



Charles Sturt
University

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND
TRAINING

Improving retention, completion
and success in higher education

Submission – 29 October 2019

Office of the Vice-Chancellor
Charles Sturt University



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The Hon Dan Tehan MP
Minister for Education
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Minister

Improving retention, completion and success in higher education

On behalf of Charles Sturt University, I am pleased to provide you with an update on our approach to implementing the recommendations from the above mentioned report, as per your request.

You will see throughout the following document, Charles Sturt is committed to improving the retention and success of our students, which is a key focus of our *University Strategy 2022*. As part of this strategy we have been developing a Student Retention Operational Plan that contains improvement actions and is in the final stages of approval for implementation.

I would be delighted to provide you with further information should it be required.

Yours sincerely

Professor Andrew Vann
Vice-Chancellor

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About Charles Sturt University

Charles Sturt University is Australia's largest regional university, with more than 45,000 students and approximately 2,000 FTE staff. Established in 1989, the University traces its origins to the formation of the Bathurst Experimental Farm and Wagga Wagga Experimental Farm in the 1890s. In one form or another, research, innovation and education has been integral to the University's character for more than a century.

Charles Sturt is a unique multi-campus institution with campuses at Albury-Wodonga, Bathurst, Canberra, Dubbo, Goulburn, Manly, Orange, Parramatta, Port Macquarie and Wagga Wagga, as well as various study centres located throughout metropolitan, regional and rural south-eastern Australia.

Charles Sturt offers a comprehensive suite of research and academic training programs that focus on addressing rural and regional labour market needs, growing regional economies, and preparing students for the jobs of the new economy through rural and regional Australia.

As one of Australia's largest online education providers, Charles Sturt leverages its course profile for the delivery of nationally available study programs that support labour market skills development regardless of student location. Our commitment to regional communities, ensures the University is a leading institution in providing higher education opportunities to students who are first-in-family, mature-aged, and from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Charles Sturt collaborates with Indigenous communities across our footprint to ensure access and develop pathways into the University. Our position as one of the top Australian universities for Indigenous participation is proof of our strong background in this regard.

The success of the University is demonstrated by its sector-leading performance in work-integrated learning, with students spending extended periods in employment with our industry partners as part of their degree, learning and applying their knowledge in practice. Charles Sturt continues to lead the sector in graduate employment outcomes and graduate starting incomes. Underpinning this success are the close links the University has forged with industry, both regionally and nationally.

Research excellence, with a strong commitment to addressing complex regional needs through engagement, innovation, and impact, has long been at the centre of the University's mission, with research strengths in agricultural science, horticultural production, food and wine sciences, crop and pasture production, veterinary science, animal production, education, curriculum and pedagogy, environmental science, applied ethics, philosophy, religious studies, criminology, nursing and marketing.

Charles Sturt University has a proud tradition of delivering high-quality research that creates new knowledge, benefits people's lives, enhances the profitability of regional industries and helps communities grow and flourish. Through its Higher Degree by Research programs, the University is training the next generation of researchers and professionals who use critical thinking and seek to influence the world for the better.

Today, Charles Sturt University continues a 100-year tradition of engagement and leadership with our local communities, of research excellence and innovation in collaboration with industry, expansion in the educational opportunities offered to our diverse student body, and preparing students for employment markets emerging with the evolution of the regional and national economy.

Response to Recommendations

Expectations of completion in the current context

Rec 1: As a first priority, institutions should ensure students who have the capacity to succeed in higher education are given the best chance to complete their studies through the appropriate provision of academic and other support services as required of them by the Higher Education Standards Framework.

Charles Sturt offers a range of academic and other services to provide both domestic and international students with the best opportunity to successfully complete their tertiary studies.

As a University with significantly high levels of participation of regional, low SES and Indigenous students, together with a large cohort of students that are studying online, our support services are designed to ensure a student-centred and personalised approach in overcoming the barriers that students may face during their studies. Our services meet the requirements of the Higher Education Standards Framework and we use student feedback to continually improve these services.

Our Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) results demonstrate that Student Support satisfaction rates are 4% higher than the national average, with a rate of 77.1% satisfaction. We also have higher than the national average results for learner engagement and we have been in the **top quintile of Australian Universities** for the overall graduate employment rate for the past five years.

