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# Improving student retention and success by improving academic practice

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**Improving student retention and success by  
improving academic practice in undergraduate  
Tourism programs (the Win-Win project)**

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Higher Education Participation and Partnerships  
Program (HEPPP)



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## Project summary

The Win-Win project aimed to improve the retention and success of Low Socio-Economic Status (LSES) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) university students. In particular, the effect of curriculum on LSES and ATSI student attrition was examined for undergraduate courses in the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management (STHM). The project comprised two phases. Phase One was an information gathering phase that included reviewing the literature, analysing attrition figures at both the university and school level, and interviewing LSES and ATSI students who had left one of the courses offered by STHM. The details of Phase One are presented in this report.

Phase One revealed that the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management was generally performing well with regard to attrition. However, STHM had a particular problem retaining LSES and ATSI students when compared to other schools within Southern Cross University (SCU) and these attrition figures were dominated by students studying via distance education. Interviews with LSES and ATSI students who had left one of the courses offered by STHM highlighted a curriculum design issue that was a common factor in the decision to leave the course. This issue concerned the perceived lack of relevance of some units being studied to both the course and careers of the students. Related to this, students indicated that these units were not engaging and there was no sense of self-satisfaction with studying these units.

The students interviewed also acknowledged that there were some personal reasons for leaving the course with the most dominant being a lack of time management on their part. Financial pressures were also an issue for some. On the positive side, students did not attribute factors related to technology, administration, teaching staff or academic support in their decision to leave the STHM course.

Students from LSES and ATSI backgrounds who were successfully continuing with their studies in an STHM course, or had graduated, were asked if they had ever considered leaving their course. Those continuing students who indicated they had considered leaving an STHM course revealed that poor time management and financial pressures were factors driving this consideration. However, they also revealed that support from family and friends and the knowledge that they had the skills and ability to succeed were factors leading to their decision to remain.

Phase Two of the Win-Win project involved raising staff awareness of attrition and curriculum issues and developing resources for teaching staff that could be utilised to help reduce attrition factors identified in phase one. In particular, the issue of unit relevance was a focus point as STHM has students seeking careers in tourism, hospitality, gaming, hotels and resorts, conventions and events and these students often study the same core units, particularly in first year. A series of meetings were held with STHM teaching staff and with university support services (e.g Student Engagement Retention Team, UniMentor, Academic Skills Development) to address issues around unit relevance, time management and other personal reasons that were cited by students as factors leading to attrition. These meetings, along with the findings from Phase One, resulted in the creation of the Retention Resource Directory that is located on the same website as this report. This Directory provides teaching staff with a suite of resources that may be utilised to address attrition issues at the unit level.

# Literature Review

## Participation in Higher Education: Equity Issues

Participation in Higher Education (HE) and the literature that surrounds it shows that equity is of increasing international concern. It is claimed that the issue is not restricted to undeveloped or developing countries, but to developed countries where it is evident that there are persistent inequalities in educational participation and outcomes and major social inequities of access to higher education despite mass higher education systems (James, 2008).

Internationally, policy-makers are concerned about the low rates of higher education participation for people from lower social class backgrounds, minority groups and disadvantaged regions and communities. This concern stems from the recognition that higher education confers significant individual benefits in terms of personal development, social status, career possibilities and lifetime earnings (Nelson, 2008:1).

Australia's National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education's (NCSEHE) 2011 progress report reiterated Nelson's comment:

*...social systems (including education systems) tend to produce unequal outcomes (advantage and disadvantage); in part, this is because individuals' starting positions and the processes involved in the production of social and economic outcomes are unfair. In this context, a commitment to equity is a commitment to adjusting social systems for socially just purposes. Equity then is a strategy that sets out to achieve socially just means and ends (NCSEHE, 2011).*

The Australian Government in 2009 announced a target (with an accompanying four-year \$5.4 billion policy package) to increase higher education attainment in Australia, its goal being 40% of 25 to 34 year olds attaining a Bachelor's degree or higher by 2025. This necessitated an expansion in higher education places across Australia in line with recommendations of the 2008 *Review of Australian Higher Education* (the 'Bradley Review'). The subsequent emergence of a demand-driven HE system led to rapid growth of 4% per annum in student enrolments between the years 2009 and 2012. The Government focus on equity in higher education carried with it a 2020 target for low SES participation, equal to 20% of the total domestic undergraduate student population in all higher education providers. In 2008, low SES (LSES) students accounted for 16.3% of all domestic undergraduates.

Prior to the 2013 election of a Liberal & National Coalition-led Government, education providers had abided by the 2009 targets. However, in recent times a government commissioned report, *A Review of the Demand Driven Funding System (2014: xiii)*, has made recommendations that negate the 2009 HE targets, suggesting instead that there be:

1. no higher education attainment targets, and
2. no set enrolment share targets for low socio-economic status students.

It remains to be seen whether the current government will act on these recommendations.

Historically, LSES students have a higher participation in regional universities. In Table 1 below, Koshy (2014) presents evidence of the steady growth in equity group enrolments over the years 2007–2012.

Table 1. Student Equity Enrolments 2007–2012 (Koshy, 2014:13)

|                            | 2007  | 2008  | 2009  | 2010  | 2011  | 2012  |
|----------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Low SES                    | 16.2% | 16.3% | 16.3% | 16.7% | 17.0% | 17.3% |
| Students with Disabilities | 4.4%  | 4.4%  | 4.5%  | 4.8%  | 5.0%  | 5.2%  |
| Indigenous                 | 1.3%  | 1.3%  | 1.3%  | 1.4%  | 1.4%  | 1.4%  |
| Regional                   | 19.1% | 19.0% | 18.8% | 19.1% | 19.2% | 19.1% |
| Remote                     | 1.0%  | 1.0%  | 1.0%  | 1.0%  | 0.9%  | 0.9%  |
| NESB                       | 3.2%  | 3.2%  | 3.2%  | 3.1%  | 3.2%  | 3.4%  |

Of all universities in Australia those that consistently enrol the greatest percentage of low SES students are shown in Table 2. In 2012 Southern Cross University enrolled the largest proportion of low SES students compared to all other Australian universities.

Table 2. Collation of Australian Universities percent enrolment of low SES students for 2011–2012.

| 2011   | 2012   |
|--|--|
| 1. Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education (78%)* | 1. Southern Cross University (24.1%)         |
| 2. Central Queensland University (27.1%)                       | 2. University of Southern Queensland (23.9%) |
| 3. Southern Cross University (23.6%)                           | 3. Central Queensland University (22.2%)     |
| 4. University of Southern Queensland (23.4%)                   | 4. Victoria University (21%)                 |
| 5. Victoria University (22%)                                   | 5. University of Newcastle (21%)             |
|  | 6. University of Ballarat (20.9%)            |
|  | 7. University of South Australia (20.9%)     |

| 2011 |                                       | 2012 |                                      |
|------|---------------------------------------|------|--------------------------------------|
| 6.   | University of Tasmania (21.6%)        | 8.   | James Cook (20.3%)                   |
| 7.   | University of Newcastle (20.7%)       | 9.   | University of Western Sydney (20.1%) |
| 8.   | University of Western Sydney (20.6%)  | 10.  | University of New England (20.1%)    |
| 9.   | University of South Australia (20.3%) |      |                                      |
| 10.  | University of Ballarat (20.1%)        |      |                                      |
| 11.  | James Cook (20.2%)                    |      |                                      |
| 12.  | University of New England (20.2%)     |      |                                      |

\* Due to the merger of Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Education with Charles Darwin University the 2012 registered % low SES students fell to 17%.

There is notably a relationship between high enrolments of LSES and high attrition rates, with the same institutions being identified in both categories. Table 3 presents the attrition rate across the HE institutions with the highest enrolments of LSES students.

Table 3. Attrition rate for universities with high LSES enrolments 2001–2008 (Department of Education, 2014, adapted)

| Higher Education Provider         | HE institutions with the highest attrition rates |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
|-----------------------------------|--|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
|                                   | 2001   | 2002  | 2003  | 2004  | 2005  | 2006  | 2007  | 2008  |
| Southern Cross University         | 32.49  | 32.27 | 28.18 | 30.71 | 31.29 | 28.82 | 28.91 | 27.29 |
| Central Queensland University     | 25.11  | 25.42 | 26.94 | 24.79 | 33.84 | 34.38 | 32.79 | 32.21 |
| University of Southern Queensland | 26.49  | 27.51 | 27.71 | 30.12 | 28.79 | 27.59 | 28.51 | 26.85 |

(a) Attrition rate for year (x) is the proportion of students who commenced a bachelor course in year (x) who neither complete nor return in year (x + 1).

Southern Cross University together with the University of the Sunshine Coast and Central Queensland University registered the highest attrition rates in the years 2001 to 2008.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up 3% of Australia's 23 million population. In 2012 Indigenous students accounted for 1.4% of all domestic enrolments in Australian undergraduate programs (Koshy, 2014) but with a less than 1% award completion rate. These figures have been relatively stable over the five years 2007–2012. There is a divergence in institutional share of Indigenous enrolment, with the Group of Eight (the 1999 coalition of leading Australian tertiary institutions – ANU, University of Melbourne, University of New South Wales, University of Queensland, Sydney University, University of Western Australia, Monash University, and Adelaide University) – having a 0.7% share in 2012, with regional universities recording an overall share of the remaining due to having larger Indigenous populations in their local or regional student recruitment areas.

