

Progression and Attrition Rates Across the Australian Higher Education Sector

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Progression and attrition are central indicators of student success, institutional effectiveness and educational equity. They should NOT, however, be interpreted as simple league-table measures. Rates are shaped by a range of issues including - student characteristics, course design, mode and intensity of study, institutional mission, labour-market conditions and major disruptions. The most useful approach combines nationally consistent measures with disaggregated cohort analysis, longitudinal outcomes and evidence about the student experience.

Australian enrolments recovered in 2024: *total higher education enrolments rose 4.7%* to 1,676,077, while domestic enrolments increased 1.0% to 1,086,789. The Department cautions that pandemic disruption, strong labour-market conditions and cost-of-living pressures have influenced recent patterns. This context matters when interpreting changes in continuation (progression) or withdrawal (attrition).

Key concepts and measures

Core measures used in sector analysis		
Measure	Meaning	Interpretive caution
Progression	The share of attempted student load or units successfully completed, or the movement of students into the next study period.	Definitions vary across reporting systems; always confirm the numerator, denominator and reference period.
Success rate	Passed load as a proportion of total assessed load.	A high rate can coexist with later withdrawal and does not measure course completion.
Attrition rate	The proportion of students who neither complete nor return in the following reference period, subject to the published methodology.	May include temporary stop-out, provider transfer or changed study plans; it is not automatically evidence of academic failure.
Retention rate	The proportion of students who continue or complete, commonly presented as the complement of attrition after relevant exclusions.	Can obscure differences between full-time, part-time, online and on-campus cohorts.
Completion rate	The percentage of a commencing cohort that completes within a specified period.	Requires longitudinal tracking; short observation windows disadvantage students studying part-time or taking approved breaks.

Sector context and recent evidence

The national statistics collection provides annual tables on attrition, success and retention, as well as cohort analyses that track whether commencing students complete, remain enrolled or do not complete an award over nominated periods. These two views answer different questions: annual indicators show short-term movement, while cohort results reveal longer-term educational outcomes.

Recent data should be treated as a period of structural volatility rather than a stable trend line. In 2023, around 79% of domestic students who had not completed in 2022 continued studying in 2023; just over 20% deferred or left higher education. Changes in border settings, employment opportunities, living costs and the post-pandemic return to normal study patterns can affect both enrolment volume and persistence.

Student experience data adds important explanatory evidence. In the 2024 Student Experience Survey (QILT), undergraduate overall educational experience was 76.5%, broadly steady from 76.7% in 2023. Peer engagement improved to 60.2%, but undergraduate student support and services remained at 71.2%, the lowest level recorded since 2015. *These findings do not establish causation, but they identify areas that institutions can test against progression and attrition patterns.*

Sector targets are usually 80% progression – 20% attrition – the 80/20 rule pops its head up once again.

Why rates differ across providers and cohorts

- **Student mix:** prior achievement, socioeconomic circumstances, First Nations status, disability, age, language background, caring duties and first-in-family participation can interact with institutional conditions.
- **Study pattern:** part-time, online, mixed-mode and interrupted study often produce different pathways from continuous full-time study.
- **Course and discipline:** assessment design, prerequisite knowledge, professional placement requirements and course sequencing affect early success.
- **Institutional mission:** open-access, enabling, regional and specialist providers serve different populations and should not be compared without adjustment.
- **External environment:** housing, transport, paid work, health, visa conditions and economic cycles can change persistence independently of teaching quality.

A sound approach to benchmarking

- **Fix the definition.** Specify the measure, cohort, year, exclusions and treatment of transfers, deferrals and completions.
- **Compare like with like.** Benchmark by qualification level, field of education, study load, mode, campus, commencing status and student characteristics.
- **Use multiple years.** Examine at least a rolling trend and flag structural breaks or methodology changes.
- **Report uncertainty and scale.** Add cohort counts, percentage-point changes and warnings for small cells.
- **Triangulate.** Combine administrative data with survey results, student feedback, subject-level performance and support-service use.
- **Follow students over time.** Distinguish temporary interruption, provider transfer, re-entry and permanent non-completion where data permits.

Institutional strategies to improve progression

- Provide realistic pre-enrolment information and conduct diagnostic assessment before or early in study.
- Design coherent first-year curricula with accessible assessment, timely feedback and clearly sequenced prerequisites.
- Use early-alert systems ethically, with human review and rapid outreach rather than risk labelling alone.
- Integrate academic skills, peer connection, advising, careers support and wellbeing referral into the curriculum.
- Offer flexible pathways, including reduced load, leave, re-entry and recognition of prior learning.
- Evaluate interventions using matched cohorts or staged implementation, and monitor whether benefits are equitable.

Governance and reporting

Progression and attrition should form part of an institution's academic monitoring and continuous-improvement cycle. Governing and academic bodies require regular, disaggregated reporting; clear ownership of actions; documented evaluation; and evidence that risks to particular cohorts are identified and addressed. *TEQSA *the national regulator) treats attrition as a significant student-risk indicator and emphasises provider-wide approaches to retention and completion.*

Sector rates are most valuable as signals for inquiry, not final judgements. A defensible analysis defines measures precisely, separates annual movement from long-term completion, accounts for student and provider context, and links quantitative findings with the lived student experience. Used in this way, progression and attrition data can guide targeted action while avoiding misleading comparisons or deficit-based conclusions about students.

References

- [Australian Government Department of Education, Key findings from the 2024 Higher Education Student Statistics.](#)
- [Australian Government Department of Education, 2023 Section 15—Attrition, success and retention.](#)
- [Australian Government Department of Education, Completion Rates—Cohort Analyses.](#)
- [Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, Good Practice Note: Improving retention and completion.](#)
- [Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, 2024 Student Experience Survey results.](#)

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