



FINAL REPORT

March 2022

Towards the point of return:

Maximising students' uptake of university places following deferral and leave

Towards the point of return: Maximising students' uptake of university places following deferral and leave is published by La Trobe University.

La Trobe University
Melbourne Victoria 3086
Australia
Tel: +613 9479 1423
Web: latrobe.edu.au

May 2022

© La Trobe University 2022

Written by Professor Andrew Harvey, Michael Luckman, Yuan Gao, Matthias Kubler, A/Professor Wojtek Tomaszewski, Naomi Dempsey, Professor Marcia Devlin, Elizabeth Cook, Professor Braden Hill, Professor Angela Hill, Professor Sue Shore, Alison Reedy and Professor Kathryn Holmes

To cite this report: Harvey, A., Luckman, M., Gao, Y., Kubler, M., Tomaszewski, W., Dempsey, N., Devlin, M., Cook, E.J., Hill, B., Hill, A., Shore, S., Reedy, A., & Holmes, K. (2022). *Towards the point of return: Maximising students' uptake of university places following deferral and leave*. Report for the Department of Education, Skills and Employment. Melbourne: Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research, La Trobe University.

Acknowledgements

This project was funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment through National Priorities Pool Program (NPPP).

The authors would like to thank the Department of Education, Skills and Employment project team, Amanda Franzi, Laura Barwick, Elouise Arch and Nathan Cassidy for their valuable support and feedback during the project.

The work in this report depended on large datasets from the Higher Education Information Management System (HEIMS), and the authors would like to thank Department of Education, Skills and Employment staff who advised on the specifications of the data, and compiled and made available various datasets of some complexity, in particular: Wayne Shippley, Ben McBrien and Ravi Ravindran. We would also like to thank Luke Richardson for his specialist feedback on the technical appendix to this research report.

Finally, we thank Beni Cakitaki, Hannah Beattie and Maria Rosales of the Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research (CHEEDR) for their efforts in helping to pull together the final report.

Table of contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	5
CONTEXT AND REPORT STRUCTURE	8
RECOMMENDATIONS	10
Universities	10
Government	11
KEY TERMS	12
LITERATURE REVIEW	13
Major findings	13
Recommendations	13
The growth of higher education and non-linear pathways	14
Reasons for taking an intermission	17
Factors that influence intermission	21
Re-enrolment after intermission	23
ANALYSIS OF STUDENT ENROLMENT DATA	25
Major findings	25
Recommendations	25
Introduction	26
Methodology	27
Analysis of deferral rates	30
Deferral over time	32
Factors predicting return after deferral	34
Leaving after commencement	36
Returning to study after leave	37
SURVEY OF INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES TO LEAVE-TAKING	39
Major findings	39
Recommendations	39
Introduction	39
Methodology	40
Strategic environment and governance	41
Interventions	43
SENIOR STAFF INTERVIEWS	49
Major findings	49
Recommendations	49
Methodology	50
Leadership and governance	51
Policy and procedure	52
Intervention and engagement strategies	54
Evidence of effectiveness	62
Constraints and challenges	63
PARTNER INSTITUTION CASE STUDIES	67

Major findings	67
Recommendations	68
Introduction	68
University A case study	68
University B case study	78
University C case study	82
University D case study	89
University E case study	97
REFERENCES	107
APPENDIX 1: TECHNICAL APPENDIX TO THE “TOWARDS THE POINT OF RETURN” REPORT.	118
APPENDIX 2: DEFERRAL PROJECT STAFF SURVEY	119
APPENDIX 3: INTERVIEW GUIDES FOR SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS WITH UNIVERSITY STAFF	131

List of figures

Figure 1: Deferral rates over time for all students, Indigenous students, low SES students and regional students.	15
Figure 2: Raw and regression adjusted deferral rates by student SES, 2018.	31
Figure 3: Odds ratios for selected factors found to be significantly related to student deferral.	32
Figure 4: Unadjusted deferral rates by SES, 2011 to 2018.	33
Figure 5: Odds ratios for selected factors significantly associated with the likelihood of a student returning to study after a deferral.	35
Figure 6: Odds ratios for selected student characteristics associated with the likelihood of a student leaving the university early.	36
Figure 7: Odds ratio of selected factors significantly related to the likelihood of returning to study after a break.	38
Figure 8: To what extent is the conversion of deferrers or leave takers a priority for your institution?	41
Figure 9: To what extent do you feel policies and procedures regarding deferral and leave of absence respectively are visible at your institution?	43
Figure 10: Does your institution have any interventions in place to encourage deferrers and/or leave takers to return to study?	44
Figure 11: To what extent do you agree with the following statements regarding the overall effectiveness of your institutional initiatives to encourage the conversion of deferrers and leave takers?	46
Figure 12: What constraints, if any, exist with regard to effectively supporting deferrers and/or leave takers to return to study?	47
Figure 13: Numbers of domestic Bachelors in each ‘reason’ category and whether they returned	85
Figure 14: Current enrolment status of students who took a leave of absence between 2014-2019	100

List of tables

Table 1: List of variables used in the analysis of HEIMS data.	29
--	----

Executive summary

Deferral and leave-taking behaviour substantially affects enrolment and retention rates across Australian universities. Almost ten per cent of commencing students defer their university offer every year, while over 20 per cent of continuing students take leave from their university within three years of commencing a Bachelor degree. Our research confirms that around one third of deferring students do not return to the university sector. Many more return to the sector but enrol in a different course or university from which they deferred. More worryingly, less than a third of continuing students who take leave subsequently return to study within the next two years. Universities have become more flexible in enabling students to leave, but arguably not as flexible and motivated to accommodate their return.

An equity lens can be applied to these national figures. Under-represented students, including those from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds, are generally thought to be more likely to defer and to take leave. Previous research suggests that they are also less likely to return to study from that leave, creating a compound effect that contributes to lower degree completion rates (Harvey, Szalkowicz, & Luckman, 2017). Until this report, there had been little national data analysis of the many factors correlated with leave-taking and returning to study.

Our research reveals a complex equity picture. Data analysis confirms that low socio-economic status, in itself, is not a predictor of deferral. In fact, after controlling for various geo-demographic and behavioural factors, we find that low SES students are actually less likely to defer than other students. Nonetheless, low SES students are less likely to return to higher education after a deferral, suggesting deferral is still a risk for access to university. Equally, once students have commenced a qualification, low socio-economic status is a risk factor both for taking leave and for not returning to study after leave.

Regionality was found to be the most highly correlated risk factor for deferral in our study, with a student from a regional area much more likely to defer than a metropolitan student. While regional students are somewhat more likely than metropolitan students to take up a university place after deferring, the collective result is still a substantial gap in enrolments. For continuing students, regionality was associated with a slightly greater likelihood of leaving, and of not returning from leave.

Indigenous students are less likely than non-Indigenous students to defer a university offer, owing mainly to their high likelihood of mature aged status. However, Indigenous students who do defer an offer are less likely to return than non-Indigenous deferrers. After commencement, our findings reflect the broader literature, which highlights that Indigenous students are at a much higher risk than other students of leaving university early, and also of not returning to study from a period of leave. Based on the relatively high sectoral rates of deferral, leave, and non-return to study, we recommend greater attention to these behaviours within institutional retention strategies. We also advocate Government adoption of recommendations contained within the Napthine and Halsey reviews, particularly around expanding eligibility of Youth Allowance, in order to increase the number of regional students able to attend university without deferring. Equally, we recommend a continuing Government focus on low SES students, and the impact of financial disadvantage on leave-taking

and non-return. Relatedly, we suggest a specific focus on deferral and leave-taking within institutional Indigenous strategies. In addition to financial and health support, universities need to explore the effects of campus climate, feelings of belonging, unconscious bias, and discrimination around leave-taking behaviour among regional, low SES, Indigenous, and other student groups.

More generally, we found that low prior achievement, age, course preference, part-time status and online enrolment are often closely correlated with both deferral and leave-taking, and with the subsequent likelihood of returning to higher education. In particular, data confirm the importance of educational achievement to patterns of leave and return. Our findings lead to recommendations for more sophisticated institutional approaches and analytics, which can address the root causes of leave-taking and reluctance to return.

In conjunction with our analysis of Higher Education Information Management System (HEIMS) data, we conducted extensive qualitative research to explore the perspectives of staff and students, and to understand how universities are managing the expansion of non-linear pathways. We surveyed and interviewed senior staff at a range of institutions across the country and developed in-depth case studies of five diverse universities that explored governance, strategies and stakeholder perspectives around leave-taking. Our research revealed a sector in transition. Many universities are strengthening their approaches to supporting students on leave and those who are returning to study. New approaches are being driven by a range of factors, including: comparative retention rates being publicised to prospective students through the Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT); a constrained financial environment, reflected in the reintroduction of funding caps for Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs) in 2017 and relatively flat domestic demand and population growth; the introduction of performance-based funding, to which retention rates are central; student choice, with a desire for multiple entry and exit options to study; and new data capabilities to track deferral, leave-taking and return to study behaviours.

Despite these institutional approaches, we found a need for further action across the student life cycle. At the pre-departure stage, we advocate specific course, financial, and academic advising around deferral processes and implications, including within secondary school outreach. Our data analysis confirms, for example, that deferral often results from receiving a low course preference and/or relatively low prior achievement. In such cases, it is in the interests of both the student and the university to explore alternative courses, pathways and options for engagement. More broadly, many universities are adopting a range of well-documented orientation, transition and first year activities to build a sense of belonging and reduce the likelihood of students taking leave.

Further efforts are also being developed to engage students who are on deferment or leave. We found that communication strategies are growing and becoming increasingly personalised, designed to foster senses of belonging, maintain connection with the institution, and encourage timely return. These strategies are encouraging, particularly given our previous research highlighting that students who have left or withdrawn from a university often feel marginalised and/or stigmatised (Harvey et al., 2017). Nevertheless, most institutional staff confirmed a need to improve their current evidence base, for example, by better capturing the stated reasons for leave and related student-level data. We recommend development of tailored interventions based on robust evidence, and subsequently evaluated by changes in return to study patterns, student satisfaction and degree completion rates. Students who leave for academic reasons, for example, could be specifically informed of academic

support, bridging opportunities and pathways to alternative degrees. A lighter touch could be adopted for students who leave for travel reasons and who are statistically likely to return to study.

Increased transition support is also required for students who have returned to study from a period of leave. These students have often lost contact with their initial cohort and subsequently may face challenges in readjusting to university study, course requirements and institutional environments. While we found some evidence of new approaches being adopted, we recommend broader institutional reform to support re-orientation, including the establishment of peer mentoring programs. At Government level, we recommend more detailed reporting of leave-taking and return to study patterns, consistent with reporting practice in the United Kingdom. The relatively high rates of churn both within and between institutions indicates that student recruitment is a long game, and we found some evidence of students taking multiple periods of leave, or 'stop-outs', over time. Capturing these nuances in reported data would assist institutions to refine their strategies.

We also found a need to position students as central to the development of deferral, leave and re-engagement strategies. From the student perspective, the processes around deferral and leave-taking were generally clear and visible, but there was scope to improve institutional support at each stage of the life cycle. The students we interviewed, most of whom had themselves returned to study after a period of leave, advocated: increased advice to students contemplating deferral or leave; better communication with students during their period of leave; and greater support for those returning from leave. In addition to these specific recommendations, we also suggest the active involvement of students and elevation of the student voice in institutional strategy design.

At a policy level, we found evidence that official definitions of retention and attrition may bely the reality of relative student mobility. We found differing institutional definitions and terminology around leave of absence and varying periods of leave granted by different institutions. Relatedly, HEIMS data do not allow for a distinction between students who are on approved leave as opposed to those who have withdrawn. As a consequence, large numbers of students on approved leave are classified as attrition each year. Further work is required to document course and institutional mobility at more granular levels. Such work will be increasingly important as retention becomes a tenet of performance-based funding and the job-ready graduate reforms.

Finally, it should be noted that our research was conducted before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Clearly, universities have been extremely constrained financially by the pandemic, particularly by the unprecedented decline in international student revenue. Among many other priorities, the sector will need to intensify efforts to retain students, particularly those enrolled online. Our research suggests that such efforts could be guided by better capture and use of data, inclusion of the student voice, tailored interventions, and an overarching commitment to student equity. Through these approaches, even in a time of crisis, universities and governments can continue to support non-linear pathways while simultaneously improving retention and completion rates.

Context and report structure

Commissioned by the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE) and funded through the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program's National Priorities Pool, our research sought to strengthen the evidence on the causes of deferral and leave, particularly among low SES students, and to identify strategies by which universities can promote return to study. The project was led by La Trobe University in partnership with the University of Queensland, Edith Cowan University, Victoria University, Charles Darwin University and Western Sydney University.

The project's Chief Investigators included:

- Professor Andrew Harvey, Griffith University (formerly La Trobe University);
- Associate Professor Wojtek Tomaszewski, University of Queensland;
- Professor Angela Hill, Edith Cowan University;
- Professor Braden Hill, Edith Cowan University;
- Professor Marcia Devlin, Victoria University;
- Naomi Dempsey, Victoria University;
- Professor Sue Shore, Charles Darwin University;
- Professor Kathryn Holmes, Western Sydney University.

We begin the report with a review of national and international literature around deferral and leave, with a particular focus on under-represented students within the six identified equity groups in Australian higher education: those from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds; those from non-English speaking backgrounds; Indigenous people; those with a disability; people from regional and rural areas; and women in non-traditional study areas. Existing research suggests that deferral and leave-taking behaviour has increased following the mass expansion of higher education, technological advances and the rise in participation by under-represented students. Despite the growth of leave-taking and non-linear student pathways through university, we find a paucity of evidence around return to study and little national analysis of related higher education data.

Our next section involves a comprehensive data analysis of deferral and leave behaviour in Australia, based on three datasets sourced through the DESE. We have included the full quantitative research in an appended technical report. While initial analysis was focussed on low SES students, our research quickly revealed that low SES in itself was not a predictor of deferral, and only moderately linked to taking leave. In fact, when controlling for other factors, low SES students were significantly less likely to defer compared to high SES students. This important finding contributes to an ongoing set of assumptions and narrative around socio-economic status and educational achievement.

For a given ATAR, low SES students typically outperform high SES students, are less likely to take leave and are more likely to be retained (Harvey & Burnheim, 2013; Messinis & Sheehan, 2015). The correlation between low SES and relatively low prior educational achievement has led to many

misdiagnosed problems, and to a deficit narrative that overlooks the perseverance, dedication and other strengths that consistently enable low SES students to outperform other students. In this context, reducing deferral and leave relies on addressing the primary factors that are commonly correlated with low SES, such as rurality and lower prior achievement, more than the condition of being from a low SES background itself.

In the data analysis we also track deferral levels over time and quantify the effect of major predictors of leave, including age, part-time study, parental education and external (online) enrolment. We similarly analyse the factors related to return to study. Notably, we find that nearly two thirds of commencing students return to the sector following deferral, but less than one third of continuing students return to the sector following a leave of absence.

We then conducted surveys with senior staff across fifteen universities to understand governance, strategies and perspectives on deferral and leave across the sector. Respondents were asked about their institutional processes for managing leave, the perceived visibility of these processes to students, their views on student equity and any groups of institutional focus, and the perceived effectiveness of strategies.

Following these surveys, we conducted more intensive interviews with senior staff across five diverse institutions. These interviews enabled us to explore some of the issues raised within the survey, and to examine whether and why universities were prioritising leave and deferral within their strategies. We also explored how universities were coordinating strategies for deferral and leave across central and academic areas, and attempting to reduce leave-taking through curriculum and pedagogy. For example, we investigated how institutions were building a sense of belonging through orientation and transition initiatives and using data analysis to identify attrition risk and to tailor policies to different student groups.

In our final qualitative research phase, we conducted in-depth case studies across five diverse Australian universities. In these case studies we sought the voices of administrators, academics, frontline staff and, particularly, students, many of whom had returned to study from a period of leave. The case studies explore strategies to promote return to study from multiple perspectives and provide insights into the complexity of institutional structures and processes. The studies also highlight the innovative ways in which data and evidence are being used to tailor approaches to different student groups and the increasingly diverse nature of curriculum models. Growing institutional diversity and student mobility suggests a need to reconsider official definitions of leave, retention and attrition and to position students more centrally in developing university strategies.

Recommendations

UNIVERSITIES

Noting the research that much leave-taking is inelastic and beyond institutional control, we make the following recommendations.

1. That deferral, leave-taking and return to study be specifically addressed in each institutional retention strategy, which the Higher Education Standards Panel has recommended all institutions adopt.
2. That universities explicitly support non-linear student pathways, and seek to normalise leave-taking within the student life cycle.
3. That universities undertake further research on the causes of leave-taking and, particularly, the factors that contribute to returning to study from leave.
4. That universities develop strategies to address the high rates of deferral by regional students, including outreach advice and financial, travel, and accommodation support.
5. That universities develop explicit strategies to address high rates of leave-taking (over 20 per cent) and relatively low rates of return to study from leave (28 per cent within two years), focussing on the major predictive factors of leave-taking (prior achievement, age, part-time study, parental education, and online enrolment).
6. Within these strategies, that universities also include a particular focus on low SES and Indigenous students, both of whom are more likely to leave and less likely to return to study from leave than other students.
7. That universities develop tailored return to study communications that are informed by data at student level, including equity group status.
8. That universities invest in data systems and analytics to provide timely information on deferral, leave-taking and return to study behaviours, which can in turn inform communication and intervention strategies.
9. That universities embed the principles of evidence-based practice and thorough program evaluation within all student retention and success programs.
10. That universities develop flexible course structures and cross-institutional cooperation to minimise leave-taking and maximise the potential for students to return to study from leave.
11. That universities provide academic and course advice to prospective students considering deferral, including within secondary school outreach programs.
12. That universities focus on first year transition strategies to increase senses of belonging and to reduce leave-taking behaviour.

13. That universities elevate the student voice in developing strategies to minimise withdrawal, and to increase the rates of return to study from leave.
14. That universities provide more active outreach to students on periods of leave or deferral, including tailored advice around course choice and transfer options, financial assistance, and health and support services.
15. That universities develop re-orientation strategies for students returning to study from leave, such as peer 'buddy' systems and academic support.
16. That universities include in their Indigenous strategies specific initiatives to address the high rates of leave and non-return of Indigenous students. Such strategies could consider and monitor the impact of unconscious bias, racism, financial disadvantage, and the curriculum on Indigenous leave-taking and return to study behaviour.

GOVERNMENT

17. That the Australian Government create and report an additional student achievement/success measure that monitors the proportion of students who return to study after a period of absence. A similar statistic is currently reported by the UK's Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).
18. That the Australian Government adopt the recommendations of Halsey and Napthine reviews to increase the capacity of regional students to attend university without the need to defer.
19. That the Australian Government commission further research into student income support, including reviewing any changes introduced as a result of the Halsey and Napthine reviews. The research could include a review of the dependent and independent eligibility criteria and the impact of student income support on deferral, course choice and subsequent course completion.
20. That the Australian Government consider additional validations/verification of Applications and Offers data within HEIMS to ensure accurate national level data on deferral is being captured.

Key terms

Absent without leave (AWOL): when a student fails to enrol for a subsequent study period but fails to officially withdraw or have an approved leave of absence. Institutions know relatively little about this cohort because there is no opportunity to collect information about the reasons why they disengaged from study.

Defer, Deferring and Deferral: refers to the specific situation when a prospective student makes an application to commence a university degree, receives an offer but elects to delay their commencement to a future study period. Deferrals are generally recorded and reported to government (although not always).

Gap year: refers to a more general trend for students to take a break between completing secondary school and commencing higher education. This can include students who have deferred but it could also include students who intend to commence a higher education course but are yet to apply or those who rejected an offer.

Intermission: see leave-taking

Leave-taking: a general phenomenon where a student takes a temporary break from their studies after commencement. This can include official periods of approved leave, but may also include students who officially withdraw or who are absent without leave. Referred to as “stop-out” in the US literature.

Leave of absence: a break from studies for a defined period that is officially approved by an institution for a student who has commenced their studies. Can also be referred to as: suspension of studies, leave and program leave.

Under-represented students: an umbrella term is used to describe a wide variety of student cohorts who are underrepresented in higher education. It includes the official “Fair Chance for All” equity cohorts but also unofficial equity cohorts such as first in family, young people who have left out of home care, refugees.

Withdrawal: when a student follows the official process for withdrawing from study. These students are usually easily identified within student information systems and institutions usually record rudimentary data regarding the reason for withdrawal.

Literature review

MAJOR FINDINGS

- Massification and widening participation have led to more students taking leave and pursuing non-linear pathways through university. Rates of deferral by commencing students and leave-taking (intermission/stop-out) by continuing students have increased in recent decades.
- Under-represented students are more likely than other students to take leave and less likely to return to study from leave.
- Causes of deferral and leave include educational, financial, geographic and personal reasons, and are typically multi-factorial. Much leave-taking is inelastic and beyond institutional control.
- Analysis of deferral and intermission behaviour at the national level remains limited and there is little research on which students return to study from leave, and why.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For universities

- That deferral, leave-taking and return to study be specifically addressed in institutional retention strategies, which the Higher Education Standards Panel has recommended all institutions adopt
- That universities explicitly support non-linear pathways, and seek to normalise leave-taking within the student life cycle
- That universities undertake further research on the causes of leave-taking and, particularly, the causes of returning to study from leave.

For governments

- That the Australian Government create and report an additional student achievement/success measure which reports the proportion of students who return to study after a period of absence. A similar statistic is currently reported by the UK's Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).
- That the Australian Government adopt the recommendations of Halsey and Napthine reviews to increase the capacity of regional students to attend university without the need to defer.

THE GROWTH OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND NON-LINEAR PATHWAYS

In this section we explore the massification of higher education (Trow, 2007), including the growth of non-traditional students and non-linear pathways. Historically, 'traditional' university students were perceived to be school leavers from highly selective schools, representing a small and relatively privileged societal minority. From the late 1980s, in particular under the creation of the Unified National System and the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS), a rise in non-traditional student enrolments contributed to rapid sectoral growth (Dawkins, 1988). These new groups included mature aged students of 21 years and above, regional and rural students, students from low SES backgrounds, new migrants, carers, parents and others who had previously lacked access to higher education (Harvey, Burnheim, & Brett, 2016). Widening participation, alongside expansive technological change, led to many students seeking non-traditional and non-linear pathways through university. With students increasingly desiring intermissions before and during their courses, institutions needed to balance student demands for flexibility with institutional demands for timely completions and revenue. We also address here the existing research on students from equity groups withdrawing more often and being less likely than other students to return to study after they withdraw.

Non-linear pathways through university are now common, with many students 'stopping out' and withdrawing from their study at various intervals. As Tinto (1993, p. 27) acknowledged, 'the odysseys many individuals take to degree completion are long drawn out affairs with many intermediate stops'. Variable patterns of enrolment flow partly from the massification of higher education participation since the closing decades of the 20th Century, which encouraged universities to recruit a considerable number of students from non-traditional backgrounds (Gaële, 2006). Although the expansion in enrolments has been driven largely by economic priorities, linked to technological change, globalisation and increased international competition, it has also led to a broadening of eligibility for higher education (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007; Epstein, 1995). In response to the diversification of student populations, universities have offered more flexible academic provisions, such as modularisation and credit transfer (Morley, 1997). Similarly, universities have adapted to student preferences by developing deferral and leave of absence processes that enable students to move in and out of their studies over time.

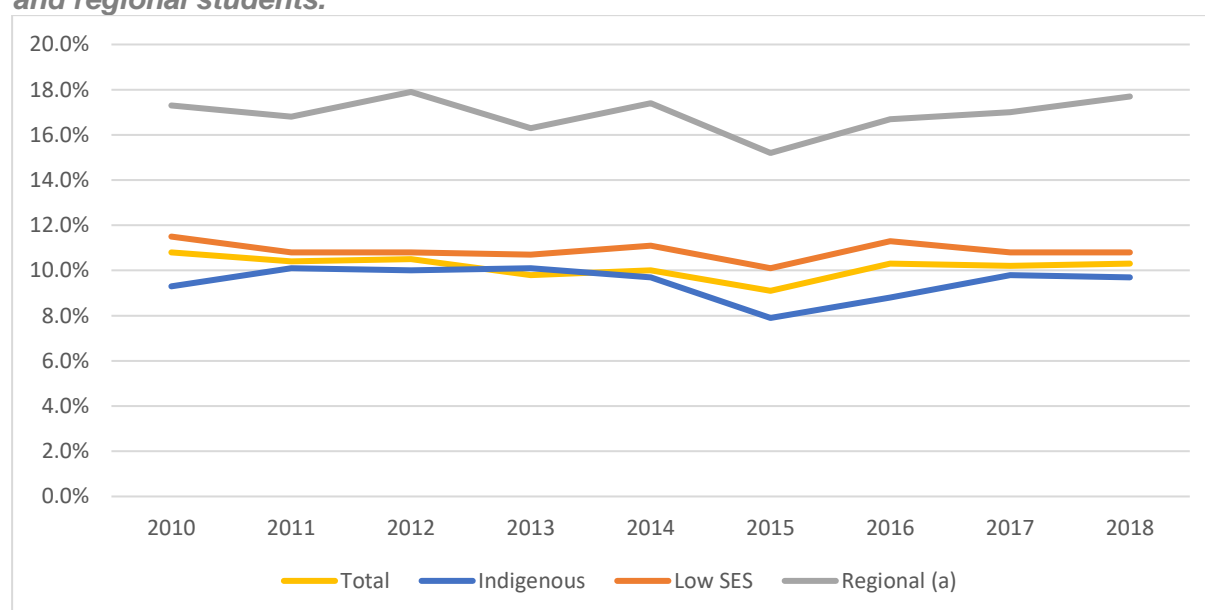
In Australia, the needs of a rapidly changing workforce and escalating demand for highly skilled labour resulted in soaring higher education participation between the mid-1990s and the late 2010s (Norton & Cherastidtham, 2018). From 2008 to 2017, as a result of the Australian Government's adoption of reforms proposed within the Bradley Report (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008), funding caps on domestic Bachelor degree student numbers were eased and then abolished, enabling universities to enrol unlimited numbers of undergraduate students in most disciplines and receive funding for each additional place.

The resultant surge in provision of places drove higher education participation for 19-year-olds up 10 percentage points, to 42 per cent overall (Norton & Cherastidtham, 2018). Overall expansion of the system was accompanied by a fund to ensure access and success for students of low SES backgrounds. Establishment of the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) supported the twin Government targets of expansion and equity as outlined in the Bradley Report (Bradley et al., 2008).

One manifestation of new enrolment patterns is the increasing prevalence among tertiary students in Australia and globally to take an intermission during their study (Jones, 2004; Heath, 2007; Stehlik, 2010; Lumsden & Stanwick, 2012; Curtis, 2014). Unlike a linear pathway, more university students are choosing to arrange their study flexibly to accommodate changing needs and preferences. Intermission can take place at different stages of tertiary study, typically either before the student officially commences their course or between university semesters. Students who decide to take a break before transitioning from high school to university can defer their university offer. Others who would like to take leave during their university years can take a leave of absence, be absent without leave, discontinue their enrolment or withdraw.

The changing nature of student careers is reflected in the increasing prevalence of intermissions from study in Australia. In the case of deferral, approximately 4 per cent of Australian students were estimated to defer their university education in 1974 (Linke, Barton, & Cannon, 1985). By 2018, 10.3 per cent of students had chosen to defer. Across states and territories in that year, the Northern Territory recorded a much higher deferral rate of 39.3 per cent, while the Australian Capital Territory recorded the lowest deferral rate of 4.5 per cent (Department of Education and Training, 2018). Data from the Department of Education, Skills and Employment's Application and Offer reports indicate that, over the past ten years, some equity cohorts are more likely to defer than other students. Figure 1 shows that regional students consistently have deferral rates twice that of metropolitan students. Those from low SES backgrounds have slightly higher rates of deferral, although the scale of the differences varies year to year. In 2018, students from low SES backgrounds were around 12 per cent more likely to defer than students from high SES backgrounds, while in 2015, they were 31 per cent more likely to defer. Indigenous students, by contrast, were consistently less likely to defer their studies compared with the non-Indigenous cohort.

Figure 1: Deferral rates over time for all students, Indigenous students, low SES students and regional students.



Data source: Department of Education, Skills and Employment Application and Offer reports 2010 to 2018 retrieved from <https://www.education.gov.au/undergraduate-applications-offers-and-acceptances-publications>.

The classification for regional students was updated in 2016 to the latest Australian Statistical Geography Standard

Less is known in Australia about the frequency with which students take an intermission during their degrees, but the evidence suggests it is relatively common. Research by Harvey et al. (2017) examined the re-recruitment rates of students who had been reported as absent from higher education in 2006, over a period of eight years through to the 2014 enrolment year. The study found that, of the domestic Bachelor students in Australia who discontinued university, 21 per cent returned to study the very next year; 36 per cent had returned within three years; and almost 50 per cent had returned within eight years of leaving. Although re-recruitment increased at a relatively slow rate beyond the eight-year period after intermission, the data revealed that nearly half of all students who take leave subsequently returned to the higher education sector, despite limited encouragement from universities to do so (Harvey et al., 2017).

Although many students who take an intermission manage to eventually re-enrol in universities, there remains a risk that withdrawing from the system could result in a 'disconnect' from formal study that might never be re-connected (Stehlik, 2010). Moreover, students who withdraw can become stigmatised as well as suffer financial loss (Harvey et al., 2017). At the system level, the impact of student withdrawals and subsequent attrition affects overall attainment levels and efficiency. As several authors have noted, further improvement to attainment rates must come partly from a focus on improving student retention and completion (Productivity Commission, 2019).

Withdrawals can also be examined through the lens of student equity. Despite the fact that students from non-traditional backgrounds have increased their absolute chances of continuing to some form of higher education, there remain significant differences in their retention and graduation levels compared to national averages (Department of Education and Training, 2018; Edwards & McMillan, 2015). Previous studies in Australia and other countries have shown that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are generally more likely to take an intermission and are less likely to return to study (e.g., Barrett & Powell, 1977; Bornholt, Gientzotis, & Cooney, 2004; Harvey et al., 2017; Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005; Linke et al., 1985; Weaving, 1978; Wright, Frew, Hatcher, & Mok, 1996). Greater student equity demands more than a simple focus on access, but also efforts to improve success and completion (Devlin, 2013; Devlin & McKay, 2014).

For all groups of students, higher education confers significant personal benefits, including lifelong development, income earning capacity, and career and social status (Norton, 2012; Rizvi & Lingard, 2011). It was not until after World War II that Australians in general began to perceive education as a means to improving the life chances of individuals, no matter their social origins (Anderson & Vervoorn, 1983). There is an increasing requirement to have a tertiary level of education to succeed in the labour market and to protect oneself from economic hardship (Checchi, 2006; Côté, 2006; OECD, 2010). Those who obtain higher education degrees improve their chances for economic security, while many who do not risk falling into poverty (Terriquez & Gurantz, 2015). As the life span theory of control (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995) indicates, investment in goals at periods of transition (e.g. from school to university) is crucial for successful pathways to adulthood (Haase, Heckhausen, & Köller, 2008). Transition delays are often associated with negative outcomes, including poorer academic attainment and lower well-being (Haase et al., 2008); increased likelihood of attrition (Cardak & Vecchi, 2016; Crawford & Cribb, 2012; Holmlund, Liu, & Nordström Skans, 2008; Parker, Lüdtke, Trautwein, & Roberts, 2012); and lower earnings and wages (Crawford & Cribb, 2012).

REASONS FOR TAKING AN INTERMISSION

In this section we outline existing research into the major reasons for intermission, including deferrals by commencing students, and the taking of leave by continuing students. Importantly, our previous research and existing data confirm that recent trends in deferrals and withdrawals are fairly steady, as are university attrition rates across the sector. Institutions may therefore have limited ability to prevent students deferring and withdrawing, but they have greater ability to facilitate the re-enrolment and re-recruitment of those students (Harvey et al., 2017). Here we examine the financial, developmental, personal and cultural reasons identified for deferring and taking leave. We also address the prominent view among researchers that most leave-taking is multi-factorial, and the belief that some degree of leave-taking is either inevitable and/or advisable.

Deferrals

Around two thirds of deferrals are taken by school leavers (Department of Education and Training, 2018) and, in this context, it is worth understanding some of the broader issues around adolescent development and sectoral transition. The transition from secondary school to university is a major developmental milestone and is associated with the requirement to address a number of developmental tasks that can be a confronting experience (Dietrich, Parker, & Salmela-Aro, 2012; King, 2011; Nurmi, 2001; Oswald & Clark, 2003; Parker, Lüdtke, et al., 2012; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006). As Hunter (2006) notes:

'The first college year is not "grade 13." Incoming students, whether they come to college from high school or from the world of work, enter a new culture... [with] a foreign set of norms, traditions and rituals, and a new language and environment' (p. 4).

This is particularly true for students from low SES and rural backgrounds, who are more likely than others to believe that their Year 12 studies did not prepare them adequately for their first year of university (Naylor, Baik, & James, 2013). Likewise, Cosser (2009) argued that the transition is not a linear process, but that the various disjunctions between aspiration and actualisation reveal an inherent volatility in the youth-to-adulthood transition, as young people move from one phase of school to the next, and from school into and through the higher education system.

The school-to-higher education transition, as indicated in the life span theory of control and other career construction and exploration theories, presents an age-graded developmental task in which young people are expected to begin to implement long-term educational and career goals (Dietrich et al., 2012). It offers a vital opportunity to enact career goals, self-beliefs and identities developed during schooling (Savickas, 2005). This is possible via pathways such as entering the labour market, undertaking tertiary vocational education or traineeships, or by enrolling in university in anticipation of fulfilling entry requirements into high prestige occupations (Parker, Schoon, et al., 2012). This developmental pathway is re-enforced by social and educational structures in such a way that opportunities are typically amassed directly following high school and decline thereafter (Dietrich et al., 2012; Heckhausen & Tomasik, 2002).

