

EVIDENCE-INFORMED PRACTICE SERIES
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ADDRESSING PROGRESSION RISK

SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS POLICY
AND COURSE SEQUENCING

Addressing Progression Risk: Support for Students Policy and Course Sequencing

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1. Introduction and context

The Support for Students Policy (*Section 19-43 of the Higher Education Support Act 2003*) introduces new obligations for universities to identify students at risk of failing a course (i.e. subject/unit), provide timely and effective support, and report annually on policy effectiveness. These reforms represent a shift toward systematic academic performance monitoring and proactive support intervention. However, a review of sector-wide responses to the Act suggests a prevailing institutional assumption: that students are already following scaffolded, coherent academic plans, and that the primary risks relate to their engagement with course content. That assumption does not hold in practice.

At a recent national workshop on course sequencing and student progression, 94 percent of registrars, academic advisors, and curriculum experts surveyed indicated that commencing students lack the skills to plan a coherent sequence of courses¹. More than half of all students were thought to be following study plans likely to delay graduation or undermine academic success. This reflects a broader tension in curriculum design: flexible program structures—offering a range of majors, minors, and electives—support personalisation and interdisciplinary options; however, they increase the risk of suboptimal course sequencing. This challenge is particularly acute for students who are first in family or from equity cohorts, as they often lack access to informal peer advice networks.

Without proactive measures to provide sequence-informed academic advising—delivered through both self-service tools and one-to-one support—students are likely to enrol in advanced courses before completing foundational ones, postpone key prerequisites, or cluster high-intensity courses within a single semester. These decisions introduce progression-related risk by disrupting knowledge scaffolding, weakening academic preparedness, and increasing the likelihood of failure, attrition, or extended time to completion.

The scale of the problem, and its impact on institutions and students, is substantial. The 2022 National Student Experience Survey (n = 233,916) found that 29% of students struggled with enrolment, 35% felt academic support was unavailable, 35% felt unprepared for study, and 19% were considering leaving due to stress. First-year attrition remains the largest single source of annual revenue loss for Australian universities (\$1.6 billion) and accounts for \$346 million in lost student investment.

This paper positions *progression-focused advising* as a foundational capability for institutions aiming to meet their Support for Students Policy obligations while improving student retention and graduate outcomes. It outlines

the pedagogical basis for course sequencing, describes the relationship between sequencing and academic performance, and presents a capability framework for implementing progression-focused support systems. A self-assessment tool is included in Annex A to guide institutional evaluation and planning.

2. Why sequencing matters: pedagogical foundations

Students engage with the curriculum through the sequence of courses they undertake to complete a program of study. When that sequence is scaffolded and coherent, it supports a logical progression of learning—laying the groundwork for success by building cumulative knowledge, reinforcing key concepts, and ensuring students are adequately prepared for each new learning experience.

Scaffolding—the structured development of knowledge and skills—relies on purposeful sequencing to ensure students encounter material in an order that builds understanding over time. This principle is reflected in the *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021*, which requires that: “Teaching and learning activities are arranged to foster progressive and coherent achievement of expected learning outcomes throughout each course of study” (Section 3.1.3).

Contemporary curriculum design reflects that intent. Foundational courses introduce core concepts, disciplinary terminology, and academic conventions. Intermediate courses deepen understanding, apply theory, and develop analytical skills. Advanced and capstone courses consolidate prior learning, requiring synthesis, application, and the demonstration of high-level competencies. Proper course sequencing underpins the following key curriculum design principles:

- **Constructive alignment**, where learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessments are deliberately connected from course-level to program-level. Sequencing ensures students build the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in assessments. When sequencing is flawed, students may be assessed on concepts they haven't yet encountered, weakening alignment and undermining learning outcomes.
- **Assessment calibration and standards-based teaching**, which depend on predictable student preparedness. When students enter advanced courses without shared foundational learning, educators may be forced to adjust expectations, reteach content, or simplify material. This leads to curriculum drift and reduces confidence in the consistency and rigour of academic standards.

- **Programmatic assessment**, which develops graduate capabilities through cumulative, staged assessment. Key skills—such as academic writing, ethical reasoning, or disciplinary analysis—are introduced early, refined across successive courses, and assessed with different task types. If students delay or skip critical courses, they may reach capstones without the skills needed to succeed, weakening both capability development and quality assurance.

In short, sequencing is the mechanism that operationalises scaffolding across a program. Its integrity is essential to effective learning, consistent teaching, and defensible assessment design.

3. Course sequencing as a driver of student outcomes

Many students lack an understanding of how critical sequencing is to their performance and progression. A coherent course sequence provides structure and clarity. It helps students understand academic expectations, anticipate workload, engage more deeply with material, and experience a sense of academic momentum. When this sequence is disrupted or incoherent, students can become overwhelmed, disengaged, or blocked in their progression.

Common mis-sequencing risks include:

- **Taking advanced courses too early**, including those without formal prerequisites but which assume prior knowledge, academic maturity, or discipline-specific experience. This can result in cognitive overload and assessment against standards for which students are unprepared.
- **Delaying prerequisite courses**, which can stall progression, reduce flexibility in later semesters, and block access to advanced study options.
- **Clustering high-intensity courses**—where multiple subjects with dense content, frequent assessments, or heavy preparation demands are taken in the same term—creates peak stress periods and increases the risk of withdrawal or poor performance.

Consequences of mis-sequencing include:

- Delayed progression and increased failure rates, pre-census withdrawals, and attrition.
- Lower grade outcomes and reduced eligibility for placements, capstones, or honours options.
- Loss of confidence, reduced engagement, and lower attendance.

