

UWS PRESSURE POINTS ON STUDENT RETENTION: A CONSOLIDATED ANALYSIS OF RECENT REPORTS, PAPERS AND INITIATIVES

Background and need

The issue of student retention has been very high on the UWS list of priorities since 2004, when the University's retention rates overall, and for undergraduate students in particular, considerably decreased compared to the previous two years (Table 1). The strategies adopted by the University, including the biannual *First Year Exit Survey* and the 2005-2006 *Retention Project*, outlined further in this paper, appeared effective in promoting student retention over the period from 2005 to 2007.

However, student retention at UWS should continue to be improved because of the following:

- There was a drop in UWS retention rates in 2007-08 compared to the previous year, which, even being marginal, warrants the University's attention;
- The current UWS retention rates are below the sector average (Table 1);
- The 2008 Bradley Review of Higher Education sets targets of 20% for low SES participation by 2020 and the successful completion of a degree to be increased from 29% of adult Australians to 40%. Funding rewards will be available for universities which contribute to meeting this target.
- There are significant financial penalties for the University for every student who is not retained. In 2008 the loss in fee income resulted from full fee paying student first year attrition was estimated to be just over \$1 million dollars. In terms of CGS students a failure to retain (which involves CGS income of approximately \$18 million per annum) means that increased 1st year intakes in subsequent years are necessary to fill load targets. This, in turn, can have a negative impact on class size and subsequent rates of retention.

Table 1: UWS Undergraduate Student Retention Trends

Course Commencement	Academic Year					
	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08
Commencing	81.9%	79.6%	75.1%	76.9%	79.0%	77.9%
Continuing	82.3%	76.9%	76.9%	81.1%	80.3%	79.7%
Total – UWS	82.2%	78.0%	76.3%	79.3%	79.8%	79.0%
Total commencing – sector	81.4%	81.9%	82.1%	82.2%	82.6%	n/a

Thus, retaining students remains a key priority at UWS, given the current economic climate, decreased public funding allocated to Australian universities over the past decade, growing competition within the sector and the UWS commitment to opening up educational and life opportunities for those traditionally underrepresented in higher education.

Objectives

This consolidated analysis is focused on identifying key pressure points across the university which must be addressed in the comprehensive retention campaign planned for UWS in 2009. A particular focus on first year retention and transition will simultaneously pick up all of the key action strategies in the L&T area of the *Making the Difference* Strategy 2009-13 and the associated L&T action plan for 2009.

Documents and data analysed

- The UWS 2006 and 2007 First Year Exit Survey reports.
- Scott, G., Shah, M., Grebennikov L., & Singh, H., (2008). Improving student retention: A University of Western Sydney case study. *Journal of Institutional Research* 14(1), 1-23.
- Grebennikov, L. & Skaines, I. (2008). UWS students at risk: Profile and opportunities for change. *Journal of Institutional Research* (in print).
- Campbell, M. (2008). *Students at Risk Project Report and Recommendations*. Internal UWS report.
- Scott, G. (2009). *University student engagement and satisfaction with learning and teaching*. Review of Australian higher education: Commissioned research and analysis report. DEEWR, Canberra.
- Scott, G. (2008). *Improving student retention and success at Charles Darwin University*. Unpublished partnership project report.
- Cusick, A. (2009). *An audit of students excluded in 2008 who appealed and those who did not appeal*. Internal UWS analysis.

Documents and data analysed: A brief overview

The UWS 2006 and 2007 First Year Exit Survey

Essentially this survey asks all UWS students withdrawing before the end of first year about their reasons for leaving. The top ten reasons for student withdrawal identified in the 2007 Exit survey, (N = 320) are very similar to those found in the 2006 survey (N = 465) and include (in rank order): Employment commitments, the course wasn't what the student

expected, students felt isolated, family pressures, staff did not give enough feedback or individual help, financial difficulties, the timetable made it difficult to attend classes, the teaching and learning methods were un-motivating, staff were difficult to access and the expectations about what students had to do in assessment were unclear.

