

Achievements of Curtin University's Retention Plan

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Abstract

In 2007, the author presented a paper at the 16th Biennial ANZSSA conference in Auckland entitled "Developing a Student Retention Plan". Since then, Curtin University has implemented many interventions and programs deriving from the resulting Student Retention Implementation Plan. This presentation will highlight some of the key achievements, and present data which demonstrates the impact of the plan on first year student retention figures

Introduction

After a period of development and consultation, Curtin's Student Retention Implementation Plan (SRIP) was approved by Academic Services Committee on 11 June 2008 and Academic Board on 27 June 2008. The approved plan is accessible at <http://retention.curtin.edu.au/retentionplan/>. It is now timely to review this plan and consider the most appropriate next steps.

There are a multitude of possible measures of retention, but the representative retention measure targeted by the SRIP is the 1st year domestic undergraduate retention rate. The data in Table One below (provided by Strategy and Planning) demonstrate that there has been considerable progress in addressing the goals of the SRIP. It should be noted that the interventions resulting from this plan were gradually introduced from 2008. The data from earlier years are provided for the purposes of comparison. For 2004-2007, the retention figures show no particular trend. From 2008 onwards, the trend is clearly in the desired direction.

Table One: For the whole of Curtin - the % of 1st year undergrads (i.e. new to course) retained

1. For the whole of Curtin - the % of all 1st year undergraduates retained

Year	Still at Curtin	Same Faculty	Same Pown OU	Same Course
2004	85.7%	82.9%	81.2%	79.1%
2005	85.8%	82.7%	80.6%	78.9%
2006	84.4%	81.7%	79.1%	76.9%
2007	86.2%	83.2%	79.8%	77.8%
2008	83.5%	80.6%	77.7%	75.7%
2009	87.1%	82.0%	78.9%	78.7%
2010	87.3%	84.2%	79.5%	77.9%

2. For the whole of Curtin - the % of 1st year Domestic undergraduates retained

Year	Still at Curtin	Same Faculty	Same Pown OU	Same Course
2004	82.3%	78.9%	75.8%	73.2%
2005	85.1%	80.6%	77.0%	74.4%
2006	83.4%	79.8%	75.8%	72.9%
2007	84.2%	79.9%	74.9%	72.4%
2008	81.2%	77.1%	72.6%	70.0%
2009	83.8%	78.4%	73.5%	71.3%
2010	83.6%	78.6%	70.6%	68.4%

3. For the whole of Curtin - the % of 1st year International undergraduates retained

Year	Still at Curtin	Same Faculty	Same Pown OU	Same Course
2004	89.5%	87.4%	87.0%	85.7%
2005	86.6%	84.8%	84.4%	83.6%
2006	85.6%	84.2%	83.3%	82.0%
2007	89.3%	88.4%	87.5%	86.5%
2008	87.1%	86.2%	85.9%	84.8%
2009	92.0%	87.4%	86.9%	89.5%
2010	92.0%	91.4%	90.8%	89.9%

The SRIP sought to raise awareness of student retention issues on a University-wide basis. As a consequence, there have been a range of actions either introduced or developed further at various levels across the University – some of these are briefly summarised later in this paper. The plan itself identified a small number of priority areas for intervention. These are:

1. Development of interventions directed at students placed on Conditional status
2. Review of processes associated with course switching within Curtin with the objective of reducing impediments to students seeking to change course
3. Development of processes which identify and support at-risk students as early as possible
4. Further development of student mentor programs for students, with a focus on enrolling areas with lower than average retention rates
5. Development of the links between University courses and future career pathways
6. Increase on-campus student accommodation

Since the adoption of the plan, there has been progress in addressing these priorities. In summary:

Interventions directed at students placed on Conditional status: There has been considerable discussion and debate with respect to the terms and conditions associated with both Terminated

and Conditional status. A research project carried out collaboratively by START, the Counselling Service and Student Guild clearly identified that students who had proceeded to Terminated status had typically not engaged in any serious actions to address the issues affecting their studies whilst on Conditional status. The Assessment and Student Progression Manual (dated November 2010) has revised and clarified definitions and processes associated with Conditional status in order to be somewhat more directive with students on this academic status. In addition, a resource for students and staff has been created at <http://retention.curtin.edu.au/programs/conditional.cfm> to assist. Students placed on Conditional status are directed to this source of help when provided with official advice of their Academic Status. It should be noted that this resource was provided as a “place holder” until a more interactive resource could be developed. This has not occurred, but is under development at the time of writing.

