

*Chapter Twelve:
Decreasing Attrition While Increasing
Diversity: Connections and Contradictions
in Transforming Marginalisation in an
Australian Contemporary University*

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Abstract

This chapter uses the current focus on universities' efforts to decrease student attrition as a lens to explore the connections and contradictions faced by those same universities as they increase diversity and aspire to transform marginalisation. The chapter draws on statistical data relating to Australian university students generally and to Central Queensland University (CQU) students specifically to illustrate some of the challenges and opportunities faced by universities as they bring their own institutional strategies into alignment at the macro level with government socioeconomic policy and at the micro level with the individual goals and aspirations of students and other stakeholders.

Findings presented in the chapter support the argument that CQU specifically and the Australian higher education sector more broadly have contributed to maximising the educational outcomes, and hence to transforming the marginalisation, of some minority groups, such as students from non-English speaking backgrounds and some residents of regional communities. On the other hand, relatively high attrition rates remain the norm for other groups, such as Indigenous students, those from isolated areas and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and for some groups not generally associated with minorities. For these groups, and for universities striving to increase their diversity by including such groups in their student cohorts, the groups' marginalisation remains untransformed.

Introduction

This chapter brings together three distinct foci that separately and in combination have a profound impact on teaching and learning in contemporary universities. The first focus is *student attrition*, which occurs when students withdraw from their studies before obtaining the qualification for which they are enrolled. The second focus is *student diversity*, which is reflected in the widest possible range of heterogeneous backgrounds and experiences prior to and during students' university studies, as opposed to the relatively narrow and homogeneous set of backgrounds and experiences of the socioeconomic elite who previously had a near monopoly on university entrance. The third focus is *marginalisation*, which is evident when particular individuals and groups have inequitable difficulty in gaining access to, and/or in remaining at, university, while *transformation* refers to the reduction of that marginalisation and the creation of new understandings of the value and values of those individuals and groups.

This chapter is part of a larger study, a research project centred on student attrition and retention at Central Queensland University (CQU). With interested others we have conducted seminars and written papers (see for example Alcock et al., 2004; Bowser, Danaher & Somasundaram, 2004, 2005; Danaher, Somasundaram & Bowser, 2004; Somasundaram, Bowser & Danaher, 2005), with a view to raising the profile of this important topic, to articulating with the current national emphasis on the topic as a performance indicator of quality in Australian universities and to highlighting the complicated and contested character of both attrition and retention.

Within this broader study, this chapter navigates a pathway through the complex connections and contradictions that universities face in seeking to reconcile the three foci identified above and at the same time is intended to contribute to the conceptualisation of marginalisation and its transformation with which this section of the book is concerned. It does so by engaging with the links that can be identified between two pairs of ideas:

- student attrition and diversity
- marginalisation and transformation.

The first pair of ideas is centred on the perceived and potentially problematic association between student attrition and diversity. From one perspective greater student diversity at CQU can be taken to reflect reduced social marginalisation, as students who would not previously have had an opportunity to complete higher education now do so in increased numbers. From another perspective, however, there is a possible contradiction between attrition and diversity: more students from previously marginalised groups may well enter university, but unless there are appropriate support structures they are at greater risk of leaving prematurely as “attrition statistics” (Beasley, 1997). This possible contradiction is based on the argument—which some researchers might well contest—that universities have traditionally been agents of the preservation of “high culture” and

social elites, and that they are still far from being “a level playing field” for particular minority groups and communities (Gale & McNamee, 1996; McConaghy, 1996; Rowan, Bartlett & Danaher, 1996).

The second pair of ideas is marginalisation and transformation. If the chapter is to contribute to conceptualising marginalisation and its potential transformation, it must help with the understanding of these two concepts as being enacted and situated in the material conditions and the lived experiences of students, academics, university managers and government policy-makers negotiating the complexities of studying and teaching at and managing contemporary universities. This is crucial to understanding why some minority groups have their marginalisation transformed, and others have theirs replicated, through higher education.

The chapter consists of three sections:

- changes to the Australian higher education landscape reflected and enacted at CQU over the past 39 years;
- attrition, diversity and marginalisation in Australian higher education;
- attrition, diversity and marginalisation at CQU.

The analysis of national and institutional student attrition statistics demonstrates that, while the marginalisation of some minority groups is being transformed by their university studies, that is not the case for other groups, with consequent limitations on the increase in diversity of CQU and Australian universities more broadly.

Central Queensland University in the Australian Higher Education Landscape

Exploring key features of the recent history of higher education in Australia as they have impacted on CQU provides the contextual background to the chapter. In particular, our emphasis is on how those features have influenced the “look and feel” of decreasing attrition and increasing diversity, and hence of transforming marginalisation, at the university.