In addition to the support provided in the learning and teaching environment, our student support services include:

- **Free pathways courses**, alternative entry and transition to University courses.
- Comprehensive **orientation programs** to ensure that students are aware of the type and level of support that is available to them throughout the duration of their studies, including tailored content and welcome events for international students.
- **Training modules to support academic success**, including academic integrity, study skills and time management.
- An **academic skills service** that helps students develop their academic literacy and academic integrity, learning, referencing and numeracy skills combined with a service that enables assignment drafts to be submitted for feedback.
- Online study advisor and **student mentoring programs**.
- A successful model of culturally appropriate study centres and an **Indigenous Academic Success program** to support Indigenous student progress and completion through tutoring, peer support and advice.
- A **Residential Support Scheme** built on our LIFE (Leadership, Independence, Friendship, and Engagement) framework which focuses on proactive support and out of classroom learning experiences which enhances student engagement and academic success.
- A priority on **student safety and wellbeing** – supported by a team that includes qualified expertise in counselling, disability and advocacy services, as well as a range of training to assist with educating students on behavioral expectations.

- **Careers programs and workplace learning experiences** scheduled early in courses to ensure students are well suited to their chosen field of study.
- **Proactive student contact** when learning analytics indicate disengagement.
- **24/7 Information Technology support.**
- Students can easily connect with the wide range of support services available to them through a '**one-stop**' **student web portal** or can contact Student Central to discuss options face to face or via telephone.

Supporting students to make the right choices

Rec 3: Career advice cannot be left to schools. Every higher education institution should ensure that their students are given the opportunity for career planning and course advice on entry to the institution and as they require it throughout their studies.

Charles Sturt is actively involved in aspiration raising, career planning and course advice to both prospective and current students.

Far from leaving careers advice to schools, we have a broad range of programs to develop career awareness for prospective students. Our **Future Moves program** aims to lift aspiration for university study for primary and high school students. We communicate the benefits of higher education, address perceived barriers, and encourage prospective students to become more confident in considering tertiary study as a realistic option in their career.

The Future Moves team works in partnership with schools and their communities, bringing together university and industry partners to create a suite of engaging interactive activities for students in years 5 to 12. The team also works closely with local Indigenous communities to develop activities specifically designed to encourage the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Charles Sturt also holds **Open Days** at its campuses that are an opportunity for prospective students to obtain detailed information about courses, meet with academics and industry experts, and find out more about exciting career opportunities, before making an application to study. Similarly, our **Explore Days**, specifically aimed at year 10 to year 12 high school students, provide an opportunity for students to learn about university courses, pathways to professions, and life as a university student.

We also hold a range of **career expos and industry specific events**, for example, to provide hands-on exposure to STEM careers and courses. As a consortium member of the Three Rivers University Department of Rural Health, we also offer school visits, alumni talks and specific career expos to improve aspiration in health related careers.

Prospective students who are unsure of what to study are provided with pre-application advice. A team of specialist staff work with the prospective student to ascertain the right pathway to meet their needs.

For current students, Charles Sturt has a **dedicated career development service** that assist students in their career aspirations. The team provides advice on planning a career path, preparing a resume and job application, and supports participation in workplace learning outside of the course requirements.

The team also ensures relevant career content is included in course development and support partnerships with employers to ensure a strong level of work placements are available in a range of industries.

Other career focused initiatives at Charles Sturt include:

- **Workplace Learning** – Most courses have a significant workplace learning component built into the course and assessment structure, which enables students to get a taste of their chosen career early in their studies. This ensures that students have the opportunity to change course or career direction before they have invested too much time if necessary.
- **Graduate Learning Outcomes** – Our *Graduate Attributes Policy* specifies the characteristics of Charles Sturt graduates. A set of common learning outcomes, known as Charles Sturt's Graduate Learning Outcomes, has been written to support alignment between course and subject outcomes, and assessment. It is mandatory for all undergraduate courses and professional entry courses of more than one-year duration to embed Graduate Learning Outcomes. One of the key Graduate Learning Outcomes is professional practice, which ensures students can demonstrate the knowledge, capabilities, practices, attitudes, ethics and dispositions of their discipline or profession.
- **'Earn as you Learn' Program** – Connects students to local employers during their duration of study to help reduce the financial pressures often associated with studying, as well as provide on the job learning opportunities and insights to aid with career planning.

Our course design is built on strong workplace learning elements, together with the career support and advice available to students, and this has resulted in Charles Sturt being in the **top quintile of Australian Universities** for the past five years for the overall employment rate for graduate employment outcomes according to QILT.

