

LSAY Research Report 39
Course Change and Attrition from Higher Education

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the pathways of recent school leavers who enter the higher education sector in Australia. The focus is on the first three years after completing senior secondary school. The report has four broad aims:

- to provide estimates of the proportions of entrants who change courses or leave the higher education sector before completing a course;
- to identify factors associated with course change within the higher education sector;
- to identify factors associated with attrition from the higher education sector; and
- to examine the initial education, training and labour market destinations of those who leave the higher education sector before completing a qualification.

The report uses data from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth to address each of these aims. The findings are based upon a sample of young people who had been in Year 9 in 1995 and who commenced higher education in 1999 or 2000. Their education, training, and labour market activities were tracked until late in 2001 when they were approximately 20 years of age.

Among young people who first commenced higher education in 1999 or 2000, 13 per cent had changed courses within the higher education sector by 2001, and 14 per cent left the higher education sector without completing a qualification and had not returned by late in 2001. It must be emphasised, however, that attrition is not necessarily a permanent state; some course non-completers may return to the higher education sector at a later date to complete their course or to commence another course.

Factors associated with course change and attrition

The characteristics of students who changed courses and persisted in a subsequent course were compared to those of students who persisted in their original course of study. Groups that displayed relatively *high* levels of course change included students whose parents had a university degree or diploma, students from independent schools, students with moderately high ENTER scores, students whose initial course was not their first preference, students who commenced higher education immediately after completing Year 12, full-time students, students in fields of education such as the natural and physical sciences, medicine/dentistry/veterinary science/law, society and culture, and engineering and related technologies, and students who spent over 15 hours per week in paid work.

The characteristics of young people who left the higher education sector before completing a qualification were compared to those of young people who persisted in the higher education sector. Groups that displayed relatively *low* levels of attrition included students from language backgrounds other than English, students from small provincial cities, students whose parents have a university degree or diploma, students with high ENTER scores, and students in fields of education such as health and law. Students working up to 10 hours per week were no more likely to leave the higher education sector than students who were not in paid work, but long hours of paid work while studying were associated with higher levels of attrition.

The reasons that students give for both course change and attrition suggest that interests play a major role as well. In contrast, students less commonly cited academic difficulties, difficulties juggling work and study, or financial difficulties as their main reason for changing courses or leaving the higher education sector.

Educational, training and labour market destinations of the attrition sub-group

The initial educational and labour market destinations of the higher education attrition sub-group suggest that many are faring well. Attrition from the higher education sector did not signify the end of education and training for the third of the attrition sub-group who moved to the VET sector by age 20. Seventy-six per cent of the attrition sub-group were in full-time education, training or employment activities at age 20. In the short-term, the attrition sub-group did not appear to face disadvantage in gaining access to such activities relative to Year 12 graduates who did not enter higher education, or recent higher education graduates.

Implications

The findings of this report suggest that some course change and attrition may be regarded as part of a settling-in period in the transition from school to higher education. Furthermore, course change or attrition can be a positive outcome for some students. For example, interests are more commonly cited than academic difficulties as a reason for changing or leaving, and the majority of the attrition sub-group entered full-time education, training or employment after leaving higher education.

However, not all course change and attrition can be viewed in positive terms. A very small proportion of students experienced a highly uncertain start in the higher education sector typified by multiple course changes or course change followed by attrition. Particular sociodemographic groups were more likely than others to experience course change or attrition, and just under a quarter of the attrition sub-group were in activities at age 20 such as part-time work/study, unemployment or being outside the labour market and not studying.

The findings also have implications for strategies aimed at minimising negative instances of course change and attrition. For example, school achievement is associated with student flows, especially attrition. In order to reduce attrition, institutions need to ensure that students enter with, or are provided with early opportunities to acquire the skills needed for success in a university environment. In addition, the variability in levels of course change and attrition between fields of education suggests the need for field-specific initiatives to improve student flows, or the need to examine particular courses when designing interventions at the university level.

Finally, the findings have a number of implications for estimating the incidence of course change and attrition. It is necessary to track the movement of students both within and between institutions as nearly one-half of the course changers in the present study moved to another higher education institution when they commenced their second course. The use of data such as the Department of Education, Science and Training's Higher Education Statistics Collection, which is restricted to student flows within institutions, will lead to an overestimate of the extent of attrition from the higher education sector as a whole. It is also necessary to track the movement of students over a substantial period of time. In the current study, a number of students in the attrition sub-group indicated that they had deferred their study; these young people (and others in the attrition sub-group) may return to the higher education sector at a future date to complete their course or commence a new course.