

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Student Retention and the Pandemic: Some Preliminary Analysis

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Research Domain: Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract: Covid-19 forced sudden change to higher education and social policy in many countries and provided opportunities for naturalistic observation of how changes to education systems and interact with other environmental and social policy systems. The question asked in this paper is can these observations shed any light upon the internal and external factors that influence student retention? This preliminary study used institutional data to identify how retention of various student sub-cohorts was affected during 2020 when compared with pre-pandemic retention patterns. Analysis found varying patterns of retention for different student sub-cohorts within the course. In this analysis mature-aged part-time on-campus students appeared to be most adversely affected, whilst online students appeared to benefit to differing degrees. The analysis concluded that some curriculum changes and some external factors may have improved the learning environment for online students, but that external factors may have been particularly adverse for some part-time mature-aged students.

Paper: Many researchers have affirmed that student retention is influenced by multiple factors, including external factors that are beyond the control of universities (Braxton et al., 2013; Cooper, 2002; Tinto, 1993; Yorke & Longden, 2004). In Western Australia universities mostly serve local students, who live within daily travelling distance of the university. Students can study on-campus or online, either full-time or part-time. Smaller groups of students live remotely, always study online and never attend campus or move to Perth to study on-campus.

In Western Australian the response to Covid-19 has been less disruptive than in many countries. Teaching on-campus occurred for the first four weeks of semester 1 (during March 2020) and then online until the end of May. When learning went online, all students had access to additional weekly 'live' online tutorials, alongside the standard online course, which was delivered through recorded lectures, downloadable course materials that included exercises and an electronic Discussion Forum. End of semester examinations were replaced with open-book online tests. Teaching in semester 2, 2020 (July-the end of October) returned to normal and was offered in on-campus and online modes for the whole semester. The increased frequency of live online tutorials was retained, and the examinations were replaced by tests, as in semester 1.

From April 2020 onwards, the Australian government closed international borders, and the state governments instituted lockdowns. In Western Australia, the lockdown was comprehensive for about

three months (most shops, entertainment and businesses closed, and travel was not possible). From the beginning of April until the end of 2020, financial supports were in place which meant that some students received payments to compensate for lost earnings and those on 'Youth Allowance' or 'Austudy' had their payments doubled. These measures meant many students were financially more secure than previously and had less work pressure.

Method

The sub-cohorts examined are school leavers (17-19), Youth (20-25), mature-age 26+, on-campus, online, full-time, and part-time. The numbers were too small to provide reliable trends for other characteristics. Analysis uses a systems perspective.

Findings and discussion

Two sub-cohorts were retained at above the course average. These were full-time on-campus students (79%) and part-time online students (91%) at much higher than the 5-year course average. Under pre-pandemic conditions, on-campus students were retained at a [5-year average of 77.4% \(variance 72%-82%\)](#), and online students were retained at a 5-year average of 61.8% (variance 42%-80%). Two sub-cohorts were retained at below the average course rate. These were online full-time students (67% slightly above the 5-year average) and on-campus part time students (53%) much lower than the 5-year average rate for on-campus students, see Figure 1.

When age is examined as a factor, both sub-cohorts of mature age students had lower retention rates, and unusually, this was more pronounced for on-campus mature-aged students than for mature-aged students studying remotely. Figure 2 shows that whilst the 'youth age' were retained at 87% and school leavers at 82%, mature-age students had the lowest retention at 66%. When this is examined in more detail the retention rate was lower for full-time mature aged students (63%) than for part time mature aged students (71%) and lower for on-campus mature aged students (64%) than for online mature aged students (70%).

