

MEDIA RELEASE

University retention and completion rates have improved

07 November 2011: The retention rate* for commencing bachelor degree students in Australia has increased from 81 per cent in 2001 to 84 per cent in 2009, while the completion rate has increased from 72% in 2005 to 80% in 2008, according to a research briefing released today by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER).

The ACER *Joining the Dots* research briefing (Volume 1, Number 6, October 2011) also noted that in the next few years new university enrolments are expected to come disproportionately from low socio-economic status (SES) groups that are historically under-represented.

The engagement of low socio-economic status (SES) groups will be crucial to ensure the Australian Government achieves the target of 40 percent of all 25 to 34 year olds having a qualification at bachelor level or above by 2025.

ACER Senior Research Fellow, Dr Julie McMillan, said currently university students from low SES backgrounds persist in their studies at rates similar to, or slightly lower than, high SES students.

“As the participation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds increases, it will be necessary to continue to monitor their retention and completion rates closely. Among those who discontinue their studies, low SES students are more likely than high SES students to cite academic and financial difficulties as a consideration for non-completion of their degrees.”

The briefing examines how students who commence higher education studies progress through their courses. The briefing provides a synthesis of currently available information on student retention, attrition, and completions, as well as the reasons underlying course non-completion.

Dr McMillan said Australia’s completion rates are substantially higher than the OECD average of 70 per cent, but substantially lower than the 93 percent reported by Japan.

“While the results are positive, and considerably higher than the 2005 figure of 72 percent for Australia cited by the Bradley Review, there remains scope for improvement,” Dr McMillan said.

“For example, the overall rates mask substantial differences between domestic and overseas students, with overseas students consistently displaying higher retention rates and lower attrition rates throughout the last decade. Also, there is considerable variation among institutions, with retention rates for commencing bachelor degree students ranging from 60 per cent to 94 per cent in 2009.”

Dr McMillan said while it was encouraging to see completion rates improve over the last few years with four in five students completing their bachelor degrees, it was important to understand and develop appropriate retention strategies for those who didn’t complete their studies.

The most common reasons students give for discontinuing study relate to interests, health and personal factors, and their course turning out to be not what they wanted. Financial and academic difficulties are less prominent considerations.

** The retention rate is a measure of the proportion of commencing students in a given year who continue studying in the following year.*



Improving Learning

Joining the Dots is a subscription-based resource provided by ACER to those with an interest in Australian Higher Education. In 2011, the series includes eight research briefings, a monthly news and event digest and a webinar series. More detail can be found at www.acer.edu.au/jtd or by emailing: jtd@acer.edu.au

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