STUDENT
SUCCESS
STRATEGY

2019-2022

THE UNIVERSITY OF
NEWCASTLE
AUSTRALIA

AN INITIATIVE OF
THE NEW EDUCATION FRAMEWORK

Introduction

Today's students are living during a time of rapid technological and social transformation. Digital disruptions have transformed the way students want to engage and connect with their peers and with the University. Student expectations of what university should be like and what they want to achieve have changed. We are seeing more students from traditionally under-represented groups: many are first in family to attend university, from disadvantaged backgrounds, over 25 years of age or from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. There are multiple demands on students' time, and juggling the balance of life, work and study seems to be increasingly challenging.[1] These changes bring with them a new reality – universities must adapt to meet the needs of their students and create an environment which promotes academic and social success.

There is a complex interplay of factors which influence student success and the likelihood of students leaving higher education. Universities will have to work harder to retain the students they traditionally enrolled, as well as deliver new kinds of support to a more diverse student population in terms of demographics and prior-learning experience. Additionally, the Government's plan to tie financial funding to performance outcomes requires a sharpened focus on retention, success, graduation and employability. As the demand for accountability continues to grow, student success will become a critical factor that will affect funding, reputations and rankings.[2]

At the University of Newcastle, we take great pride in the rich diversity of our students: different cultural and socio-economic status backgrounds, different ages, experience and aspirations, and different stages of the learning journey. The University's distinctive and diverse student profile brings with it an array of challenges and requires a student-centred approach. We are committed to supporting all students, regardless of their background or circumstances, not just to gain entry, but to thrive in their field of study and to be successful as graduates. The development of the Student Success Strategy is representative of this commitment. This Strategy, and the priority areas, builds on the considerable work that is already been done at the University to support students to succeed. This Strategy recognises the needs of the different student cohorts we have at the University to ensure the support is appropriate, timely, and geared towards providing the best chance of success. It articulates a commitment to a student-centred approach to learning, teaching and the student experience.

The Strategy provides a whole-of-institution, integrated and collaborative approach for enhancing student retention and success across all cohorts and campuses and aligns with our NeW Futures Strategy and the University's values. The Strategy also forms an integral part of the Education Redesign, incorporating the NeW Education Framework and the Student Journey Map which have been designed to provide a learning environment that supports student retention, success and completion.

Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic)

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[1] Deloitte (2015). Global Generations: A Global Study on Work-life challenges across generations. Retrieved at https://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/EY-global-generations-a-global-study-on-work-life-challenges-across-generations/$FILE/EY-global-generations-a-global-study-on-work-life-challenges-across-generations.pdf

[2] Ellucian (2016). *Retention and Student Success: Implementing strategies that make a difference*. Virginia: Ellucian. Retrieve from https://www.ellucian.com/Insights/Retention-and-student-success--Implementing-strategies-that-make-a-difference/

Why do students leave university?

There is a large body of research describing the complex interplay of factors that influence the likelihood of students leaving higher education. Commonly cited reasons why students withdraw include:
- inadequate preparation for higher education
- weak institutional and/or course match, resulting in poor fit and lack of commitment
- poor academic experience
- lack of social integration with peers and educators/support staff
- financial issues and personal circumstances.[3]

Many of these reasons are beyond the control of the university. At the same time, research also suggests that a central factor influencing student retention is the quality of the students' experience at university and their level of integration into the academic and social systems.[4] With this in mind, it is evident that we have a significant role to play to improve the student journey and enable the success of our all students.

What works?

Efforts to improve retention and success in higher education have been informed by a growing body of national and international research. Research suggests that initiatives or activities should aim to: nurture supportive peer relations and foster meaningful interaction between staff and students; develop students' knowledge, confidence and identity as successful learners; and, provide an experience that is relevant to students' interests and future goals.[5]

Research into the effectiveness of interventions which aim to improve student engagement, belonging, retention and success has identified the following key features:

- **Mainstream –** interventions and approaches to improve student retention and success should be embedded within the whole of the institution.
- **Proactive –** activities should proactively seek to engage students with the higher education experience.
- **Relevant –** activities need to be informative, useful and relevant to students' current academic interests, abilities and future aspirations.
- **'One size does not fit all' –** understanding the local context is fundamental. Interventions ought to be tailored to address the issues experienced in specific disciplines and in relation to the characteristics of the student cohort.
- **Ongoing –** interventions should not be one-off - engagement and belonging should extend throughout the student experience.
- **Collaborative –** activities should encourage collaboration and engagement with fellow students and staff.
- **Informed by data and evidence –** institutions need accessible and meaningful data to understand the issues and to monitor the success of interventions.[6]

