

Originally published in *The Australian* <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/opinion/address-attribution-rate-with-many-happy-returns/news-story/5be6a80fbd28d4b7de55c3d542a484a8>

Address attrition rate with many happy returns



Illustration: Eric Lobbecke.

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- The Australian
- 12:00AM March 15, 2017

Student attrition is overstated but not overrated. National re-enrolment data reveals that about half of students who withdraw from higher education return to the sector within eight years.

Despite this positive trend, too many students still leave the sector and too few return. This is costly for institutions, but particularly for some groups of students.

Low socio-economic students who leave are less likely to return to study, creating a significant degree completion gap. Better addressing the root causes of attrition would encourage many students to stay, and many more to return.

Attrition is defined by comparing university census data annually. For statistical purposes, it is a binary system: you are enrolled or you have left the sector.

Yet more than 20 per cent of so-called dropouts return after just one year out of the sector. In many cases, these are students taking a formal leave of absence who always intended to re-enrol. We know this because most return to the same institution they left. Overall, nearly 50 per cent of those who leave are soon back in higher education.

Our present definition of attrition does not capture the complexity of student pathways. This reflects a broader problem where university language and processes do not reflect student realities and wishes. There are in fact many - stages of enrolment, but they are rarely transparent to students. Our research found that many students who left the sector were unaware of their ability to request a period of formal leave. Others were unaware that they were about to be struck off the university system, with their status simply changed to absent without leave.

The sector lacks common language and definitions. Deferment, leave of absence, absence without leave, discontinuation of enrolment, withdrawal, and re-enrolment mean different things at different institutions. This opacity is confusing for students and ultimately prevents some from staying. Similar confusion about how to re-enrol and obtain credit for prior study was a common theme among students we surveyed.

It should be relatively easy for many students to return with credit for their prior study. Nationally, there is greater overall attrition among continuing students than commencing students. Many students who withdraw therefore have successfully completed a year or more of their course. Evidence suggests that some higher education is better than none, but qualifications remain important. We need more transparency to recognise prior learning, and more creativity to develop nested and scaffolded degrees. Universities are still making it too easy to leave and too difficult to return.

There are also important differences in why students leave the sector and why they might therefore return. In our surveys, low socio-economic students were nearly twice as likely as high socio-economic students to leave because of a change in career plans. This trend reflects previous research highlighting inadequate levels of careers education provided to students in some secondary schools. The lesson for universities here is that recruitment does not end at enrolment. Commencing students need clear degree maps, ongoing career advice and knowledge about potential transfer pathways.

Other students leave because of anxiety and mental health issues. In our surveys of students who had withdrawn from university, mental health was cited as a greater reason for withdrawal than academic difficulties. This finding suggests a potential need to reallocate university resources.

While many preventive strategies are employed to tackle academic difficulties, such as tutoring, academic analytics and bridging mathematics courses, there are often fewer initiatives directed at developing wellness and mental health.

Recruitment need not end at attrition either. Nationally, students from high socio-economic backgrounds are 25 per cent likelier than those from low socio-economic backgrounds to be recruited into higher education after a two-year absence. This gap in re-enrolment helps to explain why there is a 10 per cent gap in degree completions between high and low socio-economic students.

Wealthier students are likelier to change institutions, while less affluent students are likelier to re-enrol in a different course from their original one. Re-recruitment campaigns should not assume that former students want to enrol in their original degree, or at their original institution. Tailored recruitment strategies are required, and careers advice is crucial at all stages of the student life cycle.

Partial completers are among the largest group of prospective students that universities can recruit. All have been accepted into higher education previously and demonstrated their academic preparedness for study. Targeted campaigns could quickly increase student enrolments and student equity.

There is no national crisis of student attrition but neither is there clarity. Too many students are still withdrawing for preventable reasons, while many more could be re-recruited. Institutions need flexibility, transparency, and energy to support the many student pathways from recruitment to graduation.

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