



# Student Transition and Retention Success (STARS) Plan

PVC: Student Engagement and Success

2021-2022

# Student Transition and Retention Success Plan: 2021-2022

## Acknowledgment

Charles Darwin University acknowledges and pays respect to Elders past, present and emerging of the Larrakia people where the main Darwin campus is located, along with our campuses on lands of the Arrernte of Alice Springs, the Jawoyn, Wardaman and Dagomon of Katherine, the Warumungu of Tennant Creek, and our interstate campuses on lands of the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation of Sydney and the Kulin Nation of Melbourne. CDU also acknowledges its footprint is on the lands of many nations of Aboriginal custodians including the Kungarakan people of Batchelor and Adelaide River, Yolngu of northeast Arnhem land, and the Tiwi people. We recognise all Australia's Indigenous Peoples as the First Educators and the First Innovators.

## Document Purpose

This document articulates a University-wide Student Transition and Retention Success Plan with supporting projects and initiatives for execution in 2021-2022 (phase one).

Student transition and retention is a critical enabler in delivering the University's *Connect Discover Grow* Strategic Plan. The STARS Plan is a subset of the Learning and Teaching Strategic Pillar Plan and the Indigenous Leadership Strategic Pillar Plan, together combining to contribute to CDG strategic targets:

- A rise in the HE student retention rate to 75% (non-Indigenous) and 60% (Indigenous), with a long-term aspiration to reach parity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous student retention.
- A rise in the Indigenous VET unit completion rate to 75%, with a long-term aspiration to reach parity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous unit completions.
- Consistent student satisfaction ratings over 80%.

This Plan will be centrally coordinated by the Retention Steering Group with representation from Colleges and relevant central portfolios. Updates will be provided to appropriate CDU governing groups (HELTG, Academic Board, Executive Leadership Group) on progress with a full report on progress delivered in early 2023. This will also include a proposed phase two Plan (2023-2025) developed in the final quarter of 2022.

## External Context

Today's students come from an increasingly diverse cultural, language and study background, and juggle multiple demands on their time and energy. They're more likely to be studying online, part time, and therefore in relative isolation compared to their counterparts even 10 years ago. Social isolation leads to poor help-seeking behaviour, and that combined with low study confidence leaves students vulnerable to withdrawing.

Research has shown that attrition correlates with being over 25, being Indigenous, studying part time, being in a rural or remote area and being first in family to tertiary study. These factors compound when combined, making some students at very high risk of withdrawing before completing their course.

CDU's student population has a large proportion of high-attrition-risk students, characterised by learners who are:

- Part time, with a relatively low average load. 50% of CDU students study part time, with average equivalent full-time student load of 0.32 EFTSL.
- From one or more target equity groups, including those from low SES backgrounds, those with English as an additional language (EAL), students with disabilities, regional or remote students and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders. 61% of all CDU students and 73% of all domestic students belong to at least one target equity group.
- Intermittent, taking a break during their study (68% of students counted as not retained each year intend to return to study with CDU in the future).
- Mature aged. Students at CDU are significantly older at time of commencement than at other universities. 70% of CDU students are over 25 years of age in the year of commencement, and 48% are over the age of 30.
- Online, with approximately 78% of all coursework students choosing to study at least partially in this mode; and 57% studying completely in this mode.

Students who come to tertiary study from paths other than high school, whether whilst working or caring for families or on career breaks, often lack study confidence, feeling "out of practice" with the requirements of formal study. These students are often also low in educational capacity – with limited information, academic or digital literacies. The relative social isolation of CDU

online students is strongly correlated with poor help-seeking behaviour, making online students less likely to access support than if they had strong peer relationships or spent more time in a campus environment.

Attrition risks are further compounded by a lack of access to role models to support learning and career decisions (see [here](#)).

Even when well supported, and highly engaged in the learning experience and with their peers, the majority of CDU students must place their study commitments below work and family commitments. They balance study, work, family and financial commitments to a much greater extent than the traditional school leaver cohort. This means from time to time the most effective way to manage this balance is for them to take a break from study, leading to CDU's high number of intermittent learners. A break from study, even when a student intends to return, can result in a student being counted as not retained in regulatory reporting, driving retention rates down.

### **Learning from the sector**

There are many recognized frameworks for improving student retention, driven by more than two decades of research in the US, UK and Australia.

Research points to the need for a whole-of-university approach to retention, delivering course and university coherence that focuses on the first term. It is during this first term that attrition risk is highest as students transition into study.

