How university planning managers can advance student engagement

This AUSSE Enhancement Guide makes suggestions about how university planning managers can enhance student engagement.

Benchmarking using AUSSE data

University planning managers need reliable, contextualised data on which to base their contributions to strategic and operational decision-making, quality assurance, policy development, and monitoring and review processes – and much else besides! A valuable source of such data is the AUSSE Student Engagement Questionnaire completed by undergraduate students, and benchmarked against national and international data for the same items and scales.

Benchmarking is an activity that planning managers and their teams have the skills and knowledge to support. Productive benchmarking depends on nuanced interrogation of data. Comparisons within and between institutions must account for variations in cohort composition such as relative proportions of part time and full time students, or of international and domestic students. These variations have a significant influence on an institution's student engagement outcomes.

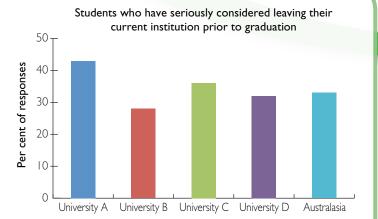## Supporting an institutional focus on student retention

Load management is complex. That complexity is frequently deepened by shifts in government and institutional policy objectives, and adjustments to funding models. Much relies on good load management – the allocation of scarce resources is heavily influenced by the forecasts you and your team produce.

Retention rates are a key consideration in load management, at both institutional and program levels. Historical data simply replicate the past in a load management model. Planning units can change the course of history.

Planning managers are in a prime position to support strategic and operational decision-making by monitoring and reporting on AUSSE data. They can highlight areas in which attrition can be minimised through action at the institutional, faculty and divisional levels. Higher retention rates have many benefits. Students benefit by completing: there is a link between having a qualification and improved life chances. There is a pay-off for the investment of funds by governments. Institutions have more resources to allocate because more students complete their entire academic program.

The impact of student engagement on retention rates

In 2008, 33.1 per cent of Australasian students reported they were seriously considering leaving their institutions in the 2008 academic year. It is important to note that that the rate varied from 22.0 per cent at one institution to 44.9 per cent at another. In an era where funding models and policy emphasise access and higher levels of participation, there is concern that these figures may rise without focussed effort to alter institutional practices in ways that the evidence tells us build student resilience and persistence.

Students who have seriously considered leaving their current institution prior to graduation

Student engagement has a direct effect on student retention. AUSSE data demonstrates correlations between supportive learning environments and retention. Students are more likely to persist when their programs have high levels of academic challenge and support, and when their learning is enriched by participation in experiences outside the classroom.

Linking AUSSE data and research evidence to improve retention

'One size fits all' prescriptions for improving student engagement are flawed. Planning managers can marshal data, and report it, in a way that prompts deep thinking about differential interventions.

For example, AUSSE data confirms important differences in the perceived level of challenge between disciplines. Students in the fields of general management and information systems give a low rating to academic challenge. Students in education and justice and law enforcement give high ratings to academic challenge. Differences of this kind need to be reported in an accessible way. The correlation between academic challenge and retention needs to be made clear. The impact of attrition on funding needs to be starkly drawn. Again, benchmarking is a powerful tool for highlighting discipline areas in need of attention, and for identifying pockets of student-assessed good practice worthy of investigation.

Improving knowledge of student engagement in planning teams

Knowing how best to interrogate student engagement data, and knowing how best to interpret them, relies on familiarity with student engagement theory and evidence. Context-free statistical analysis is unlikely to be insightful and subtle enough to capture what is important and to convey the key messages clearly. Planning managers can ensure that their team members have opportunities to expand their understanding of student engagement and its impact on the student experience.

About this guide

This AUSSE Enhancement Guide forms part of the suite of resources developed by ACER and the broader AUSSE community to enhance students' engagement in effective educational practices. Visit **www.acer.edu.au/ausse** for further information about the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement.