

Originally published in The Australian: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/opinion/its-on-and-on-and-ennui-go/story-e6frgcko-1226525179092>

### **It's on, and on, and ennui go**

- By: *Andrew Harvey*
- From: *The Australian*
- November 28, 2012 12:00AM



Picture: Tom Jellett *Source: The Australian*

**GEORGE Harrison once said the Beatles saved the world from boredom. But the world has moved on and boredom among students is widespread across university campuses and cyberspace alike.**

The challenge of apathy is reflected in high attrition rates and low levels of academic engagement.

Modern students with short attention spans are held to blame, and short online courses are seen as the latest way to accommodate their caprices.

Paradoxically, the rise in attention deficits coincides with an unprecedented expansion in postgraduate study and a lengthening of professional degrees.

The rise of student uninterest is matched by a rise of student perseverance. Why do many students lose interest so early, while others now stay in the sector so long?

To understand this dilemma we need to isolate the underlying causes and effects of disengagement.

The first obvious effect of boredom is that it leads to attrition.

In last year's Australasian Survey of the Student Experience, almost one-quarter of domestic students intending to withdraw listed boredom as their primary reason for doing so. More students wanted to leave because of uninterest than because of financial difficulties, health reasons or workload pressures. The last words of these students at university mirror the last words of Winston Churchill: "I'm bored with it all."

Some groups are less interested than others. Only 15 per cent of international students contemplated withdrawal because of boredom, and part-time and external students were also less likely to be disengaged. The cohort claiming to be least interested is the same cohort to which most student engagement activities are targeted -- those who study full time and on campus. More than one-quarter of men in this category considered boredom as a reason for departure.

To address this apparent ennui, a whole new set of occupations has been created. First-year co-ordinators, transition officers, student enrichment managers and educational designers are all relatively new position titles.

Boredom affects the quality of learning as well as the likelihood of completing a course. While some students withdraw when they lose interest, others simply stop learning. A recent US national study found that students' motivation and interest in academic subject matter actually declined during their first year in college.

Similarly, research from La Trobe University has found that subjects from which many students withdraw early are often the same subjects in which others subsequently fail to submit assignments. Some lose interest early and leave the course, while others remain enrolled but disengaged.

The cause of all this uninterest is disputed. One prominent theory is that today's students simply have low boredom thresholds and short attention spans. Traditional teaching and learning does not suit this cohort, and they quickly tire of our long, campus-based degrees. By this logic, the rise of open online courses could provide a cure for boredom by delivering shorter, more interactive courses.

Despite their popularity, though, students seem even less likely to finish a short course than a long course. Massive enrolments in free online taster courses are usually followed by massive withdrawal rates from the same courses. More than 150,000 students started the first free MIT course on circuits and electronics, but only 5 per cent finished. Apathy occurs despite most new online courses being only six to eight weeks long. The rise of free online courses may be a symptom of student boredom rather than its cure.

Yet are we overstating the short attention span of the modern student? Postgraduate student numbers are expanding. Professional degrees are being transferred to postgraduate level and it takes longer than ever to qualify as a lawyer, teacher or engineer at universities such as Melbourne and Western Australia. Indeed, more than one-quarter of university students are enrolled at postgraduate level. So while some students lose interest early, others are showing profound levels of dedication, recognising that graduate education is critical to success and earnings in many fields.

Boredom cannot then be blamed on a generation Y gene. Nor can it be claimed that only boring people get bored. The paradox of undergraduate attrition and postgraduate completion reveals that academic engagement is not reducible to generational stereotypes. Rather, variations in student engagement largely reflect a need to improve teaching to appeal to a broad range of learners. As US researcher Vincent Tinto has shown, tinkering at the margins is no substitute for classroom reforms, and retention needs to be a high institutional priority.

Those who begin but do not complete an undergraduate degree receive little benefit in future earnings. By contrast, those who persevere to complete professional and postgraduate degrees earn a substantial wage premium. Developing better strategies to engage and challenge students is central to equity, institutional and systemic objectives.

*Andrew Harvey heads the access and achievement research unit at La Trobe University*