

Improving Student Retention: A University of Western Sydney Case Study

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Abstract

Retention at university matters. It matters morally, as we know the life chances of people who complete a degree are dramatically improved. It matters financially, as students who leave a university before graduation take their fees with them. And it matters nationally, as the higher the education level of the population, the greater the nation's levels of productivity and innovation.

This article provides a consolidated picture of patterns and trends in student retention in Australian universities. Common reasons for student withdrawal and strategies to improve student retention are also explored using both empirical research and a review of the literature. Further, the article presents approaches effectively used by the University of Western Sydney to improve student retention. These approaches include: identifying and prioritising the main reasons for student withdrawal and corresponding retention solutions; using a range of tactics to ensure that these solutions are consistently implemented; and finally, monitoring the improvement actions for two years to measure their efficiency based on student feedback, and to identify areas warranting further improvement attention. The strategies adopted and the way they were implemented in 2004–2006 have resulted in a 4.2% improvement in overall retention and a 6.4% improvement in overall satisfaction on the national Course Experience Questionnaire.

Keywords: Higher Education, Student Retention, Tracking, Change Implementation

Among the many challenges currently facing Australian universities — such as decreased funding, growing competition, increased student diversity, demands from industry and community and higher education policy change — student retention is a major issue. Stable enrolment depends as much on retaining students as it does on recruiting them. There has been a dramatic fall in the proportion of public funding allocated to Australian universities over the past decade (Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, 2005; Soutar & Turner, 2002). In combination with meeting the challenges of filling allocated student places this has increased the importance of students as a source of income, and thus, furthered the competition between universities to recruit and retain students. Withdrawals from higher education incur significant institutional and personal costs and require careful scrutiny. Acknowledging this, as part of the review of higher education (Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training [DEST], 2003), the federal government introduced a number of initiatives including the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund (LTPF). One of the performance indicators that has been employed to assess universities' performance in the LTPF is student retention.

Both research and anecdotal evidence suggest that the life chances of an individual dramatically improve after completing a university degree. Such improvement includes enhanced employment and career opportunities, earnings, satisfaction of one's needs and contribution to the social and economic development of one's community and nation. Recent research by Krause, Hartley, James and McInnis (2005) and by Long, Ferrier and Heagney (2006) has found that the reasons people enrol in universities include study in a field that is of interest, an expected increase in employability, preparation for the chosen career and developing particular talents and creative abilities. Graduate Careers Australia (GCA) reports that higher education graduates have a notable labour market advantage and generally earn more than those possessing only a high school certificate, and that master's degree holders earn more than bachelor's degree holders (GCA, 2006). A recent study by Universities UK (Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2007) reports that, over a working life, an individual with an undergraduate qualification can expect to earn 20–25% more than an equivalent person with one or two A levels. This equates to a gross additional lifetime earnings for a typical degree of more than £160,000 (AU \$375,000) — when income and employment effects are combined. Additional lifetime earnings for a postgraduate degree are approximately £75,000. There are, of course, significant differences depending on the degree — from an additional £340,000 for medicine and dentistry to £34,000 for arts.

In Australia, some universities have enjoyed relatively high retention rates. A highly selective entry scheme, a well-developed and matured student support system and learning infrastructure may be the factors influencing high-level retention in these institutions. However, this article focuses on what universities like the University of Western Sydney (UWS) can do to optimise retention of students traditionally underrepresented in higher education.

In recent years, government policies aimed at increasing participation in higher education by various DEST-defined equity groups have highlighted the issues of targeted support during transition into university and during the first year of study. Some universities have accentuated their missions as non-elite, community-focused institutions committed to opening up educational and life opportunities for those traditionally underrepresented in higher education. UWS, for example, has domestic students from more than 170 countries, 52% of whom are the first in their family to attend university. Greater Western Sydney has more Indigenous residents than either Victoria or South Australia. Thus taking an empirical and focused approach to retention has great value for students like these. UWS faces an additional challenge: with 35,000 students it is one of the largest in the sector and has the most evenly dispersed student load across its six campuses of all Australian universities.

