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The significant and indispensable impact of timely, online academic support on student confidence and progression

Submission and recommendations from YourTutor.edu.au
to the Higher Education Standards Panel

7 July 2017

Submission and recommendations from YourTutor.edu.au to the Higher Education Standards Panel, to offer assistance with efficient implementation and measureable outcomes for universities, government, and the Australian public.

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Response to the Higher Education Standards Panel Discussion Paper, "Improving retention, completion and success in higher education," June 2017

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Executive Summary

Value for investment, the impact of the digital revolution, and time to completion are making attrition rates a national priority.

Our position as Australia's own online, at-scale, Tier Zero university support specialists makes our perspective and recommendations unique.

A discussion around student attrition now requires a focus that includes digital, online academic support, and any implementation strategy in the higher education sector must offer timely, digital proof of outcomes.

We recommend:

- that the Higher Education Standards Panel adopt a strategy that reduces reliance on enrolment data and adds real-time data for a better student experience;
- the Panel considers the importance of timely intervention, digital priority, support of academic staff, the Tier Zero organisational approach, and students' pre-census engagement in relevant support services;
- We offer recent research and review findings that indicate including YourTutor in a strategy for student support is best practice, when the intent is scalable student confidence and academic achievement.

Background: The HESP discussion paper and our role in the Australian higher education landscape

We welcome the opportunity to make this submission to the Higher Education Standards Panel's (HESP) discussion paper "Improving retention, completion and success in higher education"[1] We write from our unique sector perspective, experience, and expertise in the niche area of online academic support services.

The HESP discussion paper raises a number of important questions, not least whether the current national student attrition rate of ~15% is too high, too low, or at an acceptable level. While it provides some comfort to (most) universities that their attrition rates are not excessive, the issue of improving student success rates is an increasing national priority. We believe this is for the following three key reasons:

1. **Value for Investment**. The Minister has communicated clearly that the trade-off between the demand-driven system and unlimited Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs) is that universities must demonstrate that, for EVERY enrolled student, "everything possible is being done to ensure students have the best chance of successfully completing their enrolled units, courses and qualifications."[2]

2. **The Impact of the Digital Revolution**. The paper describes two factors that correlate strongly with attrition: mature aged students and external enrolments. Belinda Robinson from Universities Australia emphasises that "students with the highest attrition rates are those most likely to be juggling university with jobs or caring for their families. That's particularly true for students who are mature age, part-time or studying online."[3] Increased access to higher education studies need to incorporate support systems that suit these groups of students who 'juggle' university and private life and may never be able to attend on-campus support.

   The use of the word "external" may be consistent with previous reports into attrition; however, it is not reflective of the changing nature of "external" study in contemporary student cohorts. Specifically, "online students," and "campus-based students" are taking on traits of each other and increasingly becoming "digital students," who, regardless of their study modes or physical location are spending more time online, less time on campus, and expecting more services to be delivered digitally.

3. **Time to Completion**. Measuring completion rates based on a time frame of nine years is, we argue, too long in the increasingly digitised educational landscape. If the sector can only achieve 85% completion rates in 2017 for students who commenced in 2008, then we need to understand the

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[1] https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/final_discussion_paper.pdf

[2] The Australian Government 2016, Improving the transparency of higher education admissions Australian Government response to the report of the Higher Education Standards Panel, https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/australian_government_response_to_hesp_admissions_transparency_report_0.pdf

[3] Universities Australia, Media Release, 14 June 2017, http://link.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/m/1/67805778/02-b17165-a5aa7785f5dd43c8adbbda075e7e6674/1/740/a39568c6-a125-4ed4-b5dc-13b3d5223032

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efficacy, impact and benefit for graduates of earning a degree in such an extended timeframe. The world of employment is changing at an accelerating rate, and successful graduates generally complete in fewer years and secure employment based on the knowledge and skills gained in a more compressed time period.

Our position in the Australian higher education sector, the only scalable Tier Zero supplier

YourTutor is Australia's own online, at-scale, 'Tier Zero'[4] university student support specialist provider.

