Undergraduate courses need exit points: La Trobe researchers
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Australian universities should offer more undergraduate courses with early exit pathways to better support the 46,000 students who leave university every year after completing one year of their degree, experts say.

Andrew Harvey and Giovanna Szalkowicz from La Trobe University have called for an expansion of nested courses where students can receive a formal qualification, such as a diploma, for partly completing their bachelor’s degree.

This would turn “college dropouts” into “partial completers” more attractive to employers, while also making re-enrolment easier for students who later seek to return and complete their degree, they argue in a new paper.

The need for more flexible qualifications is underscored by the continued growth in university enrolments — up 23 per cent between 2009 and 2013 — which includes a rise in disadvantaged students, who are at greater risk of not completing their degrees.

“Thousands of students satisfactorily complete multiple units of study yet leave the institution with no credit,” according to the paper.

It notes that 53 per cent of students who withdrew without a degree had completed at least one year of study.
Increasing student mobility is another driver as “more students are transferring between institutions and seeking transparency and consistency of credit transfer arrangements”, the authors say.

Universities also would be better placed to respond to the increasing “threat of non-university providers” and plethora of massive online open courses and mini-degree programs if their undergraduate courses are offered in flexible formats, they argue.

Dr Harvey said the present undergraduate model was “increasingly unrealistic for many students, including mature-age students”.

“Many people simply cannot, or do not want to, study for three or four years in succession,” he said.

“Universities will need to adapt or their competitors will.”

While half of all students who withdrew from university re-enrolled at an institution within a decade, most had to go through recognition of prior learning processes that were “opaque, variable by institution and hard to navigate”, he said.

Dr Harvey’s paper notes that nested courses are common at the postgraduate level and in the vocational education sector but rare in undergraduate degrees.

Few of the universities that provide undergraduate courses with exit pathways advertise these arrangements, possibly because of “perceived reputational risk”. The fields of education most likely to have nested degrees were those that had links with TAFE institutes, such as health sciences, Dr Harvey pointed out.

Martin Riordan, chief executive of TAFE Directors Australia, said while some TAFE-university collaborations worked well in delivering nested courses in niche areas, they were a “small component” in the broader push to improve employment outcomes.

At Victoria University’s college of health and biomedicine, three bachelor degrees were offered with exit pathways where students could leave with a diploma after completing first year, said Karen Lawrence, the college’s director of learning and teaching.

“The biggest benefit of the nested pathway is that it allows students to enter a bachelor degree and if they have to withdraw at the end of 12 months due to work or family commitments, they can leave with a qualification that is recognised and usable in industry,” Dr Lawrence said.

“It’s costly to go to university, so to exit without a qualification is a very expensive 12 months. “But to leave with a diploma is very empowering for students,” she added.

Sonya Bannan finished her bachelor of health science degree at Victoria University in October last year.

Since then she has been working in a non-emergency patient transport firm while she waits for a job with Ambulance Victoria.

She said many of her colleagues had obtained the 12-month diploma and found it was the right amount of study needed to work in non-emergency patient transport.

“It really works for them. And those who want to go on and continue studying can more easily get into the degree,” she said.