The recurring reasons for withdrawal identified in the post-survey written comments are:

- Course Information: lack of detailed information about the course, such as core and elective units and also information in relation to the courses that are planned to be phased out or discontinued.
- Course Design: pathway units, course did not allow exemption for previous post graduate study, mode of course offering, such as evening and distance learning, flexibility in timetabling to suit mature aged students who are working full time.
- Student Assessment: group assessment was unorganised, overwhelmed by large amount of assessment, needed individual help with assessment, unclear assessment requirements.
- Student Support: insufficient individual support for students to settle into and succeed with their studies.
- Staff: patchy quality with some excellent but others with poor teaching and communication skills, lack of preparation, and insufficient responsiveness.

Additionally, the Exit Surveys indicate that mature aged students are dropping out in disproportionately high numbers. They also reveal that the undergraduate retention rate is lower than the post-graduate one and that there is some variation between Colleges.

Improving student retention: A University of Western Sydney case study

This paper is mainly focused on the UWS 2004-2006 *Retention Project*. Of the many reasons for student withdrawal this project highlighted the ones which were: (a) within the University's ability to affect, and (b) of both high importance and low performance for students. Six key areas identified as being most important to retention in the unique context of UWS and subjected to improvement action in 2005 were:

- quality of student orientation;
- accuracy and speed of enrolments and fees invoicing;
- provision of contact for students to promptly resolve their administrative problems;
- first-year student engagement in learning (easy access to IT resources, use of WebCT, group projects, peer mentors);
- ensuring student clarity about what was expected of them, especially regarding assessment;

- more active and targeted promotion and communication of support services and facilities.

One year later, five of these six areas showed statistically significant improvements in terms of student satisfaction with their quality. The overall student retention rate at the University had increased by 3.5%. One area, “clarity of assessment tasks” did not demonstrate similar improvement and is currently the focus of a university-wide development project.

UWS students at risk: Profile and opportunities for change

The paper identifies a set of variables predicting UWS student academic performance and retention using various sources of data concerning 8,896 undergraduate students commencing at the university in 2004. It was found that, (a) despite of a positive relationship between student academic achievements and retention the predictors of student retention and the predictors of student performance are not identical; (b) a large majority of early withdrawing students leave UWS without applying to other institutions; and (c) within the above cohort part-time and mature age students have significantly higher odds of leaving UWS as compared to full-time students and current school leavers. Further, the proportion of part-time students is significantly higher among mature students than among current school leavers. Management and Commerce and Health are the FOEs with the greatest concentration of both part-time and mature age students. Tailored pro-active programs which have to meet the needs of UWS students at risk in these discipline areas are discussed further in the paper.

UWS students at risk: Project report and recommendations

This report was developed in response to work completed in the University’s Students at Risk project 2007-2008. The report highlights the importance of understanding the diverse range of profiles of UWS students – their specific qualities and particular needs at certain points in their learning cycle. It also focuses on initiatives trialled at UWS School level to support students within certain fields of study. Many of the 20 recommendations made concern developing the capacity of teaching staff to respond to student needs, especially those teaching commencing year students. This work takes an “all of commencing year” approach to transition support and requires that we define students at risk of failure or early withdrawal as those who are either not coping, or in order to cope, need to be directed to targeted support to help overcome the hurdles they face. In terms of the profile of UWS students who are most at risk of early withdrawal this project identified those studying part-time, studying in COB or COHS and mature age students. Further the project identified the

key UWS undergraduate, commencing year student issues related to their early withdrawal.

Many of these students:

- Work long hours in paid employment and are extremely time poor;
- Are independent earners;
- Are from academic backgrounds which have not focussed on participatory learning methodologies;
- Are often inadequately advised prior to committing to a particular pattern of study units and attendance pattern;
- Lack personal decision making skills to appropriately select courses and units;
- Live off campus and travel to UWS and to work;
- Have limited academic choices and need encouragement to participate in many academic contexts;
- Have strong family loyalties and responsibilities.

Interestingly, studies of UWS students at risk have found that those with a NESB tend to carry on with their program even if they have academic difficulties, while ESB students with such difficulties are more likely to withdraw.