We are entering a new phase of education delivery where technology can be utilised to increase capacity and scale, personalisation, 24/7 accessibility, and cost-efficiency; factors that are crucial to the success of our universities.

At the time of writing, we partner with half of all Australian universities, as well as a growing number in South-East Asia and the United Kingdom.

YourTutor strongly supports the HESP's investigation into solutions that can improve retention, completion, and student success. As the discussion paper notes, student retention is an interest at both individual and national levels. As a nation, we invest billions of dollars underwriting the educational aspirations of millions of Australians. For the individuals who pursue their dream of a university degree, a failure to complete is the worst possible personal outcome: no "portable" evidence of capability and a substantial debt that must be repaid.

Invitation for a roundtable to discuss best-practice implementation for digital higher education services

In addition to this submission, we invite the Australian Government and partner stakeholders to review with us, at a roundtable, the best-practice implementation of online student support, using our 14 years of data, insights, and experience.

A government initiative that seeks to improve retention, completion, and success and that seeks to future-proof the results and implementation will inevitably rely on at-scale, online delivery for cost-efficiencies and digital, trackable proof of student outcomes.

Further, to show the Australian public and key stakeholders in the higher education sector the merits of HESP initiatives, results need to be visible - both immediately and long-term. We are currently helping universities achieve goals focused on retention and course completion in faculties, colleges, and, increasingly, at the

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[4] Tier Zero references a cross-industry concept, in which customers are directed toward self-service models as a first option, to quickly prevent escalation of customer frustration and to relieve personnel and economic burden on a limited pool of support staff. 'Tier Zero' includes scalable, self-service options such as FAQ guides, slides, printed material, or an on-demand academic support service like YourTutor. Subsequent tiers – Tier 1, Tier 2, Tier 3 - include critical escalation of student academic enquiries to specialist Academic Support Staff at the university. In industries with large user bases (for example, telecommunications and higher education) this structure has been necessitated by the changing expectations of mobile, 24/7 customers.

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institutional level. Despite measureable success for student outcomes, HESP goals have unparalleled value at a scale we have not yet seen inside any individual university.

We look forward to collaborating with the government and our university partners to make the HESP discussion productive, as well as being part of subsequent discussions on successful implementation and measurement.

The YourTutor service in universities, in 2017

YourTutor is on-demand, timely intervention. It is an online, one-to-one, learning experience (*YourTutor Connect Live*) as well as an asynchronous writing feedback service (*YourTutor Writing Feedback*).

It is a live, human service, staffed by our own screened, accredited and trusted network of experts.

Within partner universities, the service is integrated with existing institutional Learning Management Systems (LMS) for ease of access for students, and minimal technological disruption for administrators.

The service is on-demand and accessible due to its digital basis, affording the potential for universities to capitalise on thousands of untapped support opportunities that increase learning and confidence.

Support needs are currently unmet due to accessibility for an increasing number of distance learners, and the restricted opening hours of existing on-campus support. The HESP discussion paper cites that confidence is a major and consistent determinant of student discontinuation.[5]

The Context for Digital Change

We propose that, in considering the holistic "student experience," higher education institutions need to prioritise technology-enhanced "digital" delivery to meet wider societal standards being set (and expected) outside the sector.

By "enhanced digital delivery" we refer to the re-imagination of the 'traditional' student experience - one where students attend lectures on campus, participate in tutorials, submit written work and sit exams - by forward-looking institutions around the world. These institutions seek to better meet diverse student expectations for accessible, convenient, relevant, personalised, just-in-time learning experiences.

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[5] "Improving retention, completion, and success in higher education." Higher Education Standards Panel Discussion Paper, pg. 24, https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/final_discussion_paper.pdf

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Digital delivery is intrinsically linked to universities applying an evidence-based approach that delivers measureable impacts on student outcomes, and provides insight, through analytics, into areas such as the likelihood of students to engage in various learning experiences. Digital solutions, delivered 24/7, should be prioritised to fulfil student expectations and requirements as modern, digital 'consumers'.

