Perspectives on student retention and success

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adelaide.edu.au
Student retention: the national picture

• DET retention rate for year = the number of bachelor students who commenced a course in year x and did not complete in year x and continued in year x+1 (retained students) as a proportion of all students who commenced a course in year x and did not complete in year x

• Sector attrition rates have remained at a similar level for over a decade

• Enabling students to engage and succeed in their chosen studies, getting the outcomes for them and the workforce, minimising loss of their time and debt for non-completed studies
Normal = within institution 93% - 48% (Adelaide 85.6%)
Adjusted = within sector 96% - 62%
Commitment and obligations to students

• How well do we know our students’ needs, aspirations and learning experiences? Why do they drop out?

• Student characteristics
  – Student factors explain only 22.5% of the overall variation in student attrition across the sector (HESP 2018)
  – Institutional factors really matter
  – Behavioural factors may predict better than demographic

• Some Adelaide initiatives
  – 2015 1st Year Experience cohort tracking study
  – 2016 Sense of Belonging survey of undergraduates
  – 2016 on: Student Withdrawal survey
  – Better understanding of risk factors of specific student cohorts
Strategic context and government policy

• University strategy (e.g. growth) and financial targets
• End of uncapped demand-driven system
• Expected performance-based funding model from 2020 with student retention in sector a likely key measure
• Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) supports retention and success of low SES students
Accountability and regulation

• TEQSA’s mandate to oversee student attrition, retention and completion
• The Standards expect providers to demonstrate support for transition into HE, early progress assessment and detection of students at risk, and targeted support programs
• The Standards reinforce the need to address student progression and success in curriculum design
  – e.g. 3.2 “teaching and learning activities [must be] arranged to foster progressive and coherent achievement of expected learning outcomes throughout each course of study”
HESP 2018 Recommendations

1. Appropriate provision of academic and other support services as required of them by the Higher Education Standards Framework (Rec. 1)

2. Students given the opportunity for career planning and course advice on entry to the institution and as required throughout their studies (Rec. 3)

3. Every institution should have its own comprehensive student-centred retention strategy e.g. institutional retention benchmarks, entry and exit interviews, data-based risk analytics and targeted support interventions, a suite of support services and a means to re-engage with students who have withdrawn (Rec. 5)

4. Automatic review of the enrolment of all students who have not engaged in their studies to an agreed level by the census date (Rec. 6)

5. Support services for external students not regularly attending campus (Rec. 7)

6. An institution-wide mental health strategy and implementation plan for all students (Rec. 8)

7. Institutions should increasingly offer nested courses to provide students with more exit options with meaningful qualifications (Rec. 9)
What does the literature say?

• The prime importance of academic and social integration
• Student engagement
  “a broad construct intended to encompass salient academic as well as certain non-academic aspects of the student experience” comprising: active and collaborative learning; participation in challenging academic activities; formative communication with academic staff; involvement in enriching educational experiences; feeling legitimated and supported by university learning communities (Coates 2007:122)
• “Engagement and belonging can be nurtured throughout the institution (academic, social and professional services) but the academic sphere is of primary importance” (Thomas et al 2017)
Strategies with impact

• Pre-admission
• Orientation and beyond
• Progression and re-engagement
• Curriculum, learning, teaching and assessment
• Co- and extra-curricular activities
• Governance, organisation and data
• Place and space
Some Adelaide strategies

- In faculties, peer mentors, social events, drop-in academic support programs and services
- Central Succeed@Adelaide outreach and referral campaigns (e.g. opt-in of all students on high fail-rate courses)
- Pre-census assessment and feedback on all courses for commencers
- Learning analytics incl. ‘On Task’ tool pilot
- Suite of support services including PASS, Writing and Maths centres; out-of-hours online academic skills support
- First institution-wide Retention and Success Plan in development; institutional target set
**Extended orientation-transition**

- In each faculty, the program should include, as minimum:
  - an extended program of peer-to-peer support, e.g., peer mentoring, embedded within all disciplines in the faculty and targeted at improving retention and engagement amongst first-year undergraduate students;
  - increased opportunity for first year undergraduate students to interact over time with academic staff in the context of extended orientation-transition activities. This could take the form of academic mentoring;
  - embedded referral or direct advisory support to new commencing students on matters such as academic advice, academic skills support, program change, dropping load, etc.
Some key challenges

• Taking a joined up, strategic institutional approach connecting across academic advice, curriculum, learning and teaching, careers and employability, academic skills support, health and wellbeing, communications
• Engaging academic staff and rethinking educational practice
• Including focus on continuing as well as commencing students
• Deploying data effectively and conducting rigorous impact evaluation
• Taking the opportunities offered by digital technologies to provide students with personalised communications, assistance, feedback
• Cultural change!
10 principles for Adelaide’s Plan

1. It recognises that responsibility for and ability to improve student retention and success is widely distributed across the institution, inclusive of academic and professional areas. A whole-institution, partnership approach is required and all relevant areas are expected to establish targets and actions resulting from the Plan.

2. It adopts a ‘student journey’ perspective on planning of sustainable, structured support for student retention and success, with a special focus on undergraduates and the first year experience but also including continuing and PGCW students.