A deeper understanding of diversity, retention, and attrition phenomena needs to be gained in order to better understand the challenges faced by Higher Education institutions such as SCU in their effort to effectively cater for LSES and ATSI students. This aim frames the following review of the literature and will inform the STHM HEPPP project objectives.

### **Trends in participation in Higher Education**

Since 2012 there has been a greatly increased widening of participation in Higher Education – the Demand-Driven HE System – has given rise to several trends.

- (i) The rise of neo-liberal views combined with precarious economic conditions and international comparisons making education more accountable to public scrutiny and international comparisons.
- (ii) The HE participation movement described as moving from selective (elite) to mass and finally universal (Trow, 1974; James, 2008; Marginson & van der Wende, 2007; Marginson, 2011).

According to the Vice Chancellor of Melbourne University, Glyn Davis, the 2014 budget decisions in Australia by the Coalition Government, which include fee-based policies and university course fee deregulation, will set in motion a 'social experiment without precedent in Australia' (Ireland, 2014). It was frequently proposed in the media following the budget announcements that these changes may return the HE sector to elite participation despite the rhetoric of the government budget statements claiming:

- (i) there will be 100,000 more undergraduate places (with an increase of 15,000 dedicated LSES places); and
- (ii) Higher Education institutions will dedicate 20 per cent of their additional revenue raised through increased student fees to scholarships and other supports for disadvantaged students (Department of Education Budget Statements, 2014:64).

Over the last decades the shift towards universal participation and the subsequent swelling in the HE ranks of students from non-elite backgrounds has brought about a change in the characteristic of student cohorts giving rise to increased diversity. The rationale of the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) (renamed the Higher Education

Participation Program (HEPP) in 2015) is to ensure that Australians from LSES backgrounds who have the ability to study at university get the opportunity to do so. HEPP funding is designed to assist Australian universities to undertake scrutiny of their policies and practices and facilitate the implementation of inclusive pedagogy that would, it is conjectured, improve success in undergraduate courses for people from LSES and ATSI backgrounds, and ultimately improve their retention and completion rates.

In what follows the concepts of attrition and retention are unpacked with a view to understand what might be involved in a process of scrutinising institutional policies and practices so that more informed recommendations around the implementation of inclusive pedagogy can be made.

### **Attrition**

Australia's attrition rates are lower than those rates reported for countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) where one-third of students withdraw from higher education without completing a qualification (OECD, 2008) (Maher & Macallister, 2013:62). Moore and Signor (2014: 366) outline the case that in Australia, student attrition rates are very important to learning institutions as they are seen to be a barometer of quality learning outcomes.

A Norwegian study (Hovdhaugen, 2011) noted that the impact of attrition amounts to a loss not only for the university concerned, but also for the individual and society, although individual affective costs are difficult to measure (Johnes, 1990). These affective costs can include resultant negative implications for students' self-esteem and efficacy (Cunningham, 2007), along with reductions in employment prospects for those individuals (Torenbeek, Jansen, & Hofman, 2010). Maher and Macallister (2013) claim these aspects hold true for students in Australia. Further to the social effects noted in international studies, there are additional financial implications for Australian students since those students who do not complete have education debts with nothing to show for it (and in the current political climate given the possible deregulation of universities, this debt for Australian students is set to escalate).

According to the Program Director of Higher Education at Grattan Institute, Andrew Norton, the Australian HE landscape has been shifting:

*Since 2012 public universities can take unlimited numbers of bachelor-degree students. The share of offers to students with Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR) below 60 has increased from 10% in 2011 to 15% in 2014. Young people with lower ATARs are being diverted from vocational education and work to higher education. ... lower-ATAR university students are over-represented among those who don't complete their courses. (Norton, 2014)*

A Department of Education (2014) longitudinal study of a cohort that entered HE in 2005 and a tracking of their participation patterns through to 2011 – six years after enrolment – showed that for lower ATAR students the final completion rate is estimated to be around 40%, compared to nearly 90% for students in the 95-plus ATAR group. Norton claims 'it isn't social progress to leave someone with a student debt but no degree, if with better advice they would have made a different educational decision' (Norton, 2014).

In the UK, a researcher from Open University, Baxter (2012), drew from a broad research-base on the higher education sector focused on both distance learning and campus-based learning. Her conclusion was that student retention and progression was based upon a complex mix of institutional and personal factors. The complex mix of factors was also evident in an Australian study by Errey and Wood (2011). On the institution side Errey and Wood (2011) cited pedagogy, classroom structure, and the nature of assignments, as key elements that increase or decrease engagement. In another Australian study, Gill, Ramjan, Koch, Dlugon, Andrew and Salamonson (2011) looked more closely at personal factors and reported that initiatives promoting peer and academic support ensure that students feel part of the community. Yet another study reflecting the personal domain, conducted by Australians Noble and Henderson (2011), found those students with high quality peer and academic staff interactions in informal contexts were more likely to register academic success. Students feel valued when a bond has been established with lecturers, and they are then more apt to seek support, thus enhancing the likelihood of their success (2011:79).

Kift and Nelson (2005) posit that institutional activities designed to engage students should be located within the curriculum. Gale (2009) adds that the engagement initiative must also embody the students' social and cultural knowledges:

*It is about how we structure the student learning experience in ways that open it up and make it possible for students to contribute from who they are and what they know. It is about an enriched learning experience for all students. (2009:12)*

The work of Nelson, Smith and Clarke (2011) and Nelson, Kift and Clarke (2012) collectively present the argument that successful engagement, particularly in the critical first year of university experience, requires an inclusive and intentional approach to first year curriculum design and enactment. There is general agreement in the literature that engagement is achieved through a combination of students' efforts and institutional activities and that all students, irrespective of their backgrounds, should be able to participate in activities designed to promote engagement, with the institution having an active role to play in creating academic structures in which engagement is possible.

Zepke and Leach (2005) suggested that rather than expecting students to fit into the institutional culture, the institutions should adapt their culture to promote the engagement of all the students. Findings from their New Zealand study suggested that:

*... central to the emerging discourse is the idea that students should maintain their identity in their culture of origin ... Content, teaching methods and assessment, for example, should reflect the diversity of people enrolled in the course. This requires significant adaptation by institutional cultures ... The foreshadowed outcome of this institutional change is better student retention, persistence and achievement. (Zepke & Leach (2005:54)*

Given that student engagement is widely accepted as an important and critical factor related to student achievement and retention, international and Australasian universities have introduced a variety of initiatives for students who are at risk of disengaging. A final note on attrition raised by Grau-Valldosera and Minguillon (2014) is the view that whilst causes and solutions to attrition are important there is also a need to contemplate how an institution determines attrition i.e. 'defining what a drop out student is' (2014:290). They offer the case from Spain where students were counted in the attrition percentages when they failed to enrol for either the

academic year in which they should have theoretically finished their course, or for the next academic year in their course. Grau-Valldosera and Minguillon (2014) go on to demonstrate how this method of measuring attrition raises a dilemma:

*‘ ... if a given student fails to enrol for several successive semesters, it is impossible to be 100% sure that this student has definitively dropped out of their programme, as they may simply be taking a longer break. We can therefore conclude that the official definition of dropout in Spain does not reflect the specific characteristics of online higher education’.*  
(2014:290)

In the scope of the current project, clarity around attrition has been sought and it was confirmed that a student registers in the attrition category if they do not take up units of study from year to year. This process of determining attrition is carried out across all HE institutions in Australia and is tied to funding mechanisms. Therefore the ‘true’ attrition – that is, where a student disengages from his/her studies and never returns – is not clearly evident in the current calculation of attrition, neither is the student who takes a semester off i.e. where she/he postpones their studies for personal or professional reasons; for students in the external mode this could amount to a sizable proportion of SCU’s student cohorts.

Additional measurement issues exist with regard to socio-economic and ATSI status. Socio-economic status has typically been determined by postcode but even this is still problematic (e.g. in the past it was postcode of current address, but that changed more recently to postcode in the year prior to university). Also, ATSI status is based on self-report when a student first enrolls.

### **Online learning and attrition**

According to studies conducted in the USA, the growth rate of student enrolments in online courses (external/distance education) has outpaced the growth rate of the total higher education student population (Christensen, Horn, Caldera, & Soares, 2011). There is a great deal of debate about whether the primary reason for such a drive is economic rather than pedagogical.

In 2013 Pennsylvania State University examined the behaviour of one million participants in 16 Coursera<sup>1</sup> offerings, and found that completion rates averaged just 4%. Rates were higher for courses with fewer assignments, but even then they only reached about 6%. A longitudinal survey tracking online education conducted over the last ten years and annually reported by Allen and Seaman (2013) noted the following issues; first, the lack of faculty acceptance of online teaching (although this concern has remained stable over the last two years of the survey); second, the degree of concern for more discipline on the part of online students; and third, the lower retention rates. The degree of concern related to the second and third barriers has risen in the last years of the survey.

