



On Track

School completers who defer tertiary study

A recent survey of Victoria's school leavers has revealed a third of those living in regional areas put off university study and enter the workforce to qualify for Youth Allowance. **Sheldon Rothman** explains why.



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The global economic situation and the rising cost of living are leading young Victorians to re-think which path they take once they finish school according to the latest findings of Victoria's On Track study of the state's school leavers. Twelve per cent of Victorian school leavers offered a place at university, TAFE or a similar institution have deferred their studies. While some just need a break from study and others want to work to earn their own money, some young people in regional areas, faced with the financial burden of leaving the family home to attend university, put off their studies to qualify for Youth Allowance.

As many as one in three school leavers in Victoria's regional areas deferred tertiary study and took on full-time or part-time work to qualify for Youth Allowance, compared to just one in 10 in metropolitan areas the 2009 On Track report shows. Qualifying for Youth Allowance is the number one reason young people in regional areas decide to defer tertiary study. In metropolitan areas, school leavers are more likely to defer because they want to take a break from study or to travel before continuing their education.

The global economic situation also appears to have some school leavers reconsidering career plans. One in four young Victorians who defer their tertiary studies consider a different career or study path to find a more stable, better paying or more secure job. Some have already changed their study or career plans.

On Track, a study of more than 36 000 young Victorians, provides a comprehensive picture of what happens to them after they finish school. ACER carried out On Track for the Victorian Government in April and May of 2009, speaking to 2008 school leavers six months after they had completed their secondary studies. The On Track report reveals a total of 4430 school completers surveyed for the study had been offered a place at a university or other tertiary institution

but had deferred their place for at least a semester.

Who defers?

Young women are more likely than men to defer their studies. Just over 10 per cent of men deferred studies compared to 13 per cent of women.

Only 3.8 per cent of people with a language background other than English deferred compared to 12.9 per cent of those who speak only English at home. Looking at achievement, 7.5 per cent of those from the lower General Achievement Test (GAT) quartile deferred their studies compared to 15.9 per cent of those from the highest GAT quartile. The findings suggest that young people with lower prior achievement, as measured by GAT, are less inclined to defer their tertiary studies than those with high GAT scores. But, it should be remembered that tertiary applicants in general tend to be high achievers.

What are they doing?

Almost all of the young people who deferred their studies (95.8 per cent) said they were either working or looking for work. The remaining school leavers were NILFET (Not in the Labour Force, Education or Training). Most of the deferrers worked part-time, although the proportions varied across Victoria's regions. More than four in every ten deferrers in the Grampians, Hume and Loddon Mallee regions had secured full-time work, while in the metropolitan regions between one in four and one in three deferrers worked full-time. Rates of unemployment and being NILFET were higher among deferrers in metropolitan areas, with 17.1 per cent of young people in the Northern Metropolitan region looking for work, compared to 11 per cent for all of Victoria. Greater numbers of men were in full-time work and greater numbers of women were in part-time work. Among deferrers who were NILFET, 52.5 per cent said they had deferred to travel, while 16.1 per cent

At a glance...

- 36 022 young people who completed school in 2008 were surveyed.
- 4340, or 12%, of those surveyed indicated they were offered a place at university, TAFE or similar institution but had deferred their studies for at least a semester.
- 95.8% of deferrers entered the labour force and were either employed or looking for work.
- The most common occupation among deferrers is Sales Assistant, following by Travel Agent and Tour Guide.
- Greater numbers of males were in full-time work, whereas greater numbers of females were in part-time work.
- The most common reason for deferring was that school leavers needed a break from study. The second most common reason was they wanted to start earning their own money.
- The most common reason for deferring in regional areas was the need to wait to qualify for Youth Allowance to finance future studies.
- One in four young people had been influenced by the global economic situation when considering their post-school plans.
- Preliminary data from the latest survey indicate that 10% of young people who left school in 2009 deferred a tertiary place for 2010.

were involved in voluntary work or doing some other form of unpaid work.

What jobs do they do?

The most common job for deferrers was Sales Assistant, with 10 per cent of all employed deferrers working in this area. The second most common job among men was Store Person (11 per cent), and for women it was Travel Agent/Tour Guide (15.1 per cent).

Reasons for deferring

All of the school leavers who had deferred their studies in 2009 were asked to indicate, from a prepared list of reasons, why they had chosen to defer. For young people living in regional and rural parts of Victoria, waiting to qualify for Youth Allowance to finance their future studies was the most common reason for deferring their studies, with between 24 per cent of responses in Barwon South Western and 33.6 per cent in Hume. Under new eligibility rules, young people who wish to be counted as independent to claim Youth Allowance must work full-time for at least 18 months or work part-time for at least two years after leaving school. New eligibility criteria will place tougher restrictions on young people living in metropolitan and inner regional areas.

The second most commonly cited reason young people in regional areas gave for deferring was the need to take a break from study (19.2 per cent in Hume and up to 25.4 per cent in the Grampians). Overall, the most common reasons for Victorian school leavers deferring were the need to take a break from study and wanted to start earning their own money, with more than 80 per cent saying that these factors had been a reason for their decision. One in ten young people said they had deferred because they wanted to do some other sort of study or training before undertaking tertiary study. When asked to give their main reason for deferring their studies, the most commonly cited reason for men was needing a break from study (28.2 per cent) while women said they wanted other experiences, such as travel, before continuing with their education (28.3 per cent).

Post-school transitions in an uncertain economic climate

In 2009, questions were introduced into the On Track survey to gain some insight into what impact, if any, the global economic situation had on young peoples' plans. One in four deferrers said the economic crisis had influenced their decisions about what to do after finishing school (23.8 per cent). These young people were then asked to indicate the ways in which the

economic situation had influenced their planning. More than 25 per cent of those respondents felt that their post-school transitions had been affected by the economic situation and the main influence had been to highlight the importance of finding a job or having an income, while 20 per cent said that they were having difficulty finding a job or had lost a job because of the economic situation. Some of the young people surveyed said they were re-thinking their plans, with 11.4 per cent considering a different study or career path in order to find a more stable, better paying or more secure job. A further nine per cent had already changed their study or career intentions.

The wellbeing of deferrers

School leavers were asked about their happiness with the work they do – studying, at home or in a job – their career opportunities and their lives as a whole. There were very few differences in the levels of happiness reported by young people who had deferred their studies and those who had not. There was also not a great difference in the happiness levels of male and female deferrers. The vast majority of young people who had deferred their tertiary studies were happy or very happy. Satisfaction was lowest with career opportunities, with almost seven per cent of males and nine per cent of females saying that they were unhappy or very unhappy with this particular area. ■