

## **University Course Completion and ATAR Scores: Is there a Connection?**

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### **Abstract**

In the context of proposed changes to university funding introduced by the federal government, including ‘uncapping’ of university places for undergraduate courses, universities are examining the potential impact that these changes may have on their enrolment patterns, university budgets and resources. Federal government policy requires universities to ensure that twenty per cent of undergraduate university places be provided to students from a low socio-economic background. This paper reports results of some research that challenges current perceptions about student entry scores, course progression and course completion rates.

### **Introduction**

In Australia, the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) is set by universities for students who have gained a Year 12 qualification, awarded on completion of the final year of secondary school. The ATAR is designed to ensure that applicants have the required preparation to enable them to succeed to course completion at university. Generally, an ATAR score of 70 out of a possible 100 is deemed to be the minimum score for admission to a university course, but this is often an arbitrary score, as minimums are often set for particular courses affected by demand. Admission scores called “cut-off” scores for courses in universities are made public generating a great deal of discussion in the mainstream media (newspapers/radio/TV), when (Year 12) results and ATAR scores are provided to students and parents.

Governments world-wide, have been implementing policies and setting targets to increase the numbers of people with a university qualification (Marginson, 2011). In countries such as Canada and the United States of America (Christofides, Hoy & Yang, 2009), in Europe, (The Bologna Declaration, 1999), in Australia the Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley, 2008) support increasing overall student numbers in higher education, including raising the number of student from low Socio-Economic (SES) backgrounds.

Between 1983 and 1995 the number of people attending university in Australia increased by 70% (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1997). This increase was the direct result of government policy designed to achieve a broader student base for tertiary education participation (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001). However, the proportion of candidates from low-socio-economic backgrounds enrolled in higher education has been consistently lower during this period, which indicated that the enrolment profile showed little change, with an expansion in enrolment of students from middle SES backgrounds but not low SES (Long, Carpenter, & Hayden, 1999). During 1999 and 2010, the number of candidates entering higher education rose by 24.4% (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010). The number of young people from low SES completing Year 12 increased but not the number from low SES backgrounds transitioning from Year 12 to university (Rothman, 2003).

Though the majority of students completing year 12 obtain an ATAR score, universities have multiple categories for admission to an undergraduate course, such as previous study at a Technical and Further Education institution (TAFE), students transferring from one university course to begin another university course, students who left school without completing year 12 and have completed a university preparation course, and students who are offered early entry to a university course under a special category such as a school principal's recommendation. An ATAR score category applies to students who enter a university course straight from the completion of their secondary education, but not all students admitted to first year university courses have come straight from school.

The 2012 academic year in Australia has seen an unprecedented rise in the number of candidates applying to and being accepted into universities due to a combination of the removal of restrictions on student numbers and removal of federal government policy requiring universities to provide more places for students from low SES backgrounds. However, the number of offers made to students from low SES background rose by 5.8%, the largest rise of any SES group (Department of Industry, Innovation, Science & Tertiary Education, 2012).

Criticism arises in situations where particular university courses have "cut-off" ATAR scores below 70, a score deemed to measure success at university. Education courses in some universities, over many years, have been recipients of such criticism. Concern with ATAR scores and cut-off scores for university courses has increased markedly with the significant increased enrolment numbers for 2012. The Canberra Times (Macdonald, 2012) expressed concern that there was a risk of large numbers of students being admitted, with unacceptably low ATAR scores (i.e. below 70) in order to meet targets.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between the method of entry (whether with an ATAR score or without an ATAR score) to an undergraduate teacher education course at one particular university and the course completion rates for those students. The research question was as follows: Do students who enter the first year of a university course with an ATAR score have better completions rates than students without an ATAR score, and is there a difference between course completion rates for students with an ATAR score of 70 and students with an ATAR score below 70?