3. It recognises academic and social integration as key to student retention and success, and the importance of the quality of the educational experience within the academic sphere as a key factor in positive retention and success outcomes.

4. It promotes student engagement and sense of belonging to academic community, and positive academic staff-student and peer-to-peer relations in discipline contexts.

5. It recognises employability development as an integral part of the academic and broader student experience, and students’ expectations about employment outcomes as a factor in their motivation, engagement and retention.
10 principles for Adelaide’s Plan

6. It recognises the importance of mainstreamed advisory and support provision for all students, as well as the importance of targeted support for specific cohorts.

7. It encourages the development of tailored strategies to meet the retention and success challenges of different programs and courses, and prioritises enhancement strategies for programs and courses with lower rates of student retention and success.

8. It encourages best practice and innovation in strategies for retention and success, including through creative and innovative deployment of digital technologies for flexible and personalised support.

9. It recognises and supports students as active agents in their own and peers’ engagement and success, and promotes co-creation and partnership with students in the development and delivery of retention and success initiatives.

10. It promotes an evidence-based approach, informed by sector research and evaluation, and requiring timely access by stakeholders to relevant institutional data to inform intervention and support strategies.
Adelaide ‘Belonging’ Project

With acknowledgements to the project team and all its contributors
Sense of belonging

“The experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment” (Hagerty et al 1992:173)

“The experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers) (Strayhorn 2012:3)
A social theory of learning

(Wenger 1998:5)
“the impact of student college experiences on motivation can be understood as the outcome of the interaction among student goals, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and perceived worth or relevance of the curriculum” (Tinto 2017:255).
A theory of engagement

“the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities” (Kuh 2009:683).

“It is not engagement per se that drives sense of belonging, as it is students’ perceptions of their belonging that drives their engagements. Not all engagements lead to that perception” (Tinto 2015: 8)
## Community and belonging in quality metrics

**Australian SES Learning Engagement items, “To what extent have you:”**

- had a sense of belonging to [institution]?
- participated in discussions online or face-to-face?
- worked with other students as part of your study?
- interacted with students outside study requirements?
- interacted with students who are very different from you?
- been given opportunities to interact with local students?
What works...? factors in sense of belonging

“At the heart of successful retention and success is a strong sense of belonging in HE for all students [...] A strong sense of belonging [...] is most effectively nurtured through mainstream activities with an overt academic purpose that all students participate in” (Thomas 2012:12)

- “Engagement and belonging were found to be developed and enhanced through interventions that enabled students to develop supportive peer relations; allowed meaningful interactions between staff and students; developed students’ capacity, confidence and identity as successful HE learners; offered a HE experience that was relevant to students’ current interests and future (career) goals”

(Thomas et al 2017)
Some facilitating factors in sense of belonging

• Reasonably representative makeup of academic community
• Positive interactions inside and out of the classroom
• Forms of activity that require shared academic and social experiences e.g.
  – pedagogies that require active and cooperative learning strategies, and students to learn together as equal partners
  – cohort programs, learning communities
• Right level of academic challenge and support for individuals

(see Tinto 2015)
High impact practices (HIPs) for engaged learning

(Kuh, G.D 2008)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st year seminars &amp; experiences (small groups)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Common intellectual experiences</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning communities (including inter-disciplinary)</td>
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<td>Writing-intensive courses (repeated practice across curriculum)</td>
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<td>Collaborative assignments and projects</td>
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<td>Undergraduate research</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diversity/global learning (intercultural studies, study abroad)</td>
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<td>Service and community based learning</td>
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<td>Internships and placements</td>
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<td>Capstone courses and projects</td>
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Method and questions

- Focus groups (students and staff) exploring factors perceived to affect students’ sense of belonging to their academic communities at Adelaide
- Online survey of all on-shore undergraduates, Nov 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How strongly do you feel part of an academic community in your studies at UoA?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the factors that contribute to you feeling more strongly part of your academic community? (Please rank)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the factors that contribute to you feeling less strongly part of your academic community? (Please rank)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any further comments?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would you like to be contacted in future regarding opportunities to be part of student-led projects based on the results of this survey?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Factors

1. Approachable academic staff
2. Approachable professional staff
3. Clear connections between degree and future career
4. Encouragement/support from family/friends
5. External/personal issues (e.g. health, family, paid work)
6. Interaction with peers inside classes
7. Interaction with peers outside classes
8. Interaction with teaching staff inside classes
9. Interaction with teaching staff outside classes
10. Interest in study area
11. Involvement in discipline based clubs and societies
12. Involvement in extra-curricular activities (e.g. clubs, volunteering...)
13. Involvement in mentoring program
14. Opportunity to contribute (e.g. degree rep...)
15. Personal academic achievement
16. Positive experiences in classes
17. Satisfaction with choice of university
18. Satisfaction with current degree choice
19. Small group discovery experiences (SGDEs)
20. Strong motivation toward completing studies
## Response rate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage in survey</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
<th>Completion %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commenced</td>
<td>2084</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreed to participate</td>
<td>2065</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed part A</td>
<td>1951</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed part B</td>
<td>1882</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed part C</td>
<td>1748</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open ended responses</td>
<td>431</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest in future projects</td>
<td>470</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linked to added demogr.</td>
<td>1476</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 19,159 undergraduates enrolled Semester 2 2016
# Year profile (completed part A)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year level</th>
<th>Survey participants (n/%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>631 (32%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>513 (26%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>463 (24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>203 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or greater</td>
<td>123 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer not to say</td>
<td>18 (1%)</td>
</tr>
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Also identified Faculty, degree program, international/domestic, socio-economic status, commencing/continuing.
Strength score

