

Students' early departure intentions and the mitigating role of support

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In many higher education systems around the world increasing retention is vital if institutions are to produce the number of graduates identified through government projections to meet industry needs. Taking Australia as an example, the analysis uses results from a large-scale survey of undergraduate students to review rates and rationales for students giving serious consideration to departing before graduation. Demographic, educational and contextual concomitants of departure intention are explored. From there, the analysis looks at the role played by student support in mitigating departure intentions, showing that effective provision and use of support is strongly correlated with retention. Yet there are major disjunctions between the support used by students and the support they need, disjunctions that evidence-based practice can do much to resolve. In closing, the paper makes research-driven suggestions about how institutions can increase student support and retention.

Supporting student retention

A focus on attrition

Over the last few decades Australia has explicitly sought to expand higher education participation and outcomes so as to get more students into the system and keep them engaged in effective learning through to graduation. Mirroring developments in Europe (European Commission, 2013) and the US (Lumina Foundation, 2013), for several years the Australian government set attainment targets (40 per cent of 25 to 34 year olds having a bachelor degree or above by 2025) that were coupled with explicit policies to diversify the student mix, in particular by balancing the inclusion of people from disadvantaged backgrounds (raising participation to 20 per cent by 2020) (Australian Government, 2009). A recent national review (Kemp & Norton, 2014) affirmed the warrant and implications of this expansion agenda; Australia's most recent Budget (Australian Government, 2014a) foreshad-

owed a suite of economic reforms intended to cement growth even further.

With such expansion ambitions and a broadening student cohort comes increasing focus on student retention and the reduction of attrition. Student retention is vital to any increase in the quality, size or productivity of higher education. While various arguments can be mounted in favour of attrition, or at least to cast it as neutral – as do basic funding arrangements in Australia that fail to encourage retention or penalise dropout – in general attrition can be considered a 'bad thing' (Tinto, 1993). A range of adverse consequences flows for individuals, institutions and the broader economy from students leaving higher education before graduation (Norton, 2012; Adams, Banks, Davis & Dickson, 2010).

Compared with other countries, Australian higher education has relatively low attrition, though this should not be considered either success or grounds for complacency. Attrition rates for domestic first-year students in Australian

universities sit at around 13.5 per cent (Australian Government, 2014b). While a portion of these students may return to complete their study at a later time, a sizable number still fail to complete their degree. Internationally, around 30 per cent of undergraduate university students leave higher education and fail to complete their study (OECD, 2013). Though Australian rates compare favourably with other systems, the costs of attrition remain real and serious for all concerned.

Of course, attrition is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that incorporates a range of different movements, change rationales and destinations. Example transitions include cross-institutional mobility, dropout from higher education, course transfer, temporary deferral and academic failure. The current analysis focuses on intentions for early departure, defined as departure from an institution before the completion of a qualification. Analysis of such intentions is important, for it offers insights on the space prior to any actual departure into which institutions might intervene.

A preventative focus on support

Much research has been conducted on why students drop out from higher education. Lobo (2012), for instance, suggests that the main factors research has uncovered include a mismatch of student expectations and experience, course unsuitability, teaching, learning and assessment styles, academic difficulties and student preparedness, personal factors such as student age, sex, employment, finances, health and familial responsibilities, and social and academic support from the university community. Such factors have been well charted in the research and policy literature, including by, among others, Astin (1975), Tinto (1975), Pascarella and Chapman (1983), Dobson, Sharma and Haydon (1996), Yorke (2000a; 2000b), Powdthavee and Vignoles (2007), Harvey and Luckman (2014) and Burgess and Sharma (1999). Clearly, the reasons are many and varied, and ultimately, individual in nature.

Comparatively less research has focused on strategies that could be developed to mitigate attrition. It is known that a lack of support from fellow students and staff, and the amount of contact students have with academic staff, influence students' decisions to withdraw from study (Yorke, 2000; Yorke & Longden, 2008). Research also shows that personal adjustment and social integration seem to be as important to retention as academic integration (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994). Recent research suggests that an institution's expenditure on student services is significantly related to retention and attrition, and that institutions placing a higher priority on provision of stu-

dent support services have lower levels of attrition (Chen, 2011). In Australia, recent analyses have revealed that student support would appear to be one of the more important correlates of early departure, and hence is likely to play an important role in its prevention (see, for example, Coates, 2008; Coates & Radloff, 2010; James, Krause & Jennings, 2010; Coates & Ransom, 2011).

