

Version 4 7/1/2004
UWS Action Plan 2005
Retention

Context

At the UWS Senior Management Conference in August 2004 an agenda for the development of UWS was identified which had four interlocked elements: Increasing income; academic development; efficiency and organisational change management and structures to support the University's development. Two key action plans consistent with this agenda have emerged from extensive work and consultations across the University in the latter half of 2004. One is focused on increasing student retention and the other on taking a more strategic approach to engagement with targeted UWS Communities, with a particular focus on increasing professional and post-graduate partnerships around short courses, articulation, research and research training.

In actioning these plans the process objective is to achieve systematic, consistent and coordinated action around each change agenda across all of UWS, not just in the many areas of excellence which already exist.

Both action plans have been carefully tested for their relevance, desirability and feasibility. They have been produced by taking into account a wide range of inputs from across the University. These include not only wide ranging discussions with staff on current good practice but also the results of the 2004 UWS Exit Survey; a detailed analysis of the UWS complaints data base; *CEQuery* results; an investigation of national and international good practice research, including the AUQA good practice data base; a comparative analysis of the key UWS College-level Strategic Directions identified in mid 2004; the UWS Strategic Plans endorsed by the Board of Trustees in December 2003; the Vice-Chancellor's 2004 discussion papers: (a) *A different world: a strategy to build organisational sustainability* (b) *Shaping UWS for strength & sustainability*; and recent discussions about giving community engagement a more embedded, strategic and central role in all of the University's activities.

The approach to the development and implementation of the action plans takes into account extensive research on effective change management in higher education¹.

The action plan for the UWS Retention Project is the subject of this briefing sheet.

UWS Retention project

This project explicitly links and seeks to apply more systematically the many individual strategies identified from the above sources which have been found to increase student retention at UWS. Not only is ensuring that all students who enrol in UWS graduate an important part of the University's mission but improved retention is also essential to optimise the University's income in a period of significant economic constraint. For example, a loss of just 30 UG students in first year costs the University well over a million dollars with a consequent negative impact on the funds available for services and salaries.

The retention project is comprised of a number of mutually reinforcing components. It is proposed that each component be coordinated by a carefully selected leader and action team responsible for its successful and consistent implementation. It is proposed also that there be an overall project manager to ensure that what each action

¹ This research is summarised on the UWS Quality Management Website at:
http://www.uws.edu.au/download.php?file_id=8569&filename=AUQF_04_Paper_Scott.pdf&mimetype=application/pdf

team does links with and reinforces what the other teams are doing. Each team has available clear evidence from the sources listed above of what is necessary to ensure productive student engagement with the University in their component.

Key components of the Retention Project

The UWS retention project applies to both Undergraduate and Postgraduate students. It is made up of a mutually reinforcing set of sub-projects. What each sub-project addresses has been identified from the research outlined above as being a key factor in retaining UWS students. What is distinctive about this initiative is making sure that there is consistent application of good practice in each of the following areas across UWS:

- student orientation;
- student enrolments and fees;
- provision of convenient contact for students with queries and prompt & effective resolution of them;
- consistent attention to the key factors known to engage students in productive learning in their first 12 months of study at UWS;
- clear expectations' management, especially in terms of assessment;
- provision of timely and effective student support including appropriate use of WebCT, easy access to UWS student support services, the consistent use of peer mentors and complementary support from the UWS Student Associations.

UWS sponsors: Nigel Bond and Geoff Scott

The project sponsors are responsible for ensuring that the initiative has the support of the UWS Executive, that what is happening is widely understood and supported by those who are to implement it, that each of the project's components are being successfully put into practice and that any areas requiring executive action during implementation are being dealt with promptly and wisely.

Coordination of project components: Bernadette Nutman².

The overall project coordinator's job is to support and link each of the project components and to monitor their implementation and assist project leaders to address an emerging areas for improvement promptly and wisely.

Project Component leaders

Each of the key components of the UWS Retention Project has a team leader who is responsible for ensuring that good practice is consistently implemented across the university in the area concerned. Details of each project component and their UWS team leader are as follows

- **Orientation:**
 - Team leader: Ellen Brackenreg**
 - i. Ensure that students get a consistently high quality orientation experience;
 - ii. Clear expectations' management from the outset about key UWS processes, support systems and student requirements;
 - iii. Welcome by senior staff - same message at all orientations
 - 1. Wisdom of your choice;
 - 2. Support available;
 - 3. Who to go to if you want help or are unclear about anything;
 - 4. UWS listens to its students: thus this new strategy;

² Bernadette Nutman is on secondment to the UWS Planning & Quality Unit. Her permanent role is Executive Officer to the Dean CLAB. In this role she was closely involved in the development of the College's key strategic directions for 2005-7 and has extensive experience linking academic activities with the support provided by the UWS Divisions.

