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Initial educational experiences of tertiary students

Introduction

Tertiary study at university and TAFE plays an important role in the lives of many young Australians, and research has suggested that the transition from secondary school to tertiary study and the initial experiences of young people entering tertiary study are pivotal in establishing values, attitudes and approaches to learning that will endure throughout the experience of tertiary study and beyond the undergraduate years. The first year of tertiary study has been identified as the year in which the greatest amount of both academic failure and attrition from study occur.^(4,9) In the view of some researchers, completion of the first year is 'more than half the battle' in persistence to course completion.⁽⁸⁾ Information on young people's experiences and perceptions of their first year of tertiary study is therefore of great importance in understanding why people change their course of study, why they discontinue their studies, and how they become lifelong learners. Since 1994, the experiences of young Australians in their first year at university have been investigated and reported on

using *The First Year Experience Questionnaire*.^(5, 10) The experiences of students in their first years of study at TAFE or other providers of vocational education and training, though, have not received the same extent of research attention.

This *Briefing* presents information about the initial tertiary education experiences, such as satisfaction with aspects of student life and changes to initial enrolments, of two groups of young people, based on two recent LSAY research reports. One study focussed on the first year experiences of a group of young people who completed Year 12 in 2001 and entered tertiary education (university and TAFE) the following year.⁽²⁾ In this study, TAFE students who were enrolled in traineeships or apprenticeships were excluded from the analyses. The second study examined course changes and attrition from university study among a group of young people who completed Year 12 in 1998 and entered university in 1999 or 2000. Their experiences of university study were analysed up until the end of 2001, that is, during their first two years of study.⁽⁶⁾

LSAY Briefings is a series produced by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), drawing on data from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY), a research program managed jointly by ACER and the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training. The aim is to bring summaries of

findings from LSAY research to a wider audience and in an accessible format. Key LSAY reports published by ACER on which this paper is based, and related references, are listed at the end of the paper. A superscript number [¹²] in the text is used to cite a specific item in the reference list.



Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth BRIEFING

HIGHLIGHTS

- Overall, the vast majority of students were satisfied with their initial experiences of tertiary study, including the atmosphere on their campus and enjoying being a student.
- There were generally only small differences between university and TAFE students in their reported experiences of first-year study.
- One in five students reported no major difficulties during their first year; however, one in four students had difficulty juggling study and work commitments.
- Changes to enrolments, including changing course or institution or withdrawing from study, were usually motivated by students' interests rather than poor results or other factors.
- Dissatisfaction with the course first enrolled in was the main reason for changing to another course. The main reason for withdrawing from tertiary study was that the course did not turn out to be what the student wanted.

Satisfaction with student life in the first year

In 2002, students in their first year at university or TAFE were asked to comment on their impressions of student life. Overall, around nine out of ten students said that they liked being a student and that tertiary student life suited them; they enjoyed the atmosphere on campus and they felt that they had made close friends at their tertiary institution. A slightly lower proportion—around eight out of ten students—indicated that the tertiary experience had lived up to their expectations.⁽²⁾

There were some small differences between university and TAFE students regarding their satisfaction with student life. These are highlighted in Figure 1. Slightly more university students than TAFE students liked being a student (94% compared to 91%, respectively), and 89% of university students and 85% of TAFE students said that student life suited them. University and TAFE students reported similar agreement to the item ‘you have made close friends’, around 89%.

Transition difficulties

The transition from secondary school to tertiary study is not always smooth, and students can experience ‘bumps’ along the way. One in five students reported that they had not had any major problems during their first year of tertiary study, but this differed by where they were studying: 17% of university students reported no major difficulties compared to 34% of TAFE students. One quarter of tertiary students overall had difficulty juggling work and study commitments, the area of difficulty most cited by students.⁽²⁾

There were some differences in the transition problems reported by various groups of first-year students:

- A greater proportion of university students than TAFE students reported problems balancing personal relationships with the demands of their study (11% of university students and 5% of TAFE students);
- Students at regional universities reported more difficulty paying

course fees than students at other universities;

- TAFE students who were enrolled part-time were more likely than full-time students to report conflict between family commitments and study (6% of part-time and 1% of full-time students, respectively);
- Indigenous students were more likely to report difficulties associated with caring for children or other family members than non-Indigenous students.

There was no difference in the problems reported by male and female students.

