Universities ‘unfairly penalised’ for dropouts

Many students who do not complete their course at the first attempt often return to their studies, say experts

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By John Ross

Universities are squandering a massive opportunity to lure dropouts back to higher education, while policymakers are more interested in apportioning blame than helping individuals to fulfil their promise, according to Australian experts.

Data from the country suggest that universities face being unfairly punished over non-completions that are often beyond their control, with students often withdrawing from courses because of financial pressures or family responsibilities.

Many retain such high regard for their alma maters that they re-enrol. But their return is usually too late to prevent them being counted as withdrawals and affecting their universities’ completion rates.
With attrition likely to be among the performance criteria that the government will use to allocate teaching growth funds from 2020, the damage could be financial as well as reputational.

“A lot of what we’re calling attrition is actually a leave of absence,” said Andrew Harvey, director of the Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research at La Trobe University. He said that, while universities often allow students to formally apply for leaves of absence, many students are unaware of this option.

Dr Harvey said that inconsistent terminology and “arbitrary” timeframes are used to determine when students are absent without permission. Exacerbating matters, students can be deemed dropouts even when they have obtained formal leave.

“It’s one thing when inaccurate data is sitting on a website,” Dr Harvey said. “Once you start explicitly funding universities on the basis of that data, you need to make sure it’s accurate.”

Simon Maddocks, vice-chancellor of Charles Darwin University, said that the focus on attrition has arisen from “the government trying to blame universities for wasting taxpayers’ money, rather than a substantive discussion about the value of education”.

“We have lots of women who take 18 months out to have a baby, and then come back and finish their programme with us,” Professor Maddocks said. “But we get the black mark because the definition [of attrition] is 12 months without continuous study.

“That black mark doesn’t get taken off when they come back and finish. We have to get some of these definitions right, and call out this language that is being used to smear us for political agendas that have nothing to do with where we’re trying to take society.”

Australian universities’ overall attrition rate is at its lowest level in four years, according to the latest education department data. Dr Harvey said that there is little variation in different universities’ completion rates, and it is unclear “what problem the government’s trying to solve” by introducing performance funding.

While 1 million Australians have partially completed higher education qualifications, education department figures suggest that around one in five university dropouts return to higher education within a year. This rises to 47 per cent after eight years.

Despite this, just 17 per cent are contacted by university staff before they withdraw, according to a 2017 La Trobe report. Just one in 20 university dropouts say that they were contacted after they had left.

Dr Harvey said that universities could do far more to win students back and prevent them leaving in the first place. “Students thinking about withdrawing often don’t get any advice at all,” he said.

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