

MEDIA RELEASE

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School sector and SES make little difference to university course completion

A new analysis of the characteristics of students who fail to complete university courses by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) has found that whether a student attended a government or independent school and their socioeconomic background made little difference to the odds of completing their course.

The study, released today, investigated attrition rates from university courses, background factors that may influence attrition and the labour market consequences of non-completion. Data were collected from a group of young Australians who commenced university study between 1998 and 2001. Their education, training and labour market activities were tracked up until 2004 when they were around 23 years of age.

Of the young people who enrolled in their first course at a university between 1998 and 2001, 66 per cent had completed that course by 2004, 16 per cent had withdrawn, 11 per cent had changed course and 8 per cent were continuing. From these figures, the expected completion rate for first courses was between 71 and 74 per cent and that for any university course around 80 per cent.

“The findings indicate that once students with a lower socioeconomic status enter university, their background does not negatively affect their chances of completing the course,” said ACER chief executive Professor Geoff Masters.

“To improve equity in university graduation rates, however, more needs to be done to assist students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to complete Year 12 and go on to university.”

The strongest influence on course completion was the Tertiary Entrance or ENTER score gained in Year 12. About 90 per cent of students with ENTER scores above 90 completed a university course compared to 73 per cent of students with scores between 60 and 69. A difference of 20 points in ENTER score was found to more than double the odds of course completion.

The study also documented the activities of non-completers up to five years after leaving university. Although they showed very low rates of unemployment, the weekly pay and job status of university non-completers was substantially less than that of university course completers and similar to that of students who had not gone to university or not completed Year 12.

Further information and additional findings are available in the report, *Completing University: Characteristics and Outcomes of Completing and Non-completing Students* by Gary N. Marks. The study is research report number 51 in the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY), a program conducted jointly by ACER and the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST).

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LSAY background information is available on the ACER website at www.acer.edu.au