Higher education in Australia has undergone a noticeable transition in the last four decades. Social change and education policy have altered the landscape considerably. A system once considered accessible only to the affluent and a lucky few who were able to secure scholarships now reflects more of the character and construction of the broader community.

In the case of CQU, whose geographical distance from already established universities meant that it became a university in its own right rather than amalgamating with or being subsumed by other universities, this situation carried with it its own connections and contradictions with regard to student attrition and diversity. On the one hand, as an institute of advanced education for almost 25 years, it had a nationally recognised reputation for its provision of professional and vocational qualifications,

greatly facilitated by its being named in 1989 as one of eight nationally designated providers of distance education (King, 1992). Moreover, since the mid 1990s university managers have pursued vigorously an expansion of provision of programs to international students through CQU's partnership with Campus Management Services at the University's Australian metropolitan campuses. It might therefore be presumed that as a new university CQU was accustomed to engaging students from a wider variety of backgrounds than might attend long-established universities and was effective at meeting their needs. On the other hand, it could be argued that, once all institutes of advanced education became universities and competed with existing universities for funding and students, CQU might be considered a "second choice" option for many of those students precisely because of its geographical location and its short history as a university.

This latter argument is not one that we endorse (partly because our observation is that the University has established itself on its own merits as the University of first choice for many Central Queensland residents and many other Australian and international students). We raise it here because it helps to illustrate two contradictory but equally fundamental positions in discussions of student attrition and diversity. One position is that, for certain commentators (as well as some university academics and managers), increasing student diversity means reducing quality, reflected in decreased student attrition. The other and oppositional position is that, for other commentators, increasing student diversity means increasing student attrition, reflected in reduced quality. The first contradiction equates quality with "excellence" and attrition with "standards"; the second contradiction associates quality with "equity" and attrition with "inequity". These opposed positions highlight the complex connections and contradictions associated with the links among decreasing attrition, increasing diversity and transforming marginalisation, as we seek to demonstrate in the remainder of this chapter.

Attrition, Diversity and Marginalisation in Australian Higher Education

The national and institutional changes noted above have altered the Australian and CQU higher education landscape once characterised by a very homogeneous group of students with known academic qualities and knowledge drawn from a particular socioeconomic group within the community to one that is more representative of the various groups that constitute contemporary society. Members of groups considered as underrepresented or marginalised are now more readily found at universities and while the percentage of the overall enrolment may not have shifted noticeably the numbers have increased as the total enrolment at each university has grown. The once marginalised and unnoticed now create a diversity within the student group of a sufficient magnitude for the connections and contradictions of attending to attrition to be compounded as the range of social, economic and educational factors influencing individuals' decisions about whether to continue or withdraw expands.

Within this broader contextual framework, in 1990, the Australian government, reflecting the social change that it had been instrumental in activating, released the paper *A Fair Chance for All* (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1990). This paper established the government's objective of increasing the participation in higher education of six groups identified as being traditionally underrepresented. These were:

- people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people;
- women in particular non-traditional areas of study;
- people from non-English speaking backgrounds;
- people with disabilities; and
- people from rural and isolated areas. (Retrieved June 19, 2005, from <http://www.dest.gov.au/archive/highered/eippubs/eip9608/chapter1.htm>)

Universities were openly encouraged by the government to increase their enrolments from these groups and were explicitly rewarded for doing so, and they responded accordingly. While the government paper *Our Universities: Backing Australia's Future* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003) altered the national equity framework, it continued its support for increasing enrolments from members of marginalised groups.

With regard to these six groups, a recent report of research into all the groups except Indigenous Australians (James, Baldwin, Coates, Krause & McInnis, 2004) found a mixed result. On the one hand, the report recommended that women studying in non-traditional areas not be included on the list, except those studying engineering and information technology, and that "People from non-English speaking backgrounds as presently defined should no longer be considered an equity target group" (p. xiv). On

the other hand, the report recommended that men studying nursing, society and culture and education be designated a new equity group. Moreover, the areas where the greatest improvements still needed to be made related to students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, students from rural and isolated areas and students with disabilities. The report's findings about the first two of these groups, who have a preponderance at, and hence a particular relevance for CQU, were confirmed by Heagney (2004): "Low SES [socioeconomic status] is a primary determinant of disadvantage and is present in differing combinations in nearly all manifestations of disadvantage" (p. 12). Furthermore this phenomenon can be extrapolated to other contemporary societies: "Everywhere the proportions from the upper and middle classes [attending universities] are still significantly higher than from the working classes or farmers, despite a generation of efforts to close the gap" (Trow, 2006, p. 246).

