Students who leave before finishing their degree are not lost to the system, with about half returning to study within eight years. And that is despite almost non-existent efforts from institutions to engage with them before, during and after their withdrawal.

A report into the re-recruitment of students says attrition figures are bloated by large numbers who leave their study for just one year and who always intended on returning — usually to the same institution. At the same time it says far too many students considering a period away from formal study are unaware of formal leave processes and end up dropping out for lack of available information.

The report for the federal Department of Education and Training by Andrew Harvey and his colleagues Michael Luckman and Giovanna Szalkowicz from La Trobe University’s Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research, found that 47 per cent of domestic undergraduates who had been
counted as dropouts by the official retention calculation had returned to university within eight years.

Students are likeliest to return within the first three years, with 76.8 per cent of those who would eventually re-enrol having done so in that period.

But the report is scathing of the lack of effort universities put into contacting and engaging withdrawing students despite them making up the “second biggest cohort of student enrolments after school-leavers”, according to Dr Harvey.

“It’s strange that we spend so much time and money recruiting students and then almost no time or money re-engaging with the ones who leave,” Dr Harvey told the HES.

“It’s almost as if there is a perception that the decision to leave is final and doesn’t matter much, whereas that decision probably isn’t final and does matter a lot.”

He said greater overall attrition among later-year students than first years pointed to the fact higher education was no longer a linear process for many students and that nested and scaffolded degrees could help address discontinuous study pattern.

“The reality of student pathways these days is that they are nonlinear and universities should not punish people for not completing four years straight of an undergraduate degree,” he said.

However, Dr Harvey said it was clear universities could not control much of the attrition that took place because it was unpredictable or inevitable.

The most often cited reasons included health, including mental health; lack of motivation; finances; and work commitments. However, the report concluded that universities could do much more to engage with students who had left or who were at a high risk of leaving.

Polly Fleeting, 20, dropped out of her bachelor of arts at the University of Sydney at the end of last year because she realised she had made the wrong decision. Her original plan had been to study media arts and production at the University of Technology Sydney but, during a gap year, switched her first preference to arts. She is now in her first semester of journalism at, unsurprisingly, UTS.

“We met with careers advisers throughout Year 12 but you have no idea at that age. You think you know but really you don’t until you have started uni,” Ms Fleeting said.
“I think the BA was a good way to start university. I fully intended to do the full three years but it didn’t have a definite career pathway and I need something more specific.”

Ms Fleeting, who received an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank of 90, said she officially withdrew from the BA online and had no other contact from Sydney University.

While Ms Fleeting moved directly from one degree to the next, the report found that the vast majority of students return after one year, usually to the same institution. But as time goes by they are less likely to return to their previous place of study. However, overall, almost three in every five students who did enrol returned to their previous institution. It also found that those from low socio-economic backgrounds were 20 per cent likelier than high SES students to return to the same institution as the one they left.

Following a pilot conducted at one university, the researchers found that attrition was neither “the primary fault of the institution nor within the direct power of the institution to prevent it”. But the researchers say universities can learn a lot about themselves and their students simply by becoming more engaged with those who leave.

“Students who do withdraw are unlikely to be asked to complete an exit interview, unlikely to be contacted personally after their withdrawal and equally unlikely to receive tailored re-recruitment advice from their university,” the report found.

“It means that recruitment doesn’t end at enrolment. For starters, a lot of people go into general degrees and they have just one foot in the door because they really don’t know what they want to do. Others choose the wrong course and only realise when they start. Universities need to keep giving them options rather than just let them disappear.”