

Sunny prospects: The non-school-leaver segment in South Australia

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Abstract

The introduction of demand-driven funding following the Bradley Review has seen the progressive removal of constraints on the number of undergraduate places that universities can offer, therefore allowing universities to set their own growth levels. In South Australia, there is little unmet demand for university places. Traditionally, universities in South Australia have centred their recruitment attention on school leavers; however, population projections indicate the number of school leavers will decline over the next six years. This article provides a case study on non-school leavers in South Australia. It explores the diverse profile of non-school leavers and their experience in the university environment. It suggests four main groups of non-school leavers – the gap year cohort, the delayed entry cohort, the tertiary transfer cohort and the TAFE entry cohort and identifies the distinctive profile of each group.

Keywords: Student demand, applications, higher education, non-traditional students, student characteristics

Background

With the introduction of demand-driven funding following the Bradley Review (Bradley et al., 2008) and the subsequent progressive removal of constraints on the number of undergraduate places that universities can offer, universities are now allowed to set their own growth levels. The intention of this policy is to increase the proportion of the population who have a bachelor-level degree or higher and to widen the participation of the population in higher education.

South Australia currently has little unmet demand for university places. Demographic trends forecast South Australia will experience a decline in the number of 15–17-year-olds by 2018, as will Tasmania, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory. Only Queensland and Western Australia are forecast to see continuing growth in the 15–17-year-old cohort through to 2025. If South Australian universities want to increase the number of students commencing university, they need to increase the numbers coming from the non-school-leaver market. While the school-leaver market is fairly well understood, the non-school-leaver market has had much less focus in the past and is therefore less well understood. This article contributes towards the understanding of this increasingly important market segment through a descriptive examination of this group.

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The majority of literature differentiates school leavers from non-school leavers, but does not disaggregate non-school leavers any further. The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) report on *Applicants, Offers and Acceptances 2010* refers to Year 12 and non-Year 12 applicants. For the purposes of this article, school leavers are defined as applicants who apply for university in the year they complete Year 12 for commencement at university the year following their completion of Year 12.

Heagney et al. (2007) explored non-traditional students' success in higher education from underrepresented groups in the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia. In the United States (US) the term non-traditional students refers to a different group of students that includes delayed entry students (defined as those not entering postsecondary education in the same calendar year that they complete high school), part-time attendees, those studying while working full-time, those considered financially independent, single parents and those who do not have a high school diploma (National Centre for Education Statistics, 2002).

A number of studies explored specific subgroups of students within the non-school-leaver cohort. Whittington and Thompson (2010) looked at vocational education entrants. Tindle and Lincoln (2000) examined mature-age students as did Stone (2008). However, these studies do not look into any differences between the various subgroups.

In Australia, Nimon (2005) provided insights into the non-school-leaver market, particularly in comparison to the school-leaver market and identified some key aspects of the variable profile of non-school leavers. Access Economics (2008), using data from *The Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth*, identified the traditional university pathway as the path taken by those progressing directly from secondary school to university and later entry to university as those who have several years in the labour force prior to university entrance. Again, these studies did not examine the non-school-leaver market specifically, but rather incorporated them within a broader context of non-traditional applicants to university.

Methodology

Data on applicants to university was sourced from reconciled data from the South Australian Tertiary Admissions Centre (SATAC) and included the three years:

- 2009 reconciled data (applicants applying to commence in 2009)
- 2010 reconciled data (applicants applying to commence in 2010)
- 2011 reconciled data (applicants applying to commence in 2011).

SATAC manages applications to universities in both the Northern Territory and South Australia. For this analysis the dataset was restricted to:

- applicants whose first preference was University of South Australia (UniSA), Flinders University or the University of Adelaide
- domestic applicants
- applicants applying for undergraduate programs through SATAC.

Data on enrolled students was sourced from the UniSA student submissions to DEEWR for 2010. Demographic and enrolment variables included in these datasets were explored to provide a detailed analysis of the non-school-leaver market.

Applicant type: General overview

Three types of applicants are recognised in the SATAC dataset.

- SA/NT school-leaver applicants—applicants who attended an SA or NT school in the year of application (to commence university the following year)
- Interstate school-leaver applicants—applicants who attended a school in another state in the year of application (to commence university the following year)
- Non-school-leaver applicants—all other applicants.

The non-school-leaver applicants comprised just over half of all applicants through SATAC in the last three years (Table 1).

Table 1

Number and percentage of applicants by applicant type through SATAC, 2009–2011

Applicant Type	2009	2010	2011
Non-school leaver	10,881	11,501	11,881
SA/NT school leaver	8,206	8,412	8,500
Interstate school leaver	2,259	2,360	2,593
Total	21,346	22,273	22,974
Non-school leaver	51%	52%	52%
SA/NT school leaver	38%	38%	37%
Interstate school leaver	11%	11%	11%
Total	100%	100%	100%

The proportion of SATAC applicants who were non-school leavers was slightly higher than the national average, for which non-school leavers comprised 48.5% of all applicants in 2010. Queensland and Tasmania were the only other states where non-school leavers comprised more than half of all applicants (DEEWR, 2011).

Demographics

Across all three years, 60% of applicants were female. The proportion of female applicants among non-school leavers was slightly higher for non-school leavers than school leavers (62% and 58% respectively).

Approximately 95% of school-leaver applicants were aged under 20 years of age, compared to 14% of non-school leavers. Ninety-nine per cent of school leavers were aged under 25 years, compared to 60% of non-school leavers. It is evident that non-school leavers were, overall, older than school leavers.

Applications

Over half of school-leaver applicants used all six preferences and three quarters had five or six preferences. In contrast, around one third of non-school-leaver applicants had only

one preference and just over half had only one or two preferences. This suggests that non-school leavers were more targeted in their choice or were seeking to gain a particular qualification. They may also have more limited options for mobility to take up an offer. This is consistent with national data for 2010 (DEEWR, 2011), which found 59% of applicants aged over 25 had only one or two preferences, and 47% of all non-school-leaver applicants had fewer than three offers.

DEEWR (2011) reported school-leaver applicants were more likely to receive an offer than non-school-leaver applicants. Nationally, school-leaver applicants had an offer rate of 80%, compared to 73% for non-school leavers.

SATAC data revealed 72% of all applicants who received an offer had an offer to their first preference. For non-school leavers 78% of those who received an offer had it made for their first preference, compared to 66% for school leavers. Again, this is consistent with the national data as reported by DEEWR (2011).

Non-school-leaver applicants

This section of the article focuses on non-school-leaver applicants.

Course rank set

The course rank set (CRS) is allocated when an applicant receives an offer and provides information on which basis the applicant was made an offer—this has been used in this analysis as a proxy for basis of admission. The CRS analysis included all applicants who received an offer to one of the three SA universities, including those whose first preference university was Charles Darwin University (Northern Territory). It excluded any offer to Charles Darwin University even if the first preference was to an SA university.

Of the non-school-leaver applicants who received an offer, around 30% were made an offer on the basis of their Year 12 results. Approximately 16% were made on the basis of higher education grade point average (GPA) for either complete or incomplete programs. Applicants made an offer on the basis of alternate entry (e.g., Special Tertiary Admissions Test (STAT) or combination of STAT and alternative rank) increased from 16% in 2009 to 18% in 2011.