In the literature surveyed, mixed research outcomes were found on attrition and retention for online courses related to course completion rates. Some research conducted over ten years ago found course completion in online courses was as good as or better than in traditional courses

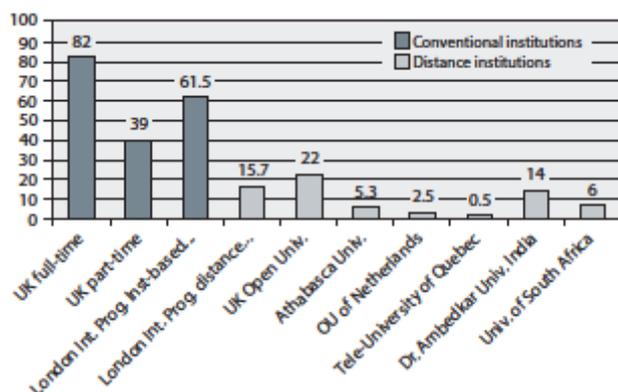
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<sup>1</sup> Coursera is an education platform that partners with top universities and organizations worldwide, to offer courses online for anyone to take, for free. It is counted amongst the many Massive Open Online Learning (MOOC) courses available today.

(Roach, 2002). As the offering of online courses has increased in the decade since that finding so have the outcomes showing traditional courses have higher course completion rates compared to their online equivalents (Bowden, 2008; Kreideweis, 2005, Simpson, 2012).

A UK researcher Simpson (2013) suggests that there is currently a distance education deficit with many distance institutions having less than one-quarter of the graduation rates of conventional institutions. The graduation rates reported by Simpson are diagrammatically represented in Table 4 below.

Table. 4 Graduation Rates across a variety of higher education institutions (Simpson 2013:106)



Engaging initiatives that are said to lead to success and therefore retention, pose challenges for online/external/distance education modes of learning. Recent research by Means, Toyama, Murphy and Bakia (2013:47) investigating the relative efficacy of online and face-to-face instruction found that while on the average, students in online learning conditions ‘performed modestly better’ than those receiving face-to-face instruction, the advantages over face-to-face classes were significant [only] in those studies contrasting blended learning with traditional face-to-face instruction but not in those studies contrasting purely online with face-to-face conditions. Further research is needed to determine which variables play a role in creating more conducive learning under blended learning conditions.

Few studies have been carried out that rigorously contrast learning via online with face-to-face. One US systematic meta-analysis of findings from over one thousand studies mostly involving medical training or higher education programs of online learning by the Department of Education (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2009) concluded there is evidence of positive benefits for online over face-to-face instruction, although it was found again that the effect was larger for blended learning (modes of instruction that combine online and face-to-face). However, the studies did not control for curriculum content, aspects of pedagogy or learning time. One of the findings was that there was little evidence of an increase in the amount of learning when learning included digital or interactive elements such as videos or online quizzes; on the other hand, digital ‘manipulations that trigger learning activity or learner reflection and self-monitoring of understanding are effective’ (Means et al., 2009, p. xvi). Means et al. overall finding was that the mean effect size is significantly positive for the use of online learning for undergraduate and older learners.

The assumption ‘that distance education is being hailed as the next best thing to sliced bread’, is challenged by Moody (2004):

*Many problems exist with distance-delivered courses. Everything from course development and management to the student not being adequately prepared are problematic and result in high attrition rates in distance-delivered courses. Students initially perceive distance-learning courses as easy. However, it may be this perception that ultimately results in the student dropping the course'. (2004:205)*

The recent longitudinal study 2005–2012 by the Australian Department of Education (2014:6) of undergraduate performance found that 85% of the 2005 cohort studied internally (on campus), 8.9% studied externally (off campus) and 5.5% undertook multi-modal study (a combination of on and off campuses study). In terms of retention it was found that students studying internally achieved the highest completion rate of 75.4%. The completion rates for students studying externally were 44.4%, and 69.5% for multi-modal study.

Moody and Hart (2004) call for a closer examination of course development, suggesting that the barriers to success may be based on the practicality claim that online course development is extremely expensive to do properly as it involves high levels of support for staff, which occurs in varied degrees from institution to institution. Perreault, Waldman, Alexander and Zhao's (2002) US research of a decade ago indicated that 53% of course developers create courses in their spare time; that they were not adequately prepared to develop online courses; and that release time was not allotted for course development. There have been calls for the questioning of claims that online course environments can mimic the methodologies of face-to-face courses (Harvey, 2002). Considering these issues from the viewpoint of the academics it was found from Johnson's (2013) findings of an investigation into the meanings university professors attach to the use of digital technologies for their teaching, found that whilst university authorities actively push for increased use of digital teaching tools, staff perceived this as coercion that subtly 'unbundles' and deskills their work and in some aspects contradicts the meanings they hold in relation to academic freedom, professional autonomy, and pedagogic beliefs and the primacy of their research, writing and personal scholarship (Selwyn & Facer, 2014). Further inquiry is needed into these and other questions such as whether 'face-to-face' class discussions can be effective inside asynchronous bulletin boards, or synchronous chats, through the use of text-based postings, and whether they can – or whether they should – attempt replication of the give and take of students and educators talking about a topic or questions in a face-to-face context.

Peters and Fitzsimons (2013:15) believe that digital technology has the potential for transformative pedagogy. However, up until now technological advances have only spurred on the acceleration of online modes of study resulting from huge investments that have strong front-end preparation but promise efficiencies only in the delivery of programs especially through forms of digital Taylorism that offer easy cuts to academic labour costs. Along the same lines of argument, Tauber (2013) commenting on the Massive Open Online Learning (MOOC) courses, asks 'why are all these students falling asleep, virtually, in their digital classes?' He conjectures that it is mainly because the people putting education online are still thinking in terms of twentieth century instructional methods. These he claims, just don't work as well for busy, distracted 21st-century learners.

Tauber argues:

*... a big issue, especially for non-traditional students, is that learning has to fit in between life and work ... most of today's online courses basically consist of reading assignments, lecture videos, homework problems and quizzes. They might be broken up into short lessons, but they still follow the same old linear, 14–20 week-long semester structures. So is it really surprising that so many of the students in a recent University of California, Irvine, massive online microeconomics course couldn't be bothered to read the textbook or supplemental learning materials? (Tauber, 2013)*

He concludes that for online education to be effective course developers need to grab and hold learners' attention, and suggests they start by recognising that learning online is not the same as it is in a classroom 'digital learning needs to become much more mobile, personal and social. At last count, according to Tauber, only 34% of college faculty is using social media for teaching' (Tauber, 2013).

### **Institutional and personal dimensions related to attrition**

Whilst there may be some basis to the argument that poor retention in online learning environments can be laid at the feet of course developers, there are other factors equally compelling that set researchers on a course towards deeper understandings around attrition in online learning environments. There is a persistent binary in the literature: the first is to approach the issues of attrition by looking through an institutional lens which relates to characteristics of the course of study being undertaken; the second is to look through a personal lens which encompasses students' social, emotional, cultural, linguistic, geographical and material contexts. Motivation is one aspect spanning both the personal (having intrinsic motivation) and institutional dimension (where the lecturer and unit content contributes to the generation and sustainment of motivation extrinsically). According to research by Hartnett, St. George and Dron (2014) motivation is generated by the relevance of the learning activities within the unit of study; the provision of clear guidelines, and the ongoing support and feedback from lecturers who are responsive to learners' needs. Supportive, caring relationships were also important.

The full gambit of institutional decisions and practices around the delivery of online units can impact on the ultimate pedagogy enacted within the online unit. These are dimensions that remain under-researched in any study of attrition in online learning environments.

Hart (2012), speaking from within the discipline of nursing, reports on an integrative review of literature of factors associated with the ability of students to persist in online courses. She claims that the lack of persistence has been identified as an important factor leading to attrition among online nursing students worldwide (Hart, 2012:20) – persistence being the sum of those factors that enhance a student's ability to complete an online course (Park & Choi, 2009). Hart concluded that there was almost unanimous agreement with the claim that communication with the instructor; motivation; and peer and family support could overcome any barriers to persistence and assist students to achieve success in online courses (2012:38).

Muilenburg and Berge (2001) reported that online students feel isolated and apprehensive. They claim that to be successful in delivering online courses, lecturing staff must afford students certain opportunities to engage in student-to-student interaction with minimal faculty

intervention, to engage students in regular assignments so they can monitor their own progress, for staff to intervene when needed, and to be provided with specialised attention particularly if they are students with low levels of self-directedness. Finally, they suggest online students need to receive help to become more self-directed/autonomous<sup>2</sup>. In a more recent study Moore and Signor (2014:366) from Swinburne University, report on students' emotional intelligence related to their ability to engage or have social presence in online settings (Berenson, Boyles, & Weaver, 2008; Leong, 2011).

Moving away from the contributing factors and returning to the continuing evidence of poor retention of students enrolled in online course compared to those studying face-to-face, Sampson (2012) reveals that a decade-long survey of online courses conducted by the US Sloan Consortium from 2002 to 2012 (now the Babson Survey Research Group), drew up a comparison of retention rates for students in online courses and traditional courses and in light of the persistence of evidence that online courses present poor retention figures, they concluded that teaching staff need to better understand the contributing factors to student satisfaction in order to design quality instruction.

