

***Promoting Strategic Scholarship
in University Teaching and Learning:
Researching Student Attrition and Retention
at an Australian 'New Generation' University***

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OVERVIEW OF PRESENTATION

- **Background information about Central Queensland University (CQU)**
- **Strategic scholarship and evidence-based practice**
- **Conceptual constructions and methodological dilemmas attending student attrition and retention at CQU**
- **Sources of information and links with practice around student attrition and retention**
- **Concepts and research questions around student attrition and retention**
- **Promoting strategic scholarship around student attrition and retention**
- **Suggested implications for enhancing university teaching and learning**

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ABOUT CQU

- **A richly diverse and organisationally complex institution**
- **Former college of advanced education; a university since 1992**
- **Five Central Queensland campuses for domestic students (Bundaberg, Emerald, Gladstone, Mackay, Rockhampton)**
- **Four east coast campuses for international students (Brisbane, Gold Coast, Melbourne, Sydney)**
- **Overseas teaching sites for international students (China, Fiji, Malaysia, Singapore)**

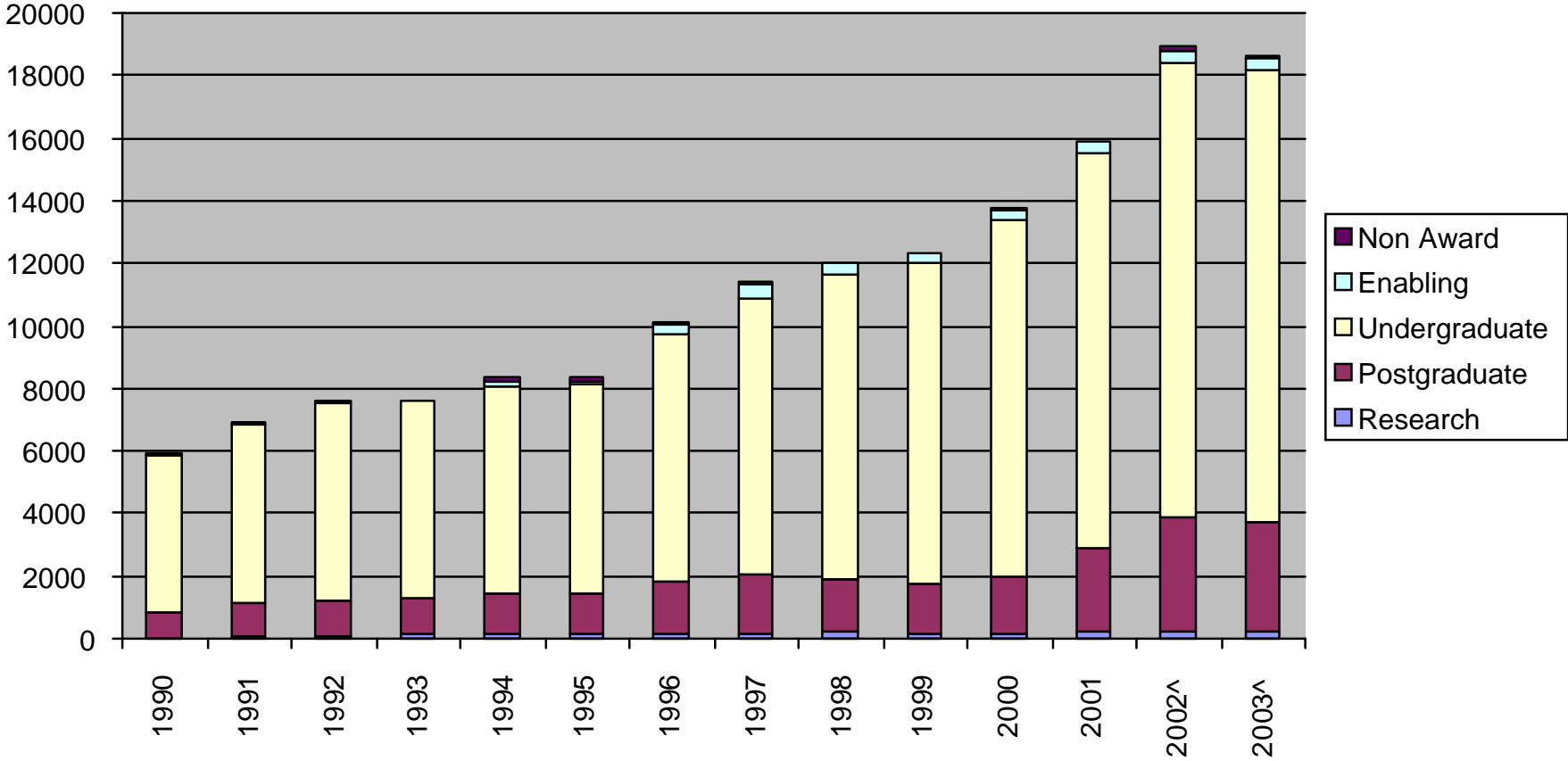
CQU's Australian campuses (Luck, Jones, McConachie & Danaher, 2004, p. 3)