Within this broader developmental context, previous studies suggest three broad categories of reasons that drive students to defer their university offer: educational, financial and personal. Jones (2004), for example, argued that delaying entry into higher education could allow students to gain vital life experience and help students to decide which course to pursue (Jones, 2004). Heath (2007)

and Stehlik (2010) argued that taking a gap year may allow students to develop 'soft skills' needed in the modern world of work via employment and travelling, to develop social values allowing them to better adapt to university life and ultimately become more attractive to employers. The development of these skills is part of young people's identity development during their transition to adulthood (Bagnoli, 2009; Beames, 2004; King, 2011; Pike & Beames, 2007). In this way, the intermission experiences are recounted as spaces in the life course whereby significant biographical changes had occurred: for example, regaining or developing confidence, maturity and/or independence (King, 2011). Those who envisage deferral as a 'gap year' may also be provided with more time for self-reflection, enhancing their sense of perspective and facilitating better-informed decisions about their degree plans and future career options (Heath, 2007). That is, in the face of possible post-school uncertainty, the gap year might be a pursuit that is a means of developing implementation intentions and specific goals (Martin, 2010). Moreover, Halsey (1993) also noted that some students may defer their offer in order to retake entry examinations to increase the range of institutions to which they will be accepted. In summary, for deferrers who take a gap year between school and university for educational purposes, the decision is usually deliberately made to pursue prospective benefits through well-structured activities during the year. Thus, intermission could be seen as an opportunity to enhance individual economic, social and cultural capital, which offers advantages in competitive education and labour markets (Ball, Vincent, Kemp, & Pietikainen, 2004; Brown, Hesketh, & Williams, 2004; Heath, 2007; Power, Edwards, Whitty, & Wigfall, 2003; Reay, David, & Ball, 2005).

However, not all deferrals are a positive choice, or arguably a choice at all. Many people delay the commencement of their university studies due to financial barriers. Students often must accumulate savings to cover expenses and qualify for governmental financial support whilst studying (Curtis, 2014). For many students, financial necessity remains the main reason to defer an offer. According to a survey in the UK, around one-quarter of students defer university entry specifically to raise finances to cover the costs of further study, whereas they might not otherwise have been able to afford university (Heath, 2007). In Australia, deferrals have also been linked to obtaining Youth Allowance (YA), a Government income support payment. Ryan (2013) found evidence that receiving the YA while in tertiary study is associated with an increased probability of deferment. Qualifying for Youth Allowance appears to be a strong motivator for regional students particularly, with research conducted by Freeman, Klatt, and Polesel (2014) revealing that regional deferrers were more likely to receive Youth Allowance than students from urban areas when they returned to study.

Until July 2010, there were normally two ways by which tertiary students could claim the benefits of YA – as a dependant or by claiming independent status. As dependants, parental incomes and assets are required to fall below a threshold in order to be qualified for the YA. Students could qualify as being independent of others if they earned \$19,500 over 18 months or worked part-time for at least 15 hours a week for two years (Lumsden & Stanwick, 2012). A typical way to qualify for this allowance was through deferral. The number of students qualifying as 'independent' rose from approximately 55,000 in 2000 to 75,000 in 2007 (Bradley et al., 2008). Although the allowance was intended for people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, the threshold for parental incomes was found to disadvantage many students from low- to middle-income families for whom the available support proved inadequate (Dow, 2011). Data from LSAY also demonstrated that a greater proportion of students from higher socio-economic backgrounds received YA at university than those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and this applied even more so to deferrers

(Lumsden & Stanwick, 2012). Given this distortion, and subsequent to the Bradley Review (Bradley et al., 2008), reforms were introduced to the YA scheme.

The key components of the change revolved around raising the threshold for parental income and ‘tightening’ the independence criteria, such that to be classified as ‘independent’ the young person had to work for at least 30 hours per week for 18 months over a two-year period. By making it harder to access YA through the independence criteria and easier to access the criteria through the dependent criteria, it was hoped that young people from low- to middle-income families would be the main beneficiaries (Lumsden & Stanwick, 2012, p. 9).

There has been no systemic formal review of student income support since the Kwong Lee Dow review in 2011, although, income support was considered by the Halsey and Napthine reviews into regional education. The Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (Halsey Review) found that the current Youth Allowance requirements was a particular issue for prospective regional students, many of whom already face the significant financial burden of having to relocate for tertiary level study. The independence criteria were identified as being particularly challenging in locations suitable jobs were in short supply and could result in fewer students undertaking tertiary study (Halsey, 2018 p. 60). In response to the Halsey review, the family means testing for the Concessional Workforce Independence criteria for regional students was increased by 10,000 dollars for each child within a family (Napthine, Graham, Lee & Wills; 2019).

The National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy, which followed the Halsey Review, recommended further changes, including: a new payment for all regional full time students who have to relocate for their studies, allowing regional students who undertake their first year via external study to access Youth Allowance as an independent if they relocate in their second year, reducing earning requirements for the workforce test for regional students and reviewing changes to parental income means testing to ensure those changes had the intended impact (Napthine et al., 2019 p. 63). The government has indicated that it accepted the aims of the seven key recommendations of the Napthine Review (Tehan, 2019), with many of these recommendations being adopted in the recently announced Job Ready reforms (Australian Government, 2020).

Given the substantial changes to Youth Allowance over the past decade, there is a need to ensure the reforms have had the desired effect. Publicly available statistics from the Department of Social Services show that the number of higher education students accessing Youth Allowance has increased from 2009 levels but has remained relatively steady since 2013. Over the same time, the number of dependents receiving Youth Allowance payments have dramatically reduced from a high in 2011, likely to be due to moving payments for secondary school students from Youth Allowance to the Family Tax Benefit (Department of Social Services, 2018). A systematic review, using customised data from the Department of Social Services, or longitudinal datasets like the LSAY, may be required to ensure the intentions of the post-Bradley Youth Allowance reforms met their intended purpose.

In Terriquez and Gurantz’s (2015) study of over 2,200 young people in California, they observed that financial considerations in emerging adulthood play a key role in shaping pathways through higher education. This can include receipt of government financial aid, attending to family financial obligations, paying for housing expenses and rising tuition rates. More importantly, they argued that

it is worth distinguishing the influence of 'financial factors connected to an individual's family background, and related, but temporally distinct financial issues experienced during the transition to adulthood' (p. 204) on young adults' trajectories after they leave high school. Young people typically cannot determine or define their family socio-economic background, but they do exercise some level of agency in responding to their financial circumstances as they make their way through school.

Additionally, young adults' own financial circumstances merit separate attention because students have been paying for an increasing share of their own postsecondary education in recent decades (Perna, 2006). Equally, lack of sufficient financial literacy (Jorgensen & Savla, 2010; Shim, Barber, Card, Xiao, & Serido, 2010) could worsen the financial stress of young adults when facing rising housing and tuition costs (Baum & Ma, 2012; Kroll, 2013; Terriquez & Gurantz, 2015). Students from regional and remote locations particularly experience financial barriers. In the *On Track Survey 2011 Longitudinal Report: The 2007 Cohort 4 Years On*, many deferrers from non-metropolitan locations cited the need to move away from home – and the financial implications of that move, including the costs of study – as an important factor in their decision to defer further study (Brown, Rothman, & Underwood, 2012). The costs of relocation help to explain why students from regional areas are more than twice as likely to defer than students from metropolitan locations (Polesel, 2009).

In addition to educational and financial reasons, personal considerations are frequently reported by deferrers. Freeman et al's study on deferment in regional Victoria found health problems or disabilities such as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and epilepsy were reported as prominent reasons to delay the commencement of university study. Health considerations are not exclusively physical but also include psychological concerns. It has been suggested that students may feel inadequately prepared to start their adulthood at university and may experience reluctance to make the transition, or desire to take a break from formal education (Martin, 2010). A study by Harvey et al. (2017) also confirmed that mental health issues and a change of career plans were two primary reasons for undergraduates discontinuing their study.

Leaving study after commencement

Reasons for leave-taking among continuing students often resemble those cited for deferrals among commencing students. Health, personal reasons and financial challenges are prominent (Li & Carrol, 2017). Continuing students, however, often have more constraints on their time and greater responsibilities than the majority of deferrers (school leavers), for example as parents and carers. Further, some continuing students appear to take leave because of negative perceptions about the culture and climate of their university campus. We address these cultural issues broadly here, and will return to them in our discussion of low SES and Indigenous student leave-taking in particular. Previous studies (e.g., see Bonham & Luckie, 1993; Daubman, Williams, Johnson, & Crump, 1985; Hoyt & Winn, 2004; Letseka, Cosser, Breier, & Visser, 2010; Li & Carroll, 2017; Slonimsky & Shalem, 2006; Terriquez & Gurantz, 2015; Woosley, 2003; Woosley, Slabaugh, Sadler, & Mason, 2005; Zurita, 2004) have found that students may leave university because of health and personal issues, financial hardship, lack of time (including other adult role commitments), family deprivation, under-preparedness for higher education (e.g., lack of clear career and educational goals), academic failure and travel challenges, among other reasons.

Lack of time has been identified as a major reason for leave-taking. In Bonham and Luckie's (1993) study of about 400 leave takers from a community college in the United States(US), participants

frequently identified work and family responsibilities as their reason for intermission or 'stop-out'. In Australia, family and work responsibilities have been identified as particular influences on leave-taking among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and first in family, students (Li & Carroll, 2017). Such circumstances are a source of stress for students and form barriers to integration into the university culture, both here and overseas (Tinto, 1987). According to Li and Carroll (2017), health or stress was reported as a reason for considering leaving university by a considerable number of students with disability.

In addition to individual level factors, institutional culture has been identified as an obstacle for students from non-traditional backgrounds to remain enrolled. Student-to-academic staff and student-to-student interactions are crucial for student integration and university persistence (Davis & Murrell, 1993). Student-to-student interactions outside of the classroom, for example, have been found to have a strong relationship with students' sense of belonging at university (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). In Australia, one-third of first year students consider withdrawing during their first semester (McInnis, Hartley, Polesel, & Teese, 2000), often due to adjustment problems or environmental factors—a mismatch with university culture or feelings of isolation—rather than because of intellectual difficulties (Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001).

Li and Carroll (2017) found that students from non-English speaking backgrounds are particularly more likely to report institutional reasons to consider leaving university. Indeed, despite an increasingly diverse student population, it is questionable to what extent changes in universities' culture, epistemology, curriculum development, dominant academic discourses, pedagogy and service delivery have occurred (Edwards, 1993; Evans, 1995; Harding, 1990; Leathwood, 2006; Morley, 1997; Wolffensperger, 1993). Furthermore, the location of 'diversity' concerns within student bodies detracts attention from the sector's remarkably 'un-diverse' staff and management profile (Archer, 2007). Jewson, Mason, Bowen, Mulvaney, and Parmar (1991) suggested that universities have rarely regarded themselves as institutions that could or would engage in unfair discrimination, as they have been traditionally 'wedded to an ethic of individual academic achievement which purports to recognise no boundaries or barriers other than that of merit and ability' (p. 184). Thus, the education system itself, including the academic and administrative culture of the universities, continually contributes to inequalities in access and success (Gale & Tranter, 2011).

In our forthcoming analysis of campus climate (Harvey & Luckman, 2020), we found substantial prevalence of perceived unconscious bias and blatant discrimination on an Australian university campus, particularly among groups such as Muslim students. Our previous research on Somali-Australians also identified significant trends of discrimination both within and beyond university campuses. Most notably, we found that a Somali-Australians with a Bachelor degree had employment outcomes similar to other Australians who had left school before completing Year 12 (Harvey, Szalkowicz & Luckman, 2020). Australia does not run regular campus climate surveys and the student experience surveys and barometers are limited in their diversity focus. Thus, the extent to which cultural prejudice and/or disconnect is influencing withdrawal is not well known.

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE INTERMISSION

Many scholars have attempted to isolate specific geo-demographic and behavioural factors that affect the likelihood of a student deferring or withdrawing, such as academic achievement, gender,

family location, the type of secondary school attended, language background and wealth. In this section we address research around some of these individual factors, beyond the self-reported reasons and qualitative research covered previously.

A clear relationship has been noted between students' scores on university entrance examinations and the rate of university deferrals (Barrett & Powell, 1977; Birch & Miller, 2007; Bornholt et al., 2004; Curtis, 2014; Elsworth, Day, Hurworth, & Andrews, 1982; Hillman, 2005; Linke et al., 1985; Lumsden & Stanwick, 2012; Weaving, 1978). Low-achieving students are more uncertain about their tertiary academic studies than high-achieving students. The negative relationship may indicate that lower-achieving students do not have the motivation or conviction to continue with study straight after high school (Birch & Miller, 2007; Martin, 2010). Other characteristics of deferrers include being female (e.g., see Hillman, 2005; Lamb, 2001); from independent schools (e.g., see Bornholt et al., 2004; Hillman, 2005; Krause et al., 2005; Linke et al., 1985); having English-speaking backgrounds (see Curtis, 2014; Lumsden & Stanwick, 2012); being employed when in Year 12 at school; and being less likely to receive Youth Allowance payments while at school (Lumsden & Stanwick, 2012).

In addition, abundant evidence has proved that students who live in rural areas are more likely to have a one-year break between high school and university (see Barrett & Powell, 1977; Bornholt et al., 2004; Curtis, 2014; Freeman et al., 2014; Krause et al., 2005; Linke et al., 1985; Lumsden & Stanwick, 2012; Weaving, 1978). The high impact of living in non-capital city areas on rates of deferral partly reflects the fact that students who do not live close to their tertiary institutions need time between high school and university study to accumulate savings for the additional costs (i.e. living) of attending university (see Birch & Miller, 2007; Krause et al., 2005). Polesel (2009) analysed the tracking data from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) in Victoria and confirmed the greater propensity for school completers from rural and provincial regions of Victoria to defer a university place, compared with school completers from Melbourne. Tracking work conducted out in Queensland (for example, Department of Education Training and the Arts, 2007) also confirms the tendency of non-metropolitan school-completers to defer university places at a higher rate. As discussed previously, the higher rate of deferrals with non-metropolitan students is due to a combination of factors relating to isolation and financial hardship, and regional students are more likely than metropolitan students to be from low SES backgrounds, which compounds the disadvantage (Harvey, Burnheim, & Brett, 2016).

In Australia, students from identified equity groups, such as those from regional and/or low SES backgrounds, with a disability and Indigenous students, are also more likely to discontinue their university degree when compared to their peers (Department of Education and Training, 2016; Li & Carroll, 2017). As a cohort, students from low SES backgrounds are slightly more likely than the overall domestic student population to leave university (Harvey et al., 2017). In addition, low achievers at school are disproportionately susceptible to attrition (Edwards & McMillan, 2015) and the correlation between ATAR and SES is well documented (e.g., Birrell, Calderon, Dobson, & Smith, 2000; Dobson & Smith, 2000; Dobson & Skuja, 2005; Lomax-Smith, Watson, & Webster, 2011). These findings are consistent with international research highlighting that non-traditional students, including under-represented minorities, older students, etc., are more likely to discontinue their studies (Rose-Adams, 2013; Terriquez & Gurantz, 2015; Walker, Matthew, & Black, 2004).

RE-ENROLMENT AFTER INTERMISSION

There has been little research at national level on deferral patterns and causes. In this section we cover existing research from Victorian studies in particular, but it should be noted that there remains a gap in national analysis of deferrals, to which our research in this report directly responds. Equally, there is little research around leave-taking at national level, with our own previous research providing analysis based on limited national data (Harvey et al., 2017). To our knowledge, this project is the first in-depth analysis of HEIMS data on deferral and leave-taking patterns.

Previous Victorian studies suggest that the majority of those who defer subsequently take up their university study after one to three years of deferment. Polesel (2009) surveyed 806 non-metropolitan deferrers who completed Year 12 in Victoria at the end of 2006. He found that 69.9 per cent of the group were attending university in 2008 (after a one-year deferment), 9.3 per cent were enrolled in Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs and the remaining 3.1 per cent were combining employment with training in the form of an apprenticeship (1.2 per cent) or a traineeship (1.9 per cent). In total, 82.3 per cent of deferrers were in some form of recognised education or training. A similar survey, conducted by Freeman et al. (2014) for non-metropolitan deferrers who completed Year 12 in Victoria at the end of 2009, suggested that 61 per cent of the cohort entered university in 2011 (after a one-year deferment), with a further 11.8 per cent attending VET programs. The proportion of re-enrolment at university of this cohort increased to 63.2 per cent in 2012. By 2010, 60 per cent of 2008 deferrers were at university, with 92 per cent of them in the same course as in the previous year. In 2011, 65 per cent of the 2008 deferrers were studying at university, an increase compared to the previous year (Brown et al., 2012).

Previous research also suggests that deferrers with high prior achievement from medium-high SES backgrounds and living in non-metropolitan areas are more likely to recommit to their studies. In Polesel's (2009) study, it was observed that deferrers who made the transition to university in 2008 were more likely to come from the two higher SES quartiles, suggesting that the financial implications of university study continue to have an impact on the pathways of regional deferrers two years out of school. A previous study (Teese, Robinson, Lamb, & Mason, 2006) noted a similar relationship between students' SES and their likelihood to take up university study. In addition, Polesel (2009) found that deferrers who made the transition to university were more likely to come from the two higher quartiles of achievement. Non-metropolitan deferrers may in fact be more likely to take up their place in university one year after deferment than their metropolitan peers (Polesel, 2009; Teese et al., 2006). However, it should be remembered that non-metropolitan students are far more likely to defer in the first place than metropolitan students.

Despite the majority of deferrers eventually taking up tertiary student status, there remains a small but sizable proportion of deferrers who could be classified as 'at risk', reporting destinations of part-time employment, unemployment or 'inactive' status. In Polesel's (2009) study, 17.7 per cent of deferrers were not in education or training of any kind in the year following deferment. Most (16.2 per cent of the cohort as a whole) were in paid work with 11.4 per cent of these in full-time positions and 4.8 per cent in part-time positions. Few were unemployed (1.0 per cent) and a very small group (0.5 per cent) were inactive, which means, in this context, they were not in education or training and were neither in paid employment nor looking for paid employment. The *On Track Survey 2011 Longitudinal Report The 2007 Cohort 4 Years On* also reported that one in five deferrers were not in

education or training, of which 10 per cent were full-time employed, 8 per cent were part-time employed and 2 per cent were either looking for work or unemployed.

There has been relatively little research focusing specifically on the re-engagement of leave takers. Nonetheless, research conducted by Harvey et al. (2017) found a consistent gap in re-recruitment rates by socio-economic background, among other variables. Low SES students were less likely to be re-recruited than students from both medium and high SES backgrounds, which partly explains the extent of the completion gap. That is, the relatively low degree completion rates of low SES students are a result of slightly higher rates of withdrawal and lower rates of re-enrolment following withdrawal. The analysis found that students from high SES backgrounds were 25 per cent more likely than those from low SES backgrounds to be re-recruited into higher education after a two-year absence (Harvey et al., 2017). The authors also found that the re-recruitment rate in Australia was approximately four percentage points lower than the return rate in the UK between 2007-2008, with rates broadly comparable between the 2013-2015 period.

The research also found that in the United Kingdom, additional contextual information is provided with the headline “non-continuation” rate (Harvey et al., 2017). The Higher Education Statistics Agency reports the proportion of students who transferred to a course in the same field of education but a different institution, the proportion of students who changed both fields of education and institution and the proportion of students who return to study the year following an absence (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2020). These statistics provide useful context for the non-continuation rates published for each institution by provide greater context around break taking and allows institutions to benchmark performance and aim to improve it.

Analysis of student enrolment data

MAJOR FINDINGS

- Between 8 and 10 per cent of students defer their offer each year. Most deferrers (64 per cent) subsequently enrol at university, though not always in their original chosen course or institution.
- Major predictors of deferral include prior achievement, geography, school leaver status and course preference.
- While low SES students have slightly higher deferral rates, these rates appear to be driven by other correlated factors, e.g. achievement and geography, more than SES itself. In fact, after controlling other factors, low SES students are less likely to defer than high SES students.
- Regional students are far more likely to defer than metropolitan students, though slightly more likely to return from deferral
- Over 20 per cent of students take leave or withdraw within the first three years of their enrolment. Of those who take leave or withdraw, 28 per cent return to the sector within two years of their initial leave-taking. Combined, these data suggest that leave-taking is a significantly greater risk to institutions than deferral.
- Major predictors of leave-taking include prior achievement, age, part-time study, parental education and distance (online) enrolment.
- Low SES and Indigenous students are more likely to take leave than other students and less likely to subsequently return to study. These combined patterns contribute to lower degree completion rates among both groups.
- Students who are externally enrolled (online) have slightly higher rates of return to study than students studying internally.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For universities

- That universities develop strategies to address the high rates of deferral by regional students, including outreach advice, financial, travel, and accommodation support.
- That universities develop explicit strategies to address high rates of leave-taking (over 20 per cent) and relatively low rates of return to study from leave (28 per cent within two years). These strategies could specifically address the major predictive factors of leave-taking, such as prior achievement, age, part-time study, parental education, and distance enrolment.

- Within these strategies, that universities also include a particular focus on low SES and Indigenous students, both of whom are more likely to leave and less likely to return to study from leave than other students.

For government

- That the Australian Government commission further research into student income support, including reviewing any changes introduced as a result of the Halsey and Naphine reviews. The research could include a review of the dependent and independent eligibility criteria and the impact of student income support on deferral, course choice and subsequent course completion.
- That the Australian Government consider additional validations/verification of Applications and Offers data within HEIMS to ensure accurate national level data is being captured on deferral.

INTRODUCTION

A major component of the project was to improve the quantitative evidence base for patterns in student leave-taking and subsequent rates of return to university study. Previous studies have either been based on sample-based surveys on patterns of deferral and subsequent educational outcomes of students (Polesel, Klatt, & O'Hanlon, 2012), or analysis of aggregated student enrolment data from HEIMS (Harvey, Szalkowicz, & Luckman, 2017). For the first time, our project has conducted multivariate analysis on student level records within HEIMS, enabling us to examine the patterns of student leave in detail.

The following section summarises the major findings from the analysis conducted by one of the project's collaborators, the Institute of Social Science Research (ISSR) at the University of Queensland. The full technical report and a detailed methodology are attached as Appendix 1. The analysis of HEIMS data entailed descriptive comparisons of the composition of deferrer and leaver populations, as well as modelling of the risk factors for deferring, returning after deferring, leaving after commencement and returning after leaving. These findings will serve as important context for the exploration of institutional action covered in the subsequent sections of this report.

We begin with a brief outline of the methodology conducted and then consider deferral patterns among commencing students, including the likelihood of deferred students returning to study. Our findings reveal the importance of factors such as prior educational attainment, geography, school leaver status and course preference. While we acknowledge that low SES students are slightly more likely to defer than other students, we find the causes of deferral relate more to other correlated factors than to SES itself. Indeed, after controlling other factors, such as age, geography, and attainment, we find low SES students to be less likely than other students to defer. This finding reinforces our view that educational attainment is typically more important than SES as a predictor of university achievement and behaviour. Previous work has highlighted the relative over-performance of low SES students at university, for a given ATAR (Harvey & Burnheim, 2013; Messinis & Sheehan, 2015).

We then examine patterns of leave among continuing students, including the likelihood of returning to study after taking leave. Educational attainment, age, part-time status and external (online) enrolment were important predictors for leave-taking. We also found that low SES students, students with a disability and Indigenous students were more likely to take leave. Low SES and Indigenous students were also less likely to return after taking leave, which contributes to the well-documented gaps in their degree completion rates. Students studying externally, usually online, were found to be more likely than others to return, a finding which is likely to have increased relevance as external delivery expands during the COVID-19 crisis. Yet, since low SES external students are less likely to return than other external students, additional support may need to be provided to ensure they return to study after a break.

METHODOLOGY

The analysis was based on customised data sourced from HEIMS. It was developed by the Institute of Social Science Research (ISSR) in partnership with the DESE. Due to the complexity of the data, and differences in the ways that student data is collected between the Applications and Offers and Higher Education Student collections within HEIMS, three separate datasets were constructed as part of the project.

The first dataset is based on data from the Application and Offers collection within HEIMS for 2011 to 2018 and was used to analyse trends in deferral over time. The second dataset matched student records from the Applications and Offers and Higher Education Student collections for years 2014 through to 2017. This dataset was developed to examine the subsequent enrolment patterns of students who had deferred their study in 2014. Finally, a longitudinal dataset between 2011 and 2018 was created using the Higher Education Student collection, which allowed the project to examine the patterns of student leave once students had commenced study including subsequent re-enrolments. The analysis used a mix of descriptive statistics and logistic regression modelling to examine patterns in leave-taking and returning to study.

The analysis is based on domestic Bachelor (Pass, Honours, Graduate entry) students enrolled in Table A or B higher education providers. Deferrers were defined by the 'response code' (element 723) for a Bachelor level offer reported in the Offer Details file within the Applications and Offers data collection. Students returning from deferral were defined as those who had an enrolment record by 2016 after deferring an offer in 2014.

While virtually every university in Australia allows students to take a temporary leave of absence from study, HEIMS does not specifically capture any details regarding leave of absence. As a proxy, the quantitative analysis defined a university leaver as someone who was absent from study for between one to two years and was calculated using an approach similar to the Department's attrition calculation. The analysis focussed on students who commenced in 2011 and were absent (had no enrolment record) for at least one year until 2013. Returners were defined as leavers who had an enrolment record within a Bachelor level program within two years after leaving.

Logistic regression modelling was used extensively within the project to evaluate the likelihood of deferral, leave-taking and subsequent return for a variety of variables recorded in HEIMS. The use of regression models allows the project to isolate the effect size of various socio-demographic

variables while controlling for the impact of all other variables included in the model. A list of the HEIMS elements used in the regression modelling are listed below.

Table 1: List of variables used in the analysis of HEIMS data.

VARIABLE	VALUES
Gender	Female, Male
Age	<18 years, 18 years, 19-22 years, >=23 years (as of 1 January of the reference year)
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (ATSI)	ATSI, Not ATSI
Remoteness	Major city, Regional, Remote
Citizen	Australian citizen, other
Previous highest level of educational participation	Completed degree (includes sub-degree), incomplete degree (includes sub-degree), Year 12, Other (includes complete and incomplete TAFE, other qualification and none)
ATAR quartile	No ATAR, First quartile, Second quartile, Third quartile, Fourth quartile (calculated for each year)
Tertiary Admissions Centre (TAC) (deferral models only)	Direct, NSW and ACT, QLD, SA and NT, VIC, WA
University group	Go8, ATN, IRU, RUN, Other (group membership defined as of January 2020)
Number of university campuses	Up to 3, Between 4 and 7, 8 or more (defined by number of postcodes associated to a university in the data)
Multiple offer (deferral models only)	Received multiple offers, Received single offer
First preference (deferral models only)	First preference, Other (included '0' values)
Highest level of parental qualification (leaver models only)	Postgraduate, Bachelor, Other post-school, Year 12, Other, don't know/NA/missing (based on information on up to two parents)
Full-time/part-time status (leaver models only)	Full-time, part-time
Mode of study (leaver models only)	Internal, external, multi-modal
Field of study	Science & Mathematics, Computing & Information Systems, Engineering, Architecture & Built Environment, Agriculture & Environmental Studies, Health Services Support, Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, Dentistry, Veterinary Science, Rehabilitation, Teacher Education, Business & Management, Humanities, Culture & Social Sciences, Social Work, Psychology, Law & Paralegal, Creative Arts, Communications, Tourism, Hospitality, Personal Services, Sport & Recreation

Given the challenges of matching data collections that were not intended to be linked, the researchers were required to make several decisions throughout their analysis regarding what constituted a case for the study. As such, much of the analysis is not directly comparable between the three datasets used in this analysis, nor are they comparable to the statistics reported in

aggregate by the DESE. A thorough discussion of these methodological issues are discussed in detail within the full report attached as Appendix 1.

As part of the data checking and validation process, deferral statistics were calculated by institution and examined. The researchers found that a small number of institutions reported zero or very few student deferrals, suggesting that there may be some undercounting of deferrals in the Department's Applications and Offers data collection within HEIMS. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the stakes of the data collection are not as high as the other data collected by HEIMS that is connected to funding calculations. Nonetheless, to ensure accurate statistics on student deferral it may be necessary for the Department to conduct an audit on the data collection and for additional verification to be conducted when the data is submitted to HEIMS by institutions.

ANALYSIS OF DEFERRAL RATES

Our analysis shows that around 9 per cent of domestic Bachelor level applicants who receive an offer subsequently elect to defer their studies each year. Modelling by a range of geo-demographic and course factors recorded in HEIMS shows that three factors appear to be most strongly correlated with the likelihood of deferral: regional/remote residence; school leaver status; and relatively low prior educational attainment. Perhaps surprisingly given the context of this project, we found that students from low SES backgrounds were less likely than other students to defer, after controlling other factors.

The results of the modelling for students from low SES backgrounds are curious, given the fact that previous research (Polesel et al., 2012) and the Department's own statistics publications (Department of Education and Training, 2018) appear to suggest that students from low SES backgrounds have a slightly higher risk of deferral. The apparently contrasting findings are explained by modelling: while low SES students do indeed defer at slightly higher rates than other students, these higher deferral rates are explained by factors other than SES itself.

Using a regression model, the project sought to examine the relationship between low SES background and the likelihood of deferral while controlling for a multitude of variables available within HEIMS (see Table 1 above for the full list of variables included in the model). As Figure 2 shows, once other geo-demographic factors are controlled, the relationship between deferral and SES is completely reversed. This relationship suggests that other characteristics, rather than SES in itself, are driving higher deferral rates among low SES applicants. Our analysis shows that it is primarily those from regional areas, school leavers and those with weaker prior academic achievement that have the highest risk of deferral.

Figure 2: Raw and regression adjusted deferral rates by student SES, 2018.

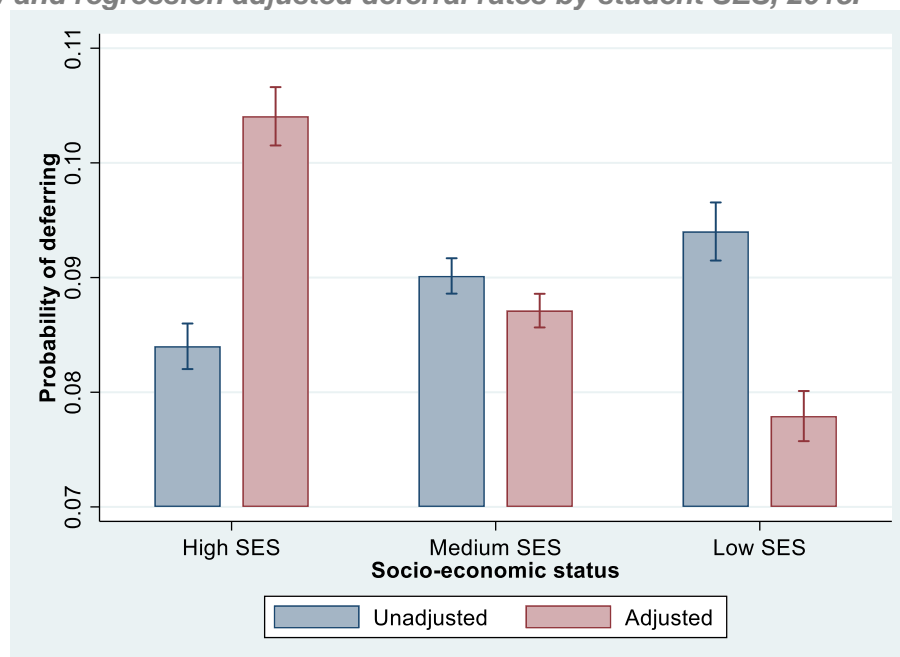
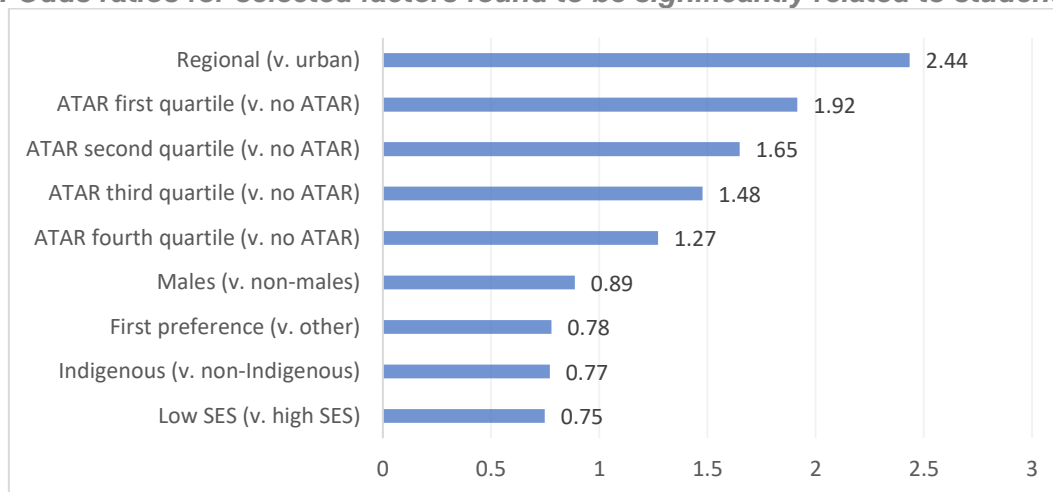


Figure 3 shows the odds ratios of selected factors from our regression modelling that were found to be significantly (at the 99 per cent confidence level) related to the likelihood of deferring among all students. An odds ratio greater than 1 indicates an event is more likely to occur, while an odds ratio of less than 1 indicates an event is less likely to occur. By far the strongest factor linked to student deferral was being from a regional background. The odds of a regional student deferring were nearly two and a half times higher than a student from an urban area. On the other hand, Indigeneity was not found to be a risk factor in deferral, with the odds of an Indigenous student deferring their offer being around 23 per cent lower compared to non-Indigenous students. The odds of a student from a low SES background deferring were 25 per cent lower than a student from a high SES background.

The modelling also found that there was a strong relationship between ATARs and the subsequent likelihood of deferral. In the first instance, simply having an ATAR was a statistically significant predictor of a student deferring, suggesting school leavers, as opposed to students who had previous university or VET study, were more likely to defer. Secondly, we found that students with lower ATARs had a higher likelihood of deferral compared to students with higher ATARs. For instance, the odds of a student with an ATAR in the first (lowest) quartile deferring were nearly twice as high as a student who did not have an ATAR.