In the research surveyed by Sampson (2012) both institutional and personal dimension were identified as impacts on student satisfaction. They are as follows:

- components of instruction, such as teachers' interactions and support with feedback (Cameron, Morgan, Williams, & Kostelecky, 2009)
- students' interactions and support of each other (Baglione & Nastanski, 2007)
- student services, such as admission and financial aid
- active student engagement in learning (Cameron, Morgan, Williams, & Kostelecky, 2009)
- rigour and relevancy of material and instruction (Cameron, et al., 2009; Sampson, Leonard, Ballenger, & Coleman, 2010)
- students' perceptions of their own performance (Richardson & Swan, 2008)
- students' understanding of course evaluations and their self-confidence for learning and communicating in an online course (Palmer & Holt, 2009)
- technology issues
- assessment
- institutional issues such as student support of technology and ease of the management system for the online course (Tallent-Runnels, et al., 2006).

The work by the UK Higher Education Academy Retention Grants Briefing Programme (HEA 2010) also outlined a combination of institutional and personal dimensions that contribute most to student retention and progression.

These include:

1. building relationships to ease student transition to university and enhance the sense of belonging
2. use of social networking tools such as Facebook to help social and academic integration

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<sup>2</sup> In recent Win-Win Project consultation with Lismore STHM staff, this very issue was raised.

3. forming early strong interpersonal relationships between staff, students and their peers
4. working closely with students to identify how they can support each other to prosper and succeed at university
5. reducing factors that make students doubt
6. increasing factors that make students want to stay
7. building communications between families and students.

More recently a study in the US by Lee (Lee, 2014) investigated the online learning of graduate students. It looked at human and design factors. According to the results student satisfaction levels were found to be closely associated with a combination of factors such as clear guidelines on assignment, rubrics, and constructive feedback. Student satisfaction levels were also related to the teacher's knowledge of the content and materials used in the units of study. Another dimension is that of student engagement – involving both academic and non-academic activities – which has been previously cited as important and critical to retention.

Nelson and Creagh (2013:110) presenting case studies from international and Australasian universities where a variety of institutional initiatives were aimed at monitoring and intervening when students are at risk of disengaging; the monitoring processes involved the use of existing corporate data and a range of descriptive and academic indicators, such as attendance, assessment submission details and participation in face-to-face and online activities (Nelson & Creagh, 2013:112). It was believed that these were necessary to make supportive interventions in the activities of students who appear to be at risk of disengaging. But the collection of such mega-data on individuals is attracting some criticism.

Arguably the most well-known international intervention program is the Purdue University *Signals* project, that operates as an early warning of potential student attrition and actively demonstrates the potential of applying academic analytics to gain 'near real-time status updates of performance and effort in a course ... [providing] the student with detailed, positive steps to take in averting trouble' (Arnold, 2010, para. 5). Another intervention the *Student Success Program* (SSP) at the Queensland University of Technology utilises a custom-built Contact Management System (CMS) to retrieve student data available within other student systems and to import data on the students from external sources.

In the SSP:

*... proactive highly individualised contact is attempted with all students identified as being at-risk of disengaging. A managed team of discipline-experienced and trained later year students employed as Student Success Advisors (SSAs) makes the outbound contact by telephone ... When at-risk students require specialist support, the advisors refer them on (e.g. to library staff) or in some cases, manage the referral process with the student's permission (e.g. to a Counsellor). (Nelson, et al., 2011:86)*

Early evidence of the impact of the SSP has been documented (Nelson, Duncan, & Clarke, 2009) and Nelson et al. (2011:83) have provided qualitative and quantitative data to suggest that the impact of the SSP interventions on student persistence has been sustained and has positively influenced student retention at that institution. Nevertheless, programs such as SSP

and *Signals*, while actively monitoring students learning engagement, need to be mindful of diversity within student cohorts and avoid assumptions about the conditions that may lead to a student being ‘at risk’.

In ‘*A Good Practice Guide: Safeguarding Student Learning Engagement*’, Nelson and Creagh (2013:42) report on other interventions by Australasian universities. For example, Auckland University of Technology (AUT) runs a program of student engagement and retention aimed at supporting students at-risk of disengaging from their studies initiative program. The university acknowledges that student success and retention is a complex matrix of responsibility between academic staff, support staff and the student themselves; the program is designed to identify at risk students via a series of ‘trigger points’. Their initiative, entitled *The First-Year Experience* (FYE), responds to high attrition in first year. FYE assistants – senior students – proactively support identified ‘at-risk’ students, they call the student to discuss their studies, offer advice and, if necessary, make a referral to the appropriate student support service.

Another case study involved a group of trained students who also make calls to first year students as an intervention activity (Nelson & Creagh, 2013:44). Conducted at Charles Sturt University, and based on a centrally coordinated approach to student success and retention, their *Student Success Team* (SST) concentrates on domestic, undergraduate students who are categorised LSES. The university’s Division of Technology provides information about students who have not accessed their subject outlines for one or more of their enrolled subjects. Not accessing subject outlines – containing information vital for success in a subject – is a very strong indication of a student’s disengagement from a subject. Additionally once the semester has commenced students who fail to make satisfactory academic progress, in the first instance, receive a notice that they are ‘At Risk of Exclusion’. The Student Success Team will then make contact with these students and discuss the sort of help that exists for them. In 2011, 3000 students were contacted via phone and/or email and by late 2012, 8000 students had been contacted. Along similar lines of intervention, RMIT’s ‘*Student Success Program*’, Edith Cowan’s ‘*Connect for Success*’ and Curtin University’s ‘*Student Transition and Retention Team*’ *JumpSTART* programs work in collaboration with academic staff, and contact students who meet the following indicators: not attending required classes by Week 3, or other key classes later in the semester, submitting the first major assignment late, or not at all, failing any major assignments, or any other key indicators as deemed appropriate by the Faculty.

The University of New England’s initiative *The Early Alert Program* is an emoticons identification activity embedded in an online student portal. The emoticons activity allows students to self-report by adding comments to summarise their emotional reaction to an individual unit or subject of study. In 2010 UNE developed and trialled an Automated Wellness Engine (AWE) (Nelson & Creagh, 2013:86–87). Critical success factors rely on productive relationships with all key student support staff such as first year advisors in faculties; the student experience being made visible via social media tools; and the dynamic feedback and monitoring of the student experience providing immediate opportunities for intervention. On the other hand the initiative faced challenges. These were the apprehension of staff around ‘social media’ as a legitimate platform for student learning engagement; the acceptance of a centralised approach for the identification of student need; the ability to create a sense of community for external/online learners (the University’s student body is 40%

external); and lastly some apprehension around the practice of privacy and data mining on students' behaviours and practices in the drive to determine 'at risk' students.

A final note relevant to institutional dimensions that impact attrition, offered in the research literature, is the effect of casual teaching staff, who according to Ryan, Connell, Burgess and Groen (2013) are estimated to account for 50% of the overall teaching load, and up to 80% of the first-year teaching load (Percy et al., 2008). Ryan et al. (2013) claim that:

*... universities have been restructured from an employment model that was previously linked to long-term engagement, secure employment [ ... and a career structure, into organisations that resemble construction sites and supermarkets with day and casual labour; short-term and insecure hires; seasonal and monthly fluctuations in demand; and a "floating pool" of contingent labour located on the boundaries of universities. (Ryan et al., 2013)*

The reality is that whether or not there is a positive or negative impact related to casual/sessional teaching staff is something that is yet to be determined (Larkins, 2011). Amongst an array of casual staff practices in Australian institutions (which deliver units online), Larkins suggest the following should be carefully studied for the impact they may produce in relation to attrition and student engagement:

- the employment of casual staff to assess (mark) inside units that they not involved in teaching;
- the contracting of casual/contractual staff (not full members of a Faculty/School) in the development of the online units of study that they do not ultimately teach
- the year-after-year delivery of units of study without consideration of renewal/rewriting to keep the content relevant and up-to-date
- and the disconnect between the unit writer/teacher's concept of the unit's appearance to the learners and the limitation or protocols of online platform administration regulations.

Reducing attrition and maintaining successful retention in both face-to-face and online programs is a multi-faceted task, resting heavily on both personal and institutional dimensions. What is not mentioned by Nelson and Creagh (2013) in their review of practices are those initiatives related to the content/curriculum of the units of study such as inclusive pedagogical elements that reflect culturally responsive and an acknowledgement of diversity..

### **Diversity among students: Low SES students and attrition in online environments**

An Australian study undertaken by Phillips and Loch (2011) looked into the part that curriculum plays in the progression of LSES students and ultimately in their retention. It involved an analysis of students' performances across different year cohorts in an introductory corporate finance course at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ). The course enrolment of approximately 400 students was comprised of full-time students dispersed across three different campuses and 150 distance education students. In 2008, a traditional approach was taken to the delivery of the course in both face-to-face and distance modes. In 2009, the delivery of lectures was undertaken with the assistance of a tablet PC and the (live) lecture recording 'screencasts' were made available to all students.

The aim of the comparative inquiry was to explore the differences in student engagement and performance during the tablet PC semester against the control or non-Tablet PC semester (Phillips & Loch 2011:240).