How strongly do you feel part of an academic community in your studies at The University of Adelaide?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>50 or less</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51 to 75</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76 or more</td>
<td>23%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Number of factors selected

Number of factors selected as contributing to feeling **more** strongly and **less** strongly part of an academic community.

![Bar chart showing the number of survey respondents for different numbers of factors selected, with categories for 1 to 3, 4 to 6, 7 to 9, 10 to 12, 13 to 15, 16 to 18, and 19 to 21 factors. The chart compares respondents feeling 'Less strongly' and 'More strongly' associated with each number of factors.]
Positive factors

Factors that contribute to feeling **more strongly** part of an academic community

- Positive experiences in classes (i.e. lectures/tutorials/practicals/labs)
- Interest in study area
- Approachable academic staff
- Interaction with peers inside classes
- Interaction with peers outside classes
- Satisfaction with current degree choice
- Interaction with teaching staff inside classes
- Strong motivation towards completing studies
- Satisfaction with choice of university
- Clear connections between degree and future career
- Personal academic achievements
- Approachable professional support staff (e.g. administrative staff, advisors)
- Encouragement/support from family/friends
- Interaction with teaching staff outside classes
- Opportunity to contribute (e.g. degree representative, involvement in degree/course...
- Involvement in extra-curricular activities (e.g sporting clubs, volunteering)
- Involvement in discipline based clubs/societies
- Small group discovery experiences (SGoDEs)
- Involvement in mentoring program (either peer or academic staff)
- Don't know

Count
Most important positive factor (rank #1)
Most important (rank #1) positive factors for low SES (11% of respondents)
Negative factors

Factors that contribute to feeling less strongly part of an academic community

- External/personal issues (e.g., health and well-being, family, paid work)
- Negative experiences in classes (e.g., lectures/tutorials/practicals/labs)
- Struggling with academic study
- Lack of connection between degree and future career
- Unapproachable academic staff
- Lack of motivation to complete studies
- Lack of interaction with peers outside classes
- Lack of interaction with peers inside classes
- Lack of involvement in extra-curricular activities (e.g., sporting clubs, volunteering)
- Lack of involvement in discipline based clubs/societies
- Lack of interaction with teaching staff inside classes
- Unapproachable professional support staff (e.g., administrative staff, advisors)
- Small group discovery experiences (SGDEs)
- Lack of interaction with teaching staff outside classes
- Lack of interest in study area
- Lack of opportunities to contribute (e.g., degree representative, involvement in...)
- Lack of satisfaction with current degree choice
- Lack of involvement in mentoring program (either peer or academic staff)
- Lack of encouragement/support from family/friends
- Lack of satisfaction with choice of university
- Don’t know

Count
Most important (rank #1) negative factor

Proportion of students who ranked factor as most important in feeling less strongly part of an academic community in their studies

- Internal/personal issues (e.g., health and well-being, family, paid work)
- Negative experiences in classes (e.g., lectures/tutorials/practicals/field)
- Lack of connection between degree and future career
- Struggling with academic workload
- Lack of motivation to complete studies

Number of students

Proportion of students who ranked factor as most important in feeling less strongly part of an academic community in their studies

- Internal/personal issues (e.g., health and well-being, family, paid work)
- Negative experiences in classes (e.g., lectures/tutorials/practicals/field)
- Lack of connection between degree and future career
- Struggling with academic workload
- Lack of motivation to complete studies

Number of students

University of Adelaide
Most important (rank #1) negative factors for low SES students (11% of respondents)
Conceptions of community (open responses)

• Locating community
  – Discipline, degree program and course
  – Campus
  – University

• Participating and (co)creating
  – Academic and social relationships and interactions
  – Research and scholarly activity
  – Academic success
interactive L&T and contact (peers & staff)
research engagement
co-curricular activity
informal support networks and services

Facilitators of belonging (open responses)
Barriers to belonging (open responses)

• Low self-confidence and empowerment
• Learning needs and support not valued or addressed
• Perceived individual invisibility in large group
• Perceived low status discipline
• Weak connection with staff (sometimes oppositional)
• Weak cohort interaction and collaboration with peers
• Social differences and divides among cohort groups
• Competitive study culture
• Digital technologies in learning and teaching
• Little time on campus
• Small, separate campus
Thank you

• Questions and comments?

• Your perspectives on and initiatives for retention in the sciences

• What’s the role of academic staff and academic practice in retention?
References and selected sources

- Kift, S. (2009). Articulating a transition pedagogy to scaffold and to enhance the first year student learning experience in Australian higher education. Final Report for ALTC Senior Fellowship Program, OLT.