### **Methodology**

Subjects available for this study were students at one university who enrolled in five teacher education courses in February 2006 and completed their study at the end of 2009. Data for this study were provided by the Division of Planning and Audit at Charles Sturt University (CSU). To ensure ethical protocol and confidentiality, any information that could identify an individual student was removed from the database. Data selected for the study were drawn from students who enrolled in five undergraduate teacher education degree programs at the beginning of the 2006 academic year and completed their studies in 2009. These five courses consisted of one primary and one early childhood/primary course and three secondary courses with a total enrolment of 609, of which two-thirds (418/68.6%) were in Early Childhood/ Primary programs and one third enrolled in three secondary programs. Two of the secondary programs have smaller enrolments, but the 2006 cohort comprised the largest intake for these courses from the previous two years. The three secondary groups were combined and analysed as one secondary group and the primary/early childhood groups were combined into a second group for analysis.

Data gathered related to the following variables for students entering these courses in 2006:

Admission categories: TAFE/Higher education/secondary entry/special entry/other  
Year 12 (Secondary entry): ATAR entry score/no ATAR score  
Course completion  
Demographic variables: socio-economic status/school attended/gender.

Results of the study are presented as two groups, with one group as early childhood/primary and the other group as secondary, thus combining the three secondary programs. The data was derived from a population and the study sought to determine proportions so totals and percentages have been used for data analysis. Tables show data expressed in means, medians, standard deviations, and percentages.

## **Results**

Results of data analysis are reported according to the following headings:

- Socio-economic Status (*SES and course; SES and school attended*)
- Admission Categories (*Admission Category and course/Admission Category and Student ATAR scores/Admission Category and no ATAR scores/ATAR band scores and course/ATAR Bands and Admission Category*)
- Course Completion (*Course Completion and course/Course completion and ATAR/Course completion and admission category/Course completion and school attended*)
- School Attended (*School Attended and course/School attended and ATAR scores*)
- Gender

### ***Socio-Economic Status***

#### ***a) Socio-Economic Status and Course***

Socio-economic status is an indicator used to measure access to education. SES groupings of 'low', 'middle', and 'high' are based on the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census data concerning the employment and education characteristics of the population in a particular location according to postcode. For rural and isolated students, postcodes have been identified by the ABS Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008) according to their distance from population centres and on population size.

Dobson and Birrell (1997) analysed data for commencing undergraduate students in Australian universities by their SES, using postcodes as a measure of SES. This analysis revealed that Charles Sturt University had the lowest proportion of students from a low SES background compared with some of the other Australian universities, eleven years prior to the release of the Australia the Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley, 2008) which advocated for increasing the number of students from low SES backgrounds accessing university. The total commencing cohort in 1997 at CSU consisted of 6566 students and 21% were from low SES. An overview of a selected number of Australian universities is illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1: Australian Undergraduates by Socio-economic Status, 1997**

University	Number	High	Middle	Low	Total
University of Newcastle	6,034	12%	53%	35%	100%
Central Qld University	3,891	10%	59%	29%	100%
Victoria University of Tech.	4,560	19%	49%	28%	100%
University of New England	3,424	28%	45%	25%	100%
Southern Cross University	3,276	16%	59%	25%	100%
La Trobe University	6,082	27%	48%	24%	100%
Uni. Of Southern Qld	4,323	18%	56%	23%	100%
Charles Sturt University	6,566	19%	58%	21%	100%

Data analysis of student background from the group of students enrolled in undergraduate teacher education courses at CSU in 2006 showed that the SES profile for undergraduate students had changed, with 27.7% of teacher education students classified as low SES background, up from the overall total of 21.0% in 1997. Early childhood/primary showed 29.2% of the student intake was from low SES, which was a higher percentage than secondary. This information is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: SES and Course**

Course	Socio-Economic Status			
	High SES	Medium SES	Low SES	Total
Early Childhood/Primary	28 (6.7%)	265 (64.0%)	121 (29.2%)	414 (68.4%)
Secondary	21 (10.9%)	123 (64.3%)	47 (24.6%)	191 (31.5%)
Total	49 (8.0%)	388 (64.1%)	168 (27.7%)	605 (100%)

*b) Socio-Economic Status and School Attended*

The profile of students from Government, Catholic and Independent schools was analysed according to SES background. Results showed that the higher proportion of students from medium SES supported previous research (Long, Carpenter, & Hayden, 1999). The lowest proportion of students from high SES backgrounds came from Independent schools, but this may reflect the location of CSU as a regional university. This information is shown in Table 3.

**Table 3: SES and School Attended**

SES	School Attended			Total
	Government	Catholic	Independent	
High SES	26 (7.8%)	15 (13.3%)	3 (6.5%)	44 (9.0%)
Medium SES	207 (62.7%)	69 (61.6%)	32 (69.5%)	308 (63.1%)
Low SES	97 (29.3%)	28 (25.0%)	11 (23.9%)	136 (27.9%)
Total	330 (100 %)	112 (100%)	46 (100%)	488(100%)
% School	330 (67.6%)	112 (22.9%)	46 (9.4%)	488 (100%)

**Admission Categories**

The Australian federal government has six entry categories for applicants applying to study in higher education institutions. These categories include (a) Technical and Further Education, “TAFE”, for candidates who have completed studies in a TAFE institution; (b) “Secondary Entry” for Year 12 school ‘leavers’; (c) “Higher Education” for candidates who have commenced studies in a higher education institution; (d) “Special Entry”, which includes non-Year 12 ‘leavers’; (e) a category of “Other”, which includes the Principal’s Report Entry Program (PREP) for Year 12 ‘leavers’, which is aimed at attracting academically talented students from high schools and TAFE’s in non metropolitan areas, as well as candidates who come into programs through Interviews, and Indigenous applicant schemes; and, (f) the sixth category is “Professional Qualification”. The sixth category, Professional Qualification, was deleted because there was only one student in that category. These categories reflect those identified by McNaught & McIntyre (2011) as the range of ‘entry points’ available to students to gain admission into university.

*a) Admission Category and Course*

Admission categories were analysed according to course of study. Results showed that less than one quarter of students (20.4%) were admitted under the category Year 12 - “Secondary Entry”. Except for the category higher education (15.8%) students were admitted to the remaining four categories in fairly similar proportions (24.0%/21.5%/20.0%/18.7%).

Nearly half (48.9%) of early childhood/primary students were admitted via either Year 12- “Secondary” (25.8%) of “Other” Category (23.1%). Whereas for secondary, half (50.2%) were admitted via either TAFE (30.1%) or Year 12 - “Secondary Entry” (20.1%). Contrary to expectations, in the Year 12 category, early childhood/primary numbers (25.8%) were greater than secondary numbers (20.1%), and the number of secondary students entering via Year 12 (20.1%) was less than the number of secondary students admitted via TAFE (30.1%). This information may be found in Table 4.

**Table 4: Admission Category and Course**

Course	Admission Category					Total
	TAFE	Year 12	Higher Education	Special Entry	Other	
EarlyChildhood/Primary	64 (15.3%)	108 (25.8%)	70 (16.7%)	80 (19.1%)	97 (23.1%)	419 (100%)
Secondary	57 (30.1%)	38 (20.1%)	26 (13.8%)	34 (18.0%)	34 (18.0%)	189 (100%)
Total	121 (20.0%)	146 (24.0%)	96 (15.8%)	114 (18.7%)	131 (21.5%)	608 (100%)

*b) Admission Category and Students with an ATAR Score*

The admission categories for students with an ATAR score were analysed according to course of study. A majority of students (452/74.3%) had achieved an ATAR score; however, although Year 12 entry was the largest category (27.7%) this amounted to less than one-third of the total, with a greater percentage of early childhood/primary candidates (28.3%) with an ATAR than in secondary (25.9%), in this category. Almost half of the students (46.5%) were admitted via two categories, namely; “Other” (23.7%) and “Special Entry” (22.8%).

The largest category of entry for early childhood/primary was via Year 12 “Secondary Entry” (28.3%), with two other categories, “Special Entry” (21.2%) and “Other” (23.8%), accounting for 45.0% of students; whereas the largest category for secondary students was “Special Entry” (27.7%), with two other categories (Year 12 “Secondary Entry”, 25.9% and “Other”, 23.7%) accounting for 49.6% of students. This information is shown in Table 5.