These complex connections and contradictions among decreasing attrition, increasing diversity and transforming marginalisation for students are evident also in a recent overview (Lukic, Broadbent & Maclachlan, 2004) of constants and shifts in the Australian higher education attrition rates between 1994 and 2002. The summary of the overview's main findings was as follows:

- The 2002 attrition rate for all domestic students and all international students is the lowest since 1994.
- The attrition rate for international students has declined to a greater extent than that for domestic students over the period.
- Attrition rates vary considerably across institutions and student groups.
- School leavers commencing in undergraduate courses have a lower attrition rate than other undergraduate commencers.
- Domestic students generally have a higher attrition rate than their international counterparts.
- Postgraduate students have a higher attrition rate than undergraduate students.
- Rates in the first year after commencement of a course are around double that of those in the second year. (p. 1)

What these statistics reflect is an extensive diversity of the student population at Australian universities and a considerable variability in the attrition rates of that population. This complexity extends to inferences about the marginalisation and/or its transformation of particular social groups, as exemplified by the observation: "Thus age of the student may be a more important contributor to attrition rates than whether the student was new to higher education or not" (Lukic et al., 2004, p. 5). In other words, the profiles of students most at risk of experiencing attrition are highly differentiated and some of their defining characteristics reflect membership of particular minority groups and others do not, while some minority groups

have significant representation among students at risk of attrition and others do not. We infer from this that attrition, diversity and marginalisation are all evident in contemporary Australian higher education, although in widely varying combinations. The complexity of their interrelationship underscores the importance of interrogating these phenomena at the level of a single institution, to which we now turn.

Attrition, Diversity and Marginalisation at Central Queensland University

The connections and contradictions among reducing attrition, increasing diversity and transforming marginalisation noted above in relation to Australian higher education are evident also at CQU. Some of the key characteristics of CQU's student population in 2003 are represented in Table 12.1. These include the very small proportion represented by Indigenous students (0.6% compared with 3.5% for the Queensland population [Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001, Table 2-1]), the marked preponderance of mature age students over school leavers and the significant proportions represented by international and external students. As we noted earlier in the chapter, some of these categories (such as Indigenous students and some groups of external and international students) represent minority groups; others constitute diverse demographic markers.

Tables 12.2, 12.3, 12.4 and 12.5 portray some of the connections between this diversity of CQU's student population and selected retention statistics for that population. These tables have been adapted from Lukic et al. (2004) and the original attrition values have been converted to retention values in order to facilitate comparison with the charts in the figures that follow. The conversion formula used was per cent retention equals 100 minus per cent attrition.

Table 12–1: Characteristics of CQU’s student population in 2003

(adapted from Luck, Jones, McConachie & Danaher, 2004, p. 22)

Total in 2003	Category of student (includes both undergraduates and postgraduates)
21,351	Total number of students enrolled in all CQU programs in 2003
76	Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students
924	School leavers (completed full-time schooling in 2001 or 2002)
20,427	Mature age students
12,436	Domestic students
8,915	International students
7,261	Distance education (external) students
1,187	Multimodal (internal and external) students

Table 12–2: Comparison of overall domestic and international, undergraduate and postgraduate student retention percentage rates at CQU, 1994–2002

(adapted from Lukic et al., 2004)

Student category	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
All domestic	74.8	75.7	74.5	75.0	74.3	77.0	78.5	72.3	76.4
All international	72.3	69.0	63.6	73.9	76.7	73.5	76.2	78.2	78.8
Domestic undergraduate	75.2	76.1	75.6	75.9	75.0	77.9	79.0	73.1	77.3
International undergraduate	79.6	71.8	64.2	76.3	79.2	73.2	75.8	77.9	78.8
Domestic postgraduate	72.1	75.4	71.2	73.2	72.3	71.4	73.3	64.9	69.3
International postgraduate	71.4	68.3	67.1	73.9	74.9	74.2	77.1	78.7	78.8

Several patterns are noteworthy among these retention statistics for CQU. One pattern is consistency and resilience, with certain rates varying little from year to year across the nine-year period, suggesting the conflation of several underlying factors influencing phenomena of considerable complexity. Another pattern, based on comparing the rates in 1994 and 2002, is a significant increase in retention, suggesting a range of possible causes, including the effective application of university-wide and faculty-

specific strategies aimed at enhancing student retention and progression. Yet another pattern is the sizeable variation of rates for different categories of students, from a high value of 89.5% (see Table 12–3) for domestic undergraduate students who commenced in 1999 and who are not new to higher education and are in their second year of study to a low value of 62% (see Table 12–5) for international undergraduate students who commenced study in 1996.

In an effort to ground the discussion further in a more specifically circumscribed set of data, retention rates were calculated for all CQU students who applied through the Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre and enrolled in the first term of 2003. Student enrolments were tracked for the subsequent major terms in 2003, 2004 and 2005. Figure 12–1 shows the compound or gross retention rates of students as they progress through their studies, as a percentage of those students who first enrolled in the first term of 2003. The reducing slope of the gross retention rate indicates a significant increase in retention rates as students progress to later years of study, reinforcing the earlier comment about the evident utility of targeted university-wide and faculty-specific strategies directed at enhancing student retention and progression in the first year.

