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Student Retention Project: Evaluation plan

Prepared for the University of Wollongong
as part of the Building Evaluative Capacity to Improve Equity
Student Retention Project (funded by ACSES)

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Contents

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1 Introduction

This document outlines an evaluation plan for the Student Retention Project at the University of Wollongong (UOW). It has been developed through workshops and planning with the Retention team under the Building Evaluative Capacity to Improve Equity Student Retention project funded by the Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success (ACSES).

The Student Retention Project forms a central part of UOW's commitment to improving student success, progression and equity. The Student Retention Project reflects this commitment by proactively identifying students who may be at risk of disengagement and offering timely, respectful support adapted to their individual circumstances.

The project brings together functions including risk identification, CRM-enabled outreach, personalised communication, student support planning and referral pathways to create a coordinated and student-centred approach to retention. These activities are articulated in the Student Retention Logic Model, which describes how early contact, proactive guidance and follow-up can increase student confidence, improve help-seeking and support students to stay enrolled, complete units of study and progress successfully through their degrees.

As the initiative matures, from research conducted at the University of Wollongong (Hill, Fulcher et al. 2018), to pilots in 2024, and roll out to the whole of UOW in 2025, it is increasingly important to understand how well the project is being delivered, how students experience it and what difference it is making. This evaluation plan provides a structured approach for doing so, ensuring that UOW builds an evidence base for good practice in retention and improves outcomes for students through program improvements. The plan also recognises the practical realities of the operating environment: competing priorities, resource constraints and the need for evaluation to be flexible, feasible and genuinely useful for staff.

This plan has been prepared with and for internal UOW staff. It provides a framework for monitoring, evaluating and learning in the Student Retention Project, with options that can be scaled depending on the time, team capability and resources available. We have designed a modular implementation approach to ensure the evaluation is utilisation focused and contributes to better outcomes for UOW students.

2 Project overview

2.1 The Student Retention Project at a glance

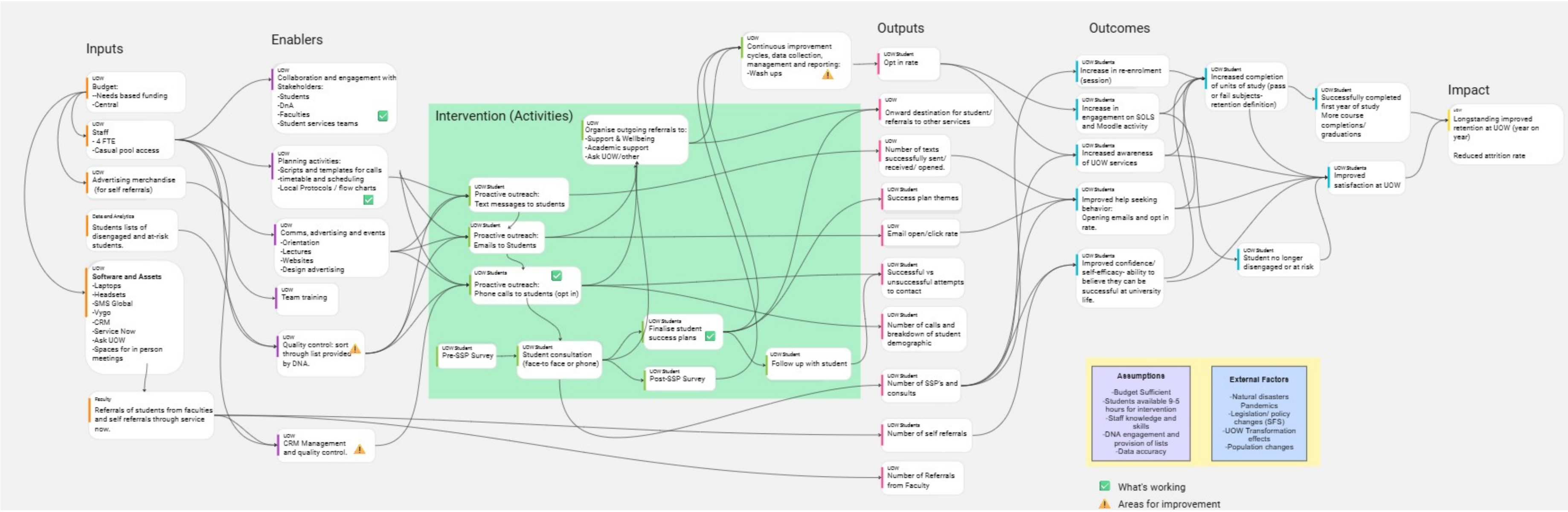
Activities	Target audience
Sending proactive outreach notifications via text messages, emails, phone calls.	Students identified as at risk.
Calling students to offer support, create space for conversation and understand barriers.	Students with flagged risk factors who opt in for a consultation after a text and email.
Student Consultation: developing personalised student support plans (SSPs) (academic, wellbeing, administrative)	Students who accept support and opt in to discuss their situation.
Referrals to academic services (PASS, tutoring, peer support)	Students with academic concerns, failing units or low academic engagement.
Referrals to wellbeing and personal support services	Students experiencing wellbeing, financial, housing, personal or motivational challenges
Navigational support (help with systems, deadlines, enrolment steps, forms)	Students unfamiliar with UOW processes, Commencing students, International students
Follow-up contact after consultation and SSP development.	Students who have successful completed an SSP
Collaboration with faculties, student services and academic support teams	Faculty staff, Student services teams, Subject co-ordinators, DnA and students
Staff reflection and continuous improvement cycles	Retention team members, Faculty staff and Subject co-ordinators

2.2 Project logic

The main purpose of this project logic is to tell the story of intended impact - the difference that the project is expected to make for the people who interact with it, in the places where these people live.

The logic was developed in consultation with the project team. It reflects the team's thinking at the current time, noting that this may have matured since the project was originally conceived and designed.

Figure 1: Project logic diagram



The narrative of the logic

The notes below set out key aspects of the story behind this project that might not be self-evident from the diagram in Figure 1.

- Early, proactive contact with students can address emerging disengagement with studies and provide timely guidance before issues escalate.
- The quality of the interaction is central to whether students act on advice, engage with services and remain enrolled.
- Students are more likely to take up support when they understand the consequences of inaction and feel the university is genuinely invested in their success.
- Equity cohorts may face additional barriers (including financial, cultural, wellbeing and administrative) that shape how they respond to outreach.

2.3 Assumptions, external factors and project risks

Project logics are inherently optimistic. They assume that everything goes well in the implementation: that all the pieces come together as expected, under conditions that are supportive. They also assume that the activities, once undertaken, will lead to the intended impacts. Essentially, wherever there is an arrow in a logic model, there is a positive assumption being made.

Assumptions

It is helpful to explicitly identify assumptions and external factors so that they can be prioritised in the data collection and considered in analysis. Sometimes the most transferrable lessons from an evaluation can be about the conditions under which key assumptions do or do not hold true. Some assumptions we can trust, others we need to test.

Important assumptions in the logic of this project are:

- Student identification is accurate, with risk flags able to reliably identify students who would benefit from early support
- Students are contactable, reachable and able to engage with communication channels used (SMS, email, phone)
- Students will be willing to engage with support when contacted, and perceive the outreach as relevant and useful
- Support model is appropriate for diverse student cohorts, including equity groups with varying needs
- Staff have the capacity, capability and consistency required to deliver outreach and record interactions accurately
- Data systems will capture interactions reliably, enabling credible monitoring and evaluation
- Referral pathways are available, accessible and have capacity to accept students referred during outreach

- **Academic and service units will collaborate effectively** to support referred students
- **Early, relational contact can address disengagement**, build confidence and prompt students to access help
- **Timely guidance and support improves student self-efficacy**, which contributes to improved progression and retention

External factors

External factors sit outside the control of the project but can have a significant bearing on its implementation or impact. Sometimes these come out of the blue, other times they can be anticipated. External factors that could have an impact on this project include:

- **Broader institutional changes:**
  - Changes to UOW's strategic priorities, funding allocations and organisational structures
  - Shifts in faculty-level commitments to student support or retention initiatives
  - Resource constraints affecting CRM, student services or teaching teams
- **Policy, regulatory or funding shifts:**
  - Federal policy changes (e.g., HEPPP/SEHEEF requirements, HELP reforms, Commonwealth support changes)
  - Changes in reporting obligations or performance metrics affecting retention work
  - Emerging compliance requirements for student communication or wellbeing
- **Sector-wide pressures:**
  - Increases in cost-of-living pressures affecting students' ability to continue study
  - Accommodation, housing, transport or financial stress impacting student engagement
  - Rising mental health challenges across higher education cohorts
- **Economic and labour market conditions:**
  - Job market fluctuations influencing students' decisions to pause, withdraw, or change study load
  - Growth in part-time employment among students, reducing availability for study
- **Student cohort shifts:**
  - Demographic changes in the student population
  - Changes in academic preparedness, English proficiency or digital literacy
  - Evolving student expectations about communication, contact and support

Project risks

Where an assumption looks like it might be a bit of a stretch, it is a good idea to take steps to help assure that the logic holds. This is akin to risk mitigation.

For this project, risk mitigation strategies in place include the following:

Project risks	Mitigation strategies
Capacity and workload constraints: Retention, faculty and service teams may not have the capacity to deliver outreach, follow-up, or evaluation activities consistently especially during peak periods	• Keep evaluation requirements small and prioritised (pulse survey, simple dashboard) • Embed monitoring tasks into existing workflows and CRM processes • Use modular evaluation components that can scale up/down depending on workload • Coordinate timing with faculties and service units to avoid overload
Inconsistent or incomplete recording of student contact: Variation in how staff log calls, notes, referrals or follow-up creates gaps in the data, limiting the reliability of analysis.	• Provide short templates/checklists/ in CRM for consistent logging • Build a shared understanding of “minimum data to record” • Regular data quality checks by DnA or project leads • Staff training refreshers to embed consistent practice
Data access or system changes disrupt evaluation: Changes to CRM, early-alert systems, data governance, or analytics tools may delay or prevent access to the data needed for monitoring and evaluation.	• Secure clear data governance agreements and points of contact early • Document data extraction processes to ensure continuity during system changes • Use minimum viable indicators that can be tracked across system transitions • Engage DnA as an ongoing partner in the evaluation cycle

3 Evaluation focus

3.1 Purposes of the evaluation

Understand effectiveness

Assess **whether, how and for whom** the Retention Project is improving:
- help-seeking and engagement
- student awareness of supports
- re-enrolment, unit completion and retention outcomes
- equity of outcomes across different student cohorts
- aligned to UOW's Student Strategies

Strengthen implementation

Identify what is working well, what could be improved and what processes or supports need to change to deliver consistent, high-quality outreach and support.

Support continuous learning

Generate insights that help staff improve communication, referral pathways, navigational support and student engagement practices across sessions.

