

# Stopping dropouts: how can universities keep hold of first years?

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One in every five students will drop out or change course in their first year of university.

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Deputy vice chancellor at James Cook University, Professor Sally Kift, echoes Bashford's comments.

She says that while the statistics are less severe for mature-aged students, a lot of first-time students endure significant uncertainty when starting university.

'I don't think an easy, seamless transition to university is assured, wherever students come from,' says Professor Kift.

'Whether private or public schooled, there are a complex combination of factors and pressures.

'We know from quite extensive evidence that at least a third of school leavers are very uncertain about the course or career-choice they've made.'

Combine that type of longer-term uncertainty with short-term pressures such as financial difficulties, and first year dropout statistics begin to add up.

Jordi Austin, director of student support services at the University of Sydney, likens the first year of university to entering a foreign country.

'You have to learn the culture, the language and how to navigate a complex environment,' she says.

How then should the education system address the rate of first year drop outs?

James Bashford says more flexibility is needed from universities: 'One of the most important things is to make sure that their courses are flexible and the university is flexible.

'If there does need to be a change, maybe if they need to go to part-time or change their major, that's not a complex process that is going to set their degree back.'

Jordi Austin, who also serves as president of the Australia-New Zealand Student Services Association, says concerted efforts are being made by a number of universities to proactively reach out to students during the first few weeks of semester, rather than wait for students to approach faculty staff.

'A lot of students in those first four to six weeks are quite overwhelmed with the enormity of what they are doing,' she says.

She argues it is critical to have people with recent, relevant experienced involved as part of that process.

'It is important to have someone who is a senior student, who they can ask those questions they are perhaps afraid of asking their lecturer,' she says.

Ms Austin says educators are noticing the benefits of addressing smaller issues early on.

'The academics are seeing this as helping to solve small problems before they snowball across the semester and before the students feel that it's a lost cause and they better pull out.'



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One in every five students will drop out or change course in their first year of university.  
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*An alarming number of students still do not make it beyond their first year of university. **Life Matters** speaks to a panel of educators and student representatives to find out why, and what is being done to curb the first year dropout rate.*

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Around one in five students will drop out of university or change their course within their first year.

That's an uncomfortable statistic for Australia's universities, and one that points to a number of underlying issues with the education system.

I don't think an easy, seamless transition to university is assured, wherever students come from.

According to James Bashford, a welfare officer from the University of Melbourne Student Union, the timing of the university census four weeks into first semester—a date from which students will be charged for their courses—represents a crucial moment for first year students.

'There's definitely always this crunch point before the census date, where students have to make a make or break decision: "Do I stick this out and try and sweat it out, or do I make the change now?"

'That adds a lot of pressure to students to make that decision within those first four weeks, when they are just finding their feet,' says Mr Bashford.