



Does focusing on retention make a difference? The impact of Curtin's retention plan

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In 2007, the author began facilitating an internal process at Curtin with the intention of creating a Student Retention Plan – with an initial focus on first year student retention. The resulting plan was adopted in June 2008. Since then, Curtin University has implemented many interventions and programs deriving from the resulting Student Retention Implementation Plan. This paper will discuss the multi-pronged approach taken; highlight some of the key achievements; and present data which demonstrate the positive 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 in June 2008. The initial impetus to develop a response to student retention issues derived from Curtin's ranking in the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund – a Federal government funding program no longer in existence administered by the then Department of Education, Science and Training. The student retention rate was amongst the performance indicators used in this process. There was some concern expressed amongst senior management of the university that there was room for improvement in our student retention statistics.

Development of a plan aimed at affecting student retention rates involved considerable investigation into factors affecting student attrition, retention and persistence. There is a significantly large body of research in this broad area – far too many publications to include in a reference list for this paper. An outcome of the retention plan development process was to develop a web resource enabling staff to easily access this body of research (see reference list for a link to this resource). Further consideration of this research led the university to make the following summary within the Student Retention Implementation Plan:

Research into student retention indicates that there are particular variables associated with the student experience which have an impact on whether students persist or leave. In broad terms, students who persist have the following attributes:

- **General Factor 1** - Appropriate motivation to undertake the course for which the student has enrolled
- **General Factor 2** - Appropriate capacity to enter the course – including English language ability and prerequisite subject knowledge
- **General Factor 3** - Suitable background support variables including such matters as adequate finance, accommodation, family support and moderation in the levels of competing demands on time
- **General Factor 4** - Development of positive relationships and functional connections with members of the University community – both with other students and with staff. This is inclusive of engagement in positive teaching and learning processes, and in extra-curricular relationships and activities.
- **General Factor 5** - Development of effective learning skills – including IT skills and effective use of the library
- **General Factor 6** - Timely access and use of support services “

In order to influence student retention, it was therefore necessary to develop interventions which impact on these variables. The initial development of the plan identified 43 potential interventions, a rather unwieldy number of possibilities. Whilst these were all retained as options within the final plan, six were targeted as high priority interventions. These were:

1. Development of interventions directed at students placed on Conditional status (this status at Curtin refers to being placed on what is often called academic probation in other institutions)
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

The SRIP also described several key principles:

The key principles of the Retention Plan are that:

- Student retention is a responsibility of the whole University community
- Retaining students within the University is a higher priority than retaining students within any individual enrolling area, which carries the implication that there should be no unnecessary impediments to students seeking to switch courses within Curtin
- Improving student retention is a long term objective which should be widely embedded in University processes and functions
- All areas of the University will act together in a collaborative and integrated manner to address retention issues; with the proviso that some areas may also act independently to address retention issues peculiar to their own area of responsibility
- Current students and alumni should be actively engaged in student retention initiatives wherever feasible.
- Wherever it is appropriate, the University will seek to engage students in support roles where there is suitable training and supervision and where this does not abrogate the University's duty of care to provide professionally qualified staff.
- The plan aims to improve the student experience across the whole Curtin community, whilst also targeting specific areas, groups or variables which are known to impact on retention
- Early intervention is a critical feature of all retention initiatives.
- It is important to take account of workload implications of interventions directed at improving student retention
- There will be on-going identification and development of new opportunities to improve student retention added to this plan as appropriate.

These principles highlight important issues, the first few of which are worthy of a little elaboration. The first principle is an acknowledgement that addressing student retention is most certainly not a matter to be left to central specialist support services. Neither is it restricted to academic staff. Everyone in the university community – general staff, support staff and current students all have a role to play. The second principle is a response to the problem that different areas of the university may have different retention goals. It is clearly in the interests of a specific department to retain a student within his/her original course; whereas it is in the interests of a Pro Vice-Chancellor to retain the student within the faculty. However, the most useful position we can take is that it is in everyone's interests to do whatever is necessary to retain the student somewhere within the university, whilst respecting that there are also times when it may be in both the student's and the university's interests to leave. The third principle is an acceptance that affecting student retention takes time. The factors affecting attrition are complex and interactive, and the measures of retention lag some time behind whatever interventions are undertaken. We need to ensure that we take the "long view" and do not necessarily expect instant results.

