CurtinLife Student Engagement and Retention Strategy

Specifically focusing on student retention has some history at Curtin. In 2008, the University adopted a Student Retention Implementation plan. This plan reached completion in 2010 – and since then many of the actions within that plan have become embedded in Curtin processes. However, there is a great deal more that we can do. This very brief document will provide some history and background for interested stakeholders.

What can we do to encourage students to enrol and succeed through to graduation?

A targeted Retention Strategy is only one way the University can support student retention. The quality of the whole student experience will affect attrition, retention, student engagement and persistence. Many of the other projects with TL@C will have a significant impact on student retention, as will other strategic projects of the University and a multitude of existing services, programs, facilities and activities.

The Retention Strategy builds on some existing programs that have demonstrated their effectiveness in improving student engagement and retention. We know that:

- Early identification of students at-risk of attrition is possible by a range of indicators on Student One, Blackboard and other IT platforms
- Personalised early intervention and high quality case management with students at-risk reduces the risk of attrition
- Active engagement between new students and current students via programs such as the Mentor Program has great benefits for engagement and retention
- Students will actively use good quality digital resources

Our longer term transformational objectives in retention are to use this foundation knowledge to scale up our capacities to support and influence students who may be at-risk of attrition. We want to have easy-to-use communication channels with new and continuing students; to implement systemic approaches to identifying and offering support to students at-risk; to have effective ways of managing the customer relationship that each individual student has with the University; and to build a strong sense of belonging and commitment to Curtin. As this project develops, a series of specific programs, activities and processes will be implemented to address each of these.

Maximising student retention is our goal – that is, an improved measure is an institutional goal not a student goal. We will only achieve an improved measure if the student experience is a positive one in which they meet their objectives in enrolling at Curtin.

Are there student attributes and situational variables that raise the probabilities of attrition or retention?

Curtin’s internal data and research is consistent with the wider literature on student retention, attrition and persistence. There is nothing unique about Curtin in this respect. There are multiple complex and interacting variables that affect the probability of retention. These variables may overlap, and can be difficult to disentangle from one another. Some of the variables are very much within Curtin’s capacity to influence; others are less amenable to our control. It is also important to emphasise that “at-risk of attrition” does not necessarily equate with “at-risk of academic failure”.


Variables affecting retention and attrition include:

**Gaps between student expectations and the reality of the experience**: For a variety of reasons, students will have their own particular expectations of the university experience. They may be influenced by our own recruiting materials and agents, and by family or peers. They may have done a lot or very little research about the university and the course they are undertaking. Clearly, some students arrive and discover it is not as they hoped or expected.

**Demographics**: Some demographic descriptors are associated with higher risk of attrition, although we should note many students with these descriptors persist at university. Higher risk is associated with some equity groups such being first in family at university (acknowledging the complexities associated with defining “family”), coming from an Indigenous background, students from rural/remote areas, and students with disabilities.

**Capacity to handle academic English**: Students whose English language background is lacking are at some level of risk—this will include some migrant students, refugees and a proportion of international students.

**Motivation and Career Path**: The extent of commitment to the career path is a highly significant factor. Students who lose commitment to the end goal of their course are clearly at risk of leaving. The commitment may not have been strong or clearly formed from the beginning or may change over time. Students for whom this is an issue may find there is a more attractive option elsewhere.

**Engagement and Success with Study and Course Demands**: Clearly some students experience challenges in handling the demands of their courses, including library usage and the existing IT demands of the course. This challenge may be disheartening enough for some students to leave without experiencing actual failure either at assessment level or unit outcome. In other cases, difficulty with course demands is demonstrated by fail grades and/or Conditional academic status.

**Negotiating the Administrative System**: Some students are lost to the university because they have not successfully accessed appropriate channels or processes in the administrative system in a timely way.

**Personal Matters**: There are a range of personal issues that can affect a student’s capacity to persist—such as mental health, physical health, disability, relationships, sexuality, and misadventure (assault, robbery, motor vehicle crash). There may be issues affecting those close to the student such as death in the family, parental break-up and so forth. Some of these issues may be known to the student in advance; others may be entirely out of the blue.

**External Situational Factors**: Matters such as personal finances, employment commitments, accommodation, commuting/transport and family support can have a significant effect.

**Grievances**: A number of students have a real or perceived negative experience or series of experiences in their interactions with the university. These may range in intensity and significance, and can lead to a student discontinuing their study.
As noted, the above list of potential variables is multiple, complex and interactive. For any individual student, they may be weighted differently. There may be a final “tipping factor” for some students that can appear rather trivial in itself. But in the end, withdrawing, not re-enrolling or being terminated will be the outcome of the totality of all these variables.

**When do our systems currently show we have lost students?**

We become aware of the loss of students at various touch points including:

- The gaps between the offer of a place, acceptance an enrolment: some students who are made an offer do not convert that into an enrolment. This includes those who accept an offer and defer their enrolment for (usually) a year and do not subsequently take up the place.
- Some students will actively withdraw from their course via the formal administrative process: most usually this takes place before study period census dates, but also includes those activating a late withdrawal under special circumstances.
- Students will formally apply for Leave of Absence, and not re-enrol when the period of leave lapses.
- A substantial proportion of the loss is those students who do not re-enrol for the succeeding study period: This may be seen as a passive attrition – these students simply do not come back, but we typically note this some later when they are flagged as AWOL.
- Students whose enrolment is terminated by the University: This is almost entirely on the grounds of successive study periods in which the student has not made satisfactory academic progress and has therefore been placed on Conditional status. In addition, there are a small proportion of disciplinary cases where students are not permitted to re-enrol.

So, the above points illustrate when we officially become aware of the loss of the student – but the variables affecting the attrition have taken place somewhat earlier. A key component of the Retention Strategy is to “get in early” and address the issues affecting retention and attrition before they show the student as no longer enrolled.

**A Short Note on Background Literature and the Concept of Retention as a Measure**

This brief paper is not the place to present a substantial summary of the literature on student retention. Interested readers will find links to a significant body of Australian and International research at the START website (http://unilife.curtin.edu.au/staff/retention_literature.htm). Existing and planned programs to improve student retention are firmly based on the empirical evidence and theoretical constructs described in this extensive literature.

The concept of retention as a measure is worth considering. The typical standard measure of student retention is an annual measure – put simply, it is the percentage of students from one calendar year who have re-enrolled in the subsequent year, excluding those who have completed
their course. It is therefore a lagging statistic, in that we cannot be sure that a student has not re-enrolled in any unit in the subsequent year until the last possible date for re-enrolment in the final study period has passed. This means that by the time we have measured retention, the students who have been lost to the University have not been enrolled for some time. Further, if a student returns to study in a later year, he/she will have already been measured as part of student attrition. The lagging nature of the measure also makes it difficult to link any single specific intervention with a change in retention rate.

Most frequently, the representative figure used is the commencing undergraduate student retention rate, although we are obviously interested in the retention of all students. The Department of Industry, innovation, Climate Change, Science, Research and Tertiary Education publishes comparable statistics on attrition rates, progress rates and retention rates Appendix 4 at http://www.innovation.gov.au/highereducation/HigherEducationStatistics/StatisticsPublications/Pages/Students12FullYear.aspx. For 2012 (the most recent national data available), Curtin currently has the 12th highest retention rate (at 85.75%) amongst Australian universities. Those ranking higher than Curtin are Macquarie University, University of Sydney, University of NSW, UTS Sydney, Monash University, RMIT University, the University of Melbourne, the University of Queensland, the University of WA, and the Australian National University.