This paper contributes to our understanding of this complex field by focusing on the mitigating role of student support. Of course, terms such as 'attrition', 'student support' and 'student services' are broad concepts that mean different things in different contexts. The definition of services and support used in this paper is thus broad and focuses on individuals' perceptions of formal and informal support provided by academic and support services staff, as well as by fellow students. Many interactions and activities support student learning, thereby enhancing students' engagement and motivation to study. Student support can, therefore, be the difference between an average experience and an excellent one, between dropping out or staying in.

Specifically, this paper uses results from a large multi-institution survey to explore links between perceptions of support and current students' departure intentions. Groups of students who may be at greater risk of dropping out are identified. The impact of their perceptions of support on their intentions to depart is investigated. The survey results reveal a strong link between students' perception of support and their departure intentions, with students reporting that high levels of support provided by their institution make it less likely that they will have seriously considered leaving before finishing their study.

Research approach

The Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE)

This paper uses data from the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) to analyse students' perceptions of institutional support and whether they have seriously considered leaving their institution before completing their studies. First deployed in 2007, the AUSSE was administered in 2010 to students in 55 Australian and New Zealand tertiary education institutions, making it the largest survey of its kind conducted (until recently) in these countries (Coates & Radloff, 2010).

The AUSSE is derived from the US National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2013), a collection that has been replicated in a dozen or so countries, including Canada, China, Ireland, Japan, New Zealand and South

Table 1: Items included in analyses

Scale	Question text	Item text	Response scale
Supportive Learning Environment	Which of these boxes best represent the quality of your relationships with people at your institution?	Relationships with other students / Relationships with teaching staff / Relationships with administrative personnel and services	1 Poor / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5 / 6 / 7 Excellent
	To what extent does your institution emphasise each of the following?	Providing support to succeed academically / Helping cope with non-academic responsibilities / Providing support to socialise	1 Very little / 2 Some / 3 Quite a bit / 4 Very much
Departure Intentions	In this academic year have you seriously considered leaving your current institution?	Not considered change (reverse coded) / Graduating (reverse coded) / Academic exchange / Academic support / Administrative support / Boredom/lack of interest / Career prospects / Change of direction / Commuting difficulties / Difficulty paying fees / Difficulty with workload / Family responsibilities / Financial difficulties / Gap year/deferral / Government assistance / Health or stress / Institution reputation / Moving residence / Need a break / Need to do paid work / Other opportunities / Paid work responsibilities / Personal reasons / Quality concerns / Received other offer / Social reasons / Standards too high / Study/life balance / Travel or tourism / Other: Please specify	0 Not selected / 1 Selected
	What are your plans for next year?	Continue with current study (reverse coded) / Move to vocational education and training / Leave university before finishing qualification	

Africa (Coates & McCormick, 2014). The AUSSE's questionnaire measures around 100 different aspects of student engagement; it also includes several context and demographic questions. Many of these questions group together to form a number of different scales related to student engagement and outcomes. The AUSSE has been well validated as a tool to measure student engagement and education quality (Coates, 2010). This paper focuses on the AUSSE's Supportive Learning Environment and Departure Intentions scales. The items that make up each of these scales and form the basis for analysis are detailed in Table 1.

Production of the evidence

Students studying at higher education institutions in Australia are the population of interest in this paper. In their first or later year of undergraduate study, 125,013 students were invited to participate in the AUSSE between late July and early September 2010. These students were sampled from 226,283 students enrolled in one of 34 Australian higher education institutions who opted to participate in the survey. Institutions could choose to run a census of all students in the target population or draw a sample of students to survey. A census was conducted at 14 of the 34 participant institutions.

Students sampled to participate in the 2010 AUSSE were emailed a unique, individualised internet link by their

institution. They were to complete one of three rotated item versions of the online questionnaire. A further two email reminders were sent to students. A subset of 39,400 students at 20 Australian institutions was also sent a paper survey form. Of the 26,582 respondents, 3395 students (13 per cent) responded using the paper survey and the remaining 23,187 (87 per cent) responded online, giving an overall response rate of 21 per cent.