Conclusions

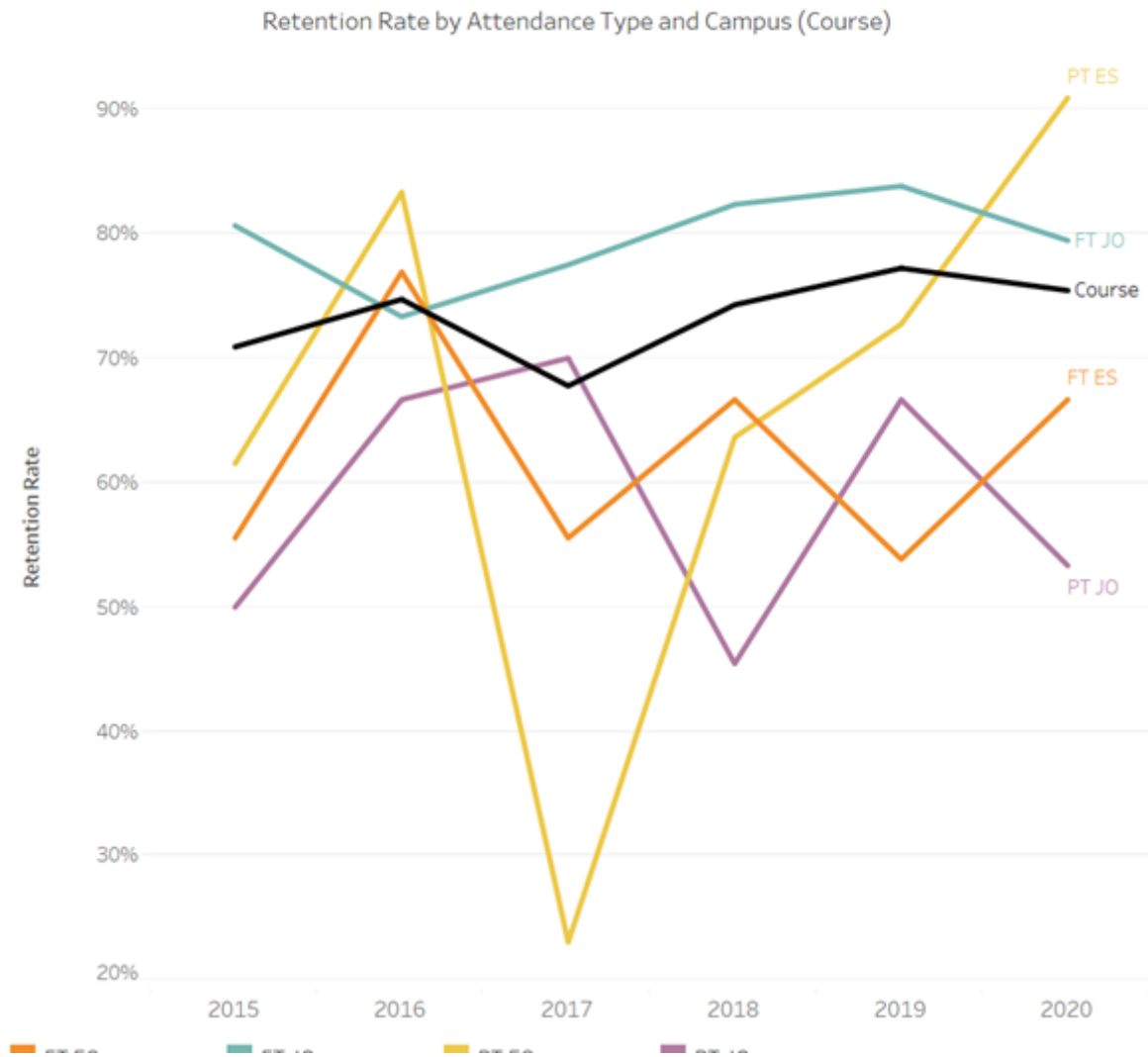
Putting this together, the students who were least likely to be retained after the pandemic year were mature-aged students who had been studying on-campus especially if they were studying part-time. The students who were least likely to be affected, in terms of retention were the 'youth' cohort. The cohort that showed most 'benefit' from the changed arrangements were online students generally and especially online part-time students where retention increased to its highest level ever in 2020. The researcher considered the possibility that 'live' weekly tutorial may have been useful, or the replacement of the examination by an open book test and some student feedback indicated that this was the case. The lack of consistency in these findings about attendance or mode of study point to the influence of external factors as mediators of retention. Positive factors included better financial support for some students and the restrictions on work and social life may have permitted some students to engage more with study. These results are also consistent with the assumption that some mature age students experienced additional pressures during lockdown that were not compensated for by having extra money. This work is on-going. Further analysis is being conducted on larger samples.

