The "Absent Presence" of Part-Time Senior Secondary Study: A Research and Policy Challenge

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Abstract

Part-time engagement is a significant feature of senior secondary study for large numbers of students, in a context which includes high level policy pressures to achieve better outcomes for many more and a wider proportion of the schooling population, and significant policy and practice shifts at school, system and accreditation authority levels. Yet little is currently known about which students choose this option, and why, or the policy, schooling practice, system or theoretical implications of this change in senior secondary engagement patterns. The paper argues that research is required to fill this gap by identifying the intersections between part-time study and retention, engagement and completion, within broader theoretical, contextual and educational frameworks around post-compulsory study, and youth transitions more generally. It highlights definitional and statistical complexities which confuse understandings and distort analyses of changing patterns of senior secondary engagement, and the disjuncture between these definitions and the lived realities of students and their schools. Rather than trying to capture this shifting and fluid educational engagement through definitional gymnastics and statistical manipulation, the paper concludes by suggesting the concept of extended completion as a more useful descriptive and analytical tool. And it introduces a research project designed to fill the research and policy gap explored below, and to enhance retention and completion policy and practice.

Introduction

For more than a quarter of a century, Australian governments have focussed policy attention and considerable resources on increasing the proportions of young people who are retained in and successfully complete secondary education. This policy imperative is generally attributed to economic drivers, especially the increasingly

competitive global economy, the rate and extent of technological change, and the demands these create for different and higher levels of workforce skills. Attention has also been given to the wider social impacts of incomplete secondary education, for individuals and their communities, such as the significance of secondary completion for future well-being and full participation in adult life (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2006) including employment outcomes (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2003; Fullarton, Walker, Ainley, & Hillman, 2003), and levels of political and social engagement (Dusseldorp Skills Forum, 2002), and incomplete education with higher prevalence of chronic and mental health problems (Sturm & Gresenz, 2002).

Recognition that completion of a secondary education credential is a critical determinant of successful post-school life has increased pressure for secondary education to cater more effectively for all students, not only those deemed academically oriented. And there is wide consensus across educational policy and research circles that more flexible approaches to senior secondary education are required to achieve this, including different mixes of working, learning and training. From its inception, the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) introduced completion time flexibility, and hence part-time engagement. Meanwhile, the freeing up of completion time requirements in all other jurisdictions (see Table 1 below) indicates the relevance elsewhere of more flexible patterns of senior secondary engagement. While estimating the extent to which students across Australia are engaging with their final years of schooling on less than a full-time basis depends on what is being measured and how, the high rates of part-time students attributed to South Australia by census data and the early introduction of completion time flexibility together provide a useful entry point into an examination of part-time senior secondary study.

Aust. States & Territories, & NZ	Current
ACT	5 years maximum
New South Wales	5 years rolling indefinitely
New Zealand	Indefinite
Northern Territory	Indefinite
Queensland	2 years*
South Australia	Indefinite
Tasmania	Indefinite
Victoria (VCE and VCAL)	Indefinite

** Note: To be changed to 9 year blocks (which can be recommenced indefinitely)*

Table 1: Time requirements for completion of senior secondary certificates

Requirements are in flux in many locations – information accurate at 17 May 2006

One clear expression of the public policy expectation that most secondary students should complete school, and exit with a credential, are the reviews of senior secondary curriculum, accreditation and certification requirements conducted in almost every Australian jurisdiction over the last decade. A recent analysis attributed these reviews to three main triggers: "the growing diversity of the senior secondary student population in Australia; recognition that senior schooling has not been meeting the needs of many of its students, especially the non-university bound cohort" (Figgis, 2005); and a conviction that changes need to be made (the terms flexible and broad pathways are commonly used) to respond to the imperative that more young people remain in education to the completion of their secondary schooling. The most recent of these reviews is the 2004-2006 Ministerial Review of the South Australian Certificate of Education, the final report of which argues that "senior secondary education for all is more important now than it ever has been" (Government of South Australia, 2006, p 1).