The university sector is being transformed by several key social, technological, and economic trends, all of which are putting unprecedented pressure on the sector to embrace change:

1. **Growing Enrolments.** In 2017, domestic enrolment intake is 270,000, an increase from 180,000 in 2012.[6] In just the first four months of 2017, international enrolments increased by 14%, and are now the nation's third largest 'export' revenue, accounting for over $22-billion.[7] An increase in non-traditional student numbers and diversity including ESL students, Indigenous Australians, mature age and students with lower entry scores, necessitates an increased emphasis on support mechanisms to maximise these students' chances of success.

2. **The Digital Revolution Challenges the University Sector.** Universities are coming to understand that the "student experience" is not only relevant, it is crucial to long-term institutional viability. University revenues are increasingly reliant on domestic and international enrolments and students will seek out the best quality educational experiences. Today there are no 'online students'; all students are digital.[8] Forward-looking universities are modifying the way courses are delivered and support is provided to optimise the student experience and ensure student attrition rates are kept to a minimum. This has involved adopting cost and organisational efficiencies to ensure resources are available to and accessible by diverse cohorts, and that these resources are scalable to meet increasing demands. This includes the development and implementation of scalable models such as Tier Zero - self-serve - customer service to triage and meet the needs of increasing student academic and emotional support requirements.

3. **Economics and Sustainability.** Student success is now an issue of national importance - for the students themselves who assume growing debt, for the nation's economic and social future, and for the universities seeking to maintain and grow a sustainable model of revenue to enable further research and employment. Ultimately, society's recognition of the value of an academic credential is the most important determinant of a university's brand. Every university needs to protect and grow its brand by ensuring that the degrees students obtain accurately represent the quality of its courses, knowledge, and the capabilities of its graduates. Cutting corners with undergraduate degrees - or

[6] https://internationaleducation.gov.au/research/International-Student-Data/Pages/InternationalStudentData2017.aspx
[7] "International student numbers surge by 15 per cent" (26 May 2017). http://www.senatorbirmingham.com.au/Latest-News/ID/3534/International-student-numbers-surge-by-15-per-cent
[8] https://www.edsurge.com/news/2017-03-21-why-students-living-on-campus-take-online-courses

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setting double standards for domestic versus higher-fee paying international students - is an unsustainable approach for the country and for individual institutions. This issue has been magnified with the introduction of the public Quality in Learning & Teaching (QILT) data and the ensuing higher degree of scrutiny that each institution now undergoes.

Supporting students to complete their studies

What are the most effective identification, intervention, and support strategies for improving student completion?

Recommendation 1.1 Behavioural data must be collected constantly and digitally, to achieve more effective, actionable student identification.

To date, a profiling analysis of incoming enrolments offers a snapshot of student readiness for academic study. While this profile is static, it can certainly offer a way to segment students based on descriptors - ATAR score, no ATAR, background demographics. This can offer some insights and clarity around likely attrition risk. For instance, through this analysis, non-ATAR students who demonstrate to have higher attrition rates can be identified and monitored more effectively.

However, reasons for attrition extend past enrolment data points like socioeconomic status or English as a second language. For instance, a student's lack of confidence and perceived lack of academic capability are consistent attrition triggers[9]. Universities need to move beyond the use of enrolment data to identify at-risk students. Behavioural monitoring is also advised, related to academic activity, which would involve merging enrolment data with insights available in 'back-end' systems from support services, such as YourTutor. Some universities have already set up early warning systems, which include behavioural data points - for example, logs of student engagement with LMS systems, including frequency and content. This provides a more dynamic picture of student activity and reduces reliance on static enrolment insight (which also may or may not be complete or current). It also enables universities to shift focus back to large populations (the middle-majority) and away from the small percentages of easily-identified, high-attrition-risk students who are more likely to receive intensive support from university staff. This also affords insights into continuous improvement in student support systems as trends emerge around typical student behaviours prior to drop-out.

