

Originally published in the Australian: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/opinion/how-unis-can-win-the-battle-of-attrition/story-e6fmgcko-1226622004571>

How unis can win the battle of attrition

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- From: *The Australian*
- April 17, 2013 12:00AM

ATTRITION exists in many forms. Some students transfer from one institution to another, others leave university altogether.

Using the higher education support student number, we can now track students who transfer between universities over the course of their studies, thereby separating institutional attrition from sectoral attrition. This distinction is central to raising student retention and addressing student mobility.

The new data reveals that many more students stay at university than previously was thought and there has been a manifest increase in student mobility in recent years. We now know that student transfer rates are particularly high among Group of Eight universities and among the newer metropolitan universities and that dropping out of university completely is a serious problem in the regional universities. Finally, rates of student transfer vary markedly across similarly ranked institutions.

Using previous government data, we had assumed that the attrition rate for domestic undergraduates was one in five. However, we now know that many simply moved to another university. We now know that the real attrition rate for 2010 was 13 per cent, which shows that it is still a serious problem, but not as serious as we had thought.

Equally, the extent to which students transfer between universities has been underestimated. In 2010-11, about 6 per cent of domestic undergraduates went to a different institution the following year. This transfer rate has been climbing steadily since 2006-07, when it was just 4 per cent. It's fair to say that students are likely to keep moving under the demand-driven system.

Increasing student mobility hastens the need for institutional partnerships, such as the one in NSW that allows students from selected schools to complete their first year at the University of New England before transferring to the University of Sydney.

Mobility may also affect quality assurance and credit transfer arrangements. Students are likely to seek greater transparency around the recognition of their prior learning and mid-course entry pathways. They will also seek to complete their degree at a university perceived as high quality. For some universities, a loss of students may be caused by reputational weakness as much as student disengagement.

Transfer rates are a particular issue for lower status recruiter institutions. Some, such as the University of Western Sydney and Victoria University, record transfer rates as high as 9 per cent. Under the previous data regime, their attrition rates appeared to be extremely high, about 25 per cent. When adjusted for institutional churn, their attrition falls to a more respectable 16 per cent for commencing students. Examining student transfers as a proportion

of institutional attrition is also instructive. The data challenges the widely held belief that there is a one directional flow of students from lower status recruiter institutions to high-status institutions. More than half of the attrition at the University of Sydney in 2010 comprised students who had transferred to another institution. Retention rates are relatively high across the Group of Eight universities.

By contrast, regional universities record high levels of attrition. More than 80 per cent of the attrition at Charles Sturt, Central Queensland, and Charles Darwin universities comprises students who have left the higher education sector altogether. In some regional institutions, more than one in five commencing students leaves higher education. Different strategies are clearly required to address retention in these cases.

Finally, we can now identify relative institutional performance more accurately. Charles Sturt and Griffith Universities both recorded attrition rates of about 25 per cent in 2010-11 under the previous data regime. However, the transfer rate at Griffith was 9 per cent compared with just 4 per cent at Charles Sturt.

Understanding the different elements of attrition is important if the government aims to reward universities for student completions. The new data improves our knowledge of where students go and why. It clarifies the different types of attrition, allowing more tailored policy approaches to be developed. Better information will enable us to target the causes of student disengagement where they are most prevalent.

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