Institutional variables linked to retention

To develop an overall picture of the relative contribution of various institutional measures that predict retention 2004–2005 data from 38 Australian universities available on the DEST website (DEST, 2006) and the Australian Education Network (AEN) website (AEN, 2006) was examined. The variables investigated were:

- university entry score (mean and median)
- size (enrolments)
- attendance mode (% of full-time students)
- admission mode (% of school leavers)
- student/staff ratio

- student load on the largest campus as a measure of university multicampus operation (% of total load)
- age of institution (since accreditation) in years
- student load in broad field of education (FOE) (% of total student load, 10 variables)
- total revenue per equivalent full-time student load (EFTSL)
- self-generated income (% of total income)
- explicit overall satisfaction measure on the course experience questionnaire (CEQ) (% scoring 4 or 5)
- explicit good teaching measure on the CEQ (% scoring 4 or 5)
- explicit student support measure on the CEQ (% scoring 4 or 5).

Of the 13 variables examined, nine showed statistically significant and positive correlations with university retention rate ($r(38) > .36, p < .05$). These were: university entry score (mean and median), size of university, age, admission and attendance mode, revenue per EFTSL, the proportion of self-generated income and, interestingly, the proportion of students in the Architecture and Building FOE. A significant negative correlation was found between student/staff ratio and retention ($r(38) = -.39, p = .015$).

There was also high intercorrelation between many examined variables, which made determining the precise link between each of them and retention difficult. The stepwise regression procedure was used to remove ‘weak’ candidate predictors from the model and identify ‘stronger’ predictor variables among those highly correlated with retention. The procedure also tested whether retention could be influenced by any combination of the selected variables. As a result, the combination of median entry score, the proportion of full-time students and the size of university were — in that order — found to contribute significantly to the prediction of retention rate (aggregate $R^2 = .64, p < .001$).

In order to sustain their equity mission, some universities may have to keep their entry score relatively low (e.g., UWS average entry score was ranked 28th of 38 universities in 2005), as well as to take in relatively lower proportions of full-time students. On this measure UWS is ranked 17th of the 38 universities studied. Because of this the identification and consistent implementation of empirically verified retention strategies is of critical importance.

General and university-specific reasons for student withdrawal

In terms of the academic reasons for students leaving before completing their program, many studies have shown a positive relationship between student withdrawal and poor academic preparation or performance (e.g., Ashby, 2004; Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005; Rickinson & Rutherford, 1996). Insufficient information about the course or institution before students enrol has been highlighted more recently as another major reason for withdrawal (Yorke & Longden, 2007). Some studies discuss more generic factors associated with student withdrawal, such as incompatibility between the students and their course and a lack of commitment to the course (Rickinson & Rutherford, 1996; Williford & Schaller, 2005).

In 2004, a national research project investigating attrition from first-year university undergraduate degree courses involving 4,390 domestic students was carried out in 34 Australian universities (Long, Ferrier, & Heagney, 2006). The rationale for limiting the retention study to first-year students was that the most significant loss of students, as a result of withdrawal, was reported to occur during the first year of their program (Tinto, 1999). If

students can be retained beyond the first year, their probability for success increases in each subsequent year (Williford & Schaller, 2005). Based on the responses of 1,917 students who did not re-enrol at the same university in the first semester of 2005, the study identified the 10 most important reasons for withdrawal out of the 64 surveyed. The top ten influences identified as playing a large role in the respondents' decision to discontinue their program are listed in rank order in Table 1.

Table 1
Reasons for Student Withdrawal (2005 National Data)

Reasons for student withdrawal in rank order	% large influence	Rank
I needed a break from study	24.3	1
Difficult to balance study and work commitments	23.7	2
I changed my career goals	21.6	3
I found something I'd like to do better	19.3	4
I found a better path to my career goals	15.5	5
The course or program wasn't what I expected	15.1	6
I felt stressed and anxious about my study	14.0	7
Course would not help me achieve my career goals	13.3	8
I didn't like the way the course was taught	12.9	9
The subjects weren't as interesting as I expected	12.6	10

These findings show that the top reasons for student withdrawal arise from both personal and university-related sources, with personal motivators appearing to be the most commonly reported reasons for leaving. The study also demonstrates considerable intercorrelation between many factors. For example, students experiencing a conflict between study and employment are also likely to have financial difficulties. A sub-sort of the UWS results from the above study comprised 142 students who did not re-enrol at the university in the first semester of 2005. Table 2 shows the 10 most common reasons for UWS student withdrawal in rank order as proportions of students who indicated that the cited reasons had a large influence on their decision to leave the university. It also shows the corresponding ranks for the same items in the national data.