The findings demonstrated a considerable improvement by the cohort in the second year of the study, when the tablet PC was used. Across the SES categories students from low SES backgrounds exhibited the greatest improvement in progression in 2009. Similar improvement was found for the medium SES students while the high SES students' progression remained fairly static. 'It is possible that the effective utilisation of teaching technologies helped to offset some of the challenges to self-regulatory efficacy (which is important for distance study) presented by SES' (Phillip & Loch, 2011:249)

Moore and Signor (2014) also sought to investigate approaches and techniques that would prove effective for engaging online students from diverse backgrounds. They analysed an Australian university open access online undergraduate bachelor program, nationally recognised for its inclusive online pedagogy (ALTC, 2010). It was found that by using constructivism and social-constructivism the educators had successfully engaged diverse student cohorts in real-time collaborative sessions using Student Centred Discussion (SCD) pioneered by Wright and Schoop (2003). The SCDs were facilitated through a synchronous environment, affording both students and educators opportunities for real-time active case study discussions and assessments.

Other studies such as the study into LSES students undertaken by Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith and McKay (2012) have explored:

- the need to anticipate and meet the particular needs of students from low socioeconomic status (LSES) backgrounds in terms of curriculum, teaching and support at university
- the need for the sector to use existing and new knowledge on effective teaching and support of LSES students in systemic and embedded ways
- the moral responsibility to provide the highest level of teaching and support to students from LSES backgrounds and to all university students.

Synthesis and analysis of interview data in the study by Devlin et al. (2012) revealed four key themes that could lead to effective teaching and support of LSES students:

1. employing inclusive teaching characteristics and strategies
2. enabling student agency
3. facilitating life and learning support, and
4. taking into account students' financial challenges.

The Devlin et al. (2012) study generated a new integrated national resource, comprised of five interrelated sets of materials and exemplars, all of which have been made available to the sector via the project website at [www.lowses.edu.au](http://www.lowses.edu.au)

In a recent study conducted at SCU in the School of Arts and Social Sciences (SASS) entitled 'Examining the Sources of Resilience' (Biermann et al., 2013) a group of successful third-year

SASS students from LSES backgrounds were engaged in a collaborative dialogue with first-year SASS students from LSES backgrounds to determine what constitutes success at university and what are the most challenging experiences. Ultimately the purpose of the project was to determine, from a student perspective – taking account of local demographics and context – the various factors that make a difference to LSES students' retention and success. The findings and recommendation were:

#### *Personal dimension*

- Students' views of success are diverse and multi-faceted.
- Peers play a crucial role in providing reassurance and motivation.
- Work and caring commitments make focusing on study difficult.
- Social isolation and lack of information inhibits motivation and success.
- Economic disadvantage is an everyday barrier to academic success.

#### *Institutional dimension*

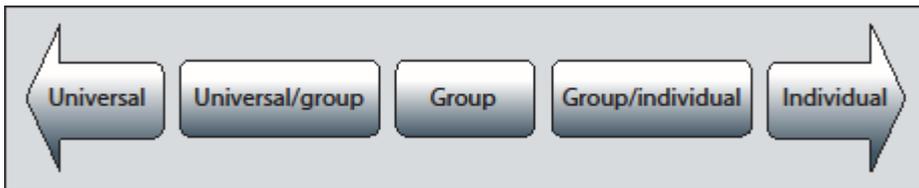
- Programs such as Preparing for Success Program (PSP) and providing Early Opportunities for Skills Development are essential.
- Making the university interface more accessible and student-centred is a necessity.
- The need to set up and promote unit/course/school-level online hang-out/social spaces for external students to share ideas, survival strategies, and to ask questions etc.
- The need to clearly communicate expected computer literacy skill levels at the beginning of semester (including in different computer programs required for their studies, such as Adobe Photoshop) and, if necessary, to organise or refer students to training opportunities if they don't feel competent and also to clearly communicate which programs are required for courses and how much they will cost students to purchase (ideally prior to enrolment).
- Produce, upload and make accessible audio/visual recordings of talks/welcomes (from Head of School, Course Coordinator, Student Liaison Officer etc.) so that external students feel more actively included.

#### *Pedagogical dimension*

- Passionate, encouraging and empathetic teachers make a big difference.
- Widely inconsistent approaches to teaching frustrate students' learning.
- A lack of explicit expectations turns learning into a guessing game.

### **Diversity and attrition**

In New Zealand Zepke et al. (2005) also investigated curriculum processes and practices, with a view to improving retention, persistence and completion of students from culturally diverse backgrounds in their first year of study. Their angle was to study data to determine the views teachers held about diverse students. The researchers believed that attitudes held by teachers powerfully impact the learning of students. It was revealed that rather than a consensus on how educators respond to diversity in their student groups, a continuum emerged with five positions that educators hold in response to diversity. These are visually represented below (Leach, 2011:253).



A sizable minority of the educators fell into the far left universal group and held a perspective focused on similarities i.e. treating students equally. This group argued it would be racist to have differential treatment for members of different groups and explicitly ignored students' ethnicity or race. According to Leach (2011:258) this position is associated with an assimilationist ideology. Leach identified a benefit of this position – universal educators will focus on the similarities within the group, thus potentially connecting students across their differences.

A second position identified from responses was that of the middle category called group. More than half of all respondents fell into this position. Educators who recognised group identities voiced responses such as 'I respect, understand and welcome their cultures; The first thing I do is ask them to teach me to correctly pronounce their given names; I try to provide relevant content'. Leach (2011:259) explains that 'group' educators focus on differences rather than similarities, and on diversity rather than unity, reflecting Banks's (2006) cultural-pluralist ideology. However, Leach (2011) cautions that focusing on group identity and difference may create divisions between groups rather than establish connections across them.

The third position, represented by only a few educators, was the left of centre 'group/universal', which includes some recognition of group identities but still holds the view that students be treated the same. Similarly another small number of educators fit the fourth right of centre individual/group position. These educators recognise group identities but argue that groups are diverse too ('within the ethnic groups is diversity') and believe individuals within these groups need to be catered for. Their responses included: 'I believe it is important, as much as possible, to be aware of the range of student cultural diversity in the classroom and how this may impact on the way individual students feel in the learning environment'.

At the far right end of the continuum is the fifth position that of individual, the third most commonly held position. These educators focused on individual students and their learning. They expressed views that did not universalise or essentialise, or aim to treat students equally; nor treat them as members of a group. Each student was considered an individual, and their needs were met to the best of the educator's ability: 'I tend to regard all students as individuals and treat them with respect as learners'. Leach (2011:260) explains that this last group '... relates to one characteristic of the assimilationist ideology – individual rights are primary – but it does not share other characteristics. Educators at the 'individual' position on the continuum focused entirely on individual students.

Leach states:

*It is laudable to try to meet the learning needs of each student, ... However, being 'all things to all people all of the time' is an impossible goal. (Leach, 2011:260)*

Leach concluded that in respect to all positions that there is no one 'best' response to diversity proposing instead that a merger of the three main positions and the development of a set of

workable, practical teaching and learning strategies around these positions renders the best outcomes in teaching students with diverse backgrounds (2011:260).

It would be strategic for an institution and its teaching faculties who are contemplating a focus on inclusive curricula to be mindful of Leach's (2011) response-to-diversity categories and their advantages and disadvantages when planning inclusive strategies such as those planned for in Phase 2 of the Win-Win project. In respect to teaching in online learning environment, the translation of Leach's suggestions present challenges that need unravelling if we want to learn more about how educators can respond to diversity and produce positive outcomes. A first step could be that teachers know and have some understanding of students' backgrounds.

### **Indigenous students in Higher Education: Attrition and retention**

Australian Indigenous students are significantly underrepresented in higher education, and they are also collectively less likely to be successful in terms of participation, retention, and outcomes (O'Rourke, 2008; Devlin, 2009). In the previously mentioned Australian Department of Education (2014) undergraduate six-year study it was found that 1.2% of the cohort was Indigenous. The findings were that 45.5% of the 1.2% of Indigenous students completed their studies by 2012 compared with 72.6% of students from a non-Indigenous background. These results confirm the claim that less than half of all Indigenous undergraduate students in HE complete the courses of study that they are admitted into.

Indigenous students are often exposed to multiple equity issues and access to education is considered to be the key element in improving their lives and their health (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2001). Willems (2012) explains that although the Indigenous community is referred to as a single collective, Australian Indigenous peoples are a heterogeneous group comprising many distinctively diverse and different peoples. Willems' (2012:14) contribution to the debate is her work on *educational resilience* but at the same time she retains a concern for the other issues Indigenous students may need to overcome such as adversity, equity, or 'invisible fences' in negotiating HE – all of which impact on their participation, retention, and outcomes. Willems (2012) proposes that educational resilience not be considered an individual quality but a shared responsibility of students, educators, institutions, and communities. She explains that a shared or quadripartite model could contribute to the minimisation of Indigenous student attrition.