Recommendation 1.2 For student support strategies to be better promoted and utilised:

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[9] Willcoxson, L et al 2011, *The Whole of University Experience: Retention, attrition, learning and personal support interventions during undergraduate business studies*, Australian Learning and Teaching Council, cited in https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/final_discussion_paper.pdf

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1.2.1 Timely intervention

Student access to support must be unhindered and driven by each student's own preferences. Contemporary learners' study patterns are diverse and take into account existing personal and professional commitments. Students need help on demand, at their unique time of need.

YourTutor serves students' needs for academic support at times of their choosing. YourTutor uses a 24/7 platform integrated into existing Learning Management Systems (LMS), staffed by our own network of accredited subject-area specialists.

For the most part, current university support services include on-campus learning centres, which struggle with the capacity to meet the needs of current student cohorts. The ratio makes the current risk clear: 30,000 undergraduate students and 30 Academic Support staff. This is a misalignment that needs addressing as part of any resolution to encourage student utilisation of support strategies. This is further exacerbated because students who do not attend campus, or whose limited hours on campus don't align with support services' open hours, are unable to access these services.

Published literature demonstrates that timely academic support boosts learner confidence and encourages retention. If students cannot access support, their confidence is diminished, their frustration and sense of failure increases and they are at increased risk of 'dropping out'.[10] When these moments are addressed in a timely manner with convenient, accessible, personalised support, learners can build self-efficacy, which is directly linked with student success and course continuation.

1.2.2 Digital support must be the priority

As a first line of action, intervention and support strategies must be online, to ensure scale and equitable reach to students from regional and remote locations, international offshore students, and those that do not attend campus, or for other reasons have minimised their time on campus. This would also address the recognised trend that students studying solely in distance mode are at higher risk.[11] YourTutor - online, on-demand academic help - is an unmatched intervention tool for its scalability, efficiency, and equitable delivery - to include not only students identified as 'at risk', but all students needing help with academic literacy, due to fluctuating levels of confidence between different units within their course.

1.2.3. Academic staff must be able to critique support services and receive professional development benefits

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[10] http://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/new-online-guidelines-aim-to-arrest-low-completion-rates/news-story/6d4ed6fc22f31a8c676e875f06c50573
[11] http://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/distance-students-still-far-from-engaged-education-data/news-story/3574076cd786cc43f8c8870d1f1f423d

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We recommend academic staff become familiar with YourTutor and evaluate its efficacy prior to widespread implementation. Buy-in from both staff and students is required to ensure maximum benefits from the service are achieved in both student achievement and retention rates.

For successful and scalable implementation of student support and the resulting performance outcomes, it is necessary and prudent to work with the curriculum-expert and primary student contact, often a course convenor, who can embed YourTutor support into course outlines. This has been demonstrated to be an effective strategy for utilisation. In a recent survey, 72% of students said that they utilised YourTutor's academic support on the recommendation of their educator/teacher (2016 YourTutor student survey, MevCorp).

1.2.4 A Tier Zero structure should be adopted by universities to 'funnel' students and enable the application of logic to reserve on-campus university staff support for critical student conversations.

For the most efficient use of valuable, limited on-campus support services, students should be directed to online support as a first line of help. A Tier Zero organisational approach allows all students to self-serve. For example, 40,000 undergraduate students have access to YourTutor in one university partner, making it the first help point for academic support. The majority of students will benefit sufficiently from this help to negate the need for further one-to-one on-campus support, thus reducing demands on limited services. However, students who require extra help can progress to more specialised services available on campus. YourTutor works with academic/learning support centres to signpost 'at-risk' students, as required.

1.2.5 Universities must engage students early in the academic support system, within a pre-census assessment task strategy.

Even earlier than a pre-census assessment task grade, participating lecturers currently make submissions to YourTutor mandatory, in order to foster a student habit of actively utilising the university's support systems for academic literacy help. The submission, draft, and feedback received from the YourTutor expert is included in the student's final assessment submission to allow academics to assess modifications based on service use. Further, 83% of students at a university who undertook a course with mandatory YourTutor assessment submissions indicated that they felt that their assignment quality was improved, due to the feedback they received through the service[12].