Table 2
Reasons for Student Withdrawal (UWS Sub-sort of the 2005 National Data)

Reasons for student withdrawal in rank order	% large influence (UWS)	Rank (UWS)	Rank (national data)
I wanted to study somewhere else	38.0	1	29
I was offered a place in a course elsewhere which I preferred	34.5	2	43
I always intended to move to another university	26.1	3	49
I found something I'd like to do better	23.9	4	4
I couldn't study the subjects I wanted	21.8	5	18
I changed my career goals	21.1	6	3
I found a better path to my career goals	20.4	7	5
The course or program wasn't what I expected	19.0	8	6
I didn't like the way the course was taught	16.9	9	9
Course would not help me achieve my career goals	16.9	10	8

In comparing Tables 1 and 2 a number of conclusions can be drawn. First, while students were more likely to leave because of personal reasons overall, the UWS students put stronger emphasis on a specific set of university-related or course-related motivators for withdrawal. Second, a large proportion of UWS students reported leaving UWS with a view to studying elsewhere. This general finding led the university to undertake targeted research on what actions would increase student retention in its specific and challenging multicampus context and in the particular aspects identified.

Strategies to improve student retention

There is a large body of research and theory exploring the individual, social and organisational factors that impact on student retention. As noted by Tinto and Pusser (2006, p. 4), ‘it is easily one of the most widely studied topics in higher education over the past 30 years’. Some of these factors have a well-developed empirical record supporting them; others need to be explored further. It is not surprising that many factors reported as contributing positively to retention, for example, student academic preparedness, are the exact reverse of those causing student withdrawal.

Over the last decade there has been a substantial focus on the factors pertinent to retention that are internal to universities and are within immediate institutional control and action (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). For example, factors like the social climate established on campus; the academic, social, and financial support provided by the institution; student in-class and out-of-class involvement in campus life; and frequent feedback provided to students and staff about their performance have all received increasing attention in current research (Berger, 2001; Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Braxton & McClendon, 2001; Kuh, 1999; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Tinto & Pusser, 2006; Yorke, 2000).

Many studies have focused particularly on student involvement, or what is frequently termed ‘engagement’, ‘persistence in learning’ or ‘academic and social integration’ as a predictor of retention (Baker & Pomerantz, 2001; Borglum & Kubala, 2000; Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000; Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2003; Kaya, 2004; Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005; Kuh, 2003; Zhao & Kuh, 2004; Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2004). In this regard, the measures reported to affect retention positively include: established first-year programs, such as freshman seminars and orientation programs; provision of sufficient on-campus university-supported housing; peer support programs; peer tutoring or study groups; and the extended availability of academic staff for teacher–student interaction.

Of interest to UWS was the case study by Thomas (2002), which investigated a modern university in England that had both a diversity of student intake similar to UWS (with a large proportion from low-income groups) and good performance on student retention. A key finding from this research was that prizing diversity, difference, flexibility and willingness to change promotes higher levels of student persistence and program completion.

Adopting a more flexible and responsive approach to course design and attention to the overall student experience were endorsed by the analysis of 285,000 comments from 93,000 graduates in 14 Australian universities on the ‘best aspects’ of their university experience, and on those most ‘needing improvement’ (Scott, 2006). This study shows that it is the total experience of a university that shapes students’ judgment of quality, motivates

their engagement in learning and optimises retention. The following factors were found to be of particular relevance to retention:

- the presence of a supportive peer group
- consistently accessible and responsive staff
- clear management of student expectations, including active briefings on ‘how things work around here’
- prompt and effective management of student queries
- ‘just-in-time’ and ‘just-for-me’ transition support, including the use of self-teaching and orientation materials written by students from a similar background who have successfully managed the transition, on how they did it
- use of a coherent, responsive, flexible, relevant and clear course design — a design that uses a variety of interactive, practice-oriented and problem-based learning methods
- efficient, conveniently accessed and responsive administrative, IT, library and student support systems; all working together to support the university’s operation and
- relevant, consistent and integrated assessment with prompt and constructive feedback.

These findings align well with and complement the summary of institutional strategies found to improve retention in Australian universities in another study (Long, Ferrier, & Heagney, 2006). The strategies identified in that study included:

- provision of accurate and detailed information about courses before students enrol
- general and academic support services specifically customised to suit a variety of students and disciplines
- assurance that no students feel isolated or lonely by providing a responsive social environment, active orientation and transition programs, the support of campus-based clubs and societies
- provision of financial support to students in the form of scholarships, emergency funds, containing non-tuition costs such as books, internet access, printing costs, library fines and parking fees and fines
- the results of regular student-based assessments of teaching made known to the staff and explicitly linked to promotion and recognition systems
- regular monitoring of withdrawal and reviewing patterns of attrition.

