

The First Year Experience: The Transition from Secondary School to University and TAFE in Australia

LSAY Research Report 40

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examined the experiences of young people during their first year of tertiary education. The data used in this report are drawn from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY), which study the progress of cohorts of young Australians as they make the transition from secondary school to work and further education and training, beginning in Year 9. The group of young people who were in Year 9 in 1998, and who first entered tertiary education during 2002, are the focus of this report.

Three sets of questions form the basis of the report:

- How satisfied are university and TAFE (non-Apprenticeship) students with their initial experiences of tertiary education? What areas of their transitions have been difficult?
- Who is the most likely to change course, or institution, or defer study or withdraw? What are their reasons for doing so?
- Are the outcomes and experiences of the “equity target groups” - those students from backgrounds that historically have been under-represented in higher education - different from the experiences of other students?

The first year experience can have a major impact on later study options and participation, and institutions and governments have a clear interest in ensuring a successful transition from school to tertiary study.

The LSAY program offers considerable advantages in studying these questions as it collects extensive educational and background information each year from national samples of young people as they move through the education and training systems. This is the first national study that has analysed the first year experience of both university and TAFE students within the same framework. The data used in this report were obtained from students in the fifth wave of LSAY interviews, towards the end of 2002. The average age of the participants at that time was 18 years. The satisfaction, difficulties and outcomes of first year tertiary students at universities and TAFE institutions were compared in order to investigate potential differences in the experiences of students attending different types of institutions. Relationships between first year experiences and outcomes and other characteristics, such as students’ gender, plans for post-school study, course load and employment status were also examined.

The major findings of the investigation of the satisfaction and difficulties reported by first year tertiary students are:

- Overall, the vast majority of students agreed or strongly agreed that they liked being a student (94%), that tertiary student life suited them (87%), they enjoyed the atmosphere on campus (88%), and that they had made close friends at their tertiary institution (89%). Over eighty per cent (82%) indicated that the tertiary experience had lived up to their expectation.
- University and TAFE students reported similar levels of satisfaction with their experiences of tertiary study. A greater proportion of university students than TAFE students, however, reported that they had difficulty juggling work and study commitments (50% compared to 35%). A greater proportion of TAFE students, compared to university students, reported that they had faced no major difficulties during their first year.
- Juggling work and study was the most commonly nominated main area of difficulty across all students, at 26%. Twenty-one per cent of the sample indicated that their first year had been without major difficulty.

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- Students at regional universities reported more difficulties paying course fees than students at other universities, and students with higher depth of curiosity scores reported fewer problems than lower scoring students with finding the course more difficult than they had expected. There were no associations, however, between the main area of difficulty and gender, or between main area of difficulty and plans for further study as recorded during secondary school.

The major findings from the investigation of the outcomes of first year students are:

- Most students remained in their initial course at their initial institution at the end of their first year. Relatively small proportions of students changed course or institution (2% and 1%, respectively), while greater numbers withdrew or deferred from study (6% and 4%, respectively).
- There were significant associations between these changes to initial enrolments and a number of individual, background and current environment characteristics. For example, students who were studying part-time were more likely to have *changed institution* during their first year than students who were studying full-time; students who had not planned to participate in post-school study or who were studying at a TAFE college were less likely to have *changed course* than other students; students who did not score highly on attitudes to school scales or who were working full-time were more likely to *defer* and to *withdraw* from study.
- Overall, the reason most frequently nominated as the main reason for changing institutions was that the second institution provided better quality education than the initial institution, a reason that can be interpreted as predominantly positive. For those who changed course, the most commonly reported main reason for the change was that they had simply not liked the first course. For both those students who had withdrawn from study and those who had deferred their study, the reason most frequently nominated as the main reason for their decision was that their course had turned out to be not what they wanted.

The major findings from the investigation of the experiences and outcomes of the six target equity groups are:

- Students from most of the equity groups tended to report similar or higher agreement with the satisfaction items than other students.
- In terms of difficulties faced during their first year of tertiary study, students from remote or isolated location backgrounds nominated paying fees or other study-related costs as their main source of difficulty more often than other students.
- Indigenous students reported conflict between study and caring for children or other family members, as well as financial difficulties, more often than non-Indigenous students.
- Indigenous students were more likely to withdraw from study during their first year, compared to non-Indigenous students. The most commonly reported main reason for doing so was the same as that reported by other students: their course turned out to be not what they wanted.

Overall, the majority of first year tertiary students reported predominantly positive experiences of tertiary study: they were satisfied with many aspects of their lives as students and, although they may sometimes have faced difficulties, they remained committed to continuing their education. There are some students, however, who appeared to be having trouble maintaining a balance between education and work commitments, between the need for income and the need for time to study and learn, as evidenced by lower levels of satisfaction and an increased likelihood of terminating their study. With the majority of tertiary students combining study with paid employment, further research and monitoring are needed to clarify the impact of paid work on the transition to tertiary education.

Careful monitoring of the experiences, difficulties and first year outcomes of some of the equity target groups, particularly students from an Indigenous Australian background, is also required. Results suggest that although these students have made the first step in accessing tertiary education, they may still face relatively high difficulties in continuing with their studies.