CQU's overseas teaching sites (Luck, Jones, McConachie & Danaher, 2004, p. 4)



CQU's growing and shifting student cohorts (McConachie, Danaher, Luck & Jones, under review, p. 4)



- **In 2001, CQU's students were:**

- **49.8% mature age; 50.2% school leavers**
[in 2003 commencing undergraduates were respectively 83% mature age and 17% school leavers]
- **2.3% Indigenous**
- **34.1% international [nearly 50% in 2002]**
[international programs managed by a commercial agent; staff members have different working conditions and circumstances]
- **42.2% distance education**
- **79.5% undergraduate; 18.1% postgraduate**
- **37.7% low socio-economic background**

- **Two positioning statements about CQU:**

- **“CQU supports the principles developed by the emerging group of New Generation Universities” (Hancock, 2002, p. 7)**
- **“CQU’s...vision is to be a unified university, acknowledged universally as a leader in flexible teaching and learning and well-focused research, contributing strongly to the sustainable development of the regions and communities in which it operates” (Hancock, 2002, p. 4)**

STRATEGIC SCHOLARSHIP AND EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE (Danaher, Harreveld, Luck & Nouwens, 2004, pp. 8-10)

Strategic scholarship

- Disrupts the (mis)construction of the intellectual work of universities in terms of 'ivory towers' and ...brings together a focus on 'real world' relevance and benefits on the one hand and an academic rigour in considering alternatives to current and proposed situations and solutions [on the other]. (Danaher, 2004, p. 5)
- Resonates with Boyer's contestation of the 'teaching'–'research' binary in his conception of four scholarships:
 - *discovery* (research)
 - *integration* (linking research with own and other disciplines)
 - *application* (service)
 - *teaching* (transmitting, extending and transforming knowledge)

- **Articulates with a representation of ...[university] teaching as a reflective and informed act of engage students and teachers in learning [that] is supportive of the aims central to the project of developing a scholarship of teaching. (Trigwell & Shale, 2004, p. 523)**

Evidence-based practice

- **Has been defined as ...the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions regarding the welfare of service users and carers. (Adapted from Sackett, Rosenberg, Gray, Haynes & Richardson, 1996; cited in Centre for Evidence Based Social Services, n.d., n.p.)**
- **Has been depicted as ...an approach to decision making which is transparent, accountable and based on careful consideration of the most compelling evidence. (Macdonald, 2001, p. xviii; cited in Centre for Evidence Based Social Services, n.d., n.p.)**

In combination

- **Strategic scholarship eschews an ‘ivory tower’ construction of research disconnected from the lived experiences and practical concerns of individuals and groups**
- **Strategic scholarship resists the promotion of an anti-intellectual agenda that favours untheorised practice that fails to engage with the deeply embedded educational, political and sociocultural inequities confronting the world today**
- **Strategic scholarship can be seen as a crucial partner of evidence-based practice**
- **Strategic scholarship is also a powerful counternarrative to the ‘research/teaching’ binary that causes many conscientious university teachers to believe that teaching remains less highly valued than research in universities**

***CONCEPTUAL CONSTRUCTIONS AND METHODOLOGICAL DILEMMAS
ATTENDING STUDENT ATTRITION AND RETENTION AT CQU***

We illustrate this argument through a discussion of current constructions of student attrition and retention at an Australian ‘new generation’ university. Some of those constructions seek simple solutions to complex and diverse issues, such as the array of links among curriculum, pedagogy and assessment on the one hand and students’ (dis)engagements from/with a course or program on the other. The dilemmas attendant on developing a model of student attrition that addresses the distinctive characteristics of the university being discussed encapsulate the challenges and opportunities of promoting strategic scholarship in relation to this central concern of university teaching and learning.