Despite the policy and practice emphasis on increased flexibility and broadening pathways, including different combinations of learning and earning, current approaches to defining part-time secondary study and measuring part-time students (in all their permutations) tend to normalise full-time study and assume a lock-step engagement with schooling. These approaches no longer reflect the more fluid realities of senior secondary engagement and are ill-fitted to identify the extent and nature of secondary engagement no longer conforming to the assumed norm. Nor can they communicate the multiplicity of ways in which Australian students are actually engaging with their senior secondary education. Similarly, the long-dominant conceptual, policy and data measurement dualism of retention-attrition fits awkwardly in an educational system in which there is evidence that a minority of at least one State's entire senior secondary commencing cohort (from both public and private schools) engage in the assumed normal pattern of two years of full-time study (see Table 1).

Yet the phenomenon that not all senior students (and less than half in South Australia) undertake their final two years of schooling on a lock-step full-time basis appears to be reflected throughout Australia, regardless of the incapacity of current definitions to accurately convey and capture this. It is telling, for example, that the previously rigid time limits for the completion of secondary accreditation requirements have now been freed up in every jurisdiction in Australia. Given the policy imperatives mentioned above, there is an urgency to better understand the causes and educational implications of this significant shift from previously dominant patterns of senior schooling. For example, a preliminary quantitative study (Ramsay, 2005) suggests intersections between factors relevant to retention, engagement and successful completion and the causes and consequences of part-time secondary study. Within this overall context, part-time senior secondary study remains a significant and largely unexplored policy challenge.

Policy and Research Neglect

Part-time senior secondary study is surprisingly absent from the policy arena and research literature about school retention, engagement and completion. This is puzzling given the research and policy attention being given to improving retention and completion rates, and the emphasis on flexibility, alternative arrangements, and responsiveness to changes in young peoples' lives. Its absence from the policy and research screen may be partly due to definitional and statistical complexities, and the fluidity of shifting realities and blurring boundaries across post-compulsory education and training. It may also be that the appearance of part-time secondary engagement as a more widespread phenomenon has emerged piecemeal, an on-the-ground response to the challenges schools face in providing more effectively for those students who leave school early.

The most recent and pointed example of this neglect in the public policy arena is the report of the SACE Review "Success for All: Ministerial Review of Senior Secondary Education in South Australia" (Government of South Australia, 2006). While it notes South Australia's high number and percentage of Year 12 part-time students, it does so as evidence of the extent and nature of changes to young people's lives (Government of South Australia), not to interrogate any relationship between this feature of senior secondary education in South Australia and the "dramatic decline" in full-time apparent retention since the SACE's introduction documented within the report (from over 90 to 68 per cent between 1992 and 2004).

Similarly, surprisingly little attention is given to senior secondary students who undertake some (or even all) of their final years of schooling part-time in the large research literature which explores the inter-related issues of secondary retention, engagement, and successful completion (e.g., Lamb, 1996; Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia (SSABSA), 1999; Lamb, Dwyer, & Wyn, 2000; OECD, 2003; Ryan & Watson, 2003; Fullarton et al., 2003; Lamb, Walstab, Teese, Vickers, & Rumberger, 2004; Cormack, 2004). Research into early school leaving has largely focused on determining school completion rates, the reasons for attrition, and strategies to improve retention and successful completion. Part-time participation has not been identified as a factor in either retention or attrition within the research design of these studies, although it could well be contributing to either or both in varying circumstances. Nor is it explored as a potential retention strategy, hence its effect on completion is currently unknown.

Even those studies which focus on the educational impact of part-time employment omit part-time study as a factor in their research design and analysis. Yet student surveys have identified economic necessity, and the need to gain immediate employment, as the primary reason for early school-leaving (Marks & Fleming, 1999),

whereas combining part-time work with part-time study may have avoided this outcome. Similarly research showing the negative impact on Year 12 outcomes for students working more than ten hours a week did not differentiate the impact on part-time compared to full-time students (Robinson, 1996). Lack of interest in and engagement with the curriculum is identified as another key reason for leaving school (Hattam & Smythe, 2000-1), with student satisfaction and engagement being measured largely in relation to the effectiveness of specific retention programs. Yet the impact of such programs on part-time students and their relative levels of satisfaction and engagement in comparison to their full-time counterparts remains unknown, since the research did not identify them separately. None of this suggests that part-time study is unrelated to retention and completion but rather that this relationship has not yet been explored.

