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Getting students into uni is one thing, but how to keep them there?

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Abstract
Opposition Leader Bill Shorten has revealed Labor’s policy platform for higher education, saying the focus would be on retaining students in higher education and curbing the numbers dropping out. The students most at risk of not graduating are those from equity backgrounds including low socioeconomic and Indigenous students. So how do we make sure these students complete their degrees? Labor has been light on detail, but we know of some things that would help.

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Opposition Leader Bill Shorten has revealed Labor’s policy platform for higher education, saying the focus would be on retaining students in higher education and curbing the numbers dropping out.

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**Getting students into university**

Australian universities have done an excellent job of attracting more students from a greater diversity of backgrounds. From 2007-2013, the rate of undergraduate enrolment increased by over 25%. The growth was spurred by both policy directed at increasing participation rates and the more recent demand-driven system that uncapped university places.
Since 2007, student numbers from designated equity groups have significantly increased. The exceptions have been women in non-traditional areas of study and students from rural and remote areas.

While increased access and participation are cause for celebration, getting students into university is only the beginning of this journey. The successful retention of learners remains elusive. Student dropout rates in Australian universities consistently hover around 18%, with some institutions indicating that an average of 25% of students leave before gaining a degree.

Rates of early departure from university remain particularly high among students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, rural and remote areas, and Indigenous students. Obviously for students who fall into multiple equity groups, the possibility of leaving university without a degree increases dramatically.

Entering university has similar characteristics to entering a foreign or unfamiliar country. New students have to master a new and somewhat alien language; all the time adjusting to an unfamiliar environment where accepted etiquettes may be unclear or simply invisible.

Expectations, presumed both prior to arrival at university and during the initial stages of study, may remain hidden or unexplained for certain groups.

Students who do not traditionally attend university or have a family history of graduates may feel like imposters who don’t belong or deserve study. Such feelings can quickly lead to thoughts of departure.

How do we ensure the ‘open door’ doesn’t become a ‘revolving door’?

There is one key resource for retaining and engaging beginning students that all institutions have access to – the existing university population. A key component of effective retention strategies is including existing students in the transition of new students into the university environment.

One strategy is peer mentoring, where new students and current students can meet informally to discuss university practices and expectations. This provides a “safe space” for students, particularly those from equity backgrounds, to get insider knowledge that is important for academic success.

Mentors often share similar life experiences and stories to their mentees, and so can provide practical solutions and strategies for managing the rigours of tertiary study. They can explain university timetabling, university terminology and highlight critical stages in the semester. There is a substantial amount of assumed knowledge within universities and mentors can be critical in explaining these assumptions.
Mentoring can assist in reducing student isolation in university and increase engagement with the campus, faculty and staff. Importantly, this is the case for both the student being mentored and also the mentor. This mutuality has been clearly indicated in our research with the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Program (AIME).

In interviews, AIME mentors said their involvement in the program personally evoked a greater sense of belonging with the campus community, encouraging some to continue with their own studies.

This educational mentoring program has improved the high school completion rates of Australian Indigenous students, transitioning 100% of their Year 12 students into university, further education, or employment.

The potential of mentoring programs is not limited to getting students into university. It should be offered as an ongoing aspect of university life. Engaging with existing students more advanced in their degrees is particularly important for those students who may not have a trusted person available to answer questions or provide advice.

Nurturing mentoring relationships over time, with continued opportunities for conversations and meetings throughout the first and even second year of study, can assist in retention, particularly among students most at risk of dropping out.

Labor
Bill Shorten