Retention research also points to the requirement for engaging, authentic, relevant and scaffolded assessments that deliver high-quality feedback to students. This is critical for students who are returning to study after a long break and have no real sense of how well they're doing, clouded by a lack of confidence. Feedback becomes a yardstick for students, providing them with evidence of their own capacity to succeed.

It is well documented that engagement is a catalyst for retention. Signs of engagement include social connection, curiosity and the application of discretionary effort. Successful engagement relies on building trusting and enduring relationships with students and not simply processing transactions or providing support in a reactive manner. The ability to identify, understand and connect with *individual* students – beyond a cohort lens – is critical to authentic and productive engagement.

More recent work on retention has focused on student ambition and attitude which strongly correlates retention with the presence of grit (purpose and perseverance) and a growth mindset (readiness to learn).

### **The CDU retention journey**

The University has a long history of retention work, having previously commissioned a number of studies and detailed analyses including:

- 2013 Increasing student retention and success at CDU, a proposal for action
- 2014 action plan against the 2013 report
- 2017 Benchmarking Student Success Strategies against IRU outcomes
- 2018 Student Retention Action Plan
- 2019 Student Retention University Strategy Consultation Paper

During the last 6 months colleagues from each of the Colleges and relevant shared service portfolios, including Education Strategy and Student Engagement and Success, have reviewed the plans that have been in place since 2013, analysing the actions and outcomes from the body of work. The 2021/22 Student Transition and Retention Success Plan has been developed with reference to and in acknowledgment of this previous body of work and charts a path forward for continued success in lifting the retention outcomes for CDU students.

# Student Transition and Retention Success (STARS) Plan 2021-22

## TARGETS:

- A rise in the HE student retention rate to 80% (non-Indigenous domestic award) and 70% (Indigenous), with a long-term aspiration to reach parity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous student retention.
- A rise in the Indigenous VET unit completion rate to 75%, with a long-term aspiration to reach parity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous unit completions.
- Consistent student satisfaction ratings over 80%.

CDG Strategic Priority	Strategic Priority Initiatives	STARS Initiatives
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A provider of transformative skills and learning</li> <li>2. Globally recognised for Indigenous leadership</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.2 Enhance teaching quality, the student learning experience and student success</li> <li>2.1 Realise our aspirations for Indigenous leadership</li> <li>2.2 Deliver improved outcomes in teaching, research and engagement</li> <li>2.3 Play a key role in the success of Indigenous Australians</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>TRANSITION for early success</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.1. Introduce <b>effective orientation and onboarding programs</b> for all learners including online and remote students                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide CDU students with a warm welcome and equip them with the right information at the right time</li> <li>- Recognise the diverse paths students take to reach a CDU VET or HE course</li> <li>- Enable peer-to-peer connections as students develop their own learning communities and future networks</li> </ul> </li> <li>1.2 <b>Improve students' study skills</b> by developing specific preparatory and bridging modules to supplement their existing knowledge base                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide supportive ways to introduce students to the academic environment at CDU focusing on the development of academic study skills</li> <li>- Develop student confidence with early assessment success, improving educational capability (academic, digital and information literacy)</li> </ul> </li> <li>1.3. Introduce targeted <b>early course advice and study planning</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Connect students with an advisor to support them throughout their first year</li> <li>- Encourage confident decision-making supported by accurate advice</li> </ul> </li> </ol> </li> <li>2. <b>RISK MANAGEMENT for early interventions</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2.1 <b>Monitor courses</b> to identify those with the most significant attrition risk and plan systemic interventions for improved retention                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Establish College teams to monitor and improve retention in identified 'hot spot' courses</li> <li>- Share good practice and lessons learned with the wider College and University community</li> </ul> </li> <li>2.2 <b>Monitor students</b> using predictive analytics to identify students at risk and plan individual interventions for improved retention                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Develop predictive analytical capability to understand attrition risk at CDU and identify students at risk</li> <li>- Introduce a success advisor model to coordinate interventions across College and shared service teams</li> <li>- Share good practice and lessons learned with the wider College and University community</li> </ul> </li> <li>2.3 Focus attention on <b>vulnerable cohorts</b> (mature age, online, regional/remote, Indigenous students)                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Plan for specific interventions to protect the success of vulnerable student cohorts</li> <li>- Collaborate with the University's specialist service areas, including the office of the PVC Indigenous Leadership</li> <li>- Share best practice in the teaching of non-traditional students</li> </ul> </li> </ol> </li> </ol>