[3] Jones.R (2008) Student retention and success: A synthesis of research. York: Higher Education. https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/wp_retention_synthesis_for_pdf_updated_090310_0.pdf
[4] Aljohani, 0 (2016). A Review of the Contemporary International Literature on Student Retention in Higher Education, International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies, Vol 4, No 1 pp40-52.
[5] Thomas, L (2012) *Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change: final Report from the What Works? Student Retention and Success programme.* Paul Hamlyn Foundation: London.
[6] Thomas, L, Hill, M, O'Mahony, J & Yorke, M (2017) Supporting student success: strategies for institutional change/; What Works? Student Retention & Success Programme. Paul Hamy In Foundation: London.

Profile of our students

The University of Newcastle is at the forefront of the widening participation and increased diversity of the higher education student population. We take pride in the rich diversity of students in our cohorts and actively seek student enrolments from different backgrounds. We know that our students have a range of other commitments – they are juggling work commitments, raising families and managing caring responsibilities.

Many of our students have experienced social and economic disadvantage, are the first in their family to attend university and/or are from rural or remote locations. We have one of highest proportions of Indigenous student enrolments. It is important that we remain responsive to the varied needs, skills, backgrounds and aspirations of all our students. We know that universities such as the University of Newcastle, with diverse and challenging student cohorts, need to ensure that our students are well supported to achieve their desired educational outcomes.[7]

Who are our students?

To effectively support our students and respond to the barriers our students face, we must recognise that our students do not fit the traditional profile.

- **49%** have external commitments, such as work, community or family[8]

- **57%** of our undergraduates are non-school leavers[9]

- **27%** of domestic students are from low socio-economic or disadvantaged backgrounds[10]

- **3.7%** are Indigenous[11]

- **10%** have identified as having a mental health condition[12]

- **6%** experience a disability[13]

- **18%** are from regional or remote locations

- **52%** of our undergraduate students are first in family[14]

- **63%** are studying full time on campus[15]

- **12%** of our undergraduate students are international.[16]

[7] KPMG (2018) *Reimaging Tertiary Education: From Binary System to Ecosystem*. KPMG Australia.
[8] Learning Impact Data – count and proportion of students. As at Semester 1 2018.
[9] Good Education Group (2018) *Good Universities Guide 2018*. Retrieved from https://ebook.gooduniversitiesguide.com.au/#folio=1
[10] University of Newcastle (2018) *Annual Report 2017*. University of Newcastle: Newcastle,
[11] Data provided by Strategy, Planning and Performance, Resources Division, University of Newcastle.
[12] University of Newcastle (2018). Learning Impact Data – Count and proportion of students. As at Semester 1 2018.
[13] Department of Education and Training (2014) Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2014 Student Data. Retrieved at https://www.education.gov.au/selected-higher-education-statistics-2014-student-data
[14] University of Newcastle (2018) *Equity Report, Student Equity and Social Justice Expert Panel*, 15 May 2018.
[15] Good Education Group (2018) *Good Universities Guide 2018*. Retrieved from https://ebook.gooduniversitiesguide.com.au/#folio=1
[16] Good Education Group (2018) *Good Universities Guide 2018*. Retrieved from https://ebook.gooduniversitiesguide.com.au/#folio=1

Retention and Success at the University of Newcastle

The University is committed to delivering a dynamic and positive student experience. We recognise that well-supported and well-engaged students achieve the best possible outcomes. We offer an extensive range of initiatives, programs and activities which aim to enhance the student experience and ensure students have the opportunities, environment and support they need to succeed in their studies through to graduation and beyond. The Student Success Strategy provides an overarching framework to review existing student success, identify opportunities for innovation in our learning and teaching, and transform the student experience. At the University of Newcastle, we have chosen to be future-facing in our approach and, whilst we are keen to respond to current issues and barriers, we want to understand how we prepare for the future student experience.

How are students doing at the University of Newcastle?

For more than 10 years, the University has closely aligned with the national sector rates of retention and success. When compared to regional universities, we sit well above the average in terms of the retention and success of students. Whilst we are performing reasonably well on retention and success, there are still large numbers of students who are attriting or not achieving their potential success, and results vary across particular cohorts. For example, part-time (the greatest contributor of non-completion) and on-line students have lower levels of success and retention. Those entering via alternative entry pathways such as Mature Age Special Entry and VET students often achieve lower retention and success rates compared to other cohorts such as School Leavers. Data also shows that we are below the sector for retention and success for postgraduate students, particulary international students. The gap continues to widen between students with a disability and those without for retention.

