Third of students failing to complete

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Australia's university dropout rate is worsening, with one in three students failing to complete the course they began within six years of enrolling, prompting the federal government to name the country's worst performing institutions for the first time.

As the government moves to force universities to become more transparent about graduate outcomes, a new Department of Education report shows only 66.7 per cent of students who enrolled in 2009 completed their courses within six years.

The worst universities for student completions have fewer than half of all enrolled students graduating within six years of beginning a course, in many cases leaving behind debts to the commonwealth never to be repaid.

Dropout rates are the highest in Queensland and the Northern Territory, where there are more indigenous, rural and remote students, while universities in the ACT and Victoria have the country's best completion rates.

Just over 40 per cent of students who enrolled at Charles Darwin University in the Northern Territory, Central Queensland University and the University of Southern Queensland had completed courses within six years, suggesting a combined dropout of more than 20,000 students.

University of Melbourne had the best completion rate, 88 per cent, which was almost 4 per cent higher than in 2010, while the University of Sydney and the Australian National University also recorded completion rates above 80 per cent.

With universities preparing to offer course positions to thousands of Australian students this week, Education Minister Simon Birmingham urged them to "make the right choice, first time".

"We've heard too many stories about students who have changed courses, dropped out because they made the wrong choices about what to study, students who didn't realise there were other entry pathways, or who started a course with next to no idea of what they were signing themselves up for," Senator Birmingham said.

"To the thousands of students anxiously checking emails, text messages, newspapers and mailboxes this week to learn what your future study options might be, I urge you to take your time to understand those options." The report he will release today finds that students who study externally, are part-time or older are more likely to drop out of university courses.

Completion rates were also affected by students' admission scores and whether they

were indigenous, from remote locations, or from low socio-economic areas. With the boom in online courses, how a student studies has become one of the most influential factors on university completion rates, with about one in five students who choose external study dropping out in the first year, compared with about 7 per cent for those on campus.

Students older than 25 are three times more likely to drop out in the first year of study than school-leavers under the age of 19, the report shows.

For non-university higher education courses, dropout rates are higher. After the first year of study at non-university institutions, 27.7 per cent of students who enrolled did not return, almost double the rate for most universities.

A measure of outcomes over four years found that fewer than half of all students on-campus at non-university higher education institutions completed their courses within four years, but that was almost five times better than the 9.7 per cent of external students who completed courses.

The release of the completion rate data today comes as the government and the higher education sector roll out reforms that will require that prospective students are provided with information about graduate outcomes and completion rates.

A report released last year by the Higher Education Standards Panel on how to improve transparency at Australia's 170 higher education institutions made 14 recommendations that have all been accepted by the government and are in the process of implementation.

Senator Birmingham has also asked the panel to investigate trends in student completion rates and to consider how universities can be helped to arrest attrition rates and support enrolled students through to course completion.

Doing so would help the government claw back the amount of debt now not expected to be repaid, which is accruing under the FEE-HELP student loan scheme.

HELP debt stands at $52.5 billion, of which about 20 per cent won't be repaid under current policy settings.

Flinders University's deputy vice-chancellor for students Clare Pollock said the report highlighted that students' ages and choices of studying part-time or full-time were the single biggest factors influencing whether they would complete their courses.

The Adelaide-based university recorded a completion rate of 62.5 per cent, slipping almost six percentage points since 2010.

"Older students in particular, who may be undertaking study to bolster their career options, want to be able to integrate work and study and maintain balance in their private lives," Professor Pollock said.

"In the decade since (2006), Flinders has focused on improving access to their learning and support online so that students can study where and when they need to

ensure their success, irrespective of their circumstances." University of Sydney vice-chancellor Michael Spence said his institution offered students "strengthened support, especially in the early years of university". ANU graduate Sarah Campbell, who is planning to study for an honours degree this year after completing a bachelor of advanced science, said she chose the Canberra university because of its reputation.

Having moved from a goat farm in Bega in southern NSW to study, Ms Campbell said ANU had helped her adjust to city life as a 17-year-old freshly graduated from high school. "Definitely the transition moving from small country town to a city, living at college with so many people around you, was hard."But ANU has a first-year (housing) guarantee -- there are many colleges on campus where you can stay and so much support and when you move in there is pastoral care and support."