Interested readers may wish to see the entire Student Retention Implementation Plan. The approved plan is a somewhat lengthy document, and may be accessed at <http://retention.curtin.edu.au/retentionplan/>

There are a multitude of possible measures of retention, but the representative retention measure targeted by the SRIP is the first year undergraduate retention rate. The data in Table 1 below (provided by Curtin's Office of Strategy and Planning) demonstrate that there has been considerable progress in addressing the goals of the SRIP. Table 1 shows the overall first year retention rates, domestic student retention rates, and international student retention rates. 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 1: For the whole of Curtin: Percentage of first year undergraduates (i.e. new to course) retained

1. For the whole of Curtin: Percentage of all first 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: Percentage of first 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: Percentage of first 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%

Interpretive Note: retention data are a lagging statistic. For example, a 2010 percentage in these tables refers to the percentage of students who enrolled as first years in 2009 who subsequently were enrolled in at least one unit in 2010. This cannot be established with certainty until the second semester final date for withdrawal has passed. We therefore are not able to obtain a retention measure until well after we have introduced programs aimed at improving retention rates.

It is worth noting that apparently small percentages changes in retention rates represent substantial numbers of students. The difference between the 2008 and 2010 first year retention rate equates to

approximately 260-270 individual students who are then likely to persist throughout their degree program. This represents a considerable benefit to the university, financially and in terms of the quality of the student experience. The SRIP also 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 focused on the priority areas listed above for intervention.

Interventions affecting retention

Since the adoption of the plan, there has been progress in addressing the six high priority targets of the plan. In summary:

Interventions directed at students placed on Conditional status

There has been considerable discussion and debate within the university with respect to the terms and conditions associated with both Terminated and Conditional status. A research project carried out collaboratively within Curtin by the Student Transition and Retention Team (START), the Counselling Service and Student Guild (Elliott, Murray and Roy, 2010) 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. Students who have been terminated from their studies on the grounds of poor academic performance may appeal against that decision. If they do so, they must clearly identify what factors led to their poor results, and indicate exactly what they intend to do in order to improve academic results in future. It was thought highly desirable to encourage students to engage in such a reflective process before they had reached a point of termination. However, many students clearly did not perceive Conditional status to be problematical and many seemed unwilling to act. Curtin's 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 to assist students and staff has been created at <http://retention.curtin.edu.au/programs/conditional.cfm>. Students placed on Conditional status are now directed to this source of help when provided with official advice of their Academic Status. Here, they are guided through a process to assist in identifying what went wrong with their studies, and what sources of help and advice are available. At the end of process, they are invited to consult with their course controller and to construct a "Success Plan". At the time of writing, this resource is being redeveloped to be more interactive.

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 in the retention statistics. 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 some students have switched courses. It is difficult to attribute this to any single intervention. There have been changes to some courses such as common first year programs developed in Health Science and Humanities. There has also been a concerted effort to publicise 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

Students who are placed on Conditional status have demonstrated risk by showing poor academic results at the end of a semester. However, it is highly desirable to identify at-risk students at an earlier point if possible. The people most likely to observe that a student is experiencing a difficulty is a staff member in close contact with students – tutors, laboratory staff, student services office staff, housing managers and so forth. To assist with identifying and contacting at-risk students, an online referral system was developed and trialled in 2009 and 2010 (see http://retention.curtin.edu.au/programs/student_support.cfm). This process 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 responded very positively to the outreach, and 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 the Student Success 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 several 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. Third, there is a higher pass rate amongst students who are successfully contacted through JumpSTART compared to those who cannot be contacted. Finally, there is extremely positive feedback from students in terms of feeling that the university cares about their progress; and positive feedback from participating academic staff that the program assist them in managing workloads associated with student progression.

JumpSTART is a highly effective program which operated in Semester One 2011 in ten first year units. There have been requests from other unit controllers to be included, but unfortunately there are insufficient resources to do so – in particular, there is a need for less labour-intensive software to manage the program more efficiently. The program is over-extended as it stands and the number of units included will be reduced in 2012 whilst more effective software resources are investigated.

(It should also be noted that this program has been included in an ALTC Project led by QUT entitled “Good practice for safeguarding student learning engagement in higher education institutions”. Curtin’s role in this project involves participating in an investigation directed at developing effective practice guidelines in early identification of students a risk of attrition.)