Figure 12–1 also shows “relative retention” rates from term to term. The relative retention graph shows that only 80% of students in Term 1 2003 progress to Term 2 2003, and just over 80% of Term 2 2003 students are retained in Term 1 2004. However, the relative retention rate from one term to the next is approximately 90% for courses in the second and third years of study. This is equivalent to saying that the attrition rate in Year 1 (approximately 20%) is twice the attrition rate in subsequent years (approximately 10%).

student category ...									
all domestic postgraduates	72.1	75.4	71.2	73.2	72.3	71.4	73.3	64.9	69.3
commencing* domestic postgraduates in first year of study	63.2	72.6	68.3	66.1	66.9	68.1	74.5	–	66.9

Table 12–5: Comparison of retention rates for various categories of international students at CQU between 1994 and 2002

International student category ...	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
all students	72.3	69.0	63.6	73.9	76.7	73.5	76.2	78.2	78.8
all undergraduates	79.6	71.8	64.2	76.3	79.2	73.2	75.8	77.9	78.8
commencing* undergraduates	71.9	65.6	62.0	72.4	75.9	70.4	74.6	76.0	76.9
all postgraduates	71.4	68.3	67.1	73.9	74.9	74.2	77.1	78.7	78.8
commencing* postgraduates	77.9	68.5	68.4	71.9	74.7	75.2	79.4	–	77.9

* Commencing students are those who began studies in the year indicated in Row 1 of this table.

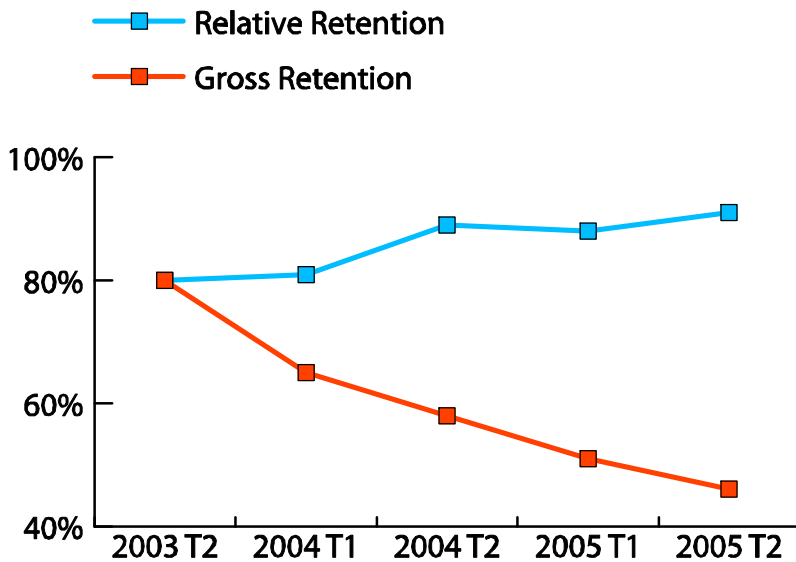


Figure 12-1: CQU gross and relative retention rates for students who applied to enrol through the Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre (QTAC) and who began their studies in Term 1 2003

The subsequent figures provide relative retention rates as the ratio of the number of students who took courses in a term compared with the previous term (with the range of percentages being restricted to the range of values represented in each figure in order to enhance clarity and readability). Figure 12-2 shows the relative retention rates by gender (1,334 female students, 826 male students), with females having higher retention rates and a distinct step-like increase in their retention, while males' retention increase was more steady. This aligns in a general sense with the recommendation by James et al. (2004) noted earlier that women studying in most non-traditional areas should no longer be considered an equity group and that men studying in particular non-traditional areas for males should be considered a new equity group.

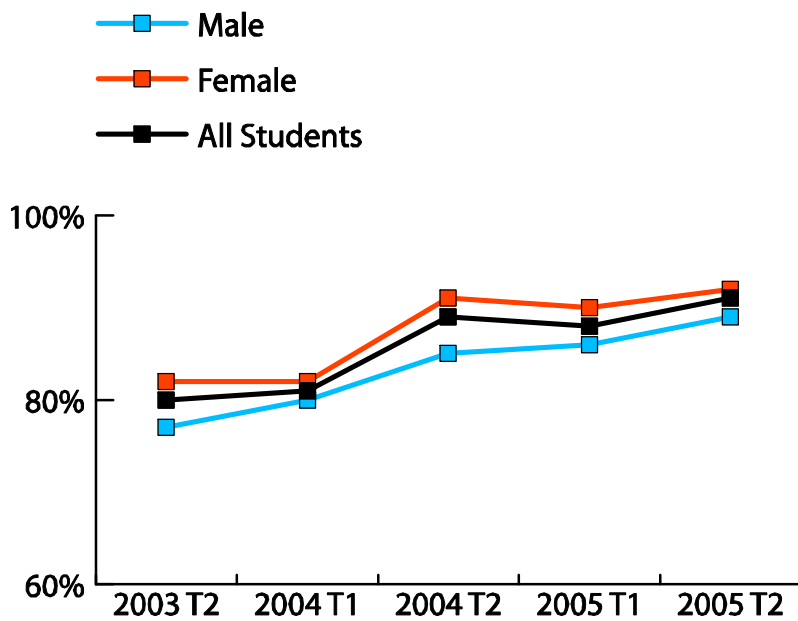


Figure 12-2: CQU relative retention rates by gender

Figure 12-3 shows the relative retention rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) students (39 students), who generally have a higher attrition rate than the general population (the increased retention rate noted in Term 1 2004 possibly being due to a statistical anomaly, perhaps arising from the small population). This accords with the trend noted throughout the chapter whereby Indigenous Australians remain at considerable risk of attrition from university studies, despite the gains that have been made with particular students in specific programs (see also Hunt, this volume).

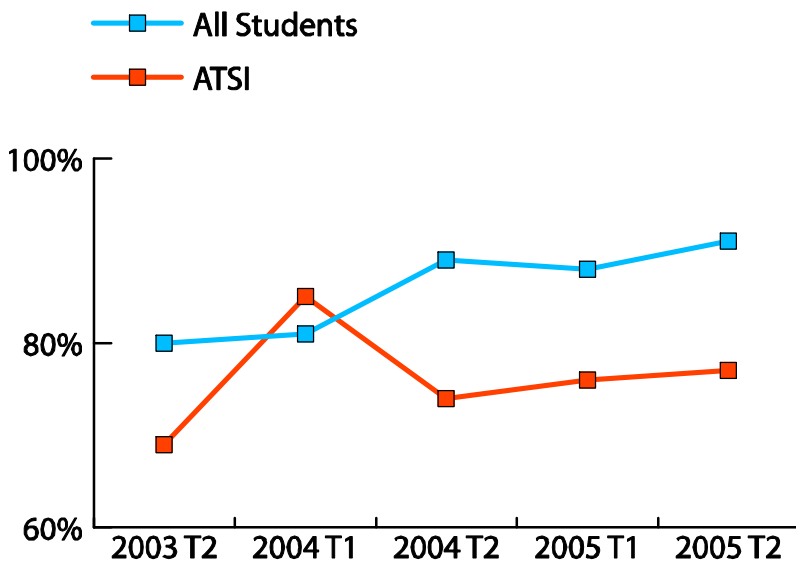


Figure 12-3: CQU relative retention rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

Figure 12-4 shows relative retention rates by age group (1,014 students younger than 20 years, 571 students between 20 and 30 years, 340 students between 30 and 40 years, 235 students older than 40 years). Specifically it reveals the 20-30 age group as having the lowest retention, with older students being relatively strong stayers. This outcome contradicts the finding by Lukic et al. (2004) that school leavers have lower attrition than older commencing students, a result that might be associated with the preponderance of mature age over school leaver students at CQU (with the former possibly feeling less isolated in their studies) and/or with the point that many students in the 20-30 age group might be more likely to be enrolled in the external mode, which is prone to higher attrition; the interaction between age group and mode of study certainly warrants further attention.

