Missing

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out on a university place

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At the start of each university year many media reports focus on the disappointment of young Australians who applied to enter university but did not receive an offer of a place. This group of unsuccessful applicants is often referred to as representing 'unmet demand' for university.

***Gary Marks** describes the findings from a study that investigated who missed out on a university place and the alternative study pathways they took.*

Why do some students miss out on a university place and what happens to them next? These questions were addressed in a report released by ACER in December 2005. Using data collected for the ongoing Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) research program, the study examined the characteristics of unsuccessful applicants to university. It also tracked their progress after missing out on a place at university to see what alternative pathways they took.

The study, *Unmet Demand? Characteristics and Activities of University Applicants Not Offered a Place*, analysed the experiences of almost 8000 young people who were in Year 9 in 1998. Most completed Year 12 in 2001. The report analysed the characteristics of the group of students who applied to university but did not receive an offer (referred to in the study as the unmet demand group) by comparing them to other students who were also in Year 9 in 1998. They were followed through until 2003, which was two years after Year 12 for most of them. By that stage most were 19 years old.

A relatively small proportion of the cohort, around 5 per cent, applied to enter university but did not get a place. This amounted to about 10 per cent of all Year 12 university applicants in 2001. Although they eventually missed out on a place, these students had expressed clear intentions to go to university. In Years 9 to 11, about 70 per cent of the group indicated that they wished to attend university.

Membership of the unmet demand group was slightly higher among women than men, higher among those from metropolitan than non-metropolitan areas and higher among those from non-English speaking backgrounds. It was lower among those whose parents had professional backgrounds and more highly educated backgrounds. However, overall there were only small differences in demographic and social background between the students who applied to university but did not receive an offer and the other students enrolled in Year 12 in 2001.

The main reasons this group of students missed out on a university place were lower levels of academic achievement and possibly

unrealistic expectations. On average, members of the unmet demand group were substantially less academically able that those who were offered a university place and subsequently enrolled. Their average Equivalent National Tertiary Entrance Rank (ENTER) score was only 54 compared to 70 for the sample as a whole and over 80 for those who enrolled at university.

Some members of the unmet demand group seem to have been unrealistic in their expectations by applying for courses with cut-off ENTER scores well above what they had achieved or they did not perform as well in Year 12 as they had hoped. On average, the courses that unsuccessful applicants had chosen as their first preference had a cut-off ENTER score of 20 points above what they had achieved.

In addition, members of the unmet demand group achieved substantially lower average scores in Year 9 literacy and numeracy achievement. The lower the achievement score in the Year 9 tests, the more likely the student was to eventually belong to the unmet demand group. By contrast very few students who had been in the top achievement quartile on the Year 9 tests were in the unmet demand group.

What was the effect of missing out on a university place? A positive outcome for members of the unmet demand group is that many of them were able to take advantage of alternative study or vocational pathways provided by TAFE, traineeships or apprenticeships. Two years after completing Year 12, about 45 per cent were engaged in some other form of education or training. Around 24 per cent were enrolled in a TAFE diploma course, 11 per cent in a Traineeship, 6 per cent in a TAFE Certificate course and 5 per cent in an Apprenticeship. A total of 37 per cent were working full-time. Seven per cent were unemployed.

These relatively high levels of participation in other forms of education and training suggest that credit transfer arrangements may enable some of the unsuccessful applicants to enter university at a later stage of their lives, if their interests are still in that direction.

While the outcomes for unsuccessful university applicants two years after completing Year 12 appear to be largely positive, at this relatively early stage in their transition from school to work it is not possible to conclude if the group is experiencing particular difficulties. Subsequent research will allow a fuller examination of their labour market and other outcomes in future years.

Further information

Further information and additional findings are available in the report, *Unmet Demand? Characteristics and Activities of University Applicants Not Offered a Place* by Gary N Marks. The study is research report number 46 in the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) research series, a program conducted jointly by ACER and the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST). All LSAY reports can be downloaded from the ACER website at *www.acer.edu.au* ■

Students who did enter university

Other reports from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth released earlier in 2005 investigated the experience of students who did successfully enter university.

In *Course change and attrition from higher education*, (LSAY Research Report No. 39) Julie McMillan provided a description of the incidence and nature of higher education course change and attrition and associated factors. The study found that university students who change courses or withdraw from study without gaining a qualification are more likely to be driven by personal interests and career objectives than academic difficulties or financial pressures.

Tertiary study was found to be a largely positive experience for the vast majority of first year students, in *The first year experience: The transition from secondary school to university and TAFE in Australia* by Kylie Hillman (LSAY Research Report No. 40). A large majority of students reported that they liked being a student, tertiary student life suited them, they enjoyed the atmosphere on campus and they had made close friends at their tertiary institution. A significant majority felt that the experience had lived up to their expectations.

These and all LSAY reports are available from the ACER website at *www.acer.edu.au*