Development of student mentor programs

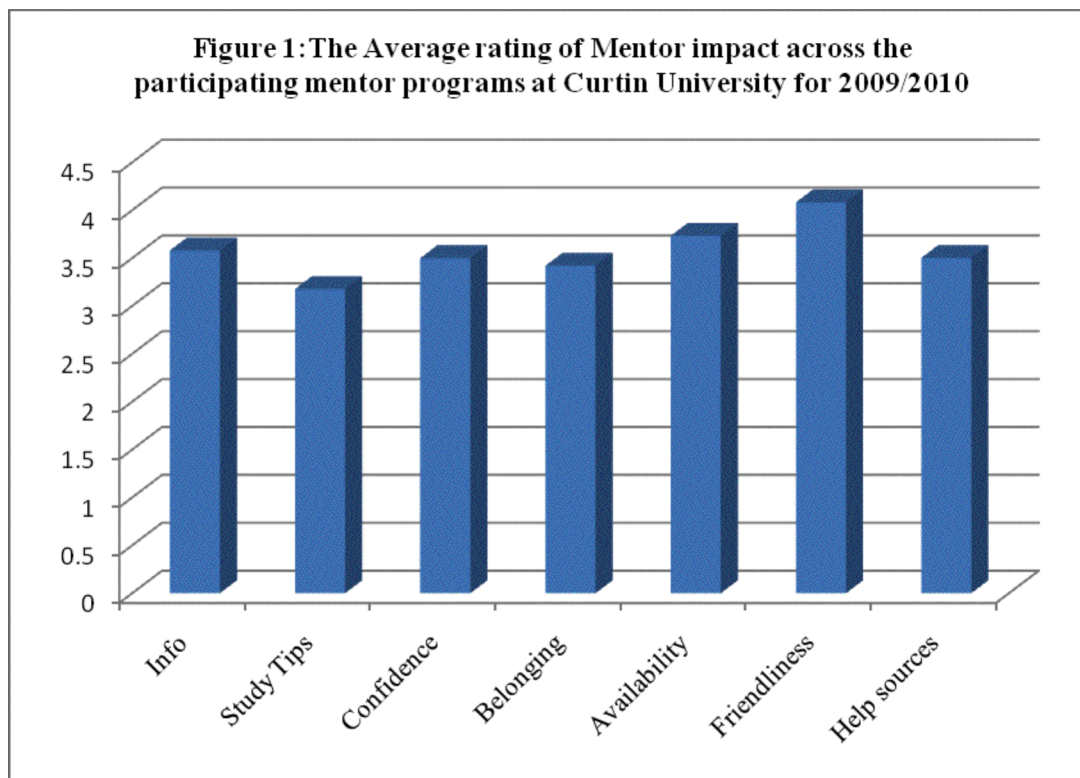
This has been the most visible and successful of the retention interventions (see <http://mentoring.curtin.edu.au/start/>). Virtually all beginning undergraduate students on the Bentley campus are now assigned a senior student in their own course as a mentor. This program has been documented in several reports (Elliott, Beltman, and Lynch, 2011; Elliott and Lynch, 2010), and attributes of the program are fully described in those papers. Evaluations from mentees and mentors indicate a very positive impact. In the context of this paper, the data obtained from mentees is of most relevance.

At the end each semester, mentees are asked to rate their own mentor 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.



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 in Table 2.

Table 2: The Impact of Mentors on decisions to persist (rounded percentages)

Mentors influence on decision to continue at Curtin	% in 2009	% 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.

Development of the links between University courses and future career pathways

There has been further development of the Careers Centre, most notably an increase in professional staffing and 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 Curtin's 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/>), a program in which employers

and other professionals act as mentors to students in their final year of undergraduate study. Nonetheless, there is some continued frustration in getting the message across that the 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.

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 provision of a Student Wellbeing Hotline and email service has further highlighted the availability of a single portal to access support services and advice (see <http://studentwellbeing.curtin.edu.au/>)
- *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. The author has been engaged in developing quality standards for orientation programs for many years – for example, see Elliott, 1994 and Hunter, Crome, Elliott, Ouakrime, Nyati-Ramahobo, and Stafford, 2009, and has introduced a number of "best practice" standards into Curtin.
- *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 and participation in recreational, leisure and sport opportunities.
- *Ensuring contact is made with students Absent Without Official Leave (AWOL)*
A substantial research project into AWOL students was undertaken by START (see Elliott, Roberts, and Guy, 2009). This study provided useful information to the University on the reasons students discontinued their study. In particular, it was found that many students who did not re-enrol are open to contact from the university to facilitate a return to 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*
It was noted that some students drop out due to financial problems that involve relatively small amounts of money. For example, some students are on such tight budgets that the need to spend several hundred dollars on short term immediate needs can significantly jeopardise their capacity to continue with study – such as the need to repair a motor vehicle. A fund to provide short term emergency loans has now been implemented to address this problem.
- *Active support offered to students admitted under exceptional circumstances*
It is clear that some students enter their course of study with pre-existing risk factors, particularly those who formally apply using Curtin's Special Consideration processes. In the past, if these students were admitted, they were not linked in any systematic way with appropriate support services. Admissions staff now 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 the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP). Outcomes from this program were consistent with other Australian PASS programs (documented widely within the *Journal of Peer Learning* at <http://www.uow.edu.au/student/services/pass/centre/research/index.html>) – that is, students who participated showed higher success rates than those who did not. At the time of writing, it is intended to extend the program significantly 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 paper to document and acknowledge all of the positive contributions that have been made, but it is clear that many areas of the university have adopted very positive practices which impact on student retention.

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 measures of the quality of the first year experience, we would be wise to broaden our view more widely than just the retention rate.

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