Retention Strategies

Personal Mastery	Community	Academic	Institutional
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Time Management - Money Management - Assertiveness - Self awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Clubs - Mentors - College 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Core Skills programs - Quality Teaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - University Policies - Federal Policies

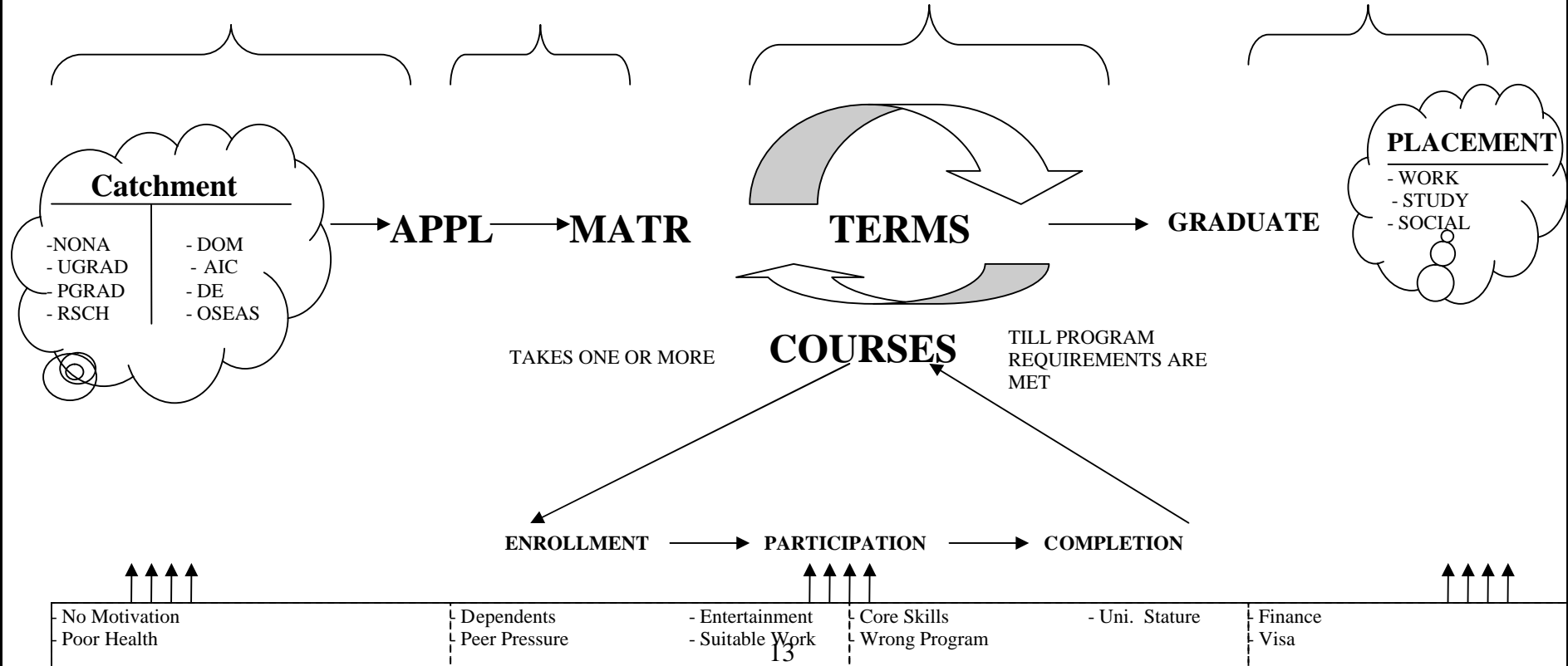


MARKETING & RECRUITMENT

ADMISSIONS

STUDENT SUPPORT SYSTEMS

CAREERS & PLACEMENT



Personal

Social

Academic

Institutional

- **The key element is progression**
- **Attrition needs to be considered from an enquiry by a prospective student**
- **Unit of measure as student or course load**

