

# Student employment and inflexible university policies drive online drop out

Written by Steven Greenland, Professor in Marketing, Charles Darwin University

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Inflexible online assessment policies are inappropriate for working students. Flickr

Employment is the main reason students drop out of online degree courses, [our new research shows](#). This is despite claims that online university programs offer greater flexibility to workers and employers who want to up-skill.

Most online dropouts occur due to students' changing employment commitments, which affect their ability to complete assessments on time.

However, the assessment policies of many universities offer no concession for work-related challenges, so working students often fail to resume their studies. To tackle the biggest driver of attrition, university policies must offer flexibility around employment and assessment. Only then can universities truly provide the flexible online learning experience that workers and industry require.

## What is the problem?

[Our research](#) shows the assessment policies of many online courses are no more flexible than their on-campus counterparts. Some vaguely mention that employment and leave extensions are subject to course co-ordinator discretion. Others explicitly state that work is not a valid reason for granting extensions for assignments.

Some universities have merely adopted traditional on-campus policies for their online programs. This approach highlights the disconnect between university policymakers and the needs of online students.

Retention is the biggest challenge facing online educators. For example, Open Universities Australia, a provider with [more than 41,000 online students](#), experienced [attrition rates above 20%](#) for its introductory online units.

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A recent Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency [report](#) stresses that such high attrition represents huge revenue loss and creates reputational issues for governments and institutions.

Retention rates are [often mistakenly used](#) as a measure of a university's quality.

Since online education serves nontraditional students, it automatically experiences higher attrition compared to traditional on-campus learning. Using completion rates as a benchmark for education quality therefore places institutions with higher proportions of online students at an unfair disadvantage.

### What should universities do?

Considerable research and investment has sought to improve the retention of online students by focusing on the design and curriculum of learning websites.

However, this focus alone will not really help retention; it ignores the key driver of online attrition. What we need is fundamental change in the way universities think about online education.

Online students are offered flexibility in terms of study location, separate learning activities, and study progression. But considerable scope exists for improving retention by effectively accommodating the needs of online students in relation to assessment.

Or, at the very least, institutions could better manage student expectations by clearly communicating exactly what – if any – flexibility is offered in relation to employment.

Rather than imposing traditional on-campus student assessment extension policies, online students' employment commitments should be taken into consideration. This could come in the form of assessments aligned with workplace challenges by offering a choice of assessment options and flexible deadlines.

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A more radical move would be to allow online students to drop out and pick up again where they left at a later date.

### What is the chance universities will change?

Potential opposition to such suggestions could be anticipated from institutions that want to be seen as fair by treating on-campus and online students equally.

However, this argument is flawed. It merely illustrates universities' unwillingness to move beyond their comfort zones.

Other potential challenges relate to resource planning. Teaching staff would be required to process assessments and grades over a longer period. Administrators would also find it difficult to apportion revenues and costs to students who study a unit across more than one semester given current management practices.

Regardless of the challenges posed, reviewing online assessment policy in relation to student employment, and offering more flexibility around assessment, is essential. This would not only enhance student satisfaction, but enable universities to overcome – or at least lessen – the biggest driver of online student attrition.

*Research undertaken with Catherine Moore of the University of South Australia. Swinburne University of Technology Researcher Development Grant (RDG) of \$10,000 received for investigating the drivers of online student attrition.*

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