Due to greater accessibility to the latest technology, it is claimed that distance education is the means by which groups such as Indigenous students can participate in higher education (Universities Australia, 2014). Reedy (2011) rightly claims distance study for Indigenous students in Higher Education is however, not without its challenges. Gray and Beresford (2008:219) voice an urgency to better understand the complexity and interrelated social conditions that impact on the participation, retention, and resilience of Indigenous students. Just such an inquiry was recently undertaken by Kinnane, Wilks, Wilson, Hughes and Thomas, (2014). The inquiry involved the collation of strategies employed to assist potential students, and analysed best practice examples in an effort to identify factors affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander transition to Australian universities. It identifies the key enablers, constraints, knowledge gaps, and current initiatives related to under-represented Indigenous students' successful transition into Higher Education. It concluded that vital determinants of

successful transition for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students into higher education are impacted by:

- individual family and community relationships
- targeted pathway programs that rely on family and community support, while mutually enhancing wider community relationships through breaking down myths and barriers and achieving outcomes, are increasingly effective (2014:14).

The report also claimed that a diversity of new technologies, targeted programs, pathways and models are now available to enhance Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' opportunities to transition to higher education. Of these initiatives enabling factors have been identified to include:

- proactive, early, and targeted university outreach and career guidance in schools
- critical role of university enabling programs, Indigenous education centres, websites, outreach activities.

Whereas the barriers that still persist are the:

- lack of ongoing funding, and funding for solid research
- fact that many projects are short term, often pilot programs with limited follow up, and not integrated, holistic or coming from an evidence-base
- limited community input, and engagement; the need for a framework to enable government to identify key priorities, actions/opportunities, and monitoring and evaluation)
- overall lack of leadership and engagement by universities in embedding Indigenous perspectives, knowledges and pedagogies across courses and in individual units of work and creation of culturally safe work environments
- lack of leadership and engagement by universities in Indigenous cultural competency training for academic and professional staff to foster inclusive and culturally safe studying environments
- lower completion rates among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students than for non-Indigenous students, signalling the need for skills to negotiate higher education cultures.

In addition to these factors there are also other aspects surrounding institutional support for ATSI students. One example raised in STHM staff Win-Win project workshops was that of the tutor scheme. This support is seen to be important, however, STHM staff involved mentioned the logistics such as tutors' and students' time mis-alignments, and lack of tutorial spaces/meeting places for external/distance students, which all prove at times to be difficult to arrange.

In the work of Canadian academics Deer and Hakansson (2005) there is a claim made that knowledge, information and communication are culturally defined concepts; even though these researchers hold the belief that knowledge, information and communication are at the core of the emerging global information society they caution that information and communication technologies are products that are cultural constructs of the society that developed them; and go

on to argue that First Nations/Indigenous peoples have their own concepts of knowledge that need to be embraced, otherwise colonisation in a new guise, will be enacted.

### **Tourism and hospitality in Higher Education: Issues of attrition and retention**

Literature specific to the field of Tourism and Hospitality and also to issues of retention and attrition is minimal. One study found that on online learning can be an effective means of preparing tourism and hospitality students for global tourism workplaces (Sigala & Christou, 2002). These researchers claim tourism workplaces increasingly require a knowledgeable workforce that can work collaboratively irrespective of their spatial, time and cultural differences.

Cho and Schmelzer (2000) also expressed the view that online learning has the ability to facilitate tourism and hospitality students' acclimatisation to technology's impact in their industry, and at the same time provide opportunities to experience multicultural diversity and teamwork by interacting with people of different social and cultural backgrounds via the Internet. The improvement in students' managerial skills in workplaces comprising people from different cultural, racial, socioeconomic and educational backgrounds was suggested as a benefit. When this benefit is combined with the reality of increased applications of e-business, and e-commerce between tourism and business it is self-evident that tourism students need to acquire competencies related to communication via technology with their peers, customers and employees all of whom may function in different organisational cultures and settings (Cho & Schmelzer, 2000).

Sigala and Christou (2002) offered a framework for the development of effective e-learning strategies for tourism and hospitality education. Their advice to educators was that they:

*... should immigrate from e-learning models that simply re-implement existing practises by webifying them ... educators need to re-examine how online learning occurs and how online instruction can be facilitated. [They] ... need to emigrate towards higher order e-learning models that more fully exploit the Internet's capabilities and tools to advance online teaching and learning. (Sigala & Christou, 2002:42)*

They also advocated the design of student-centred (collaborative and constructivism) and student-determined (personalised) online learning environments as steps towards such higher order e-learning.

### **Conclusion**

The literature review has attempted to provide some clarity around the issue of attrition of LSES and ATSI students in HE and to some extent in Tourism and Hospitality. It is clear that this is an issue affecting universities globally and many studies have attempted to understand the causal factors. The framework that has emerged from these studies is that impacting factors can be expressed in terms of categories such as: *personal*, *institutional* and *pedagogical*. For example, personal factors include student motivation; institutional factors largely relate to financial constraints; and pedagogical issues include the shift away from face-to-face teaching and the academic staffs' ability to keep up with pedagogical changes. Within these, this review notes that some institutional aspects are under-researched, i.e. the impact of casualisation of

teaching staff and the pedagogical impact of cultural factors pertaining to online learning for ATSI students. Added to all of this are specific discipline factors. Given the diverse profile and needs of learners entering tourism and hospitality education (e.g. high school leavers, people with industry experience, and industry professionals), as identified by Sigala and Christou (2002), there is a need to identify discipline specific factors affecting STHM's LSES & ATSI students' learning. It is anticipated that the current Win-Win project will go some way to identifying these factors for the development of appropriate resources.

## Attrition Data (STHM)

### Overview

Southern Cross University has been reported as having one of the highest undergraduate attrition figures of all Australian universities (22.25%) and in particular a high attrition figure for students from low SES background (29.70%) (DEEWR, 2014). These figures relate to students who commenced study in 2009 and had not completed their course, and were not enrolled in any SCU units, during 2013. The SCU figure places it as the university with the highest figure in NSW and third highest nationally.

Within SCU, the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management generally performs better than other Schools for attrition, however, this is not the case with regard to attrition of LSES students. Attrition at SCU is typically measured on a yearly basis, that is, students who were enrolled in a STHM course in one year but were not enrolled in any STHM units in the following year are considered to be attrition students. From 2008 – 2012 STHM's attrition figure for all students was below the university mean for 3 out of the 5 years. However, the attrition rate for STHMs low SES students was above the university mean for all but the year 2008.

Looking more closely at the STHM data reveals some variations with students studying in the external mode having much higher attrition rates than internal modes and internal only students had higher attrition rates than multi-modal students (combining external with internal study). This pattern matches that of the broader attrition figures for SCU students. There is also variation across students studying internally (on campus) dependent upon the campus of study. Coffs Harbour and Lismore have much lower attrition rates than Gold Coast and Sydney (The Hotel School Sydney).

There was also a great deal of variation in the ATSI data, however this is most likely due to the very small number of ATSI students enrolled in STHM courses. For example, for the years 2010, 2011 and 2012 there 4, 8 and 8 commencing students respectively who identified in the ATSI category. Subsequently, there were 2, 3 and 3 students who failed to re-enrol in the following year and were classified as attrition, which registers as a high percentage but this presumption is somewhat misleading as further discussion will reveal.

### Curriculum issues

The data overview presented above does not directly implicate curriculum issues as the reason for attrition within STHM. The curriculum largely remains the same irrespective of mode of study or location. However, the literature review has suggested that the curriculum is one area that can be modified to reduce attrition figures. It is the interaction of the curriculum with the mode of study that is of interest here. With this in mind the next stage of the project was undertaken, involving the interviewing of STHM attrition students with questions posed on their experience of the curriculum and its relationship to their decision to discontinue their study with the School.

# Methodology

## Approach

Qualitative methods and analysis were used to gather data from LSES and ATSI students – both former and current – who willingly agreed to be involved in a phone interviews or to respond to an online survey. The survey and the interview also set out to gather data from students who had successfully completed their STHM course. The survey and interview also identified the students according to gender, age group, and mode of study. Students who registered in the attrition category answered a separate set of questions from students who graduated. Also interviewed were continuing students. The identified attrition students were contacted because they were listed as attrition students on the SCU database for one particular year. However, it was found once contacted, that they had more recently returned to their studies and were now continuing or in some cases had completed their course.

The first group of STHM students who were targeted included LSES and ATSI students enrolled throughout 2010, 2011 and 2012. They were representative of:

- (a) Attrition students: a number of LSES students in this category in any given year were subsequently found to be continuing or graduated students. For some a more accurate categorisation for their attrition state was that they had taken a deferment of their course – in the literature such students are referred to as ‘dropping in and dropping out’ students. One major difficulty (as mentioned previously) with SCU’s university system database (and all institutions) is that the database records all students who do not resume their studies in a subsequent academic year of their course as an attrition student – regardless of whether the student is involved in international exchange for a year and therefore not on campus, or that the student has simply re-enrolling in another STHM course, or the student has chosen to defer for a year for personal or professional reasons
- (b) ATSI students: inclusive of all those who registered as continuing, graduated or who were registered as attrition students.

The pool from which the LSES & ATSI interview participants could be drawn totalled 179 – inclusive of 21 ATSI from all enrolment statuses and 158 LSES students from the database of LSES attrition and continuing students over the years 2010–2013. Attempts were made to contact all 179 students first by email (10-17 July) – this contact alerted them to a forthcoming phone call, which was subsequently made between the dates 24th and 31st July. If any student was unreachable on their mobile number, a text message was sent to their mobile number with a direct link to the online survey. Thus an attempt was made to speak personally with the 179 students (all students were called on their mobile numbers not a landline number) – finally the number of students who agreed to be interviewed by phone was 26, and another 16 students agreed to respond to the online survey. In total there were 42 LSES STHM former and current student respondents. Those interviewed numbered 26 inclusive of LSES and ATSI students.