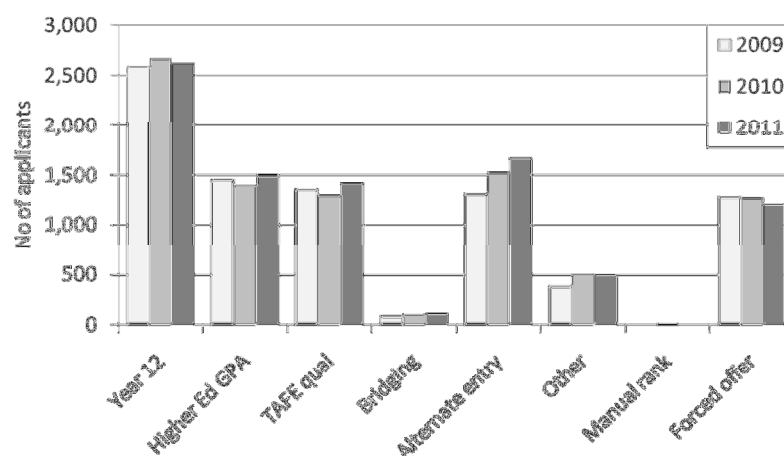


Figure 1. Course rank set of non-school leaver applicants through SATAC receiving an offer, 2009–2011.

The distribution of CRS, as shown in Figure 1, lends itself to the identification of four key cohorts of non-school-leaver applicants:

- The ‘GAP YEAR’ cohort—non-school leavers made an offer on the basis of Year 12 results—comprised the largest share of non-school leavers who received an offer (30%).
- The ‘DELAYED ENTRY’ cohort—non-school leavers made an offer on the basis of alternate entry—comprised the second largest share (18%), and the share was increasing.
- The ‘TERTIARY TRANSFER’ cohort—non-school leavers made an offer on the basis of higher education GPA—was the third largest group (17%).
- The ‘TAFE ENTRY’ cohort—non-school leavers made an offer on the basis of TAFE qualification —was the fourth largest group (16%).

These four groups are examined in greater detail below, and the differences and similarities between them identified.

The gap year cohort—non-school-leaver applicants receiving an offer based on Year 12 results

Just under one third of offers made to non-school-leaver applicants were made on the basis of Year 12 results. These applicants form the gap year cohort as they have taken a short break between completing secondary school and applying for university, although it may be more than one year, but still used their Year 12 results to gain an offer.

Demographics

Over two thirds of gap year cohort was aged 21 or less, with those aged 20–21 comprising the largest share (Figure 2). Eighty-three per cent of the gap year cohort was aged under 25 years and almost two thirds of gap year applicants were female (62% for all non-school leavers).

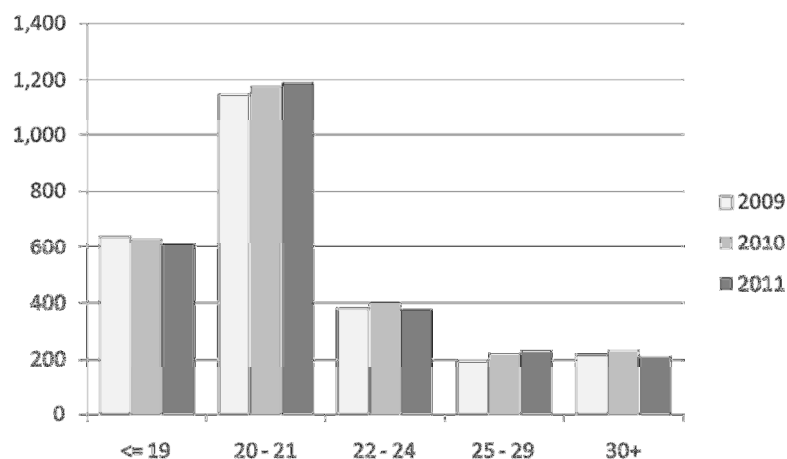


Figure 2: Age of gap year applicants through SATAC receiving an offer, 2009–2011.

Approximately 21% of gap year applicants came from a low socioeconomic (SES) background (26% for all non-school leavers) and 30% from a high SES background (24% for all non-school leavers).

Applications

Just over half of the gap year cohort had three or fewer preferences (65% for all non-school leavers). This suggests that even though these applicants may have only taken a break between secondary and tertiary education, they were still more selective about their tertiary choices than school leaver applicants. Less than 20% used all six preferences (15% for all non-school leavers). Three quarters received an offer to their first preference (78% for all non-school leavers).

Gap year applicants through SATAC had a broad distribution of Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) with around half having a base ATAR of between 70 and 89 groups¹. Just less than one quarter had an ATAR of 90 or above and just over one quarter had an ATAR below 70.