Changes to enrolment during the first year of tertiary study

Most changes to university study involving courses or institutions occur during the first year, perhaps as a part of the settling-in process.⁽⁶⁾ At the end of their first year, most tertiary students among the 2002 entrants from LSAY were still

Figure 1 First year tertiary students’ satisfaction with aspects of tertiary student life, by institution type

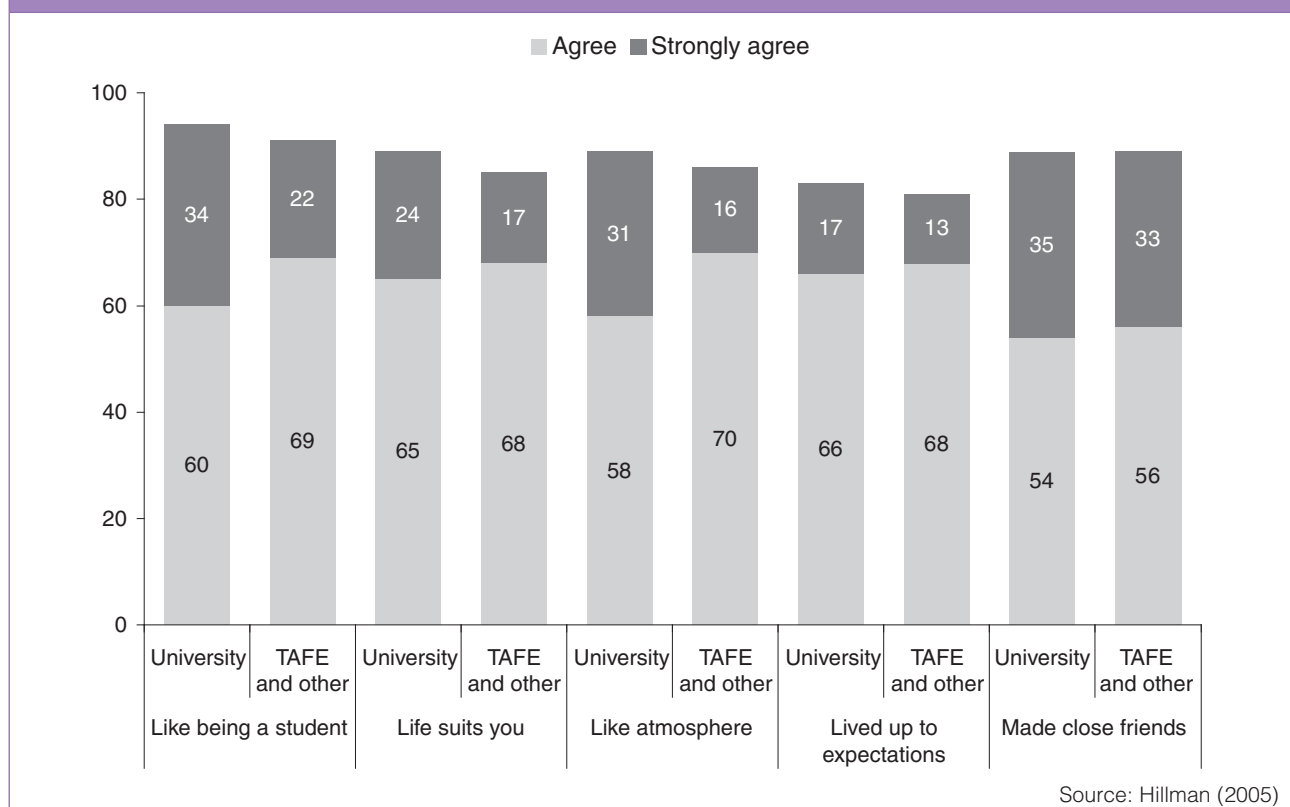


Table 1 Main area of difficulty experienced during first year of tertiary study, by institution type

| Main area of difficulty | University | TAFE | All respondents |
|---|------------|------|-----------------|
| | % | % | % |
| No real difficulties | 17 | 34 | 21 |
| Paying fees or any other study costs | 12 | 13 | 12 |
| Juggling work and study commitments | 27 | 21 | 26 |
| Course was more difficult than expected | 11 | 12 | 11 |
| Conflict between family commitments and study | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| Caring for children or other family members | <1 | <1 | <1 |
| Balancing personal relationships with study | 11 | 5 | 9 |
| Fitting in with other students and making new friends | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Finding time for other commitments | 16 | 11 | 15 |
| Other | 3 | 2 | 3 |

Source: Hillman (2005)

enrolled in their initial course at their initial institution.⁽²⁾ Relatively small proportions of tertiary students overall changed course (2%) or institution (1%), while greater proportions withdrew (6%) or deferred study (4%). See Box 1 for a brief explanation of how these terms are used in the LSAY program.

