



6 WAYS

Australian universities
are stopping student attrition





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The impact of COVID-19 on universities is still playing out but lower student engagement and satisfaction across 2020 and 2021 could lead to an increase in attrition rates.¹ Indeed, between May 2019 and May 2020, the number of tertiary students dropped by 112,500. Women made up three-quarters of the reduction in student numbers.²

Prior to the pandemic, the student attrition rate at Australian universities sat at around 15%, and approximately 20% for first-year students.³ According to the latest QILT

Student Experience Survey, 19% of students who were retained in 2021 actually considered leaving, with half of those citing health or stress as the major cause.⁴

Now, with more students enrolling at university, the number of students leaving without their degree is growing substantially.⁵

So how can Australian universities address this outward flow of students? Why are students leaving? How can we help them see their studies through? Here, six higher education experts

share their responses to these questions and their tips for how Australian universities can stem attrition rates.

The focus, as you'll see, is on creating a student experience that uses technology thoughtfully and creatively to build an inclusive and accessible learning environment where community and connection are prioritised.



“The student attrition rate at Australian universities sat at around 15%, and approximately 20% for first-year students.”

REID MELDRUM
SIMPLUS AUSTRALIA



112,500

fewer students were enrolled in Australian universities in May 2020 than in May 2019.



75%

of the reduction in student numbers was a result of fewer women studying.

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Student retention relies on wellbeing

Universities can feel overwhelming – the sheer scale of the physical or digital campus, the number of people, the demands of coursework, the pressure of exams, the opportunities to socialise.

Then there are the day-to-day stresses of work, family, relationships, rent. Given the heavy load many students carry, it's little wonder that their wellbeing is at risk – and with it, their ability to remain at university and complete their studies.

It's critical then, that student wellbeing be prioritised by universities looking to address their attrition rates and improve the student experience they provide.



Head of Student Wellbeing Dr Benjamin Wilkes at the University of Sydney shares his insights into supporting wellbeing by connecting with students before they reach crisis.



DR BENJAMIN WILKES
HEAD – STUDENT
WELLBEING, EDUCATION,
UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

tip #1

3 ways to connect with students early

“A single source of information can track not only student interactions with support services, but can integrate their course and housing information.

"There is an important preventative aspect to student wellbeing. We want to be connecting with a student well before they feel that dropping out seems the only option.

"For universities to do this effectively, three key ingredients need to be in place.

"The first is that support teams must be under the one service arm so there is continuity across interactions.



"Second, having all the relevant information in one system is critical. One of the common artefacts of traditional support services is that they sit in isolation with different data sets. It's much easier for people like myself or senior practitioners or emergency responders to do their jobs effectively if they have quick access to crucial information about the student in need of their support.

"Moreover, a single source of information can track not only

student interactions with support services, but can integrate their course and housing information. This can help in identifying red flags that indicate a student might need help. For example, when a previously diligent student stops handing in coursework or fails to attend an exam, support services can connect with them.

"Finally, universities need a diverse workforce in terms of cultural and gender identities, skills sets, and modes of interaction. Some students, for

example, might be more likely to reach out if they know they can do it in their first language. Other students might not need counselling but could benefit from a peer support adviser.

"For others, a self-paced online course or app might be more appropriate. It's about making sure the right kind of help is available and accessible."



19%

of undergraduate students considered leaving their institutions in 2021.



Leading reasons include:

1. Health and/or stress
2. Study/life balance
3. Workload difficulties

Source: QILT Student Experience Survey 2021

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Build a learning environment that boosts engagement

A new student experience model can provide flexible and equitable access, boosting engagement.

A true digital campus is more than a digital learning management system. It enables students to blend their learning experience with their lived reality, rather than sacrificing one for the other.

It also offers an equity opportunity, making higher education accessible for students from non-traditional backgrounds through flexibility in time and location, and to students with differing needs through universal design.



As experts note in the following pages, digital technology is critical to creating an equitable and accessible student experience but it can't be used simply as a replacement for an on-campus experience.

Blended learning and blended engagement are key to producing the kind of meaningful engagement and access to problem-solving that encourages students to stay the course.

