How ‘ghost students’ fare in future studies

By: Dallas Bastian in News, Top Stories March 3, 2021

Academic teaching staff have long witnessed students who one day walk out of class and never return. Now, researchers have investigated the outcomes of the ‘ghost student’ – one who remains enrolled in one or more of their units yet shows no evidence of engaging in any learning or assessment.

The team from La Trobe University and Curtin University said ghosting behaviours have ramifications for students, institutions and the Australian government.

“The student receives a record of academic failure and an increased financial burden, institutions see a reduction in their published ‘success rate’ and governments see little return for the allocation of Commonwealth Supported Place (CSP) funding,” they wrote.

“A report of this kind is also timely given the forthcoming government changes to CSP eligibility and the introduction of a ‘50 per cent pass rule’ in 2022.”

The authors added that the “all too binary” success rate is part of the reason why this form of student disengagement and failure frequently goes unnoticed.

To unpack the phenomenon, the team looked at the relationship between non-participating enrolments (NPE) and rates of student retention and completion.

It found NPE results accounted for more than a quarter of all fail grades. “Crucially, only a tenth of students with an NPE result managed to achieve an overall average pass mark,” the authors wrote.

“Students with a non-zero fail result as their lowest mark had much better overall academic achievement than NPE students. Despite having failed a unit, more than two thirds of these students still achieved an average mark of 50 or higher.”

The study also examined the extent to which student equity categories are linked to a higher risk of NPE behaviour.

Dr Bret Stephenson from La Trobe University said: “Indigenous students were found to be at
particularly high risk of returning an NPE result, alongside students studying part-time and those returning an ATAR below 60.

“While equity group membership was not found to be a predictor of NPEs for most equity groups, these students were overrepresented among the more susceptible part-time and lower ATAR cohorts.”

To address the issue, the researchers recommended consistent identification, monitoring and reporting of NPEs as a distinct category.

“Australian universities should create policies dedicated to NPE failures and make the tracking and remediation of NPE failures a central feature of their student success and retention, and student equity strategies,” Stephenson said.

“We also recommend greater conformity of NPE data collection across institutions and government processes.”

Click here to read the full report and list of recommendations.

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