Although informative, the above studies did not tell the university precisely how each of these retention checkpoints might best be addressed in practical terms in the unique context of UWS. What follows gives the background and outlines how UWS specifically addressed and significantly improved its overall retention by 4.2% in two years and overall satisfaction on the national CEQ by 6.8%. What was done can be adopted and adapted by any university wishing to optimise retention and student engagement.

Costs of student withdrawal

As noted earlier there are not only significant costs to the individual and to the country of student withdrawal — there are also significant financial penalties for the university. For example, if one full fee-paying student is lost at the end of year one of an undergraduate degree, between \$20,000 and \$30,000 in fee income for years two and three are lost. Lose just 10 students and around a quarter of a million dollars is lost — and lost money can mean a loss of jobs. Making this clear to staff can help foster their engagement in

a university retention project, especially when combined with intrinsic motivators such as staff wanting to make a difference to the life chances of their students by ensuring they graduate.

The UWS 2004 Exit Survey

To identify precisely why students were withdrawing, in late 2004 a telephone exit survey run by the UWS Call Centre was carried out with the 1,520 students who enrolled in February 2004 and withdrew before the end of their first year of studies. The questions asked in the survey were based on a review of the higher education retention and exit literature (see above) and input from key UWS staff. In total, 496 students responded to the survey and constituted a response rate of 33%. The response sample was generally representative of the total population surveyed. Respondents were asked to rate the relative importance of a range of factors explaining their withdrawal.

Consistent with other higher education retention studies, the factors attracting the highest importance ratings were a mix of issues that the university could address, and more general life factors that were beyond its influence. The 10 most important reasons for student withdrawal out of the 32 surveyed are presented in rank order (highest first) in Table 3. This table shows the proportions of students who indicated that the particular factor surveyed was very important in their decision to leave. The table shows that at least six of 10 highly important reasons for student withdrawal — factors such as unclear expectations about the course and its assessment, difficulties with administrative matters or timetable issues, were within the immediate ability of the university to influence.

Table 3
Reasons for UWS Student Withdrawal (2004 Exit Survey)

Reasons for student withdrawal in rank order	% very important	Rank
The course wasn't what students had expected	35.2	1
Conflicting employment commitments	24.1	2
Difficulties with enrolments, fee payments, student admission	20.0	3
Expectations about what students had to do in assessment were unclear	16.5	4
The timetable made it difficult to attend classes	16.0	5
Pressure to enrol in a university course in which they weren't really interested	15.3	6
Family pressures	13.1	7
Staff were difficult to access	10.2	8
The teaching and learning methods were un-motivating	8.8	9
Financial difficulties	8.6	10

Respondents were also asked to list other factors important to their retention, which were not covered in the survey. A total of 65% of the respondents provided such comments. Key retention factors identified in this qualitative data included:

- Administration: speed of application, offers, enrolment and advanced standing processes; availability of preferred units at the nearest campus; minimal timetable clashes and tutorial registration downtime; responsiveness of administrative staff; ensuring units advertised are offered; length of queues during enrolment; prompt arrival of HECS notice and distance education materials.

- Teaching staff: responsiveness in handling student enquiries; teaching skills; accessibility and commitment.
- Delivery methods: clear direction and communication; use of active learning methods; use of practice as a site or source for learning.
- Communication and information: quality of information about the course, units of study and electives available; clear and prompt communication between students and staff; information on available facilities and services made clear during enrolment; clear grading rules for assessment, with examples.
- Facilities and infrastructure: comfortable classrooms; regular public transport; minimum travelling between campuses; a range of social activities; variety and quality of food in the cafeteria; IT facilities; easy to navigate and user friendly website, especially for distance students wanting information.

The UWS 2005–2006 Retention Project

In 2005–2006 UWS implemented a university-wide retention project. This project directly and systematically addressed not only the general research findings on what optimises student transition and retention at universities outlined earlier, but a triangulated analysis of UWS-specific data on what students find most helpful. The data used built on the results of the UWS Exit Survey (above) and included key areas identified as being of high importance and lower performance in the university's Student Satisfaction Survey and an analysis of 30,000 'best aspect' and 'needs improvement' comments written on the UWS CEQ in 2002–4 and analysed by CEQuery.¹

The aim of the project was to improve first-year student experience and retention by linking and applying more systematically the many individual strategies that have been found to increase student retention within and beyond UWS. The Retention Project was sponsored by the Pro Vice Chancellor (PVC) (Quality) and coordinated by the Associate PVC (Quality) in conjunction with many UWS administrative leaders and staff members. The triangulated analysis of the above data identified six interrelated areas for improvement action:

- 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 is expected of them, especially regarding assessment
- more active promotion and communication of support services and facilities.

