Non university providers account for more dropouts

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Higher education providers display four characteristics that can be correlated with above-average attrition levels in first-year students but low ATAR is not one of them, says a report from the national regulator.

And for the first time, non-university providers’ track records on attrition have hit the spotlight with the report revealing possibly troubling trends among some types of providers.

The four characteristics that would appear to feed into higher attrition are: lower levels of senior academic staff; a lower proportion of postgraduates; lower levels of full-time staff and a higher proportion of students who have been admitted on the basis of VET qualifications, said Anthony McClaran, chief executive of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency.

“At a provider level, we didn’t find the same issues with low ATAR, mature-aged entry and low SES that other studies at the student level have found,” Mr McClaran said.

“They were present but not strongly at an institutional level.”

The report found attrition rates among universities averaged about 20 per cent and were lower than for non-university providers, which averaged 27 per cent — but with large variations. While nine universities had first-year attrition rates of 25 per cent or higher, according to the report, a number of non-university providers spiked above 50 per cent.

The report notes that predominately faith-based colleges often attract students who enrol with no intention of completing.

“TEQSA often receives feedback from this group of providers that a number of their students never intend to complete a course of study but instead enrol in particular single units which contain material they want to study,” the report says. “This sometimes leads to higher attrition rates because such students never intend to return to study in the following year.

“In fact, in TEQSA’s regulatory assessments, high attrition rates are often accompanied by high progression rates.

“This combination of indicator values suggests that for these institutions, increased levels of attrition are not generally related to poor academic progress or within-year academic success, but may reflect other characteristics and reasons for non-continuation of study, such as personal issues or the structure of academic programs.”
Andrew Harvey, director of the Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research at La Trobe University who has researched attrition extensively, said the four key institutional characteristics identified by the report were in some ways proxies for personal characteristics of the students enrolled in them.

“This is a problem with not including student characteristics, so it is quite limited. A lot of things are proxies for academic preparation and achievement whether it’s SES status, the size of the university or regional participation.”

Dr Harvey said he was pleased to see the non-university sector under public scrutiny.

“As the non-university side of the sector grows, it’s good to start getting some insights into their characteristics. While they represent a small part of the sector, there are a lot of them. The fact is, a lot of these providers have attrition rates above 30 per cent.”

Mr McClaran said high attrition raised a red flag for the regulator, which would look at that provider’s regulatory history and how it was trending.

“The purpose of this is not to discourage providers from recruiting certain types of students, such as mature students, who for a whole range of reasons entirely unrelated to the provider may be unable to complete.”

Mr McClaran said the next phase of the research would examine how effective the regulatory conditions TEQSA has set had been in improving attrition rates in individual providers.