networks (particular of peers) is a consistent factor for successful progression.
- Cohorts with less mention of such support networks (and hence more emphasis on self-reliance) also share characteristics (language, culture, diabilities) making them susceptible to marginalisation from their academic community.
- Special efforts are need to ensure that all students have the same opportunities for interaction with and development of these networks, within the class environment, during their first year.

Conclusions from the questionnaire data:

- Clear goals and career aspirations play very important roles in enhancing persistence in a course of study.
- In-class strategies that assist students with goal identification and clarification in their first year of study may encourage retention.
- This may be particularly important for the youngest students (those <20 years of age).
- For older students, support and course flexibility to assist with balancing life/family responsibilities and workload are particularly important.

Some additional emerging themes:

- Having clear goals and career aspirations are important factors for persistence and resilience.
- Initiating and developing help-seeking behaviours is not easy for students, but these are important tools for progression.
- Support must be understanding of what “being a student” is, to be effective.
- The similarities in need between local students of different diversities, rather than the differences, are often the most striking.
- It is the within learning environment factors which almost totally dominate our successful students’ narratives.

Our project website and contacts:

http://www.chs.ecu.edu.au/org/tlo/projects/CG638/

Thank you