Supporting students to complete their studies

Rec 5: Every institution should have its own comprehensive student-centred retention strategy, which is regularly evaluated. These strategies could include institutional retention benchmarks and, as appropriate, processes for entry and exit interviews, the integration of data-based risk analytics and targeted support interventions, a suite of support services and a means to re-engage with students who have withdrawn.

'Our Students' is one of three strategic focus areas within the Charles Sturt *University Strategy 2022*. The first output of this strategic focus area is the development of a student-centred culture underpinned by a **service charter** that defines how we work with students. The University Executive regularly monitors both strategic and operational performance measures against institutional and industry benchmarks and adjusts the University Strategy as required. We have reserved the term 'Strategy' for the highest level of planning and to avoid confusion within the University, we are not reusing that term for lower level plans. However, at the September meeting of the Vice-Chancellor's Leadership Team, a draft **Student Retention Operational Plan** was presented for discussion and comment (see Appendix I). The University Executive provided support for the direction of this plan and acknowledged that it would be appropriate to adjust the University Strategy to make retention activities more explicit. The University Executive recommended that wider consultation and formal approval of the retention plan to be sought through the University's academic governance processes.

The draft Student Retention Operational Plan includes five key outputs that have emanated from a comprehensive analysis of student performance data and a series of pilot projects targeting retention over the past three years. The first output focusses on the collation of meaningful and actionable data through the development of dashboards and models that genuinely assist in student retention. This is consistent with the requirements in Charles Sturt's TEQSA reregistration decision, entailing more explicit focus on student performance monitoring through our central governance committees. The second and third outputs relate to curriculum design and improving teaching quality. Output four focusses on the personalisation of student communication and support; and Output five articulates the need to ensure that the University has an appropriate Policy Framework to support student retention. Charles Sturt already has in place processes for entry and exit interviews, data-based risk analytics and targeted support interventions and a suite of support services; however, activities within the Student Retention Operational Plan will review and improve these and many other initiatives that are in place to support student retention.

In addition to the entry and exit surveys, a range of support interventions are available. By proactively and systematically identifying students who may be disengaging or at risk of disengaging, we are then enabled to run a range of student retention communication campaigns, engage our outreach service team to follow-up cohorts and individuals, and offer a range of support such as academic skill and academic integrity support, online study advisor services, disability access services, and our Indigenous Academic Success Program.

We have only just received the final information pack on Performance Based Funding, but we note that we have been given 100% funding in the student success category on the grounds that we are exceeding (i.e. below) the expected threshold for attrition for our student demographic. Although we are certainly working hard to improve things further, we feel this is an indication of the success of the approaches we have deployed to date.

Rec 6: Institutions should automatically review the enrolment of all students who have not engaged in their studies to an agreed level by the census date.

In 2017, our Faculty of Science initiated a pilot program to identify and proactively contact students who had not engaged in their studies prior to the census date. The program intentionally overlays the curriculum (through pre-census assessment) and uses proactive outreach and support services to identify and support disengaged students. This program was further refined and expanded within the Faculty of Science in 2018 and over the 2-year period, achieved a 7.1% improvement in commencing progress rates for online students. In 2019, the program has been expanded to all Charles Sturt Faculties, with further refinements and evaluation of the pre-census strategies continuing to occur. In addition to the proactive support strategies, the Division of Student Administration, on advice from the Faculties, has deferred the enrolment of any commencing, domestic, undergraduate student who has not engaged in any of their subjects prior to the census date (student engagement was determined based on learning analytics extracted from our learning management system).

Alongside the proactive and supportive approach to monitoring pre-census student engagement, the University is currently in the process of refining and refreshing all academic policies. The Admissions and Enrolment Policies have both been updated to include specific clauses related to pre-census engagement. Clause 50 of the Admissions Policy approved by Academic Senate on 3 July 2019 (for implementation in July 2020) states:

‘Where an undergraduate student commencing study in a Commonwealth-supported place does not engage in their studies by census date in their first session of study, the Division of Student Administration may remove their subject enrolments, to avoid the student incurring a Higher Education Contribution Scheme debt. The enrolment procedure states the processes for deciding whether such students engaged with their studies and, where they have not, cancelling the subject enrolments.’

Rec 7: Institutions should pay particular attention to ensuring their support services are meeting the needs of external students who are not regularly attending campus because these students are identified as at risk of not completing their studies.

Charles Sturt provides support services to all students regardless of their chosen mode of study. Our long history of being a leading online provider, with approximately 58% of our students currently studying online, means that we are very aware of the particular challenges in supporting this cohort of students to successfully complete their studies.