Supporting students to follow valid, scaffolded course sequences is essential to fulfilling the Support for Students Policy. *Progression-focused advising*—and the technologies that support it—enables institutions to identify risks early, guide enrolment decisions, and prevent avoidable failure. Far from a back-office function, it is a core preventative strategy that strengthens academic support, retention, and quality outcomes. The following framework outlines five key capability domains for operationalising this approach.

4. Operationalising progression-focused advising: the five essential domains

Progression-focused advising refers to the processes and technologies for validating, monitoring, and optimising student study sequences based on academic rules and pedagogical progression logic.

Institutions seeking to improve sequencing and progression can assess their current capabilities across five domains:

1. **Progression-risk identification and plan validation**
Validating compliance with program rules, checking course dependencies (prerequisites, corequisites, antirequisites), and confirming eligibility requirements.
2. **Academic readiness and sequencing logic**
Ensuring course order reflects pedagogical logic and supports readiness-based progression pathways for full and part-time students.
3. **Curriculum change and transition planning**
Supporting adaptive planning that respond to curriculum changes, program transfers, and pathway adjustments, with tools for scenario-based progression planning.
4. **Automation and system integration**
Embedding automated validation and progression checks into advising workflows, while providing scalable academic planning tools for staff and students.
5. **Data and quality assurance**
Tracking progression risk and platform usage, supporting s49B reporting, and providing strategic data for timetabling, resource planning, and quality improvement.

See Annex A for a detailed self-assessment tool.

References:

1. Survey of participants - 2023 Higher Education Users Group (HEUG) ANZ Workshop "Course Sequencing & Academic Success – Issues, Impacts, and Solutions".

About this series

This white paper is part of the Evidence-Informed Practice Series, produced by StudyPlanner's internal Research and Engagement Unit.

The series supports the development of sector-facing insight, institutional capability frameworks, and practical guidance informed by academic research, policy alignment, and the lived realities of higher education practice.

It reflects our commitment to contributing to shared sector knowledge and enabling evidence-based improvement in student advising, academic progression, and curriculum navigation.

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Annex A: Progression-focused advising capability self-assessment tool

Purpose:

This self-assessment tool helps universities evaluate their readiness to address Support for Students Policy obligations through progression-focused academic advising systems and practices. It provides a benchmark for identifying institutional strengths, gaps, and priorities for digital transformation.

DOMAIN 1: Progression-risk identification and plan validation

Capability area	Description	Current status
Real-time component rules validation (majors, minors...)	Does your system validate course selections against component rules and requirements in real time?	<input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Limited system support <input type="checkbox"/> Fully system-enabled
Course dependency and sequence validation	Are students warned when attempting to enrol in courses that violate pre-requisite chains or are out of sequence?	<input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Limited system support <input type="checkbox"/> Fully system-enabled
Degree auditing and graduation checking	Can students and advisors verify plan compliance with complex degree rules and check graduation readiness?	<input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Limited system support <input type="checkbox"/> Fully system-enabled

DOMAIN 2: Academic readiness and sequencing logic

Capability area	Description	Current status
Learning-centred sequencing logic	Are course sequences prioritised using academic progression logic (not just availability)?	<input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Limited system support <input type="checkbox"/> Fully system-enabled
Study-load-responsive sequencing	Are course sequences tailored to optimise progression for full-time or part-time study pathways?	<input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Limited system support <input type="checkbox"/> Fully system-enabled
Detection of excessive study load or course duplication	Can the system flag plans that have excessive study load, course duplication, or unviable course combinations?	<input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Limited system support <input type="checkbox"/> Fully system-enabled

DOMAIN 3: Curriculum change and transition planning

Capability area	Description	Current status
Curriculum update responsiveness	Can students receive accurate, updated study plans when program rules or course offerings change?	<input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Limited system support <input type="checkbox"/> Fully system-enabled
Program transfer and credit mapping	Does the system support credit transfer and progression planning for students who change programs or institutions?	<input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Limited system support <input type="checkbox"/> Fully system-enabled
Scenario modelling and what-if planning	Can students model alternative scenarios such as switching programs, changing majors, or adjusting study load?	<input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Limited system support <input type="checkbox"/> Fully system-enabled

DOMAIN 4: Automation and system integration

Capability area	Description	Current status
Advising collaboration tools	Can advisors co-author and approve student study plans within the platform?	<input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Limited system support <input type="checkbox"/> Fully system-enabled
Advisor workflows and alerts	Are advisors alerted to students at risk (e.g., invalid plans, delayed core courses, lack of engagement)?	<input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Limited system support <input type="checkbox"/> Fully system-enabled
Curriculum support and change tracking	Are curriculum changes version-controlled and synced with the planner for advisors and students?	<input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Limited system support <input type="checkbox"/> Fully system-enabled
Student self-service planning tools	Is a student-facing interface available that supports independent program navigation, course planning, and validation of sequencing, prerequisites, and study load?	<input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Limited system support <input type="checkbox"/> Fully system-enabled

DOMAIN 5: Data and quality assurance

Capability area	Description	Current status
Support for annual reporting (s49B)	Can the system generate de-identified data and evidence for the annual Support for Students report?	<input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Limited system support <input type="checkbox"/> Fully system-enabled
Usage analytics and engagement data	Is usage of the platform (by students and staff) monitored and reported to inform continuous improvement?	<input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Limited system support <input type="checkbox"/> Fully system-enabled
Strategic planning and operations data	Can the system export strategic data on planned course enrolments for timetabling and workforce planning?	<input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Limited system support <input type="checkbox"/> Fully system-enabled