Paper questionnaires were scanned after the close of fieldwork, data were cleaned and coded, and a data file was built and verified. To compensate for potential bias in responses, sampling weights were calculated and applied to the data. As in all large-scale survey research, such sampling weights help to ensure that the response yield matches the population in terms of key characteristics, thereby enhancing the representative of results. These sampling weights took account of institution, students' year of study, students' mode of study (internal or mixed and external) and student sex. All results presented in this paper have been weighted.

As noted, the questionnaire was completed by current undergraduate students, not by students who had already withdrawn from their studies. This means that respondents who indicate that they have seriously considered leaving or plan to leave their institution before completing their qualification may not actually drop out of study. Because of this, the results provide an indication

of whether students are at risk of dropping out and their reasons for having departure intentions. As the survey was conducted at the start of the second semester, it is important to note that students might have already withdrawn from study in first semester.

What students say – findings and insights

The incidence of departure intentions

The following analysis focuses on the rates and reasons for students' departure intentions and explores the potential role of student support in preventing early departure. The results further emphasise the need for higher education institutions to focus on providing tailored group and, if possible, individual support. Note that given the large number of responses all results that are noted in this paper as significant are statistically significant to a level of $p < 0.05$ unless otherwise stated.

Overall, 26 per cent of first year students and 32 per cent of later year students indicated that they had seriously considered leaving their current institution prior to completing their studies. Levels of departure intention ranged from lows of 21 and 25 per cent of students in around one-quarter of participating institutions to a higher level of between 34 and 52 per cent in around one-quarter of institutions.

In terms of explanatory power, demographic and context factors explained a relatively small amount of variation in early departure intentions for reasons that are clarified in the analysis of causal factors below. Focusing on first year students, the institution, narrow field of study and average overall grade are the strongest correlates, respectively explaining around 2.1 per cent, 1.4 per cent and 1.0 per cent of the variance in departure intentions. For later year students, the strongest correlates are narrow field of study (5.8 per cent), institution (2.9 per cent), working for pay off campus (1.1 per cent) and average grade (1.0 per cent). Interestingly, there is little covariation between rates for first year and later year students.

While demographic characteristics explained relatively little overall variation in departure intention, there was certainly variation across subgroups and statistically significant differences were evident between different subgroups of students. Departure intentions were higher among students studying externally, or by distance or via mixed mode (35 per cent of students had seriously considered leaving) rather than fully on campus (30 per cent), and higher among part-time students (33 per cent) than full-time students (30 per cent). Mature-aged students also

had significantly higher levels of departure intention, with 34 per cent of students aged 25 or older seriously considering leaving. Students with a self-reported disability had much higher rates of departure intention than other students, with 44 per cent indicating that they had seriously considered leaving or planned to leave before finishing study compared with only 30 per cent of students who did not report a disability. These large-scale results affirm the outcomes of research in Australian and international contexts (see sources cited above).

Very few differences appeared for students in different socioeconomic groups, although students from provincial areas had slightly higher levels of departure intention than students from remote and metropolitan areas. Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) students reported significantly higher levels of departure intentions than non-Indigenous students, with 40 per cent indicating that they had seriously considered leaving or planned to leave before completing their undergraduate studies. Not surprisingly, students with high demands on their time through caring responsibilities and paid work were more likely to have seriously considered leaving. Students with a self-reported overall average grade of less than 60 per cent were much more likely to have departure intentions (39 per cent) than students with an average grade of 60 per cent or higher (29 per cent).

Attitudes do not translate directly into behaviour. There is a difference between seriously considering or planning to discontinue study and actually doing so, but these rates still highlight the high number of students who could be considered at risk of leaving. The diversity in rates among different student groups also suggests that there are specific groups of students who are at greater risk of withdrawing from study.

Rates and reasons for departure intention

Students who indicated that they had seriously considered departing early were asked to indicate reasons. Students were presented with a large array of possible reasons (synthesised from literature reviews and open-ended responses given in prior AUSSE administrations) and could select as many of these options as were applicable, as well as being given the option of providing an open-ended response to explain their departure intentions. Open-ended responses given were coded into these categories of reasons or into the category 'Other'. The capacity for each student to select multiple reasons and the coding of open-ended comments to 'Other' accounts for the large portion of responses in this category and, indeed, affirms the need for sustained empirical work in this area.