Programs with a broad Field of Education (FOE) of Health comprised 29% first preferences programs for gap year applicants with one third of these to nursing programs. Twenty-one per cent had a first preference of a Society and Culture program, with 17% of these being Law. Health comprised the largest FOE for both male and female gap year applicants, although the proportion of females preferring Health was higher than males (32% and 22% respectively).

Enrolments at UniSA

Two thirds of the gap year cohort was enrolled in internal mode (63% for all non-school leavers) and 83% were full-time (75% for all non-school leavers).

Almost 80% of commencing gap year students had a grade-point average (GPA) of four or more—a passing grade (77% for all non-school leavers). Eighty-five per cent of gap year students in subsequent years had a GPA of four or more (84% for all non-school leavers). Eleven per cent had a GPA of six or more (12% for all non-school leavers).

The gap year cohort had a retention rate of 79% (76% for all non-school leavers).

The delayed entry cohort—non-school leaver applicants receiving an offer based on alternate entry

Applicants who are made an offer on alternate entry form the delayed entry cohort. Offers in alternate entry are based on STAT or on a combination of STAT and alternative rank with restriction on the amount of previous higher education course enrolments over the previous two years. Each university has slightly different rules and some are program-specific (e.g., medicine, music). The proportion of non-school-leaver applicants who were made an offer on alternate entry increased from 16% in 2009 to 18% in 2011.

Demographics

The number of delayed entry applicants who were aged 21 or less increased over the years to become the largest group (Figure 3). The increase in the proportion of applicants aged 21 or less is likely a result of the decrease in the minimum age to undertake the STAT to 18 years in 2010. Just over half of delayed entry applicants were female, which was lower than the average of 62% for non-school-leaver applicants.

¹ ATAR range from 0 to 99.95.

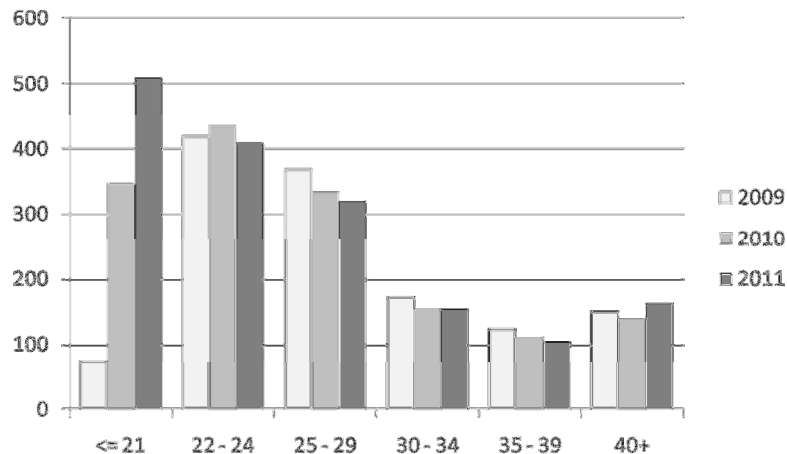


Figure 3: Age of delayed entry applicants through SATAC receiving an offer, 2009–2011.

Just over one quarter of delayed entry applicants came from a low SES background (26% of all non-school leavers) and approximately 21% from a high SES background (24% of all non-school leavers).

Applications

Approximately 35% of delayed entry applicants had three or fewer preferences (65% for all non-school leavers). Another third utilised all six preferences (15% for all non-school leavers), showing a clear split in the preferencing behaviour of this cohort. Approximately two thirds of delayed entry applicants received an offer to their first preference (78% for all non-school leavers).

Programs with a broad FOE of Health and Society and Culture comprised just under half of all first preferences programs for delayed entry applicants. Nursing comprised 55% of Health programs. Almost 40% of female delayed entry applicants had a first preference of a Health program. In contrast, one quarter of male applicants preferenced a Society and Culture program with 16% preferencing a Health program.

Enrolments at UniSA

Two thirds of the delayed entry cohort were enrolled in internal mode (63% for all non-school leavers) and 66% were full-time (75% for all non-school leavers).

