

Originally published in The Australian: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/opinion/encourage-uni-dropouts-to-return-instead-of-stigmatising-them/story-e6frgcko-1227401043189>

Encourage uni ‘dropouts’ to return instead of stigmatising them

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- From: *The Australian*
- June 17, 2015 12:00AM



Raising retention rates has proved tough, but students who leave can be tempted to return.
Source: News Limited

Not all attrition is preventable. Some students will inevitably withdraw from university, but their journeys do not end there. Universities need to re-engage and re-recruit departed students and to avoid treating those who do withdraw as failures.

Raising retention rates is tough. Many first-year students still do not make it to the second year of their degree. In 2002, the retention rate for commencing students was 19.8 per cent. In 2013, it was 19.9 per cent.

Why has attrition remained so hard to conquer? The answer lies partly in why students leave. Students who withdraw are typically young and from under-represented backgrounds. Causes of departure vary but external forces are prominent. They leave because they are uncertain about their course or future career, or for personal reasons. Universities cannot control these factors, but can influence what happens next.

Given their youth and the myriad reasons for departure, many withdrawing students can be expected to return to higher education. International research confirms that further study is a

common desire and outcome. In Australia, about 25 per cent of commencing undergraduate students are admitted on the basis of some prior higher education.

Apart from school-leavers, departed students probably represent the single largest group of prospective students for universities to target. Students themselves understand the words of Samuel Beckett: Try again. Fail again. Fail better. They should inspire university recruiters and managers, too.

Yet students who withdraw from university remain stigmatised. A common normative language of failure reinforces the idea that departing students are unlikely, or even unworthy, to return to study. Historically, attrition was referred to as student wastage. Students are still referred to as dropouts, non-achievers, failures and non-completers. These negative labels are often internalised.

Re-engagement requires a conceptual and linguistic shift. Institutions need to ensure that departing students are not considered failures. It is more appropriate to consider them as an alumni subset or as partial completers. Reframing the conversation would enable further opportunities for recruitment and strengthening institutional reputation.

This last point is important. Although relatively few students who withdraw are openly hostile to the university, the reputational impact can still be significant.

Concrete steps are also important. Exit surveys are rare and many students simply drift away after an extended period of absence without leave. Only 4 per cent of students who withdraw are interviewed. There is no equivalent of the graduate destination survey and most institutions know remarkably little about these students..

Re-entering the university is also difficult. Contact details are often lost, and returning students must commence their enrolment process from scratch. Nested undergraduate degrees are rare. Students who have completed a year or two of study typically leave as “dropouts”, with no diploma or associate degree. To re-enter the university, they must complete complex procedures to obtain recognition of their prior learning. Or start from scratch again.

These issues can be addressed. Universities need to recognise the reality of student uncertainty, acknowledge the validity of the decision to withdraw, and engage more deeply with departed students. Students who leave should be valued as potential future students and alumni. Deeper engagement with departed students would improve institutional reputations and recruitment levels. It would also assist many students to consider departure as a stage of life rather than a mark of failure.

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