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Multiple exit points needed for students

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Sturt Krygsman *Source:* The Australian

ENROLLING in a university degree does not count for much. Research from the US highlights that starters who do not complete their degree earn little more than non-starters.

While graduates still receive high returns, successfully finishing a year or two of higher education can be financially ineffective. The effects of attrition are psychological as well as financial. As the recent base funding review noted: "Each failure to reach graduation may be associated with shattered aspirations accompanying a substantial student debt."

This underlines the need to focus on retention, but also to redefine completion and success. For some students, completing a full degree in sequence becomes impractical for financial, personal or other reasons. They may successfully complete part of a degree but only have a HECS debt to show for it.

There are few descriptions for this oft-repeated scene. Instead, the language of higher education refers to early leavers, non-completers, drop-outs and failed graduates.

Partial success does not equate to failure. An expansion of formal exit points within undergraduate degrees would allow students to leave and re-enter as their circumstances require. By enabling students to receive credentials at different points of their undergraduate degree, universities could ensure fair reward for effort and promote greater flexibility.

Grades of success could replace degrees of failure.

Flexibility has already become a defining feature of access to higher education. University acceptance may be based on a vocational qualification, completion of an enabling program, work experience, an aptitude test or the recommendation of a school principal. Indeed, most new students do not enter via a tertiary rank (ATAR) but by some other mode. Diverse entry pathways have been central to broadening access, particularly among under-represented groups.

US researchers Stacey Bennett and Julia Makela have categorised three types of credentialing models to cater for students who stop short of completing a degree. The first is an alternative exit model, which provides a lower-level qualification to departing degree students to ensure that they leave with some recognition. By contrast, the stepping stone model builds one credential on top of another towards a degree, with regular checkpoints. The third model of nested opportunity embeds a range of discrete qualifications within the full degree.

Varieties of each model already exist within the Australian landscape. Charles Darwin University has several courses that follow the alternative exit model, with certificates, diplomas and associate degrees available to students who complete only one or two years of their degree.

Charles Sturt University has created several joint degrees in collaboration with TAFE with multiple exit pathways. More recently, Victoria University has introduced a range of degrees where students can exit after one year with a diploma or after two years with an associate degree.

The sub-degree space is becoming congested. In particular, changes to TAFE funding have highlighted the overlap between higher education associate degrees and vocational advanced diplomas.

A recent report by Tom Karmel noted that associate degrees are more lucrative from a provider point of view and usually provide more credit for students who wish to articulate to a university degree.

However, two-year advanced diplomas are cheaper for students and often preferable if they lead directly to the labour market.

Universities are already increasing flexibility in the competition for sub-degree students, but approaches remain piecemeal.

Degree structures are driven by sectoral differences, competing government policies, professional registration requirements and financial need. These pressures have led to a patchwork undergraduate system that compares unfavourably with the postgraduate level, where flexibility is widely embraced.

Graduate certificates, diplomas and masters degrees are frequently nested within the same course framework.

In creating more undergraduate exit points there are several questions of ethics and politics. Will a proliferation of sub-degree credentials change student behaviour? How will employers value these qualifications and what will it mean for the labour market? What effect will new credentials have on relations between the higher education and vocational sectors?

These questions need to be addressed, and the development of mid-point credentials within undergraduate degrees is an unfinished project.

Nevertheless, it seems likely and desirable that more students will be formally rewarded for completing one or more years of their degree.

There may be few Schuberts but there are many unfinished symphonies deserving recognition. A system centred on students will require multiple exit points as well as entry points.

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