Seventy-one per cent of commencing delayed entry students had a GPA of four or more (77% for all non-school leavers). Eighty-one per cent of delayed entry students in subsequent years had a GPA of four or more (84% for all non-school leavers). Fourteen per cent had a GPA of six or more (12% for all non-school leavers). The delayed entry cohort had a retention rate of 73% (76% for all non-school leavers).

The TAFE entry cohort—non-school-leaver applicants receiving an offer based on TAFE qualification

Applicants who received an offer on the basis of TAFE qualifications form the TAFE entry cohort. The proportion of non-school leavers made an offer on the basis of TAFE qualifications was around 16%.

Demographics

The age of TAFE entry applicants was dispersed across all groups (Figure 4). Applicants aged 25–29 were the largest age group comprising just under than one fifth of these applicants. Two thirds of TAFE entry applicants were female (62% for all non-school leavers).

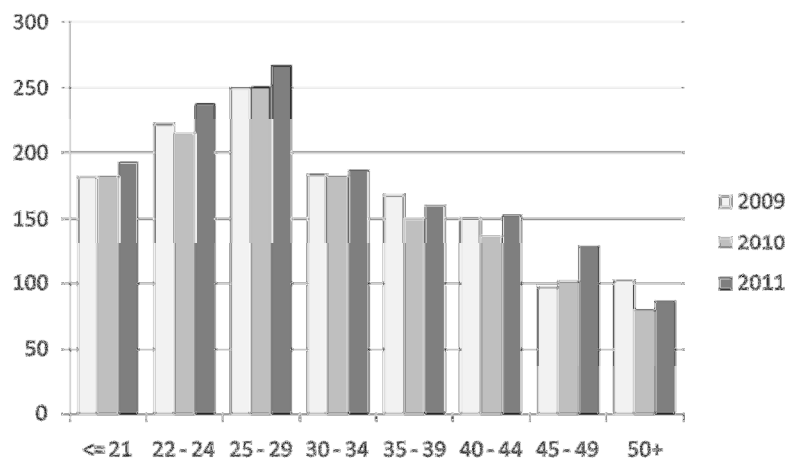


Figure 4. Age of TAFE entry applicants through SATAC receiving an offer, 2009–2011.

Approximately 31% of TAFE applicants came from a low SES background (26% for all non-school leavers) and around 17% from a high SES background (24% for all non-school leavers).

Applications

Two thirds of the TAFE entry cohort had three or fewer preferences (65% for all non-school leavers). Only 15% used all six preferences (15% for all non-school leavers). Over 80% of the TAFE cohort received an offer to their first preference (78% for all non-school leavers).

Programs with a broad FOE of Health comprised forty of first preferences of TAFE entry applicants. Eighty per cent of these were to nursing programs. Fifty per cent of female TAFE entry applicants had a first preference of a Health program as did 21% of male TAFE entry applicants. Nineteen per cent of males in this cohort preferred Management and Commerce programs and 18% Society and Culture programs.

Enrolments at UniSA

Forty per cent of the TAFE entry cohort was enrolled in internal mode (63% for all non-school leavers), and 64% were full-time (75% of all non-school leavers).

Seventy-eight per cent of commencing TAFE entry students had a GPA of four or more (77% for non-school leavers). Eighty-three per cent of TAFE entry students in subsequent years had a GPA of four or more (84% for all non-school leavers). Eight per cent had a GPA of six or more (12% for all non-school leavers). The TAFE entry cohort had a retention rate of 78% (76% for all non-school leavers).

The tertiary transfer cohort—non-school leaver applicants receiving an offer based on higher education grade point average

Applicants who received an offer based on a higher education GPA form the tertiary transfer cohort. The proportion of non-school leavers made an offer on the basis of higher education GPA was approximately 17%.

Demographics

The age of tertiary transfer applicants who received an offer was dispersed across all age groups (Figure 5). Two thirds of tertiary transfer applicants were female (62% for all non-school leavers).

