Student Experience: Attrition, Retention and Progression

Issue

Measurement of the student experience is complex and indicators such as student attrition, retention and progression seem to have a relationship with each other. The respective attrition, retention and progression rates of undergraduate students are used by the Australian Government for benchmark reporting purposes\(^1\). Further, they provide the University with a snapshot of student turnover. The 2011 Macquarie University (University) attrition rate was 12.73\% ranking the University 7\(^{th}\) from 39 Institutions while the 2011 retention rate was 87.08\% ranking the University 6\(^{th}\). Both these results could be regarded by some as generally high. The 2012 progression rate of 81.11\% ranks the University at 22\(^{nd}\) from 39 in Australia. This result indicates that student progression needs to be explored further and addressed.

Discussion

Attrition\(^2\) refers to the proportion of students who commence in a year and neither complete nor return to study in that year, in other words, drop out of their study. Progression\(^3\) refers to the proportion of a student’s load (EFTSL) that is successfully completed during a year (i.e., fail). Retention\(^4\) refers to the ratio of students who commenced in a year and continue with their study as compared to those who commenced and did not continue.

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\(^2\) The Attrition rate for the year is the proportion of students who commenced a bachelor course in the year who neither complete nor return in that year
\(^3\) The Progress rate for the year is the proportion of actual student load (EFTSL) for units of study that are passed divided by all the units of study completed (passed + failed + withdrawn)
\(^4\) The Retention rate for the year is the number of students who commenced an undergraduate course in that year and continue in the year as a proportion of the number of students who commenced in an undergraduate course in that year and did not complete the course in that year
In regards to these rates the attrition rate for international students is 7.08% and domestic students is 9.01% (i.e., relatively good). The retention rate for international students is 92.81% and domestic students, is 90.73% (i.e., relatively good). The progression rate for international students is 77.38% and domestic students, is 82.32% (i.e., relatively poor). While domestic and international student attrition and retention rates are relatively good the progression rate for both domestic and international students is relatively poor.

An examination of the failure rates of students reveals that between 6-10% of students (e.g., 2500 to 3750) fail 50% or more of their units each semester. Further, of those students who fail an average 65% are domestic and 35% are international students indicating that at a time when the University has around 60-65% domestic and 30-35% internationals enrolled, failure seems evenly spread by cohort. There is some incentive for international students to pass because if they fail too many subjects there is a risk of breaching Australian visa requirements. Failure also means, on some occasions, an increase in charges to students (and income for the University) from those individual students because of their need to redo the, or a, further unit to strive for award completion. While failing one subject is thought to be personal and situational, failing two or more units is regarded as an indicator that an individual student is having some form of difficulty with their progression, either personally, and/or within their chosen field of study.

A past examination of the failure rate by Faculty and Subject level\(^5\) reveals that some subjects are more problematic than others (e.g., media studies, ancient history & law in Arts; accounting in FBE; psychology & early childhood in Human Sciences; biology & information systems in Science). While no firm conclusions can be drawn from the limited data, these types of results indicate that failure may not be cohort based but is more person and environment (e.g., self-efficacy) or even structurally based (e.g., learning needs & assessment). Supporting a view that structures are important Gairn (2012) identified that within FBE, intervention by letter and consultation can improve the academic performance of low GPA students.

\(^5\) Conducted initially in 2012 using Session 2 2012 data
Finally, there is some evidence that these students report low levels of Academic advice\textsuperscript{6} and the existence of a more compliance rather than supportive environment within their University.

In acknowledging these broader issues the Provost and Senate have recommended action is taken to redress student retention and progression. Therefore a Retention Working Group was established, Chaired by the DVC-Students and Registrar and comprised Associate Deans Learning & Teaching among others, with a brief to review, discuss and develop a draft student attrition, retention and progression strategy. This group met throughout 2013 and following a review, development of a Report\textsuperscript{7} and strategizing by the group, a proposed strategy was developed for consideration (refer attachment 1).

**Proposed strategy:**

It is proposed that an institution wide approach to student attrition, retention and progression is adopted, by way of strategy, with an overarching aim to achieve the University purpose to ‘serve and engage our students and staff’. The goal of the strategy is to fulfil the Universities strategic priority to “offer experiences, within formal settings and beyond, that change the lives of our students, support them in achieving their aspirations and provide an incubator for the next generation of leaders”\textsuperscript{8}.

The student attrition, retention and progression strategy involves the following objectives: (1) improving student engagement upon acceptance of offer (opt in basis), (2) developing and promulgating content to enhance discipline and academic literacies, and (3) creating a supportive environment through training, monitoring and intervention. These objectives will be met by: embedding retention and progression practice in the formal curriculum, identifying units where students are withdrawing, having poor experiences and fail to complete, improving academic literacies and clarifying expectations (pre, during, post), providing learning and health/wellbeing support services for students, and lifecycle based monitoring of student progression.

\textsuperscript{6} 2011 AUSSE Report
\textsuperscript{7} Retention Working Group Data Collection Project Report (2013)
\textsuperscript{8} Our University: A Framing of Futures (2013)
A significant amount of ongoing work is required in each element to realise a step change in student ‘progression’ at Macquarie University.

**Recommendations**

1. Broad strategy is adopted.
2. Student Progression Workgroup is established, led by Professor Janet Greely, comprising Associate Deans Learning & Teaching among others, to operationalize and implement the strategy at whole of institution level.

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Figure 2. Student attrition, retention & progression

1. Improve engagement upon acceptance of offer (on an opt in basis)
2. Develop & promulgate content to enhance discipline & academic literacies
3. Create a supportive environment through training, monitoring & intervention (unit, staff & student)

Focus on the design & conduct of early assessment tasks
Promote frontline staff training (tutors & lecturers)
Promote tutor induction programs (TIP)

Targeted intervention
- withdrawal at census date
- LEU results
- failure rate > 20%
Faculty & HOD accountability

Define & embed discipline specific literacies & learning
Conduct staff training about Unit design & rubrics
Access to systems, equipment & resources
Universal design

Personalised communications
Learning modules
Library & study skills
Mentoring
1st assessment monitoring & tailoring

Identify predictive indicators of academic fit. Maximise student success through intervention. Identify students at risk.