Statistical Issues

Outdated but still powerfully dominant assumptions about full-time study being the desirable norm at the senior secondary level may be contributing to the research and policy neglect of part-time study. Such assumptions are reflected most overtly in official apparent retention rates based on Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) census data, which exclude part-time students, even in terms of their full-time equivalence; "As the normal apparent retention rates measure only accounts for full-time students, these part-time members of the student population are not reflected in the retention rates although they may have been part of the base year cohort" (ABS, 2004, p. 6).

The inadequacies of apparent retention rates, as currently calculated, have been increasingly acknowledged within the notes accompanying most recent annual ABS "Schools, Australia" reports. The 2004 report informed readers that a three-phase review of the retention measure was being conducted in response to "expressed reservations about the quality and relevance of the ABS apparent retention rates measure", and noted that it has "become less relevant as changes to the education system have broadened the pathways available to young people in post-compulsory education" (ABS, 2004, p. 38). The 2005 report acknowledges the diminished "relevance and usefulness of apparent retention rates as a measure of retention and completion" (ABS, 2005, p. 38). It also provides information on the alternative measures being considered by the review, including an age-specific rate which, unlike the current measure, includes part-time, repeating and returning students (ABS, 2005, pp. 41-42). Another age-related indicator of students' participation has been developed by the national Ministerial Taskforce on Performance Measurement and Reporting (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), 2005).

Significantly, new tables have been inserted into the annual "Schools, Australia" reports in recent years showing numbers of part-time and full-time students in each state and territory, and at each year level, but not their relative retention rates despite the relevance of these to the public policy imperatives noted above. Also relevant and interesting is that a new table has appeared since 2003, giving apparent retention rates (Year 10 to 12) for **all** students for the first time; that is, aggregated retention rates for part-time and full-time students considered together. It shows improved retention rates nationally, most particularly in government schools, and most especially in those parts of Australia with the poorest rates for full-time students alone, including South Australia, Tasmania and the Northern Territory (ABS, 2005, 2006).

In those relatively few instances when the existence and extent of part-time secondary students are acknowledged within the policy or research literature, this is typically within the context of the retention measurement challenge and analytical conundrum they represent; that is, discussion of the best way to achieve comparable data given the need for statistical adjustment to reflect the range of variables which impact on (and can significantly distort) these data (e.g., Ryan & Watson, 2003; Lamb et al., 2004). The differing rates and definitions of part-time secondary study and students are amongst the variables contributing to the challenge of achieving a statistically valid way to compare apparent retention rates nationally; students who repeat a year and those re-entering school education (who themselves are often part-time) are another and related one.

The most recent statistical analysis of these variables and their impact (Lamb et al., 2004) was prompted by the public policy requirement to identify a sound basis for comparing secondary retention rates nationally. The study proposes a statistical model which compensates for a range of relevant variables, including part-time study, and indicates their statistical impact on apparent retention rates. The national spread of 2002 apparent retention rates reduces when account is taken of population differences, remoteness, interstate migration and part-time study (Lamb et al., 2004, p. 124), and the study notes that the latter's exclusion from apparent retention rate estimates "could substantially under-report levels of retention in systems where there are large numbers of part-time students". (Lamb et al., p. 105). Consistent with the ABS data referred to above, upward adjustment to retention rates is required for all states and territories when part-time students are included, particularly for South Australia, the Northern Territory and Tasmania where census data suggests that they are the most numerous.