Table 2: Reasons given for considering leaving before completion, by student year

<i>Reasons</i>	<i>First year (%)</i>	<i>Later year (%)</i>	<i>All students (%)</i>
Boredom	23	21	22
Study-life balance	18	17	18
Personal reasons	18	16	17
Health or stress	16	19	17
Difficulty with workload	17	16	17
Needing a break	14	17	16
Change of direction	19	11	15
Needing paid work	15	15	15
Financial difficulties	13	13	13
Quality concerns	9	17	13
Academic exchange	14	11	12
Career prospects	12	11	12
Academic support	7	15	11
Family responsibilities	10	12	11
Commuting difficulties	12	7	9
Social reasons	11	7	9
Institution reputation	7	9	8
Gap year or deferral	10	5	8
Paid work responsibilities	5	9	7
Travel	7	6	7
Other opportunities	7	6	6
Administrative support	3	8	6
High standards	5	5	5
Difficulty paying fees	5	3	4
Moving residence	5	4	4
Graduating	1	5	3
Receiving other offer	3	3	3
Government assistance	3	3	3
Other reasons (or elaboration)	27	26	26

Three-quarters of students with departure intentions gave up to four reasons for seriously considering leaving their study, indicating that departure is a complex rather than simple phenomenon. As Table 2 shows, the most cited reason (leaving aside ‘Other’ reasons) was ‘boredom/lack of interest’; 22 per cent of students cited this as a reason they had seriously considered leaving their current institution. Reasons given by more than 10 per cent of students included issues with their study-life balance, per-

sonal reasons, health or stress, difficulty with workload, needing a break, having a change of direction, needing paid work, financial difficulties, quality concerns, going on an academic exchange, concerns about career prospects, academic support and family responsibilities.

Table 3 reports departure reasons by field of education. The above list of around 30 discrete factors have been grouped by five composite measures: quality factors, psychosocial factors, financial factors, practical factors and academic factors. A score for each of these composite measures (or factors) has been produced by taking the simple average of the percentage score for each of the constituent factors. The average score for each field has then been computed. Hence, a higher score corresponds to this reason for departure being selected by more students. The fields of study were sorted in terms of the average total across all composites. Of all fields of education, physics and astronomy had the highest aggregate score for departure, computer science the lowest. For each field, looking across the factors helped highlight patterns that underpinned student departure. Replicating this kind of analysis within institutions would provide enormous insight into the factors linked to student departure.

Focusing on first year students, Table 4 reveals the variation that exists between different groups. Students studying externally or at a distance, and students studying part time, have very different experiences and often different demands on their time than those of full-time students studying on campus. External students’ top reason for seriously considering leaving is due to difficulties balancing study and offcampus life (22 per cent), difficulty with the workload (20 per cent), health or stress (18 per cent) and needing paid work (17 per cent). Other frequently cited reasons include family responsibilities, paid work responsibilities and academic support. While boredom was the most commonly cited reason overall, this was only the eleventh most common among external students.

Part-time students are also far less likely to cite boredom (15 per cent) than are full-time students (23 per cent). The most frequently given reasons by part-time students include issues with balancing study and offcampus life (22 per cent), health or stress (23 per cent), difficulty managing the workload (19 per cent), needing paid work (17 per cent), family responsibilities (18 per cent) and financial difficulties (16 per cent). Boredom also was mentioned far less by students from non-metropolitan areas and from low or middle socioeconomic status backgrounds. Among students with a self-reported disability, the most commonly given reason for seriously considering leaving was health or stress (37 per cent).