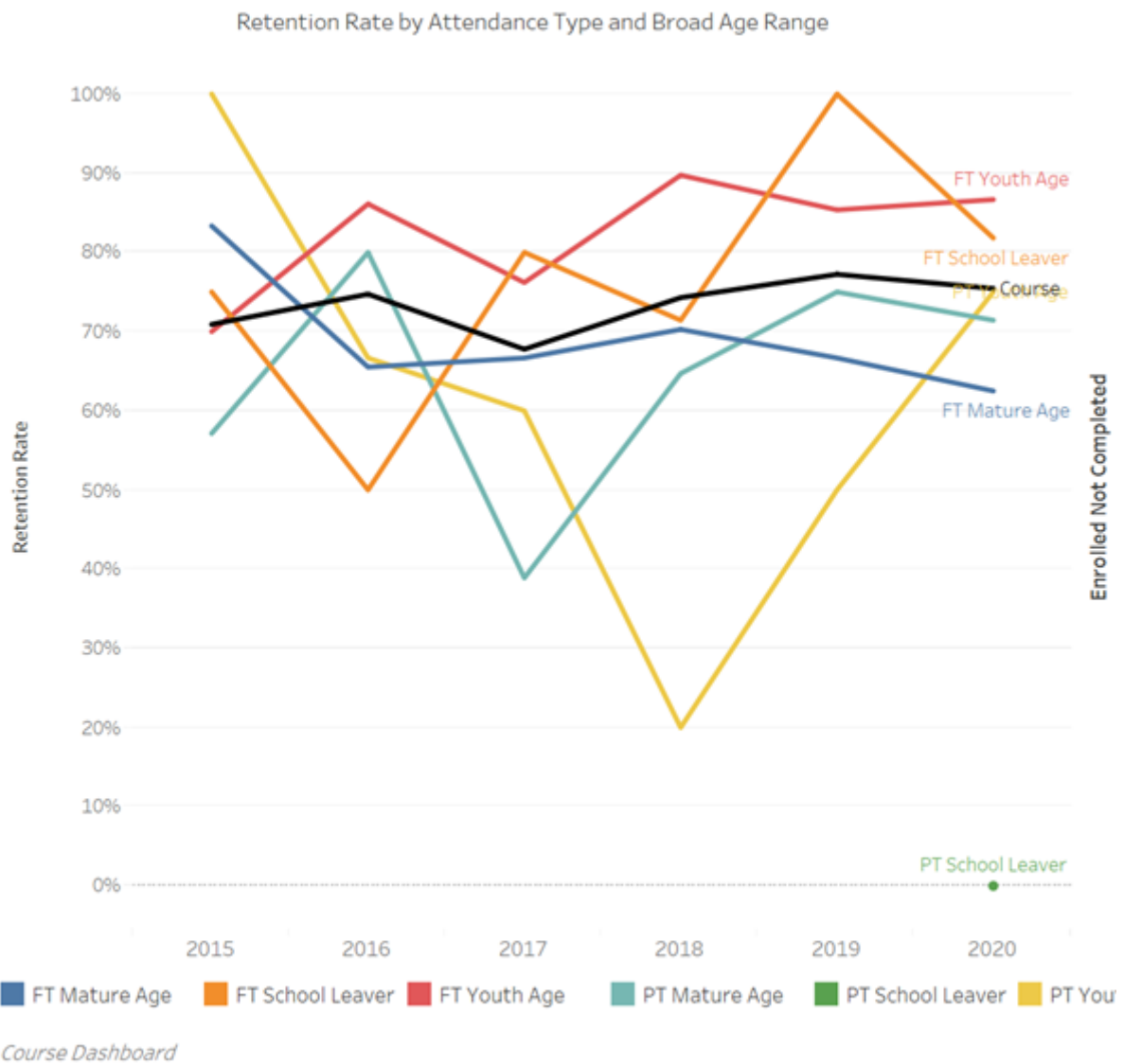
References:



RETENTION DEGREE

This sheet provides a more detailed view of retention rates. Selecting from the filters on the right of the page





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