Each of the above components of the retention project was led by the senior staff member who was responsible for its delivery. For example, the Director of Student Support Services was responsible for orientation, student support and provision of convenient contact for students with queries. Each action team was informed of the other teams' activities. The specific measures undertaken included tailored customer service training provided for UWS

¹ For details of the CEQuery qualitative analysis tool see the DEST website at: http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/publications_resources/profiles/access_student_voice.htm Since 2004 the university has included 'best aspect' and 'needs improvement' comment sections in all of its surveys, including its UWS Feedback on Unit surveys. In 2007 this has generated a database of some 100,000 UWS-specific comments for analysis by CEQuery.

Student Centre staff and other administrative staff; development of customer inquiry and service protocols; a refurbishment of campus libraries; a major upgrade of IT equipment and computer labs; online enrolment of students for implementation in 2006; additional online learning material and student services made available through UWS online learning sites and the full implementation in 2005 of an online query management and complaints resolution system. At the same time the university actively promoted peer-mentoring, advising, counselling, early intervention of at-risk students and other initiatives focused on student socialisation and adjustment. Additionally, information on the financial impact of attrition and the potential revenue benefits of increasing retention, along with the outcomes of the related UWS surveys, were communicated to the university community (e.g., Scott, 2005).

Outcomes

Measuring the impact of the Retention Project

In 2005 and 2006 the university conducted a First Year Retention Survey aimed to measure the impact of the retention project. The survey participants were asked to assess various aspects of orientation, academic advice, enrolment, fees management, online information, problem resolution, assessment, timetabling, engagement in learning activities, study assistance, online learning, library access, campus life and student services. They were also asked to provide comments on the ‘best aspects’ of the university’s performance, and on those most ‘needing improvement’.

Random samples of 1,000 first-year undergraduate and postgraduate coursework students were selected each year for a telephone survey. The survey generated a 40.5% response rate in 2005 and 70.7% in 2006. Both response samples were representative of the overall first-year student population. Compared with the 2005 results, those for 2006 showed improvements at the university, college and campus level in most of the areas examined. It was found that a difference of 6% or greater between the proportions of students marking the services ‘ok’, ‘good’ or ‘excellent’ in 2006 versus 2005 was statistically significant at $p < .05$ for the given sample sizes of 405 and 707 respondents.

Table 4

Comparison of the 2005 and 2006 UWS First Year Retention Survey Results

Items	% satisfied in 2005	% satisfied in 2006	% difference
Quality of orientation	(Not asked)	89.7	
Quality of academic advice	84.8	83.0	-1.8
Quick and convenient enrolment	67.5	78.2*	10.7
Speed at which the fee notice was sent	70.1	91.9*	21.8
Accuracy of fee notice	70.1	95.0*	24.9
Handling administrative problems	47.3	61.7*	14.4
Clarity of assessment tasks	88.3	87.3	-1.0
Timetable makes easy attendance at classes	87.5	89.9	2.4
Learning activities engage and keep interest	89.1	89.1	0.0
Staff accessibility	86.4	89.6	3.2
Access to IT resources	79.8	93.9	14.1
Campus life and facilities	73.9	77.8	3.9

Table 4 cont'd.

Items	% satisfied in 2005	% satisfied in 2006	% difference
Experience in using WebCT	91.2	96.2	5.0
Library access and quality	93.7	96.0	2.3
Experience in using other student services	(Not asked)	78.9	

* Significant improvement in 2006 vs. 2005 at $p < .05$

As shown in Table 4, significant improvement in student satisfaction at the university level was evident for:

- quick and convenient enrolment
- speed at which the fee notice was sent
- accuracy of fee notice
- handling of administrative problems and
- access to IT resources.