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[12] 2015 YourTutor student survey of select cohort at participating institution

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2. Disseminating best practice: Evaluations of new and innovative approaches to improve student completion

YourTutor is improving student confidence and correlates strongly with student academic achievement.

Evaluations recommend that it is an academic student support service that can improve student outcomes in higher education.

Finding 1. Mean GPA is higher amongst students who use online, on-demand academic support

Lynch, A. (2017, March 29). The JCU Trial of YourTutor. Data presented at Universities UK Innovation and Excellence in Teaching and Learning Conference, London.

The James Cook University trial engaged 23% of the participating student cohort (for a total of 1,384 students) to use the service. Results are as follows:

a. Mean GPA was higher amongst students who used YourTutor. Those students who used YourTutor scored a mean of 4.49, over those who did not, 3.57.
b. The statistically-significant improvement in mean GPA was apparent regardless of gender, ethnicity, NESB, OP class (high school attainment, Queensland measure), or mode of delivery.
c. Student performance improved most significantly for the majority-middle cohorts, showing a higher performance closer to par with high-achievers. Repeat use shows higher average GPAs.
d. Nine out of 11 courses had mean GPAs below pass - except students who sought help with YourTutor, who were all over the pass line (4.0 GPA).
e. The after-hours service potentially reaches previously unengaged students. 28% of YourTutor users did not appear to engage in any other support service, reaching students who had not previously reached out for help. This could make the after-hours option a first step for feedback and confidence, building a student's capacity and desire to later engage in an even broader collection of programs, for deeper engagement with their study.

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Achievement
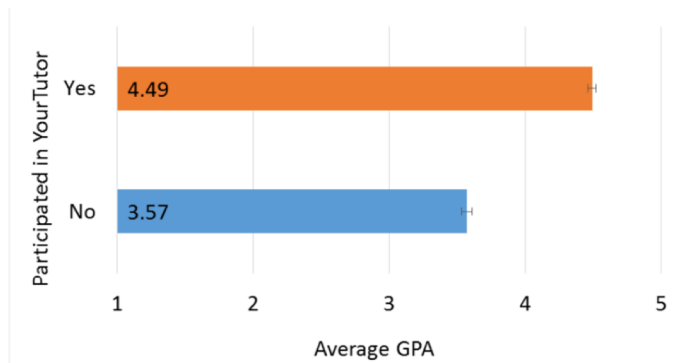
Students who sought assistance through YourTutor, have a higher mean GPA than those who did not. Analysis not intended to suggest causation.

Finding 2. Timely online academic support predicts confidence, predicts grade

Lee, C.B, & Hanham, J. (2017, May 31). Interim Report No.2 - Evaluating the impact of online tutoring (YourTutor)

Data were collected through an online survey that was completed by 506 undergraduate students from a university located in Sydney, Australia. Data were analysed using confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation
modelling.

"YourTutor can be considered a valuable instructional aid for improving students' academic confidence which, in turn, can contribute to improvements in student grades."

Academic confidence attributed to YourTutor positively accounted for 20% of the variance in students' self-reported grades.

Finding 3. Online, on-demand academic support has the required flexibility for a diverse student intake

Department of Education and Training (16 May 2017), HEPPP Evaluation Final Report, Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program, p. 80

"Using HEPPP funding, many universities are providing academic support through online learning tools. For example, the YourTutor online tool is being used by 11 universities under the HEPPP to provide tutoring support to students after hours. The online tool supports flexibility around work schedules and family

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commitments, particularly enabling low SES and mature age students to access academic support (Regional Universities Network, Submission 47). YourTutor states that 83 per cent of students using the service reported improved confidence in academic study (YourTutor, Submission 83)."

Finding 4. Widening participation programs include YourTutor as an effective capability-building component to prepare sustainable enrolments in higher education

KPMG Audit and Report (2015, April) Evaluation of Bridges to Higher Education, p. 56

"With respect to secondary school students, programs such as WSU YourTutor provide students with the skills to strengthen their academic pursuits."

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