University student engagement and satisfaction with learning and teaching:

Commissioned research for the Bradley Review

This report brings together a wide range of research on university student engagement and satisfaction with learning, along with a range of associated contextual information. It gives an empirically confirmed set of quality assurance principles and checkpoints for ensuring that universities not only gain but retain students and engage them in productive learning. They include:

- Provision of detailed information about the university and the course before enrolment, as students often choose a university on quite flimsy grounds;
- Ensuring that students receive adequate advice about subject choices and find themselves in courses about which they are well informed and prepared;
- The effective management of student expectations – what is promised in a prospectus should be what is delivered.
- Targeted and sustained transition support (the review identifies 12 key elements of an effective transition strategy which align with UWS studies; see Attachment 1);
- Students' sense of belonging to the university community, being linked into strong support networks, engaging with peers both in an out of class on projects or assignments, and for moral support. Such things are vitally important because learning is a profoundly social experience;

- Active learning – a focus on learning methods which are interactive, practice-oriented, problem-based and are in the context of a group rather than individual or traditional classroom context. Extended availability of experiential learning offerings which enable students to learn by grappling with the real world problems / challenges characteristic of their profession or discipline;
- Multiple methods for learning;
- A focus on assessment. This is an area where students look, in particular, for a clear indication up front of what a fail, pass, credit, distinction and high distinction looks like in the specific subject being studied and then careful adherence to these criteria in marking and feedback;
- Flexible, integrated and responsive learning designs; and
- Consistently accessible, responsive and high quality staff.

Improving student retention and success at Charles Darwin University

The objective of this partnership project was for Professor Scott to analyse a set of CDU diagnostic data and interview a wide range of CDU staff in order to identify how the University might best enhance student retention and success. The project has identified a range of key, practical steps which CDU can adopt to enhance retention in such areas as: course design and review; course delivery; support and administration for staff and students; tracking and improving L&T and retention.

A framework with which to give overall direction to the project, an evaluation framework and a set of implementation support steps and tactics (similar to the outlined in the review above) have also been identified; along with data relevant to further developing a change capable culture at CDU that is evidence-based and collaborative.

An audit of students excluded in 2008 who appealed and those who did not appeal

This manual audit of every UWS student who was excluded mid-year in 2008 was conducted by the chair of Academic Senate in early 2009, with particular focus on the records of 192 students who were excluded but did not appeal. The audit found that 45 of these students were close to completion or had good performance in most units. It appeared that many of these students did not understand the full impact of failing to appeal and viewed the UAC requirement to re-apply as an administrative process rather than one which attracts a new range of admission policies relating to limits for advanced standing and so on. It was suggested that administrative remedial action should be taken to help bridge whatever gap exists in students' understanding of and sophistication with administrative processes that affect them, especially if these students are first in their family to attend UWS.

Common themes

Two key common themes regarding UWS student attrition were identified through the analysis of the above documents:

1. Employment commitments remain a major reason for student early withdrawal from UWS. This aligns with the fact that: a) Two largely overlapping groups of UWS students are most at risk of early withdrawal: mature age and part-time students; b) Higher proportions of UWS part-time students report being employed, including full-time employment, compared to the national averages; and c) A higher than nationwide percentage of UWS students who agree or strongly agree that work adversely affects their study. Whereas these students tend to request financial assistance none of them suggest that they will, if assisted, give up work.
2. Insufficient information and counselling are provided to prospective UWS students about the course before they enrol. This aligns with the UWS Exit Survey item “the course wasn’t what I expected”, which is consistently perceived as the second top factor influencing UWS student attrition.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

1. UWS recognise that many of its students work in paid employment, often 35 hours or more a week, and are likely to keep doing so; and that carefully managing the expectations, study commitments, flexible learning designs (like the 6 week term model at Swinburne) and targeted transition support (see Attachment 1) for such people is a key to their retention. The importance of these factors is increased if these people are also first in their family to study at university (at UWS it is reported that approximately half of its undergraduate enrolments fall into this category). Further, in order to improve retention of this large group of students it is recommended that the University seek to consistently increase the capacity for its facilities and services to operate outside of normal working hours. The existing services, academic literacy support programs and general facilities could, for example, be offered in evenings, weekends and/or electronically for 24/7 access.