Table 3: First-year student departure reasons by field of education

Field of education	Quality factors	Psycho-social factors	Financial factors	Practical factors	Academic factors
Physics & astronomy	35	68	9	17	22
Geomatic engineering	50	13	0	0	20
Biological sciences	8	21	17	16	18
Optical science	0	26	0	13	34
Earth sciences	5	19	19	15	10
Political science & policy studies	8	15	14	15	10
Public health	0	21	19	10	12
Architecture & building	10	15	8	11	14
Mechanical & industrial eng.	20	20	0	5	14
Law	13	14	8	10	12
Engineering & related technologies	10	14	10	9	12
Nursing	9	17	11	6	10
Health	7	16	10	8	12
Business & management	10	16	11	8	8
Medical studies	2	19	9	8	13
Mathematical sciences	12	9	5	10	16
Natural & physical sciences	6	13	8	10	14
Creative arts	7	13	7	10	14
Society & culture	6	14	9	9	11
Teacher education	5	15	10	8	11
Behavioural science	4	16	9	9	11
Studies in human society	1	13	12	10	11
Management & commerce	8	14	9	8	9
Philosophy & religious studies	6	7	6	8	18
Agriculture & env. studies	0	14	12	9	9
Pharmacy	4	14	5	10	10
Sales & marketing	4	14	6	7	13
Information technology	3	12	7	9	12
Language & literature	3	11	10	7	10
Human welfare studies & services	3	11	11	6	9
Accounting	4	12	9	6	8
Economics & econometrics	5	9	6	12	6
Chemical sciences	0	2	9	10	16
Dental studies	0	12	7	3	15
Veterinary studies	4	7	2	7	15
Civil engineering	0	8	6	13	5
Electrical & electronic engineering	12	1	9	6	2
Computer science	4	5	2	5	14

Departure intentions are very high among Indigenous students, whose reasons for considering leaving are quite different from non-Indigenous peers. The top reasons given for having departure intentions are shown in Table 4. Further analysis of the engagement of Indigenous students is given by Asmar, Page and Radloff (in press).

Students with caring responsibilities were much more likely to indicate that family responsibilities were a reason for considering departure (25 per cent) than students caring for dependents for five hours or less (5 per cent). Similarly, students working more than 20 hours per week are much more likely to cite paid work responsibilities (22 per cent) as a reason for considering withdrawing than are students working fewer than 20 hours per week (4 per cent). A large proportion of students with low grades indicate that boredom is a reason for seriously considering leaving (27 per cent). Other reasons given by students with low grades include difficulty with workload (26 per cent), personal reasons (25 per cent), health or stress (25 per cent) and issues balancing study and life (23 per cent).

The role of support

To explore the relationship between students' perceptions of support and departure intentions more explicitly students were divided into two groups by using a median split for Supportive Learning Environment scale scores. Among students with scores for Supportive Learning Environment less than the median, 39 per cent reported seriously considering departing before completing their study, compared with only 21 per cent of those students who had higher than the median level of support.

Table 4: First-year student departure reasons for selected subgroups

Departure reasons	Mode of study		Home location			Socioeconomic status			Family background		Indigenous	
	Part time or external	Full time and on campus	Metro-politan	Provin-cial	Remote	Low	Middle	High	Not 1st in family	1st in family	No	Yes
Government assistance	2	3	2	3	7	2	2	2	2	3	2	6
Receiving other offer	3	3	3	1	2	1	3	3	3	3	3	5
Administrative support	4	3	3	4	3	3	3	3	3	4	3	5
High standards	6	4	4	5	11	5	5	3	3	6	5	5
Moving residence	6	5	4	7	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	9
Paid work responsibilities	14	3	4	9	16	7	6	3	4	8	5	21
Difficulty paying fees	7	5	4	8	13	6	5	4	4	6	5	9
Other opportunities	6	7	7	6	7	6	6	8	7	5	7	7
Institution reputation	4	8	8	4	0	9	6	7	7	8	7	4
Travel	6	8	8	7	10	7	7	9	7	8	7	10
Academic support	8	8	7	8	4	7	7	7	6	9	8	8
Quality concerns	9	9	9	8	1	9	9	9	9	11	9	4
Family responsibilities	17	8	8	15	30	16	10	5	7	13	9	26
Gap year or deferral	7	11	10	10	4	11	8	13	11	9	10	13
Social reasons	9	12	10	11	2	9	11	11	11	11	11	7
Commuting difficulties	6	13	13	8	7	12	12	12	12	12	12	17
Career prospects	8	13	13	11	0	13	13	12	13	12	13	8
Financial difficulties	16	13	10	21	22	16	13	11	10	17	13	17
Needing a break	10	15	13	14	33	17	14	12	15	13	14	15
Academic exchange	10	15	14	11	0	11	12	17	15	12	15	9
Needing paid work	18	15	14	20	15	17	16	12	13	19	15	27
Health or stress	17	15	14	20	16	17	17	13	14	18	15	26
Difficulty with workload	20	16	15	21	40	20	18	13	13	22	16	26
Personal reasons	15	19	16	22	29	23	17	17	18	18	18	26
Study-life balance	23	18	16	22	22	23	18	14	16	22	18	32
Change of direction	14	20	20	20	9	20	18	21	23	16	20	12
Boredom	16	25	23	20	20	19	23	23	24	21	23	20