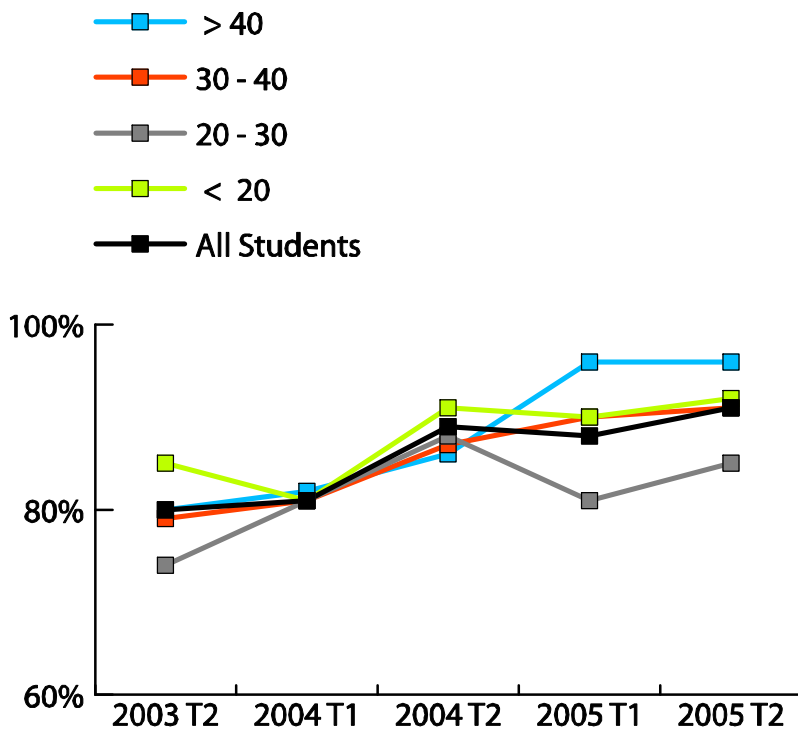


Figure 12-4: CQU relative retention rates by age group

Figure 12-5 shows the relative retention rates of internal and external students (those studying respectively in face-to-face and distance modes) (1,388 internal students, 772 external students). Distance students were categorised as those students who were not taking any courses as internal students in the first term (Term 1 2003) of their study. The figure suggests that, once past their first year, distance students have retention rates closer to those of other students. However, the data include students who may have missed a term and come back, and there is likely to be a distortion because a relatively high number of distance students may simply pause their study. As noted earlier, the general trend is for students from rural and remote areas to have higher attrition than their urban counterparts. Distance education students also suffer higher attrition rates and, since rural and remote students are more likely to be studying by distance education, there may be a confounding set of factors at work.

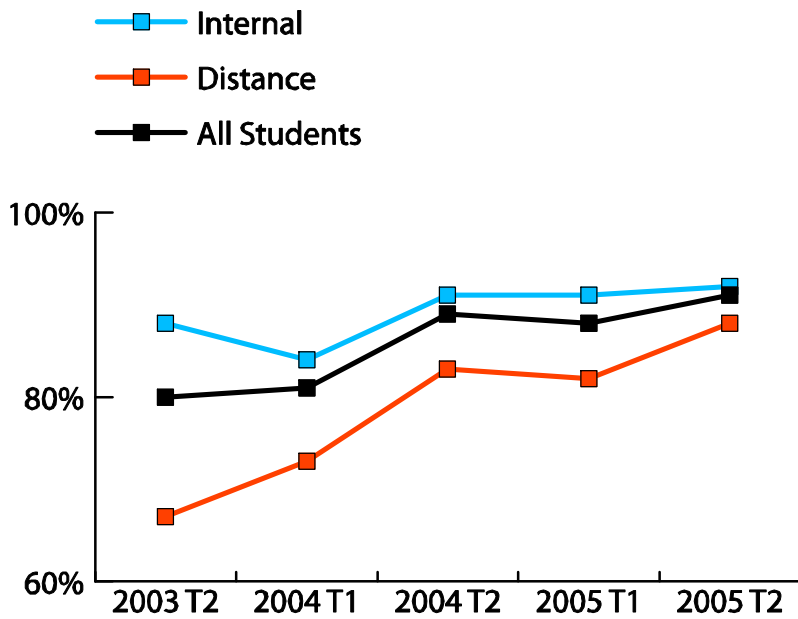


Figure 12–5: CQU relative retention rates by mode of study

Figure 12–6 shows retention rates of students by country of birth, grouped into Australian, other “western” English speaking countries (such as New Zealand and the United Kingdom) and other nations where usually the mother tongue is not English (1,978 Australian students, 87 other English students, 86 non-English speaking students, 9 students not known; these numbers do not include international students studying at CQU’s Australian International campuses because they include only students who enrolled through QTAC). The figure shows that, while the retention rates for students born in Australia and other countries are quite similar, that of students born in other “western” English speaking countries is lower. This finding is in general accordance with the trend noted by James et al. (2004) for students from non-English speaking backgrounds to be increasingly seen as less likely to conform to the criteria of an educational equity group.

