Study urges transparency on ‘ghost’ enrolments

Students who ‘strategically’ jettison subjects early are among the least likely to complete courses, Australian research finds

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University attrition statistics mask a multitude of “ghost” enrolments, where students have completely disengaged from individual subjects, with an Australian study highlighting this behaviour as an unheeded predictor of failure.

Research at La Trobe University has found that zero is by far the most common fail mark at the unit level, suggesting many students simply do not even attempt assessment tasks for particular subjects. One in 10 commencing undergraduates notch up “non-participating enrolments” (NPEs) in at least one unit, in what may be “strategic” decisions to sacrifice one subject and focus on the rest.

But just a 10th of these students manage to pass their first-year studies overall. By comparison, more than two-thirds of students who fail individual units – but still manage scores above zero – achieve average pass marks across their subjects.

The study, published by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, analysed the results of more than 38,000 first-year bachelor’s students between 2012 and 2017. It found that NPE was a “leading indicator” of course withdrawal, with just 50 per cent of these students making it to second year – compared to 79 per cent of students on average, and 86 per cent of those who passed all their first-year subjects.
And while underprivileged students proved no more prone to “ghost” scores than peers from wealthier backgrounds, indigenous Australians had a “significantly higher likelihood of NPE” – even after the researchers controlled for risk factors such as part-time study and inferior high school results.

Lead researcher Bret Stephenson said it was not clear why subject-level disengagement was so common among Aboriginal students. But the findings suggested that policies to encourage indigenous university participation could be undermined by a provision in last year’s Job-ready Graduates reforms, whereby students lose access to student loans and teaching grants when they have unsuccessfully attempted eight subjects.

“That’s a big worry,” Dr Stephenson said. “The more draconian approaches to addressing [failure] could have a huge negative impact on equity groups of concern.”

He said the study had highlighted the need for more nuanced attrition data, and for support staff to be alert to the “warning sign” of students completely disengaging from particular units.

“The way in which a student fails matters greatly,” he said. “Subtypes of failure say an awful lot about what is happening with a student and within institutions, and what types of interventions might be effective. That’s really been overlooked in university policy, practice and research.”

But one “good news story” was that if NPEs could be eliminated among indigenous students, they would be no more likely to fail their courses than non-indigenous Australians.

The study was unable to explain why students did not avoid financial consequences and academic black marks by formally withdrawing from subjects before the “census date”, when debts started accruing. Dr Stephenson likened the phenomenon to new year’s gym memberships.

“Students start with every intention of doing well in a full suite of subjects, but the going gets hard and they may tramp away without officially unenrolling,” he said.

He said students who recorded zero in all their subjects may have switched to other institutions “early on”, unaware of the need to cancel their original enrolments and oblivious to future debts accumulating under Australia’s deferred loan scheme. “Only a qualitative study could get to the heart of that,” he said.

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