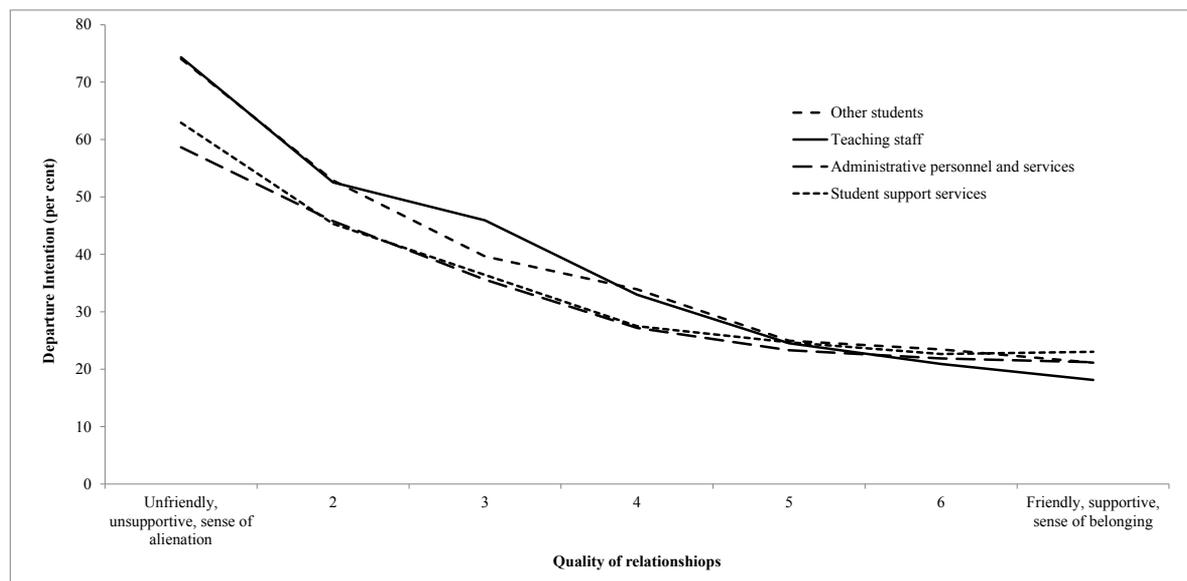


Figure 1: Departure intentions by the supportiveness of relationships

Correlations between student's scores on the Supportive Learning Environment scale and their Departure Intentions score also suggest a moderate and statistically significant relationship between these two phenomena ($r = -0.28$, $n = 163,315$, $p < 0.01$). In addition, students' perceptions of support are linked closely with overall satisfaction with the educational experience.

Figure 1 emphasises the importance of relationships, showing the percentage of students signalling departure intentions in terms of the quality of relationships with members of the institutional community. The same broad trends were notable for all four types of relationships. Students who rated the quality of their relationships with other students, teaching staff, administrative staff and student support services as poor were much more likely to signal serious early departure intentions than students who rated their relationships highly. The impact of poor relationships with other students and teaching staff is particularly notable.

Students' perception of the support that their institution provides them is closely linked with departure intentions. Close to two-thirds of students who feel that their institution provides little support for them to succeed academically have intentions to withdraw. Students who feel little support from their institution to cope with non-academic responsibilities also report higher departure intentions (39 per cent), as do students with little support to socialise (42 per cent). Students who report that they receive very much support to succeed academically, to cope with non-academic responsibilities or to socialise have much lower levels of departure intention.

Challenges for enhancement

Summary observations

To recap, attrition is a major issue and a challenge to individuals, institutions and national policy. Results from a large-scale cross-institutional survey of undergraduate students showed that a significant number of students have seriously considered discontinuing bachelor degree study before graduation. This is concerning, not least given expansionary policies seeking to boost graduate numbers. This paper has also showed that intentions to depart vary among different groups of students. Departure intentions were higher among students with a disability, students with lower grades, Indigenous Australians, mature-aged students and students studying part time or at a distance. With reference to results from a large-scale survey, this highlights certain groups of students who, due to contexts or demographics, are at a greater risk of dropping out than others.