- **Different student categories between CQU and Department of Education, Science and Training**
- **Large number of ‘failing’ grades; difficulty of distinguishing between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ failing grades**
- **Need to distinguish between students ‘failing’ a course and those who change programs and/or withdraw from a course in which they enrolled at the beginning of the year as a ‘safety net’**

- **Need to encompass complexity and diversity of CQU’s:**

- **multiple campuses**
- **multiple enrolment/study modes (internal, external, mixed mode, online)**
- **multiple program 'levels' (preparatory to doctoral)**
- **'at risk' student categories as identified by literature (eg, students with disabilities, distance learners, first generation attending university, Indigenous, international, mature age, Non-English Speaking Background, research higher degree, rural residents, school leavers)**

- **Multiple levels of accountability, agency, responsibility and structure:**
 - **Individual (students, academic and other staff members)**
 - **Institutional (CQU and its constituent elements)**
 - **Systemic (government policies and resources)**
 - **Community (valuing of and support for higher education)**

SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND LINKS WITH PRACTICE AROUND STUDENT ATTRITION AND RETENTION

In particular, we explore those challenges and opportunities by means of three organising questions:

- Which sources of information are available to stakeholders in student attrition and retention and how are they linked with practice?

Sources of information

- The CQU Teaching and Learning Management Plan
- The CQU Student Retention Action Plan
- The submissions to, and the reports arising from, the 1999 CQU student attrition mini-conference held at CQU Gladstone
- The proposed model of student progression at CQU
- The CQU attrition e-mail discussion list
- The archive and annotated bibliography of student attrition and retention literature being developed by Jay Somasundaram, Don Bowser and Patrick Danaher
- Ken Diefenbach's and Cindy Christensen's statistical data

Links with practice

- **Already existing policies and strategies across a wide range of sections of CQU (eg, CQ Connect, DEMentor, Office of Research)**
- **Complexities of facilitating coordination and integration of these efforts**
- **Need for theoretically framed and methodologically rigorous evidence-based practice**

CONCEPTS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS AROUND STUDENT ATTRITION AND RETENTION

- **Which concepts and research questions are helpful in understanding and engaging with student attrition and retention?**

Some possible concepts

- **Authenticity**
- **Co-operative communities**
- **Capacity building**
- **Dialogical and other forms of andragogy**
- **Engagement**
- **Forms of capital**
- **Multiple subjectivities**
- **Resilience**
- **Self-actualisation, concept and esteem**

Two 'authentic' research questions

- **What are the factors influencing the decisions made by Indigenous male undergraduates at the Rockhampton Campus of Central Queensland University in relation to their choice to remain in study?**
- **Which policies and procedures are likely to enhance the retention of Indigenous male undergraduates at the Rockhampton Campus of Central Queensland University and maximize their educational experiences? (Arizmendi, 2001, p. 2)**

PROMOTING STRATEGIC SCHOLARSHIP AROUND STUDENT ATTRITION AND RETENTION

- **How can the evidence and the research findings be transformed into strategic scholarship around student attrition and retention?**

Promoting strategic scholarship

- **Strategic scholarship requires attentiveness to the multiple diversities of CQU and to the complexities of conceptualising and investigating student attrition and retention**
- **Strategic scholarship needs to highlight and maximise links among research questions, conceptual frameworks, research designs, data gathering and analysis, and feeding findings into course and program improvement and policy development**

- **Ongoing need for ‘champions’, ‘critical friends’, ‘Devil’s advocates’, ‘friends in high places’, ‘kindred spirits’ and ‘speakers of counternarratives’**
- **Importance of locating strategic scholarship at the intersection of self and social interests (respectively ownership and mission)**
- **Requirement to engage productively with multiple understandings of forms of knowledge and of what ‘counts’ as research and scholarship**
- **Value of working simultaneously on several fronts to achieve multiple outcomes**

SUGGESTED IMPLICATIONS FOR ENHANCING UNIVERSITY TEACHING AND LEARNING

These research questions can be expressed also in terms of strategic issues confronting contemporary universities, 'new generation' and otherwise:

- **How do we engage our communities?**
- **How do we scope and clarify our areas of inquiry?**
- **How do we promote research, scholarship and evidence-based practice?**

On the basis of our responses to these questions and issues, we posit the empirical, methodological and theoretical benefits of a strategically scholarly approach to university teaching and learning.

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