

Completing University: Characteristics and Outcomes of Completing and Non-completing Students

LSAY Research Report 51

Gary N. Marks

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the factors that influence course completion by young Australians who commence university. It also documents the labour market outcomes of those who enrol at a university but who leave before obtaining a qualification.

University education involves substantial public and private resources. It is important, therefore, to better understand the factors associated with course completion, and whether even a partial experience of university study may be beneficial in opening up other pathways.

The report analyses data from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) program to address these questions. The data are from a sample of young people who were in Year 9 in 1995 and who commenced higher education between 1998 and 2001, that is within three years of completing Year 12. This report uses annual data collected on their education, training, and labour market activities up until 2004 when they were approximately 23 years of age. By mapping the pathways followed by the same group of young people over an extended period of time, longitudinal analyses can add to the understanding provided by other data sources on the university sector.

The main findings on completion of university degree courses are as follows.

Overall Course Completion

- 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first course at a university between 1998 and 2001, 66 per cent had completed that course by 2004, 16 per cent had withdrawn, 11 per cent had changed course and 8 per cent were continuing.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 the first course is in the range from 71 to 74 per cent.
- Of those who switched to a second course, the proportion completing is lower. By 2004, 53 per cent had completed their second course, 23 per cent had withdrawn, 6 per cent had changed course and 18 per cent were continuing. The expected completion rate for a second course was calculated to be between 63 and 71 per cent.
- Of all those who enrolled at university, about 68 per cent had completed *any* university course by 2004, 17 per cent were continuing and 16 per cent had withdrawn from university study. From these estimates an expected completion rate of 81 per cent was calculated, assuming that continuing students complete at the same rate as those whose completion status had been established.
- The expected completion rates derived in this report are in line with those for earlier cohorts of young people from LSAY, but higher than those estimated from administrative data. However, the latter include mature students (who tend to have lower completion rates) and often do not take into account students transferring to other institutions to complete a university course.

Course Completion and Socio-Demographic Factors

- Female students were more likely to complete than males, with the gender difference about 6 percentage points for the first course and 4 percentage points for expected completion of any course.

- There were no clear regional differences in course completion according to students' home address while in school.
- Only 31 per cent of Indigenous students had completed their first course by 2004, and only 33 per cent had completed any course, although these results should be treated with caution due to the small number of Indigenous students in the sample.
- Expected course completion did not vary in a systematic manner with parents' occupational group, but there were some differences by parents' education. Students whose parents had not completed secondary school had the lowest expected completion rate for any course (72%), and those whose parents had a highest qualification of Year 12 had a higher completion rate (87%) than those whose parents held a degree or diploma (85%).

Overall, these results indicate that a student's regional and socioeconomic background has little influence on their likelihood of completing university. Once students from a lower socioeconomic background enter university, their background does not negatively affect their chances of completing the course.

Course Completion and Educational Factors

- The ENTER (Equivalent National Tertiary Education Rank) score gained in Year 12 was the strongest correlate of expected course completion identified. About 94 per cent of students with ENTER scores above 90 were expected to complete a course compared to 73 per cent of students with scores between 60 and 69. The importance of ENTER score was confirmed by the multivariate analyses: a difference of 20 points in ENTER score more than doubles the odds of course completion when controlling for other variables. This finding indicates that non-completion of university courses is much more likely among academically weaker students.
- Students who had attended Catholic secondary schools showed the highest levels of expected course completion (88% for any course). There was little difference in course completion between students who attended government (79%) and independent schools (81%). However, after taking into account ENTER scores there was little or no impact of school sector on expected completion rates.
- Expected course completion varied with field of university study with the high prestige courses such as law and medicine showing the highest levels of completion (around 97% for any course). Education also had a high completion rate. Course completion was particularly low in Information Technology (70%).

Labour Market Outcomes of Completers and Non-Completers

- Unemployment among university non-completers was very low (2% of the group in 2004). There are some indications that even a partial experience of university does assist in avoiding unemployment since unemployment was higher among the Year 12 completers who did not enrol in university (4%) and those who did not complete Year 12 (6%).
- In 2004 the weekly pay, occupational status and work-satisfaction of university non-completers was generally substantially less than that of university course completers and comparable with young people who had never enrolled in a university course. These differences could not be accounted for by labour market experience or achievement in literacy and numeracy.

This suggests that university non-completion has not had substantial negative effects on the transition to the labour market compared to other groups of young people with the important exception of university course completers.