Definitional Complexities

Definitional issues introduce further complexities to the exploration of part-time study. For example, in South Australia the Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS) and the State's assessment authority (Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia, SSABSA) define part-time study in different ways, collecting data at different times of the year, and for different purposes. SSABSA's definition is determined by students' enrolment in the SACE, part-time study being defined as less than a full-time SACE load, which it identifies as 10 units. This introduces a further data disjunction for while schools also identify 10 units as a full load at Stage 2 of the SACE, they regard 12 (not 10) units as a full load at Stage 1. The Department calculates and reports part-time students according to their school year levels, rather than SACE stage, applying national census requirements. The census identifies full-time study as whatever is so regarded by the local educational authority, yet educational authorities' approaches to defining full-time study have been changing in response to policy and practice shifts across the country. For example, until very recently South Australian departmental guidelines referred to "normal" school subjects as making up a full-time study load. But since 2005 the calculation of students' study load can include "alternative pathways programs such as TAFE, tertiary studies, apprenticeships, work placements, VET in schools or a combination thereof" (DECS, 2004, p. 1) much of which occurs outside of schools. Thus students are now recorded as full-time whose out-of-school programs would previously have caused them to be reported as part-time, a contributory factor in the apparent national decrease in part-time students noted by the corresponding ABS report. (ABS, 2005, p. 3; ABS, 2006, p. 3)

Further definitional and statistical blurriness is caused by a range of flexible SACE curriculum frameworks increasingly being made available in schools, involving vocational, community and other out-of-school learning which can be accredited for SACE purposes including retrospectively. The absence of any time restriction on SACE completion makes it impossible to determine completion rates at any particular point in time, since non-completing students may yet complete in future years. The picture is further clouded by the very real implications for schools, and their students, of departmental reporting and SACE enrolment practices. For example, students' eligibility for Centrelink payments is determined by what their school regards as a full-time study load. And school staffing formulae are determined by full-time equivalent students, so increases in reported part-time students could reduce teaching and support staff. Such implications may well be causing inconsistencies in schools' interpretation and application of departmental definitions of part-time students, raising additional questions about the usefulness and reliability of existing data.

The difficulties in identifying part-time secondary study and students extend beyond those mentioned above; that is, different authorities using different definitions, changes

to these definitions over time, and inconsistency in reporting due to very real (and not necessarily fair) implications for schools and students. The terms themselves are not only difficult to apply with any accuracy but are increasingly meaningless to students, due to the range and complexity, flexibility and fluidity of the on-the-ground realities of secondary schools and their post-compulsory students. For example, there are students undertaking a full SACE load, who are enrolled at (and case managed by) but never (or rarely) attend their school; students who attend school full-time but undertake less than a full SACE load; time-tabling arrangements in schools which mean that senior students are enrolled full-time who may (or may not) be undertaking a full SACE study load; students who are enrolled in less than a full SACE load but who nevertheless complete (or who have the potential to complete) a full SACE by accreditation for non-SACE studies; and other variations of the above. Further students have their own views about whether they are full or part-time students, depending on whether they are at school all day or whether they think they are undertaking a full SACE load, and these are not necessarily consistent with their schools' views. Since census data derive from self-reports, this raises further questions about the accuracy of ABS reports on the numbers of part-time students and introduces further inconsistencies in their measurement by the ABS, schools and schooling authorities.

South Australian Policy Context

The South Australian Government has made an improvement in school retention rates one of its highest policy priorities. The recent SACE Review reflects this commitment, the first wholesale external review of senior secondary education in the State since the 1986-89 enquiry provided the blueprint for the SACE's introduction (Gilding, 1988, 1989). Despite slight rises to South Australia's apparent retention rates in the last couple of years, these have essentially remained static for about a decade since the initial dramatic decline in the recessionary first half of the 1990s (Government of SA, 2006, p. 24). These poor retention rates are cited in the Review Report as clear evidence that, as currently structured, the certificate is beyond the reach of a large number and unacceptably large proportion of South Australian students.

