The Australian Educational Researcher (2024) 51:1–20
https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-022-00579-4

An individualised approach towards student retention: students at the centre of university deferral and leave-taking policy

Andrew Harvey[1] · **Catherine Yuan Gao**[2] · **Michael Luckman**[3]

Received: 3 April 2021 / Accepted: 26 September 2022 / Published online: 20 October 2022
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Abstract

As the university student body becomes more diversified and students' lives less linear, student retention carries increased importance for universities, including the conversion of deferrers and the re-enrolment of leave-taking students. This paper is based on a broader research project which explored national patterns of deferral and leave of absence in Australia and the policies and strategies for re-engaging the students who defer or take leave. Through a mixed research design, the study explores the extent to which students are positioned at the centre of deferral and leave of absence policy, informed by relationship marketing concepts. This study suggests that many universities have moved towards greater consideration of student perspectives and individualised approaches to building a trustworthy and supportive relationship with deferral and leave-taking students, based on data analytics of individual students' information and circumstances. Despite such efforts, there remain both limitations and tensions within these approaches.

Keywords Student retention · Deferral · Leave of absence · Relationship marketing · Individualised approach · Australia

✉ Catherine Yuan Gao
catherineyuangao@gmail.com

Andrew Harvey
andrew.harvey@griffith.edu.au

Michael Luckman
m.luckman@latrobe.edu.au

[1] School of Education and Professional Studies, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia

[2] Centre for Higher Education Research, Southern University of Science and Technology, Shenzhen 518055, Guangdong Province, China

[3] Data and Analytics, La Trobe University, Bundoora, VIC, Australia

Introduction

Over the past four decades, the Australian higher education sector has witnessed many significant changes, among which is an unprecedented massification that has resulted in a growing number of 'non-traditional' students enrolled, and increasingly non-linear and flexible pathways developed. Historically, 'traditional' university students were perceived to be school leavers from highly selective schools, representing a small and relatively privileged societal minority. From the late 1980s in Australia, the creation of the Unified National System, the implementation of an income-contingent loan scheme known as the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) and the later expansion of the sector under demand-driven student funding have all led to an increasingly diverse student body and rapid sectoral growth (Bradley et al., 2008; Dawkins, 1988). The diversification is manifested in the enrolment of mature aged students of 21 years and above, regional and rural students, students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds, new migrants, parents, and others who had previously rarely accessed higher education (Harvey et al., 2016). Widening participation, supported by advanced information and computer technology, has led to many students seeking pathways through university that are non-traditional and non-linear. As Tinto (1993) notes, "the odysseys many individuals take to degree completion are long drawn out affairs with many intermediate stops" (p. 27).

One of the consequences of these new enrolment patterns is the increasing trend among university students, both in Australia and worldwide, to take an intermission throughout their study (Curtis, 2014; Heath, 2007; Jones, 2004; Lumsden & Stanwick, 2012; Stehlik, 2010). Unlike a linear pathway, a growing number of university students are choosing to arrange their study flexibly to accommodate their varying needs and preferences. The intermission can occur at different stages of tertiary study, but typically occurs either before the student officially commences their course at university or between semesters. Students who decide to take a break in their transition from secondary school to university can defer their university offer. Others who would like to leave from study during their university years can take a leave of absence, be absent without leave, discontinue their enrolment, or withdraw. In response to the diversification of student populations and pathways, universities have offered more flexible academic provisions, such as modularisation and credit transfer (Morley, 1997). Similarly, universities have adapted to student preferences by developing and renewing their intermission policies and procedures to enable them to arrange their study in a more individualised manner.

Although many students who take an intermission do manage to re-enrol in universities eventually, there remains a risk that withdrawing from the system could result in a 'disconnect' from formal study that might never be re-connected (Stehlik, 2010). Students who withdraw can also be stigmatised as well as suffer financial loss (Harvey et al., 2017). At the system level, the impact of student withdrawals and subsequent attrition affects overall attainment levels and efficiency. As a recent government report noted, further improvement to attainment rates must come partly from a focus on improving student retention and completion (Productivity Commission, 2019).

The intermission taken by secondary school graduates before they commence further study could be interpreted through different lenses. For those who envisage deferral as a 'gap year', it is more likely to indicate an active choice for opportunities for self-reflection, enhancing their sense of perspective and facilitating better-informed decisions about their degree plans and future career options (Heath, 2007). That is, in the face of possible post-school uncertainty, the gap year might be a pursuit that is a means of developing implementation intentions and specific goals (Martin, 2010). However, not all deferrals are a positive choice, or arguably a choice at all. Many people delay the commencement of their university studies due to financial barriers. Students often have to accumulate savings to cover anticipated expenses and to be qualified for governmental financial support whilst studying (Curtis, 2014). In Australia, deferrals have been found to be linked to obtaining the Youth Allowance (YA), with Ryan (2013) finding that receiving YA while in tertiary study is associated with an increased probability of deferment.

Withdrawals can also be seen through the lens of student equity. Despite the fact that students from non-traditional backgrounds have increased their absolute chances of continuing to some form of higher education, there remain significant differences in retention and graduation levels among groups (Australian Government Department of Education, 2018; Edwards & McMillan, 2015). Previous studies in Australia and other countries have shown that students from marginalised backgrounds are generally more likely to take an intermission and less likely to return to their study (e.g. Harvey et al., 2017; Krause et al., 2005; Wright et al., 1996). Greater student equity demands more than a simple focus on access but also efforts to improve success, completion, and indeed outcomes (Devlin, 2013; Harvey et al., 2018).

In this paper, we explore the extent to which students are positioned at the centre of deferral[1] and leave of absence[2] policy via a mixed-methods approach that is informed by relationship marketing concepts. In particular, we examine the way that institutions consider student perspectives in their establishment of governance and policy, communications and language, and analytics. This paper is based on a broader research project which explored the national pattern of deferral and leave of absence in Australia and the policies as well strategies for re-engaging the students who deferred or took a leave (see Harvey et al., 2022).

[1] The term of *Deferral* used in this study refers to the behaviour of students who have received an offer to study at a university and decided to defer their studies before the census date, and to begin their course at a later date (e.g. the following semester or year).

[2] The term of *Leave of Absence* used in this study refers to the behaviour of students who would like to discontinue after the census date has passes, or who have completed and obtained results for a subject but experience difficulties in their personal or academic life and decide to put their course on hold.

Literature review

Deferral and leave-taking behaviour substantially affect enrolment and retention rates across Australian universities. Almost 10% of commencing students defer their university offer every year, while over 20% of continuing students take leave from their university within three years of commencing a Bachelor degree (Harvey et al., 2022). The growing deferral and leave-taking behaviours are closely linked to the increasing complexity of students' personal and study arrangements. Against this context, it is worth understanding some of the broader issues around adolescent development and sectoral transition. The transition from secondary school to university is a major developmental milestone and is associated with the requirement to address a number of developmental tasks that can be a confronting experience (Dietrich et al., 2012; King, 2011; Nurmi, 2001; Oswald & Clark, 2003; Parker et al., 2012; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006). As Hunter (2006) notes,

> The first college year is not "grade 13." Incoming students, whether they come to college from high school or from the world of work, enter a new culture… [with] a foreign set of norms, traditions and rituals, and a new language and environment. (p. 4).

This cultural change is particularly true for students from low SES and rural backgrounds, who are much more likely than others to believe that their Year 12 studies did not prepare them adequately for their first year of university (Naylor et al., 2013). Likewise, Cosser (2009) argues that transition is not a linear process, but that the various disjunctions between aspiration and actualisation reveal an inherent volatility in the youth-to-adulthood transition, as young people move from one phase of school to the next, and from school into and through the higher education system.

The school-to-higher education transition, as indicated in the life span theory of control and other career construction and exploration theories, presents an age-graded developmental task in which young people are expected to begin to implement long-term educational and career goals (Dietrich et al., 2012). Transition to post-secondary education or labour market offers a vital opportunity to enact career goals, self-beliefs and identities developed during schooling (Savickas, 2005), which is enabled via pathways such as entering the labour market, undertaking tertiary vocational education or traineeships, or by enrolling in university in anticipation of fulfilling entry requirements into high prestige occupations (Parker et al., 2012). The available developmental pathways to individual students are reinforced by social and educational structures in such a way that opportunities are typically amassed directly following high school and decline thereafter (Dietrich et al., 2012; Heckhausen & Tomasik, 2002).

Within this broader developmental context, previous studies suggest three broad categories of reasons that drive students to defer their university offer: educational; financial; and personal. Many educational considerations could encourage students to delay their first foray into higher education until later in life, including gaining life experience, developing 'soft-skills' needed in the modern

world of work, and developing social values allowing them to better adapt to university life (Heath, 2007; Jones, 2004; Stehlik, 2010). Many students also delay the commencement of their university studies due to financial barriers. Students may have to defer their enrolment to raise finances to cover the costs of further study, without which they might not otherwise be able to afford university (Curtis, 2014; Heath, 2007; Li & Carroll, 2017). In addition to educational and financial reasons, personal considerations are reported frequently by deferrers, including health problems, disabilities, and psychological and mental concerns (Freeman et al., 2014; Harvey et al., 2017). Similarly, reasons for leave-taking among continuing students often resemble those cited for deferrals among commencing students, with particular emphasis on the financial and personal challenges (e.g. see Letseka et al., 2010; Li & Carroll, 2017; Terriquez & Gurantz, 2015). In addition to individual-level factors, institutional culture has been identified as an obstacle for students from non-traditional backgrounds to take an intermission during their study (Davis & Murrell, 1993; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001).

Many scholars have attempted to isolate specific geo-demographic and behavioural factors that affect the likelihood of a student's intermission-taking. A clear relationship has been detected between students' scores on university entrance examinations and the rate of university deferrals (e.g. see Lumsden & Stanwick, 2012; Curtis, 2014). In addition, previous evidence has shown that students who live in rural areas are more likely to take a one-year break between high school and university (Curtis, 2014; Freeman et al., 2014; Krause et al., 2005). In Australia, students from identified equity groups such as those from regional and/or low SES backgrounds, with a disability, and Indigenous students, are also more likely to discontinue their university degree when compared with their peers (Department of Education & Training, 2016; Harvey et al., 2017; Li & Carroll, 2017). Our own analysis of the data on all commencing Australian students from 2011 to 2018 provided by the Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE) shows that between 8 and 10% of students defer their offer each year (Harvey et al., 2022). Most deferrers (64%) subsequently enrol at university, though not always in their original chosen course or institution (Harvey et al., 2022, p. 24). Statistical evidence indicates that low SES and Indigenous students are more likely overall to take leave than other students, and less likely to return subsequently to study. Importantly, however, the condition of low socio-economic status itself is not correlated strongly with either deferral or leave of absence (Harvey et al., 2022).

Theoretical framework

This paper is informed by the theoretical concepts of relationship marketing and building. Such concepts were originally drawn from Marketing studies and have been innovatively applied to educational research. Berry (1983) defined relationship marketing as "attracting, maintaining, and enhancing customer relationships" (p. 25), which focusses on building ties with existing customers to strengthen customer ties with the intent of retaining them (Jain, 2005; Peltier et al., 1999). Berry (1983)

further suggested that relational marketing concepts can be applied whenever the customer has an ongoing need or desire for the service in environments in which the customer makes the selection from alternative service providers.

The application of relationship-building theory in the higher education field is closely linked to the marketisation in higher education and the concept of 'students as customers'. Many factors have led to this changed perception, including increased competition, decreased government funding, and the increased cost of education. Students have different options, and universities have needed to attract and maintain students (Guilbault, 2018; Nixon et al., 2018). The conceptualisation of students as customers is believed by advocates to improve the quality of higher education by improving the responsiveness, flexibility, and efficiency of universities (Brooks, 2021; Kamvounias, 1999; Williams, 1993).

Such a marketisation approach has aroused many concerns and criticisms. Some scholars have argued that constructing students as consumers risked promoting a narrow view of the purpose of higher education, damaging education quality and academic standards, as well as degrading student learning (Brooks, 2021; Molesworth et al, 2009; Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005). Others have suggested that students are more than customers, and universities have more customers or stakeholders than students. Indeed, the complex relationship between the student and the university cannot be reduced to a single dimension. Students, then, should be seen not only as customers but as learners, co-producers, and partners. In addition to students, parents, employers, professional bodies, governments, and the public are also customers or stakeholders of higher education institutions (Cuthbert, 2010; Helms & Key, 1994).

Despite these concerns and criticisms, there are some areas in which customer-related theories can clearly be applied to the university student context. To avoid misusing the concept in higher education, researchers should avoid taking a narrow view of students as customers or generalising its application into every function and activity on campus. As indicated by Mark (2013), "customers are no longer viewed as passive recipients, but as active participants in service delivery and co-producers of the services they receive" (p. 3). Customers now have become part of business, co-producers of the product or service which they seek, by drawing on the resources which the organisation draws together. Such understanding of the concept suggests that in higher education research, we should focus on the relationships between university, staff, teachers, and students as joint producers, partners, or co-contributors to the campus experiences (Carter & Yeo, 2016; Cuthbert, 2010). Moreover, students may only be a true customer for a limited and peripheral part of the university's offering. They may be less treated as customers in the classroom, while they could be treated as customers in an area where a market-regulated service can easily be substituted, such as at crucial stages where a student is considering enrolment/re-enrolment decisions (Cuthbert, 2010).

Given the above considerations, this study used relationship marketing and building theory to frame the empirical research. Two constructs are critical to relationship building: commitment and trust. Commitment serves as a measure of how important to both parties the relationship is and their mutual willingness to continue it. In the educational setting, it is proposed that students who perceive a mutual and strong

commitment between themselves and the college are more likely to remain enrolled (Ackerman & Schibrowsky, 2007). Trust is often viewed as a primary factor in building relationships and is a key factor in building customer loyalty. In higher education, trust can be viewed as an integral factor in increasing students' likelihood to persist (Berger, 2002; Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2000; Strauss & Volkwein, 2004).

Tinto (2006) argued that retention involves two commitments on the part of the student. The first commitment is the goal commitment to obtain a college degree, and the second is the decision to obtain that degree at a particular institution (institutional commitment). Increasing student retention requires the development of both goal and institutional commitment, alongside trust and relationships. Indeed, the word "customer" is derived from the Latin "consuescere", meaning "to become acquainted with". In marketplaces of the Renaissance, it suggested a bond founded on familiarity and trust (Sax, 2004). In this sense, taking students as customers means to tie them to university by bonds of familiarity and trust over an extended period (Sax, 2004). Berry and Parasuraman (1991) identified three pertinent bonds to customer relations: financial; social; and structural. Financial bonds emphasise economic incentives to obtain customer loyalty and are frequently seen as the weakest of the three types of bonds because they could be easy to establish but difficult to maintain. In an educational setting, financial bonds refer to activities that reduce costs in terms of time and money associated with attending a specific university (Ackerman & Schibrowsky, 2007).

Social bonds are developed through ongoing personal interactions and communications with customers. At the social bonding level of relationship building, there is a distinction made between customers and loyal clients. Customers are dealt with in groups; loyal clients are individually served. Customers are numbers; loyal clients are people with names. Anyone who is available can service a customer, but loyal clients are served by persons that are assigned to that individual and trained to work with them (Donnelly et al., 1985). While creating social bonds between the university and students requires input from all stakeholders (e.g. the academics, administrators, students), administrators play a central role in establishing and maintaining positive, supportive social environments (Kuh et al., 2005). Compared to financial and social bonds, structural bonds are considered the most challenging to build but also the most enduring. They are often built into the service delivery system to create change costs or exit barriers for the customer to leave the relationship. Applied to educational settings, structural bonds refer to any policies, procedures, and initiatives that lead to close ties between students and the school or university and which make them feel disinclined to leave the school or university either due to financial cost or a psychological commitment (Ackerman & Schibrowsky, 2007).

Methods

This study is a part of a broader research project to investigate Australian universities' policies and strategies for re-engaging deferral and leave-taking students. The project (Harvey et al., 2022) employed a mixed-methods approach to investigate universities' policies regarding leave-taking and strategies for re-engaging

such student cohorts. Initially, a desktop review was undertaken to examine the institutional policies of leave-taking at all 38 Australian public universities. The policy review was helpful for developing the subsequent national survey of senior university staff, which intended to understand institutional practices relating to leave-taking and re-engagement. The questionnaire collected high-level data on the strategic environment, governance arrangements and the details of interventions. Respondents were targeted using publicly available information from university websites. One senior staff member was recruited per institution to ensure the responses were representative of the sector generally. The targeted respondents were generally staff at the Pro Vice-Chancellor level who were listed as having responsibility for 'Students' or 'Education'. These roles were judged as being senior enough to understand the broader strategic environment within which the issue of leave-taking is located but also having knowledge (or at least able to enquire with their direct reports) of the interventions their institution had in place. Where no obvious candidate was apparent from our desktop review, we either targeted staff at a higher level, such as Deputy Vice-Chancellors (Education), or senior staff closer to the operational level, such as Executive Directors working in a field connected to student success.

The survey was conducted using the Qualtrics online survey platform, and representatives from all 37 public universities were invited via email to participate in mid-November 2019. The survey received 15 completed responses, representing a response rate of 40.5%. While a relatively strong response rate was achieved, the small sample size means that, statistically speaking, there is likely to be a relatively large margin of error in the results. As such, the analysis focusses on broad trends identified within the survey and does not make statistical inferences about the perspectives of all institutions.

Based on the preliminary results of the survey, six universities that reported a high commitment to encouraging students to return from a break were recruited from a range of industry groupings (incl. Group of Eight, Innovative Research Universities, Regional Universities Network and unaffiliated institutions) to participate in the next phase of qualitative investigation. Pro Vice-Chancellors (PVCs) of Students (or equivalent) of the selected six universities were sent an email invitation for an interview and asked to recruit another two to three operational staff in their portfolio whom they considered 'good informants' (Spradley, 1979). Of the six universities selected, five were ultimately recruited, and the final sample of interviewees included two PVCs and 13 team leaders. The interviews were semi-structured, and variations of the interview protocols were developed for senior executive members (the PVCs) and the department leaders. The interviews took place either face-to-face or online, depending on participant availability and preference. Each interview lasted between 35 and 70 min. All interviews were recorded digitally, transcribed, and analysed using NVivo 12 software. An inductive thematic analysis was conducted to identify themes that emerged from the data and general patterns across participants. In this case, the researchers explored the original text, coding to identify events, occurrences, and perceptions found to be conceptually similar in nature or related in meaning, and these were in turn grouped into themes or categories (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A codebook was developed to guide the process of coding

transcripts, and existing literature informed the generation of the initial codes. Once the coding process was completed, related themes were merged into broader themes.

Findings

This section explores the findings from our research, with a particular focus on the qualitative research conducted with senior institutional staff. First, we focus on governance, communication and language, and analytics to show how participant universities have been attempting to build a trusting relationship with deferral and leave-taking students and maintaining their sense of belonging and commitment to the community.

Governance and policy

Most institutions had clear governance and responsibility arrangements in place for the issue of leave-taking. Just over 73% of survey respondents indicated a senior executive responsible for deferral and leave of absence. Many institutions also had committees with oversight of leave-taking, with 67% of respondents indicating there was a committee responsible for deferral and 53% indicating there was one for leave of absence. In the following interviews, participants also highlighted that various measures were designed to improve policy responsiveness so that more flexibility could be granted to individual students in consideration of their various circumstances and needs. There is evidence from previous studies that responsiveness, communication, and access are important determinants of student satisfaction (Douglas et al., 2008; Schertzer & Schertzer, 2004). Flexibility included consideration of different student groups, particularly a perceived need to accommodate the cultural obligations of many Indigenous students when framing policies around leave of absence.

> Certainly, we understand that Indigenous students are likely to want, for cultural reasons and family obligations, time out. Again, it is always that balance of how much time can you give. (Interviewee 3, female, PVC).

> The majority of students, if they turn up at our door and want to come back in, we're going to let them come back… We also offer more flexibility, so that if a student, life's gotten in the way or they've been caught up with the bushfires or whatever it is, we allow deferrals for non-deferrable courses, so that's a way we operate some flexibility too. (Interviewee 12, male, Manager)

Such responses reflect both a level of institutional trust and commitment to students, which we have argued are central to effective relationship management. However, the responses also reveal the discretionary nature of deferral and leave policies. While institutions seek to develop structural bonds to support students on their non-linear journeys, flexibility commonly appears to be at the discretion of the institution rather than clearly codified.

In some participant universities, policy changes had occurred by centring the student voice and involving students more directly in the policy and planning discussions.

> We had an equal number of students on our steering committee as staff and we had a very deliberate, student engagement strategy around it and for the first time I had mature aged students, I had Indigenous students, I had really remote students actually being deeply engaged in the policy review and that meant we started to understand what was the lived experience of those policies. (Interviewee 6, male, Director)

Again, this deliberate empowerment of the student voice reflects growing trust, and an institutional positioning of students as partners with agency.

The development of structural bonds was noted as important, but difficult to develop within institutions whose capacity for flexibility was perceived as limited. Some interviewees stressed the limitations of course structures, whose design prohibits multiple entry and exit points, which is a barrier that can often be addressed through more effective course design. More commonly, however, interviewees noted a tension between offering greater flexibility to students and increasing challenges of process management.

> I think at the moment we can defer for up to two years. And there's been examples of people who have been granted additional periods of deferral beyond that. So, I think that's relatively generous. (Interviewee 8, female, Senior Manager)

> I think, to be honest, [we've] been probably more reasonable than is probably for the university's benefit. (Interviewee 9, male, Assistant Manager)

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While flexibility was therefore seen as important in confirming trust and commitment, such discretion had implications for university admission and planning processes. More worryingly, respondents noted that there might be some students seeking insurance rather than holding a genuine interest in studying the course deferred, as illustrated by the following comments:

> We also said a student could basically defer a second time as well. And it was very difficult to police and manage, and I think the idea here was we wanted to be as friendly to our students. It was like an insurance policy. I'll get an offer from the university and I'll just defer it. (Interviewee 9)

> For the student, the bar was super-low… They didn't have to set up an account or to really invest anything themselves to do that. We're trying to weed out the people who had no interest in studying here. We made it more of a self-service

> last year. It requires the student to then create an account and a login. (Interviewee 9)

Consequently, some universities were perceived to be tightening up their deferral processes in particular and requiring more purposeful activity from students before granting requests for leave. Unlike leave of absence, the case of deferrals typically arises in an environment of relatively low student commitment. Deferring students have not yet commenced study and set up their goal and, by Tinto's description, may lack both goal and institutional accountability. Indeed, our findings highlight that a substantial proportion of the deferring students who do return end up enrolling in different courses and/or institutions. The extent to which universities should maintain flexibility for deferring students is thus influenced by the relatively weak bonds and accountabilities of deferring students. We would expect universities to offer greater flexibility for continuing students taking leave of absence, where goal and institutional accountability have typically already been demonstrated through their studies. However, flexibility is also typically offered to deferring students as a competitive institutional strategy, in order to support the broader goal of recruitment. Our findings highlight the tension of being student-centred in a constrained environment, where maintaining institutional responsibility and accountability and compliance with accreditation bodies are also important.

Communication and language

Guilbault's (2018) study showed that the manner that institutions react to students is of primary importance to retention, persistence, and completion. Students are keen to build personal relationships with their institution and lecturers (Brooks & Abrahams, 2018), and their perception of the quality of relationships among people at the university, including faculty members and administrative personnel, is a key indicator for their satisfaction (Guilbault, 2018). Several interviewees reported a change in the nature of communications with students from largely bureaucratic language, which was framed by institutional processes and policies, to language that was student-centric as informed by research in academic fields, including psychology. Again, such language was designed to reduce stigmatisation, promote growth mindsets and personalise messaging.

As outlined in our theoretical framework, interviewee responses revealed a growing focus on strengthening social bonds, and on transitioning from a 'customer' approach to a 'loyal client' approach.

> Effectively setting up a way to send students regular communication every, perhaps, three months or six months or depending on how long they're away. Just checking in, effectively. It wouldn't be bureaucratic and a long, complicated email, with, dear student, whatever. You want to be personalised because you can do that now with artificial intelligence. (Interviewee 3, female, PVC)

> A significant change of the communication strategies took place last year to make the nature of communication shift from administrative to student focussed. (Interviewee 10, male, Assistant Manager)

While these responses highlighted the importance of language and perception in developing social bonds, the following section highlights how analytics and artificial intelligence are able to provide more granular data. These data enable not only a student-centred approach, but one in which students can be treated as individuals, if not loyal clients.

As previously outlined, stigma is another significant factor for many students who take leave, and a prominent reason for their non-return. One respondent noted the value of tailoring messages around growth mindsets in order to develop trust and empathy towards students on leave, and to encourage return from study:

> We've been really interested in the work that's come out of the United States led by David Yeager which is looking at some of the work from Dweck around growth mindset and looking at normalising difficulty, framing more growth mindset concepts into language and that makes a significant difference, the research has shown, around how students then respond. (Interviewee 6, male, Director)

These comments all indicate a positive trend, though none of the interviewees specifically mentioned that students were involved in designing these communications. In engaging students to review and develop policies for leave-taking, the most effective strategies are likely to involve students directly in the development of communications and approaches.

Analytics

Sax (2004) has argued that new technologies and data analysis should help to render the relationship of the university to its students more lasting and more personal. In our study, it was observed that many universities appear to be in transition from generic strategies and communications to responses tailored to individual students. In many ways, this approach reflects a transition from perceiving students as customers, to be dealt with in groups, towards a notion of students as (loyal) clients, to be served individually.

Data analytics were perceived as central to this transition, with survey respondents aware of the need to understand the different causes of leave and deferral and the behavioural predictors of attrition and to design strategies that respond to specific circumstances of individual students. Most respondents noted that universities were trying to improve their analytics and ability to provide individualised advice, but that transition was slow given the complexity of the organisation and the multiple stakeholders involved, from teaching and faculty staff through to central service staff. Interview findings are in accordance with the result of our institutional survey. Almost all interviewees reported that a data collection mechanism has been established or planned to quantify and track the reasons for deferral and leave of absence:

> That would be part of the analysis of the data that we use to find out who defers and why. It will be all part of what we do every year or even more often to look at our data. How many students are progressing, and it will be part of the full progression picture. (Interviewee 12, male, Manager)

> Currently, the university is tracking the number of students who take leave of absence, but not the reason. A new CRM [Customer Relationship Management System] is due this June, which is assumed to improve the data collection mechanism and reporting system via collecting more detailed information. (Interviewee 10, male, Assistant Manager).

One respondent specifically noted the importance of financial and social bonds in driving patterns of leave and non-return:

> 'We also have an exit survey that our planning and analytical services colleagues do… it shows clearly that the majority of the reasons are what used to be called, "Life gets in the way." It's probably the standard stuff that you'd see at every other university. Finances, family commitments, commitments. (Interviewee 12, male, Manager)

The development of analytics to support interventions was a clear new frontier, particularly given resourcing limitations, performance-based funding drivers to reduce attrition, and the shift towards student-centred institutional behaviours. A few interview participants identified specific examples in which the provision of more detailed information and data could inform tailored communications:

> One of the bits of data that we do collect at the time of deferral is the reason that someone has chosen to defer. And we think there's an opportunity for us to customise that campaign that they get to include support for those particular reasons. So, for argument's sake, if someone told us they're deferring for financial reasons, we might be able to make sure that there's some information about scholarships in that sort of email series. (Interviewee 8, female, Senior Manager)

Others also noted the need not only to collect data but to manage and translate data effectively and ethically into action:

> I would say from an analytics point of view, our data strategy is probably in desperate need of a revamping …. Simply calling a student from a list we've found hasn't been an effective strategy. (Interviewee 6, male, Director)

Indeed, one of the major challenges perceived was the translation of data and analytics to effective interventions. Several respondents noted that data itself were necessary but insufficient to strengthen social bonds. While institutions could show their commitment to students through identifying individual learning, financial, and behavioural challenges, translating this commitment to action was often challenging. Respondents noted a lack of resources, challenges of coordination within institutions, and a limited evidence base, all of which potentially hindered the development of trust and commitment.

> We do have access to that data but again, it goes back to usage of that data. If there's a trend that we noticed, we might flag it for the relevant unit or faculty, but we don't really do anything beyond that with the data. Structurally the way that universities are structured around these different service doors, I think

> that's a major pain point from a data point of view, having too much data, not being able to use it well. Another pain point is the way we mobilise and use data to design intervention strategies, that's been a problem. (Interviewee 6, male, Director)

> Certainly, I want to be able to make better use of learning analytics to monitor engagement online, while we're also monitoring engagement on campus. I really need to understand the percentage of students who are just not engaged and do not appear to be connected in any way. They are our biggest risk of attrition. (Interviewee 14, Female, PVC)

The interviewees' comments and reflections on the use of analytics in tailoring communications with students indicate that such effort within a university requires staff at all levels and across areas, including academic faculty, administrative staff, and students, to have both the capacity and evidence to develop a student-focussed mindset (Allen et al., 1998; Kennedy et al., 2002). While many campus staff may claim themselves to be student-centred, some researchers have argued that few actually take that initiative seriously or act on it in comprehensive ways (Ackerman & Schibrowsky, 2007). Our own study found that staff are increasingly prioritising the need to be student-centred, but often still struggling with the implementation of processes that will build financial, social, and structural bonds.

Discussion

As the paths of university students have become less linear, and as performance-based funding has grown, student retention carries increased importance for universities, including the conversion of deferrers and re-enrolment of students who take leave during their study (Harvey et al., 2022). Improving student retention is a crucial goal for individual, social, and economic reasons (Schuh, 2005; Tinto, 1993), and previous studies have identified students' trust and commitment as critical enablers of retention and recruitment (Ghosh et al., 2001; Guilbault, 2018; Wilkins & Stephens Balakrishnan, 2013). Given this reality, it is necessary for universities to prioritise relationship building, and this process can be informed by theories of customer trust and commitment. To this end, the concept of relationship marketing can be helpful in understanding, and addressing, patterns of deferral, withdrawal, and return from study.

This study explored the policies and strategies that selected Australian universities employ to encourage the return to study of both deferrers and leave-takers. The policies and strategies developed by many participating universities highlighted an increasingly individualised approach, which has been recognised as a critical component of effective relationship building with students and quality service provision (Astin, 1993; Boyer, 1987; Kuh et al., 2005). Such an individualised approach is manifested in many aspects, including more flexible and responsive policies and procedures on deferral and leave of absence, as well as personalised communications with students who defer or take leave. Effective communication between the institution and its students has been argued as essential to the development of a

trustworthy relationship and a supportive environment. At one level, communication-building activities that lead to a strengthening of social bonds may be a fairly inexpensive way for a campus to promote a culture that values student connection. Personal communications from the university in the form of mail, email, telephone calls, and satisfaction and information gathering surveys all work to strengthen social bonds (Ackerman & Schibrowsky, 2007). Our study suggested that many universities have employed more targeted language and content in communications with both deferrers and leave-takers to maintain a unique and individualised relationship with the cohort.