Figure 3: Odds ratios for selected factors found to be significantly related to student deferral.

Being offered their first preference was found to reduce the likelihood of deferral. This result, together with the connection between deferral and having a lower ATAR, could suggest that the students with fewer university options at selection are more likely to defer to explore other potential career options.

Patterns of deferral for low SES applicants

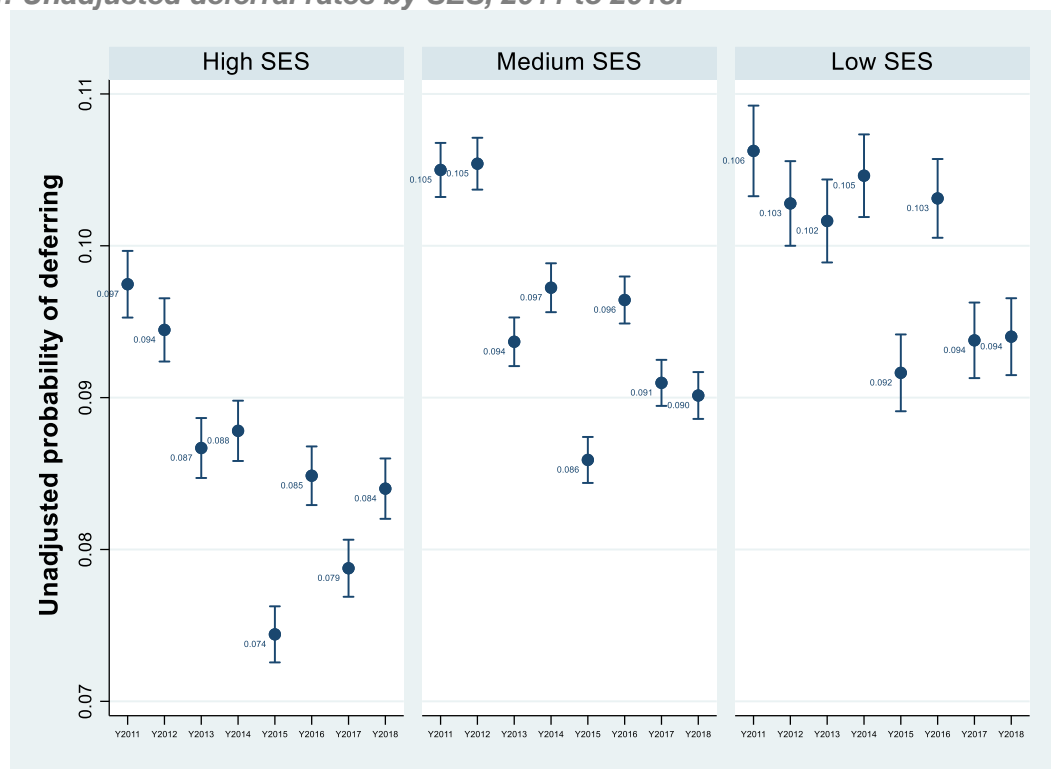
Overall trends for the low SES student cohort were similar to those for all students. However, low SES students were more likely to have other traits linked to deferral. For instance, compared to other deferrers, low SES deferrers had a younger age profile, were less likely to have undertaken previous higher education studies and were more likely to have undertaken 'other' educational participation, such as Vocational Education and Training (VET). Low SES students also had a lower ATAR profile, were less likely to have received an offer from a Group of Eight (Go8) university and more likely to have received an offer from a university belonging to the Innovative Research Universities (IRU) network or the Regional Universities Network (RUN).

There is a considerable range of deferral rates for students from low SES backgrounds associated with different fields of study: Computing & Information Systems, and Engineering typically had lower rates of deferral, while Agriculture and Environmental Studies, and Architecture & Built Environment had higher deferral rates.

DEFERRAL OVER TIME

Overall, there has been a slight decrease in the deferral rates of Bachelor level domestic students from 9.1 per cent in 2011 to 8.1 per cent in 2018. As shown in Figure 4, when examined by SES, we found that the decline in deferral rates was largest amongst students from high SES backgrounds, while students from low SES backgrounds experienced the smallest decline. This overall trend was exacerbated once adjusted deferral rates – which control for the effect of a wide range of covariates within the HEIMS dataset – were compared, suggesting the factor(s) contributing to the decline in deferral rates are likely to be external to our modelling of HEIMS data.

Figure 4: Unadjusted deferral rates by SES, 2011 to 2018.



While it is not possible from our analysis of HEIMS data to establish the possible cause of the overall decline in deferral rates with deferral time series data alone, one possible explanation could be changes made to Youth Allowance in the years following the Bradley Report. The 2008 Bradley Report found that income support was comparatively poorly targeted to those who needed it the most, with income support being provided to relatively well-off students (Bradley et al., 2008, p. 54).

As outlined in the literature review, there are two main pathways to be eligible for Youth Allowance payments. Firstly, if applicants are still dependent on their parents, a household means test is applied to gauge eligibility. Secondly, if an applicant is judged to be independent, the applicant would only be assessed based on their personal circumstances (Services Australia, 2020). Research conducted by Ryan (2013) suggests there is a strong relationship between the requirements for independence, which commonly relates to working a certain number of hours over a certain period, and the likelihood of deferral. The changes recommended in the Bradley Report, and subsequently implemented in the 2010 Social Security and Other Legislation Amendment (Income Support for Students) Bill, were designed to reallocate student income support to those who needed it the most. To achieve this, the means testing for students judged to be dependent was relaxed and the criteria for independence were made more onerous by increasing the work requirements, with more lenient criteria for students from regional and remote locations (Daniels, 2017).

As shown in Figure 4, there has been a larger decrease in deferral rates for students from advantaged backgrounds compared to students from low SES backgrounds; a trend exacerbated after controlling for covariates within HEIMS. This pattern may suggest that students from advantaged backgrounds are deciding the potential benefit of acquiring Youth Allowance as an independent is not worth delaying university entry for an extended period in order to meet the paid

work requirements. Meanwhile, the changes appear to have had less of an impact on changing the incentives for deferral by students from low SES backgrounds.

Further research would be required to examine the full impact of Youth Allowance changes. This research could draw on more detailed data about the activity and socio-demographics of Youth Allowance over time. This analysis would require custom data from the Department of Social Services, or longitudinal data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey, LSAY, or the experimental composite datasets being developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

In addition to the overall decline in deferral rates between 2011 and 2018, there was also a noticeable one-year drop in deferral rates in the 2015 enrolment year. Our analysis could find no obvious change in Youth Allowance policy in 2014 or 2015 (Daniels, 2017). One possible explanation could be the proposed changes to higher education included in the 2014-15 Federal Budget, which included a proposal to reduce the Commonwealth Grant Scheme (CGS) funding and uncap student contribution amounts to shift an increasing proportion of the burden for study costs from the taxpayer to students themselves (Department of Education and Training, 2015). It was highly probable that the proposed changes would have resulted in a significant increase in student fees starting from the 2016 enrolment year. Most observers agreed that institutions would, at the very least, increase their fees by 20 per cent to offset the reduction in CGS funding, and that, in the most extreme scenario, institutions might have increased their student fees to be comparable to international or full postgraduate student fees (Ryan, 2014; Sharrock, 2014).

The observed decrease in student deferrals could therefore be due to students deciding to start their courses sooner to capitalise on at least a single year of their degree under the prevailing student contributions policy. Potential deferrers were in a unique position to be able to adjust their behaviour to take advantage of the change. The decline in deferrals may imply that a relatively significant proportion of deferrers, around 14 per cent, were aware of the changes and acted accordingly. The fact that students from high SES backgrounds reported a slightly larger decrease compared to students from low SES backgrounds is consistent with previous research, which shows that students with higher reserves of social capital are more likely to act strategically when it comes to decision-making with regards to higher education study (Cardak, Bowden, & Bahtsevanoglou, 2015).

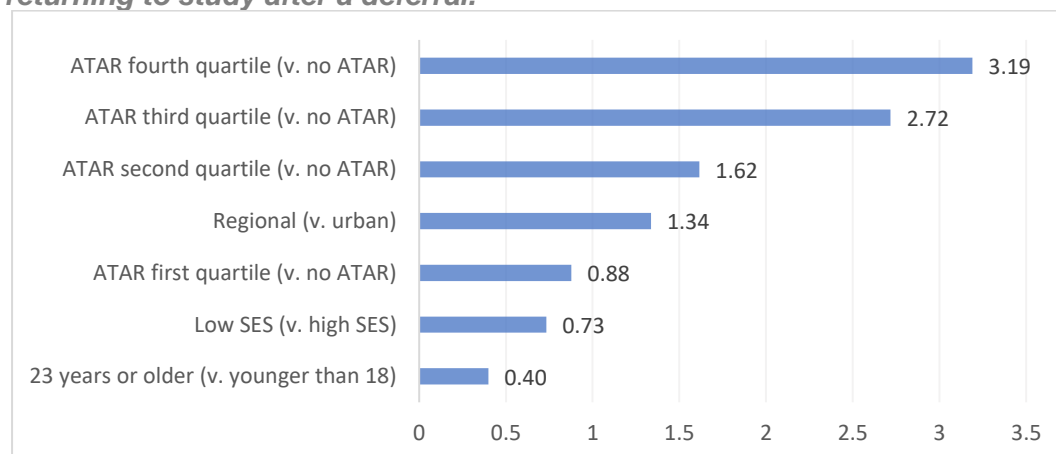
FACTORS PREDICTING RETURN AFTER DEFERRAL

The study found that most deferrers, 64.3 per cent, subsequently enrolled in a university course, although not always in the same course that they initially deferred. This data is broadly consistent with previous studies of the destinations of students who defer (Klatt & Polesel, 2013; Polesel & Klatt, 2014; Polesel et al., 2012). According to our analysis, of the 22,590 applicants who deferred their offer in 2014, 35.7 per cent (or 8,073 applicants), had not enrolled in a Bachelor's degree by the end of 2016 despite receiving an offer. This gap represents a relatively large number of students lost to the sector, despite most students returning.

Figure 5 shows the odds ratios of selected factors correlated with the likelihood of returning to study after deferral. As previously outlined, low SES was not in itself a high predictive factor of deferral, though SES was a moderately strong predictor of not returning to study. The odds of a deferrer from

a low SES background returning to study are 27 per cent lower than a student from a high SES background.

Figure 5: Odds ratios for selected factors significantly associated with the likelihood of a student returning to study after a deferral.



The figure also shows that students with ATARs in the highest quartile have a much higher likelihood of returning to study compared to students with no ATAR or ATARs from the lowest quartile. The odds of a student with an ATAR in the top quartile returning to study were more than three times higher than students who had reported no ATAR. Being from a regional background was associated with a higher likelihood of returning and the odds of these students returning to university was around 34 per cent higher compared to students from urban areas. This trend seems to support the view that regional deferral is driven by strategic considerations, such as saving money for relocation and qualifying for Youth Allowance as an independent.

Older students were less likely to return after deferring. The odds of a mature age (23 or older) student returning to study after deferral were 60 per cent lower than students aged 18 or lower. Thus, while both age and SES were not associated with a higher risk of deferral, both factors were associated with a higher risk of not returning to study after a period of deferral.

Patterns of returning to study for low SES students

For students from low SES backgrounds, we found that younger low SES deferrers (aged under 23 years) were significantly more likely to return than older low SES deferrers. Low SES deferrers in regional areas were significantly more likely to return than low SES deferrers in major cities, and low SES deferrers with incomplete higher education degrees were more likely to return than other low SES deferrers. Higher ATARs were also associated with higher return rates, as was having applied through the TAC in the case of WA. Low SES deferrers who had a place at a Go8 university were significantly more likely to return than deferrers who had an offer to study at a RUN university. Indigenous deferrers were less likely to return than non-Indigenous deferrers, but this result was not statistically significant at the 95 per cent confidence level.

Overall, return patterns after deferral appear to be largely influenced by two aspects: mature age and previous educational attainment. Combining the risk factors for deferring with those for failing to return reveals the importance of educational attainment. Low attainment is a major predictor of

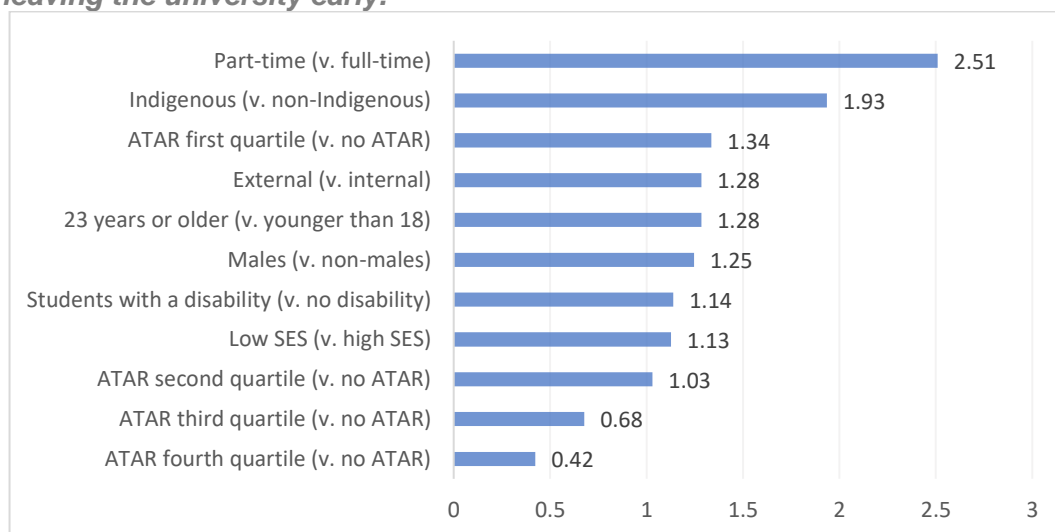
deferring, and of failing to return after deferring, which together results in complete withdrawal from the sector.

LEAVING AFTER COMMENCEMENT

Overall, around 22 per cent of students who commenced in 2011 were found to have taken leave or withdrawn from the higher education sector in the first three years of study, which represents more than 45,000 students. Students were around twice as likely to take leave after commencing university study than to defer an offer prior to commencement.

Our analysis of overall risk factors for students' leaving higher education broadly reflects the substantial body of previous research, which has examined the issue of early departure using HEIMS data (Birch & Miller, 2007; Department of Education and Training, 2017; Li & Carroll, 2017; Norton, Cherastidtham, & Mackey, 2018). Figure 6 shows selected factors that logistic regression modelling found were significantly associated with the likelihood of leaving university. It shows that studying part-time, having a low ATAR, being mature aged, being male and studying externally were associated with a higher likelihood of leaving university early. Our analysis also shows that several equity factors were associated with early departure: Indigenous, low SES, regional/remote and disability status were all independently associated with a higher propensity to take leave.

Figure 6: Odds ratios for selected student characteristics associated with the likelihood of a student leaving the university early.



For Indigenous students, we find that even once the covariates within HEIMS (prior academic achievement, equity group membership, age profile etc.) are accounted for, they remain at a substantially higher risk of leaving university early. Understanding the reasons for higher rates of leaving university still requires work and is not adequately explained by the quantitative models drawn from HEIMS data.

There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that factors such as the cultural climate on campus are important in explaining higher Indigenous student attrition rates (Behrendt, Larkin, Griew, & Kelly, 2012; Liddle, 2015; Raciti, Carter, Gilbey, & Hollinsworth, 2017). Fostering a whole of institution approach to building a more diverse and supportive climate on campus is a vital

component to improve the outcomes of Indigenous students, including leave-taking and encouraging students to return after a break. Furthermore, institutions must develop tailored student support interventions/initiatives that target some of the main barriers to Indigenous students' successful participation in higher education; financial pressures (Barney, 2018; Barney, 2016; Gore et al., 2017), familial obligations/issues (Barney, 2016; Day et al., 2015) while recognising key enablers of retention; family support (Barney, 2016), timely financial support (Barney, 2018; Day et al. 2015) and inclusive curricula and pedagogy (Day et al., 2015).

Patterns of leave for low SES students

Examining specific patterns of leaving university within the low SES student group highlighted some interesting results. After accounting for other differences, parental education still played a role in leaving. Low SES students with a university educated parent were less likely to leave than those with parents whose highest level of education was Year 12 or below. One of the strongest empirical predictors for leaving for low SES students was part-time study status.

There are some similarities between the predictors for low SES deferring and for low SES leaving, particularly with respect to regional or remote background, and ATAR. Regional and remote status were strong empirical predictors for deferring, and particularly remote status was a strong predictor for leaving. The higher students' ATAR, the less likely they were to defer and take leave. Students with no ATAR were also more likely to leave, though not more likely to defer.

Overall, the empirical predictors for leaving were similar for low SES university students compared to university students in aggregate. However, some of the characteristics associated with leaving, such as regional/remote residence, having no ATAR and/or a low ATAR profile, lower parental education levels and 'other' previous highest educational participation, were more likely to be found among low SES students. Low SES commencing students were also more likely to be Indigenous, which is another empirical risk factor for leaving.

Given the recent dramatic changes to teaching arrangements at virtually all Australian universities during the COVID-19 crisis, which has seen an enormous increase in online enrolments, our analysis provides a glimpse of the potential impact of these changes on students from low SES backgrounds. The data shows that the risk of a low SES student prematurely leaving their university is increased with online study, when all other factors are controlled in our regression model. However, the relative difference in leaving rates for low SES students compared to students overall appears to be slightly reduced among those studying online. Nonetheless, additional support will need to be provided to low SES cohorts who are now forced to learn online in this pandemic.

RETURNING TO STUDY AFTER LEAVE

HEIMS data was used to measure the proportion of students who returned to university within two years of initially leaving. The analysis found that 28 per cent of students returned to university within two years of taking a break from study, broadly in line with the findings from Harvey et al. (2017). This translates to nearly 13,000 students returning to higher education within two years of taking leave.

Figure 7 shows some of the selected factors found to be associated with the likelihood of return to study after leave. Again, we found a relationship between ATAR and the likelihood of returning to

study. The odds of a student with an ATAR in the top quartile returning to study after leave were 68 per cent higher than a student with no ATAR.

Figure 7: Odds ratio of selected factors significantly related to the likelihood of returning to study after a break.

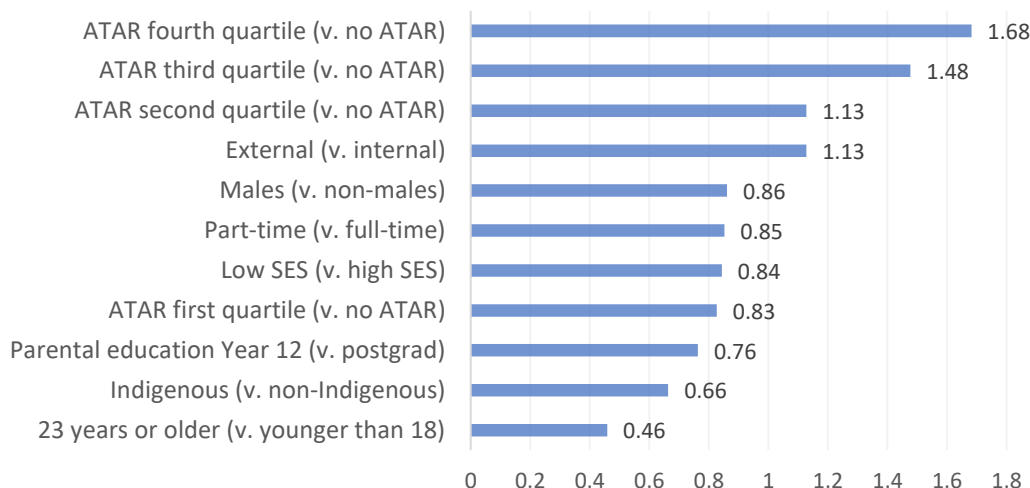


Figure 7 also shows that the odds of a student from a low SES background returning to higher education after leave were around 16 per cent lower than a high SES student. This finding means that low SES students were slightly more likely to leave university early and less likely to return after leave. These combined trends help to explain the noted gap in longer term completion rates between high SES and low SES students. Students from regional backgrounds and English-speaking backgrounds, students with lower prior achievement, Indigenous and mature age students and those who were first in family were less likely to return to study after leaving university.

Our findings regarding leave and return patterns of students studying externally are particularly salient given the current COVID-19 pandemic and the dramatic shift to online study. These data suggest that the greater flexibility of online learning may encourage and support non-linear pathways through higher education study, with a higher incidence of “stop-out” behaviours. Institutions may have to adjust existing procedures and practices to account for the increase in flexibility.

Nevertheless, we found a socio-economic dimension to the likelihood of returning to study among students enrolled externally. Students from low SES backgrounds who were studying externally were less likely to return to study than other domestic students studying externally. This fact, together with the finding that low SES students studying externally were more likely to leave in the first instance, means that extra effort may be required to support students from low SES backgrounds to return to study as online learning increases.

Survey of institutional responses to leave-taking

MAJOR FINDINGS

- Most respondents highlighted clear governance and reporting arrangements for managing leave-taking behaviour, though the level of priority varied by institution type.
- Respondents noted a number of specific interventions to increase rates of return to study, including communications, academic and personal counselling and financial support, though most felt these initiatives were only ‘somewhat effective.’
- Relatively few institutions monitored leave-taking by equity group or targeted initiatives to specific equity groups.
- Major constraints on improving rates of return to study were identified as limited availability of linked, accurate and timely data on deferral, leave-taking and return, and limited resources available to conduct widespread and tailored interventions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For universities

- That universities develop tailored return to study communications that are informed by data at student level, including equity group status.
- That universities invest in data systems and analytics to provide timely information on deferral, leave-taking and return to study behaviours, which can in turn inform communication and intervention strategies.
- That universities embed the principles of evidence-based practice and thorough program evaluation within all student success programs.

INTRODUCTION

A national survey of senior university staff was conducted to provide a broad snapshot of institutional activity regarding deferral and leave of absence. The survey covered strategic environment, governance arrangements and details of interventions conducted by institutions. Questions were designed to clarify broad national trends and responses, complementing the intensive research undertaken in our partner case studies and in semi-structured interviews conducted at a smaller number of select institutions.

Survey results revealed broad awareness of the issues surrounding leave-taking, with supporting students returning to study being a priority at most institutions. The majority of the fifteen responding institutions had a senior executive responsible for managing leave-taking behaviour and had

established governance and reporting arrangements to monitor these behaviours. Responses also revealed that most institutions had implemented specific interventions designed to improve the rates of return of those who took an intermission from their studies.

The level of priority given to leave-taking appeared to vary depending on the circumstances faced by respective institutions. Results indicated that institutions that tended to experience higher rates of deferral and leave of absence and/or lower rates of return, were more likely to treat the issue as a high priority and were more likely to intervene. By contrast, institutions with comparatively few students taking leave and the majority returning to study, such as the Group of Eight (Go8) institutions, appeared to attach a lower priority to addressing issues surrounding leave-taking.

Respondents identified a wide range of interventions designed to improve the return rates for leave takers. These measures included communication plans, such as electronic communication and phone calls; individual counselling or follow-up; provision of academic and careers counselling; and financial support. Respondents generally felt that their interventions were 'somewhat effective', emphasising the challenges inherent to improving return rates when many factors for leave-taking were beyond the control of their institution.

While most institutions considered the issue of leave-taking as a priority, and consequently had a range of initiatives to improve their rates of return, it was not perceived to be a specific equity problem by a significant proportion of universities investigated. Comparatively few institutions specifically monitored leave-taking for the six identified equity cohorts, and more than half of the interventions conducted by the institutions surveyed were not specifically targeted to students from an equity background.

METHODOLOGY

A survey of senior staff was conducted to develop understandings of institutional practices relating to encouraging deferrers and leave takers to return to study. The questionnaire collected high-level data on the strategic environment, governance arrangements and the details of interventions. A copy of the questionnaire is included in the report as Appendix 2.

Respondents were targeted using publicly available information from university websites. One senior staff member was recruited per institution to ensure the responses were representative of the sector generally. Identifying relevant participants was complicated because the responsibility for deferrers and leave takers was often split between portfolios. For example, deferral was often viewed as an issue of recruitment and, therefore, managed by recruitment and marketing departments, while responsibility for leave takers, who have enrolled as a student, often resided in student success portfolios.

To address this division, we primarily targeted staff at the Pro Vice-Chancellor level who were listed as having responsibility for "Students", "Student Success" or "Education". These staff were judged as being senior enough to understand the broader strategic environment within which the issue of leave-taking is located but also having knowledge (or at least able to enquire with their operational direct reports) of the interventions their institution had in place. Where no obvious candidate was apparent from our desktop review, we either targeted staff at a higher level, such as Deputy Vice-

Chancellors (Education), or senior staff closer to the operational level, such as Executive Directors working in a field connected to student success.

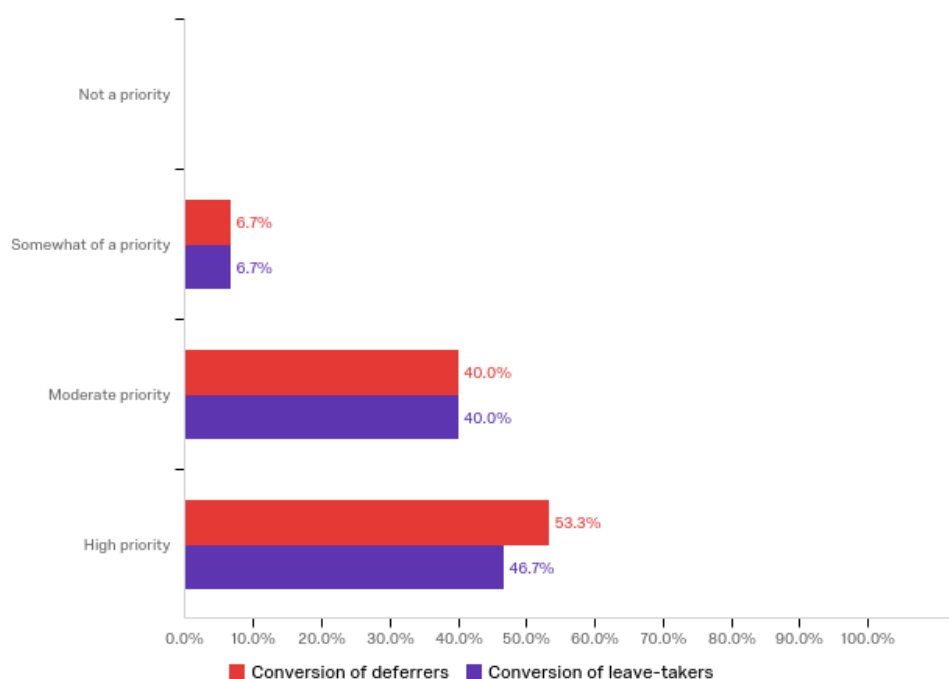
The survey was conducted using the Qualtrics online survey platform and representatives from all 37 Table A institutions (excluding the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education) were invited via email to participate in mid-November 2019. Three further reminder emails were sent to those who had not completed the survey over the next month.

The survey received 15 completed responses, representing a response rate of 40.5 per cent. While a relatively strong response rate was achieved, the small sample size means that, statistically speaking, there is likely to be a relatively large margin of error in the results. As such, the analysis focusses on broad trends identified within the survey and does not make statistical inferences about the perspectives of all institutions. Nonetheless, the survey received responses from a mix of institutional groupings, including four Group of Eight (Go8) institutions, two Innovative Research Universities (IRU) institutions, three Regional Universities Network (RUN) institutions and six unaffiliated institutions, ensuring the survey sample was relatively representative of the different perspectives between a range of institutions. In some cases, we examine survey responses according to these groupings to explore potential differences between institutional types.

STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT AND GOVERNANCE

Most staff surveyed indicated that encouraging students to return to study was a priority for their institution. Figure 8 shows that 90 per cent of staff felt that encouraging deferred students to return was either a 'high' or 'moderate' priority for their institutions. Slightly fewer respondents indicated that the conversion of those on a leave of absence was a priority. No respondents indicated that leave-taking was not a priority for their institution.

Figure 8: To what extent is the conversion of deferrers or leave takers a priority for your institution?



When the responses to this question are disaggregated by institutional grouping type, we found that IRU and RUN institutions were more likely to rate both the conversion of deferred and leave of absence students as a 'high' priority for their institutions, while Go8 institutions were more likely to rate both as a 'moderate' priority or 'somewhat of a priority'. Such findings are unsurprising given known differences in the rate of leave-taking and subsequent return based on the 'status' of the institution.

The priority given to the issue of deferral and leave of absence is also reflected by the fact that most respondents indicated that their institutional strategy documents refer to encouraging leave takers to return to study. Sixty per cent of respondents indicated that the conversion of deferrers was mentioned in strategy documents and 67 per cent indicated that encouraging leave takers to return to study was mentioned.

Most institutions had clear governance and responsibility arrangements in place for the issue of deferral and leave-taking. Just over 73 per cent of respondents indicated that there was a senior executive responsible for deferral and leave of absence. Many institutions also had committees with oversight of deferral and leave of absence, with 67 per cent of respondents indicating there was a committee responsible for deferral and 53 per cent indicating there was one for leave of absence.

The tracking and monitoring of leave-taking at institutions was found to be variable. Over 60 per cent of respondents indicated that their institutions have mechanisms in place to track the conversion rate of leave takers overall, though this reduced to 30 per cent for specific equity cohorts. Responses suggested that, while leave-taking is generally considered a priority at most of the institutions surveyed, data and tracking remain limited, particularly for students from identified equity groups. Limitations of data may potentially affect the range and precision of services and interventions offered to different student cohorts.

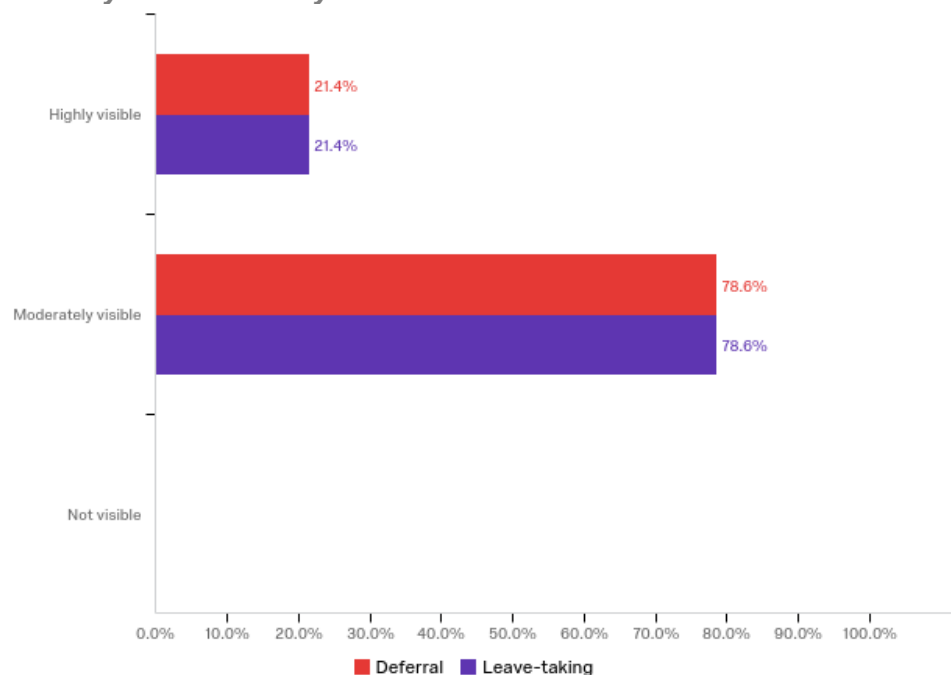
Respondents were also asked to indicate which of the six identified equity groups might be more likely to engage in leave-taking behaviours. In general, staff perceptions broadly reflected the findings from our analysis of HEIMS data, which suggested that students from low SES backgrounds, regional students and Indigenous students were more likely to withdraw from their studies and struggle to return. Around 67 per cent of respondents identified regional students were more likely to defer and leave after commencement, while 80 per cent identified Indigenous students as being more likely to leave after commencement.

Awareness of leave patterns for students from low SES backgrounds was mixed. Most respondents (80 per cent) indicated that they thought low SES students were more likely to defer their studies. This broadly aligns with our analysis of HEIMS data that showed low SES students were slightly more likely to defer an offer but that it wasn't due to socio-economic status itself. More than 86 per cent of respondents indicated that low SES students were more likely to leave university after commencement. These results suggest that there was a slight mismatch between the perceptions of risk from senior staff and the quantitative evidence on low SES as a risk factor, particularly for deferral.

To evaluate the awareness of policies around leave-taking we asked senior executives to evaluate the visibility of these policies for both students and staff. Figure 9 shows that while no senior staff

rated such policies as “not visible”, comparatively few rated them as “highly visible”. Results suggest more work may be required to communicate institutional policies.

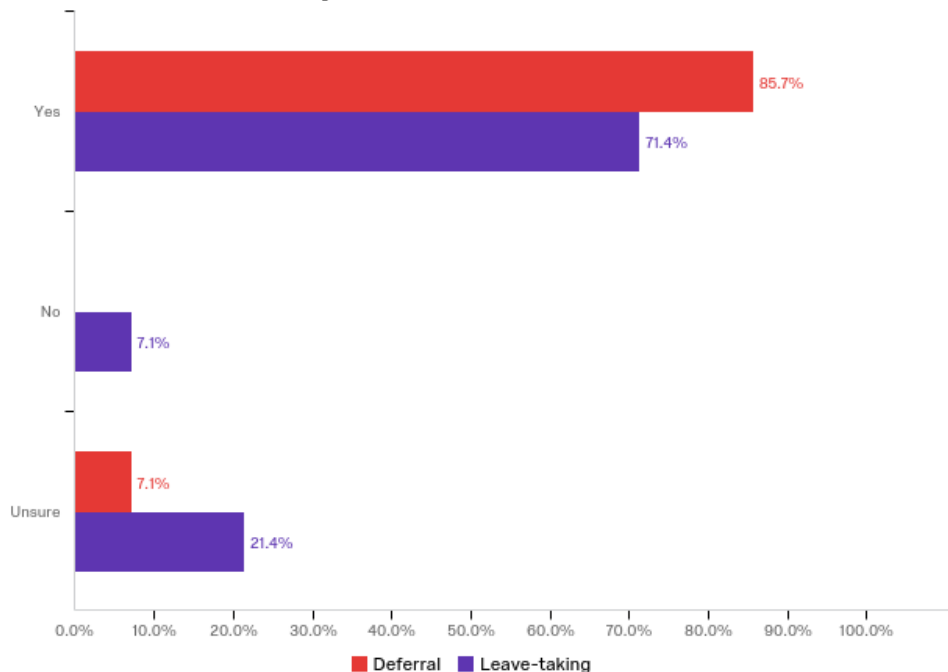
Figure 9: To what extent do you feel policies and procedures regarding deferral and leave of absence respectively are visible at your institution?