From its inception, removal of the time restriction was intended to make the new certificate within the reach of all students, regardless of levels of social or economic disadvantage. The Review Report argues (quite reasonably) that South Australia's poor apparent retention rates, even after statistical adjustment to reflect its part-time students (and other demographic factors), indicate failure to fulfil this intention. Yet this distinctive characteristic of the SACE was not one examined by the Review Team, except (as discussed below) in reference to statistical aspects of retention data (Government of SA, 2006, p. 32, 36). Nor was an analysis undertaken of whether part-time study has (as intended) improved retention by enabling students to complete

who might otherwise be unable to remain at school; or whether instead, it has contributed to poor retention rates by reducing students' engagement with school and increasing their completion difficulties.

The latest census data indicate that South Australia had the highest number of part-time students in each of Year 11, Year 12, and overall compared with the rest of Australia (ABS, 2005, p. 23). These high rates of part-time study could well have been presented as further evidence that the current requirements of the SACE are simply too much for many students who choose, are constrained, or are counselled to reduce their load as a retention, coping or completion strategy. The Review Report does record that South Australia has the highest number and proportion of part-time students nationally (most particularly, but not exclusively in government schools), with over a quarter (26.7%) of the 2003 cohort of Year 12 students in government schools studying part-time (Government of SA, 2006, p. 36). It is surprising therefore that it does not examine the relationship between these two notable features of South Australian students' engagement with the SACE; that is, that their retention rates are unacceptably low whereas their rates of part-time study are high.

A crucial, but currently neglected question is whether the opportunity to undertake the SACE over a number of years (and therefore some or all of it part-time) has supported the engagement and completion of students who might otherwise have left school early, or whether the opposite is the case; that is, that it has contributed to students' disengagement, early school-leaving and failure to complete. In the midst of the many high profile, government funded initiatives to improve South Australian retention, there has been little if any interrogation of this or related questions: such as why so many students study some or all of their secondary education part-time; which students are doing so, and in which schools; and whether the students or their schools share any significant characteristics. The silence of the Review Report on these matters is a particularly striking example of the public policy vacuum and research neglect of part-time senior secondary study.

Background Study

An initial background study used 2003 schools' census data to investigate key quantitative dimensions of part-time study in state government schools (Ramsay, 2005). This revealed distinct patterns among part-time students, according to age, concentration and representation in schools, and levels of schooling. Most particularly, while the majority of part-time Year 11 students (66 per cent) were 20 years or older, the majority of part-time Year 12 students (75 per cent) were younger. The slight predominance of female part-time students was more marked amongst the older students. Older part-time students were highly concentrated in a small number

of schools, mostly specialist adult re-entry schools together with the Open Access College. Large numbers of the younger students were in a similarly small number of (and mostly the same) schools.

These findings appear at first sight to confirm assumptions that the size of the part-time student cohort in South Australia is largely due to circumstances particular to South Australia, including the existence of these schools. However, the younger part-time students were distributed across a much larger number and far wider range of schools, at both year levels but most especially in Year 12; at Year 11, 72 schools had some younger part-time students whereas older ones were in only 26 schools, and at Year 12 the younger and older part-time students were distributed across 99 and 36 schools respectively. Significantly, the much more widely distributed younger Year 12 part-time students formed the largest cohort of all, outnumbering all of the Year 11 part-time students (in both age groupings). This numerical dominance of the younger part-time Year 12 students was due not only to the Year 12 cohort being three times that at Year 11, but also to the number of older students halving between Years 11 and 12.

Of equal interest, the background study found a clear relationship between the likelihood of part-time study and attendance at an educationally disadvantaged school, as measured by the departmental Index of Educational Disadvantage (DETE, 2001). This relationship between part-time study and educational disadvantage of school attended remained consistent regardless of the age grouping of the student cohorts and of their year levels. Thus in 2003, part-time senior students in both the younger and older age cohorts were more than twice as likely to attend a school at the lowest two of seven rankings of Educational Disadvantage, regardless of their year level. Traditional school-aged, part-time students (15 to 17 year olds) were found in the same proportions in schools in these lowest two rankings in every year over the period 2001 to 2004. Further, the jurisdictions recorded by census data as having the highest proportions of part-time senior secondary students (Tasmania, South Australia and the Northern Territory) also have higher population proportions in the lowest socio-economic quartile.

