Tertiary student retention rates

Highest retention rates for degree-level study

Eighty-four percent of domestic students who started a bachelors degree in 2016 were still studying in 2017. The first-year retention rate for doctoral study was as high as 97 percent in 2017. This compared to rates of 75 percent to 79 percent in 2017 for students in level 1 to 7 diploma or certificate study. These rates are likely to change when students return to study after taking a short break.

For people undertaking higher-level study, the first-year retention rates are more or less stable, while the rates are more changeable for people in level 1 to 4 certificate study. This suggests that unemployment rates and other social factors such as family commitments have a greater influence on people's decisions to continue in lower-level study.

INDICATOR DESCRIPTION

The proportion of students who started a qualification and are still enrolled (at the qualification level at which they started study, or at a higher level) or who successfully completed a qualification.

HIGHER RETENTION RATES FOR STUDENTS IN LONGER QUALIFICATIONS

The first-year retention rates are highest for people studying for a degree. Eighty-four percent of domestic students who started a bachelors degree in 2016 were still studying in 2017. The comparable rate for a masters degree was 85 percent and for a doctoral degree it was 97 percent.1 See Figure 1.

In 2017, the first-year retention rates for other qualification levels were:

- approximately 80 percent for level 3 and 4 certificates and honours qualifications2
- 76 percent for level 5 to 7 diplomas and certificates
- 75 percent for level 1 and 2 certificates, and
- 71 percent graduate diplomas and certificates.

---

1 Rates for students who started study recently are likely to change.

2 ‘Honours’ refers to bachelors degrees with honours, postgraduate diplomas and postgraduate certificates.
Overall, 80 percent of students who started study in 2016 were retained in tertiary study in 2017. Women have slightly higher first-year retention rates than men for certificate and diploma study (levels 1 to 7), while for degrees and postgraduate qualifications the rates for women and men are similar.

Figure 1: First-year retention rates for domestic students by qualification level and gender

Note: The retention rates for students who started study recently are likely to change. For example, rates are likely to increase when students return to study after taking a short break.

RETENTION RATES MORE CHANGEABLE AT LEVELS 1 TO 4

The retention of domestic students in level 3 certificate study showed substantial variation over the last 10 years. The first-year rate for level 3 certificates was 70 percent in 2007, compared to 84 percent in 2012. The rates for level 1 and 2 certificate study also varied considerably from 2007 to 2017. The first-year rate for level 1 and 2 certificates was 72 percent in 2008 and it was 84 percent in 2012 and 2013.

There is less variability in the first-year retention rate at higher qualification levels. For longer qualifications such as degrees and honours qualifications, the first-year retention rate varied by 3 to 5 percentage points from 2007 to 2017. See Figure 1.

RETENTION AMONG ETHNIC GROUPS VARIES BY QUALIFICATION LEVEL

Māori and Pacific peoples tend to have higher first-year retention rates than Europeans for level 1 to 3 certificate study. This pattern reverses for study of bachelors degrees and level 5 to 7 diplomas and certificates. See Figure 2.
Domestic Asian students generally have the highest first-year retention rates. An exception to this are the rates for students in graduate diploma or certificate study which are very similar among the ethnic groups.

For level 1 to 4 certificate study, the differences in first-year retention have become narrower among ethnic groups since 2007. This reflects the government’s increased emphasis on performance indicators which also led to increases in the qualification completion rates for level 1 to 7 diplomas and certificates.

For bachelors-degree study, the differences in first-year retention among ethnic groups have remained relatively stable from 2007 to 2017. However, the ethnic group differences are slightly larger than for the other qualification levels.

People studying honours qualifications had the smallest differences in retention among ethnic groups. From 2007 to 2017, these rates varied within a narrow range for each ethnic group. See Figure 2.

Figure 2: First-year retention rates for domestic students by qualification level and ethnic group

Note: The retention rates for students who started study recently are likely to change. For example, rates are likely to increase when students return to study after taking a short break.