Facilitating Course Switching: There has clearly been significant progress in this as evidenced by the improved in “retained by Curtin” and “retained by faculty” figures compared to the “same course” figure. Indeed, the percentage of students retained in the same course has actually dropped since 2004 whilst the percentage retained by Curtin has risen. This can only be explained by the fact that students have switched courses. It is difficult to attribute this to any single intervention. There have been changes to some courses such as the common first year programs developed in Health Science and Humanities. There has also been a concerted effort to publicize the message that course switching is an option. That publicity has occurred via the Careers Centre, START, the Student Mentor Program, and a variety of other channels. We can be rightly pleased with this outcome.

Processes which identify and support at-risk students as early as possible: An on-line referral system was developed and trialled in 2009 and 2010 (see http://retention.curtin.edu.au/programs/student_support.cfm). This allows staff to directly refer individual students of concern to START via a simple web form. The intended action is then for a Student Advisor to make telephone contact with the student. Early results were promising as a small number of staff began using this channel. The students who were contacted were provided with appropriate advice. However, it was found that unless this service was repeatedly publicised to staff (particularly to sessional staff) the system tended to atrophy away through lack of use. That is, the on-line referral process was found to be a somewhat passive intervention that was reliant on staff taking on an additional task.

As a result, the more proactive “JumpSTART” program (modelled on a program pioneered at Queensland University of Technology) has been introduced at a unit level – see http://retention.curtin.edu.au/programs/jump_start.cfm . In this program, START develops a service contract with unit controllers in specific units to identify students at risk of attrition. In each case, behavioural indicators of risk are agreed that are relevant to the unit in question. These may be non-attendance in required classes; non-participation in on-line activities; late submission of early significant assessment; failure of early significant assessment; or any other indicator that may be especially relevant to that unit. Students identified by one or more of these indicators are placed on a contact list and START attempts to contact them by phone. There have been very positive outcomes in three ways. First, the program helps to reduce the number of Fail – Incomplete grades on students’ transcripts by providing appropriate advice. Second, JumpSTART provides an opportunity for students to comment on areas of concern in particular units which START can then feedback to the unit controllers. Finally, there is a higher pass rate amongst students who are successfully contacted through JumpSTART compared to those who cannot be contacted.

JumpSTART is a highly effective program operating in Semester One 2011 in ten 1st year units. There have been requests from other unit controllers to be included, but unfortunately there are insufficient resources to do so. Indeed, the program is over-extended as it stands and the number of units included will be reduced in Semester Two.

Whilst there has clearly been some progress in developing interventions for at-risk students, the JumpSTART program itself is at risk. It is very worthwhile to persist with this; and it is especially important in the context of the Bradley Report goals and potential impact of the 2015 half cohort.

It should also be noted that this program has been included in an ALTC Project led by QUT entitled “Monitoring Student Learning Engagement”. Curtin’s role in this project will involve participating in an investigation directed at developing effective practice guidelines in early identification of students at risk of attrition.

Development of student mentor programs: This has been the most visible and successful of the retention interventions (see <http://mentoring.curtin.edu.au/start/>). Virtually all beginning undergraduate students on the Bentley campus are now assigned a senior student in their own course as a mentor. Evaluations from mentees and mentors indicate a very positive impact. In the context of this report, the data obtained from mentees is of most relevance.