Here, Professor Kevin Ashford-Rowe, Amritha Zachariah and Dr Jenine Beekhuyzen discuss the digital imperative facing universities and how it can be embraced.



Student ratings of the quality of their overall educational experience rallied somewhat in 2021 after a COVID-induced dip in 2020, but have not fully recovered.

2019:

78% positive

2020:

69% positive

2021:

73% positive

Source: QILT Student Experience Survey 2021



**PROFESSOR KEVIN
ASHFORD-ROWE**
PRO VICE-CHANCELLOR
(LEARNING & TEACHING),
QUEENSLAND
UNIVERSITY OF
TECHNOLOGY

tip #2

Use digital-first environments to boost engagement

“ Digital tools can enable the collaboration and interaction students want and help provide solutions to those challenges as they come up.

"We must meet students where they are and technology can help us do that by creating a digital campus that enables students to blend their learning experiences with their lived realities.

"Caring for family, working, travelling long distances – for many students these things make it impossible



to be on campus in business hours. Access and engagement are then critical to ensuring the student experience can be had by everyone.

"Universities that are truly digital at heart are disrupting and reframing the traditional student experience to provide more flexible and equitable access to and engagement with learning, community and wellbeing.

"Engagement is often a proxy for retention. If a student is engaged with their university, they are

more likely to seek ways to solve the challenges they face in order to stay at the university. Digital tools can enable the collaboration and interaction students want and help provide solutions to those challenges as they come up, whether they're on campus at 10am or logging on at home after putting the kids to bed.

"This can be especially important for students who come from non traditional backgrounds and don't have the cultural capital of being, say, the fifth generation in their family to attend university."



AMRITHA ZACHARIAH
EDUCATION AND
SKILLS CHAPTER CHAIR,
AUSTRALIA INDIA
BUSINESS COUNCIL

tip #3

Prioritise technological ecosystems that students will thrive in

“ University leadership and their teams must prioritise knowledge around how to create the technological ecosystems their students will thrive in.

"Australia is lagging behind Canada, UK and the US when it comes to reaching and retaining our international student population. There is a need to re-frame learning, business models and delivery, locally and across borders.

"India, for example, has a growing population of ~ 1.4 billion and almost 1 in 5 international students are from India. How do Australian institutions enable them to receive a high-quality education in innovative, scalable, and sustainable ways?



"Where there is a desire for higher enrollments and retention, it's imperative that our education institutions make building their digital muscle a priority. Digital technologies, used well, will play a critical role in providing accessible, personalised learning at scale, and attracting and retaining a diverse and global student population. This can ultimately be good for both local and international students.

"The majority of people in leadership positions at universities didn't grow up as digital natives

and, while they are comfortable investing money in tangible assets like buildings, they tend to be more wary about putting funding into tech. And they are right to put more rigour into this as there have been too many failed stories of wasted funds. But equally, they don't know what they don't know.

"The students who populate their institutions are digital natives and expect to operate in a digital-first environment that offers a true user experience. So university leadership and their teams must prioritise knowledge around how to create the technological ecosystems their students will thrive in and which provide not just a learning experience but an experience of collaboration, community and social interaction. Key to the success of this digital robustness is the support of a workforce that understands why and how to use it."



DR JENINE BEEKHUYZEN
HONORARY
APPOINTMENT AS
VISITING FELLOW,
UNIVERSITY OF
TECHNOLOGY SYDNEY

tip #4

Don't sacrifice interaction for digital experience

“Students might come for the curriculum, but they'll stay for the community.”

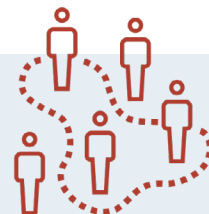
"A digital experience is not a set-and-forget replacement for a lecture theatre. Yes, the transition to digital learning worked well for plenty of students, but it can also amplify existing challenges for many others who find it difficult to make themselves heard or find opportunities for engagement.

"So technology can't be used in a passive way. The coursework might be fantastic but there also needs to be interaction, belonging, accountability

and connection. You can't overestimate the importance of communication and conversation to the success of the student experience. Students might come for the curriculum, but they'll stay for the community.