Guide decisions about scaling and sustainability

Provide evidence to inform decisions about:
- required staffing and resourcing
- CRM and analytics capability
- future enhancements or expansions to the model
- alignment with broader Student Success initiatives

3.2 Audiences for the evaluation

Evaluation Audience	Audience Use
Retention Team	Use findings to improve practice and operations Test assumptions Understand impact and outcomes for students
Student Engagement Leadership	Understand impact and experience for students Inform strategic and operational planning Feedback for the Student Advisory Council (Students as Partners)
Faculties and Academic Units	Identify emerging issues for student cohorts Develop consistent approaches for supporting at-risk students
Data & Analytics (DnA)	Improve data pipelines, dashboards, early alert accuracy and interpret system-level patterns
Supporting Services (Wellbeing, PASS, Student Services)	Anticipate demand from referrals Identify and address recurring barriers Improve support pathways collaboratively
Senior Leadership (as required)	Understand contribution to institutional KPIs Inform future investment and strategic decisions

3.3 Evaluation questions

Implementation & Reach	Student Experience	Outcomes
• How consistently are the project activities delivered and who is being reached? • Who is under-represented in outreach or engagement and why?	• How do students experience the outreach and support? Is it timely, respectful, culturally safe and helpful? • To what extent does the project reflect the Student Success principles in practice?	• To what extent does the project improve awareness of supports, help-seeking and confidence? • Does the project contribute to improved re-enrolment, unit completion and overall retention? • Are there differential outcomes for equity groups?

4 Evaluation design options

There are three main evaluation design options available for the Retention Project.

- There is no 'best option' here. The choice depends on a combination of factors, including the purpose, the detail required, and the resources available.
- The insights from evaluation are additive. The team can pursue a mix of these options, or others, over several years. This would piece together growing clarity and nuance over time.

	Option A: Essentials	Option B: Mixed Methods	Option C: Deep Dive
Purpose	Establish reliable monitoring and early insight	Understand student experience and unpack why changes are (or are not) happening	Test the project's contribution to retention and equity outcomes
Will explain	What is happening	Why it is happening	Impact on student outcomes
Will deliver	Rapid insights for continuous improvement	Richer insights about equity grouips, barriers and enablers	Deeper insights about longitudinal outcomes
Best for	Starting point, low capacity	Improving practice, student voice	Strategic decisions, investment cases
Design	Monitoring + light eval	Quant + qual	Quasi-experimental
Data sources	CRM, Student Lists, other admin data	Option A + interviews, case studies	Option B + matched cohorts
Analysis	Descriptive	Triangulated mixed-methods	Contribution analysis
Outputs	Dashboard	Mixed-methods report	Summative evaluation
Resourcing, data burden + complexity	Low	Moderate	Higher
Evidence strength	Baseline	Medium–high	High

5 Indicators, data sources and methods

This section outlines the indicators we will track, the data sources available and the methods for collecting and analysing data under each evaluation option. It is structured so the team can select the evaluation option that fits available resources and maintains consistency across all options with a set of core indicators.

5.1 Overview of indicators

Table 1: Core indicators across all options

Domain	Indicator	Purpose
Engagement Reach	Number of students identified as at risk Number of student Op-in's Number of students contacted % contacted	To monitor implementation, reach and equity
Quality of Contact	% successful calls student-reported usefulness of support	To assess quality of outreach
Referral Pathways	Number of referrals made Service usage patterns	To understand support flow
Early Change Indicators	Changes in awareness, confidence and help-seeking intention	To track early shifts
Academic Outcomes	Unit completion, progression and re-enrolment	To monitor outcomes over time
Equity	Outcomes by equity cohort (e.g., Indigenous, Low SES, Students with Disability, International, Regional, Rural and Remote)	To assess equity and inclusion
Implementation Learning	Staff insights, barriers, enablers and improvement suggestions	To support continuous improvement

5.2 Data sources

The table below shows a summary of the data sources by evaluation option

	Option A: Essentials	Option B: Mixed methods	Option C: Deep dive
CRM/	✓	✓	✓
DnA student at-risk lists	✓	✓	✓
Admin outcomes (unit completion, re-enrolment, change in course status i.e referral/ restricted status)	✓	✓	✓
Student pulse survey	✓	✓	✓
Service usage data	Optional	✓	✓
Student interviews	–	✓	✓
Case studies	–	✓	✓

5.3 Data Collection Methods

Option A — Low-Resource Essentials

Purpose: Establish baseline monitoring and early indicators of change.

