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Time for Universities to believe in ghosts

Ghost students ... they populate our enrolment lists yet are nowhere to be seen

By Bret Stephenson

It is a curious fact of Australian higher education research nearly every experienced teaching academic has encountered – and been frustrated by – “ghost” or “no-show” students, yet research on the phenomenon remains surprisingly thin. “Ghosts” are the students who enrol in our units yet fail to participate in learning activities or attempt any of the assigned assessment tasks. They populate our enrolment lists yet are nowhere to be seen – they are, ghosts in the machine.

At La Trobe University’s Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research (CHEEDR), we have been looking deeply into this peculiar student behaviour and have begun to outline its scope, patterns, and significance for institutions and governments alike.

The “ghost student” phenomenon is particularly mystifying given the consequences for students are rather severe; a student is guaranteed to incur a record of academic failure and amass wholly negative student debt.

Adding to the mystery is the fact that these consequences are easily avoidable, as a student can simply drop the unit prior to the declared census date(s).

We are finding that “non-participating enrolments” (NPEs), our term for “ghost student” fails, are an extremely varied class of student failure. For this reason, NPE behaviours are likely to resist simple or singular explanation.

We can, however, estimate the likely scope of the behaviour. Although NPE rates are in a multi-year decline at our study institution, we find that this type of failure can, in some years, impact as many as one in ten undergraduate students.

If we extrapolate these finding across a national student population, we quickly see the cost of NPE failures for students, institutions, and the Australian government.

Ghost student failure has long been obscured or ignored within the university sector, but we are now learning the importance of believing in ghosts.

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