INTERVENTIONS

The survey collected high level information regarding interventions deployed to help deferrers and leave takers return to study. As expected, Figure 10 shows that almost all institutions had interventions in place to encourage deferred students to take up their offer, while 71 per cent said that interventions were in place for students who took a leave of absence.

Figure 10: Does your institution have any interventions in place to encourage deferrers and/or leave takers to return to study?



When responses were further examined by institutional grouping, we found that IRU and RUN institutions were more likely than Go8 institutions to have interventions in place. Three of the four Go8 institutions surveyed indicated that they had interventions to encourage deferred students to return to study, but only one of the four had interventions designed to encourage leave takers to return to study. By contrast, 100 per cent of both IRU and RUN institutions surveyed indicated that they had interventions to encourage both deferrers and leave takers to return to study. When combined with the results from our HEIMS analysis, this suggests that institutional action generally reflects the scale of the issue at the institution in question.

We also sought responses on the types of interventions conducted by institutions. One of the most commonly provided services to students who had taken leave from their studies was individual counselling/consulting, which could include career and academic guidance. Stronger measures, such as accommodation support and financial assistance, appear to be used relatively infrequently.

Responses to the free text field highlighted the importance of communications as a potential intervention, with most respondents indicating that they conduct some form of tailored communication to improve rates of return. The nature and intensity of communications varied across institutions, and some were found to use multi-channel approaches. In at least one instance, communication with leave takers had been contracted to external third parties.

At the least intensive level, Electronic Direct Mail (EDM) approaches were commonly used by institutions to encourage students to return to study and guide them through the process of enrolling after deferring their offers. These are standardised emails sent to students that included information regarding policy and procedures relating to taking up an offer after a break and outlining potential support services for students. The sophistication of the EDM campaigns varied. One institution

indicated that their EDM campaign was personalised to some extent based on a small number of student characteristics recorded in their Student Information System.

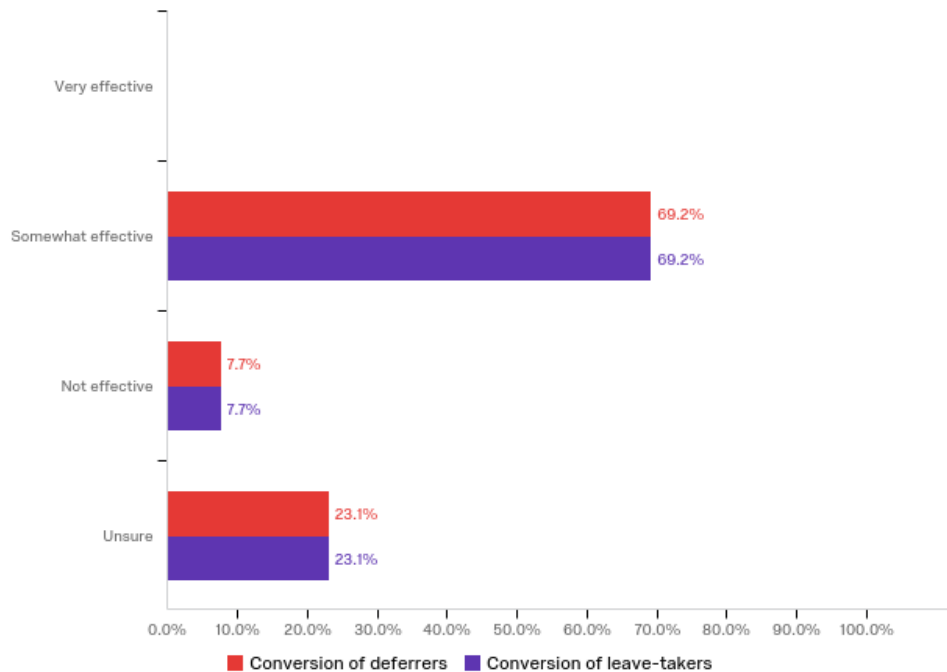
At least five of the 15 institutions surveyed indicated that they make outbound phone calls to students who have deferred around the time when they are scheduled to decide about returning to university. These calls were often made by dedicated teams specifically tasked with supporting students to succeed at university. Given the relatively high cost of such interventions, they are often 'rationed' to certain sub-groups, such as those predicted to have a lower chance of conversion, equity cohorts, those who failed to respond to earlier EDM communications or students from particular entry pathways.

The free text responses revealed that the content of these telephone calls included "mapping institutional process and initiatives" to students, referring students to support services that might help support their return to study and offering academic advising if a student's course preferences had changed during their break. In addition, several institutions indicated social media engagement and live chat as other methods for communicating with students who had taken leave.

We explored the extent to which interventions were tailored to students from equity backgrounds. More than half of our respondents indicated that they did not provide tailored support services for leave takers from equity backgrounds, again suggesting that many institutions do not perceive the issue of leave-taking as an equity issue. Of the institutions that indicated that they provided tailored programs for specific equity cohorts, the most commonly cited cohort was Indigenous students, followed by students with a disability. Relatively few institutions had interventions specifically targeted to low SES students or regional students. The extent to which institutions were employing analytics to quantify the likelihood of individual students returning to study, based on behavioural and predictive indicators beyond geo-demographic tags, was also unclear. Responses suggested that most communications and strategies were at a broad cohort level rather than tailored to sub-groups of perceived risk.

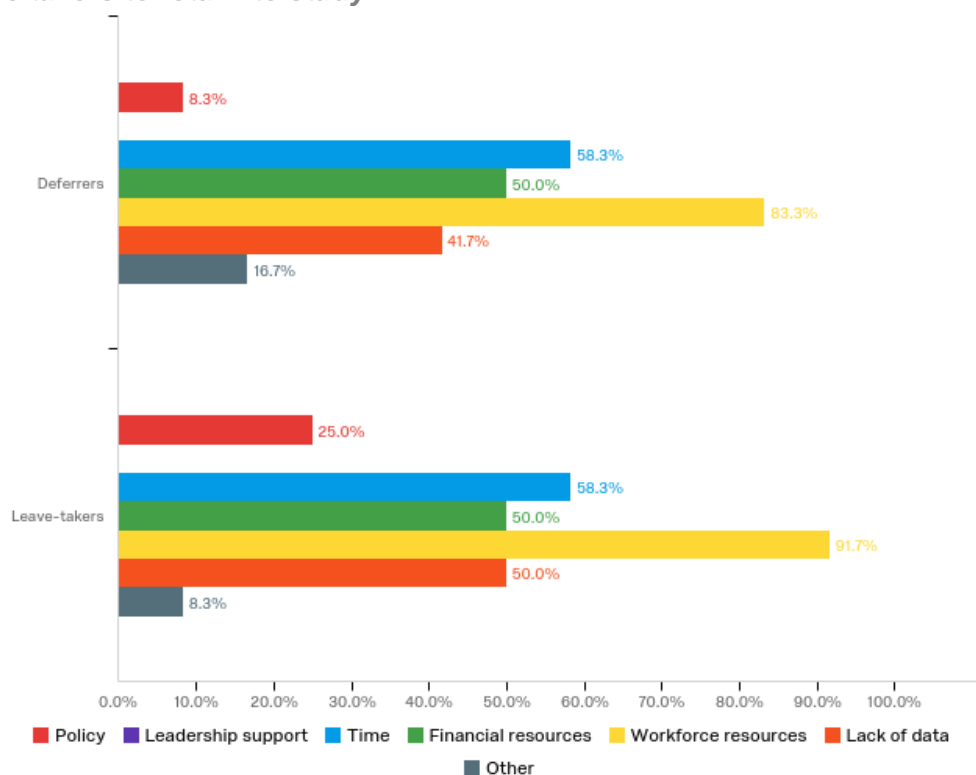
The diverse nature of institutional communications and strategies was further highlighted by the perceived effectiveness of return to study initiatives. Figure 11 shows that many respondents (69 per cent) indicated that their initiatives were "somewhat effective". A comparatively small proportion of respondents indicated that their initiatives were "not effective" but no respondents said their initiatives were "very effective". This result largely reflects the broader literature, which suggests that most institutional interventions intended to improve student outcomes often have a marginal effect (Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2019; Ortagus, Tanner, & McFarlin, 2020). This suggests that rigorous evaluation is required to feed into a process of continuous improvement to ensure interventions designed to help students complete qualifications are efficient and effective.

Figure 11: To what extent do you agree with the following statements regarding the overall effectiveness of your institutional initiatives to encourage the conversion of deferrers and leave takers?



Respondents were asked to share what they felt were the biggest constraints on the ability of institutions to effectively support students to return to study. Figure 12 shows that the most commonly cited constraint was the lack of workforce (labour) resources able to be deployed to encourage return to study. A lack of time, financial resources and relevant data were also commonly cited as major constraints to improving support for leave takers. A lack of leadership support and/or institutional and government policy were rarely cited as constraints.

Figure 12: What constraints, if any, exist with regard to effectively supporting deferrers and/or leave takers to return to study?



Respondents were also invited to list the most commonly faced constraints in a free text field. Several institutions emphasised the difference between factors that institutions could influence and those that were beyond control. They suggested that many of the reasons cited for taking a break from study, such as personal or health issues, were largely external or beyond the control of institutions. Such responses were consistent with our previous research on the inelasticity of leave-taking (Harvey et al., 2017). Respondents also indicated that resourcing was the main limitation in the free text fields, emphasising that many of the interventions highlighted above, particularly call centres, are resource intensive.

The availability of linked, high quality and timely data on deferral and leave-taking was also cited as a factor that impaired efforts to improve conversion rates. Institutions were often having to make pragmatic use of existing systems and resources available to them, rather than fit for purpose systems to monitor leave-taking and administer interventions. Relatedly, one institution also emphasised that it was challenging but necessary to ensure communications to students are consistent and effectively coordinated from an entire institution/student life cycle perspective. In many cases, communications and advising were provided by separate departments within universities, with responsibility for deferral often with the marketing departments, and responsibility for leave of absence and stop outs with the student or student success portfolios.

Several staff suggested greater use of individual case management as one way of improving the effectiveness of interventions designed to encourage students to return to study. This approach could include individualised “return to study plans” that could meet the needs of individual students,

more data and improved understandings on the factors related to leave-taking and return to study and more sophisticated/efficient communications.

Senior staff interviews

MAJOR FINDINGS

- Interviewees confirmed that most institutions are in a transitional stage, with new strategies being developed to promote the return to study of those deferring or taking leave. Communications are becoming more tailored and personalised and more resources are being directed to manage deferral and leave-taking.
- Heightened promotion of return to study and retention relates to constrained financial environments, student demands, improved data capacity and performance-based funding incentives.
- Use of analytics and student tracking were perceived to be increasing, but data limitations remained a constraint to more effective interventions to encourage return to study.
- Inflexible course structures, limited cross-institutional cooperation, resourcing and cultural barriers were highlighted as constraints to effective management of leave-taking and return to study.
- Interviewees highlighted the importance of early support and pre-departure advice to reduce the prevalence of deferral and leave-taking. Measures included outreach within secondary schools; early provision of academic and course advice to students contemplating deferral; and first year transition initiatives to increase students' sense of belonging and reduce leave-taking behaviour.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For universities

- That universities develop flexible course structures and cross-institutional cooperation to minimise leave-taking and maximise the potential for students to return to study from leave.
- That universities provide academic and course advice to prospective students considering deferral, including within secondary school outreach programs
- That universities focus on first year transition strategies to increase belonging and reduce leave-taking behaviour, recognising that recruitment is a long game for many students.

INTRODUCTION

Following the institutional survey, a small number of universities were selected to participate in an in-depth qualitative investigation. The purpose of the interviews was to develop a detailed understanding of diverse universities' policies and practices for deferrals and leave of absence. Six universities were identified and invited to participate in this phase, considering their institutional status, enrolled students' demographic characteristics, and available knowledge about their institutional strategies and interventions obtained from the prior policy review phase. Senior leaders such as Pro Vice-Chancellors and Executive Directors were asked to provide views on broad leadership and governance issues; institutional policies governing deferral and leave; specific strategies and interventions; evidence of effectiveness; and challenges.

Responses suggested that deferral and leave of absence have received increased attention in recent years, as universities understand the importance of securing enrolments and re-recruiting students in a difficult financial climate, and as performance-based funding measures are introduced. Supporting student flexibility was perceived as a high priority, communications strategies were becoming increasingly sophisticated, and institutions were beginning to use data and tracking of students to improve the effectiveness of their interventions. Nevertheless, respondents suggested that the extent to which data was driving strategy remained limited, and there were a range of cultural challenges. Overall, responses suggested that students who defer and take leave were becoming a higher priority for most institutions. However, most approaches appeared to be at a transitional stage, awaiting more sophisticated data capability and greater resourcing to ensure improved retention of both groups.

METHODOLOGY

Pro Vice-Chancellors (PVCs) of Students (or equivalent) were sent an email invitation for an interview and asked to recruit another two to three operational staff in their portfolio whom they considered "good informants" (Spradley, 1979). Of the six universities selected, five were ultimately recruited, and the final sample of interviewees included two PVCs and 13 team leaders. The interviews were semi-structured and variations of the interview protocols were developed for senior executive members (the PVCs) and the department leaders (see Appendix 3).

The interviews took place either face-to-face or online, depending on participant availability and preference. All interviews were recorded digitally, transcribed, and analysed for content and themes using NVivo 12 software. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify themes that emerged from the data and general patterns across participants. In this case, the researchers explored the original text, coding and reading between the lines to identify events, occurrences and perceptions found to be conceptually similar in nature or related in meaning, which were grouped into themes or categories (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A codebook was developed to guide the process of coding transcripts. Once the coding process was completed, related themes were merged into broader themes.

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

Priority

Respondents indicated that the issue of deferral and leave of absence had gained more prominence among universities, regardless of institutional type or the characteristics of students. Many interviewees reported the increasing complexity of students' life cycles and its effects on their study arrangements and learning experiences, which resulted in greater awareness of the issue:

I would say it's having much more visibility, particularly because of our gap year project that's focussed on regional students' decision making around post-school options and when. But prior to that I would have said no, very little visibility. Now there's definitely awareness or interest in improving things (INTERVIEWEE 4).

I think up until a few years ago, we did almost nothing about it because we are reasonably in a comfortable position recruitment wise, so it wasn't considered as a high-profile issue. But as things have tightened up and so on, the group has got more attention and I know there is a communication strategy with those on leave of absence (INTERVIEWEE 7).

Despite increasing prominence, efforts to encourage students who deferred or took a leave of absence to return to study did not appear to be as highly prioritised at all institutions. Institutions with generally low rates of leave-taking and high rates of return (as evidenced by the analysis of HEIMS data) appeared to give leave-taking a relatively low priority. However, the advent of performance-based funding is focussing universities on maximising retention and may increase as more Government funds are devoted directly to performance against such metrics:

Not at this moment. Not at this university. We haven't identified right now that as a major issue for us. We usually have fairly good retention, so in fact, retention wasn't necessarily a key focus, although we do have it as a key focus in terms of how we can measure our performance. We have it as a performance measurement that we want to improve our retention, but I don't think we are at a situation where there's such a crisis for our university (INTERVIEWEE 3).

It has certainly been not necessarily a macro focus, but it's been a micro-focus. [Leave-taking] was definitely something that we started to focus on a couple of years ago around recognising that's a cohort that has been flying under the radar and as I said, we did align some strategies but probably not as much focus as we could put on that cohort. It's certainly not one of the top priorities right now (INTERVIEWEE 6).

Governance

Growing attention to deferral and leave of absence also manifested in the structural support established at different universities, although administrative structures varied. In most cases, a senior executive member was responsible for the overarching institutional strategies used to encourage students who defer or take a leave of absence to return to their studies, and it was common practice across the universities that different teams of operational staff worked on a daily basis on these matters.

It is important to note that in several of the institutions interviewed, there appeared to be a trend towards creating more agile organisational structures and this was affecting the management of deferrals and leave of absence specifically, and student success generally. In the past, responsibility for various aspects of the student life cycle often fell to different portfolios and it was not uncommon for teams to work in their own silos with little communication and coordination. Some interviewees reported that there had been a deliberate recalibration of institutional structures in recent years to foster collaboration and cooperation to address major issues in student success and experience. The following example vividly illustrates the structural changes taking place as related to institutional action of student leave-taking:

We work closely with the division of administrative services. They gather the lists from the central student database. We'll then proactively do the calls out to the students connecting them into services. We'll send them a report on these are the students that were contacted, these were the things that were coming up and so one of the things we do with our retention when we make calls, we do note what were the key questions or concerns. We've also started to work more to have more collaboration across the group that's recruiting students (INTERVIEWEE 6).

POLICY AND PROCEDURE

In response to the increasing flexibility in students' lives and study arrangements, many Australian universities have developed visible and transparent policies and procedures for students to follow when they defer their offer or take a leave of absence during their candidature. The administrative process for deferrals and leave of absence is, in many cases, automated and students could apply for either via an online system that individual universities provided.

Visibility and transparency

Most participants agreed that their policies and procedures for deferrals and leave of absence were visible and easy to understand for staff and students:

It's all self-service and it's all visible to the students. All their options are visible to them when they log into the system, and they can read what each one of those things means. It explains if you suspend for one semester or two semesters. Yes, it's all quite clear (INTERVIEWEE 1).

You would see it on everything, like on unit of study outlines. You would see it on the first slides at the start of lectures, and things like that. In student mentoring programs, people would openly sort of talk about that. So that was well known (INTERVIEWEE 2).

Nevertheless, instances of confusion and/or lack of clarity were noted, and institutions cited that they were continuing to improve their processes. Some participants noted the need to implement a regular policy review process given the multiple stakeholders involved and the matrix of responsibilities:

There are the people who are making the policies and who are discussing the policies around it, who talk about it semi-regularly (INTERVIEWEE 8).

The current policies are broad, and a review process is taking place to make the policies more articulated to both staff and students (INTERVIEWEE 10).

There may be some confusion amongst students, the confusion amongst staff, and that is the key reason why we're looking at improving the business process (INTERVIEWEE 11).

Flexibility and practicality

In addition to ensuring that policy and procedures were visible and articulated to students and staff, participants also gave examples of various measures designed to improve policy responsiveness so that more flexibility could be granted to individual students in consideration of their various circumstances and needs. In some cases, policy changes had occurred by centring the student voice and involving students more directly in the policy and planning discussions. Flexibility included consideration of different student groups, particularly a perceived need to accommodate the cultural obligations of many Indigenous students when framing policies around leave of absence.

We had an equal number of students on our steering committee as staff and we had a very deliberate, student engagement strategy around it and for the first time I had mature aged students, I had indigenous students, I had really remote students actually being deeply engaged in the policy review and that meant we started to understand what was the lived experience of those policies (INTERVIEWEE 6).

The majority of students, if they turn up at our door and want to come back in, we're going to let them come back... We also offer more flexibility, so that if a student, life's gotten in the way or they've been caught up with the bushfires or whatever it is, we allow deferrals for non-deferrable courses, so that's a way we operate some flexibility too (INTERVIEWEE 12).

Certainly, we know Indigenous students are likely to want, for cultural reasons and family obligations, time out. Again, it's always that balance of how much time can you give. There was a Hobsons report done on retention, and that would have been done I think in 2018 or 17. If you look up the Hobsons suite of reports on retention, you'll see they did actually recommend that leave of absence should be extended and much longer than normal kind of year (INTERVIEWEE 14).

Some participants highlighted the limitations of course structures, whose design prohibits multiple entry and exit points. More commonly, however, was the tension noted between offering greater flexibility to students and increasing challenges of process management. Respondents noted that there may be were students are seeking insurance rather than holding a genuine interest in studying the course deferred.

We are still having those discussions. This is my opinion on the topic. It may tighten up. I think at the moment we can defer for up to two years. And there's been examples of people who have been granted additional periods of deferral beyond that. So, I think that's relatively generous. I could see that tightening up here to be one year once, which probably fits really nicely in that sort of on-campus deferral

use case for someone who needs to earn money to generate independence and get Centrelink (INTERVIEWEE 8).

I think, to be honest, [we've] been probably more reasonable than is probably for the university's benefit. And they've tried to tighten them up a little bit. But the university's policies, historically, would have allowed a person to defer, all as much as 24 months. They could take an offer and they could defer it for two years, basically. What we discovered was that's very much an outlier compared to other institutions who generally go 12 or 18 months. We also said a student could basically defer a second time as well. They could take that same offer and defer again. And it was very difficult to police and manage, and I think the idea here was we wanted to be as friendly to our students. We wanted to be as accommodating as possible. It was like an insurance policy. I'll get an offer from the university and I'll just defer it. And even though I don't have any intention of studying at the university, it's just as a placeholder more than anything else just in case I don't get into probably what would be my preferred institution (INTERVIEWEE 9).

For the student, the bar was super-low. What they had to do is to raise their hand to defer their offer. It was just a very simple form, basically. And it required very little of them. It required very little investment or commitment on their part. They didn't have to set up an account, they didn't have to login. They didn't have to really invest anything themselves to do that. We're trying to weed out the people who had no interest in studying here. We deployed this change in January or February of last year. We made it more of a self-service. It requires the student to then create an account and a login. We talk to them and treat them as if we expect that they're going to be studying here. It's not just an automatic that you're going through this. We expect you're going to study. It raised the bar a little bit. It added this element of self-service to go along with it (INTERVIEWEE 9).

Consequently, some universities were perceived to be tightening up their deferral processes in particular and requiring more purposeful activity from students before granting requests for leave.

INTERVENTION AND ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

As the issue of student deferral and leave of absence appears to be gaining prominence, with a number of universities having implemented a wide range of interventions and services to support the return of students on leave. These engagement strategies may also suggest a shift in the perception of students who suspend their studies. As we have argued previously, students who withdraw or take leave need to be seen not as 'drop-outs', but instead as alumni, partial completers and members of the university community (Harvey et al., 2017). Universities appear to be paying more attention to their cohort of partial completers, known in the US as students with 'some college, no degree', and recognising the financial and reputational importance of engagement.

Institutional responses generally included communication strategies, monitoring and tracking of students, early retention interventions, transition supports for students returning to study and referring students to existing student supports. Student communications were the most commonly discussed intervention and seemed to either underpin or support most other interventions raised by

interviewees. Other strategies highlighted in the interviews included more inclusive curricula, academic advisors, micro-credentialing options and a personalised management mechanism.

Communication campaigns

Participants reported various techniques employed to keep connected with students who defer or take a leave of absence, including emails, text messages, phone calls and postcards. Information was commonly sent to these student cohorts at different milestones to encourage timely return to study. The following comments serve as good examples:

So, if you go back three, four, or five years, you would defer from the university and then we would go quiet and then 12 months from then we'd send you a new offer. We were missing an opportunity to talk to a deferred student as if they were still part of the university community. So, what we now have is a series of about three or four emails that go to a student in the lead up to their new offer so that we can, from a marketing point of view, replace ourselves in that student's consideration set so that when they get that new offer from us, it's not the first thing they've heard from us in 12 months. We have got a project about to kick off in the new year where we're trying to make that campaign a little bit more personalised (INTERVIEWEE 8).

As the census date approaches, we're working with students around what they want to do with their degrees, and some of them do decide to defer their position, and the deferral process at the university is that you defer for one year of study. But what we do is, in the lead up to Semester Two, contact that group of deferrers and reach out to them, and do a couple of things. One is, let them know that we're holding a face-to-face event that they're welcome to attend if they'd like to. Secondly, the process, if they would like to commence their study in Semester Two in the same course, if it's open, or alternatively, they may have had a change of heart and want to start in a new degree, tell them the process that they would need to follow to start in Semester Two in a new degree. We do that through emails, sometimes text messaging, and also some out-calling as well. There's a small percentage of deferrers who do decide, "Okay, yeah, I've had Semester One off, now I'm ready to start, so I'll come back and commence in Semester Two." (INTERVIEWEE 12).

Several interviewees highlighted a change in the nature of communications with students; from largely bureaucratic language, which was framed by institutional processes and policies, to language that was student-centric as informed by research in academic fields including psychology. Again, such language was designed to reduce stigmatisation, promote growth mindsets and personalise messaging.

Effectively setting up a way to send students regular communication every perhaps three months or six months or depending on how long they're away. Just checking in, effectively. It wouldn't be bureaucratic and a long, complicated email, with, dear student, whatever. You want to be personalised because you can do that now with artificial intelligence. How are you going? Just checking in. And then also to remind students if there are deadlines, in case they forget. Oh, just to let you know that you're due to come back. And what's your thinking around... Do you want to talk to

the student advisor? That kind of stuff. Just really engaging with them, but not sending them links to policy, no. No one wants that (INTERVIEWEE 3).

What we've got on the cards coming up is we're revamping all of our communications because what we found is they're often very administrative and we've been really interested in the work that's come out of the United States led by David Yeager which is looking at some of the work from Dweck around growth mindset and looking at normalising difficulty, framing more growth mindset concepts into language and that makes a significant difference, the research has shown, around how students then respond. That's how we're trying to tackle it moving forward (INTERVIEWEE 6).

Emails and phone calls are used to engage students who take a leave of absence. A significant change of the communication strategies took place last year to make the nature of communication shift from administrative to student focussed. The language was changed to be less bureaucratic and to encourage students to return to their study. The new communication strategies have been included in professional development programs for university staff to apply to communications with all students (INTERVIEWEE 10).

While interviewees felt this renewed language improved the effectiveness of student communications, there remained limited tailoring of messaging based on data analytics, with deferrers typically viewed as a group.

Data collection mechanism for deferrals and leave-taking

Many universities appear to be in transition from generic strategies and communications to responses tailored to individual students. Data analytics were perceived as central to this transition, with respondents aware of the need to understand the different causes of leave and deferral and the behavioural predictors of attrition, and design strategies that responded to specific circumstances of individual students. Most respondents noted that universities were trying to improve their analytics and ability to provide individualised advice, but that transition was slow given the complexity of the organisation and the multiple stakeholders involved, from teaching and faculty staff through to central service staff.

That would be part of the analysis of the data that we use to find out who defers and why. It will be all part of what we do every year or even more often to look at our data. How many students are progressing, and it will be part of the full progression picture (INTERVIEWEE 12).

Having an understanding of why they are deferring and perhaps see whether it's possible to match them with some form of career and academic advice that perhaps might help them before they go. It's all pre-emptive. Pre-empting the problem but also don't wait until you need to react. So, my idea is that you do have to do that kind of work. Ideally, you want to have a case management approach... Support them before they go, to understand who they are, why they are doing that and then follow up with them, it's important moment. Otherwise they'd probably go (INTERVIEWEE 3).

Currently, the university is tracking the number of students who take leave of absence, but not the reason. A new CRM [Customer Relationship Management System] is due this June, which is assumed to improve the data collection mechanism and reporting system via collecting more detailed information (INTERVIEWEE 10).

We do record our data, so we know how many people have deferred each year, how many are on leave of absence, et cetera, we also have an exit survey that our planning and analytical services colleagues do. That survey is a telephone survey of people that have left. It's done every second year or ever year. And that shows why people have left the university. It's a very short questionnaire, and it's done on the phone, and it shows clearly that the majority of the reasons are what used to be called, "Life gets in the way." It's probably the standard stuff that you'd see at every other university. Finances, family commitments, commitments (INTERVIEWEE 12).

The development of analytics to support interventions was a clear new frontier, particularly in light of performance-based funding drivers to reduce attrition, and the shift towards student-centred institutional behaviours.

Some respondents identified specific examples in which the provision of more detailed information and data could inform tailored communications:

One of the bits of data that we do collect at the time of deferral is the reason that someone has chosen to defer. And we think there's an opportunity for us to customise that campaign that they get to include support for those particular reasons. So, for argument's sake, if someone told us they're deferring for financial reasons, we might be able to make sure that there's some information about scholarships in that sort of email series. Same for some of our flexibility arrangements and some of those other things that we can point at someone who's having some drama (INTERVIEWEE 8).

Others also noted the need not only to collect data but to manage and translate data effectively and ethically into action.

I would say from an analytics point of view, our data strategy is probably in desperate need of a revamping and an update and one of our biggest challenges is our data systems don't necessarily always talk to each other. We don't have a whole of university customer relationship management plan and that makes it really difficult then to look at and to create a full data picture of what's going on. So for example, we've tried predictive analytics where you get the list of students and what we found actually is those kinds of strategies when it comes to the intervention, the more personalized, the more you can connect to students in a way that's relevant to where they're at, the more that then we notice leads to positive help seeking behaviour. Simply calling a student from a list we've found hasn't been an effective strategy (INTERVIEWEE 6)

We do have access to that data but again, it goes back to usage of that data. If there's a trend that we noticed, we might flag it for the relevant unit or faculty, but

we don't really do anything beyond that with the data. Structurally the way that universities are structured around these different service doors, I think that's a major pain point from a data point of view, having too much data, not being able to use it well. Another pain point is the way we mobilise and use data to design intervention strategies, that's been a problem. (INTERVIEWEE 6).

Certainly, I want to be able to make better use of learning analytics to monitor engagement online, while we're also monitoring engagement on campus. I really need to understand the percentage of students who are just not engaged and do not appear to be connected in any way. They are our biggest risk of attrition (INTERVIEWEE 14).

Again, the complexity of institutions was noted as a barrier to effective use of analytics. Data should be interpreted wisely and effectively so that they can inform policy making and practice, and records within different units and departments should be shared to generate more integrated interventions and services.

Pre-departure interventions

Unsurprisingly, many participants stressed the importance of early interventions, which refer to initiatives before students make their decision to defer or take a leave of absence. Both researchers and practitioners have recognised that it is more difficult for universities to bring the students back once they have left the campus than to prevent them from leaving.

I think that there is a lot of research around increasing the familiarity and belonging. So, a lot of outreach campaigns seek to build that idea of a cohort, of a sense of belonging and a sense that you could feel welcome and a part of this place before you even take up your offer (INTERVIEWEE 4).

If a student's thinking about taking leave, they can, there's a whole automated process for organising it, but they probably talk with academics about what they're planning to do. Have some academic advice because there are always academics who are, there's first year directors, second year directors, there are whole course directors, there are all sorts of academics that look after people (INTERVIEWEE 1).

I've got two careers counsellors in widening participation. I've had them for eight years but they work in the field with pre tertiary and so they are experts in taking people who don't know what they want to do when they grow up and helping them make a decision and then experts in finding the cheapest, fastest pathways. They are two different things. One's career counselling, one's pathways advice. And the second part of that is highly technical because you've got to look at price, you've got to look at TAFE, you've got to... Because going a university is not the answer for most people. That's cheaper and better ways to do the thing. We've had to invent that capacity within the university to deploy it to the conversion group (INTERVIEWEE 7).

We will sometimes talk to a student who is leaning towards deferring and that's when we'll have those discussions around some of the support services that are available

to help them with the reason that they are choosing to defer. It's probably more aimed at students who we just haven't had a response from and those who are about to defer and seeing if we can prevent them from deferring. It is quite effective. We see about 20 percentage points more people who we speak to convert to an acceptance compared to those we don't. So, that's pretty good for us (INTERVIEWEE 8).

Once people have made the decision to leave, it can be really difficult to get them to come back, because they've made that decision. One of the other groups within the university is the Student Experience Office. And in the lead-up to census day, they work with what you described as at-risk groups. They do work with a small focus group of students to reach out to them and offer a very personalised approach to make sure that they're aware of all the different support services available to them (INTERVIEWEE 13).

The other thing we've introduced this year is final-year students contacting transitioning students who are coming in, at the point at which they've accepted the offer, before they've even enrolled, to welcome them, to find out what was motivating them to enrol at this university and into that particular program? Also, to find out what they know about the program, what they know about university life, and flag any students that appear to be at risk, because they're over-enrolled or they're highly stressed, concerned about academic literacy, financial ... whatever. Then, getting their permission to follow those students up (INTERVIEWEE 14).

In addition, at least one of the universities interviewed said their institution was working to communicate to young people while they were still at secondary school. Communications regarding both the potential positive and negative outcomes of student deferral was being incorporated into the broader outreach activities, and were designed to help young people make informed decisions on deferment or encourage later return.

One piece where we are designing a communications campaign is that supports regional students' gap year decision making. Social cost, financial cost, and indecision are identified as the three major factors impacting regional students' decision making on transitions to university. And some of those things like a scholarship app builder, a career finder, subject finder. So there are some online digital tools and apps that might support that decision making. As well as links to relevant articles and information that seek to counter that indecision, social cost and financial cost. And for us the key messaging has been about reframing and information heavy counterpoints to some of the misinformation or mythologising about why you might take a gap year, or why you might need to take a gap year. What it is about ensuring that that package of support information is well-communicated in our outreach activities, so that it's then equipping students with as much clear ... So that they can, you know, informed decision making such that if it is still to defer. The great thing about the conceptualisation I think is that it's also about ensuring that they stay connected to their goal such that it might make the re-enrolment more likely (INTERVIEWEE 4).

Re-engagement and re-recruitment

Several interviewees discussed interventions designed to encourage students who had taken a break from study to return when their circumstances had changed. This was largely conducted via telephone calls from student support staff. Leave takers were usually encouraged to consider themselves as members of the university community and supported in their transition back to study:

We did a proactive reach out to the students within those cohorts. The goal was to check in on how they're doing, are they thinking about transitioning back and the goal of that was then to support their transition back so that would often mean then connecting them to support for learning, like a learning advisor to help them then proactively manage that transition back (INTERVIEWEE 6).