These enrolment change and attrition rates differ slightly from other data sources, such as the Higher Education Statistics Collection⁽¹⁾ and the national VET data collection, managed by NCVER. These collections are not longitudinal and do not follow individual students, which limits the accuracy of their estimates of rates of course transfer and attrition from study. LSAY, while not designed to be representative of the intake

of any one year or institution, is representative of young Australians of a certain age.

Changing course or institution

Changes to initial enrolments were related to a number of student characteristics in both groups of students. Among those who had entered tertiary study in 2002, TAFE students were less likely than university students to change courses during their first year, but more likely to change institutions. Tertiary students who had studied at government secondary schools were less likely to change courses during their first year, as were those students who, when asked in Year 9 about plans for future study and training, reported no firm plans for

post-secondary study. Part-time students among the LSAY 2002 tertiary entrants were more likely to change institutions during their first year than full-time students.⁽²⁾

Among the 1999 and 2000 university entrants, students with university-educated parents, students from independent schools, students with moderately high ENTER scores (80-89), students whose initial course was not their first preference, full-time students and students who spent over 15 hours per week in paid work were more likely to change courses over the first few years of study relative to their comparison groups.⁽⁶⁾

Reasons for changing course

Among the 2002 first-year tertiary students, the most common reason

Box 1 Terms used to describe changes to initial enrolments

The terms describing changes to students' initial enrolments can be confusing at times, as they may be used differently by different sources of information on students in tertiary education. Within this *Briefing*, the following terms are used to describe changes to students' initial enrolments:

Changed institution indicates that a student began study at one tertiary institution and subsequently enrolled at another tertiary institution. Students who change institution may remain in the same course of study at the new institution, or they may change course when they change institution.

Changed course indicates that a student initially enrolled in one type of tertiary qualification, such as a Diploma in Fine Arts or a Bachelor of Science, but then changed to another course, such as a Bachelor of Law. Students who change course may remain at the same institution, or they may also change institution. The number of students who change both course and institution in their first year of tertiary study is relatively small (see Table 2).

Deferral indicates that a student had started study before stopping for that year, rather than deferring before classes started, and intends to return to study. It does not include young people who travel or work while a study place is reserved for them.

Withdrawal indicates that a student began study at a tertiary institution but has since terminated enrolment without completing the qualification and without reserving a study place.

Attrition refers to leaving or stopping study, and includes withdrawal and deferral.

Table 2 Changes to enrolments during first year, by initial institution type

| Current study status | University | TAFE | Total |
|---------------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|
| | % | % | % |
| First course at first institution | 87 | 65 | 81 |
| First course at second institution | <1 | 1 | <1 |
| Second course at first institution | 2 | <1 | 1 |
| Second course at second institution | 1 | <1 | 1 |
| Withdrew from first institution | 4 | 11 | 6 |
| Withdrew from second institution | 0 | <1 | <1 |
| Deferred from first institution | 5 | 2 | 4 |
| Deferred from second institution | <1 | <1 | <1 |
| Completed while at first institution | 1 | 20 | 6 |
| Completed while at second institution | 0 | <1 | <1 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 |

Source: Hillman (2005)

for changing course reported by those who did so during their first year was that they had not liked their first course (see Table 3).⁽²⁾ More male students than female students reported that they had changed courses because they believed that the second course would give them better career prospects than the first course.

The group of 1999 or 2000 university entrants who had changed courses also reported that they changed because they would have preferred to do the second course or that the first course was not what they had expected. Many also felt that they had better career prospects in the second course.⁽⁶⁾

Reasons for changing institution

Overall, the reason most frequently reported for changing institutions during the first year of tertiary study was that the second institution provided better quality education than the initial institution, a reason that can be interpreted as predominantly positive (see Table 4).⁽²⁾

A higher proportion of female students than male students reported that they had changed institutions because the second institution provided better quality education. More male students than female students indicated that the course at the first institution turned out to not be what they had wanted (19% of

male students compared to 9% of female students).