The literature on school retention and completion consistently indicates a positive correlation between coming from a low socio-economic (SES) background with early school leaving and low completion (Lamb et al., 2000; Teese, 2000; Teese & Polesel, 2003; Fullarton et al., 2003; Lamb, 2004). A dominant theme throughout the SACE Review Report is that the lowest retention rates within the State are found amongst the most disadvantaged sections of the community (Government of South Australia, 2006). It is clear therefore that both the likelihood of early school-leaving and the prevalence of part-time secondary study are increased with levels of educational and other disadvantages. Yet little if anything is currently known about the interconnections

between these two trends. For example, are they both in fact evidence of the educationally disadvantaging pressures experienced by such students? And is the availability of part-time study an effective completion strategy for students who would otherwise find this beyond their reach? Or alternatively, does it put them on an even more slippery slide away from engagement and completion? Once again it is both frustrating and intriguing that the literature and policy analyses exploring the causes of and remedies to early school leaving and non-completion almost without exception leave these particular stones unturned.

Other SA Data: Part-time Study and SACE Completion

Data currently available on SACE completion rates of full-time and part-time students raise other significant and currently unasked questions. The background study mentioned above found a strong relationship between 2003 SACE completing students who were studying part-time in their final year and the likelihood of attending schools at the lowest two levels of the Index of Educational Disadvantage. This correlation with educational disadvantage was even greater for those schools with larger numbers of part-time completing students.

Other SACE commencement and completion data were accessed from SSABSA's submission to the SACE Review (SSABSA, 2006) which included a table showing SACE enrolment data for all South Australian students (all schooling sectors) commencing their SACE in 2000. It shows students' modality of study (referred to as "patterns of engagement") for each year 2000-2003; that is, whether they enrolled in a full SACE load (FT), a part-time SACE load (PT), no SACE units (0), or a very small number (less than four) SACE units (T/Es), the latter assumed to be either mature aged students ("tasters") or Year 10 students ("early starters"). Sixty-nine different combinations were identified across this period, only the ten most populated being included in the table since the 59 remaining variations were too numerous to be tabulated.

Table 2 below (derived from these data) shows these ten patterns of engagement and aggregates students in the remaining fifty nine (unspecified) combinations, in each case indicating:

- Numbers of actual students (not full time equivalents) in each grouping,
- Their percentage of all 2000 SACE commencers, and
- Their percentage of all SACE completers (within the period 2000-2003).

There are two striking features of these data. Firstly, they show that less than half (45 per cent) of **all** of the State's 2000 commencing students enrolled in their SACE studies

for what is widely regarded as the normal pattern of two final full-time years of study. The first two patterns record these students' engagement and completion rates, showing the latter as extremely high (more than 93 percent). Secondly, these data suggests poor completion rates (between one and 57 percent) for students whose SACE enrolment pattern differed from this traditional combination.

Pattern	Student numbers by pattern	Percentage of students by pattern	2000	2001	2002	2003	Percentage of each pattern completing
1	4,976	22.9	T/Es	FT	FT	0	93
2	4,737	21.8	FT	FT	0	0	93
3	1,608	7.4	T/Es	FT	PT	0	41
4	1,608	7.4	T/Es	0	0	0	0
5	1,412	6.5	T/Es	FT	0	0	2
6	1,152	5.3	FT	0	0	0	7
7	1,000	4.6	FT	PT	0	0	32
8	978	4.5	PT	0	0	0	0
9	978	4.5	T/Es	PT	0	0	0
10	261	1.2	T/Es	FT	PT	PT	56
59 other	3,021	13.9	Not /S	Not /S	Not /S	Not /S	57
Total SA	21,731	100					55