## Results

### Barriers to study for attrition students

Of all 21 LSES STHM attrition students just less than half (9 out of the 21) indicated that the *most* significant aspect contributing to their decision was that of units lacking relevance to their field of interest, the same number (which could have been a mix of the same nine students or additional respondents) responded that another aspect of *most* significant was that the units were not engaging/interesting and they experienced no self-satisfaction.

When the interviewer delved further on this matter with interviewees a frequent explanation went something like this: *the particular tourism focus which I was interested wasn't touched on ... thus I lacked the motivation to continue*. Others offered the fact that they were ... *too young, didn't know what they wanted to do*, or they ... *made the wrong decision*. Some specifically stressed that ... *it wasn't anything to do with the teaching in the units*.

Yet another said: *I enrolled in a full-time course on the Gold Coast as there looked like there were some similar units to those I had already started at The Hotel School in Sydney; but I guess it wasn't what I was expecting, I was looking more for a hotel management sort of course – yeah – probably a wrong choice on my part*.

Another explained offered the suggestion: *It would be better to give future students a good feel for the focus of the content/curriculum and what career paths could be following with such a degree when first advertising it*.

Also considered 'somewhat significant' for five students was the fact that units 'were a challenge' for them. Five experienced *personal difficulties in relation to finances*, four experienced *personal difficulties in relation to time management*.

Somewhat surprisingly those aspects that respondents indicated were *not* a concern for them included academic difficulties i.e. lacking confidence and needing more support from unit tutors (just under half indicate N/A and eight respondents *least significant*). Technology issues were *not* a problem for all 21; this question aimed to determine if lacking adequate broadband or being able to use the platforms of online learning was a problem and it seems that for the attrition group of LSES & ATSI student this wasn't the case. University administration and timetable were also of *least significance* or *not relevant* to the fact that the students discontinued in their STHM courses.

Students were also invited to offer further comments via an open response facility. The statements of five attrition students are included below the graphed data.

**Student A:** *I was already at a uni on the Gold Coast doing a similar degree internally ... and I decided to move home to the mid north coast – I was also working at the Hilton part time on the Gold Coast when I was deciding I'd move home – I had lots of emotional issues around my dad being ill and then he passed away ... So I enrolled externally but I didn't eventually move home I stayed working on the Gold Coast and then I realised it wasn't as good studying externally as it was turning up for classes so I gave up and went back to the other uni full-time. Eventually I gave Tourism up and am now at a Sydney Uni and am pursuing an applied science degree. I think that a big problem with SCU was that I didn't have enough initial contact I was 4 weeks in – it seemed like a huge workload and I don't recall having any kind of orientation ... like finding out how the external study processes work*.

**Student B:** *It was nothing to do with the content or communication with tutors; basically I didn't really even get started in the course – I tried to sort out admin things – rang for advice – seemed that they didn't understand what I was asking – in the end I just decided it was all too much and chucked it in before I even started.*

**Student C:** *The reason to discontinue was that I was living at home with my parents – on the north coast – and only twenty minutes from the uni but I was really keen to move away – go back to the city where I was working before... I found the course was fine I was there a year and a half - but I wasn't sure what I wanted to do and that was a factor as well with motivation to finish the course, I thought that maybe the industry wouldn't offer enough money, I am working now in sales as a business development representative and with my work I know where I am now and where I want to be.*

**Student D:** *I dropped out of a tourism course and took up a business course at SCU – but then I got a full time bank job. Everything covered what I expected to learn (I had done tourism subjects at TAFE before and I had travelled a bit so I could relate to a lot of the content) – there was a lot of support – everything was online – it was fantastic and it all went smoothly. For the content everything covered what I expected to learn – there wasn't any problems there.*

**Interviewer:** *Business offered something you were more interested in?*

*No ... look I love tourism and I would have loved to have found full time work doing that, but at the time I couldn't find anything in the industry, so I just moved across to do just a plain business degree; I was working at a bank it was easier to finish my course that way instead of starting something altogether new. I figured in the long term if I wanted to finish the course I would have probably have needed to find something in tourism and the area, the town, I live in well there isn't a lot of tourism opportunities.*

**Student E:** *This was the 4th course across a few universities I had enrolled in ... I was an internal at Gold Coast when I dropped out ... I was working at the same time so I just chucked it in to work full-time work. The one [course] I enrolled in before the Gold Coast course was the Hotel School in Sydney - it was very different from the course on the GC – if I was to go and do a course I would choose one that was more like the Hotel School – it was a lot smaller and hands on. [In response to the interviewer's question about the content]: I enrolled in the GC course because I wanted to move to Qld it wasn't anything to do with the content or delivery at the Hotel School.*

### **Facilitators of study for attrition students**

The 21 students in the attrition category were asked to select from a pre-determined list the aspects of university study that *were working well for them* prior to the decision they made to withdraw from the STHM course they were enrolled in.

Ranking highly in the list of alternatives that were working well prior to discontinuing were:

Technological know-how and access to adequate internet broadband – almost all 85.7% (18) respondents selected these options.

Online requirements - 76% (7) indicated that these were understandable.

Personal finances - just over 50% (12) indicated that what was working well for them was that personal finances were adequate and that they received good support from their workplace.

University administration - . 19 of the 21 respondents indicated that the university support networks were working well for them.

Timetabling - was identified by almost all (20/20) as working well for them.

However, low on this list was the content and delivery of units - just under 50% (10) of the 21 respondents disagreed that *units were relevant to my field of interest*, another 8 (perhaps some of the same who responded to the previous mentioned alternative) also disagreed that the *... content was relevant and engaging*. Twelve respondents disagreed that *self-satisfaction was achieved*.

### **Extra support required for attrition students**

The final question for LSES students categorised in the attrition group was where an open-ended response could be given when asked in what ways the university and/or the teaching team in STHM could have better supported them to continue in the course they were enrolled in.

Responses included:

*... as an external student I needed to be a lot of support from the first days of enrolment – all the paper work started coming and I needed help to make sense of everything*

*... university needed to give me quick responses to my questions and sort out my problems so that I could feel relaxed about entering into the course of study – this didn't happen for me.*

*... tourism course was fine – it was just a personal choice thing in my case I don't think there was anything the School of Tourism could have changed really – it was just my circumstances and the work opportunities where I live that made me decide to give up the Tourism course.*

*... I don't think they could have done anything really – it was basically a personal decision – a lifestyle thing I guess.*

*... there was nothing really that the Uni could have done differently – I switched from Tourism to Business simply because I can't get work in tourism where I live.*

*... I got all the support I needed – other life things took over.*

*... the School ought to think about the units it is offering and try to match it to students' interests.*

*... it was really my own problem – I am working in the tourism industry now I like it – I might go back to do study now I am older and more experienced.*

*... I think it would be good if they to tell everyone what they can do once finishing the degree – like a couple of examples.*

*... I had tutors in the past who were very accessible and as some of them were from the industry they also understood the pressures of trying to balance a highly pressured job with part time study ... not all a like that now though.*

*... the course subjects changed half way through my course and this changed the whole course outline from my point of view. I would have finished the course if this didn't happen as I was over half way through the course. I have previously studied to complete my Advanced Diploma via correspondence at TAFE.*

### **Barriers to study for continuing students**

The number of respondents who registered in the LSES continuing group was 21 (48%) out of the total number of 42 respondents although all 21 did not answer all questions.

LSES continuing students were asked if they had considered withdrawing/dropping out of the course they were taking and if so what were the contributing aspects that they had to overcome to continue their studies.

From the 16 respondents the most commonly selected responses were related to *some barriers they face* (but were able to overcome). These were:

Time management – ten students identified this e.g. *I switched from internal full-time to external study all is going well but I find the external a bit hard mostly related to me organising myself around work and study.* [Male 18–25 age group]

Financial pressures – eight students in total indicated that this was *significant for them* e.g. *I dropped out of The Hotel School course in Sydney – I wanted to come back up the coast where I lived – and it is cheaper of course than in Sydney and in that course. I am enrolled in a similar Tourism course up here now and am nearly finished – have my internship to go.* [Male 18–25 age group]

Content and delivery - two students responded that the units lacked relevance to their field of interest. As previously mentioned student qualified these comments saying that in some instances it was their fault – they had selected the wrong course, they were too young.

Other selections related to content and delivery were found not to present any degree of challenge for continuing LSES STHM students.