A 5% improvement was also evident in students' satisfaction with their experience in using WebCT. No other areas examined showed significant changes in terms of student satisfaction in 2005 versus 2006. On a broader set of measures, over the 2004–2006 period UWS improved its overall retention by 4.2% and overall satisfaction on the CEQ rose by 6.4%. Benchmarking indicated that this was the third largest increase on this CEQ measure in the sector over that time. The average change from 2004 to 2006 across the whole sector was 1.5%.

A key explanation for this outcome lies in the careful attention given not only to the 'what' of effective quality improvement and change management (identifying evidence-based and institution-specific areas for enhancement in the university's approach to retention), but also in the careful attention given to the 'how' of making these desired changes actually work in practice. These effective change implementation lessons were identified in an article for *Educause Review* in 2003 (Scott, 2003) and discussed further in a keynote address at the Australian Universities Quality Forum in 2004 (Scott, 2004). They have recently been validated in a national Carrick Institute study of 513 Learning and Teaching Leaders in 20 Australian Universities (Scott, Coates, & Anderson, forthcoming July 2008).

UWS strategies used to engage staff in the Retention Project

Good ideas with no ideas on how to implement them are wasted ideas.
(Fullan, 1982, p. 92)

As stated by Scott (2003, 2004), change in higher education is fundamentally about the staff who are to put each development into practice wanting to engage with the development and then learning how to do something new. Everyone who is to deliver the new practices involved will have to learn a 'gap' in their expertise (and often unlearn old ways of doing things). Therefore, understanding what will motivate staff to engage in a change effort like the UWS Retention Project was critical to achieving the above outcomes. Staff will not engage unless they can personally see that doing so is relevant, desirable, clear, distinctive and, most importantly, achievable. Being involved in shaping an agreed change project, providing advice on what might happen within their area of expertise, and being clear on what is envisaged are also powerful motivators. Right from the outset the staff affected by

each change will be weighing up the benefits of engaging and persevering with it against the costs. This is a process that continues throughout the whole lifecycle of every change effort. Motivation to engage can be both extrinsic (e.g., the prospect of external scrutiny, positive or negative publicity, a financial reward, a financial crisis, threat of job loss, praise from one's boss, negative student feedback, pressure from colleagues) and intrinsic (e.g., seeing that what is proposed is consistent with one's 'moral purpose', having a sense of personal ownership of and commitment to what is planned). Motives to engage in change vary by role and with each individual, and always have both a rational and emotional dimension. All of these factors were attended to explicitly as the retention project got underway.

Various intrinsic and extrinsic motivators were identified and used to engage staff in the retention project. They included leveraging intrinsic motivators — such as the job satisfaction that comes from seeing increased student persistence, receiving positive student feedback, knowing that retaining students to graduation dramatically opens up their life opportunities, and seeing that one's contribution to retaining students is having both a financial and reputational benefit to the university. The extrinsic motivators used included: using the forthcoming audit by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) as an external lever for internal improvement (Scott & Hawke, 2003), making clear that failure to retain has a financial penalty and can lead to job loss, ensuring that staff who contributed to improved retention and satisfaction scores in their area received praise from senior staff, linking such productivity to promotion criteria, using peer networks to reinforce the value of engagement, and noting how addressing key retention factors up-front can significantly reduce the stress and time taken up in dealing with student complaints and, in some cases, litigation. Many of the above motivators and incentives have been embedded into UWS implementation and support processes for its retention project in a range of ways.

For example:

- UWS has moved to rewarding colleges and schools for improvement and excellence through its University Funding Model. One of the key variables used in this model is student retention rates, benchmarked against sector field-of-education data.
- The university's individual performance management systems for academic and support staff are used to allocate awards and other forms of recognition and provide help to staff in revising and implementing retention solutions.
- The 'listen, link and lead' approach identified as being so effective in the 2007 national Carrick study of 500 academic leaders in 20 universities (Scott, Coates, & Anderson, forthcoming) has been effectively adopted. In this practical approach to the implementation of the UWS Retention Project 'listen' involved going out to those who were to implement the retention solution to identify which set of proven strategies they saw as being relevant and feasible; 'link' meant bringing these together into a plan of action which was, therefore, 'owned' by those who were to implement it; and 'lead' meant giving targeted support to these people to learn the 'gaps' in their expertise that need to be addressed to make the change work, along with working with them to monitor and refine pilot versions of the different retention solutions before scale up.
- The use of a 'nested' UWS tracking and improvement system for learning and teaching, which integrates a series of data gathering tools and performance reports into an overall diagnosis of what is and is not working well.² This includes mechanisms for tracking retention and identifying the causes of poor retention. This system is also used to track the implementation of retention improvement projects and refine them in the

² See: <http://www.uws.edu.au/about/adminorg/corpserv/opq/tracking>

light of the feedback received. It attracted a commendation in the 2006 UWS AUQA audit.