Data Source	Collection Method	Analysis Approach
CRM activity logs	Automatic CRM capture; sessional extract	Counts, trends, equity breakdowns
At-risk lists	Sessional DnA pull	Comparison: identified vs contacted
Admin outcome data	Once per session	Before/after descriptive analysis
Pulse survey (2–4 items)	SMS/email auto-send	Frequencies, crosstabs, short themes
Staff reflections	Short form or reflection session	Light thematic coding

Option B — Mixed-Methods Evaluation

Purpose: Understand *why* change is occurring and how students experience support.

Data Source	Collection Method	Analysis Approach
All Option A sources	As above	As above + triangulation
Student interviews	Purposeful sampling, short semi-structured interviews	Thematic analysis, equity lens
Focus groups/yarning	Facilitated groups with priority cohorts	Experience mapping + cultural safety assessment
Case studies	3–5 illustrative examples	Narrative synthesis
Staff workshops	Facilitated discussion	Pattern identification + co-interpretation

Option C — Deep-Dive Contribution Analysis

Purpose: Assess the project’s plausible contribution to retention and progression outcomes.

Data Source	Collection Method	Analysis Approach
All Option A & B sources	As above	Integrated mixed-methods
Matched comparison group	Risk-based matching, DnA extract	Regression/comparative analyses
Longitudinal progression	Multi-session dataset	Trend analysis; contribution story
System/faculty integrations	As available	Alternative explanations analysis

6 Governance, roles and responsibilities

Effective evaluation requires shared ownership across teams involved in project design, delivery and monitoring. The roles and responsibilities below will ensure evaluation activities are coordinated, feasible and aligned to Strategy.

Role	Governance role in the evalation	Additional responsibilities in the implementation of the evaluation
Project Sponsor (Decision making authority)	Oversee alignment with UOW's strategic priorities Ensure appropriate support for evaluation activities	Approve major evaluation outputs Support cross-unit coordination
Evaluation Lead (Retention Manager/ Managers tasked with Evaluation)	Co-design and manage the evaluation plan Ensure evaluation activities are delivered on time and meet quality expectations.	Coordinate data collection Undertake analysis (Option A) or coordinate with DnA (Options B and C) Prepare reports Facilitate sense-making sessions
Retention Team (Practitioners)	Co-design the evaluation plan such that it meets current and emerging program needs	Maintain CRM data quality Distribute pulse surveys Participate in staff reflection Provide qualitative insights into implementation
Data & Analytics (DnA)	Advise on feasible and appropriate use of data for evaluation Hold responsibility for data quality	Deliver sessional data extracts Assist with dashboard development + manage dashboards Support and maintain data integrity Conduct analysis if Option C is selected
Faculties / Schools	n.a. - Collaborate on intervention design but do not hold a governance role in evaluation	Provide contextual insights Help interpret findings for particular cohorts
Student partners / student representatives	Provide diverse student perspectives on evaluation methods, findings and implications	Advise on research tools, including pulse survey wording, interview/FG guides Review of communication approaches Review findings for cultural safety and student relevance
Supporting service units*	Provide service unit perspectives on evaluation methods, findings and implications	Track and share referral data to provides insight into patterns of usage Interpret findings relevant to their service Collaborate on subseqent pathway improvements

* e.g., PASS, Learning Co-op, Wellbeing, Student Services

7 Evaluation timeline

The evaluation timeline follows the academic session cycle and is designed to be practical, repeatable and aligned with the rhythms of the Retention Project. The timeline below describes the core evaluation activities for Option A, with additional activities marked for Options B and C.

