Drop out, drop in: It's time universities re-recruited their discontinued students

Date
August 23, 2015 - 5:00PM

Erica Cervini

Students who withdraw from university are ignored but this group is academically qualified for university, have experienced campus life and are mostly under the age of 25 – so they should be re-engaged.

Don't be a stranger: university drop-out rates are a problem but so is the fact that universities do little to re-enrol those departed students. Photo: Karl Hilzinger

Here's a novel idea. Why don't universities re-recruit students who have withdrawn from their degrees?

Each year thousands withdraw from courses, leaving universities with empty spaces to fill with new students. Universities are running out of students and there is only so far an ATAR can fall.

Dr Andrew Harvey, director of La Trobe University's access and achievement research unit, told Third Degree that attrition rates have remained flat over the past 20 years.

This gives universities a large number of attractive students to recruit. They are already academically qualified for university, have experienced campus life and are mostly under the age of 25.

"Why wouldn't universities be targeting this group of people?" Dr Harvey asks.

Universities neglect departing students. Few have exit interviews, and most students don't fill in forms to say why they are leaving. Administration may also have incorrect contact information on students, so they silently slip away, he says.
It's important to also target withdrawing students to avoid students having a poor impression of their university experience if universities want to recruit them again, Dr Harvey says.

"There's a reputational thing," he says. "TripAdvisor follows up people's bad impressions and asks them how can we improve. Universities could follow up students by asking them, 'Are you in the wrong course?'"

Dr Harvey and his colleague Giovanna Szalkowicz report on their findings on attrition and ideas on re-recruiting students in their new paper, From departure to arrival: Re-engaging students who have withdrawn from university.

As part of their investigation, the researchers analysed two original research projects on attrition undertaken in an Australian university.

A surprise finding is that students who withdraw are generally positive about the university.

One of the research reports shows that 88 per cent of students who left university at the institution were not "hostile" towards it. Only one in eight left for reasons relating directly to the university.

Students withdraw for a variety of reasons such as financial pressures and personal issues. Some students are too scared to seek out support services and leave university. They feel that their inability to cope with university is their fault.

As a result of this finding, the researchers say that the culture around using the word "dropout" needs to change because withdrawal should not be equated with failure.

"The fact that many discontinuing students subsequently return to study underlines that withdrawal should not be equated with failure," the researchers write.

About 25 per cent of commencing undergraduate students were admitted on the basis of some prior higher education in 2012.

The following comment from a student interviewed for one of the reports shows that many students want to return to study.

"It [regional campus] was really relaxed, friendly. I only left because I was a single mum and couldn't commit the time to study. I want to go back soon."

Dr Harvey told Third Degree students who withdraw should be considered partial alumni instead of dropouts and failures. There is no reason why universities only have full alumni just for graduates.

A long-term hope of Dr Harvey's is for a culture change where people stop equating dropouts with failure.

**Practical suggestions for re-recruiting students**

Extending leave of absence could enable students to defer their studies for two or three years without falling off the enrolment system.

Keeping student numbers and university email addresses could allow re-enrolment to be expedited. Students who cite "wrong course choice" and "change of career direction" as reasons for withdrawing may benefit from this strategy.

Simplified processes for the recognition of prior learning would enable students who have successfully completed part of a degree to re-enter the university with credit.

**Reasons students withdraw from their studies**

Changed mind on career or study.

Lost direction
Course was too difficult

Difficulty in getting to the campus.

The course/university wasn't what the student expected.

Work commitments.

Financial difficulties

Personal issues

Read more

"From departure to arrival: re-engaging students who have withdrawn from university" is published in the latest edition of the Journal of Higher and Further Education.

Follow Third Degree on Twitter: @thirddegreeblog