Moreover, the development of customised communications is built on the premise of learning everything relevant about the targeted audiences and then using that information to service them (Ackerman & Schibrowsky, 2007; Tinto, 1998). Low-cost database software and data automation make it economical to identify and build relationships on a one-to-one basis (Gordan et al., 2012), and this study confirmed that university staff perceived data analytics as central to the transition from general to individualised communications with deferrers and leave-takers. Respondents highlighted the need to collect information about the reasons for leave and deferral and the behavioural predictors of attrition and incorporate the analytics into strategies that responded to specific circumstances of individual students. However, while universities are typically trying to improve their analytics and ability to provide individualised advice, there remain a number of logistical, resourcing, and behavioural challenges in translating data to effective interventions that build trust and commitment, in turn reducing attrition.

In addition, previous studies have suggested that student involvement and connection to the campus are powerful factors influencing stay or leave decisions. Students are keen to build personal relationships with their institution (Brooks & Abrahams, 2018). Therefore, when developing campaigns, it is crucial to consult and respect students' perceptions and incorporate their perceptions into programme development and policy design (Kuh et al., 2005; Quinn et al., 2009). This study identified this weakness in universities' current practices, in that none of the participating universities appeared to involve students directly in the design of communications. One useful approach is to set up a simple method for students to make suggestions, express opinions, and provide feedback. As Keeling (2004) suggests, such techniques are important to "establishing routine ways to hear students' voices" (p. 28). Other strategies could involve active and explicit involvement of students on relevant committees, which some universities had adopted.

Conclusion

A focus on converting deferrals and re-engaging students who have withdrawn or are contemplating doing so has institutional implications beyond retention and completion rates. Given the long-term nature of the relationship-building process, the recruitment of students is properly viewed as an initial stage of the relationship lifecycle, and its termination only arrives when both parties decide to end it. For many students, the relationship does not end at graduation (Ackerman & Schibrowsky,

2007; Gordan et al., 2012). To this end, we have applied the concept of relationship management to explore the depth and breadth of the student/university connection, including the potential reputational effect of this long-term relationship on the university. For universities, effective relationship marketing requires a student-centred, holistic, and long-term approach, including commitment from recruitment through to graduation and alumni relations. Developing a student-centred culture, including professional development and training for employees across a broad range of institutional areas, would help not only to improve recruitment and retention, but to foster the trust and commitment necessary for ongoing student and alumni relationships.

Funding The study was supported by the Department of Education, Skills and Employment, The Australian Government.

Ethical statement This study has been approved by the Human Ethics Committee at La Trobe University. The approval ID is HEC19342.

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Andrew Harvey is the Director of Pathways in Place Programme at Griffith University. For over two decades, Andrew has advocated for social justice, working with vulnerable communities, not for profit organisations, and extensive collaboration and community engagement. This includes Executive Director of Student Equity, Professor of Higher Education, and Director of the Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research (CHEEDR) at La Trobe University. Andrew has published extensively on the experiences of new migrants, people from out-of-home care backgrounds, Indigenous students, and other underserved groups.

Catherine Yuan Gao is a Assistant Professor in the Centre for Higher Education Research at Southern University of Science and Technology. Her research interests include globalisation and internationalisation of

higher education, Intercultural education, and STEM education. Catherine has held various educational research, teaching, and consulting positions over the past nine years, including Research Fellow in CIRES of Victoria University, Senior Research Officer in the Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research (CHEEDR) at La Trobe University. Yuan obtained her PhD from the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne, MEd with distinction from University of Bristol, and honours Bachelor of Arts (double degree) from Peking University, China.

Michael Luckman is a Senior Manager, Data Insights (Academic) at La Trobe University. He has extensive experience working on higher education data analysis projects. He has led internal evaluations of La Trobe University's School Partnerships Program, College of Science Health and Engineering outreach programmes, and analysis of La Trobe's equity and teaching and learning performance measures. Michael's recent research publications have focussed on re-recruitment of students who have stopped out of higher education; equity within student globalisation activities; care leavers in higher education; predictors of student attrition; and patterns of regional student relocation.

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