### 3. TEACHING for retention

- 3.1. Ensure students receive **quality, timely feedback** on their assessment items, with a focus on the first year
  - Ensure feedback on all progressive assessments is provided to students within ten working days of assessment deadlines
  - Monitor student sentiment of feedback through existing survey tools
- 3.2. Ensure students are presented with **authentic and relevant assessments**, with a focus on the first year
  - Audit key assessment items in high volume first year units for clarity, relevance and workload
  - Ensure assessments are contextualised and contribute to student confidence
- 3.3. Establish **first year/term communities of practice** for academic staff pursuing the scholarship of teaching for early retention
  - Provide a forum to share and collaborate on innovative practices that address transition and retention
  - Grow academic excellence in delivering retention-focused teaching

### 4. CAREERS to link to future goals

- 4.1. Explicitly embed **career management and employability skills** into the curriculum
  - Provide ongoing links between the unit experience, course outcomes and career ambitions
  - Develop graduate adaptability to meet future workforce challenges
- 4.2. Expand CDU's **employer connections** to enrich the student experience and foster lifelong professional networks
  - Increase graduate opportunities regionally, nationally and internationally, with a reputation for job-ready graduates
  - Nurture alumni relationships through student/alumni industry mentoring initiatives
- 4.3. Embed a range of quality **work integrated learning** opportunities into the curriculum
  - Immerse students in their chosen industry and broaden their understanding of career options and pathways
  - Improve the e-portfolio to record applied learning experiences and micro-credentials

### 5. CUSTOMER SERVICE systems and processes

- 5.1. Introduce a **voice of the student** program to capture real time student sentiment
  - Improve CDU's capacity to listen to students and act to resolve confusion or complaints quickly and effectively
  - Direct improvement efforts towards issues that matter most to students, co-designing solutions with students and for students
  - Drive up the CDU Net Promoter Score with responsive and pro-active student service delivery
- 5.2. Develop a whole of CDU **student communication strategy** to boost outbound communication content
  - Develop a strategic program of outbound student communications from application to second study period
  - Create a sense of student connectedness and belonging through a focus on CDU student life, profiling students and alumni
- 5.3. Introduce **new student communication platforms and channels** to ensure easy access to information and support
  - Introduce new or improved digital channels including live chat, mobile applications and a student portal
  - Collect student profile information to enable custom content and a high degree of personalisation

