

About the research

The impact of schools on young people's transition to university

Sinan Gemici, Patrick Lim and Tom Karmel, NCVER

The Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY), in addition to the characteristics of the individual students making up the sample, collect data on a range of school characteristics. This, and the fact that the sample is clustered with the selected schools as the first stage, provides the opportunity to disentangle the impact of the school from the characteristics of students. This report exploits this feature of LSAY to investigate the impact of schools on tertiary entrance rank (TER) and the probability of going to university. While secondary education is about more than these academic goals, there is no doubt that these are of high importance, both from the point of view of the schools and the individual students and their parents.

The school characteristics covered in this report are: simple characteristics, such as school sector and location; structural characteristics, such as whether the school is single-sex or coeducational; resource base, such as class size and student–teacher ratio; and average demographics, such as the average socioeconomic status of students at the school and the extent to which parents put pressure on the school to achieve high academic results.

Key messages

- The attributes of schools *do* matter. Although young people's individual characteristics are the main drivers of success, school attributes are responsible for almost 20% of the variation in TER.
- Of the variation in TER attributed to schools, the measured characteristics account for a little over a third. The remainder captures 'idiosyncratic' school factors that cannot be explained by the data to hand and that can be thought of as a school's overall 'ethos'; no doubt teacher quality and educational leadership are important here.
- The three most important school attributes for TER are sector (that is, Catholic and independent vs government), gender mix (that is, single-sex vs coeducational), and the extent to which a school is 'academic'. For TER, the average socioeconomic status of students at a school does not emerge as a significant factor, after controlling for individual characteristics including academic achievement from the PISA test.
- However, the characteristics of schools do matter for the probability of going to university, even after controlling for TER. Here, the three most important school attributes are the proportion of students from non-English speaking backgrounds, sector, and the school's socioeconomic make-up.

The authors also construct distributions of school performance (in relation to TER and the probability of going to university), which control for individual characteristics. The differences between high-performing and low-performing schools are sizeable. There is also considerable variation within school sectors, with the government sector having more than its share of low-performing schools.

Tom Karmel
Managing Director, NCVER