Nonetheless, participants also noted the limitations in engaging off-campus students:

But certainly from my perspective, the email is not effective. Contacting them via the portal or learning management is not generally effective. We do however see to personal emails, because we know when students are not on campus, they're not checking their university emails necessarily. The preference is always going to be on campus. They're not often logging in online. They may not be picking up the phone. Their phone numbers are not even right, or they're out of date so there's some real constraints just around the logistics of being able to contact students, even if you had endless resources, and people on the ground able to do intensive work to connect with them and to keep them on track. There is just that limitation of if they're not on campus, they're not actively enrolled, it is quite difficult to keep that communication going. Not from lack of will but lack of a medium to reach them (INTERVIEWEE 14).

While more research is required, it appears there is some nascent evidence to suggest well designed and targeted interventions can make a material impact on the re-engagement of students who have taken a break from study.

Transitional supports and ongoing monitoring

In addition to preventative interventions, participants suggested that the first year is extremely critical for students' retention and success and, therefore, universities had implemented various measures to help students experience a smooth transition and to consistently monitor their progress.

The transition team do conduct two things. One, we have track and connect during first year and that's a peer to peer thing. We have second year students who come in and ring students during first year just to check up on how they're going. That's one program. And then there's the progression program, which we used to call, staying on track, and that's the process by which we monitor all the students at all levels, every semester to check on the 50 per cent pass thing. Then those who are not achieving that are contacted and there's an academic intervention for them (INTERVIEWEE 1).

I am involved in the development of a new set of online transition modules, which would be open access to both students and their parents, that seek to support both

the demystifying of university and key academic skills. It's I think a really good way once it exists, because it gets you familiar with the actual learning management system that will be used for all of your courses once you do get there (INTERVIEWEE 4).

The university last year did welcome calls to all students but we kept the welcome calls to the equity cohorts because we wanted to frame those welcome calls within a learner engagement strategy rather than our conversion strategy and what we found from our data is, the more we align it to our learner engagement strategy, the more we see positive outcomes in terms of student progression, GPA and [outcomes] versus, for example, the more generic welcome calls. We look at academic performance. We look at progression rates and things like that (INTERVIEWEE 6).

It's not a recruitment exercise, it's a welcome call. And we also phone up every Indigenous student, every Pacific student, every lower SES student, we've got the cohorts, everyone from one of their target schools. Those welcome calls are meant to prevent poor choice making. People say, Oh, I got into nursing, but now I don't know if I want to be a nurse. We can sort of get them some help about that (INTERVIEWEE 7).

I think it's true to say that what we are doing here is that constantly supporting students ... find out first of all what's gone wrong. So many times, they just didn't apply for withdrawal without academic penalty. So often, it's not too late to then support students to take leave, at that point in time, and get that documentation reversed, so that they don't have that on their records. It's as much about being proactive in supporting students to recognise when they should take leave as it is about following up students who are on leave, because if we miss ... we're not attentive to why students are failing, we miss the opportunity to support students who just don't know when it's appropriate to take leave (INTERVIEWEE 14).

For students who took a leave of absence and resumed their studies later, their return was viewed as a vital transition and universities recognised the importance of providing necessary supports during this period to help students re-establish their sense of belonging:

What we're looking at then is a bespoke program for students who are returning from study. We're actually just putting that in place now and that will be linked into a learning campaign so that'll be one of the, again, we want personal reach out (INTERVIEWEE 6).

That's the other thing, celebrating success, as well. We often peg this on the students who are failing, but it's really important to ... for those students who've returned, check how they've gone at the end of the semester, give them a call and say, "Hey, congratulations, I see you got three credits and an HD, that's awesome," but if they've had a fail, "You did really well in these. What do you think went wrong with this one? Can we help you address that?" (INTERVIEWEE_14).

Referring system

According to some interviewees, a good referring system was essential for universities to achieve desirable outcomes through the support services. A pre-requisite for a good system was knowledge of the various reasons students defer or take leave:

I think sometimes the issue is if we haven't found out why a student is deferring, if we haven't kind of had that sort of almost one on one contact, it's tough to point them towards the right sort of support (INTERVIEWEE 8).

There is a general trend towards recognising that interventions for specific issues, such as leave-taking but also special consideration, remission of student debt etc... are part of an ecosystem of interactions between students and institutions. The university is seeking to join up those interactions so there is consistency. For example, a student who cites financial hardship as part of a special consideration request is put in touch with an advisor who may be able to help with a scholarship or a bursary. The new CRM is central to this new approach (INTERVIEWEE 10).

Other interventions and support services suggested

In addition to existing interventions and services, broader engagement strategies were suggested such as case management, academic advisors and the development of a more inclusive and flexible curriculum, including recognition of diversity and the introduction of nested awards, micro-credentials and unbundled offerings:

I do think in terms of inclusive curriculum design and inclusive teaching practice, it's one of the most powerful ways to build a culture in which diversities are celebrated, and that it builds a culture where lack of cultural safety, in terms of having come from an experience that isn't the dominant experience of your peers (INTERVIEWEE 4).

I find that very interesting because I've come from a Canadian university and that would identify me in the data but in Australia there's no such thing as academic advisors and in North America, if you have a difficulty with a course, there's a specific team that you go to and here there's a lot of focus on course planning, which is really different than a developmental advising model and I think that's where... I think a lot of our students fall between, especially the low SES fall between the cracks (INTERVIEWEE 6).

A case management approach will allow us, as an institution, to do more nuanced interventions. We're not there yet, but it has been identified as something that we do want to do, so watch this space (INTERVIEWEE 11).

EVIDENCE OF EFFECTIVENESS

As highlighted in the literature review, concrete evidence of the effectiveness of many initiatives remained limited and further research is required in this area. Nonetheless, several informants spoke generally about the effectiveness of their programs and the fact that even a small improvement in rates of return to study can financially justify interventions. Universities reported that

research was being conducted as programs were developed and matured to provide impact evidence.

We treated it as a kind of action research. The students who returned were monitored and connected with throughout their remaining journey, to work collaboratively with them as a students as partners kind of approach to identifying where things were going off the rails again. Not so much as, "What have you done wrong?" But, "What have we not done to best support your completion in the second round?", so that we can dynamically change processes on the fly, informed by the students' experience in their second attempt (INTERVIEWEE 14).

In at least one case, respondents were able to point to evaluations that had been undertaken which showed the demonstrable effectiveness of interventions designed to encourage students to return.

The re-engagement strategy made a big difference. We brought back 368 students. I haven't got the exact figures, but it was around that number. About 40 I think, by the time I left, had disappeared again. However, the vast majority were well on track, and I think there was about 20 completions already by the time I left. A couple of the students were already on their second degree (INTERVIEWEE 14).

CONSTRAINTS AND CHALLENGES

Participants were asked about the constraints that hinder universities from developing better engagement strategies, which manifested across three broad aspects: resources, technical and cultural/philosophical.

Resource constraints

Lack of resources was a common constraint reported, as illustrated by the following comments:

Resources is our biggest one. I think. Deferrals aren't as important to us as students who we still have a chance to secure for this session. There are some people here who will put their hand in the heart and say, "Okay, we'll just see them next year." And we know that that's often not the case, but it's easier than the alternative and you can move on to the next student who you haven't got a decision from and try and get them to accept an offer. I think we don't have sufficient resources to do all the things we'd like to across the entire conversion funnel. So, deferrals rate lower on that list than some other groups (INTERVIEWEE 8).

I think the case management approach is the only effective way of managing this issue, for both students when they're in the university and also when they're out, so there's actually much more nuanced information and actually, a much more personalised approach. That approach is reasonably expensive in terms of resources and skill level of people (INTERVIEWEE 11).

Technical challenges

Some interviewees also highlighted technical challenges, such as limited accessibility to data, a lack of data literacy and an absence of a digital platform to collect student data to provide tailored support.

Well, the major challenge that we have at the moment, we are working on, is the digital, the platform that we need to use to engage with students in their kind of personal scale. It will be great if we had a way for students to tell us who they are through some survey that then predicts steps or using artificial intelligence. And at the student portal where the student goes in and finds all the information is user friendly, but also placed where then we can use and make suggestions for students, give advice in that kind of artificial intelligence, using predictive analytics and so on. That's a work in progress, because you need to find the right platform, you need to understand how you're going to be able to service that. Is it going to be through providers? Is it going to be something you build? (INTERVIEWEE 3).

That's actually a broader issue that I'm tackling right now is that I don't have ready access to a lot of data that I need so I would say, and that's part of, we've just gone through a data restructure. I think the other bit is I'm not sure the faculties have access to the data that they need around that cohort either so that's come up as an issue (INTERVIEWEE 6).

I don't think we are for want of at least potential data. Are the right people aware of it? Are the right people able to get access to that data? Do they know who to ask for that? There's another area that's very much oriented just towards managing our data, full stop, all of it. They report that data to the DVCs and to heads of schools, but they are not engaged. They're not academics. They're not working in a faculty or a school. They are working in a data warehouse (INTERVIEWEE 9).

The other pain point would be data literacy and again, the people who often have the data are not the people who are necessarily navigating the leadership around the intervention or the analysis of the data, but they own the data. And a complete lack of data literacy among staff to use data, to capture data, to look at what are the kinds of outcomes we're trying to achieve. I find that what the government is doing in terms of very blunt instruments, we're not asking I think the right questions around things like learner, self-efficacy, motivation, sense of all the things that the literature tells us is important (INTERVIEWEE 6).

Interviewees gave a sense that there has been a shift in approaches to using analytics in these situations but it will take time for universities to address these challenges. Appropriate professional development programs would help to improve staff skills regarding interpretation and use of data.

Cultural and philosophical change required

At the overarching level, many participants argued that a cultural and philosophical change was required to respond to the increasingly diversified student body. The current model on which universities operate was perceived as not fitting the needs of today's students. Existing models were perceived to be unable to address the complexity of student life circumstances through flexible delivery. There was broad awareness among the educational practitioners involved in this study of

the increasingly varying patterns of enrolment and the non-linear journey to degree completion. Fortunately, a considerable number of interviewees displayed a positive attitude toward this change, and had a broad view of student success:

There is some idea that if you're not on a linear school to university pathway that there's somehow a negative association or a deficit, either in the experience of school or in the influences around you or in the university, outreach programs were ineffectual because so many of those Year 12 students actually aren't enrolled the following year at university. I think that that is problematic because it isn't a longer-term broad perspective view around different journeys to higher education. I think if we're serious about having a whole of life cycle approach to supporting students to make the choices that are best for them, then being able to defer and then come back should be one of those, and not seen as the thing that we have to work with students, because it's the less desirable option (INTERVIEWEE 4).

Ultimately, it's about supporting student diversity and supporting student success, whatever that looks like. For some students that may not be graduating from this university. There may be other pathways. But if we're not even engaging with them, we will never know. Whether the students that have left because there are other options available that are better suited to their career plans, and their experience of this university, or those that deferred ... they've got a better job offer, life is good. It's equally the long term, I think. It's also about leaving that door open. I guess reminding them that, while that really shiny new job with the good salary is looking pretty attractive now, there are ways that you could study part-time. We're introducing a lot of short, micro-credential type qualifications increasingly. I guess also alerting students who choose not to return, who have deferred, that there are other things we could offer you, and if you want us to keep in touch, let us know. We'd be happy to follow up with you and see how you're going. You'd be very welcome to re-apply down the track. Don't forget that it's great to have that employment pathway and great decision, you've found a job that you're really excited about, but it's about that lifelong learning, and you may find that you do need to have that other suite of qualifications behind you, as you progress through promotions and your career path. It's playing that long game (INTERVIEWEE 14).

To expand access and enable a diversity of student journeys required substantial commitments from everyone in the university community in every respect from course structure to campus culture:

I think that we're operating in a higher education model that was fit for purpose 25 years ago, but it's not so much fit for purpose now. If you're coming from a diverse range and a different background, we're still expecting them to turn up on campus, generally speaking, to do four topics a semester, in a traditional delivery model, et cetera (INTERVIEWEE 11).

The coordination between different professional teams and faculties was also critical to a holistic approach to engage students, particularly those who had suspended their studies. Participants noted the importance of coordination between professional and academic staff, but also barriers and challenges to such coordination:

Even though there was a lot of focus on those partnerships, what I found is the culture isn't necessarily there in faculties, so again we've tried to bring the student support teams into the faculties to build their relationships... I find a lot of intervention strategies are, especially in the central support areas, disconnected from the student's course experience.

I'm seeing that there are two predominant discourses that are emerging in higher education. One of the discourses is around tiered service models and the notion of a centralised service, one stop shop. A lot of universities have modelled themselves on banks or other external businesses and then there's the other thread which is around the concept of partnership and more collaborative approaches and I actually think you need both.

I think the service one has become a lot louder and it's getting a lot more resulting and versus the partnership model which is where you work with faculties to co-design. Because what I found is the more it goes back to basic, the more relevant and timelier the support is, and you cannot get relevant and timely without partnership with faculties. So I think strategies that sit where the student success team sits centrally and has no contact with or very little contact with faculties is a really problematic model (INTERVIEWEE 6).

Partner institution case studies

MAJOR FINDINGS

- Institutions are seeking to support students across the life cycle, including through pre-departure advice, communications to students on leave, and support for students returning to study.
- Universities sometimes face tensions between supporting student flexibility and maintaining institutional priorities and objectives.
- Students themselves are becoming increasingly involved in governance and the determination of processes related to deferral and leave-taking.
- Efforts are increasing to contact students intending to withdraw and students who have withdrawn. Specific campaigns have resulted in more students taking a formal leave of absence, continuing their study or returning to study. Translating these specific campaigns into mainstream practice remains a challenge at some institutions.
- Interviewed students had typically deferred or taken leave for family, financial and/or health reasons, as well as uncertainty of their choice of course. This uncertainty was identified as a barrier to returning to study along with perceived course inflexibility, loss of financial support and lack of university support.
- Students consistently advocated more active outreach from universities to students on periods of leave or deferral. They also advocated specific initiatives for students returning from leave, who have often lost touch with their initial study cohort. Suggestions included a buddy system and greater support to 're-orient' returning students.
- Leave-taking can significantly affect official reporting on attrition. At one institution, more than half of the students on an approved leave of absence were counted as 'attrited' and this is likely to be a common trend. At another institution, a block model teaching approach undermines the existing calendar year approach to measuring retention.
- Indigenous students often withdraw for medical and/or financial reasons and may be deterred by unconscious bias, cultural disconnect and racism on campus.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For universities

- That universities elevate the student voice in developing strategies to minimise withdrawal, and to increase the rates of return to study from leave.
- That universities provide more active outreach to students on periods of leave or deferral, including tailored advice around course choice and transfer options, financial assistance, and health and support services.
- That universities develop re-orientation strategies for students returning to study from leave, such as peer 'buddy' systems and academic support.
- That universities include in their Indigenous strategies specific initiatives to address the high rates of leave and non-return of Indigenous students. Such strategies could consider and monitor the impact of unconscious bias, racism, financial disadvantage, and the curriculum on Indigenous leave-taking and return to study behaviour.

For government

- That the Australian Government create and report an additional student achievement/success measure which reports the proportion of students who return to study after a period of absence. A similar statistic is currently reported by the UK's Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of these case studies is to allow for a detailed examination of the subject of study in its real-life context (Yin, 2014). The characteristics of the study profile at these universities make them ideal research sites to investigate deferral and leave-taking issues. A major strength of case study data collection is the opportunity to use multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2014) that allow the development of converging lines of inquiry. Thus, case study findings or conclusions are likely to be more convincing and accurate because it is based on several converging sources of information (Yardley, 2009). In the five case studies that follow, a range of empirical methods have been deployed to provide in-depth data to supplement the analysis of HEIMS data, the survey of university staff and the semi-structured interviews with staff from selected institutions. The case studies include custom quantitative analysis of internal datasets, analysis of internal documents, as well as interviews with both staff and students.

UNIVERSITY A CASE STUDY

Introduction

This case study presents a detailed examination of approaches to supporting low SES student retention at *University A*, a regional Australian university with campuses or study centres located across Australia. Half of the students enrolled at the university are studying part-time and almost two thirds are studying externally/online, although this varies between disciplines.

The student population at *University A* is highly diverse when compared to the Australian university sector. Most of the student population are mature age (74 per cent), female (69 per cent), are first in family to attend university and have significant family and work commitments. The student population includes regional students (56 per cent compared to 19 per cent nationally); students from remote locations (11 per cent as compared to less than 1 per cent nationally); Indigenous students (8 per cent as compared to less than 2 per cent nationally); and students from low SES backgrounds (18.7 per cent as compared to 17.7 per cent nationally) (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2019b).

At *University A*, 73 per cent of all domestic students belong to one or more target equity group: low SES, non-English speaking background, students with disabilities, regional or remote or Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders. Belonging to an equity group places a student at higher risk of attrition (Edwards & McMillan, 2015), hence *University A* has well-developed infrastructure comprising academic and other support services for all students – as well as services that target specific equity cohorts – in order to enhance student access, retention, engagement and success.

The University recognises that it can strategically develop and deploy further initiatives to improve student retention and re-engagement rates. Some strategies are linked to a significant restructure that has taken place at *University A* over the past few years. Structural change has resulted in:

- New academic departments and integrated research centres;
- Centralised administrative systems and operational structures;
- Staffing structures that enable decision making to devolve to colleges;
- New staffing positions, including those focussed on student retention;
- Substantial recruitment of staff at senior management levels;
- Significant investments in academic interventions designed to improve student outcomes.

Against this background, this case study examines patterns of deferral and leave-taking at *University A* using data from a range of sources:

- Analysis of internal statistics, including enrolment and deferral data;
- A desktop review of institutional documents about deferral and leave of absence including policies and procedures, governance structures and roles, strategies and plans;
- Interviews with academic and professional staff at the University with formal and informal responsibilities for deferring or leave-taking; and
- Interviews with students who have taken time out from study and have returned or are planning to return to the University.

Analysis of institutional data

Student retention

University A is positioned amongst the bottom tier of Australian universities in terms of student retention (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2019). This positioning is due in part to the way retention is measured by the Federal Government, as students retained from one year to the next, which does not necessarily match with student enrolment patterns at *University A*. These patterns are interesting but also generally common to the sector; higher attrition not because of a

definitional issue but simply because like some other universities, *University A* has more at-risk students. Indeed, market research conducted by the University in 2009 and 2010 indicated that more than two thirds of non-retained students felt connected to the University and intended to return to study. More recently, an exit survey of students who withdrew from all units of study in semester 2, 2019 found that 88 per cent intended to re-enrol at *University A* in the future. This aligns with national level research that ‘around half of the students who withdraw from higher education return to the sector within eight years’ (Harvey, Szalkowicz & Luckman, 2017, p. 9)

Retention rates have remained relatively stable across the university sector over the past decade and improved retention will require universities to respond to the causes of attrition based on their individual contexts. Chief Executive of Universities Australia, Catriona Jackson, has stated that universities need ‘to dig into the causes, ask who is leaving university before completing their degree and why?’ (Jackson, 2016). At *University A* retention data and patterns of enrolment reflect the nature of the student population, which includes a large proportion of high-attrition-risk students who belong to one or more equity groups, are studying part-time and are mature age. *University A* has put in place a range of services to support the retention of these students while acknowledging that ‘much of student attrition is either unpredictable or inevitable’ (Harvey, Szalkowicz & Luckman, 2017, p. 9) and is linked to a range of personal, financial and health issues.

Deferral

Analysis of HEIMS data conducted as part of this project shows that *University A* has a deferral rate of 7 per cent, which is lower than the national average of 9 per cent. The analysis of HEIMS data also shows that the proportion of non-returners (those who deferred but did not return to higher education) was 57 per cent, much higher than the national average of 36 per cent. In order to improve the conversion rate from deferral to enrolment, admissions officers at *University A* contact students twice during the year they have deferred, once in April to confirm the deferral and again towards the end of the year to encourage students to enrol for the following year.

Most students who defer and do not go on to enrol are mature aged, female, and applied to study in the most popular course offered by the university. A staff member stated that many of these students “romanticise the career” and decide not to enrol when they are faced with the reality of on-campus study blocks and unpaid but required professional placements that take them away from their families. In contrast, school leavers, who make up only a small percentage of the deferrals at *University A*, are most likely to convert their deferral to enrolment after a gap year.

Leave of absence

Analysis of national HEIMS data collected for this project indicated that *University A* had a much higher rate of leaving, 43.6 per cent, compared to the national average of 22.1 per cent within the first two years of student enrolment. The University also had a slightly lower rate of leavers returning to study. In total, 22 per cent of students who had left the University had returned to study within two years, compared to the national average of 28 per cent. Given the higher levels of leave and lower rates of return, the University is actively working to improve engagement with its students to prevent them leaving in the first instance and encouraging them to return in the second.

Institutional oversight of deferring and leave of absence students

While institutional oversight of students who defer or take a leave of absence from *University A* is situated within a central portfolio of student engagement, leadership in monitoring and supporting these students back to study is distributed (formally and informally) across the University, in central units, in colleges, through Indigenous support services and by individual academics. Practices for supporting students back to study looks different in each of these institutional locations, driven by the different role-related responsibilities of staff and the nature of the contact and relationships they have with students.

One of the challenges at *University A* is to improve the flow of information and coordinate the initiatives for student re-engagement that are planned or taking place across the University. As noted by one staff member, the links between the central services and colleges and other services that support students is relational but needs to be systematised.

Central governance and leadership

Responsibility for student progression at *University A* is situated centrally within a student engagement and success portfolio, which hosts a team of administrative officers who manage student progression, including involuntary exclusion. The portfolio has developed a student retention strategy that is currently progressing through a consultation phase. The initiative articulates a university-level student retention strategy with access, equity and inclusion projects designed to position engagement with students as the catalyst to retention.

Successful engagement relies on building relationships with students and not simply processing transactions or providing support in a reactive manner. The ability to identify, understand and connect with individual students – beyond a cohort lens – is critical to authentic and productive engagement. The identification of students will be aided by what one staff member in the portfolio describes as “new money” available as part of 2019 Higher Education Funding to increase university capacity to collect and track student data. These data will support the targeting of initiatives related to student retention and re-engagement.

Once students have taken time out from their studies, the progression team takes responsibility for contacting students to provide them with information about re-engaging with their studies. One initiative articulated in the student retention strategy is to develop an ‘active management plan for periods of intermission, keeping students within the community and motivating them to return and complete’. Aligned with this initiative, a re-engagement campaign started in 2019. This phone campaign differs from previous initiatives in that it promotes building relationships with students, requiring an investment in staff training and buy-in from the retention officers making the calls. Prior to the start of Semester 1 2020 progression officers aimed to contact 1,300 lapsed students. The progression officers involved were provided with recent details of students’ progression status prior to making the phone call. Staff were trained to use a script to navigate conversations with students.

Data from the re-engagement campaign, including the conversion rate of inactive students into enrolments are not available. However, student case data gestures to what was achieved and some of the issues with the process that need to be refined. A student, Geoffrey, had been excluded from study for 12 months as a result of progression issues due to work, family, carer and financial obligations pressing on him. Geoffrey had independently decided to return to study in 2020 at the end of his exclusion period and had re-enrolled in his course in February 2020. A brief message was left on Geoffrey’s phone in late February, in the week just prior to semester start, advising him to

“call back about his enrolment”. This message left him anxious and worried that there was a problem with his enrolment. The caller left a phone number and a first name. He returned the call three or four times but as there was no answer the calls were diverted to the main switchboard. He did not know who had called him or what the call was about so the switchboard could not redirect his call. A day later he received a follow up call and the issue was resolved, however, he was frustrated and annoyed that the call was made without checking on his current enrolment status: “I’ve re-enrolled. Can’t you see that?” (Student).

This incident illustrates the complex logistics involved in enrolling, the lag time between action and overnight or weekly updates of digital databases, as well as the gaps still apparent in initiatives to contact students. From Geoffrey’s point of view a phone call about re-enrolment would have been more useful months, rather than days, before semester started as he had arranged his family and employment commitments many months earlier in order to be able to start the semester.

College or discipline-based initiatives

As well as central functions and responsibility for student engagement and progression, the restructure established positions in the colleges that complemented or overlapped with central functions related to student engagement and success. All colleges appointed Education Support Officers (ESOs) or similar at the operational level, as well as some senior academic appointments, to lead innovation and research in student experience.

Indigenous support initiatives

Targeted support services for Indigenous students are separate to but complement the central student services, however, there is no formal linkage between these areas. Contact between the Indigenous student support officers and central services is on an as-needs basis and often to do with involuntary student exclusion.

The Indigenous student support officers aim to contact all enrolled Indigenous students twice a semester. At the start of semester, the contact is focussed on ensuring that students have a manageable unit load, are not overextended, and are aware that they can withdraw from units without academic or financial penalty if they do so before census date. An Indigenous support officer commented that taking time off when needed was a healthy approach for students in managing their work-life balance. The officers also make phone calls to lapsed Indigenous students, however this is hampered by out of date contact information.

A concern articulated by Indigenous support officers about student progression is that students need to meet certain study load requirements (characterised by enrolment in either 3 or 4 units in any given semester) in order to obtain federal financial support to study. This creates a tension for students who may be overextended and who would have a better chance to achieve academic success with a part-time load.

The Indigenous student support officers have retention initiatives targeted towards Indigenous students. One initiative is to send text messages to students at regular intervals during semester containing interesting and relevant information. A bulk messaging service is used, and the tone of the messages is informal: “check out the...”. This approach is intended to support external students to feel engaged with the University.

Another recent initiative is an online site for Indigenous students which was created within the University's learning management system. This site focusses on enhancing retention by reducing the social isolation experienced by external students. The site was piloted in Semester 2 2019 and had low activity due to limited promotion. Although the site appeared as an option in the students' lists of formally enrolled units, many ignored it as they did not know what it was. In 2020 the site will be promoted more heavily to students and its usage and impact will be evaluated.

Academic practices

According to an academic staff member, "lecturers are not included in the administrative process" of student progression. However, many lecturers have close relationships with their students and are approached by them for advice about progression and taking a leave of absence. One academic staff member indicated that it was not clear what the role of the academic is in terms of providing advice to students but noted that "the Uni [centralised services] offers less personalised support than what we can provide". There were also academic staff concerns about the lack of information flow from central services about students who were being actively monitored and had been excluded from the University for progression issues.

The distributed practices and initiatives for student progress and progression at *University A* in different organisational locations indicate a culture of support for students as well as a fluidity between formal and informal operations roles and responsibilities in the organisational structure. Some areas have developed their own "emerging systems" for keeping track of students and their progress but there is a clear need for systems and processes that facilitate knowledge exchange *between* organisational locations and streamline the different types of advice and support that are provided to students into a single narrative.

Practices relating to extended leave

Policy and procedure regarding deferral and leave-taking

There are a variety of views from staff and students at *University A* about the visibility of policies and procedures around leave-taking. One staff member indicated that policies and procedures linked to progression 'happen to students' rather than being promoted to students in ways that are clear and accessible. This staff member suggests that a flow chart with time frames would assist in clarity around progression. This same staff member suggested that the student orientation to the University should include the message that it is okay for domestic students to take their time, and to take time off study, although it must be remembered that in the long term this may affect the currency of unit content completed for degrees in law, nursing, education and social work and similarly regulated professions.

Visibility of progression information is a concern and impacts on how students take time off study. A staff member indicated "students may not know the process or know it well". This is evident in student approaches to taking time off. Mary did not go through any formal process to take time off study. She said, "I was still struggling with my finances so I stopped". Malcolm, a student who failed all the units in his first semester of study in what was a "hectic, messy year" disengaged from his studies and did not submit any assignments but stated: "I didn't know I could withdraw". He did not respond to the email he received to 'please explain' his unsatisfactory progress which resulted in his exclusion from the University for 12 months.

At *University A* students who take time out from study do so voluntarily or involuntarily.

Voluntary time out from study takes two forms:

- **Intermission:** Students can apply to suspend or take a break from their studies while reserving a place in their course by applying for an intermission, usually for a period of 6 or 12 months. Intermission is only available to students who have completed at least one unit in their course. If a student does not re-enrol or apply for an intermission by the relevant census date, the University then considers the student lapsed from their course and the student is required to reapply in order to continue their studies.
- **Non-enrolment:** Students informally take leave by not re-enrolling. When a student does not re-enrol, or apply for an intermission, the University considers the student as inactive and after a determined time then lapses the student. Once lapsed, the student needs to apply again for university admission.

Involuntary time out is referred to as exclusion. Students may face involuntary exclusion from the University for a period of 12 months as a result of making unsatisfactory progress as determined by the University progression procedures.

Exclusion from the university has negative connotations, however, it can also act as a release valve for students. For Malcolm, having time off study through involuntary exclusion “was like a weight was lifted” and his decision to re-enrol a year later was made with a greater understanding of the study requirements and the time commitment needed to engage successfully at university.

Taking time off – attempts to improve the experience

Research indicates that the factors that lead a student to take time off study are different depending on whether the student belongs to an equity group or not.

The reasons noted more commonly by equity-group students than other students revolve around finance, family obligations and core issues relating to ‘getting by’, whereas the issues noted more commonly among advantaged students than equity group students centre around issues of ‘choice’ and lifestyle. (Edwards & McMillan 2015, p. vi)

Finance is a factor that comes through strongly in student interviews at *University A* as a reason for taking time off study. Joan enrolled at the university in 2017 and decided not to continue after the first year as the financial struggle was too much. In 2019, when she completed her tax return, Joan discovered that she owed the Government around \$4,000 and rather than return to study needed to continue to work in order to pay this off. The debt was accrued unbeknown to her when a Government cadetship she had been granted in 2017 was back paid and crossed over with her study-related Centrelink payment. Joan needs to pay off this debt before she returns to study or else she will “be working for the rest of my life to repay it”.

Students at *University A* also indicated that they had experienced issues with facilities, with other students and administrative staff that had prompted them to take time off study. Mary indicated that the accommodation she was housed in during residential blocks required for her course was substandard and she was not successful in having the issue resolved. For Joan, issues with another

student who was “not a nice person” contributed to her decision to take time off study: “It was not a good environment.... I didn’t want to put up with that”.

According to a staff member, students often take time off study, voluntarily or involuntarily, because they lack information about what is involved with university study. “Uni is sold as a career and the course you need to get there” but some students enter without fully understanding what that course is about, what the study requirements are and how those requirements, such as unpaid placements, may impact on them financially.

Return to study for these students requires attention to the specific reasons they took time off and identification of solutions to support their return. While some of these solutions are related to personal issues, students also identified a range of structural issues within the University that impact on the student experience.

Communications and engagement

Engagement with students through communication and relationships are core to the University retention strategy (still in its consultation phase). To this end, progression staff indicate that “students leave at different stages of their courses, so we have different projects happening at different levels”.

The re-engagement campaign at the University is a model of how engagement with students can continue even as they take time off study. The approach of the campaign is driven by positive and optimistic staff who understand the shift in their roles from process driven to engaging meaningfully with students. Communication with students is guided by a script to ensure consistency in the message they give. This approach is intended to move away from a tick box approach and towards one where progression officers engage positively with students. Indeed, the re-engagement campaign intentionally aims to shift the negativity associated with taking time out, particularly when it is linked to involuntary exclusion, and shift the communication about re-engagement and progression to a positive conversation.

A challenge to this ‘communicative’ approach is the expectation of some students that the person calling them will know it all. To counter this, progressions officers have information about a range of services to which they can refer students, such as academic literacy programs, access and inclusion services, counselling and IT support.

While a range of excellent services exist at *University A*, staff involved in those services as well as students, indicate that they have limited visibility. One staff member observed that “the message about all these services is not getting through”. In addition to having information about the services on the University website, the staff member suggested that students enrolling in the University for the first time, as well as those returning to study after taking time out, should be provided with a welcome pack containing information about the available services. This direct approach may better communicate the availability of services to students who need it and avoid students’ comments such as “I wasn’t given information about a counsellor”.

Support services

As identified in the previous section, the University has a range of excellent academic and support services for students. The services are available to students face-to-face and online. These services

include staff and student led initiatives. In terms of peer programs, online peer assisted support is available in certain units with high student enrolments. The retention strategy promotes initiatives such as first term 'study buddies' for at-risk students and peer mentoring support to enhance social connections. As one student noted, having student representatives more visible would also provide students with a friendly point of connection with the University.

Constraints against better engagement

The constraints at *University A* against better retention, progression, and engagement with students are limited data to support decision making, inadequate systems (or use of systems) to support the cohesion of initiatives that are taking place across the University, and lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities for providing advice and support given to students.

One concern raised at the University is the lack of hard data about conversion of student deferrals into enrolments that would allow better targeting of re-engagement strategies. A staff member advised "we have no particular research" to substantiate the approaches that are being taken to student re-engagement after deferral. There is also a lack of data on students who are returning to university and consequently a lack of targeted support services for those students. One staff member indicated that if there was a way in which they could identify students who were returning to study *after* involuntary exclusion they would be able to welcome those students back, acknowledge the strength it takes to come back to study, and support them better. Another staff member said "we don't know who these students are who take time off study. We don't have that information".

There is overlap across organisational units with respect to who is responsible for student re-engagement and a range of staff in different roles who are engaged in initiatives to support student re-engagement as part of their formal or informal responsibilities. In one college a senior staff member advised his concern about the overlapping responsibilities of ESOs in colleges and progression officers in the central office. In his college there was push back from ESOs about making phone calls to lapsed or inactive students: "If [the ESO] is doing it student central is not doing it. We need to push the relationship back to central". However, staff advised that in interactions between the ESO and students, the ESO was able to deal with complex issues related to students' study plans that could not have been dealt with by progression officers in the central office. The different roles and relationships that staff have with students across the University are important to student retention, progression and re-engagement but could be better supported by improved systems for communication and information sharing.

Appropriate systems would support the multipronged and cross institutional approach to engagement with inactive or lapsed students that is taking place at the University. Enhancing information flows between staff would have benefits for students. Staff would have a stronger understanding of what was happening in other parts of the University and be able to advise or refer students accordingly. This sentiment was expressed widely by staff, with comments such as "there is no information flow. I need to go into [the student data base] or ask other lecturers" and "there is a need for the systematic flow of information. The Uni should be more present". Other comments related to poor communication, leading staff to gather information by hearsay rather than through formal channels: "We heard that if a student fails more than two times they won't be accepted again".