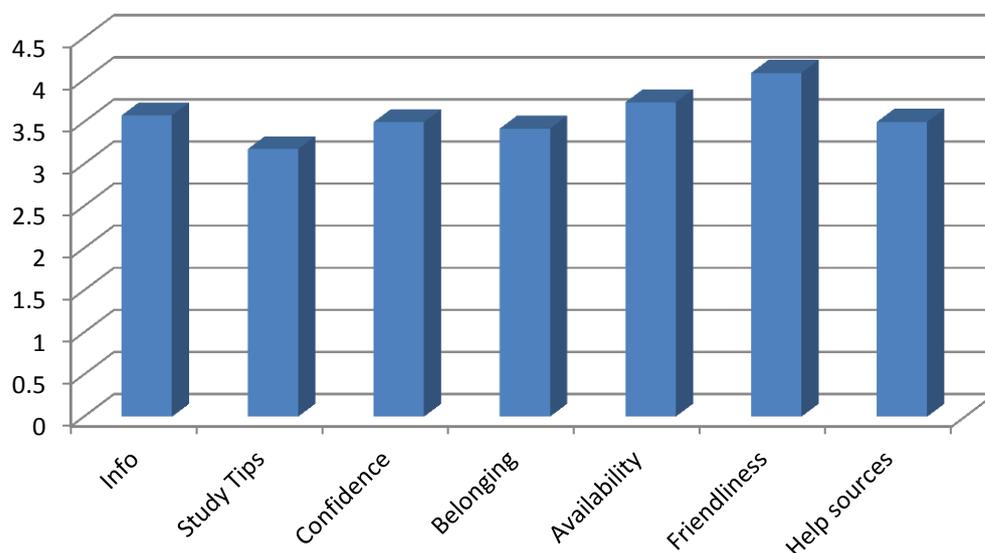
Mentees are asked to rate mentors on the statements below on a five point scale (from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strong Agree”).

My Mentor:

1. *Provided me with useful information about the University.*
2. *Helped me with study tips.*
3. *Gave me confidence and reassurance in beginning University.*
4. *Helped me feel I belong at Curtin University.*
5. *Was always available if I needed help or advice*
6. *Was friendly and approachable.*
7. *Directed me to appropriate resources at Curtin.*

The data deriving from these scales from a large sample of 2391 mentees over 2009 and 2010 are shown in Figure 1 below. These data demonstrate high ratings on all the scales, indicating a significant and positive level of influence on the experience of beginning undergraduate students – with the further implication of positively influencing new student engagement.

Figure 1: The Average rating of Mentor impact across the participating mentor programs at Curtin University for 2009/2010



A highly significant part of the evaluation data from Mentees demonstrates the impact of the program on student retention. Beginning students attribute a high impact on decisions to persist at Curtin. Mentees in 2009 and 2010 were asked - "If you were at any point considering withdrawing from the University, did your Mentor make any difference to your decision to continue at Curtin?" Whilst many students indicated that this question was not applicable to them, a substantial proportion did acknowledge the impact of the Mentor program on this issue. These results are shown on the table below.

Table One: The Impact of Mentors on decisions to persist (rounded percentages)

Mentors influence on decision to continue at Curtin	Percent in 2009	Percent in 2010
1 - Yes	14%	4.4%
2 - No, Mentor Not Involved	15%	8%
3 - N/ A – Never Considered	72%	87.6%

Whilst we cannot be sure whether these students would have seriously considered leaving the University, they most certainly attribute a very positive influence to their mentor.

This program was initially resourced from Strategic funds, and there has been a shortfall in subsequent funding (to the extent of ~\$90,000 p.a.) to enable the program to persist in its current form. Without reliable continuing funding, this program is in jeopardy.

Mentors were advised that their participation in the program could be recognised on their student record via the Supplementary Statement of Achievement (SSOA). Unfortunately, the SSOA has also been in jeopardy largely as a result of diminished administrative resources to support it. Alternatives are under consideration, but there is no outcome at the time of writing this report.