Withdrawing and deferring from tertiary study

Most attrition from study, including withdrawal from study and deferral after the start of semester, occurs during the first two years: almost half of those who leave university without completing a course do so in their first year, and another third leave the following year.⁽⁶⁾ Among TAFE students who withdrew from

Table 3 Main reason for changing tertiary course in the first year

| Reason for changing course | % |
|--|----|
| Interests and course preferences | |
| You didn't like the first course | 32 |
| First course turned out to be not what you wanted | 23 |
| Would have preferred to do the second course | 18 |
| The first course was a pre-requisite for the second course | 1 |
| Sub-total | 74 |
| Career and work | |
| Better career prospects from the second course | 9 |
| Sub-total | 9 |
| Study load and results | |
| The study load was too heavy | 2 |
| Had been getting poor results | 0 |
| Sub-total | 2 |
| Finances | |
| Course costs were too high in the first course | 0 |
| Sub-total | 0 |
| Other | |
| Health or personal reasons | 0 |
| Other | 16 |
| Sub-total | 16 |
| Number of respondents = 84 | |

Source: Hillman (2005)

Table 4 Main reason for changing tertiary institution in the first year

| Reason for changing institution | % |
|---|----|
| Interests and course preferences | |
| The course at the first place wasn't exactly what you wanted | 14 |
| The place you went to provides better quality education | 29 |
| The place you moved from wasn't your first choice | 3 |
| The course you wanted wasn't available at the first institution | 21 |
| Sub-total | 68 |
| Results | |
| You had been getting poor results | 0 |
| Sub-total | 0 |
| Other | |
| Because of easier access or better transport to new institution | 12 |
| Because of health or personal reasons | 0 |
| Other | 21 |
| Sub-total | 33 |
| Number of respondents = 43 | |
| Sub-total | 0 |
| Other | |
| Health or personal reasons | 0 |
| Other | 16 |
| Sub-total | 16 |
| Number of respondents = 84 | |

Source: Hillman (2005)

their study, 78% discontinued their first course by the end of the second semester of study.⁽⁷⁾

As with changes to initial enrolments, some groups of students show higher rates of attrition from study than others. For the group of 2002 tertiary entrants, students who had less positive attitudes towards school in Year 9 were more likely to withdraw or defer from tertiary study during their first year than students with more positive attitudes.⁽²⁾ Students who had lower reading comprehension and mathematics test scores in Year 9 were also more likely to withdraw than higher-achieving students. TAFE students were more likely to withdraw from study, while university students were more likely to defer their studies (see Table 2). Indigenous Australian students were also more likely to withdraw from tertiary study during their first year. Some research has suggested that there is a tendency for Indigenous students to enter or

re-enter tertiary study later on, as mature-age students.⁽³⁾

For the 1999 and 2000 university entrants, those with relatively low levels of attrition from study included students from language backgrounds other than English, students from small provincial cities, students whose parents had a degree or diploma, and students with high tertiary entrance scores.⁽⁶⁾

In both groups of first-year students, those who were working long hours (21 or more) or the equivalent of full-time (30 or more) as well as studying were also more likely to withdraw or defer their study than other students, although it is difficult to determine the direction of this relationship.^(2,6) Students who wish to leave their studies may go out and get full-time jobs in preparation, or those students who are juggling full-time work and study may find it too difficult to keep up with their studies and decide to leave.

Reasons for withdrawing from study

Among the 2002 tertiary entrants, most students who withdrew from study said that they did so because the course turned out to be not what they had wanted (see Table 5).⁽²⁾ For male students, the next most common reason given was that they had lost interest or never really wanted to study (32%), while for female students the next most popular reason was health or personal matters (13%). A slightly higher proportion of TAFE students, as compared to university students, withdrew from study in order to get a job or pursue an apprenticeship or traineeship.

Reasons for deferring study

The most commonly reported reason for deferring study was that the course had turned out to be not what the students had wanted (see Table 6).⁽²⁾

A greater proportion of male students than female students reported that their main reason for deferral was that they wanted to get a job, apprenticeship or traineeship (20% compared to 6%). Female students, on the other hand, were more likely than male students to indicate that the course turned out to be not what they wanted (32% compared to 16%).

More students who had not planned on studying after secondary school said that they left tertiary study, either by withdrawing or deferring their studies, because they wanted to get a job, apprenticeship or traineeship, compared to students who knew that they wanted to go on to university or TAFE.

