

Too many students slip through the net: La Trobe's equity centre

ANDREW HARVEY

10:42AM SEPTEMBER 20, 2021



Covid-19 will only exacerbate the need for some students to take leave, and make it harder for many to return says Andrew Harvey, director of La Trobe University's Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research. Stuart McEvoy/The Australian.

Every year around 10 per cent of students defer their university offer. In theory, they take time off to find work, find themselves, and save money before enrolling in their chosen course next year. However, our research confirms that around one third of deferring students do not return to the university sector. Others do return but enrol in a different course or university from which they deferred.

More concerningly, over 20 per cent of students who commence a bachelor degree will take leave from their university in the next three years. Less than a third of these students will come back. Universities are good at enabling students to leave, but worse at encouraging their return.

Students increasingly choose nonlinear pathways. Supporting them to defer, take leave and re-enter university, change courses, and adjust their study mode is now core university business. Nevertheless, patterns of deferral and leave reveal wide variations among student groups, often exacerbating inequity.

A regional student is nearly two and a half times more likely to defer an offer than a metropolitan student. Indigenous students are nearly twice as likely to leave

university as non-Indigenous students, and also less likely to return after taking leave. Low socio-economic students are more likely to leave than other students, and less likely to return after they take leave. These patterns all help to explain longstanding gaps in participation, retention, and completion.

Addressing inequity requires actions from both governments and universities. High regional deferral rates are clearly linked to the cost of living and relocating. The Australian government's adoption of recommendations contained within the recent Napthine and Halsey reviews of regional education is positive. Notably, expanding eligibility for youth allowance and allocating more equity funds on the basis of regional enrolments will provide financial assistance.

Most regional students will still pay more for their degrees under the changes made by former Education Minister Dan Tehan though, and university places remain capped within a sector that is now much less resourced. Further, regional school achievement remains relatively low. Since low school achievement is a strong predictor of both deferral and non-return, progress is required to address this regional achievement gap.

Indigenous students face specific challenges, often including unconscious bias, discrimination, and marginalisation within the curriculum and campus. Indigenous support funding has played a crucial role in allowing universities to assist students. More work is needed though to embed cultural safety, attract Indigenous staff, and educate non-Indigenous staff and students.

Further work is also required before enrolment. Year 12 students who receive a relatively low Australian Tertiary Admission Rank, or do not receive their first preference course, are more likely both to defer and not to return. Within schools, universities could provide more advice on pathways, transfers, deferral, and leave. Institutions also need to acknowledge that recruitment is a long game, and many students arrive with only one foot in the door.

At the other end of the cycle, universities could do more to encourage students on leave to return to their studies. We spoke to students across five partner institutions and found a need for better communication and more tailored engagement. Universities need to capture the reasons for deferral and leave, and adapt their engagement strategies accordingly. Students who take leave for academic reasons, for example, could be specifically informed of academic support, bridging opportunities and pathways to alternative degrees. A lighter touch could be adopted for students who leave for travel reasons and who are statistically likely to return to study.

Students who do return to study also face challenges. Returning students often confront a loss of their peer group and need time and support to become reoriented to their course and university. While we found some evidence of new approaches

being adopted, broader reform is needed to support reorientation, including the establishment of peer mentoring programs.

Despite their insights, we found that students themselves were usually marginal to the design of institutional strategies around deferral and leave. Elevating the student voice would help universities to identify and address the needs of students contemplating, experiencing, or returning from leave.

Finally, we still lack sufficient clarity about the problems to be solved. Current national data does not capture the distinction between students who are on approved leave as opposed to those who have withdrawn. As a consequence, large numbers of students on approved leave are classified as attrition each year. Course and institutional mobility patterns remain poorly documented. Further evidence and data are needed to support students through complex and multiple pathways.

Deferral and leave-taking behaviour affects all universities, but it disproportionately affects students from equity groups. COVID-19 will only exacerbate the need for some students to take leave, and make it harder for many to return. Developing strategies around deferral and leave is thus in the direct interest of universities, who are increasingly measured and funded by their student retention and completion rates. Importantly, such strategies are also in the interest of students, including those most marginalised.

Professor Andrew Harvey is Director of the Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research at La Trobe University.