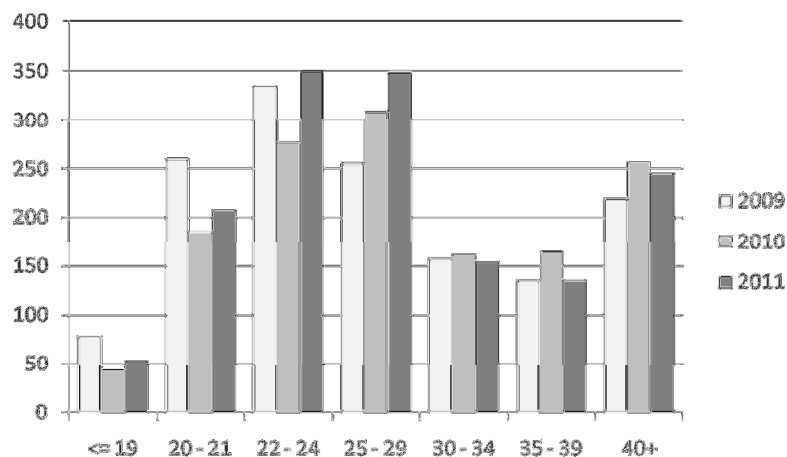


Figure 5: Age of tertiary transfer applicants through SATAC receiving an offer, 2009–2011.

Approximately 19% of tertiary transfer applicants came from a low SES background (26% of all non-school leavers) and 29% from a high SES background (24% of all non-school leavers).

Applications

Not surprisingly, 70% of tertiary transfer applicants had three or fewer preferences (65% of all non-school leavers) with over one third having only one preference. Around 80% of tertiary transfer applicants received an offer to their first preference (78% for all non-school leavers).

Programs with a broad FOE of Health comprised over 40% of first preferences of tertiary transfer applicants with 36% of these being to nursing programs. For females, 47% preferred Health programs. Among male tertiary transfer applicants, 31% preferred Health programs and 25% preferred Society and Culture programs.

Enrolments at UniSA

Two thirds of the tertiary transfer cohort were enrolled in internal mode (63% for all non-school leavers) and 68% were full-time (75% for all non-school leavers).

Eighty-six per cent of commencing tertiary transfer students had a GPA of four or more (77% for all non-school leavers). Ninety-one per cent of tertiary transfer students in subsequent years had a GPA of four or more (84% for all non-school leavers) and 24% had a GPA of six or more (12% for all non-school leavers).

The tertiary transfer cohort had a retention rate of 75% (76% for all non-school leavers).

Other applicants receiving an offer

All other applicants who received an offer have been aggregated for analysis. These included manual rank, where the university overrides the protocol and enters a rank manually; forced offer, where the university overrides the protocol to force an offer; bridging, in which the university offers the applicant a place in a bridging course; and other, which includes applicants who receive offers based on work experience, written submissions and so on.

Demographics

Just under two thirds of other applicants were aged 21 years or under, making them among the youngest non-school-leaver applicant groups (Figure 6). The majority of these were forced offers. The increase seen in 2011 was across all three universities. Sixty-three percent of other applicants were female (62% for non-school leavers).

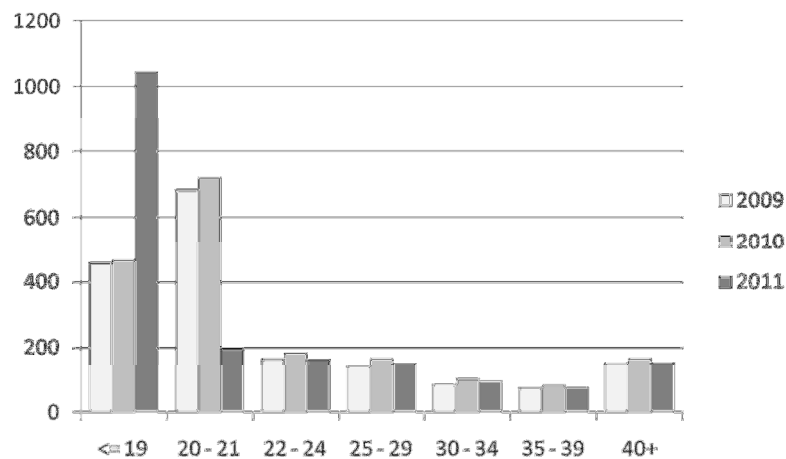


Figure 6: Age of other applicants through SATAC receiving an offer, 2009–2011.