T/Es = tasters or early starters, students enrolled in less than 4 units
FT = full-time students, ie enrolled in 10 SACE units or more
PT = part-time students, ie enrolled in less than 10 SACE units (and more than 4)
Not/S = not specified, ie the 59 other enrolment patterns not individually identified

Table 2: 2000 SACE commencers' enrolment (all SA students) – 2000-2003

Although it is possible to accurately identify, and count full-time SACE students and SACE completers, it is not at all straightforward to do so with any precision for either part-time SACE students or non-completers. For example, it needs to be noted that some of the other (not full-time) combinations shown in Tabe 2 actually involve no part-time study, while others include students recorded as part-time who enrolled in SACE studies full-time but dropped out midyear. Students in three of the ten identified cohorts did not continue beyond their commencing year, and altogether five (4, 5, 6, 8 and 9) are more likely to represent temporary or permanent disengagement; either failure to complete or taking a break with the possibility of returning. This includes some students (perhaps adult re-entry) who sampled a few SACE units but did not, and perhaps never intended to continue (4 and possibly 9). More recent data reveal that some of the disengaging students from the 2000 commencing cohort did in fact return to complete post-2003 (SSABSA, 2006, p. 12), while others may yet do so, since there is no time limit for SACE completion.

This leaves three out of the identified ten combinations which reflect the engagement of students undertaking one or more years part-time (3, 7 and 10). It can fairly safely be assumed that the majority of the remaining 59 unspecified patterns included some part-time study. In total then, some 27 percent of the entire 2000 commencing cohort may have undertaken some of their SACE on a part-time basis over the period to 2003. Accepting these conjectures about what these patterns may reflect in terms of actual student engagement, the entire 2000 commencing cohort can be aggregated into three main groupings:

- Firstly, students who undertook two final years full-time;
- Secondly, students undertaking one or more years part-time; and
- Thirdly, students who left their studies before completing (with the possibility of returning).

Student grouping	Commencing numbers by each group	Percentage of all commencers	Completing numbers by each group	Percentage of all completers	Completion rate for each group (%)
1	9,713	45	9,077	76	93
2	5,890	27	2,734	23	46
3	6,128	28	104	1	1
Total	21,731	100	11,915	100	55

Data derived from SSABSA http://www.ssabsa.sa.edu.au/docs/sace-q/finalsubmission.pdf

Table 3: 2000 SACE commencers & completers by broad grouping – full-time, part-time & early leavers

Table 3 shows the completion rates for each of these three student groupings, as well as their percentage share of 2000 commencers and 2001-2003 completers, as follows:

1. Students undertaking two final years of full-time study were 45 percent of commencers and 76 percent of completers, with a completion rate of over 93 percent.
2. Students undertaking some part-time study were 27 percent of commencers and 23 percent of completers, with a completion rate of 46 percent.
3. Of the remaining 28 percent of commencers, only one percent completed in the time-frame of the study, the remaining students leaving their studies (with or without the intention of returning), or undertaking a very small amount of SACE study (with or without the intention of completing).

The related figure (Figure 1) draws attention to two stark conclusions; firstly, most commencing students did **not** undertake their SACE studies over two final years of full-time study, but secondly, most completers (an overwhelming proportion) **did** engage with the SACE in this way.

These data throw up significant questions, the answers to which can only be surmised at this time, in the absence of research in this area. For example, does the modest completion rate (46 percent) of the part-time student grouping shown in Figure 1 indicate the completion difficulties caused by part-time study? Or is this outcome a resounding success, as many or even most of these students might have left school if part-time study had not been available to them? Further research is required to answer these questions including identifying the factors contributing to or inhibiting successful completion for those students who do not engage with their senior secondary study in what is assumed to be the dominant and "normal" mode; that is, two final years of full-time study.