Indicative Timeline

Before session (Weeks –2 to 1)

- Confirm risk flags and student identification criteria (DnA)
- Prepare CRM templates and pulse survey (Retention Team)
- Conduct brief staff refresher on data entry and quality (Evaluation Lead)

During session (Weeks 1–8)

- Routine outreach (Retention Team)
- Automatic CRM data capture
- **Pulse surveys** sent weekly or at touchpoints
- Staff record referral details and follow-up notes

Mid-session (Weeks 4–6)

- Pull preliminary monitoring data
- Quick insights check-in with DnA
- Adjust communication approach if required
- (**Option B**) Begin recruitment for interviews/focus groups

End of session (Weeks 8–10)

- Final data extract (DnA)
- Staff reflection session (“what worked, what didn’t, what next?”)
- Pulse survey summary
- Prepare sessional dashboard

Post-session (Weeks 11–13)

- Produce short insights brief (Evaluation Lead)
- **Option B**: Conduct interviews, focus groups, yarning circles
- **Option C**: Prepare matched cohort dataset for analysis

Annual Evaluation Activities

- Annual synthesis report (integrating 2–3 sessions of data)
- Equity-focused analysis (e.g. Indigenous Islander students, Students with Disability, Low SES, international cohorts, RRR)
- Sense-making workshop with Retention Team, DnA and Student Engagement leadership
- Update evaluation plan based on learning and feasibility

8 Evaluation risks, ethics and considerations

Evaluation of the Retention Project requires ethical practice, data governance, cultural safety and includes operational risks. The following considerations apply regardless of which evaluation option is chosen.

Key evaluation risks and mitigation

Risk	Mitigation Strategy
Workload and capacity constraints	Keep evaluation modular Prioritise Option A during peak times Embed data tasks into existing workflows.
Inconsistent CRM data quality	Provide quick reference templates Run short refreshers Light data quality checks each session Local protocol documentation
Low student response to outreach or surveys	Co-design messages with student representatives Use SMS Make surveys short (1-2 mins)
Referral pathways overstretched	Monitor service capacity Use triage Maintain communication with service leads Coordinate timing of referrals
Data access or system disruptions	Document extraction processes Maintain close relationship with DnA Ensure minimum viable indicators are stable

Ethical considerations

- Informed participation: Pulse survey and interview participation is voluntary, students receive brief, plain-English explanation of purpose
- Privacy and confidentiality: Only de-identified data is used for analysis, identifiable data is restricted to operational staff
- Cultural safety: Evaluation activities uphold respect, recognition and cultural safety
- Minimising burden: Student contact is kept brief, evaluation avoids duplication with other feedback mechanisms
- Vulnerable cohorts: Particular care is taken when engaging students experiencing distress or disengagement

Data governance and security

- All data storage complies with UOW data governance policies
- Administrative and CRM data are accessed only by authorised personnel
- Student feedback is stored separately in secure folders
- Data sharing follows role-based access controls
- Evaluation outputs use aggregated data only

Considerations for equity and inclusion

- Ensure representation of equity cohorts in evaluation activities (especially in Option B)
- Analyse outcomes by equity group each session
- Ensure student voice activities are culturally safe, welcoming and inclusive
- Adapt methods for accessibility (e.g., alternative formats for surveys)

Appendices

Optional: Program documentation or additional evaluation notes

- Lessons Learned Log (2025) Retention Evaluation Gantt Chart 2025.xlsx
- King, C. (2025) Retention Program Process Evaluation Report. *Internal document.*
- UOW Vision 2035 & Strategic Plan 2030. https://www.uow.edu.au/about/our-vision-strategy/

References

- F. Hill, D. Fulcher, R. Sie and M. de Laat, "Balancing Accuracy and Transparency in Early Alert Identification of Students at Risk," *2018 IEEE International Conference on Teaching, Assessment, and Learning for Engineering (TALE)*, Wollongong, NSW, Australia, 2018, pp. 1125-1128, doi: 10.1109/TALE.2018.8615370.
  keywords: {Predictive models;Logistics;Data models;Education;Australia;Machine learning;History;early alert;machine learning;random forest;predictive modelling;logistic regression},

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