Approximately 30% of other applicants came from a low SES background (26% for all non-school leavers) and around 22% from a high SES background (24% for all non-school leavers).

Applications

Approximately 84% of other applicants utilised three or fewer preferences (65% for all non-school leavers), with over two thirds having only one preference. This was the highest rate among all the non-school-leaver groups. Around 86% of other applicants received an offer to their first preference.

Programs with a broad FOE of Health comprised around one quarter of first preference programs of other applicants with 35% being to nursing programs, and Society and Culture programs contributed 22%. One third of female other applicants preferred Health programs and just under one quarter Society and Culture programs. Male applicants' preferences were more varied, with 19% preferring Society and Culture programs, 18% Creative Arts, 14% Health and 13% Engineering.

Enrolments at UniSA

Sixty-three per cent of the other applicants who enrolled did so in internal mode (63% percent for all non-school leavers). Eighty per cent were full-time (75% for all non-school leavers).

Seventy-three per cent of commencing other non-school leaver students had a GPA of four or more (77% for all non-school leavers). Eighty-one per cent of other non-school leaver students in subsequent years had a GPA of four or more (84% for all non-school leavers). Ten per cent had a GPA of six or more (12% for all non-school leavers). Other non-school leaver students had a retention rate of 72% (76% for all non-school leavers).

Applicants who did not receive an offer

Applicants who did not receive an offer comprised 21–23% of all applicants.

Demographics

Just over one third of applicants who did not receive an offer were aged 21 years and under in 2009 and 2010, rising to 46% in 2011 (Figure 7). Over half were aged less than 25 years in 2009 and 2010, increasing to 66% in 2011.

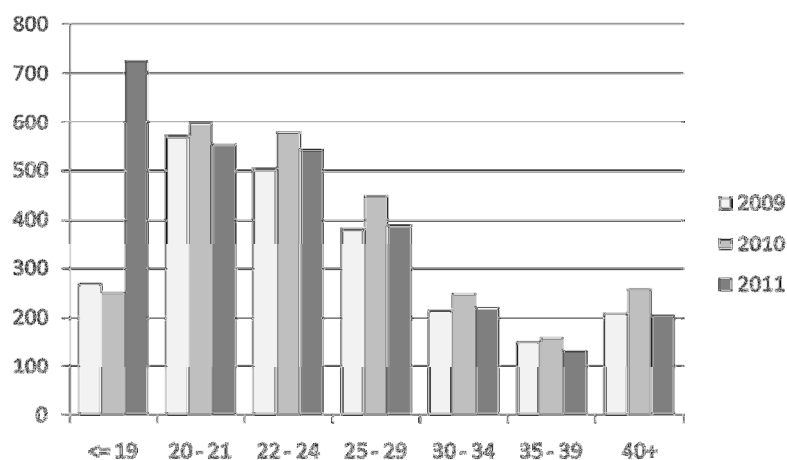


Figure 7: Age of applicants through SATAC who did not receive an offer, 2009–2011.

Sixty-one per cent of applicants who did not receive an offer were female (62% for all non-school leavers).

Approximately 29% of applicants who did not receive an offer came from a low SES background (26% for all non-school leavers) and just under one quarter came from a high SES background (24% for all non-school leavers).

Applications

Three quarters of applicants who did not receive an offer had three or fewer preferences (65% for all non-school leavers) with just over 40% having only one preference.

Half of the non-school-leaver applicants who did not receive an offer had a first preference to a Health program, with 35% being to nursing, 17% to dental studies and 15% to medical studies. Fifty-six per cent of females who did not receive an offer had a first preference of a Health program as did 39%.

