

Customer retention and attrition in higher education: sequential mixed methods investigation at an Australian university

Abstract

Persistently high student dropout has frustrated CDU and universities globally. Annually this dropout costs universities, millions of dollars in lost revenue especially for student segments with the highest dropout (e.g., First Nations, low SES and students from remote and regional areas). Shallow understanding of dropout and universities not responding to the root dropout causes have been identified as the underlying problem. Further research is therefore required to understand these aspects and how they vary across different student segments. This study addresses these literature gaps. A qualitative phase, conducted via 200 telephone interviews and focus group discussions has redefined the student dropout in higher education for different student segments, including low SES, regional or remote, First Nations, and women. Results from the qualitative phase of the project, provided valuable information about the main reasons for student dropout from units. Thematic analysis done for this phase of the project, highlighted the importance of different intervention strategies that could have helped students to reduce the dropout from the unit. Information and results from the qualitative phase guided the next phase of this project. A quantitative phase has further enabled statistical modelling of dropout causes and testing for differences between student segments. This phase conducted via online survey has applied the Importance Performance Analysis (IPA) and sought input from students regarding the effective and important retention strategies that will be successful in reducing student dropout. Results obtained from the two phases of this project, promise to provide invaluable information related to the massive issue of student dropout from Universities around the world. Even though the results are specific to Australian universities but will still provide great indications for understanding this problem in more detail. Results from the intervention part of the survey, would provide critical information that can help universities tailor their support and administrative system to provide timely support to the students and significantly prevent and reduce the dropout.