"Mentoring programs can be a powerful tool for facilitating that community connection and accountability. I've seen it change lives, especially when it comes to engaging girls and women in STEM subjects.

"Mentoring need not be formal but structure is necessary to make it effective. Mentors can show students the ropes on the physical and digital campus, help identify their challenges and strengths, connect them with other students and help them seek opportunities for conversations about their learning."



56%

of students reported that they worked with other students as part of their study in 2021

32%

interacted with other students outside their study requirements.

42%

report having a sense of belonging to their institutions.

All 3 of these findings are 10 percentage points lower than in 2019.

Source: QILT Student Experience Survey 2021

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Mentoring improves retention, and it must be easy to access

A variety of paths makes guidance and support accessible year-round.

Taking inspiration from the principles of universal design offers opportunities to improve retention. With mentoring and support available across the board, beyond O-week and past first year, and from peers, HDR candidates, coaches, academics and professional staff, many mentors can make retention a reality.

Here, Professor Marcus Randall shares how the Bond Business School has opened pathways to



mentoring to help keep students on track, and Professor Jennie Shaw details how the University of Adelaide is addressing its greatest retention challenge.



**PROFESSOR
MARCUS RANDALL,**
ASSOCIATE DEAN,
STUDENT AFFAIRS &
SERVICE QUALITY,
BOND UNIVERSITY

tip #5

Create mentoring and proactive support

“ We see a lot of students who are mentored, go on to mentor other students themselves.

“It’s crucial to offer students support from day one. Universities can be difficult places to navigate and students who feel lost and confused are more likely to drop out.

“To directly address this issue our school has been running a mentoring program for first-year undergraduate students for the past 10 years with positive results.

“It inducts students into what university life is, identifies their key contacts and helps them form networks that will stay with them throughout their studies. Mentors are senior students and staff

members, and we see a lot of students who were mentored go on to mentor students themselves.

“We also run a program that offers a coaching service. If, for example, a student fails a subject, a coach partners with them for the next semester to help them stay on track with their coursework and submit assignments on time. It’s just the basic stuff but it can make a big difference. So much of a student’s success at university depends on their ability to manage their time and subject load.

“Finally, we run academic progress registers where academics can report on their students’ progress and identify those who might need more support either academically or via the wellbeing officer who is assigned to any welfare issues.

“A support structure implemented from the beginning can be a powerful way to improve the student experience and prevent students from falling through the cracks.”





**PROFESSOR
JENNIE SHAW**
DEPUTY VICE-
CHANCELLOR AND VICE
PRESIDENT (ACADEMIC),
UNIVERSITY OF
ADELAIDE

tip #6

Offer first-year support in later years

“ Students returning after almost two years need a complete reorientation – they’ve lost their collective memory of how to be a student.

"Keeping up student retention measures in second and third years is our biggest challenge. We experienced a large exodus of students from second and third years during the pandemic, putting attrition at 10% higher than our normal range.

"This showed us that students need lots of support throughout all their years at university, not just their first year. Students returning after almost two years need a complete reorientation – they’ve lost their

collective memory of how to be a student and that can lead to a real loss of confidence and feeling of isolation.

"Much of the support we've rolled out over the past couple of years has been focused on providing first year-style support to

second- and third-year students, whether domestic or international. And the feedback we've received from students is that they want a combination of both academic and social support.

"So the University offers support, including pick up services from



the airport, English language refresher courses, assistance finding accommodation, free RAT tests, campus tours, trips down to Victor Harbour and access to the Writing and Maths Learning Centres for all students, not just first years.

"We also work with and help fund the Adelaide University Union (YouX) which has ramped up its online and face-to-face activities

to meet the demand of students for greater engagement.

"Importantly, these are offered year-round, not just for a week at the beginning of the year.

"Students, whether they're new or returning, domestic or international, need support introduced at the appropriate time – not all in one hit when they first arrive."



58%

of students said they received support from university to settle into study in 2021.



55%

said their induction and orientation activities were relevant and helpful in 2021.

Source: QILT Student Experience Survey 2021

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How to reduce attrition

Find out how Simplus can help you improve student retention and create environments for digital learning.

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