Summary

The diverse student population at *University A* and the high proportion of students who belong to one or more equity groups has a significant impact on student retention, deferral and leave of absence. The University has a range of initiatives in place to support student retention, including high quality academic and support services offered in online and face-to-face modalities. This case study suggests that the visibility of these services needs to be enhanced for both students and staff, with a focus on increasing use of these services by students at risk of leaving university prematurely and supporting students back to study. Students who contributed to this study indicated that as they became increasingly overwhelmed by their workload, they were less likely to seek out support services. The challenge for the University is to ensure that students are accessing the available services before they feel it is too late for them.

There is a high level of commitment to supporting students who have taken time off from study to re-engage with the University. Within the recently restructured University, the portfolio responsible for student success and engagement “has carriage of and responsibility for developing, articulating and championing the operational drivers” of retention. However, initiatives for re-engaging students with study are distributed, formally and informally, across a range of organisational units. Improved communication and systems that support the sharing of data and initiatives between the success and engagement portfolio and other organisational locations will be a key driver of improved student retention and re-engagement going forward.

UNIVERSITY B CASE STUDY

Introduction

University B is in a metropolitan location and enrolls a large number of students from a variety of equity groups. Approximately 25 per cent of the domestic students are from low SES backgrounds and almost two per cent identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Analysis of HEIMS data shows that the institution has a lower deferral rate, three per cent, than the national average of nine per cent. The analysis of HEIMS data also shows that the proportion of non-returners (those who deferred but did not return to higher education) was 40.7 per cent, slightly higher than the national average of 35.7 per cent.

The University has policies and procedures in place to assist students from their first enrolment through to completion of their degree. The approach is both *pre-emptive* and *supportive*. The pre-emptive procedures are based on the principle of making personal contact with the students upon enrolment, triaging their immediate needs so that their transition to university is best supported. The supportive procedures take place at the point when students apply for deferment or leave of absence and are aimed at facilitating a smooth transition back into study or by supporting an extended period of deferment or leave of absence, if required.

Overall, the policies and procedures are designed to support students' success in learning and their enjoyment of the university experience across the breadth of their enrolment, minimising the need for deferment and/or leave of absence for most students. Then, for the students who require a period of deferment or leave of absence, the policies are designed to facilitate their continued contact with the University and ultimately their successful return.

This case study includes information provided by student support staff at various levels within the institution.

Responsibility for institutional oversight of deferring and leave of absence students

The University admissions unit has responsibility for oversight of deferring students. The unit oversees processes to: invite eligible students to return from deferment earlier than planned or in time for the start of the year; process the returns from deferment; consider and process requests for extended deferment; and send email campaigns to students who have deferred including their confirmation of deferment. The admissions unit also liaises with Schools if there is the likelihood of a course being discontinued and where there are a significant number of deferred students, in order to understand the potential impact on students and to plan for alternative options.

Admissions staff are authorised to approve deferments based on the following conditions without seeking approval from the admissions team manager:

- Medical issues (accompanied by a treating practitioner's certificate and support documentation);
- Mental health issues (referred by a University counsellor or student's practitioner);

- Pregnancy, where complications prevent the student from studying (accompanied by a treating practitioner's certificate and support documentation); or where the course being studied could pose a health risk to the pregnant women or baby;
- Moving interstate (supported by appropriate documentation).

Any cases with circumstances beyond those listed above are referred to the admissions manager for consideration.

With regard to leave of absence, students are entitled to apply for up to a year at any time and it is generally approved. However, longer leave of absences require approval from either the Director of Academic Programs or appropriate University welfare services. The maximum period for any leave of absence is two years, however, in rare circumstances where, for example, the student only has one unit left to finish a degree, the leave of absence period may be extended beyond two years. The University does not have a systematic way of recording the reasons for leave of absence, as explained by the leave of absence coordinator:

A lot of the time it's for all different sorts of situations. Some students disclose the reason; others don't because it isn't technically a requirement that they have to let us know the reason. Often students are more likely to do so when the leave of absence extends for more than one year, and in those cases it is often a medical reason. For some it is work related, so they need to take time off for their jobs. Others that I've seen it has been in regards to a particular subject not being offered and that's the only [unit] they have left, so they take a leave of absence for a particular time [Interviewee A].

In some cases, particular courses of study have external structural barriers that lead to a disproportionate number of applications for leave of absence, such as the need for all pre-service teaching students to pass the Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education (LANTITE).

With the Master of Teaching students, a common reason tends to be them needing to do the LANTITE examination to become a teacher [Interviewee A].

The leave of absence process is quite automatic and usually no discussions are held with students to counsel them with regard to their application. Discussions with the student are only initiated if the leave of absence extends beyond the one-year period.

Oversight of preventative measures

While processes are in place to assist students who find themselves in a position where they need to defer, a great deal of effort is also spent on programs designed to support students so that deferral and leave of absence can be avoided. In addition to the admissions unit, the University also runs other programs particularly focussed on support for students from low SES backgrounds. One program (*Transition Success Program*) has been running for ten years and is a peer outreach program. The program has three goals:

1. To contact all commencing students, with priority given to low SES students, to ensure that they are transitioning well in their university study. These calls occur in the period leading up to the census date and take on the form of a triage service, where students are referred on to

academics or others to assist with any issues, or to support student ambitions. It is important that these calls are not viewed as always being remedial as often they act as a conduit for students to sporting events, clubs and societies, which can improve their transition to university.

...the welcome call is really about making sure that they are transitioning well into their studies, into the social environments and getting over any institutional issues that they might be having. So, it's a phone call that we make after hours, after core hours. So we are here until nine o'clock, and we will call up until the census date [Transition Success Coordinator].

2. To contact students identified as at-risk by an academic, with priority given to low SES students. These calls enable the University to make sure that students are aware of all of the support services available, and to tailor their access to these services by helping the students to identify the best course of action. These calls are very student-centred and have a clear purpose of helping students to resume their studies in a manageable way.

So, it's very student-centred and very tailored information that we give during those sorts of interventions. It could even be a broader university intervention, so for example, we will ring students who are at risk, as identified through the progression policies. So, that could be at risk of exclusion, or at risk of conditional enrolment. So, we'll just have those conversations to see if we can actually get students back on track early, before the teaching period starts [Interviewee B].

3. To contact students who have submitted an application to resign. The aim of these calls is to identify what has led to this course of action and to discuss other options that the student may have, for example, a reduced study load, or a change of enrolment into a different course. Generally, only about half of these students are contactable, and of those, about 25-30 per cent may change their decision to resign and will apply for a leave of absence instead.

The aim here is not just to talk the student into staying, but to try and find out what's gone wrong. We'll do an exit survey, but also offer alternatives [Interviewee B].

Practices related to extended leave

Deferment is able to be requested by students, prior to the semester census date, through completion of an online form within student online records. This system removes the concern that some students might experience during busy administrative periods. However, once students are enrolled in their units in any particular semester, they are unable to defer through the online system and must contact admissions staff. Where deferment is requested after the census date, students are requested to apply for a 'withdraw (W)' grade, and if this grade is granted by the unit coordinator, they can then apply for retrospective deferment. This decision is approved by the coordinator of the admissions unit.

Extension of deferment is only considered if the deferred student has experienced extenuating circumstances such as serious illness or misadventure or if they are the primary carer for a dependent (spouse/de facto, child, parent) and where this responsibility is impacting on their

capacity to recommence study. Generally, the student needs to demonstrate that these extenuating circumstances occurred during the period of deferment and not prior to the initial period of deferment, however, there is flexibility surrounding this guideline. The extended period of deferment is generally for a maximum of 12 months.

How are student views taken into account?

There are no specific processes in place to seek student feedback about the deferment and leave of absence process. Students are able to access the University's regular complaints mechanism if they are dissatisfied with the decisions made by the University in relation to deferment or leave of absence decisions.

When students choose to leave the university, they are given the opportunity on the application form to indicate their reasons for doing so, however, this is an optional component of the online form. The reasons are varied as one staff member commented:

...it could be that students are going to a different institution because they can't get to their campus....it could be about the teaching and learning, they're not happy with how it is delivered [Interviewee A].

Where relevant, this type of feedback is relayed to Schools within the University, at an aggregated level to protect confidentiality. However, where ongoing issues can be identified with a particular course or unit, the feedback is prioritised so that the issues can be addressed quickly.

Given the proportion of non-returners after deferment is higher than the national average, this suggests the need for this university to improve data processes so that there is a better understanding of the reasons behind deferment and leave of absence. This could be achieved through the systematic collection of data from students as they access leave or deferment, and could result in a higher return rate over time.

UNIVERSITY C CASE STUDY

Introduction

University C is a young and progressive university with a strong reputation for excellence in teaching within a values-led leadership framework. The institution has a visible commitment to societal issues that include reconciliation, gender equality and opportunities for people who have experienced disadvantage and celebrates a diverse cohort of students. This university has received consistently high endorsement for teaching quality from the Good Universities Guide and the Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) and offers a range of on campus and online courses at enabling, Vocational Education and Training (VET), undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

In 2019, 11 per cent of *University C*'s domestic undergraduates were from low SES backgrounds and 17 per cent were from regional locations (based on residential postcodes). Of the total student population, 16 per cent were international, 46 per cent were first in their family to attend a university, 17 per cent were studying part-time and 14 per cent were online.

Deferral practices

At *University C*, student advising, including leave-taking, is a shared responsibility and, since 2018, following a project referred to as 'service excellence', activities are distributed across three key directorates – Business Growth and Development (incorporating the Communication Centre), Student Life (including Student Success advisors) and Student Administration. The coordination of student advising across these directorates is the responsibility of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Education.

Student Administration is responsible for the administrative processing of deferred offers, whereas Business Growth and Development and Student Life are responsible for engaging with student requests to take any leave of absence. The Communications Centre manages the process of email communications to domestic students who are deferring or taking a leave of absence. These emails inform students of the outcome of their applications and provide information to support their return to study (e.g. enrolment, study support, personal support).

An online portal provides easily accessible information about commencing at *University C*, including how to respond to an offer and options for deferring.

The *Admission, Enrolment and Academic Progress Rules*, which is accessible to students and staff, provides definitions and processes related to:

- Intermit – 'status applied to a Student who has applied for and received approval to defer studying a Course for a specified period. 'Intermitted' will have a corresponding meaning.' (p. 4)
- Student – 'A person who meets one or more of the following criteria ... [including] d) a person admitted to a Course, whose studies have been deferred or Intermitted ...' (p. 5)

The Student Guide includes information and direct weblinks to the Legislation and Policy Directory and the institution's Statutes, Rules and By-Laws. While the Student Guide makes no explicit mention of deferral or taking leave, the section titled 'Course Advice, Changes or Withdrawal'

(Student Guide, p.10) mentions appropriate Service Centres to contact for more information about these matters. The 'Your Support' section of the Guide provides detailed information about the Student Hub and Student Success. In addition, the Student Hub webpage explicitly lists 'assistance with resuming your studies following deferral or discontinuation' among the list of other enquiries they handle and provides information on how to get in touch.

In recent times, a Discontinuation Working Group was formed comprising senior leaders and representatives from Student Administration, Business Growth and Development, Student Life, and Strategic and Governance Services. This group reviewed the discontinuation and leave-taking processes with a focus on streamlining these and refining the reasons students can select for withdrawing and taking leave. These changes have not yet been implemented.

Navigating current administrative practices

To defer or take leave, students would most often access the link to the 'Defer your offer' webpage, which provides students with basic tailored information about deferral specific to their situation (e.g. international, domestic, postgraduate research).

Domestic students are asked to complete the online form on the webpage and are informed that 'When you submit the form, we'll record your offer deferral and mail you a confirmation letter with instructions on how to take up your offer for a later period.' A link to information and policy related to privacy and security of student information is visible on the 'Defer your offer' webpage (relevant to students completing the online form).

The online form includes a 'reason for deferral' field. Student Administration processes these forms by placing applications on the outcome status of DEFOFFPEND. They also email students to inform them that they will receive a new offer when the course intake opens that corresponds to their intended enrolment. When the intake opens, Student Administration process a bulk update of all DEFOFFPEND applications (to DEFOFFER), which triggers emails to students about their offer for the new intake and what to do next. This is a practice that has been in place only for the most recent intake.

Direct phone contact with students is currently not part of the deferral of offer process and, as such, the emphasis of current practice is transactional rather than relational. Students receive an email confirmation of deferral from Student Admissions, in effect processing the transaction. In relation to returning to study, the Communication Centre has an automated campaign that promotes acceptance of offer including bulk email, SMS and targeted outbound calls. As part of this case study, discussions with staff indicated varying degrees of understanding of leave-taking processes including slippage of different terms for deferral and leave-taking (e.g. Defer, Intermit, Intermission or Leave). The terms were used interchangeably, and sometimes incorrectly, potentially causing confusion for both staff and students.

The Student Life Directorate documents a process, relevant information and suggested scripts to provide support to students on the phone, online and in person, including how to refer students to Student Success and other relevant services if required. The Communications Centre has plans to develop personalised scripts and customised strategies for discontinued students within specific cohorts (e.g. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander).

Current practice of staff reveals that there is not a systematic process for supporting students taking leave during their university study. In 2019, Business Growth and Development piloted a communication and data capture process for students who had applied to withdraw from university. Of the students contacted in 2019, 18 per cent changed to taking leave rather than withdrawing from university study. Like the process of taking leave, students submit an online form to withdraw. Prior to processing the request, the Communications Centre phones the student to ensure they are aware of the options to reduce their study load, change study mode or take leave.

Whilst outside the scope of this project, Student Success meet with international students on a Student Visa before an intermission request is processed and individually follow-up with students prior to their return to study and, occasionally, whilst the student is on leave. On return to study, the student and Student Success Advisors discuss the student's current circumstances and relevant support services for the semester. A similar process is followed for domestic students who are supported by Student Success prior to intermission. However, it is not a requirement for domestic students to discuss their study and enrolment as it is for Student Visa holders.

When a student submits the online form to take leave, the form recommends students discuss their decision with someone within the University. This places the onus on the student, rather than proactive outreach from the institution. There is no outreach from the University unless something within the student's comments necessitates a response. For example, review of some of the intermission applications from 2018-2019 show where students request information on the process to *Withdraw Without Penalty* and review of the student's record indicate that this information was provided to them. Similarly, the exception to this is where an international student applies without first discussing this with Student Success Advisors. In these instances, Student Success Advisors contact the student.

When a student's leave period is concluding, there is no tailored communication. Students may be included in the re-enrolment campaign that encourages continuing students to enrol in the upcoming semester when enrolment opens. Given that students may be taking leave because of distressing life events, the consideration of a separate re-enrolment campaign has been raised. However, the data and communication systems currently require significant manual effort, so this response has not yet been progressed.

Leave taker data – insights into low socio-economic status student practices

Data collected as part of this study indicates patterns of enrolment and re-enrolment and provides insight into the experiences of low SES students.

Firstly, analysis was conducted on domestic undergraduate applicants who defer an offer, and whether they either respond to their deferred offer or initiate another application to *University C* in future years.

- The rate of deferral of an offer was 7 per cent for all domestic undergraduates, versus 6 per cent amongst low SES applicants.
- Applicants who initially deferred were most likely to re-engage within the same year (i.e. defer in first Semester to second Semester) or the following year.

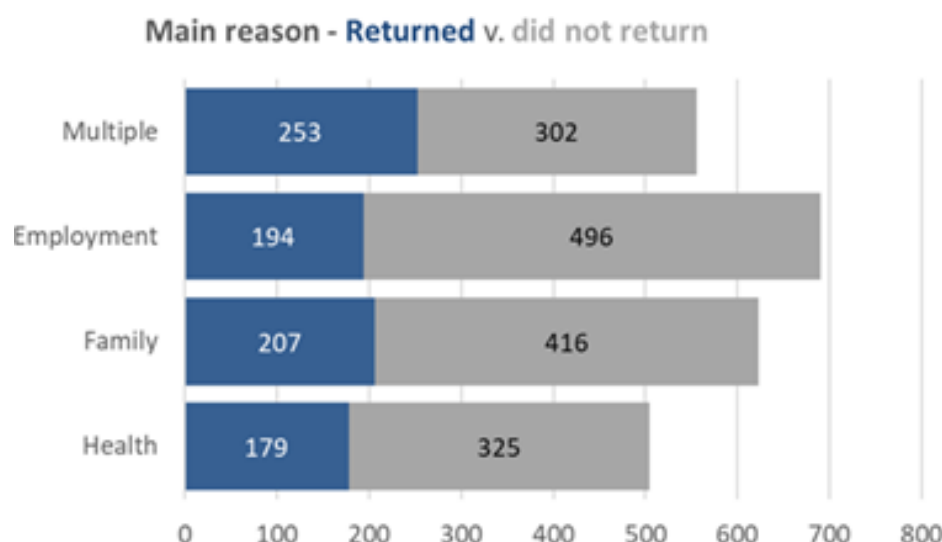
- Across all domestic applicants, approximately 30 per cent of those who deferred in 2016-2018¹ never resumed any future application for *University C*. This rate was similar amongst low SES applicants.

Of those who did resume an application, 80 per cent ultimately accepted². Again, this rate was similar amongst low SES applicants. Those 20 per cent who did not accept were either not offered due to the course being a quota course, or the student may have deferred their offer again.

Figure 13 shows the results of an analysis of the reasons for domestic undergraduate students opting to take a leave of absence in 2018 and 2019.

Overwhelmingly, the need to seek employment is the most significant factor recorded. Data on low SES students broadly reflected all student data. However, low SES students who cited family reasons on departure from the University were slightly more likely to return (41 per cent returned) than their peers (32 per cent).

Figure 13: Numbers of domestic Bachelors in each 'reason' category and whether they returned



Open-ended responses were analysed to extract information about these students' experiences, providing the following issues:

- University study is often (increasingly) undertaken at a busy life stage;
- Undergraduate study, for most of these students, required significant commitment of time (and, often, also expense, e.g. travel);

¹ More recent data is available, however, by looking at 2016-2018, this allows several future periods for students to reapply - to fully capture the return rate.

² Until the Semester 1 2020 intake, Admissions would contact all students who had previously deferred an offer into the coming period, and only issue offers for those who were still interested. This skews the base of those who resume, resulting in a higher acceptance rate.

- Students frequently cited short-to-medium term disruptions, e.g. new job opportunities, travel, children, health incidents, and reported that they expected to return to study once these issues were resolved or diminished;
- Students also frequently cited pregnancy/childbirth and care of young children as the disruptor: 22 per cent of all students who took leave in this dataset (and 24 per cent of those who did return);
- Other common challenges included mental health concerns/mental illnesses (10 per cent), moving or relocating away (11 per cent) and financial difficulty (9 per cent);
- A few students reported reasons that made it impossible to study at the University, for example, moving interstate.

Student Voice

As part of this case study, four undergraduate university students were interviewed regarding their decision to defer and/or take a leave of absence from their studies. While all these students had taken leave, all are currently enrolled to return to study in 2020.

Taking leave/ deferral

All of the participants interviewed understood that they had the option of taking leave from their studies: 'I don't really know exactly how I knew that. I just always knew that was available. I just knew that I could take a break when I needed to' (Student 3). Student 4 stated, 'I had heard about it and I thought, well, it's easy enough to do.' However, upon requesting and being granted leave, Student 4 felt it would have been appropriate for the University to enquire further as to the reasons they sought leave from their course of study: 'like just a simple, why are you leaving and are you sure [...] someone picking up the phone to ask those questions would've made a world of difference.' Furthermore, students recognised information on deferring was available online, however, felt it was not particularly accessible or clear via the University's website search function.

Reasons for deferral/leave and key influencers in decision-making

In exploring the reasons as to why students opt to leave their studies, reasons provided by the participants reflected the complexities captured in the institutional data described previously. Key factors in making the decision to defer were varied depending on each student's circumstance.

Student 1:

Student 1, a mature age student, struggled to maintain the balance between study obligation and complex personal issues at home: *'I took the leave because our marriage was struggling and my wife was finding it very hard [...] I took the leave to try and take the stress off her and help more around the house as I was at home studying and had the kids while she was working.'* This decision to leave study was supported by Student 1's lecturer who encouraged them to *'look out for family first, sort that stuff out at home then come back and get stuck into it.'* In reflecting on this part of his university journey, Student 1 felt well supported by the institution: *'The University was awesome. Couldn't give a higher recommendation [...] the University couldn't do much more. Just top line I reckon.'* Despite leaving, Student 1 always felt supported to return: *'I appreciate it a lot [the support]. The part where [University C] don't just go, oh, you've taken off or you've taken leave or signed off,*

you're gone. You know? The website's available, my emails are still available, the library's still available, and the email that came through saying should you choose to resume your studies, feels like, we're here for you. I'm very appreciative.'

Student 2:

Family reasons were also the key factor for Student 2 in choosing to leave study. Despite initially thinking that she may have been able to persist, it was the ailing health of her mother that saw her defer studies: *'I was like, okay, do I push through and hope she doesn't have anything happen again? Or do I take time off?'* Her decision was significantly influenced by the perspectives of her peers: *'I spoke to a couple of my friends and somebody else who was studying who had taken time off at the time and I was like, do I push through and hope I just pass and not stress, or do I just say nup and pull out...better to not fail?'* This decision was reinforced by the need to support their child with dyslexia. Unlike Student 1, Student 2 did not seek advice or guidance from staff, either academic or professional: *'I didn't really talk to anybody at the uni, mostly just those around me and heard their perspective.'*

Student 3:

Student 3 deferred studies twice. The first time was for financial reasons: *'I needed money. I needed the work and the youth allowance wasn't an option [...] I was still classed as legally dependent.* Like Student 2, friends were key influencers in the decision: *'I had a bit of a chat with mates and stuff just thinking like it is the right idea or whatever.'* The second deferral was for family health reasons: *'my dad was diagnosed with a glioblastoma so, like, terminal brain tumour. So, I was like well, I'm not studying during this. I'm gonna spend time with him.'* Throughout this process the student felt well supported by University C, particularly the health service. As with Student 1, Student 3 felt well supported to re-engage in their studies: *'I got some emails with links to just, from recollection, it was probably about do you want to chat to anyone as you're coming back? As well as academic workshop links and things like that, suggesting, do you need academic skills [support] or do you need to bridge back in somehow or do you want to talk to any counsellors and stuff like that.'*

Student 4:

At the end of first year, Student 4 felt like she was 'floundering' and 'had no sense of direction' so took leave to pursue an overseas teaching opportunity. After requesting two semesters of leave, she did not enjoy her experience overseas and sought to return after one semester off. Taking this break interrupted her course plan significantly. Family were a key influencer in her decision to take leave, opting not to discuss with academics or support staff: *'I feel that, when you're in those situations, you forget about all the help that is offered to you and that you've been exposed to throughout the years, so you sort of just reflect back on what you know, which is just talking to family.'* While she felt well supported, Student 4 felt proactive outreach would have been highly beneficial in informing her decision and would have supported her at a difficult time in her student journey: *'I would have liked to have been asked why, you know, why are you doing this? Why are you leaving? And maybe it would have [cries] sorry, I don't know, this experience, it's still quite fresh to me even though it's been about six months or over.'*

Recommendations from students for University C

Have proactive support conversations with those seeking deferral

All students found it easy to defer their studies at *University C*. As part of the deferral process, at the point where students are asked to nominate their reason for deferral, the student participants recommended that some form of support conversation would help ensure students requesting leave had the relevant information to guide their decision. Often family and friends were key influencers in students' decision to defer; an additional perspective from *University C* would be useful in informing students' decision to defer or not.

Recognise reasons why students leave and ensure returning students feel welcome and supported

When the students were asked to consider what would support and enable re-engagement after taking leave, all wanted proactive outreach that recognised their reasons for leaving and supported their re-enrolment process. Student 2 captured this well: [something like] *'Hey, you've had a break, this is what you might want to do to get back into the routines and all. How to get back in the flow.'* This was also the case for Student 4: *'Hey, you're returning! How are you feeling about this? Are you confident? Are you sure this is still what you want?'*. This kind of support was also deemed important by Student 1 who felt that, in taking a leave of absence, they were somewhat a failure – welcoming messages of support were viewed as being ideal. Academic skills workshops, one-to-one conversations about returning to study and maintaining institutional communication and relationships with deferred students was viewed as important to facilitating the return of students who have taken leave/deferred. Clear course advice upon return was also viewed as critical.

Review inflexible course plans that make it difficult for returning students who don't follow typical study plans

The student experience at *University C* highlighted the inflexibility of course planning for students re-enrolling after a leave of absence: *'You can end up in difficult situations where [...] you might be in your final year, and you might be doing two units, and then you have to wait until the next year to do your one last unit, which is only available in the first semester'* (Student 3). Students highlighted that upfront information about this potential impact would have been useful upon seeking leave. This was also the case for Student 4, *'I could only do two units the second semester when coming back because I screwed up first semester so much, like I'm still playing the catch-up game [...] my units were so jumbled from doing part-time, full-time, deferring and it never goes as you plan.'*

Understand and communicate to students the financial implications of deferring study

For those on income support while studying, deferral meant that this source of income was ceased suddenly. The need to then find work, as required by Centrelink, imposed a set of financial and time burdens on students taking leave from their study – with potentially serious ramifications for students going through significant hardship like family illness, death etc.: *'If you're deferring for a semester, what's going to happen to your youth allowance? You have to move over to 'job seekers' even if you deferred for personal reasons, like in my circumstance, but then suddenly you have no income and no employment. That's gotta be pretty planned out'* (Student 3). Closer liaison with Centrelink would be critical for universities or, at least, knowledge of such implications needs to underpin the work of student support staff at *University C*.

UNIVERSITY D CASE STUDY

Introduction

University D enrolls a relatively large number of students from equity groups, particularly students from low SES backgrounds and regional areas, and has a relatively small but growing number of Indigenous students (Department of Education, 2019). The institution reports retention and success rates that are slightly lower than the national average but has a strong track record of supporting disadvantaged cohorts at university, reporting higher than average retention and success for students from low SES and regional backgrounds (Department of Education, 2019). *University D* is currently undertaking a renewal of its curricular and co-curricular offerings and has made significant investments in academic interventions designed to improve student outcomes, which include projects related to deferral and leave of absence.

This case study examines patterns of deferral and leave-taking at the institution using internal enrolment data; reviews the policies and procedures regarding deferral and leave of absence; analyses the interventions and support services that the University provides students who take a break from study; and discusses the constraints for it to better encourage these students to return to their study. We draw from three separate data sources, including: a desktop review of institutional documents about deferral and leave of absence policies and procedures; analysis of internal statistics; and a series of interviews conducted with staff at the University who had responsibilities for deferrals or leave-taking. Staff were interviewed individually for between 30 and 45 minutes, using a semi-structured protocol. The interviews covered perspectives on changes in the way students progress through their degrees and the interventions offered by the institution to encourage students to return, and interviews were studied using thematic analysis.

Analysis of institutional data

Deferral

Analysis of HEIMS data conducted as part of this project shows that the institution has a higher deferral rate, 14 per cent, than the national average of 9 per cent. The analysis of HEIMS data also shows that the proportion of non-returners (those who deferred but did not return to higher education) was 38 per cent, slightly higher than the national average of 33 per cent.

The University has focussed resources on deferral and leave of absence students since initial research in 2017 found that: the rates of withdrawal are very high both within the University and across the sector; half of students on leave return to the sector within eight years, despite little active re-recruitment; better understanding of leave and communications with students on leave would boost enrolment numbers and institutional reputation.

A subsequent analysis of deferral trends using internal data (Cakitaki, 2019a) found that low SES students were no more likely to defer than other students, and that those low SES students who did defer were slightly more likely to return to the University than other students. By contrast, regional students were almost 60 per cent more likely than metropolitan students to defer their offer at university. Of the regional students who deferred, they were slightly more likely to return to the University than metropolitan students, but overall the data show a large number of regional students do not return to study. Indigenous students were slightly less likely to defer their place than non-

Indigenous students. Of those who did defer, they were almost 40 per cent more likely to return to university than non-Indigenous deferrers.

The internal analysis also found that 72 per cent of students who return to university after deferring returned to a different course. This striking finding suggests that, in many circumstances, deferral is likely related to some uncertainty regarding course choice (Cakitaki, 2019a). It was not possible to determine how many students who deferred subsequently transitioned to study at other institutions from the internal data, but it is possible that many students who did not return to the University may have changed institutions.

Leave of absence

The analysis of HEIMS data found that the institution's leaving rate was 21.3 per cent, which was slightly under the national average and the rate of return within two years of initially taking a break was 32 per cent, slightly higher than the national rate of 28 per cent.

Analysis using internal enrolment data allowed us to examine the geo-demographics and subsequent outcomes of students who took a formal leave of absence (Cakitaki, 2019b). Examining the outcomes of students who were on a formal leave of absence was not possible from the analysis of HEIMS data due to a lack of detail regarding leave of absence stored in HEIMS.

According to the internal analysis, a relatively large proportion of students undertake a formal leave of absence each year. In 2018 for example, 2,369 students undertook an approved leave of absence, which represents approximately 10 per cent of all onshore undergraduate students. The most common period of leave is between 6 months and a year, with most students commencing their leave in the first month of semester one or two.

When leave of absence patterns are examined by equity cohort, we found that students from low SES and regional backgrounds were slightly less likely to go on approved leave from their course than other students, but Indigenous students were overrepresented.

The University collects rudimentary data on the reason for students undertaking a leave of absence. The most commonly cited reason is medical related, but 'other', employment and academic difficulties are also commonly cited. Examined by equity cohort, we found that students from low SES backgrounds were more likely to report academic difficulty. Regional students were more likely to cite medical, academic difficulty and financial hardship. Indigenous students were much more likely to report medical reasons and financial hardship as the reason for taking formal leave.

Tracking the short and medium-term academic outcomes of those on approved leave show that students on an approved leave of absence are much more likely to be counted as attrition in the Department of Education's standard retention calculation. More than 50 per cent of students who took an approved leave of absence in 2018 were counted as 'attrited' in the 2018-19 retention period. The analysis also showed that nearly 30 per cent of student attrition at the University was from students on a formal leave of absence.

Analysis of longer-term completion rates suggests that students who take a leave of absence are at a significantly higher risk of non-completion. However, our internal data cannot track movement between institutions and is therefore likely to exaggerate non-completion rates. For instance, the six-year completion rate for students who took leave in 2013 was only 24.3 per cent, with a significant

proportion of students not returning to study after their formal leave period concluded. The risk of non-completion was slightly higher for students from regional and low SES backgrounds, with completion rates of 21.9 per cent and 19.3 per cent respectively. These completion rates would all be somewhat higher if the analysis was able to track completions across the sector (accounting for transfers), rather than just completions at the institution, given many leave of absence students transition to other universities.

The reason for taking a leave of absence was found to be closely connected to the likelihood of subsequent re-enrolment and completion. For students who indicated they intended to travel, 46 per cent returned to complete their qualification. Students who cited financial hardship or medical reasons for their leave of absence, which are more likely to be students from identified equity cohorts, recorded completion rates of around 21 per cent.

While these data on the medium-term outcomes of formal leave of absence students are from a single university, the relatively poor outcomes are likely to be replicated sector-wide. However, without sector-wide data on the leave of absence status of students, the issue is hidden from view. There is a need for better national level data on leave of absence to further examine the issue.

Institutional oversight of deferring and leave of absence students

Governance and leadership

The Deputy Vice-Chancellor (DVC), Students, oversees the operation of deferral and leave of absence processes as well as the re-engagement of departed students. A dedicated institutional 5-year Student Success and Retention Plan (Success Plan hereafter) was developed in 2018, which serves as an overarching guideline for relevant practice. In the plan, the then Pro Vice-Chancellor highlighted that,

(The University) continues to welcome students with a range of previous educational experiences and at varying points in the degree lifecycle, to provide enriched and supportive experiences that enable every student to achieve their unique version of success.

Operationalising deferral and leave of absence policy and practice at the University requires collaboration and coordination across different teams, including Student Services and Administration, Marketing and Recruitment, and Student Success. The four professional staff interviewed held senior responsibilities across these portfolios.

All the staff interviewed reported a structural change that had taken place at the University with respect to the leadership for student success and retention. A more collaborative and matured leadership and coordinating environment has emerged to bring different teams across the University to work together on converting deferral or departed students. Structural change also drove a change in perspective from one that viewed deferral and leave of absence practice as primarily an administrative or bureaucratic task, to one that was driven by a desire to improve student outcomes. These changes are illustrated by the following excerpts:

I think now, the organisation is at a level of maturity about how we focus on student retention and conversion, and there's more attention being paid to how do we work together to provide a good service to our students, and get them to come back, or

support them if they need help. What I see happening now, is that there's a combined commitment to working together so we can manage this process. It's not just an admin task anymore, it's more than that. From an admin perspective, we couldn't do that on our own. That's how we were operating for a few years and no one had any visibility on how many students deferred, how many actually returned, whether our comms campaign made any difference whatsoever. I think working together has been a really positive opportunity that we can start to manage this far more effectively going forward (Interviewee 1a).

I think previously, recruitment was (focussed on) marketing to new students and deferrals get lost, so deferrals, where do they sit? Who's responsible for them? What we're saying is, we don't care who's responsible for them, the University's responsible for them. Let's get all these entities together and map out what we're going to do as a group. It takes a lot of work between areas to coordinate that and to create that synergy to get things up and running (Interviewee 2a).

These observed adjustments could be partially attributable to the increasing priority of converting deferral and leave-taking students at the University. Interviewee 1 suggested that the University now has a real focus on conversion and retention and there is a combined commitment to managing the process across the University. Given that the university attracts students from a lower SES background, who often are first in family, there is an understanding of the higher likelihood for this cohort to take leave of absence and a greater level of support is needed for them in comparison with students at Group of Eight universities. Moreover, the reintroduction of capped funding and the impending introduction of performance-based funding both focus universities on the financial and reputational importance of retention.