One student who was interviewed due to being registered in the attrition category for one year but who had subsequently returned and continued in in a subsequent year offered this further explanation:

*I took a semester off due to an accident. In terms of the content and deliver I actually preferred to do it externally – as long as you are good with time management. The internal lecturers go on a bit and it could be done more efficiently. One thing I found was that I thought I would like hotel management and when I did my internship I didn't like it at all and I am not working in that side of hospitality anymore – I think what the course should do is offer more hands on opportunities early in the course so you can make a better decision about your final internship. My advice would be to offer more electives so you could tailor the course so it suits what you want to do. Say like accounting; if you are wanting to have your own business then*

*you could go into this a bit more and learn all the basics. They should ask you what you want to do and try to suit students' needs. I have learned a lot more out in the industry than I did at Uni – a lot of the theories are all well and good but they don't help you when you are out in the industry. [Mixed Mode LSES 18–25 age group female student]*

Content and delivery - Five students responded that they needed more support and communication from unit tutors. Two of these students (both external mature female and one female ASTI student) offered expanded explanations indicating that they needed more support and understanding of their circumstances:

*Unyielding attitude of some lecturers when I needed an extension of a few days due to pressing family commitments, as this was not considered a valid reason for an extension. The laborious process of asking for an extension was impractical and put me off doing it even though I needed a little extra time occasionally. Needing financial support. I was unable to manage 3 units comfortably with my family commitments, which made it impossible to get Austudy, which made it a financial pressure. Some online requirements made it difficult, and had I not had a teenager who could help me with the technology aspects, I may not have been able to complete some assignments. The impractical timing of due dates during/around school holidays made it difficult to get things in on time without a lot of stress [External mature-aged female]*

*I started off as an internal student and then went external – I felt the same difficulties when I was internal and external but the thing that held me there and I am nearly through was that I have come so far and I want to finish – is that my mum wants me to finish – so it comes down to just personal determination. The experience could be better if I had more leeway with assignments – like if you external students how are you meant to get assignments in at 5pm like every other student because you are not there at the uni you should be given the time to get it in at 12 pm you are an external student so you are obviously doing something else with your life so you should be given that leeway – I live in the middle of nowhere – in Uluru – and I don't always have internet – the connection is very very haywire – I need to buy internet the week before my assignment to get the assignment in on that day – but what if something happens and you need that extra time? You need to have some flexibility. I haven't felt comfortable to contact lecturers some have been rude on the phone – so what do you do? [External 18–25 age group ATSI female]*

Content and delivery - three students responded that they found units were challenging, and they weren't sure how to complete assignments and that units were not engaging or interesting and that no self-satisfaction was gained. One internal ATSI student qualified her comments adding:

*Never once did I consider not continuing – I was well equipped to study from my school experiences. Some of the business units were difficult. The only demotivating aspect as a full-time internal students was an accountancy class where the lecture was delivered to a group of us at Beachside Gold Coast via a conference call each week from Lismore – many of us did not turn up for these lectures. The content was not interesting for me personally (I don't have a mathematical brain) and the only thing that got me through it were the tutorial sessions for this unit that were delivered face-to face on the Gold Coast. [ATSI female student]*

One student (who has subsequently graduated) offered a barrier she faced that was not mentioned in the listed aspects. She stated:

*I attended Hotel School Sydney – I lived out in Western suburbs and had to travel into the city – there appeared that there was no flexibility with timetabling – I was very close to dropping out and was failing as well. Hated the fact that all classes commenced at 8.00 (woke up very early to get transport into the city) and we had to be out of the building by 5.00pm on the dot – no opportunity to stay behind and use facilities such as computer labs to do extra work/study. There were other people travelling from the central coast – who had the same issues that I had. I had to always work from home – using my own computer internet etc. What kept me going was the fact that I told myself. I just had to do this, I had to finish. The course itself was fine. [18–25 age group Female student]*

Of note are the aspects that registered strongly as presenting *no barriers* to continuing students:

Technology - when asked whether online requirements were beyond their level of computer literacy, all respondents (15) indicated this was of least significant.

Technology - when asked whether they experiences a lack of (and cost of) adequate broadband presented as a barrier (13) indicated this was not an issue. However two students offered their personal experiences which represent alternative views:

*In relation to the internet I have managed to get through studies most of the time but we have limited internet and sometimes my children have used all our internet allowance for the month which meant that I could not get some work done on time as I had to wait for the monthly allowance to refresh. [External mature-aged female]*

*I was half way through my course and had some family difficulties, which made me feel that I could not continue. A conversation with my accountant forced me to continue when she said that if I don't finish my course, I'll have a HECS debt with no qualification. This spurred me on in the face of difficulties. [Mature-aged male student]*

University administration – although frustrated with notifications and regulations most (12) responded that it was not an issue.

Academic difficulties - when asked if they were lacking confidence in their academic work, or did not know what to expected, or did not how to ask for help, or were unaware of how the academic system worked 11(73%) continuing students indicated these aspects were not significant

Personal - when asked if (i) family pressure and/or (ii) work pressure presented barriers they had to overcome LSES students did not agree with this statement

### **Facilitators of study for continuing students**

Low socio-economic status continuing students were asked if they had considered withdrawing/ dropping out of the course they were taking and if so what were the contributing aspects that they had to overcome to continue their studies.

From the 17 respondents the most commonly selected responses to the question asking students what aspect mostly contributed towards you continuing with your study, those most selected were:

Personal - good support from friends/family 88%(15) responded most significant

Technological - 'Know-how' and internet band-width at home were equally most significant for 81% (13) of respondents

Expectation - knowing how the system works and gaining self-satisfaction were also strongly selected by 66% (10)

Content and delivery - all aspects of this including; units were doable, understanding the assignments, units were relevant to my field of interest, relevant & engaging content, easily understood, and good tutor communication were rated as being significant to the continuation of study.

Students' additional comments on the content and delivery items included:

*Some units had more interesting and practical real-world assessments and found those of course most valuable. Nice to get an overview/intro to various sectors but I'm not sure if that's necessary as these have a tendency to be too full/intense for just one session especially if it's not what the student is interested in. I think there could be a quick intro to a few main aspects of business and tourism in perhaps the first 2 units and an option to select a number of elected core units to focus more on where the student found interest in the first 2 units (this is in addition to the 8 electives in C). There are some core units that are necessary (law, marketing, management, etc.) but having more options to steer the developmental interest of the student would be fantastic. [Female External student]*

*Technology was relatively on trend but may need to look into things like simple management programs or for those without office experience, an option to undertake discounted programs in design, CRM's, and event management.*

*Doing it online allowed me the flexibility I needed to fit it around my family commitments.*

*The best thing for an external student that has helped me is the online collaborate classes. While it seems that many external students do not attend them due to external commitments, I believe they have made my studying better. Just wish more tutors were willing to put in the time and effort for external students and run more of these classes online. I also have had only one subject in the whole of my degree that actually had online access to a live lecture. This was fantastic experience as you felt like you were getting the same information as an internal student. Of course it was fortunate that the live lecture was at a time that I could attend.*

### **Extra support for continuing students**

This was the last question asked of continuing/graduated students. It asked: In what ways could the University and/or the teaching team in STHM have better supported you and other students in your year to continue in the course you enrolled in?

Those who responded offered these views:

*Lecturers/Tutors and external staff have been very understanding and flexible with other commitments.* [External 18–25 female]

*I got exempt from a lot of my courses because I had done TAFE courses – but still I needed a starter (bridging) course – because the way we were taught to reference in TAFE was totally different than what is expected at Uni. They should have had something to check that I could do the things they were asking. The course content was not what I was expecting – I can't lie the courses are not that interesting and I learn more from my work place – the theories are boring from people in the 1990 and I am not that interested. I only have my internship to do now.* [External 18–25 age group female]

*More phone contact in each unit would be good. Just a couple of phone calls to ensure all is going well and to identify any problems. More flexibility with due dates, especially around school holidays.* [External mature female]

*I would have definitely enrolled in another university if I knew the difficulties with times and timetabling at the Hotel School Sydney – it was very stressful – I would have rather been on a Uni campus – like full time in Lismore.* [Internal 18–25 age group female].

## Conclusion

This report has presented the outcomes of Phase One of the Win-Win Project. The literature review identified the increasing diversity of students attending university that has been driven by government initiatives. However, the distribution of students with diverse backgrounds across Australian universities is not evenly spread. Southern Cross University has the largest percentage of students from low socio-economic backgrounds and one of the largest percentage of ATSI students. These students have been consistently over-represented in university attrition figures. The literature also showed that attrition is a particularly salient problem for students studying via distance education (online) and that curriculum design had often not kept pace with the increasing diversity of the student cohort.

Southern Cross University has one of the highest attrition figures of all Australian universities and it also has a large proportion of students studying online. Data from SCU revealed that the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management was generally performing well with regard to attrition, but had a particular problem retaining LSES and ATSI students.

Interviews with LSES students who had left one of the courses offered by STHM highlighted a major curriculum design issue that had presented a barrier to success and played a role in their decision to leave the course. This issue related to the students not being able to identify the relevance of some units being studied to both their course and careers. Related to this, students indicated that some units were not engaging and there was no sense of self-satisfaction with studying these. On the positive side, students were not attributing factors related to technology, administration or academic support in their decision to leave the STHM course.

The students interviewed acknowledged that there were some personal reasons for leaving the course with the most dominant being a lack of time management on their part. Financial pressures were also an issue for some.

Students from LSES backgrounds who were continuing with their studies in an STHM course were asked if they had considered leaving their course. These 'successful' students who indicated 'yes' revealed that poor time management and financial pressures were factors driving this consideration. However, they also revealed that support from family and friends and their knowledge that they had the skills and ability to succeed were factors leading to their decision to remain.

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