- iv. International component: links to GWS communities; senior buddies.
- **Accurate enrolments, fee invoices, registration on UWS support systems**
Team leader: Thea Seabrook
 - i. Error management strategy for fees and enrolments in place, with clear targets to reduce error rate;
 - ii. Clear and consistent processes in place to track and rectify errors promptly and inform students about what is happening with their queries.
- **Convenient & effective system for students to contact UWS about concerns**
Team leader: Ellen Brackenreg
 - i. Any one or a mix of the following areas have been found to be an initial contact point for students to express concerns about academic or administrative matters:
 - 1. The Library;
 - 2. IT contact staff;
 - 3. Student Centres;
 - 4. Student Administration staff in Colleges;
 - 5. Academic advisors and first year teachers;
 - 6. UWS Call Centre staff;
 - 7. The E-Learning Services Desk.
 - ii. Staff at each point of contact need a consistent and effective way of responding. With this in mind, customer inquiry and service protocols are being developed. These are based on an analysis of all of the formal UWS complaints over the past two years and recurring areas in student feedback where things are reported to have gone wrong. The findings for staff dealing with student queries include the need to: actively listen and record the exact nature of the concern, have a clear process to be followed to address the type of concern expressed, to inform the student of what will happen next, then to ensure the student is contacted at the time agreed with news of the outcome. It also requires more consistent records of what is happening with concerns to be kept and clearer/more consistent understanding of who is best positioned to resolve different sorts of queries. An online concerns management system is currently being developed to address this need.
 - iii. All new students need to receive a personalised email reminder or equivalent on the key things to be done during the first two months of enrolment.
 - iv. A small fold out list of services and who to contact for particular queries is under development for distribution at orientation.
- **Student Support**
Team leader: Ellen Brackenreg
 - i. Systematic use of peer mentors with all new students; targeted supplemental instruction for units with high attrition rates; clear processes to consistently identify and assist 'at risk' students.
 - ii. It is proposed that class lecturers identify students most at risk early on and that these students are contacted personally by A/Dean (Academic) and/or the Head of School or Program Head to advise them on the support services available and contacts these services on behalf of the student. A key resource here is the UWS Counselling

Service's *Early Intervention Program*. With this in mind all program heads will be asked to ensure staff are aware of their College's student services contact person (phone and email) and the range of services to which they can refer at-risk students

- iii. It is proposed that a Student Support at UWS pamphlet be produced to facilitate this process and that a link to this be provided as part of *WebCT*.
- iv. It is critical that all staff with whom students have contact know the full range of support which is available to students and take active steps to alert students to these areas of support
- v. The UWS student association plays an important support role in this regard and their full range of support services should also be made known to students as part of the same process.

- **Web Support**

Team leaders: Carolyn Webb and Liz Curach

- i. Ramp up the effective and consistent use of *WebCT* as an interactive learning tool, based on an evaluation of what aspects of the system are proving to be most productive as an adjunct to student learning.
- ii. Monitor and assist staff and student use of *WebCT*.
- iii. Link *WebCT* to the full range of library related services and to the other learning skills and support systems available to UWS students.

- **Optimising the Classroom Experience**

Team leaders

Centrally: Carolyn Webb

Locally: Associate Dean Academic and Program Heads

- i. Head of School and/or A/Dean to visit the first session of each class to give an overview of the elements of the UWS retention project outlined in this briefing document, pointing out that the approach being taken addresses what thousands of previous UWS students say works best for them and that this covers the total experience of UWS not just what happens in the classroom. It is suggested that all of the systems available to support students and address their concerns be briefly outlined, that the successes of graduates in the program be summarised, and that the many opportunities open to UWS students are identified, including exchanges, opportunities to meet international students, undertake coop ed placements, use credit transfer options etc.
- ii. Ensure the systematic use the College's best teachers in all 1st year classes;
- iii. Ensure that, in the first semester of the course, at least one professor outlines the research being undertaken in the College/School in the area being studied;
- iv. Undertake a survey of students in first class and acknowledge its findings in terms of the wide background, abilities, needs and experience of the current class and how this will be taken into account in how the class is taught.
- v. Ensure consistent use of 'learn in your own time' materials with a focus addressing the key Quality Management for Assessment issues identified in the joint papers of GS & NB distributed to Colleges earlier in 2004. One example is the Unit Planning Guide given the

Edith Cowan students and identified as an area of good practice by AUQA.

Performance Target

We have set an ambitious target of reducing the first year drop out rate by 25%. On last year's figures this would mean that we would lose 1140 students in year one not 1520.

Geoff Scott & Nigel Bond
January 4th 2005