- The process was team-based. A carefully selected team tested each proven retention solution under controlled conditions. The specific focus is to try out the solution, monitor and refine it and only then move to scale up. The team is now available as a key resource for staff learning and development amongst later adopters.
- The retention solutions tested at UWS, as well as its performance outcomes, have been benchmarked with like institutions addressing the same retention agenda; in combination with identifying approaches that are working in one part of the university and testing them out for ‘fit’ in another.
- A Heads of Program Network was set up to achieve ‘buy in’ and to provide peer-support for those front-line staff who will, ultimately, be the ones who actually put each improvement project for retention into daily practice. This network is led by the PVC (Learning and Teaching) and addresses a key gap in most university implementation strategies — the failure to engage these people in the process of learning how to make the change work in practice and unlearning old patterns of behaviour. It is, therefore, important to recognise that change implementation does not just happen. It must be led, and deftly. Twenty-five years of research has repeatedly found that the leadership approach that works best is akin to the one adopted by the effective teacher of adults — a process in which the learners (in this case the staff who are to change what they do in ways known to increase retention) have to be assisted to learn the key ‘gaps’ in their expertise that need to be addressed to make the change work. The same active, flexible, ‘just-in-time’, ‘just-for-me’ learning methods that work for our students also work for staff as they learn how to put their retention project into practice.
- The university consistently upgrades its IT resources to enable staff to access current and stored data conveniently, including the data relevant to student retention (e.g., Cognos, Teleform, Online Complaints Handling System). Having access to such data helps staff both to see that they are making a difference and to identify key areas for further work.
- To maintain engagement with the retention initiative the university ensures that it ‘closes the loop’ on student feedback on its six retention priorities. It does this by identifying the high importance and low performance areas in this feedback and then ensuring the resulting enhancement priorities are promptly and wisely addressed via the leadership of the PVC (Learning and Teaching) and the local assistance of the Head of Program, Associate Dean or Director. Students are motivated to continue to give feedback through the use of posters that inform them of the ways in which their feedback is being addressed by listing the actions being taken on it, and also by informing them in their unit outlines of what areas are an improvement priority for the coming semester.
- At a broader level reports on actions being taken on feedback data are discussed at the university’s Education Committee, and the Board of Trustees receives high level benchmarked tracking reports on vital signs, including retention.

Conclusion

In 2004, UWS set out explicitly to identify the reasons for student withdrawal using a detailed review of the retention literature, a range of quantitative and qualitative tracking data and benchmarking with like institutions. It then implemented a targeted, university-wide retention project based on its findings. Its approach to implementation was guided by

empirical evidence on what strategies take a ‘good idea’ in higher education and actually make it happen consistently and effectively in daily practice across a university.

Of the many reasons for student withdrawal identified the ones given priority were those that were: (a) within the university’s ability to affect, and (b) were 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 were subjected to both critical examination and improvement action in 2005. One year later, five of these six areas showed statistically significant improvements in terms of student satisfaction with their quality. One area, ‘clarity of assessment tasks’ did not demonstrate similar improvement and is currently the focus of a university-wide development project that will be reported separately.

Importantly, not only has student satisfaction improved in the retention areas identified for focused action, but also the impact of all this work has also been both positive and significant. UWS retention rates overall increased by 4.2% from 2004 to 2006 and for first-year undergraduate students the increase was 3.9% over that time. It is our view that this has been the result of not only identifying empirically what really counts for retention at UWS but also by applying key lessons on effective change implementation in higher education.

Finally, we remain well aware that the relationship between student satisfaction with these service improvements and retention rates entails a complex interaction of factors, rather than a simple causal link. Therefore, there is a need for more empirical evidence and further research in order to understand how and to what extent the improvement of a specific university service or approach can contribute to student retention. Either way, however, the key lesson for successful university renewal in the current, highly volatile and competitive operating context is to focus explicitly on not only the ‘what’ of effective change (evidence-based priorities for improving retention) but also the ‘how’ of effective change implementation (how to take these good ideas, secure local staff engagement with them and lead them effectively and sustainably into daily operations across the university). The universities that combine the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ in this way in the coming years will be the ones to flourish in Australian higher education.

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