This paper has also explored the reasons given by students for seriously considering leaving. Students seem influenced to withdraw from study for numerous reasons, many of which are psychosocial and not related clearly to tangible practical or financial reasons. This makes solving the attrition puzzle much more difficult, for it appears that a large part of the solution resides in providing more nuanced and directed forms of support. The most commonly cited reason was boredom or lack of interest, but reasons given again varied among different groups of students. Difficulty balancing study and life was the most common reason given by students studying externally

or part time and by Indigenous students. Students from remote areas were most likely to cite difficulties with the workload.

In addition, this paper has explored the relationship between student perceptions of institutional support and their departure intentions. The results show a very clear relationship between students' perceptions of support and their intentions to depart. Student ratings of their relationships with fellow students, teachers, administrative staff and support services are all linked with student intentions to depart, as are student perceptions of the level of support provided by their institution. This is a clear indication that support and departure intentions are interrelated, and that students who perceive a lack of support are much more likely to have also seriously considered leaving.

Read together, these findings suggest that support is very likely an important factor in mitigating attrition. The different rates of departure intention and different reasons for seriously considering leaving suggest that addressing attrition will require nuanced and often individually directed forms of support. A one size fits all solution is unlikely to be effective.

In reporting this empirical evidence regarding the importance of support to student success, it is essential to note caveats and directions for further research. The definition of support used in this paper is expansive as the questionnaire items are necessarily broad. The analyses focus on self-reported perceptions of support. These perceptions are reported at a high level of analysis and without reference to particular or actual support practices. It is hoped that these scholarly findings impel further institutional research into specific support interventions and the role that these might play in retaining students.

Prospects for improvement

What can be done to boost support, stem attrition and improve learner and graduate outcomes? The above discussion carries diverse insights for improving practice. An obvious way to improve student support is to increase resourcing in this area, particularly in line with the critical nature of retention and national objectives for expanding participation. If institutions are mandated to increase enrolment to students who may be unprepared for tertiary study, it is common sense to increase funding to student support initiatives.

Services can be vulnerable because they are often not well understood. The results demonstrated in this paper affirm the core value of support services to one of the academy's core missions – graduating people – but the

value proposition of support services is often not clear, or well promoted. The range of support offered is also not always obvious. Most learning skills services, for example, offer programs that further students' academic skills, but many academics still perceive learning skills only as a remedial service or are unaware that they can request a workshop tailored to their subject. Clearly, support services need to consider how to more effectively promote themselves. Similarly, academics need to take greater responsibility for understanding and using these services.

The narrow definition of teaching activities that many institutions employ – something that happens only by academics in a classroom – can also blur the integral role of support services and activities. Counselling services, for example, offer workshops for managing study-related stress, arguably an important service for students struggling to keep on top of their studies. Yet this would not be considered as a teaching and learning activity. For these perceptions to change, the connection between support and retention needs to be better understood and taken more seriously. Data such as those presented in this paper are also influential, which suggests that more research into the benefits of student support should be a priority.

Conclusion

Integration is a key concept here. Read from a students' perspective the results show that academic and student services need to work together to support students, not in isolation. This can be difficult in the hierarchical university culture, where boundary issues and competing responsibilities do not necessarily facilitate collaboration, and where research can take precedence over teaching. Increasing workloads have the potential to prevent even the most well-intentioned academics from prioritising student support.

Developing a more collaborative and holistic approach to student support requires leadership at all levels of the institution, from senior executives to course coordinators. Where there is vision and leadership, increased cooperation follows. Examples of effective faculty-service relationships are the inclusion of support service personnel on faculty teaching and learning committees, faculty-service collaborations in the development of subjects, and co-teaching and referral practices between services and faculties.

Finally, it is a basic but necessary point to make that effective student support is about the student, so we need to focus support in terms of students' situations and their needs. This calls for greater flexibility and innovation.

Support comes in many guises, and we need to consider alternative methods to deliver it so that students located at remote campuses, part-time students studying in evening courses or students with tight timetables can access relevant and timely support – even if it is out of normal business hours. Getting support should not be difficult. Equally important, we need to educate students about the value of enrichment activities: to seek out assistance, take advantage of the range of services provided and get involved in campus life.

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