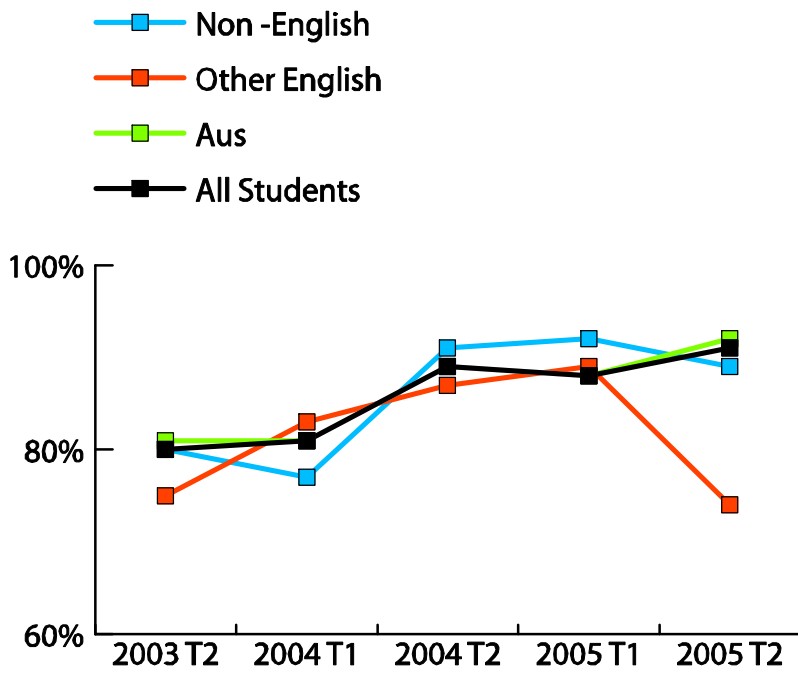


Figure 12-6: CQU relative retention rates by country of birth

Perhaps the most interesting finding from a pedagogical perspective is presented in Figure 12-7, which shows relative retention rates by Tertiary Entrance Ranks (TER) (2,160 all students, 78 students with 50-59 TER, 330 students with 90-99 TER, 80 students not known). It is heartening to note that the students who are admitted on a basis other than a Tertiary Entrance Score (NK in Fig.12.7) have relatively high retention rates. CQU's students with high TERs also have relatively high retention rates, suggesting that the University is able to retain its more able students. Unfortunately, students with lower entrance scores are more likely to drop out.

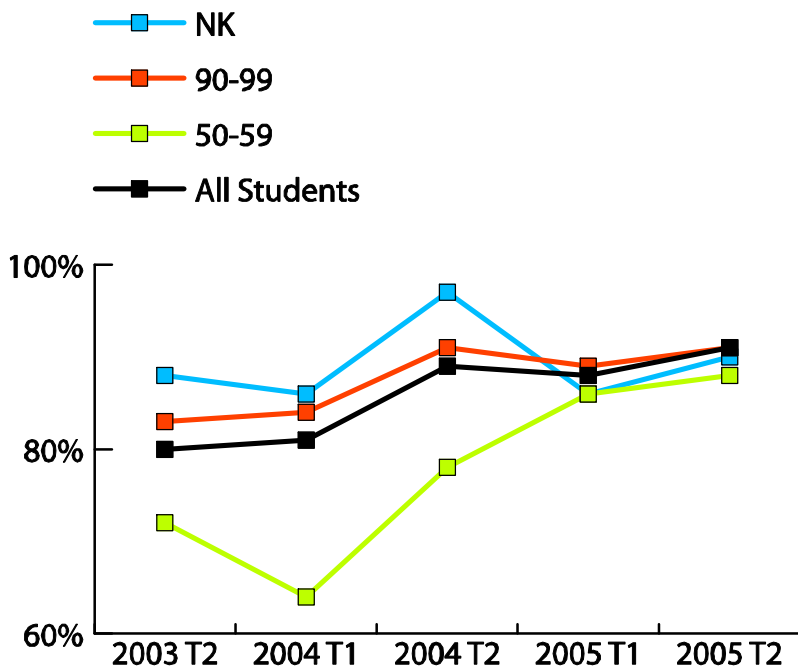


Figure 12-7: CQU relative retention rates by Tertiary Entrance Rank

We argue that the characteristics of CQU’s student population and the retention and attrition rates of various student categories presented in this section of the chapter constitute something of a “mixed bag” in relation to marginalisation and its transformation at the institution. On the one hand, it is evident that some patterns are amenable to the application of policies and strategies that appear—perhaps in combination with changing demographics and other contextual factors—to have an effect in reducing attrition and thereby in transforming marginalisation for particular social groups. On the other hand, other patterns of attrition appear far less susceptible to those kinds of initiatives, rendering attrition a continuing experience for particular categories of students, including those from some marginalised groups and in the process reducing their capacity to contribute to enhanced student diversity, at CQU and at other Australian universities. This finding highlights the intersection of “macro” and “micro” that lies at the interface among attrition, diversity, marginalisation and its transformation.

Conclusion

At this point it is appropriate to make four points of qualification about the statistics presented in this chapter and their possible implications for decreasing attrition, increasing diversity and transforming marginalisation. Firstly, although some statistics suggest that a considerable problem exists for particular groups of students, a great deal of work has been initiated and is ongoing by CQU staff members to address that issue (see for example Alcock & Alcock; Luck, McConachie & Jones; Hunt; Willans, McIntosh, Seary & Simpson; Sturgess & Kennedy; Cosgrove & Cryle, this volume). Secondly, statistics tend to be something of a “blunt instrument” when being considered as data-driven evidence providing the basis of discussions leading to the formulation of policies and strategies. This is because such statistics tend to focus on courses and programs and hence to operate at the “macro” level of institutions and systems rather than being directed at the “micro” level of individuals and groups. Thirdly and consequently, there is a considerable risk that statistics that are applied inappropriately in the policy mix might actually replicate and even extend the marginalisation of particular students because they are too far removed from those students’ lived experiences and actual lifeworlds (Kennedy & Sturgess, this volume). Finally, the data are from one cohort of students, and some of the groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are relatively small, and therefore these results are more amenable to chance.

