

Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching

**Thinking about leaving?  
Departure intentions of commencing  
university students**

AAIR SIG, Adelaide, June 2016



# Overview

1. Departure intentions & attrition
2. University Experience Survey & data analysed
3. Findings
4. <rant about student expectations & departure intentions>

# The current context

- 1989 – Dawkins, Unified National System, HECS
- Commonwealth supported places
  - 1989 – 420,000
  - 2014 – 793,300
- International students
  - 1989 – 21,000
  - 2014 – 350,000
- For bachelor level courses commenced in 2010
  - 5.8% aged 19 and under discontinued after one year
  - 10.3% aged 20-24 discontinued
  - 17.3% aged 25 and over discontinued

# Traditional views of attrition

- A vast amount of research, largely based on Vincent Tinto's work
  - Students who are less engaged with the academic and social communities are more likely to discontinue their studies
  - (based on Durkheim's Theory of Suicide – causes of suicide related to societal not individual factors)
- Criticisms that thousands of studies have not translated into actionable, early interventions
- Approximately one in ten students don't complete university courses (differs greatly within and between institutions)

# ‘Old school’ attrition concepts

- “...individuals are often forced to make a transition from the relatively secure, knowable confines of small local high school communities (where students reside with their families) to a seemingly impersonal world, in which individuals have to fend for themselves, both in the classroom and the dormitory”. (Tinto, 1982a:9)
- “For the older learner returning to college, the transition between the adult world of home or work and the youthful domain of the campus can be quite traumatic” (1982a:10).

# Attrition & engagement

- Relationship between engagement and persistence not linear (Hu)
- Older students more engaged and satisfied (Krause et al)
- Students who were planning to ‘drop out’ were more engaged (socially and academically) than those who decided to discontinue while studying (Okun et al)
- 63% of B. Health Science students enrolled to gain access to another course (O’Keefe et al)

# Attrition typologies?

- Planned attrition – the student enrolled in the course with the intention of withdrawing to enrol in preferred course at another institution.
- Unplanned attrition – personal or life circumstances resulted in the student discontinuing their studies.
- Informed attrition – the course or institution did not meet the students' needs or expectations and they have chosen to discontinue.
- Forced attrition – the student was excluded from the institution and not permitted to continue their studies.

# UES & data analysed

- All 40 Table A and Table B institutions participated in the 2014 UES
- 330,772 commencing and completing students approached to take part – 30% response rate
- 54,448 responses from first year students included
- Data from the 2015 HEIMS collection was used to identify students who were still enrolled after their first year



# Relevant UEQ items

Item	Response scale
During 2014, have you seriously considered leaving <institution name>?	Yes, I have seriously considered leaving / No, I have not seriously considered leaving
Please indicate your reason for seriously considering leaving your current university study in 2014. Select all that apply.	(Students provided with a predetermined list of reasons and an option to enter a free-text response)
At <institution> during 2014, to what extent have... a) Your living arrangements negatively affected your study? b) Your financial circumstances negatively affected your study? c) Paid work commitments negatively affected your study?	Not at all Very little Some Quite a bit Very much Not applicable

# Findings

# Destination of commencing students

Destination year 2	Considered leaving		Didn't consider leaving		Total	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
- same university, same course	5,773	58.3	32,508	75.1	38,281	72.0
- same university, different course	1,297	13.1	6,242	14.4	7,539	14.2
- different university	987	10.0	898	2.1	1,885	3.5
- discontinued studies	1,848	18.7	3,623	8.4	5,471	10.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>9,905</b>	<b>18.6</b>	<b>43,271</b>	<b>81.4</b>	<b>53,176</b>	<b>100.0</b>

# Considered leaving – uni group

	Considered leaving		Discontinued studies		Total
	Y	N	Y	N	
<b>Australian Technology Network (ATN)</b>	17.0	83.0	8.5	91.5	8,755
<b>Group of Eight (Go8)</b>	15.5	84.5	7.1	92.9	14,077
<b>Innovative Research Universities (IRU)</b>	20.4	79.6	9.7	90.3	8,790
<b>Regional Universities Network (RUN)</b>	23.0	77.0	14.2	85.8	4,971
<b>Ungrouped</b>	19.9	80.1	13.1	86.9	16,567

# Students who consider leaving

- Tend to...
  - Be younger, 19 and under
  - Be Indigenous
  - Report a disability
  - Report lower grades

# Students who do leave

- Tend to...
  - Be older, 20 and over
  - Be English speakers
  - Have higher ed as a basis for admission
  - Study part-time
  - Study online / externally

# Factors that affected study 'very much'

	Considered leaving		Discontinued studies		Total
	Y	N	Y	N	
Living arrangements	17.1	6.6	12.0	8.1	8.5
Financial arrangements	22.2	8.5	15.7	10.5	11.0
Paid work commitments	18.5	8.9	16.4	10.0	10.7
<b>Total</b>	9,905	43,255	5,477	47,683	53,160

# Reasons for thinking about leaving

		Continued		Discontinued		Overall
<b>1</b>	Health or stress	2,412	29.9	676	36.6	31.2
<b>2</b>	Workload	2,358	29.3	666	36.0	30.5
<b>3</b>	Study / life balance	2,279	28.3	643	34.8	29.5
<b>4</b>	Financial difficulties	2,176	27.0	578	31.3	27.8
<b>5</b>	Personal reasons	1,940	24.1	512	27.7	24.8
<b>6</b>	Need to do paid work	1,746	21.7	548	29.7	23.2
<b>7</b>	Change of direction	1,851	23.0	420	22.7	22.9
<b>8</b>	Expectations not met	1,798	22.3	419	22.7	22.4
<b>9</b>	Boredom	1,731	21.5	423	22.9	21.7
<b>10</b>	Career prospects	1,672	20.8	331	17.9	20.2



# Satisfaction with focus area

SES Focus Area	Considered leaving		Discontinued studies	
	Y	N	Y	N
<b>Teaching</b>	65.9	88.7	80.0	84.9
<b>Learner engagement</b>	43.2	64.7	46.5	62.3
<b>Skills development</b>	61.7	83.9	73.4	80.5
<b>Learning resources</b>	71.5	83.0	66.7	82.4
<b>Student support</b>	60.5	80.5	74.2	77.0

# Observations <rant>

- The characteristics of students who think about leaving and those who actually do leave seem to be quite different
- Key features that are linked to leaving include:
  - Age (older = more likely to leave)
  - Basis for admission higher education
  - Part-time
  - Online/external studies
- Those who think about leaving (but tend not to discontinue) look like younger, school leavers

# <rant>

- Not all attrition is bad – some students just didn't have the right 'stuff'
- Some attrition looks 'bad' – students who are performing well and getting good outcomes are leaving
- Planned attrition 'muddies' the water and makes it difficult to identify students who are struggling and need support
- How unplanned is unplanned attrition? Some of the reasons seem to be 'no brainers' (working full-time and studying full time is going to make it tough to succeed)

# <rant>

- The missing piece of the puzzle is expectations both in terms of what the student expects from the course and what they expect from themselves
  - Which students enroll in courses but intend to discontinue?
  - Which students have a poor understanding of the course and the likely outcomes after graduation? (ie enrolled in a course that won't lead to their preferred occupation)
  - Which students have totally unrealistic ideas about the extent to which they can 'balance' work, study and family responsibilities?
- The 'type' of attrition suggests very different interventions and different timing of those interventions

</rant>

Questions?

[sonia.whiteley@srcentre.com.au](mailto:sonia.whiteley@srcentre.com.au)