Summary

Table 2 summarises the variables explored for each cohort.

Table 2

Summary profile of non-school-leaver cohorts

	Gap year	Delayed entry	TAFE	Tertiary transfer	Other	No offer	All non-school leavers
<i>Demographics</i>							
Age (years)							
<= 19	54	21	7	10	55	26	32
20–24	31	41	28	36	19	40	33
24+	14	38	65	55	25	34	35
% female	63	52	65	65	61	61	62
% Low SES	21	25	31	19	30	29	26
<i>Applications</i>							
% 3 or fewer preferences	53	35	65	70	84	75	65
% 6 preferences	19	33	15	14	9	19	15
1st preference offer	76	67	82	81	84		78
<i>Enrolments</i>							
% Internal mode	65	67	40	64	63		63
% Full-time	83	66	64	68	80		75
<i>Success</i>							
% GPA >4 first year	79	71	78	86	73		77
% GPA >4 subsequent years	85	81	83	91	81		84
% GPA >6	11	14	8	24	10		12
<i>Retention</i>							
% Retained	79	73	78	75	72		76

Italics indicate the result was lower than for all non-school leavers.

Bold indicates the result was higher than for all non-school leavers.

Gap year applicants overall were younger, not from low SES areas, used more preferences and were less likely to be offered their first preference. They enrolled in full-time internal study, which they passed well and were likely to be retained.

Delayed entry applicants overall were slightly older but most often aged less than 24 years, had a lower proportion of females than average, used either few preferences or all six, and were the least likely to be offered their first preference. They enrolled in internal study but with a lower rate of full-time students. They had a lower rate of success and also a lower retention rate.

TAFE entry applicants overall tended to be older, with a higher rate from low SES areas, used three or fewer preferences and were more likely to be offered their first preference. They enrolled externally or in mixed mode and were most likely to be studying part-time. Their success rate was around average and they were more likely to be retained.

Tertiary transfer applicants, overall, were across all ages, not from low SES areas, used three or fewer preferences and were likely to be offered their first preference. They enrolled internally but had a lower proportion who studied full-time. Their success rate was high, although their retention rate was average.

Other non-school-leaver applicants who received an offer tended to be younger, with a higher rate from low SES backgrounds, used three or fewer preferences and were likely to be offered their first preference. They enrolled as full-time internal students. They had a lower than average success rate and a lower than average retention rate.

Non-school-leaver applicants who did not receive an offer were across all ages and had a higher than average proportion from low SES areas. They were likely to use fewer preferences.

The key variables in which the cohorts differ are:

- age, with gap year and other applicants having the youngest age profile and tertiary transfer and TAFE cohorts having the greatest distribution
- low SES, in which the TAFE entry cohort had a high proportion and the tertiary transfer cohort a low proportion
- enrolment in internal mode, in which the TAFE entry had a lower proportion
- enrolment full-time study, which was lower for delayed entry, TAFE entry and tertiary transfer cohorts
- average GPA of a passing grade or above, with the delayed entry cohort being lower and tertiary transfer cohort being higher
- average GPA of six or above, which was lower for the TAFE entry cohort and higher for the tertiary transfer cohort
- retention, which was higher for the gap year cohort.

Conclusion

Non-school leavers are usually grouped together as one cohort. However, analysis of the data on non-school leavers shows four distinct cohorts can be identified, plus a catch-all for the other applicants. The school-leaver cohort can be considered an additional distinct cohort.

Research into the motivations and expectations of the cohorts would provide valuable additional information. The data could be used to inform recruitment activities to enable universities to target the needs of the different cohorts and be better placed to attract students from differing backgrounds—such as developing materials that highlight areas of interest for each cohort. It could also be used to guide developments to enhance the university experience of different cohorts to improve both their retention and satisfaction levels by identifying the areas in which each cohort is more likely to benefit from additional assistance or focus. Increasing the recruitment, retention and satisfaction of a wide range of students would, in turn, contribute to the government's stated policy of widening participation in higher education and increasing the proportion of the population with a higher education qualification.

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