Development of the links between University courses and future career pathways: There has been further development of the Careers Centre, most notably a shift to more professionally appropriate accommodation in a refurbished building. The Careers service itself has been under development over the past several years and is gradually being resourced at a level commensurate with a University of this size. There have been a range of high profile and creative initiatives from this service over the past several years. It is also worth noting that the Careers Centre has built on the success of the Student Mentor program by establishing the Next Step Mentoring Program (see <http://alumni.curtin.edu.au/nextstep/>). Nonetheless, there is some continued frustration in getting the message across that career path is a significant issue right from the beginning of a degree program – rather than a matter left until the final year of study. However, this should be balanced against progress in facilitating course switching and the introduction of iPortfolio.

Increase on-campus student accommodation: At the time that the SRIP was approved, there appeared to be some pressure on student housing. However, in the intervening years, a number of private providers have entered the market. It has therefore not proven necessary for the University to directly address this need at this time.

There were also a substantial number of other potential initiatives identified in the plan, many of which have been acted upon by the areas responsible. Whilst this list is not inclusive of all these actions, some notable examples include:

- *All staff to be provided with information on the range and availability of support services*
 - A significant effort has been made to publicise this information to staff. The addition of the Student Wellbeing Hotline (which was a development unrelated to the SRIP) has further highlighted the availability of a single portal to access support services and advice
- *Parent Information Program*
 - Future Students has introduced a comprehensive series of parent information events
- *Deliver a high quality Orientation program to all beginning students*
 - A revised Orientation policy and a set of operational guidelines have assisted in lifting the quality of Curtin's Orientation program. This program received a commendation in Curtin's AUQA Report.
- *Further development of Recreational, Leisure and Sport programs*
 - The opening of a new well-equipped recreation centre has been the trigger for a substantial increase in the range of recreational, leisure and sport opportunities.

- *Ensuring contact is made with AWOL students*
 - A substantial research project into AWOL students was undertaken by START in 2008, and reported to UTLC and other university forums in 2009. This study provided useful information to the University on the reasons students discontinued their study. From time to time, there have been some individual projects to contact particular cohorts of AWOL students. Such projects always yield a re-enrolment rate which more than repays the cost of that project, but there is no systematic approach to the issue on a University-wide basis.

- *Provision of emergency short term small loans to students in financial difficulty*
 - This has now been implemented by Student Central. Staff in key advisory and counselling roles are aware of the service, and make referrals as appropriate

- *Active support offered to students admitted under exceptional circumstances*
 - Admissions staff liaise and collaborate with START on a routine basis to ensure these students are contacted after enrolment and offered support on a needs basis

- *Introduction of Peer Assisted Study Support (PASS) programs where appropriate*
 - It has only been possible to introduce a PASS program in 2011 under funds made available through HEPPP. At the time of writing, it is intended to extend the program in Semester Two 2011 and further extend in 2012.

It should also be noted that many teaching and support areas of the University undertake activities which are highly supportive of student retention. One of the guiding principles of the SRIP was that “Student retention is a responsibility of the whole University community”. This principle has been widely adopted. It is not possible in this report to acknowledge all of the positive contributions that have been made.

Conclusions

The inclusive process of developing and implementing the SRIP has shown clear benefits. It demonstrated that a coordinated approach to variables that make a difference to retention actually lead to positive results. Universities are clearly not wasting their time in giving attention to this issue. However, it is also clear that we can never say the “job is done”. In Curtin’s case, there is still some significant consolidation and improvement to be made in some of the existing interventions and programs. Further, the demographic characteristics of entering cohorts do not remain static, and neither does the institutional context remain the same.

Curtin’s initial approach to this issue focused on retention rates as a specific issue. In some respects, this places the cart before the horse. Retention rates for commencing students are one outcome measure of having delivered a good first year experience. With the impending proposals from TEQSA to introduce funding-related measures of the quality of the first year experience, we would be wise to broaden our view more widely than just the retention rate.