Practices relating to extended leave

Policy and procedure regarding deferral and leave-taking

Students could typically defer their offer granted by the University before the census date in the event that:

- They have not started their course;
- They have not completed a subject;
- They are not a recipient of a Postgraduate Commonwealth Supported Place (CSP).

Applicants who would like to defer their offer are required to complete an online form and the outcome will be communicated with the applicant within 10 working days.

All undergraduate and postgraduate coursework students may apply for leave of absence for up to twelve months from the course in which they are enrolled, in the case that they are experiencing significant difficulties in personal or academic life – financial, emotional, medical, employment or study related. Students may apply to extend the leave of absence if compassionate or compelling circumstances continue to impede their ability to pursue their course. Requests for multiple leave of absence over several Compulsory Teaching Periods or years will be considered on an individual basis. An online system and forms are used for students to lodge their leave of absence application.

Particularly, the leave of absence policy requires students who believe they may need to apply for leave of absence to first discuss their circumstances with the coordinator of their course or other relevant academic staff before applying.

According to the interviewed staff, the University's policies regarding deferral and leave of absence are highly visible to both the operational team and students, which normally cause little confusion or misunderstanding. One participant expressed her concern with extended leave of absence of over a year in duration, which, in her view, should be only considered in extreme circumstances to make sure the same admission principles are applied to a student cohort and that the competitiveness of a student would not be reduced due to delayed enrolment (Interviewee 2). She also pointed out the space for more reasonable deferral policies by streamlining and simplifying the process, improving the consistency and transparency in the decision making, and ensuring clarity for students so that they understand the rules.

Communications and engagement

Staff interviewees mentioned that students who defer or take a leave of absence are seen as members of the University community, and the University makes every effort to make sure they do not leave the community forever. Communications are central to keep engaging these students and assist them with creating a sense of belonging. Students who defer or take a leave of absence will be contacted at different key points via either email or outbound phone calls to discuss changes about their life conditions as well as plans to return to study. A communication campaign was developed mid-2017 to shape the communication with deferral and leave of absence students from an administration activity to a real retention and conversion tool. In order to achieve this, several changes have been highlighted by the interviewees and early evidence has shown how the communication campaign helps with improving the conversion rate:

What we were trying to do was really promote the University's services and facilities, and really encourage people to feel excited about returning or choosing to come and study, because at this point, they hadn't accepted and enrolled, they're just deferred. We started using... what's it called, MailChimp, so we could include images and stuff like that, instead of just a text-heavy message. And we could track who was opening their messages and that sort of thing (Interviewee 1a).

Last year [2018], I started reaching out to see, what is their experience, who touches base with them, what actually happened? With the student services and administration team, we devised a bit of an email campaign about students at the end of the year, who that would then come back in Semester One, 2020. I talked to them about how could we then work in, with these emails, what is the content? We'll follow-up after a first email, we could ring them and then a second email, so we could work together to build a more comprehensive support for these students (Interviewee 3a).

We piloted calling at the end of last year [2018] all students due to return Semester One, 2020. And the plan went exceptionally well and the data to date showing a 10 per cent increase in those returning for those who we were able to successfully reach by phone (Interviewee 3a).

There is indeed evidence from an internal evaluation of an intervention designed to improve the rate of return for leave of absence that it was effective at improving rates of return. The evaluation of welcome back calls during the final month of a student's leave of absence found that the intervention improved the proportion of students either returning or extending their leave by around 9 per cent, once demographic, equity, prior academic achievement and course factors were controlled for (Cakitaki; 2019c). While the intervention was found to improve outcomes, the relatively small effect size is consistent with other research (Bird et al., 2019; Dawson, Jovanovic, Gašević, & Pardo, 2017; Ortagus, Tanner & McFarlin, 2020).

Support services

The University runs a number of support programs. Some flagship programs were noted by the interviewees as examples that are particularly helpful for smoothing the transition of students who return to study after a leave of absence:

We referred most of them into our learning support program, which is called One Step Ahead. It is targeted towards new students, but also very good for students who are returning to study.

There was quite a significant number of referrals to careers advice as well. People who had been on a bit of a leave, they're coming back and they're thinking what's the right course for me? Is this the right career path? They left because they're not feeling that sense of purpose. Am I going to be these, is it really a good fit? So obviously careers advice is important.

We're really pleased that they were thought of and we came up with a strategy around how they might get integrated back into study. And also, where they had obviously cited things like financial reasons or things like that, we could also talk to them about what scholarships were available, book them in with a financial counsellor if they still needed assistance (Interviewee 3a).

One interviewee further argued that because students do not necessarily know the available services even if they attended orientation and may not realise how a certain service could actually help them, warm referral is useful to help with identifying the right service students need, particularly for students who are disengaged or struggling as they are the least likely to access those support services. Other interviewees stressed the importance of having face-to-face interventions to make sure support services could achieve the best result:

I think a phone call is fine, but nothing beats that face-to-face human intervention. A few years back it seems that universities moved to the self-help component. There's online help, you can help yourself here, let us know if you need help, we don't want to bother you. But sometimes you've got to go old school and face-to-face and sit down and walk people through it and we are doing that with our enrolment sessions. I think to better support them for leave of absence, it's that process before they go on leave of absence and a step in that being that they're actually talking to someone (Interviewee 2a).

We should provide some in-person support, where they can chat with an academic or whatever. I know they've set up the student advising pilot where they're actively contacting students (Interviewee 1a).

In addition to the existing services, participants also suggested a few other possible programs to remove any barriers, such as extra financial support or improvements to the availability of relevant data, to help students to re-engage with their study:

I have a feeling there probably would need some more financial support. If there is a way of targeting students perhaps who are on leave of absence and in an equity category to help them financially return. I guess we'd like to bring it off for them even more than we do (Interviewee 3a).

For deferrers, the biggest thing is knowing the reason for the deferral. I think we're in the time now that we could do that, we've got the right leadership, the right people. There's a lot of momentum to get this system right. It's just getting that data (Interviewee 2a).

Constraints for better engagement

The major constraint reported by interviewed staff for better engaging deferrers and students who take a leave of absence was the paucity of data. The following comments illustrate how data could help operational staff to deliver more effective communications and targeted interventions:

If you had a set of reasons for why you were deferring, that would then generate the intervention. Why are you deferring and then how do we map the intervention to make sure that the re-engagement is successful and that we're not maybe intervening at the right time. If it is because of an illness or a family situation, I don't want you to call me so frequently. If it's a travel situation, it's a completely different situation. Can you imagine how powerful it would be if we had that? (Interviewee 2a).

The leave of absence, I was talking to someone about this yesterday. Would be handy if we had specific course data especially about, we don't know which courses are changing and which ones, and more priorities for students to get certain types of advice. Probably the more we can get data on the individuals, for the individual student and tailor it even more, the better (Interviewee 3a).

In addition, a better data collection mechanism will help with monitoring and evaluating the effect of the communication campaign, as one participant put it:

We were lacking data collection. We had a communication campaign, because we thought it would be good to keep students on, but we didn't know were there any targets that we were aiming for? We didn't really understand whether the communication had any impact on addressing that. What has been missing, and I think this is the next stage that the organisation is looking at, is understanding what the success of that communication campaign was. Because we didn't really have any data, it is difficult to review our level of success really. (Interviewee 1a).

In acknowledgement of the data constraints within leave of absence and deferral processes, among other constraints, a data analytics team was established. The team conducted the aforementioned analysis of leave of absence call campaigns and is conducting a range of analysis on non-participating enrolments (ghost students), as well as redrafting the University's withdrawal form to enable better data capture about the reasons that students leave. This work will enable future interventions to be more targeted and, hopefully, effective.

UNIVERSITY E CASE STUDY

Introduction and overview

This case study explores low SES leave-taking within the context of the student cohort at *University E* in Melbourne, Australia. The research conducted within the University and its diverse student voices had four primary objectives:

- Understand deferral and leave of absence amongst low SES students;
- Understand the institutional oversight and management of deferral and leave of absence;
- Identify strategies by which *University E* can promote the return to study and their successful transition back of these students;
- Understand the perspectives of low SES students who have taken leave.

The findings provide future directions for improvement to institutional strategy, practices and policies as they relate to leave takers and in particular the low SES cohort, as well as directions for future research.

Institutional context

As a university of *Opportunity and Success*, *University E* is committed to being inclusive rather than exclusive, with a vision that incorporates our aspiration to uplift communities. *University E* has eight campuses across Melbourne, with an additional campus in Sydney catering for international students from over 45 countries as well as an online course offering. As a dual-sector institution, *University E* enrolls more than 40,000 students in higher education and vocational education and training, with a long tradition of increasing participation and enabling success for low SES students.

Definitions of deferral and extended leave

Deferment is an agreement to allow an applicant to defer taking up the place they have been offered until a later time. Deferment may be granted for all commencing local students in higher education (and TAFE) courses up to a maximum of 12 months.

Leave of absence is an approved break in study after study has commenced. Students approved for leave of absence have all relevant units in the study period(s) withdrawn but remain enrolled at the University at the course level.

The Block Model

In 2018, *University E* introduced a Block Model which encompasses both a First Year Model for commencing higher education students, together with a block mode approach to the delivery of learning and teaching. The First Year Model is focussed on maximising student engagement for all first year undergraduate students with a highly interactive and personal small group experience, pedagogy proven by research to ease transition and promote learning gain and personalised and co-curricular academic and other support to enhance knowledge and skills. *University E*'s Block Model focusses student learning on one unit (subject) at a time over four weeks in small groups rather than four subjects at a time over a 12 week period using large lecture delivery.

With the introduction of the First Year Model and the new learning and teaching mode in 2018 for commencing undergraduate students, the student outcome trends from previous years started to

change across the academic year, particularly in the areas of academic achievement and retention. This case study considers the impact of the Block Mode in the context of student deferral and leave of absence over 2018 and 2019.

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was used to undertake this case study, integrating quantitative and qualitative 'approaches to theory, data collection, data analysis and interpretation' (Bamberger, 2012, p. 1). This provided the best approach from which to evaluate and deepen the understanding of impacts and how they may be influenced within a particular context (Bamberger, 2012). This is an approach that enables a richer 'understanding of the social phenomena being studied' (Greene, 2001, p. 30), informed by student and staff voices on their perspectives through interviews, with an analysis of institutional data and a desktop review also employed for the case study.

Institutional data analysis

Student enrolment data from the 2014-2019 calendar year period was examined. The dataset included students in domestic onshore undergraduate (Bachelor) studies. The data collected student enrolments with an instance of a deferral, leave of absence, or both leave types. The analysis focussed only on course attempts associated with any deferral or leave of absence in that period and considered the demographic or characteristics of low SES students who had deferred and taken leave, compared with other equity groups and students overall.

Institutional Desktop review

A desktop review was conducted with a focus on institutional policy, procedure, processes, organisational accountability and responsibility associated with leave-taking, relevant website information and other publicly available documentation. The review was undertaken prior to students and staff being interviewed and was vital to understanding and interpreting the insights offered by interview participants.

Student interviews

The perspectives of six low SES students who took leave during this period were captured by semi-structured interviews that asked open-ended questions about their study experience, perspective and experiences, and ideas for future interventions and strategies. The interview questions followed the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) approved schedule.

Staff interviews

The perspectives of five staff (professional and academic) were captured by semi-structured interviews, using the HREC approved interview schedule. The interviews provided insights that complemented the desktop review, providing staff perspectives on institutional approaches and the efficacy of those, as well as future directions.

The interviews of both staff and students were transcribed. The analysis and development of key research themes and findings was undertaken separately by two independent researchers to ensure there was no bias in the analysis.

Key Findings

Low SES students at *University E*

In 2018, the most recently reported period, 24.82 per cent of undergraduate students were from low SES backgrounds, above the sector average of 16.97 per cent.

Profile of low SES students taking leave at *University E*

Low SES leave takers represent a relatively small cohort of students. There were 2,152 unique low SES students, of a total population of 42,981 students, who took leave (deferral or leave of absence). Within this dataset of unique students, multiple occurrences of deferral and leave of absence were found due to multiple course attempts by some students. It was found that there were 451 occurrences of low SES students deferring and returning to study and a further 1,723 occurrences of low SES students taking a leave of absence during a course attempt.

Data on the students who did not enrol to study after a period of deferral was not able to be collected.

Low SES students and leave of absence

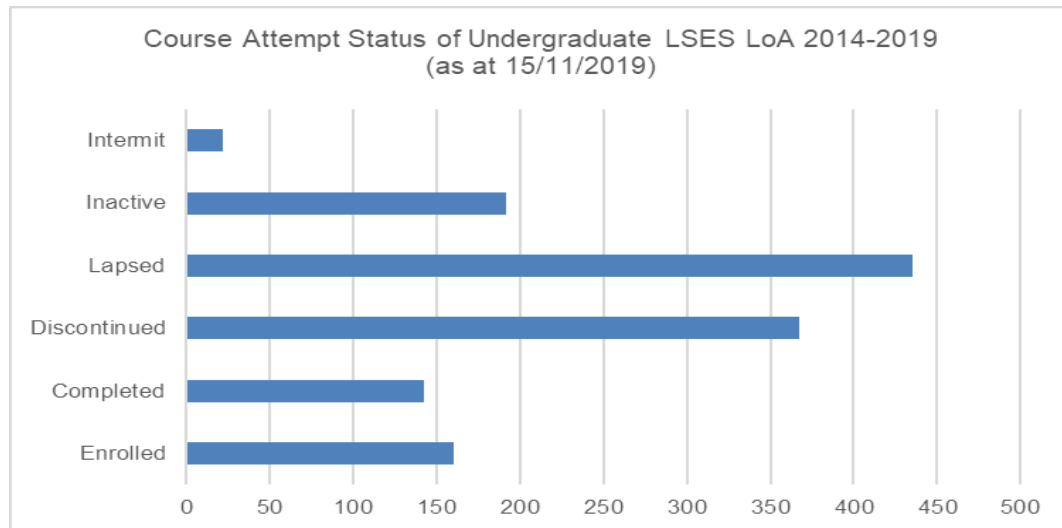
The analysis indicated that low SES students had taken an average of 190 days of leave during the six-year period.

The trends from year to year were difficult to accurately examine due to leave of absence not being available as time slice data, the need to collect data from multiple systems in a short project timeframe and the analysis of unique students and/or enrolled courses being complex. Through requesting the data, one outcome relevant to the case study is that whilst the data can be made available with some internal effort, it is not possible for key staff involved in planning, decision making and managing students with leave of absence to easily access the data and use it to proactively support improved student outcomes. The research also showed that, with the introduction of the Block Model since 2018, leave of absence records are now more complex. For example, students may have multiple leave of absence periods during a traditional semester period sometimes in multiple modes of study³.

The analysis of low SES students with leave of absence showed that there is an emerging trend for students who have taken leave of absence to either become 'lapsed' or 'inactive' in their enrolment status, or to discontinue (see Figure 14). This requires further investigation.

³ In 2018 and 2019, some students studied in both block (one subject over 4 weeks) and traditional mode (multiple concurrent subjects over 12 weeks) at the same time.

Figure 14: Current enrolment status of students who took a leave of absence between 2014-2019



Key demographic characteristics of low SES leave takers

Low SES students were compared to the total student population (number of distinct persons enrolled in Bachelor courses) – that is, 42,891 students during the period. It was found that:

- Low SES students who took leave of absence were predominantly from the West of Melbourne region (1,116 students).
- The majority of low SES students who deferred and commenced study or had a leave of absence were undertaking a Bachelor course in Arts, Education or Health and Biomedicine.
- Of the low SES students who deferred, 285 were female and 166 were male.
- Of the low SES students who took a leave of absence, 1,013 were female, 708 were male and one student identified as gender x.
- Of the low SES students taking leave of absence, 889 'only speak English' and 802 were from non-English speaking backgrounds.
- Of the low SES students who deferred and enrolled to study, 307 were from backgrounds where only English is spoken and 116 were from non-English speaking backgrounds.
- 615 low SES students (28 per cent) with either leave category had no ATAR, which is reflective of the institution's admission policy. 392 (18 per cent) of these students were in the 41-50 ATAR range followed by 349 (16 per cent) in the 51-60 ATAR range.
- Of the cohort of low SES students that took leave, 155 (7 per cent) identified as having a disability.
- A very small number of low SES students who took leave identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. It was found that three students deferred prior to commencing study and 12 had a leave of absence associated with their course attempt.

Student voice – perspectives on deferral and leave of absence

The interviews with students provided a deeper understanding of their experiences of having deferred or taken leave of absence and provided important insights to improve their transition to study. The interviewed low SES students had all returned to study from a period of either deferral or leave of absence.

Students reported that they found the experience of applying and being approved for deferral or leave of absence straightforward and that *University E* made it 'easy' for them. Through the interviews, students shared their personal perspectives of the experience, indicating that it was mostly online, took minimal time, was a straightforward process and there were advisors on call if students required them.

It was found that students who defer appear to experience no difference in their return to study when compared to any other newly commencing students. They enjoy the same welcoming and on-boarding support that any new student does. Low SES students taking a leave of absence reported that they require support in their transition to study and made recommendations for support programs to be introduced.

Reasons for deferring study were varied across students and included travelling, work opportunities, financial pressure leading to work commitments, needing a break after Year 12 studies and pregnancy. Some students wanted to explore other opportunities such as volunteering and others felt they needed to get in the right mindset for study. Through the interviews it was established that students actively made their decision to defer:

I knew from Year 10 that I was going to travel ... I'll make sure I'll get my spot straight after school and then I will defer it.

Students reported that deferring to take a gap year seemed to improve their focus, motivation and often made them feel more positive about returning to study. Upon their return to study, deferring students found the gap year had had a significant impact on them, better preparing them for study, impacting their views on the importance of study and their participation levels. One student commented that:

I think it made me better prepared because Year 12 was pretty stressful and I don't think I would have been ready to study straight after high school.

The interviews highlighted that students on leave of absence experienced difficulties in resuming their place at university after leave. They indicated a range of challenges for resuming their study and place at university which included getting back into the routine of studying, not having a group of friends, changes at university upon returning and changes due to the implementation of Block Mode/units whilst on leave.

Students who were interviewed for this study have taken leave of absence during the Block Model project implementation. It is probable that those students had challenges returning at least partly because the design of learning and teaching changed significantly in their absence. Some commenced study in traditional mode and returned to study in block mode (or a mix of both modes), which meant they had to learn an entirely new way to study, organise themselves and learn to navigate a new university system. It was found that this also had an impact on their existing friendship and study groups. Changes also included things moving to an online format, the structuring of courses/units, and how to enrol in classes. Students often felt alone in having to 'figure out what needed to be done'.

Some students who took a leave of absence found it challenging to get back into the 'routine' of study, struggling with motivation, having to learn to incorporate study back into their already

competing priorities of family life and work. Students reported difficulties associated with not having a cohort or group of friends to return to as one of the more difficult aspects of returning from leave.

Some students indicated that flexibility and choice was limited and that they struggled to develop relationships with teaching staff.

Students who took a leave of absence identified strategies that may support their transition to study more effectively. These included a buddy system, reaching out to students who had returned from leave of absence more proactively and tailored support services for their transition back to study.

Institutional oversight of deferral and leave of absence

Policy and procedure

A desktop review of institutional policy and procedure was conducted as part of this study and staff interviewed were asked about policy and procedure as part of their interviews.

Both policy and procedure related to admissions and enrolment underwent an extensive review and refresh in 2019, including extensive consultation with both staff and students. *University E's* continued implementation of the Block Model over multiple years has led to more frequent changes to processes, procedures and policies and there is an increased need for senior leaders to ensure that staff knowledge is current. The review found that policy and procedure is embedded in staff practice and students indicated that the process around leave-taking and deferral was straightforward and made 'easy' for them, as reported above. Staff reported that they find the policy and procedural documentation quite visible and easy to access in order to administer and service students.

With relevance to deferrals, the Admissions Policy and Procedure is comprehensive and current, as well as written in relatively plain English, providing clarity for students and a set of principles to guide staff in the admission of students. With relevance to leave of absence, the Enrolment Policy ensures that *University E's* enrolment practices are fair and consistent, are compliant and support the delivery of an excellent student experience. It was found that some terminology improvement could be made to documentation where the terms leave of absence and intermission are still used interchangeably and may cause some confusion.

The desktop review showed that *University E* prioritises deferrals and leave-taking through policy and procedure, and through the choice and option given to all students. In interviews, staff reported that students were supported in their decision to take a leave of absence with a level of due care, as one senior leader reported:

... if they showed reasonable circumstances for wishing to vary their enrolment, and they do so within the timely application and they can demonstrate that they've had advice or they are taking a sensible decision that's good for them, we would almost in all circumstances try to advise the student as best we can and then grant the deferral or leave of absence.

University E prioritises all students who take deferral and leave of absence with an embedded approach to support and transition services. Those approaches and the level of support differ between each leave type. Staff members described the engagement strategies for each and spoke

of the fact that these strategies were built into institutional procedures with a focus at present on process improvement to ensure the strategies are fit-for-purpose due to the introduction of the Block Model:

...at a policy level, there was a lot of work being done to try and keep in touch with those students so that we didn't lose them and that they did return at the end of the deferral date.

Monitoring, reporting and evaluation

At the operational level, student deferrals and leave of absence are routinely reported via University systems between Student Administration and Student Services for intervention, follow up and support with the aim of assisting all students to commence or return to study. It was found that these systems do not segment enrolment records by low SES identifiers to assist Student Advisors who are usually the first point of contact for students. It was clear from the review that improvements can be made in the exchange of information and reports beyond these groups so that Student Administration can better inform Colleges on their low SES cohort's leave-taking to enable better transition and support.

It was found that the overall process to 'convert' leave takers is well structured with cross-functional operating groups meeting regularly to plan conversion activities and campaigns. It also appears from the review that the information reported at the institutional level on leave of absence generally remains in traditional reporting cycles and is not yet adjusted to suit the changing rhythm of the Block Model.

The review of processes to monitor and evaluate leave takers across operational divisions highlighted that there is an exit point for outcomes data that could be improved. Whilst the campaign activity that seeks to convert students (deferral to enrolment, leave of absence to re-enrolment) are continuous and well automated, the information gathered from students during contact campaigns throughout each year could be improved. This process sends rich and insightful information back to the Student Administration team, without a follow on process to analyse and set in motion a new set of actions should low SES leave takers not return to study in a subsequent period. This process also resides within administrative systems and some College staff do not have full access to the information. Staff reported at interview that richer data would enable them to tailor follow up conversations with low SES students:

...We can basically then really tailor our conversations to those students and make them much more personable and assist with them returning to study... some better insights into reasons for deferment and leave of absence would assist those conversations and staff training.

It was evident from the review that some enhanced, low effort, automation of processes between systems and people could deliver these needed improvements to better support low SES students' return to study.

Engagement with leave takers and support services

Staff interviewed were insistent on the need to provide additional support for students from low SES backgrounds, as this was seen as a key factor in facilitating success for deferred students and for those returning from leave of absence.

Generally, staff viewed the services that leave takers might utilise as quite accessible and believed students on leave of absence have an advantage of already being a 'current student' with access to university systems and updates whilst on leave to stay informed and connected. Staff commented that some students are often reluctant to access support services as it requires them to self-report and risk 'stigmatisation'. The low SES students interviewed described the support services as visible and accessible.

University E is currently considering ways in which to better engage students during their deferral and leave of absence period, with 'authentic and genuine' communications. Staff commented that a project group is already established to automate more of the resource intensive 'duck paddling' required to manage students on leave. Staff commented that continued investment in technologies such as the enterprise-CRM is a key dependency to enable this work to be developed and for the engagement of students to be enhanced. In the case of deferred students, a trial has been completed to engage and support them better.

Deferment

Due the Block Model's opportunity to enrol at additional times in the academic year and undertake one unit / block of study at a time over four weeks, the nature of student deferrals and the frequency is changing the way in which the University needs to engage with students. Without traditional bi-annual semester start dates as the only entry point for students to enrol and commence study, deferral periods are likely to shorten as students have more flexibility and choice as explained by an academic staff member:

...So, I think it's more likely, in the block environment, the students won't be looking at the deferring for six months to 12 months, they'll simply be stepping back.

Returning from deferment is managed carefully for students, particularly those who may experience campus changes for their intended course. Returning from deferment is celebrated, similar to a commencing new student, and student welcome information is provided (e.g. orientation programs). A range of key staff interviewed explained the significant aspect of the conversion and on-boarding activities for deferral students, with some personalisation within the cohort itself.

As deferred students are considered new commencing students, they complete a personalised Success Plan on enrolment and are individually matched with a Student Advisor to support them. From the student interviews conducted, there was no feedback to suggest any issues with starting university following a deferment.

Leave of Absence

All students have the choice to apply for a leave of absence, however, the application undergoes a careful approval process as there may be implications for taking the leave related to future study patterns. As with deferral, leave of absence is changing due to the Block Model. Where a leave of absence may previously have been for a semester, it is now possible to have a leave of absence for

one four week block (i.e. unit of study). Students remarked at interview that they found it challenging to get back into the 'routine' of study, struggling with motivation, and having to learn to incorporate study back into their already competing priorities of family life and work.

The review discovered that an expired leave of absence, without intervention, is not entirely understood in terms of how it may relate to students eventually being made 'inactive' and 'lapsed' by university processes at particular time intervals throughout the year. This pattern potentially sees students disengaging with their studies; without actively discontinuing and without nuanced interventions and support to retain them. However, more work is required to fully understand the connection.

Discussion and conclusion

Due to the Block Model, the options for both leave types of deferral and leave of absence has changed significantly, with more choices for students and flexibility to decide when they study at more frequent intervals. Careful modelling and monitoring needs to be undertaken to fully understand the impacts of this change on student retention and success, as well as the benefits and challenges of that change on both the institution and its students due to greater flexibility. This change requires *University E* to undertake a unique and deeper piece of work in relation to low SES students taking leave of absence and students more broadly, to analyse and understand new patterns of leave of absence that may result in the further revision of policy and improved student engagement processes and support services. This includes the further investigation of students who disengage with their study following one or more leave of absence and are considered as absent without leave (Harvey et al., 2017).

It is evident from this research study that some students with leave of absence had a more challenging return to study and this was in part due to the rollout of the Block Model during their course which changed every aspect of their study and learning experience whilst they were on leave. It was also evident that low SES students taking a leave of absence could benefit from a more proactive support service from the University whilst on leave, although this applies to all students on a leave of absence. Staff themselves acknowledged that this is a key student retention strategy they intend to develop and it was identified during the study that *University E's* Success Planning program would be an ideal way in which to engage low SES students who take leave of absence. Particularly if their circumstances continue to change over time, a case management approach for low SES students using the established Success Planning program may better engage, support and retain low SES leave takers.

Now in 2020, with the implementation of the Block Mode nearly complete for undergraduates, it was clear from the staff interviewed that students returning to study from leave of absence in the future will experience a more flexible and engaged learning model together with more enhanced, proactive and nuanced support services already under development. Similarly, programs need to be slightly nuanced for deferred low SES students as they return to study.

It was clear from the research that the available data for key staff successfully managing low SES students in these two leave categories could be improved and would lead to a more responsive and strategic service design that improves student retention and success. Major recommendations include the design of automated reporting at new time intervals due to Block Mode; timely and simplified reporting for key staff focussed on retention activities; time slice data on leave of absence;

and reports on deferred students who never commence study which may increase with the frequency and flexibility of new admission and enrolment periods throughout each year afforded by the design of the Block Model. There were also data limitations discovered that may need addressing including the need to source data from multiple systems and personnel to make sense of a student's study journey, and the need for reportable information on leave of absence reasons to understand the trends and complex challenges in grappling course/unit data down to a student-level.

Finally, a further review needs to be directed at understanding deferral and leave of absence with a more robust analysis of leave rates, reasons, and return rates using a more sophisticated approach than was taken within the time constraints of this case study and the limitations of available data. This is already being considered at *University E*, in the context of the current and future states of the Block Model, so we may plan for future leave takers and support a diverse range of students.

References

- Anderson, D. S., & Vervoorn, A. E. (1983). *Access to privilege: Patterns of participation in Australian post-secondary education*. Canberra: ANU Press.
- Archer, L. (2007). Diversity, equality and higher education: a critical reflection on the ab/uses of equity discourse within widening participation. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 12(5-6), 635-653.
- Australian Government. (2020). *Job-ready Graduates – Higher Education Reform Package*. Canberra: Department of Education, Skills and Employment. Retrieved from https://www.dese.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/job_ready_graduates_discussion_paper.pdf
- Department of Education and Training. (2018). *Completion Rates of Higher Education Students - Cohort Analysis, 2005-2017*. Retrieved from <https://docs.education.gov.au/node/51501>
- Bagnoli, A. (2009). On 'an introspective journey': Identities and travel in young people's lives. *European Societies*, 11(3), 325-345.
- Ball, S. J., Vincent, C., Kemp, S., & Pietikainen, S. (2004). Middle Class Fractions, Childcare and the 'Relational' and 'Normative' Aspects of Class Practices. *The Sociological Review*, 52(4), 478-502.
- Bamberger, M. (2012). Introduction to mixed methods in impact evaluation. *Impact Evaluation Notes*, 3(3), 1-38.
- Barney, K. (2016) Listening to and learning from the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to facilitate success. *Student Success*, 7(1).
- Barney, K. (2018). Community gets you through: Success factors contributing to the retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Degree by Research (HDR) students. *Student Success*. 9(4).
- Barrett, E., & Powell, J. (1977). *Deferring Students Who Did Not Re-enrol at the University of New South Wales in 1976*. Kensington, NSW: Tertiary Education Research Centre, University of New South Wales,.
- Baum, S., & Ma, J. (2012). *Trends in college pricing 2011*. New York, NY: College Board Advocacy and Policy Center.
- Beames, S. (2004). Overseas youth expeditions with Raleigh International: A rite of passage? *Journal of Outdoor and Environmental Education*, 8(1), 29-36.
- Behrendt, L., Larkin, S., Griew, R., & Kelly, P. (2012). *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People Final Report*. Retrieved from <https://www.education.gov.au/review-higher-education-access-and-outcomes-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-people>
- Benson, G., Ploeg, J., & Brown, B. (2010). A cross-sectional study of emotional intelligence in baccalaureate nursing students. *Nurse Education Today*, 30(1), 49-53.

- Bettinger, E. P., Long, B. T., Oreopoulos, P., & Sanbonmatsu, L. (2012). The Role of Application Assistance and Information in College Decisions: Results from the H&R Block FAFSA experiment. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 127(3), 1205-1242
- Birch, E., & Miller, P. (2007). A National Study of Students' Performance at University. *Australasian Journal of Economics Education*, 4(2).
- Birch, E., & Miller, P. W. (2007). The Characteristics of 'Gap-Year' Students and Their Tertiary Academic Outcomes. *Economic Record*, 83(262), 329-344.
- Bird, K. A., Castleman, B. L., Denning, J. T., Goodman, J., Lamberton, C., & Rosinger, K. O. (2019). Nudging at scale: Experimental evidence from FAFSA completion campaigns (0898-2937).
- Birrell, B., Calderon, A., Dobson, I. R., & Smith, T. F. (2000). Equity in access to higher education revisited. *People and Place*, 8(1), 50-61.
- Bonham, L. A., & Luckie, J. A. I. (1993). Taking a break in schooling: why community college students stop out. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 17(3), 257-270.
- Borden, L. M., Lee, S.-A., Serido, J., & Collins, D. (2008). Changing College Students' Financial Knowledge, Attitudes, and Behavior through Seminar Participation. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 29(1), 23-40.
- Bornholt, L., Gientzotis, J., & Cooney, G. (2004). Understanding Choice Behaviours: Pathways from School to University with Changing Aspirations and Opportunities. *Social Psychology of Education: An International Journal*, 7(2), 211-228.
- Bradley, D., Noonan, P., Nugent, H., & Scales, B. (2008). *Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report*. Retrieved from https://www.mq.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0013/135310/bradley_review_of_australian_higher_education.pdf
- Breneman, D. W., & Merisotis, J. (2002). Beyond money: Support strategies for disadvantaged students. In D. E. Heller (Ed.), *Conditions of access: Higher education for lower income students* (pp. 113-133). Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Brown, J., Rothman, S., & Underwood, C. (2012). *The On Track Survey 2011 Longitudinal Report The 2007 Cohort 4 Years On*. Australian Council of Educational Research. Retrieved from https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1013&context=transitions_misc
- Brown, P., Hesketh, A., & Williams, S. (2004). *The Mismanagement of Talent: Employability and Jobs in the Knowledge Economy*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Cakitaki, B. (2019a). *Deferral at La Trobe University: An analysis*. Unpublished manuscript, Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research, La Trobe University.
- Cakitaki, B. (2019b). *What happens to students who take a leave of absence at La Trobe University?* Unpublished manuscript, Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research, La Trobe University.
- Cakitaki, B. (2019c). *Evaluation of a leave of absence intervention*. Unpublished manuscript, Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research, La Trobe University.