2. The University's Colleges and Schools ensure flexibility in timetabling, consider adopting more flexible, mixed modes of course design and delivery to suit part-time students who work long hours. Availability of sufficient teacher-student interaction and individual attention, including regular consultations, electronically or face to face, outside class hours need to be identified.
3. UWS Colleges and Schools find ways to reach out to part-time and working students with information on the availability of and application for financial aid. Such aid may be provided in the form of scholarships, emergency funds, non-tuition costs for areas such as books, internet access, printing costs, library fines and parking fees and fines.
4. In marketing UWS both locally and internationally a particular focus be on direct contact by knowledgeable staff with prospective students. Marketing of UWS courses with support of academic staff, course advisers or HoPs give particular focus to the clear management of student expectations. Targeted marketing at the School / Course level is recommended in order to ensure clear and specific expectations' management. This approach, if adopted, should help reduce attrition among those UWS students for whom "the course wasn't what they expected" – the second major factor of UWS student attrition.
5. Priority to be given to communicating to staff the moral and financial benefits of improving UWS retention with an objective of reaching the sector average for each FOE; with recognition of achievements in this area being given attention in UWS staff reward and recognition programs.
6. More generally, there be a concerted focus on applying the key first year transition and retention checkpoints identified in this paper and in Attachment 1 across all UWS campuses and courses with all staff trained on their application, importance and role.
7. UWS develop guidelines to incorporate case-by-case and program specific academic review of progression by students into the process for determining exclusion.

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Attachment 1

Targeted and sustained transition support checkpoints

This area is the focus of extensive work across the sector at present and has been selected as a key theme in a range of Cycle 2 AUQA audits. It is also the focus of Sally Kift's ALTC Senior Fellowship. A useful case study of how a targeted and sustained transition support program is being implemented at one Australian university is given by Nelson, Kift, Humphries and Harper (2006)¹ and Kift (2008)². Another is the benchmarking currently underway between UWS, Griffith and Charles Darwin Universities.

All of these sources identify the following as being key elements of an effective transition strategy:

- Pro-active assistance is given at enrolment to ensure that the correct units of study and a feasible workload are selected;
- Students are specifically alerted to 'how things work around here' and have access to a mechanism which allows them to find the answers to questions as they arise, rather than having them all covered in an up-front orientation day;
- Direct use is made of what students in specific target groups who have already succeeded at university have found works best. The notion here is that 'fellow travellers' ('students just like me who have done well') are a key source of relevant information and support for those new to the university. This approach is especially valuable for Indigenous, LSES and International students and is akin to having a "Lonely Planet" guide.
- Orientation is seen as being a process not an event. It can extend back into the schools, or the Colleges that feed the university and needs to operate in a sustained way during the early months of university study;
- Transition assistance is targeted to the particular needs of specific groups of students and fields of education;
- Targeted 'study skills' help is provided, especially for those returning to study after a long break or those who are unfamiliar with how assessment, research and writing work at university. Situated knowledge that relates directly to the subject at hand is more valued and engaging than generic workshops on academic writing;
- Transition support is available not just for those entering first year. For example, TAFE students with articulation into the 2nd year of an U.G. program also typically require considerable assistance;
- Transition support covers all aspects of the university experience identified as important to new students (Attachment 5);
- Students showing the signs typically associated with disengagement or withdrawal are actively identified and contacted. Risk indicators include failure to activate one's university email account, poor class attendance, failure to submit the first assessment task or low performance on it, repeated requests for an extension on assignments, expressing concern in class etc. The data from the institution's exit interviews or surveys are used to sharpen these indicators;

¹ Nelson, K. S., Kift, S., Humphreys, J., & Harper, W. (2006): A blueprint for enhanced transition: Taking an holistic approach to managing student transition into a large university. *Proceedings of the 9th International Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference*, available online: http://www.fyhe.qut.edu.au/past_papers/2006/Papers/Kift.pdf

² Kift., S.(2008): The next, great first year challenge: Sustaining, coordinating and embedding coherent institution – wide approaches to enact the FYE as "everybody's business". *Proceedings of the 11th International Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference*, available online: http://www.fyhe.qut.edu.au/past_papers/papers08/FYHE2008/content/pdfs/Keynote%20-%20Kift.pdf

- Both academic and administrative staff understand the important, complementary roles they have to play and are alerted to what motivates student engagement and retention. This work is not left just to a specialist unit and there is widespread understanding that investing in transition has both a moral and financial benefit;
- A range of peer mentoring and support strategies are used, particularly in the first six months of university study;
- A key staff contact person manages all queries – in some universities this is a first year coordinator, in others a designated member of the course staff. This is complemented by giving students access to an easily located “Need Help?” page on the University’s website and a system for ensuring that queries are answered promptly and accurately.

There are indications that, if such a personal, timely and proactive approach is adopted, withdrawals can be significantly reduced. There are clear overlaps here with the retention and first year experience research cited earlier.