Ghost students are failing while their universities ignore them

Universities need to learn more about students who enrol in units but do not complete the course requirements, warns a new report.

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A quarter of all fail grades awarded at university level represent “ghost students” who, although they are enrolled, do no work in their course, according to a new study.

La Trobe University researcher Bret Stephenson said more work needed to be done to identify and assist ghost students because their disengagement and academic failure too often went unnoticed.

“Ghosting behaviours place an academic and financial burden on students; universities see a reduction in their publicised ‘success rates’; and governments see little return for the allocation … funding,” said Dr Stephenson, who led the study for Curtin University’s National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education.
He said that non-participating enrolment, as the paper calls it, was particularly harmful to students because they end up with a HECS-HELP debt for courses they have not studied for or done assessments in.

Dr Stephenson pointed out that the issue has even more relevance following the implementation the federal government’s new Job-ready Graduates package, under which students who fail 50 per cent of bachelor degree units can be no longer eligible for Commonwealth course subsidies or HECS-HELP loans. He said that the ghost student phenomenon had flow under the radar.

“It makes little appearance in the research literature, but it’s something that I think every seasoned Australian teaching academic would be familiar with,” Dr Stephenson said.

Ghost student behaviour was not adequately recorded in university metrics nor in government statistics, he said.

“We’re arguing that government higher education information monitoring system (HEIM) reporting should be adjusted to include more refined unit level outcomes, including NPE results, because right now we’re only reporting a binary/pass fail,” he said.

“So it’s difficult, if not impossible, to get the national picture of what is happening with NPE failure.”

The research showed equity groups at the highest risk of falling into the NPE category were Indigenous and part-time students as well as those who entered university with a sub-60 Australian Tertiary Admission Rank.

The study, which was conducted at a single major university, found that non-participating enrolment by ghost students accounted for 26.8 per cent of failures across 254,014 units of study over the six years to 2017.

“We also found that students who have recorded NPE (non-participating enrolment) results have much higher rates of attrition and much lower rates of six-year completion rates,” Dr Stephenson said. “It’s very highly indicative of future academic underperformance and attrition.”

The report recommends universities make concerted efforts to learn more about non participating enrolments, especially student motivations, and particularly among Indigenous students.
They should make the tracking and remediation of NPE failures a central feature of their student success and retention, and student equity strategies.

“Universities need to be much more familiar with their NPE statistics and patterns within their various courses, levels and cohorts and policy and practise needs to be closely shaped around the NPE problem,” Dr Stephenson said.

He recommended early interventions “that focus on student advising and counselling … on appropriate subject loadings”, but cautioned against the adoption of “draconian catch-all policies of, say, unenrolling inactive students and such without engaging with them.

“Again, that means increased academic advising and in many cases, proactive academic advising.”

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Jill Rowbotham is The Australian’s higher education writer. Previous roles on the newspaper include bureau chief in Perth and Sydney, Opinion and Media editor and deputy editor of The Weekend Australian Magazin... Read more