- Cardak, B. A., & Vecchi, J. (2016). Graduates, Dropouts and Slow Finishers: The Effects of Credit Constraints on University Outcomes. *Oxford Bulletin of Economics and Statistics*, 78(3), 323-346.
- Checchi, D. (2006). *The economics of education*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Clancy, P., & Goastellec, G. (2007). Exploring Access and Equity in Higher Education: Policy and Performance in a Comparative Perspective. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 61(2), 136-154.
- Cosser, M. (2009). The skills cline: higher education and the supply-demand complex in South Africa. *Higher Education*, 59(1), 43-53.
- Côté, J. E. (2006). Emerging Adulthood as an Institutionalized Moratorium: Risks and Benefits to Identity Formation. In J. L. Arnett & J. J. Tanner (Eds.), *Emerging adults in America coming of age in the 21st century* (pp. 85-116). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Crawford, C., & Cribb, J. (2012). *Gap-year takers: Uptake, trends, and long term outcomes*. Retrieved from https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/219637/DFE-RR252.pdf
- Creswell, J., & Poth, Cheryl N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Boston: Pearson.
- Curtis, D. D. (2014). The 'Gap Year' in Australia: Incidence, Participant Characteristics and Outcomes. *Australian Economic Review*, 47(1), 107-114.
- Daniels, D. (2017). *Student income support: a chronology*. Canberra: Parliament of Australia. Retrieved from https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1718/Chronology/StudentIncomeSupport
- Daubman, K. A., Williams, V. G., Johnson, D. H., & Crump, D. (1985). Time of withdrawal and academic performance: Implications for withdrawal policies. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 26(6), 518-524.
- Davis, T. M., & Murrell, P. H. (1993). A structural model of perceived academic, personal, and vocational gains related to college student responsibility. *Research in Higher Education*, 34(3), 267-289.
- Dawkins, J. S. (1988). *Higher education: A policy statement*. Canberra: AGPS.
- Dawson, S., Jovanovic, J., Gašević, D., & Pardo, A. (2017). From prediction to impact: evaluation of a learning analytics retention program. Paper presented at the Proceedings of *the Seventh International Learning Analytics & Knowledge Conference*, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1145/3027385.3027405>
- Day, A. Nakata, V. Nakata, M., & Gregory M. (2015) Indigenous students' persistence in higher education in Australia: contextualising models of change from psychology to understand and aid students' practices at a cultural interface, *Higher Education Research & Development*, 34:3,501-512, DOI: [10.1080/07294360.2014.973379](https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2014.973379)
- Department of Education and Training. (2015). *Higher Education in Australia: a review of reviews from Dawkins to today*. Canberra. Retrieved from

https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/higher_education_in_australia_-_a_review_of_reviews.pdf

Department of Education and Training. (2016). *2015 Appendix 5- Equity performance data*. Retrieved from <https://docs.education.gov.au/node/41766>

Department of Education and Training. (2017). *Completion Rates of Higher Education Students-Cohort Analysis, 2005-2014*. Canberra: Department of Education and Training. Retrieved from <https://docs.education.gov.au/node/41841>

Department of Education and Training. (2018). *Undergraduate Applications, Offers and Acceptances 2018*. Canberra. Retrieved from <https://docs.education.gov.au/node/51541>

Department of Education Training and the Arts. (2007). *The next step report on the destinations of Year 12 completers in Queensland*. Brisbane: Queensland Department of Education and the Arts.

Department of Education, Skills and Employment. (2019). *Selected Higher Education Statistics - 2018: Section 16 - Equity performance data*. Retrieved from <https://docs.education.gov.au/node/53030>

Department of Social Services. (2018). *DSS Payment Trends and Profile Reports*. Retrieved from <https://researchdata.and.s.org.au/dss-payment-trends-profile-reports>

Devlin, M. (2013). Bridging socio-cultural incongruity: conceptualising the success of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds in Australian higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38(6), 939-949.

Devlin, M., & McKay, J. (2014). Reframing 'the problem': Students from low socio-economic status backgrounds transitioning to university. In H. Brook, D. Fergie, M. Maeorg, & D. Michell (Eds.), *Universities in Transition* (pp. 97-125). South Australia: South Australia: University of Adelaide Press.

Dietrich, J., Parker, P., & Salmela-Aro, K. (2012). Phase-Adequate Engagement at the Post-School Transition. *Developmental Psychology*, 48(6), 1575-1593.

Dobson, H., & Smith, R. F. (2000). What is stress, and how does it affect reproduction? *Animal Reproduction Science*, 60-61, 743-752.

Dobson, I. R., & Skuja, E. (2005). Secondary Schooling, Tertiary Entry Ranks and University Performance. *People and Place*, 13(1), 53-62.

Dow, K. L., & Dow, K. L. (2011). *Review of student income support reforms*. Canberra: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. Edwards, D., & McMillan, J. (2015). *Completing university in a growing sector: Is equity an issue?* Retrieved from https://research.acer.edu.au/higher_education/43

Edwards, R. (1993). *Mature Women Students*. London: Falmer.

Elsworth, G., Day, N., Hurworth, R., & Andrews, J. (1982). *From school to tertiary study: Transition to college and university in Victoria* (Monograph No. 14). Melbourne, Australia: Australian Council for Educational Research.

- Epstein, D. (1995). In our (New) Right minds: the hidden curriculum and the academy. In L. Morley & V. Waksh (Eds.), *Feminist Academics: Creative Agents for Changes* (pp. 56-72). London: Taylor and Francis.
- Evans, M. (1995). Ivory towers: life in the mind. In L. Morley & V. Walsh (Eds.), *Feminist Academics: creative agents for change*. pp. 73-85. London: Taylor and Fran.
- Freeman, B., Klatt, M., & Polesel, J. (2014). *Deferring a university offer in regional Victoria - final report*. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/264384165_Deferring_a_university_offer_in_regional_Victoria_-_final_report
- Gaële, G. (2006). Accès et admission à l'enseignement supérieur : contraintes globales, réponses locales ? *Cahiers de la Recherche sur l'Education et les Savoirs*, 5, 15-35.
- Gale, T., & Tranter, D. (2011). Social justice in Australian higher education policy: an historical and conceptual account of student participation. *Critical Studies in Education*, 52(1), 29-46.
- Gore et al. (2017). The participation of Australian Indigenous students in higher education: a scoping review of empirical research, 2000-2016. *Australian Education Research*. 44(1).
- Greene, J. C., Benjamin, L., & Goodyear, L. (2001). The merits of mixing methods in evaluation. *Evaluation*, 7(1), 25-44.
- Haase, C. M., Heckhausen, J., & Köller, O. (2008). Goal Engagement During the School-Work Transition: Beneficial for All, Particularly for Girls. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 18(4), 671-698.
- Halsey, A. H. (1993). Trends in Access and Equity in Higher Education: Britain in international perspective. *Oxford Review of Education*, 19(2), 129-140.
- Halsey, J. (2018). *Independent review into regional, rural and remote education: final report, National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy*. Canberra: Department of Education and Training. Retrieved from <https://docs.education.gov.au/node/50281>
- Harding, S. (1990). Feminism, Science, and the Anti-Enlightenment Critiques. In L. J. Nicholson (Ed.), *Feminism/Postmodernism* (pp. 83-106). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Harvey, A., & Burnheim, C. (2013). Loosening old school ties: Understanding university achievement and attrition. *Professional Voice*, 9(2), 29.
- Harvey, A., & Luckman, M. (2020). Towards Inclusive Excellence: a survey of diversity on campus, Unpublished manuscript. Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research.
- Harvey, A., & Szalkowicz, G. (2016). Developing multiple exit pathways within undergraduate courses. *International Studies in Widening Participation*, 3(1), 52-67.
- Harvey, A., Burnheim, C., & Brett, M. (2016). Towards a Fairer Chance for All: Revising the Australian Student Equity Framework. In A. Harvey, C. Burnheim, & M. Brett (Eds.), *Student Equity in Australian Higher Education: Twenty-five years of A Fair Chance for All* (pp. 3-20). Singapore: Springer.
- Harvey, A., Szalkowicz, G. & Luckman, M. (2017). *The re-recruitment of students who have withdrawn from Australian higher education*. Report for the Australian Government Department of Education and Training. Melbourne: Centre for Higher Education Equity and

- Diversity Research, La Trobe University. Retrieved from https://www.latrobe.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/784028/La-Trobe-NPP-Recruitment-Research-Report-24-February-2017.pdf
- Harvey, A., Szalkowicz, G., & Luckman, M. (2020). *Improving employment and education outcomes for Somali Australians*. Melbourne. Retrieved from https://www.latrobe.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/1095510/Final-Report-La-Trobe-Somali-Australians-25-Feb-2020.pdf
- Heath, S. (2007). Widening the Gap: Pre-University Gap Years and the 'Economy of Experience'. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 28(1), 89-103.
- Heckhausen, J., & Schulz, R. (1995). A Life-Span Theory of Control. *Psychological Review*, 102(2), 284-304.
- Heckhausen, J., & Tomasik, M. J. (2002). Get an Apprenticeship before School Is Out: How German Adolescents Adjust Vocational Aspirations When Getting Close to a Developmental Deadline. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 60(2), 199-219.
- Higher Education Statistics Agency. (2020). *Non-continuation: UK Performance Indicators 2018/19*. Retrieved from <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/performance-indicators/non-continuation-1819>
- Hillman, K. (2005). *The first year experience: The transition from secondary school to university and TAFE in Australia*. Melbourne, Australia: Australian Council for Educational Research.
- Holmlund, B., Liu, Q., & Nordström Skans, O. (2008). Mind the gap? Estimating the effects of postponing higher education. *Oxford Economic Papers*, 60(4), 683-710.
- Hoyt, J. E., & Winn, B. A. (2004). Understanding Retention and College Student Bodies: Differences Between Drop-Outs, Stop-Outs, Opt-Outs, and Transfer-Outs. *NASPA Journal*, 41(3), 395-417.
- Hunter, M. S. (2006). Fostering student learning and success through first-year programs. *Peer Review*, 8(3), 4-7.
- Hurtado, S., & Carter, D. F. (1997). Effects of College Transition and Perceptions of the Campus Racial Climate on Latino College Students' Sense of Belonging. *Sociology of Education*, 70(4), 324-345.
- Jackson, C. (2016). *The Other Side of Attrition*. The Australian, 13 September.
- Jewson, N., Mason, D., Bowen, R., Mulvaney, K., & Parmar, S. (1991). Universities and ethnic minorities: The public face. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 17(2), 183-199.
- Jones, A. (2004). *Review of Gap Year Provision*. London: Department for Education and Skills. Retrieved from <http://www.tussenjaartwifels.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/AndrewJonesforDfES2003.pdf>
- Jorgensen, B. L., & Savla, J. (2010). Financial Literacy of Young Adults: The Importance of Parental Socialization. *Family Relations*, 59(4), 465-478.
- King, A. (2011). Minding the gap? Young people's accounts of taking a Gap Year as a form of identity work in higher education. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 14(3), 341-357.

- Klatt, M., & Polesel, J. (2013). *Deferring a University Offer in Victoria: 2009 Year 12 Graduates - Three Years Out*. Melbourne, Victoria: Youth Affairs Commission of Victoria.
- Krause, K., Hartley, R., James, R., & McInnis, C. (2005). *The First Year Experience in Australian Universities: Findings From a Decade of National Studies*. Canberra, ACT: Department of Education, Science and Training. Retrieved from https://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/1670228/FYEReport05KLK.pdf
- Kroll, C. (2013). *The great recession and housing affordability*. Berkeley, CA: UC Berkeley Fisher Center for Real Estate and Urban Economics.
- Lamb, S. (2001). *The Pathways from School to Further Study and Work for Australian Graduates*. Melbourne, Australia: Australian Council for Educational Research, Melbourne.
- Leathwood, C. (2006). Gender, equity and the discourse of the independent learner in higher education. *Higher Education*, 52(4), 611-633.
- Letseka, M., Cosser, M., Breier, M., & Visser, M. (2010). *Student Retention and Graduate Destination: Higher Education and Labour Market Access and Success*. Cape Town, South Africa: HSRC Press.
- Li, I., & Carroll, D. (2017). *Factors influencing university student satisfaction, dropout and academic performance: an Australian higher education equity perspective*. Perth: National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. Retrieved from <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/factors-influencing-university-student-satisfaction-dropout-and-academic-performance-an-australian-higher-education-equity-perspective/>
- Liddle, C. (2015). First Peoples: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in higher education. In A. Harvey, C. Burnheim & M. Brett (Eds.), *Student equity in Australian higher education: Twenty-five years of A Fair Chance for All*. Singapore: Springer Publishing.
- Linke, R., Barton, A., & Cannon, R. (1985). *Deferment of Entry Into Higher Education*. Adelaide, SA: Tertiary Education Authority.
- Lomax-Smith, J., Watson, L., & Webster, B. (2011). *Higher education base funding review: final report*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia. Retrieved from https://www.canberra.edu.au/research/faculty-research-centres/edinstitute/documents/HigherEd_FundingReviewReport1.pdf
- Lumsden, M., & Stanwick, J. (2012). *Who takes a gap year and why?* Adelaide, SA: National Centre for Vocational Education Research. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED533076.pdf>
- Marginson, S. (1993). *Education and public policy in Australia*. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.
- Martin, A. J. (2010). Should Students Have a Gap Year? Motivation and Performance Factors Relevant to Time Out After Completing School. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 102(3), 561-576.
- McInnis, C., Hartley, R., Polesel, J., & Teese, R. (2000). *Non-completion in vocational education and training and higher education*. Melbourne: Centre for the Study of Higher Education The University of Melbourne & The Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs. Retrieved from

https://www.researchgate.net/profile/John_Polesel/publication/237438336_Non-Completion_in_Vocational_Education_and_Training_and_Higher_Education/links/0f317530d480d479ca000000/Non-Completion-in-Vocational-Education-and-Training-and-Higher-Education.pdf

- Messinis, G., & Sheehan, P. (2015). *The academic performance of first year students at Victoria University by entry score and SES, 2009-2013: Victoria Institute of Strategic Economic Studies Melbourne*. Retrieved from <https://www.vu.edu.au/sites/default/files/cses/pdfs/the-academic-performance-of-first-year-students-at-VU-by-entry-score-and-SES-2009-2013.pdf>
- Miller, M. T., & Pope, M. L. (2003). Integrating technology into new student orientation programs at community colleges. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 27(1), 15-23.
- Morley, L. (1997). Change and Equity in Higher Education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 18(2), 231-242. doi:10.1080/0142569970180206
- Napthine, D., Graham, C., Lee, P., & Wills, M. (2019). *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy*. Canberra: Department of Education. Retrieved from https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/national_regional_rural_and_remote_tertiary_education_strategy.pdf
- Naylor, R., Baik, C., & James, R. (2013). *A Critical Interventions Framework for advancing equity in Australian higher education*. Melbourne: Centre for Higher Education Study. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/266798034_Developing_a_Critical_Interventions_Framework_for_advancing_equity_in_Australian_higher_education
- Norton, A. (2012). *Graduate Winners: Assessing the public and private benefits of higher education*. Melbourne: Grattan Institute. Retrieved from https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/162_graduate_winners_report.pdf
- Norton, A., & Cherastidtham, I. (2018). *Mapping Australian higher education 2018*. Melbourne: Grattan Institute. Retrieved from <https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/907-Mapping-Australian-higher-education-2018.pdf>
- Norton, A., Cherastidtham, I., & Mackey, W. (2018). *Dropping out: the benefits and costs of trying university*. Melbourne: Grattan Institute Retrieved from <https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/904-dropping-out-the-benefits-and-costs-of-trying-university.pdf>
- Nurmi, J. (2001). Adolescents' self-direction and self-definition in age-graded sociocultural and interpersonal contexts. In J. Nurmi (Ed.), *Navigating through adolescence. European perspectives* (pp. 229-249). New York, NY: Routledge.
- OECD. (2010). *Education at a glance: OECD Indicators*. Paris, France: OECD.
- Oreopoulos, P., & Petronijevic, U. (2019). *The remarkable unresponsiveness of college students to nudging and what we can learn from it*. National Bureau of Economic Research. Ortagus, J. C., Tanner, M. J., & McFarlin, I., Jr. (2020). *Can Re-Enrollment Campaigns Help Dropouts Return to College? Evidence from Florida Community Colleges*. National Bureau of Economic Research.
- Oseguera, L., & Rhee, B. S. (2009). The Influence of Institutional Retention Climates on Student Persistence to Degree Completion: A Multilevel Approach. *Research in Higher Education*, 50(6), 546-569.

- Oswald, D. L., & Clark, E. M. (2003). Best friends forever? High school best friendships and the transition to college. *Personal Relationships*, 10(2), 187-196.
- Parker, P. D., Lüdtke, O., Trautwein, U., & Roberts, B. W. (2012). Personality and Relationship Quality During the Transition From High School to Early Adulthood. *Journal of Personality*, 80(4), 1061-1089.
- Parker, P. D., Schoon, I., Tsai, Y., Nagy, G., Trautwein, U., & Eccles, J. (2012). Achievement, Agency, Gender, and Socioeconomic Background as Predictors of Postschool Choices: A Multicontext Study. *Developmental Psychology*, 48(6), 1629-1642.
- Perna, L. W. (2006). Understanding the Relationship Between Information About College Prices and Financial Aid and Students' College-Related Behaviors. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 49(12), 1620-1635.
- Perna, L. W., & Steele, P. E. (2011). The Role of Context in Understanding the Contributions of Financial Aid to College Opportunity. *Teachers College Record*, 113(5), 895-933.
- Perna, L. W., & Swail, W. S. (2002). Pre-college outreach and early intervention programs. In D. E. Heller (Ed.), *Condition of access: Higher education for lower income students* (pp. 97-112). Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.
- Pike, E. C. J., & Beames, S. K. (2007). A Critical Interactionist Analysis of 'Youth Development' Expeditions. *Leisure Studies*, 26(2), 147-159.
- Pitkethly, A., & Prosser, M. (2001). The First Year Experience Project: A model for university-wide change. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 20(2), 185-198.
- Polesel, J. (2009). Deferring a University Offer in Rural Australia. *Australian Journal of Education*, 53(1), 87-103.
- Polesel, J., & Klatt, M. (2014). University deferrers in metropolitan and non-metropolitan Victoria: A longitudinal study. *Australian Journal of Education*, 58(2), 182-194.
- Polesel, J., Klatt, M., & O'Hanlon, C. (2012). *Deferring a university offer in regional Victoria*. Melbourne. Melbourne: Youth Affairs Council of Victoria.
- Power, S., Edwards, T., Whitty, G., & Wigfall, V. (2003). *Education and the middle classes*. Buckingham, England: Open University Press.
- Productivity Commission. (2019). *The Demand Driven University System: A Mixed Report Card*. Retrieved from: <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/completed/university-report-card/university-report-card.pdf>
- Raciti, M., Carter, J., Gilbey, K., & Hollinsworth, D. (2018). The 'university place': how and why place influences the engagement and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students. Retrieved from: <http://research.usc.edu.au/vital/access/manager/Repository/usc:22266>
- Reay, D., David, M., & Ball, S. (2005). *Degrees of choice: Social class, race and gender in higher education*. Stoke-on-Trent, England: Trentham Books.
- Rizvi, F., & Lingard, B. (2011). Social equity and the assemblage of values in Australian higher education. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 41(1), 5-22.

- Rose-Adams, J. (2013). Leaving university early: Exploring relationships between institution type and student withdrawal and implications for social mobility. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 15(2), 96-112
- Rosenbaum, J., Deil-Amen, R., & Person, A. (2006). *After admission: From college access to college success*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Ryan, C. (2013). *Student income support and education and training participation in Australia*. Adelaide: National Centre for Vocational Education Research. Retrieved from <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/student-income-support-and-education-and-training-participation-in-australia>
- Ryan, C. (2014). *Impact of the Australian Higher Education Funding Reforms*. University of Melbourne. Retrieved from https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/2168191/pb2014n02.pdf
- Savickas, M. L. (2005). The theory and practice of career construction. In S. D. Brown, R. W. Lent, & R. W. Lent (Eds.), *Career Development and Counseling: Putting Theory and Research to Work* (pp. 42-47). New York: Wiley.
- Services Australia. (2020). *Dependent or independent for Youth Allowance*. Retrieved from <https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/individuals/topics/dependent-or-independent-youth-allowance/29921>
- Sharrock, G. (2014). *How much student debt will you be facing post-budget? The Conversation*. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/how-much-student-debt-will-you-be-facing-post-budget-26712>
- Shim, S., Barber, B., Card, N., Xiao, J., & Serido, J. (2010). Financial Socialization of First-year College Students: The Roles of Parents, Work, and Education. *A Multidisciplinary Research Publication*, 39(12), 1457-1470.
- Slonimsky, L., & Shalem, Y. (2006). Pedagogic responsiveness for academic depth. *Journal of Education*, 40(1), 37-58.
- Spradley, J. P. (1979). *The Ethnographic interview*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston
- Stehlik, T. (2010). Mind the gap: school leaver aspirations and delayed pathways to further and higher education. *Journal of Education and Work*, 23(4), 363-376.
- Taylor, J. (2013). *The potential value of a reverse transfer associate degree: Diverse values and perspectives*. Retrieved from <http://occril.illinois.edu/articles/the-potential-value-of-a-reverse-transfer-associate-degree-diverse-values-and-perspectives/>
- Taylor, J. L., & Bragg, D. D. (2015). *CWID Data Note: Increasing state associate's degree attainment: The potential of reverse transfer*. Retrieved from <http://occril.illinois.edu/docs/librariesprovider4/cwid/cwid-data-note-4.pdf?sfvrsn=5>
- Teese, R., Robinson, L., Lamb, S., & Mason, K. (2006). *The 2005 on track longitudinal survey: the destinations of 2003 school leavers two years on*. Melbourne: Victorian Department of Education and Training.

- Tehan, D. (2019). *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy* [Media release], retrieved from <https://ministers.dese.gov.au/tehan/national-regional-rural-and-remote-tertiary-education-strategy>
- Terriquez, V., & Gurantz, O. (2015). Financial Challenges in Emerging Adulthood and Students' Decisions to Stop Out of College. *Emerging Adulthood*, 3(3), 204-214.
- Tinto, V. (1987). *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Tones, M., Fraser, J., Elder, R., & White, K. M. (2009). Supporting mature-aged students from a low socioeconomic background. *Higher Education*, 58(4), 505-529.
- Trow, M. (2007). Reflections on the Transition from Elite to Mass to Universal Access: Forms and Phases of Higher Education in Modern Societies since WWII. In F. J.J.F. & A. P.G. (Eds.), *International Handbook of Higher Education* (Vol. Springer International Handbooks of Education, pp. 243-280). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Walker, L., Matthew, B. O. B., & Black, F. (2004). Widening access and student non-completion: an inevitable link? Evaluating the effects of the Top-up Programme on student completion. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 23(1), 43-59.
- Weaving, A. (1978). What Happens to Deferring Students at the University of New South Wales. *Vestes*, 21, 31-33.
- Wolffensperger, J. (1993). 'Science Is Truly a Male World.' The Interconnectedness of Knowledge, Gender and Power within University Education. *Gender and Education*, 5(1), 37-54.
- Woosley, S. (2003). Stop-Out or Drop-Out? An Examination of College Withdrawals and Re-Enrollments. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 5(3), 293-303.
- Woosley, S., Slabaugh, K., Sadler, A. E., & Mason, G. W. (2005). The Mystery of Stop-Outs: Do Commitment and Intentions Predict Reenrollment? *NASPA Journal*, 42(2), 188-201.
- Wright, C. M., Frew, T. J., Hatcher, D., & Mok, M. (1996). The Social and Demographic Characteristics of Direct and Delay Entry Nursing Students in Australian Universities. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 15(2), 239-248.
- Yardley, L. (2009). Demonstrating validity in qualitative psychology. In A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (pp. 235–251). Los Angeles: Sage.
- Yin, R.K. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods* (5th ed.). Los Angeles: SAGE.
- Zarrett, N., & Eccles, J. (2006). The passage to adulthood: Challenges of late adolescence. In S. Piha & G. Hall (Eds.), *New directions for youth development* (pp. 13-28). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Online Library.
- Zepke, N., & Leach, L. (2010). Improving student engagement: Ten proposals for action. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 11(3), 167-177.
- Zurita, M. (2004). Stopping Out and Persisting: Experiences of Latino Undergraduates. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 6(3), 301-324.

Appendix 1: Technical Appendix to the “Towards the point of return” report.

Appendix 2: deferral project staff survey

Start of Block: Survey consent question

Q1.1 We are currently conducting a research project examining students' uptake of university study following a deferral or a leave of absence. The aim of the study is to explore ways institutions can encourage and support disadvantaged students who defer or take a leave of absence to return to higher education. The research is being conducted by a consortium of institutions including La Trobe University, The University of Queensland, Charles Darwin University, Edith Cowan University, Victoria University and Western Sydney University. The survey will take less than 10 minutes to complete. More detail regarding the project is available in the [Participation Information Statement for institutional surveys.docx](#).

You are encouraged to discuss the survey questions with relevant staff who have responsibilities in the deferral and leave-taking space at your institution. Before continuing to complete the survey, please indicate your agreement or disagreement with the following statement: 'I have read and understood the Participant Information Statement and consent to participate in this research project.'

Please note: You will be screened out of the survey if you select "disagree".

☐ Agree (1)

☐ Disagree (2)

End of Block: Survey consent question

Start of Block: Definitions of key terms

Q2.1 Definition of key terms

Low SES students: In Australia, the socio-economic status (SES) of students is determined by matching Index of Education and Occupation (IEO) data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics' 2011 Socio-economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) to the postcode of the student's home residence. Postcodes classified as being in the lowest 25th percentile of the population according to the IEO were classified as low SES.

Deferrers: Students who have received an offer to study at a university but choose to defer their studies before the census date and begin their course at a later date.

Leave takers & leave-taking: Students who apply for Leave of Absence (LoA), and would like to complete their course after they have returned from leave.

Return to study: Students who either deferred or had taken a leave of absence and re-enroll at a later date.

Conversion & conversion rate: The proportion of students who had either deferred or had taken a leave of absence that return to study.

End of Block: Definitions of key terms

Start of Block: Institutional deferral and intermission of study strategies

Q4.1 To what extent is the conversion of deferrers or leave-takers a priority for your institution?

	Not a priority (1)	Somewhat of a priority (2)	Moderate priority (3)	High priority (4)
Conversion of deferrers (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Conversion of leave-takers (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q4.2 Is there a member of the senior executive at your university who has specific responsibility for deferral and leave of absence?

	Yes (1)	No (2)	Unsure (3)
Deferral (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Leave taking (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q4.3 Are you broadly aware of the number of students who defer or take leave at your institution?

☐ Yes (1)☐ No (2)

Q4.4 Which student groups do you think might be more likely than their peers to defer or take a leave of absence? (Select as many as apply)

	Deferral (25)	Leave taking (26)
Students from low socio-economic status background (41)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Regional and remote students (42)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Students from a non-English speaking background (43)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Indigenous students (44)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Students with a disability (45)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Women in non-traditional areas (46)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (47)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
None of above (48)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q4.5 Do any of your institutional strategies refer to encouraging deferrers or leave-takers to return to study?

	Yes (1)	No (2)	Unsure (3)
Deferral (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Leave taking (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q4.6 Is there a committee which has responsibility for issues surrounding student deferral and leave of absence?

	Yes (1)	No (2)	Unsure (3)
Deferral (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Leave taking (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q4.7 Does your institution have any specific mechanisms in place to monitor and track the conversion rate of deferrers or leave-takers?

	Yes (1)	No (2)	Unsure (3)
Deferral (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Leave taking (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Display This Question:

If Does your institution have any specific mechanisms in place to monitor and track the conversion r... = Deferral [Yes]

Or Does your institution have any specific mechanisms in place to monitor and track the conversion r... = Leave taking [Yes]

Q4.8 Does your institution have any specific mechanisms in place to monitor and track the conversion rate of deferrers and/or leave takers **by equity group**?

	Yes (1)	No (2)	Unsure (3)
Deferral (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Leave taking (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q4.9 Does your institution monitor the number of deferrers and/or leave takers who use support services?

	Yes (1)	No (2)	Unsure (3)
Deferral (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Leave taking (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

End of Block: Institutional deferral and intermission of study strategies

Start of Block: Section 3: General engagement strategy for deferrers and leave takers

Q5.1 To what extent do you feel policies and procedures regarding deferral and leave of absence are visible at your institution?

	Highly visible (1)	Moderately visible (2)	Not visible (3)
Deferral (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Leave-taking (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q5.2 Does your institution have any interventions in place to encourage deferrers and/or leave-takers to return to study?
(Select one)

	Yes (1)	No (2)	Unsure (3)
Deferral (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Leave-taking (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Display This Question:

*If Does your institution have any interventions in place to encourage deferrers and/or leave-takers... =
Deferral [Yes]*

Q5.3 Could you please provide a description of the initiatives designed to encourage the **return of deferrers**? For example, details of communication plans, support services etc... (free text)

Display This Question:

*If Does your institution have any interventions in place to encourage deferrers and/or leave-takers... =
Leave-taking [Yes]*

Q5.4 Could you please provide a description of the initiatives designed to encourage the **return of leave-takers**? For example, details of communication plans, support services etc... (free text)

Display This Question:

If Does your institution have any interventions in place to encourage deferrers and/or leave-takers... =
Deferral [Yes]

Or Does your institution have any interventions in place to encourage deferrers and/or leave-takers... =
Leave-taking [Yes]

Q5.5 What are the main types of support services that your institution provides to encourage the deferrers and/or leave takers to return to study? (Select as many as apply)

	Deferral (1)	Leave taking (2)
Financial support (1)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Career guidance (2)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Future study guidance (3)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Disability support (4)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Housing service (5)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Individual consulting (6)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Bridging courses (7)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (8)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Unsure (9)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Page Break

Display This Question:

If Does your institution have any interventions in place to encourage deferrers and/or leave-takers... = Deferral [Yes]

Or Does your institution have any interventions in place to encourage deferrers and/or leave-takers... = Leave-taking [Yes]

Q5.6 Does your institution provide support services specifically tailored to deferrers and/or leave takers from any of these groups?

	Deferral (1)	Leave taking (2)
Students from low socio-economic status backgrounds (1)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Regional and remote students (2)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Students from a non-English speaking background (3)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Indigenous students (4)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Students with a disability (5)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Women in non-traditional areas (6)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (7)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
None of the above (8)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Display This Question:

If Does your institution provide support services specifically tailored to deferrers and/or leave ta... = Other [Deferral]

Or Does your institution provide support services specifically tailored to deferrers and/or leave ta... = Other [Leave taking]

Q5.7 Could you please specify the cohort of students that you selected as "Other" in the previous question?

Display This Question:

If Does your institution have any interventions in place to encourage deferrers and/or leave-takers... = Deferral [Yes]

Or Does your institution have any interventions in place to encourage deferrers and/or leave-takers... = Leave-taking [Yes]

Q5.8 To what extent do you agree with the following statements regarding the overall effectiveness of your institutional initiatives to encourage the conversion of deferrers and leave takers? (Select one)

	Very effective (1)	Somewhat effective (2)	Not effective (3)	Unsure (4)
Conversion of deferrers (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Conversion of leave-takers (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Display This Question:

If Does your institution have any interventions in place to encourage deferrers and/or leave-takers... = Deferral [Yes]

Or Does your institution have any interventions in place to encourage deferrers and/or leave-takers... = Leave-taking [Yes]

Q5.9 In general, how would you rate the accessibility of these services for deferrers and/or leave takers?

	Easy to access (1)	Difficult to access (2)	Unsure (3)
Support services for deferrers (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Support services for leave-takers (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

End of Block: Section 3: General engagement strategy for deferrers and leave takers

Start of Block: Challenges and constraints

Q6.1 What constraints, if any, exist with regard to effectively supporting deferrers and/or leave takers to return to study?
(Select as many as apply)

	Deferrers (1)	Leave-takers (2)
Policy (1)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Leadership support (2)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Time (3)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Financial resources (4)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Workforce resources (5)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Lack of data (6)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (7)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q6.2 What, if any, are the major challenges for your institution to increase the conversion rate of deferrers and/or leave takers? (free text)

Q6.3 Ideally, what more, if anything, could your institution do to increase the conversion rate of deferrers and/or leave takers? (free text)

Q6.4 If your institution has any publicly available resources that are relevant to deferrals and/or leave-taking, would you mind copying and pasting a link to it?

End of Block: Challenges and constraints

Appendix 3: Interview guides for semi-structured interviews with university staff

Low SES student deferrals project - Interview protocol for department/unit director

Brief Introduction of the project and the objectives of the interview

Warm-up questions

Could you please describe your role?

General institutional policies regarding deferrals and leave taking

What is your view of the increasingly flexible study arrangement/life cycle of students? (Probe: given that students decide to take a break for various reasons at different stages of their study, some may want to do some travelling, while others may have difficulties to tackle, “taking a break” may not always be a passive choice but could be beneficial as well)

What visibility do the policies and procedures of deferrals and leave taking have in your institution? Do you think these policies and procedures are reasonable?

How are issues of deferrals and leave taking reported through University governance activities?

Interventions with deferrers and leave takers

What interventions have been implemented at your institution with deferrers and leave takers?

What specific support services are available for deferrers and leave takers at your institution?

How would you like to evaluate the accessibility of these services to the deferrers/leave takers? (Probe: How often do they use these services?)

In your view, which interventions/support services are more effective than others? Why?

Does your institution offer any specific interventions/support services targeted at disadvantaged students who take a leave? If yes, could you please introduce them in a bit detail?

In your view, which interventions/services targeted at disadvantaged students are more effective than others? Why?

Challenges and constraints

Could you talk about any challenges or constraints for your department/unit to provide better supports to increase the conversion rate?

In addition to the current interventions and support services, what else do you think could be done to promote the return to study?

Do you have any other comments in regard with the issue of deferrals and leave taking?

Low SES student deferrals project - Interview protocol for senior executive members

Brief Introduction of the project and the objectives of the interview

Warm-up questions

Could you please describe your role?

How does your institution position responsibility for oversight of deferral and leave taking? (Probe: any split responsibilities among senior executive members? E.g. DVC/PVC [equity & diversity? Academic/Education? Indigenous?])

General institutional policies regarding deferrals and leave taking

How does your institution prioritise the issues of deferrals and leave taking?

What is your view of the increasingly flexible study arrangement/life cycle of students? (Probe: given that students decide to take a break for various reasons at different stages of their study, some may want to do some travelling, while others may have difficulties to tackle, “taking a break” may not always be a passive choice but could be beneficial as well)

What visibility do the policies and procedures of deferrals and leave taking have in your institution?

Do you think these policies and procedures are reasonable? Do you think in the near future (e.g. next five years) there will be any major changes in these policies and procedures at your institution?

Engagement strategies with deferrers and leave takers

Are there any data collection mechanisms at your institution to monitor or track deferrers and/or leave-takers?

How are communication and engagement strategies positioned in relation to deferrals and leave taking at your institution? Any specific strategies targeted at disadvantaged students? (low SES? Indigenous? Regional?)

How do business systems and tools reflect engagement with issues of deferrals and leave taking?

In your view, what is the key for your university to facilitate the transitions of deferrers and leave takers back to study?

Challenges and constraints

Could you talk about any challenges or constraints for your institution to increase the conversion rate?

In addition to the current strategies, what else do you think could be done to promote the return to study?

Do you have any other comments in regard with the issue of deferrals and leave taking?