One of our goals is to achieve parity between the proportion of our students who enter and graduate from diverse socio-economic, cultural and disability backgrounds with the proportion of people who are from those backgrounds in our regions.[17] While the University has achieved advancements in the retention of Indigenous, low socio-economic status (SES) and first in family cohorts, there is still much to be done to enable us to achieve parity of retention and success across all of our student cohorts by 2020.[18]

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[17] University of Newcastle (2016) *NeW Futures Strategic Plan (2016-2025)*. University of Newcastle: Newcastle.
[18] University of Newcastle (2018) *Equity Report, Student Equity and Social Justice Expert Panel*, 15 May 2018

Our Vision

Improving the student experience is at the heart of the Student Success Strategy. Our students should feel prepared, at all stages of their student journey, and most importantly, they should feel like the University of Newcastle is a place where they belong. We want our staff to feel connected to each other and to their students. Empowering staff with the information and support they need to improve student outcomes and success is also an important part of this vision.

The Student Success Strategy provides a four year vision for a whole-of-institution, integrated and collaborative approach to improving student retention and success at the University. It articulates a commitment to a student-centred approach to learning, teaching and the student experience.

Each of the strategy's four goals – connect, belong, empower and prepare – contribute to our overarching goal to improve the student experience at the University of Newcastle.

CONNECT	A student-centred institutional culture where staff are committed to student success and are responsive to our diverse students' needs, skills and backgrounds
BELONG	Students from all backgrounds have a strong sense of engagement and belonging, at all stages of their student journey
PREPARE	Students are provided with the support and opportunities they need to succeed academically at all stages of their student journey, and to develop the skills required to be relevant and competitive in the future workforce
EMPOWER	A data-driven and evidence-informed approach which proactively supports students and enables educators to improve learning outcomes and student success

The four goals overlap, interconnect and work together. Progress achieved within each goal will help to strengthen, advance and reinforce the others. Within each goal, key areas have been prioritised to provide a starting point for implementation.
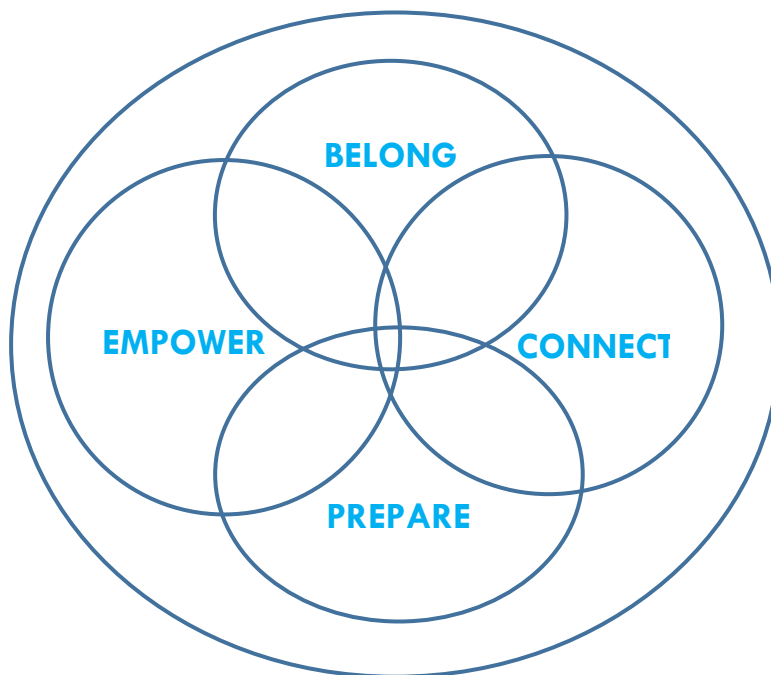
STUDENT SUCCESS GOALS

CONNECT

A student-centred institutional culture where staff are committed to student success and are responsive to our diverse students' needs, skills and backgrounds

Strategies

- *Introduce institutional benchmarks for student retention and success*

- *Create opportunities for greater collaboration across the University to increase uptake and visibility of student success initiatives*

- *Recognise, share and encourage best practice in student success and retention*

- *Review policies and procedures to ensure they are student-centred and responsive to diverse student needs and specific cohorts*

Priority Areas 2019-2020

1. **Develop institutional benchmarks for student retention and success and integrate the benchmarks into the University of Newcastle strategic planning process and related documentation.**

2. **Create a Student Retention and Success SharePoint/Website for staff. To include:**
   - **relevant data, best practice research and resources;**
   - **examples of student success initiatives and projects to enable collaboration and sharing of best practice; and**
   - **updates, events and professional development opportunities.**