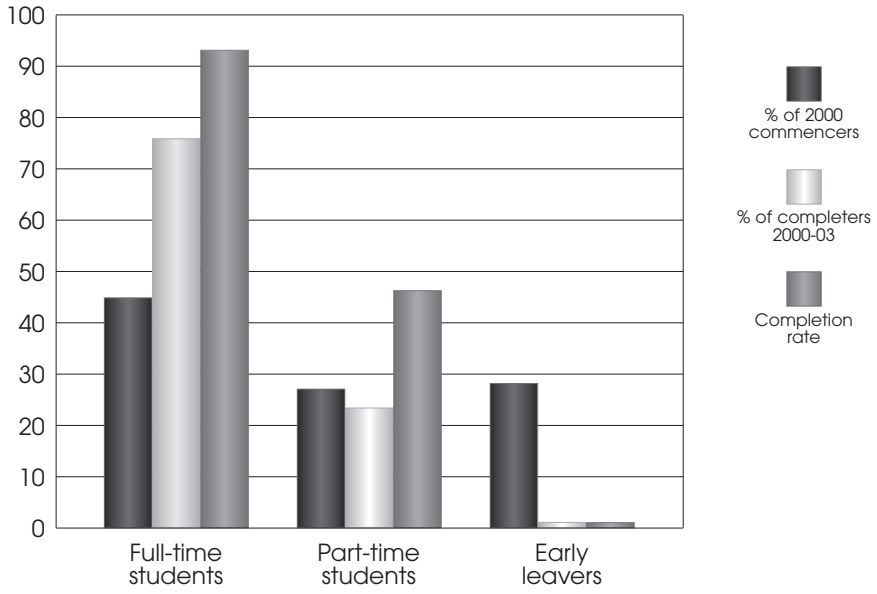

Figure 1: 2000 SACE commencers & completers by broad grouping: full-time, part-time & early leavers

Conclusion

The policy and practice shifts in schools, in census guidelines, and in accreditation practices briefly explored above, are to some extent reflected throughout Australia. Many meanings and definitions of part-time study and part-time students are in use, in different contexts and for different purposes. The resulting definitional and statistical inconsistencies suggest that a new conceptual and definitional framing is required

which better reflects the changing complexity of students' lives and the many ways in which schools, schooling systems, and accreditation authorities are responding to these realities. It is also apparent that the terms "full-time" and "part-time" study (and students) can no longer be applied with any accuracy, or much meaning. Current definitions do not provide a clear, consistent or useful approach to investigating (and even more problematic, measuring) part-time senior secondary study. The assumptions which they reflect have been left behind by what is actually happening in secondary schools across the country and by the changed nature of their students' lives.

Yet despite the definitional and other difficulties with identifying part-time students, it is also clear that while many post-compulsory students continue to engage with senior secondary in the traditional pattern of two final years of full-time study, there is another (and in South Australia at least, larger) group who do not. The concept of extended engagement (and completion) usefully differentiates these two student groups: those assumed to be the norm, engaged in two final years of full-time schooling, and those whose engagement is longer than the minimum completion period (with or without a break from secondary education). What needs to be asked by those responsible for senior secondary education is what changes are required to adapt schools and school systems to the reality that many of their students no longer fit assumed norms. And research and policy attention is required to identify what arrangements in schools support positive outcomes and successful completion for students who do not engage with their secondary education in two final years of full-time study.

In the absence of existing research or informed policy debate on the causes and impact of part-time study, Australian Research Council funding was provided to explore these dimensions, and most particularly their intersections with improved retention, engagement and completion of secondary education. The resulting research project (2005-7)[1] investigates the characteristics of part-time students and their schools, as well as the causes, outcomes and implications of part-time secondary engagement. In particular the research seeks to identify the relationship between extended engagement and retention, engagement and successful completion, and to locate our findings within broader theoretical, contextual and educational frameworks around post-compulsory study, and youth transitions more generally.

Note

[1] "Pathways or Cul-de-Sacs? The Causes, Consequences and Implications of Part-time Senior Secondary Study", a three year research project funded by a Linkage grant from the Australian Research Council, being conducted by the author, Marie Brennan and Alison Mackinnon as Chief Investigators, with the South Australian

Department of Education and Children's Services, the Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia, and the Premier's Social Inclusion Unit as industry Partners.

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