## Retention Plan on a Page: 2021/22 with 2021 focus highlighted

 <p><b>TRANSITION</b> for early success</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Orientation</li> <li>&gt; Study skills</li> <li>&gt; Study planning</li> </ul>	<p><b>Why?</b></p> <p>Attrition risk is highest in the first year, particularly for non-school-leavers. Students are often low in confidence, low in academic and information literacy, and lack educational capacity. Many suffer from information overload and those who are socially isolated have poor help-seeking behaviour. But students who start well, perform well and stay.</p>	<p><b>What?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effective orientation and onboarding for all CDU learners, including those studying online or from a remote area</li> <li>• Preparatory, bridging courses and academic skills programs to supplement students' existing knowledge base</li> <li>• Targeted early course advice and study planning to set students off on the right track</li> </ul>	<p><b>How?</b></p> <p>Plan detailed onboarding journeys for VET, UG and PG students, equipping them with the right information at the right time, recognising the diverse paths students take to get to CDU. Find a solution for peer-to-peer connections. Build co-curricular modules to fill knowledge gaps in science and maths, building skills to build confidence.</p>	<p><b>For 2021</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop HE onboarding module in Learnline</li> <li>• Improve VET onboarding/orientation</li> <li>• Evaluate peer mentoring pilots and develop a university-wide approach</li> <li>• Launch new Language and Learning services (VET/HE)</li> <li>• Finalise TEP Review, launch early bridging pilots and develop a comprehensive plan for preparatory, bridging courses and academic skills programs (HEPPP)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Who?</b></p> <p>PVC SES Deans PVC ILRO</p>
 <p><b>RISK MANAGEMENT</b> for early interventions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Monitor courses</li> <li>&gt; Monitor students</li> <li>&gt; Focus on cohorts</li> </ul>	<p><b>Why?</b></p> <p>Attrition risk can be predicted by understanding both risk and protective factors. Early intervention against predicted risk has a better success rate than reacting after problems surface. Courses with persistent attrition require systemic solutions to sustain retention. Targeting courses and students at risk will have the greatest benefit to CDU's overall result.</p>	<p><b>What?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Courses are monitored to identify those at risk and implement systemic interventions</li> <li>• Students are monitored to identify those at risk and implement individual interventions</li> <li>• Specific retention programs support vulnerable cohorts (mature age, online, regional, remote, Indigenous)</li> </ul>	<p><b>How?</b></p> <p>Launch a data analytics project to understand the early indicators of attrition risk and mitigating protective factors at CDU. Use the annual course monitoring process, with additional lead indicators, to identify high-attrition courses and establish project teams to analyse causal factors. Use data to inform improved practice.</p>	<p><b>For 2021</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aggregate data required to predict student attrition risk</li> <li>• Report on course and unit data to monitor course attrition risk</li> <li>• Identify the target courses for attrition improvement</li> <li>• Develop a student success intervention framework</li> <li>• Pilot interventions for courses and student cohorts</li> </ul>	<p><b>Who?</b></p> <p>PVC SES Deans P&amp;P</p>
 <p><b>TEACHING</b> for retention</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Authentic assessment</li> <li>&gt; Student feedback</li> <li>&gt; 1st year Community of Practice</li> </ul>	<p><b>Why?</b></p> <p>Students cite academic staff as the most influential factor in their CDU experience (NPS). Our classrooms (online, on campus and in the field) provide the greatest platform for engaging students. The way we teach and assess can reduce attrition risk and scaffold skills and knowledge, assuring students that they are capable, that they belong.</p>	<p><b>What?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students receive good quality feedback on their assessment items within the required timeframe</li> <li>• Assessments are authentic, relevant, clear and not onerous from a workload perspective</li> <li>• A first year teaching community of practice fosters the scholarship of first year teaching</li> </ul>	<p><b>How?</b></p> <p>Clarify expectations and support academics to provide the timely return of good quality feedback (within 10 days). Identify first year assessments with low participation or progress rates. and create engaging assessments. Monitor for over-assessing and reduce student workload. Collaborate on the scholarship of first-year teaching practice.</p>	<p><b>For 2021</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Refer to Teaching and Learning Strategic Pillar Plan, Pillar 1, Goal: 2.2.5 (page 9)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Who?</b></p> <p>PVC ES Deans</p>
 <p><b>CAREERS</b> to link to future goals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Employability</li> <li>&gt; Employers</li> <li>&gt; WIL</li> </ul>	<p><b>Why?</b></p> <p>Students choosing to study at CDU for a job, promotion, or career change are motivated to complete when they see a clear link between their studies and career aspiration. Equipping students to work in an era of disruption is a priority, developing self-confidence and transferable employability skills to navigate changing job markets.</p>	<p><b>What?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explicit career management and employability skills are embedded in VET and HE curriculum</li> <li>• Employer connections bring richness to the student experience; students graduate with professional networks</li> <li>• CDU showcases a range of work-integrated-learning and learning-integrated-work opportunities for VET / HE</li> </ul>	<p><b>How?</b></p> <p>Develop an employability strategy for CDU to improve employment outcomes. Leverage My Career Centre and In-Place and an improved e-portfolio solution that captures a wide range of student outcomes and helps to translate academic success into tangible employability skills. Increase WIL / LIW opportunities.</p>	<p><b>For 2021</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Endorse a CDU employability strategy (VET/HE)</li> <li>• Establish a Careers and Employability team (SES)</li> <li>• Pilot employability modules in My Career Centre</li> <li>• Coordinate a WIL working party (SES hub and College spoke)</li> <li>• Identify WIL gaps and opportunities for improvement</li> </ul>	<p><b>Who?</b></p> <p>PVC SES Deans Alumni</p>
 <p><b>CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE (CX)</b> systems and processes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Voice of the student</li> <li>&gt; Communications</li> <li>&gt; Customer interfaces</li> </ul>	<p><b>Why?</b></p> <p>Making the University easy to do business with increases the amount of effort students can put towards their studies and reduces the "stone in the shoe" impact of poor processes. Insight into the student journey enables us to put the right information and services in front of the right people at the right time.</p>	<p><b>What?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CDU's voice of the customer program captures real-time student sentiment, highlighting opportunities for fast action</li> <li>• Outbound student communications disperse the right content to the right students at the right time</li> <li>• New student communications platforms and channels facilitate a low effort transfer of information</li> </ul>	<p><b>How?</b></p> <p>Document a customer journey map for key student segments and use them to create a roadmap of improvements. Launch new communication channels that suit busy, online learners, taking the effort out of admin and providing CDU with insight into student sentiment. Capture NPS and Customer Effort metrics across every campus and online.</p>	<p><b>2021</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish a Customer Experience team (SES)</li> <li>• Roll out NPS for VET and HE students</li> <li>• Integrate the CRM and CISCO systems</li> <li>• Re-launch the current student websites (VET/HE)</li> <li>• Work with the SDX Program to implement additional student-facing solutions, including an improved mobile application</li> </ul>	<p><b>Who?</b></p> <p>PVC SES Deans Marketing</p>