BELONG

Students from all backgrounds have a strong sense of engagement and belonging, at all stages of their student journey

Strategies

- *Provide timely, targeted and tailored multi-channel student communications to create a sense of belonging to the University community*

- *Embed student engagement activities and initiatives across all stages of the student journey*

- *Normalise 'help seeking' and ensure support services are positively and proactively promoted to all students as useful to enhancing their study and wider university experience*

- *Ensure staff have an understanding of, and are responsive to, our unique student profile to provide the appropriate level of support to students with diverse needs*

- *Ensure educators are enabled to design curriculum which is responsive to different student needs (including Indigenous, international and students with disability)*

- *Increase the cultural competency of students and educators, with particular reference to Indigenous and international cultures*

Priority Areas 2019-2020

3. **Continue to develop the student website and ensure it provides the information, support, advice and resources needed to enhance the student experience, create a sense of belonging and enable academic success.**

4. **Develop a Cultural Capability Framework which aims to build capability around inclusion and cultural diversity and expand the Indigenisation and internationalisation of the curriculum, to proactively support our culturally diverse population.**

PREPARE

Students are provided with the support and opportunities they need to succeed academically at all stages of their student journey, and to develop the skills required to be relevant and competitive in the future workforce

Strategies

- *Provide a comprehensive suite of academic support programs, differentiated to student cohorts and disciplinary contexts, to improve preparedness for university study*

- *Ensure academic support services are accessible, dynamic and responsive to students during key transition points*

- *Ensure student learning and teaching experiences are of the highest quality, led by best practice in curriculum, assessment and pedagogical design*

- *Provide curriculum design support and recognition to educators who embed the development of key academic skills within their curriculum, particularly for first year students*

- *Ensure prior-learning requirements for entry into programs and courses clearly articulate the knowledge and competences required for success so that students are not placed at risk of failure*

- *Embed into courses and programs a focus on student employability and entrepreneurship to enable future career agility*

Priority Areas 2019-2020

5. **Review the framework of first year programs to identify key academic learning/study skills. Ensure that key learnings are embedded in ways that are relevant to disciplinary context and that students are able to develop the skills early for success within their chosen program.**

6. **Enhance and expand professional development opportunities for educators to build their capability for effective curriculum and assessment design. This includes a scaffolded and integrated induction into a program which focuses on the development of key academic skills.**

EMPOWER

A data-driven and evidence-informed approach which proactively supports students and enables educators to improve learning outcomes and student success

Strategies

- *Provide proactive, targeted and tailored support and intervention to students as early as practicable in their student journey*

- *Ensure educators have access to appropriate, user-friendly data to facilitate improvements in courses/programs and to enhance student retention and success rates*

- *Establish an evaluation framework for student success activities/programs to: identify opportunities to scale-up and collaborate; ensure they are effective; and align with the Student Success Principles*

Prioritised Areas 2019-2020

7. **Develop a framework for the effective utilisation of Learning Analytic data to enable proactive engagement with students at key points in the Student Journey, pertinent to their discipline and to inform the design of intervention/support strategies appropriate to the student's needs.**

8. **Develop a framework to enable effective and proactive interventions in programs and courses with low retention/completion rates, including supporting educators to improve student success outcomes.**

Principles

The Student Success Strategy is underpinned by 5 key principles which aim to improve student success at the University of Newcastle. All initiatives and activities should endeavour to meet the following principles:

- **A student journey approach**
  Students are supported at all stages of their student journey, from pre-enrolment to graduation and beyond

- **Targeted and high impact**
  Activities and initiatives are high impact, have the potential to be scalable, and support student success

- **Proactive and timely**
  Activities and initiatives are proactive, intervene early and are delivered 'just in time'

- **Evidence-based and data driven**
  Approaches are responsive to timely and accurate data, and have a demonstrable impact on student success, performance and engagement

- **Inclusive and tailored**
  Activities and initiatives are tailored to address identified needs, skills and backgrounds, and ensure all students are engaged

Background and Implementing the Student Success Strategy

In 2018, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) convened the Student Retention and Success Taskforce to develop a coherent and integrated strategy for enhancing student retention and success across all cohorts and campuses, and in line with the University's values of equity, social justice and excellence. The Taskforce membership comprised of representation from across the University.

The Student Success Strategy was developed following extensive research and consultation. The methodology included: desktop review of best practice; review of current retention and success activities; analysis of retention and success data; and consultations with subject matter experts, including staff and students.

The Student Success Strategy will provide a whole-of-institution approach through an annual implementation plan, with priority areas within each goal being assigned and tracked.

A Team has been established to oversee the implementation of the Student Success Strategy.