These points and qualifications having been noted, how does the chapter contribute to the ongoing conceptualisation of the transformation of marginalisation? According to Tucker (1990), marginality is a disputatious concept. That is, the character and existence of marginalisation—let alone the need for and the possibility of its transformation—are not necessarily accepted *a priori* by all educational researchers. Similarly, Ferguson (1990) noted that “When we say marginal, we must always ask marginal to what?” (p. 9). Partly it is a question of defining terms such as “discrimination” and “marginalisation” in ways that are understood and accepted by other researchers. More importantly, different research paradigms and ideological worldviews are pressed into service on different sides of the ongoing debate about the actual and desired connections among marginalisation, transformation and education. Indeed, it might be argued paradoxically that marginalisation can be considered an elitist concept that ascribes middle class aspirations and values to groups and individuals who have very different ideas about what constitutes happiness, knowledge and understanding (Danaher, 2000).

At this juncture it is appropriate to note the words of caution about *Defining Marginality* written by Crewe (1990). In particular, Crewe insisted that it is vital to “include consideration of its limits as well as its powers” (p. 121) and to understand that “...it is no less threatened by debilitating overapplication or repetition than by containment” (p. 121). At the same time, he asserted that “...every case of the marginal is a complex special case” (p. 121) and that it is crucial “...to recognize the possibility of operational and contextual differences between...[the marginal and the middle ground]” (p. 129).

While taking careful note of Crewe’s (1990) conceptual and methodological strictures, we contend that the chapter has affirmed his emphasis on each example of marginalisation being considered as “a complex special case” (p. 121) and on “recogniz[ing] the possibility of operational and contextual differences” (p. 129). Certainly such differences are evident in the attrition rates of different minority groups, both nationally and at CQU; clearly each group must be considered as a distinctive case for interrogation. Nevertheless, neither Crewe nor we advocate(s) abandoning the concept of marginalisation; it contains too much analytical insight and conceptual power to do that. What emerges from the chapter, therefore, is that marginalisation and its transformation are complex, contextualised, contingent and potentially contradictory phenomena, enacted in material conditions and lived experiences and exercising a profound impact on the life chances and choices of individuals, groups and communities.

An argument is sometimes made that diversity delivers a benefit for the centre by providing a richer culture and environment and that creating diversity will automatically capture and transform the marginalised. Diversity may, however, deliver that richer culture for the majority and yet fail to achieve the transformations necessary to capture the truly marginalised. Have we, for example, achieved any improvement at all in the rates of participation in higher education by members of remote Indigenous communities?

Equally or perhaps even more significantly, what are the implications of the argument presented in the chapter for CQU and other Australian universities striving to engage with the connections and contradictions that link decreasing attrition, increasing diversity and transforming marginalisation? This chapter has noted the definite shift that has occurred from elite to mass provision in Australian higher education. Despite this shift and the associated gains in financial and social capital by large numbers of groups and individuals, many minority groups (such as Indigenous Australians, residents of isolated communities and lower socioeconomic background students) remain underrepresented in, and at higher risk of attrition from, university study. This underrepresentation and risk reflect, and derive from, a fundamental paradox in government and university policy: universities remain the sites of marginalisation of many learners, despite the genuine commitment by university staff members to broadening the diversity of the student body. Far from being a circular argument

(minority groups are marginalised because they are marginalised), this situation reflects and helps to perpetuate broader continuing socioeconomic and geopolitical inequities, in Australia and internationally.

The result of this paradox is that the twin goals of decreasing student attrition and increasing student diversity highlighted in the chapter and espoused by most universities have a complex, contentious and potentially contradictory connection with each other. From different perspectives, these goals might be considered mutually exclusive and/or in an uneasy alliance.

More broadly, like decreasing attrition and increasing diversity, transforming marginalisation is not an outcome whose attainment can be guaranteed if certain policies are implemented within a specific time frame. Instead it remains at once a timeless and unattainable aspiration and a process with deeply material and significant repercussions with which each new generation must engage and struggle. A crucial responsibility of institutions such as CQU is to contribute meaningfully and substantially to that engagement and struggle, thereby giving life and spirit to the aspiration of *doctrina perpetua* for its multiple participants and communities.

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