One of the key focus areas of our *University Strategy 2022* is to transform our online learning environment. We are currently in the process of developing and implementing a new online learning model, with a key aim of embedding personalised student support. Early indicators from students who have participated in the trial of the model have been very positive.

Specific support available to online students in addition to the general support services available to all students includes:

- **Flexible orientation sessions** – Students can choose to attend live online sessions, recorded video sessions, or can attend a face to face orientation on campus. These sessions are designed to provide a mix of academic, study skills and support sessions to help give online students the best possible start to their studies.
- **Online study advisors** – These specialist staff travel to selected areas around Australia and provide face to face support to students. The team works with Faculty by offering assistance to students who begin to show signs of disengagement, and create course-specific events and content for students.

- **Recorded lectures** – Online students have access to the same lectures as on-campus students, but can view them at a time and place that suits them.
- **Online forums and mentoring groups** – These enable students to interact with teaching staff and other students at a time that suits them.
- **Specific library services** – Provide ‘anytime, anywhere’ online access to support as well as access to thousands of electronic resources, audio-visual material, books and journals.
- **Residential schools** – Provide an opportunity for students to meet their lecturers and fellow students, as well as practice hands-on and collaborative study techniques.
- **Specific online representation** – We have an online student representative committee that can raise issues specific to online student requirements. Online students are also represented on the University-wide Student Senate, the main student representation body within the University.

Rec 8: Every institution should have an institution-wide mental health strategy and implementation plan.

Charles Sturt is developing its institution-wide mental health strategy and implementation plan. There is a dedicated Student Safety and Wellbeing team which includes counselling, disability, student conduct and equity and diversity services – all areas that have direct alignment with mental health. The development of our mental health strategy is informed by the Orygen report, *Under the Radar: The Mental Health of Australian University Students*, and the current review by the Productivity Commission into the economic impact of mental health in Australia, which will be overseen by the new institutional role of Manager, Counselling and Safety.

In the lead up to the strategy being finalised, a review of our student counselling services is currently underway to ensure maximum access for students, and some operational changes have been made ensure that mental health is a key focus, such as amendments to existing health promotion roles to ensure an increased focus on mental health activities and resources for students.

Currently, mental health first aid training is offered to students and is mandatory for Student Residential Advisors. Staff members are also encouraged to attend these training sessions, to ensure our students are given excellent support from first responders.

Charles Sturt will be pleased to provide a copy of the mental health strategy and implementation plan if required once it has been completed.

Rec 9: Institutions should increasingly offer nested courses, which are appropriate and compliant with the Australian Qualifications Framework, to provide students with a greater range of exit options with meaningful qualifications.

Charles Sturt has a solid offering of nested courses that offer students multiple entry and exit points. Our approach to students who may be seeking to exit or have been identified as not progressing within a nested set of courses is to encourage them to apply to graduate and award them credentials aligned to the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). We also proactively review student eligibility to graduate through our specialist Course Director and Course Administrator staff, and also encourage students to utilise our student graduate planning system to assist them in understanding their full range of options.

Our graduate planning system has been piloted in select courses over the past 12 months. This is a **web-based Degree Planning Tool** that helps students to monitor their progress and allows them to plan their future enrolments with the assistance of their Course Director. Further development and refinement is occurring, with the aim that all courses will be included within this system. Student feedback on the system has been positive as it assists them in understanding their choices in a more comprehensive way.

Charles Sturt is also currently exploring the use of micro-credentialing in a stackable format with our first courses to be launched in 2020. The use of micro-credentials is an emerging University practice as a means of certifying attainment of smaller and more specific elements of learning that can be taken as standalone micro-subjects for professional development purposes or accumulated as part of a degree. Higher education providers are seeing micro-credentialing as a means of building competency in the workplace and enhancing professional practice, whilst providing flexibility for students who can use it as a pathway to build recognition towards a formal qualification.

Conclusion

Charles Sturt has demonstrated solid progress in adopting the provider-focused recommendations on improving student completion, retention and success through:

- Ensuring that we continue to identify students who have the capacity to succeed in their studies and offer appropriate support and services at the individual level;
- Supporting students in making the right course choice by continuing to run our primary and secondary school programs and career support initiatives; and
- Delivering the Charles Sturt 'Our Student' Strategy, by implementing our Student Retention Operational plan, continuing our institution-wide Mental Health Strategy, enhancing entry and exit pathways, and ongoing monitoring of the effectiveness of existing, new and piloted retention and support strategies

Appendix 1.

Draft Student Retention Operational Plan