Interests played a major role in attrition from study for the 1999 and 2000 university entrants as well. Just over one-fifth of students who stopped higher education at some point—not just during their first year—indicated that the course turned out to be not what they wanted, and just under one-fifth

Table 5 Main reason for withdrawing from tertiary study in the first year

| Reason for withdrawing from study | % |
|--|----|
| Interests and course preferences | |
| The course turned out to be not what you wanted | 39 |
| Lost interest, never really wanted to study | 19 |
| Never really intended to complete the course | 1 |
| Sub-total | 59 |
| Career and work | |
| Wanted to get a job, apprenticeship or traineeship | 11 |
| Problems juggling study and work commitments | 4 |
| Course wouldn't have led to a good job or career | 1 |
| Sub-total | 16 |
| Study load and results | |
| The study load was too heavy | 4 |
| Had been getting poor results | 1 |
| Sub-total | 5 |
| Finances | |
| Financially, couldn't afford to continue | 4 |
| Sub-total | 4 |
| Other | |
| Problems with access or transport | 4 |
| Health or personal reasons | 9 |
| Other | 3 |
| Sub-total | 16 |
| Number of respondents = 257 | |

Source: Hillman (2005)

indicated that they wanted to get a job, apprenticeship or traineeship.⁽⁶⁾ Although longer hours of paid work were associated with higher rates of attrition, the students did not tend to identify difficulty juggling study and work as the main reason for stopping their study.

Conclusions

The vast majority of school leavers who enrol in tertiary study are satisfied with student life and are able to overcome any initial difficulties in the transition to tertiary study. The majority of students also remain in their initial course at their initial institution. Estimates from one group of young people in the LSAY program suggest that nearly three out of four students who enter university remain in their first course over the first two to three years of study.⁽⁶⁾ These findings suggest that, in most cases, the match

between the student, institution and course of study has been successful.

That said, results from both groups of students discussed here indicate that a small proportion of students experienced a highly uncertain start in the tertiary education sector, with multiple course changes or course change followed by attrition. Students who report disappointment or lack of interest as their prime motivation for withdrawing or deferring from their courses form a group that, although small, should be of particular concern. Secondary schools have a key role to play in ensuring that students acquire the skills necessary for success in post-school study, while also providing guidance for students in their choice of careers, education and institution. In turn, tertiary institutions have an important role in ensuring a smooth transition to tertiary study, in monitoring students' progress and in

providing appropriate guidance and counselling.

Overall, the LSAY analyses indicate that withdrawal from tertiary study or a particular institution is not necessarily a failure of the system or the individual student, but may be part of a process of self-discovery that is in the young person's long-term interests. The important implication is that 'decisions made by institutions about who enters and remains in tertiary study are discriminating, not discriminatory', and that decisions made by students are not based on marginalisation from the tertiary experience, other students or membership of a particular group.⁽²⁾

The aim for students, secondary schools and tertiary institutions should be to maximise the fit between incoming students and a course, to ensure that those young people embarking on a course of study have the interests and skills that will help them succeed in their particular course of study and eventually in their chosen occupation. In addition, it is imperative that education pathways are seen as flexible and responsive to changing circumstances of students' lives, allowing those students who need to take time out or make changes to their courses to return to study at all points along the way. In these ways, the pursuit of further education can truly be a life-long educational journey.

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Table 6 Main reason for deferring from tertiary study in the first year

| Reason for deferring from study | % |
|--|----|
| Interests and course preferences | |
| The course turned out to be not what you wanted | 26 |
| Lost interest, never really wanted to study | 18 |
| Never really intended to complete the course | 1 |
| Sub-total | 45 |
| Career and work | |
| Wanted to get a job, apprenticeship or traineeship | 12 |
| Problems juggling study and work commitments | 4 |
| Course wouldn't have led to a good job or career | 2 |
| Sub-total | 18 |
| Study load and results | |
| The study load was too heavy | 3 |
| Had been getting poor results | <1 |
| Sub-total | 3 |
| Finances | |
| Financially, couldn't afford to continue | 6 |
| Sub-total | 6 |
| Other | |
| Health or personal reasons | 16 |
| Problems with access or transport | 1 |
| Other | 11 |
| Sub-total | 28 |
| Number of respondents = 163 | |

Source: Hillman (2005)

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The Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth

The Longitudinal Surveys of The Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) is a research program jointly managed by ACER and the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST). Funding for LSAY is also provided by the Australian Education Systems Officials Committee (AESOC) through the National Fund for Educational Research.

The program includes more than 20 years of data on young Australians

as they move through school and into tertiary education, the labour market and adult life. LSAY commenced in its present form in 1995 with a national sample of Year 9 students. Another sample of Year 9 students was drawn in 1998, and a further sample of 15 year olds was drawn in 2003. Data are first collected in schools, then by mail and telephone interviews.

Advice and guidance are provided by a Steering Committee, with representatives from DEST,

other Australian Government departments, AESOC, the Chief Executive Officers of State and Territory training authorities, non-government schools, academics and ACER.

The data collected through LSAY are deposited with the Australian Social Science Data Archive for access by other analysts.

Further information on the LSAY program is available from ACER's Website: www.acer.edu.au



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