**Table 5: Admission Category, ATAR and Course**

Admission Category with ATAR						
Course	TAFE	Year 12	Higher Education	Special Entry	Other	Total
Early Childhood/Primary	48 (14.1%)	96 (28.3%)	43 (12.6%)	72 (21.2%)	81 (23.8%)	340 (100%)
Secondary	13 (11.6%)	29 (25.9%)	13 (11.6%)	31 (27.7%)	26 (23.2%)	112 (100%)
Total	61 (13.4%)	125 (27.7%)	56 (12.4%)	103 (22.8%)	107 (23.7%)	452 (100%)

*c) Admission Category and Students without ATAR*

The admission category for students who did not have an ATAR score was analysed according to course of study. For all five teacher education courses, nearly two-thirds of students (64.3%) enter via the categories of TAFE (38.2%) and higher education (26.1%).

Results showed that, for those candidates entering into secondary teacher education courses without an ATAR, over half (58.2%) entered through the category “TAFE”. Whereas for early childhood/primary courses, two categories of entry, “Higher Education” and “Other” (36.0% and 20.5%, respectively), accounted for over half (56.5%) of the number of students. This is shown in Table 6.

**Table 6: Admission Category and Course - Candidates without ATAR**

Admission Category without ATAR						
Course	TAFE	Year 12	Higher Education	Special Entry	Other	Total
Early Childhood/Primary	14 (17.9%)	12 (15.4%)	28 (36.0%)	8 (10.2%)	16 (20.5%)	78 (100%)
Secondary	46 (58.2%)	9 (11.4%)	13 (16.4%)	3 (3.8%)	8 (10.2%)	79 (100%)
Total	60 (38.2%)	21 (13.4%)	41 (26.1%)	11 (7.0%)	24 (15.3%)	157 (100%)

*d) ATAR Band Scores and Course*

Data from the *Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth (LSAY)* (Marks, 2007) indicates that the Equivalent National Tertiary Entrance Rank (ENTER) scores gained by a candidate in Year 12 were found to be the strongest indicator of university course completion. Approximately 94% of candidates with ENTER scores above 90 were expected to complete a university course compared with 73% of students with scores between 60 and 69.

Data regarding students with an ATAR score were analysed to provide percentages according to two selected admission bands: 70-100 and below 69. Results showed that

approximately one third of students, from the 2006 entry cohort, had an ATAR score of 70 and over. Of the group with an ATAR score of below 69, the percentage of secondary students (74.1%) was slightly higher than the percentage of students from Early Childhood/primary (70.2%). This result is shown in Table 7.

**Table 7: ATAR Bands and Course**

Course	ATAR Grouping		Total
	70-100	Below 69	
Early Childhood/Primary	101 (29.7%)	239 (70.2%)	340 (75.2%)
Secondary	29 (25.8%)	83 (74.1%)	112 (24.7%)
Total	130 (28.7%)	322 (71.2%)	452 (100%)

*e) ATAR Band and Admission Category*

There were a number of students admitted with an ATAR below 69. The data were analysed in order to determine the categories of admission by which students with an ATAR below 69 were accepted into the university. Results showed that the largest number of students were admitted through the category “Other” (29.7%) followed by “Special Entry” (23.2%), accounting for over half the total (52.9%). This result is shown in Table 8.

**Table 8: ATAR Bands and Admission Category**

Basis Admission	ATAR Grouping		Total
	70-100	Below 69	
TAFE	2 (1.5%)	59 (18.2%)	61 (13.4%)
Secondary Entry	70 (54.2%)	55 (17.0%)	125 (27.6%)
Higher Education	18 (13.9%)	38 (11.7%)	56 (12.3%)
Special Entry	28 (21.7%)	75 (23.2%)	103 (22.7%)
Other	11 (8.5%)	96 (29.7%)	107 (23.6%)
Total	129 (28.5%)	323 (71.4%)	452 (100%)

**Course Completion Rates**

Data from LSAY indicates that expected course completion varies according to the field of university study with high prestige courses, such as law and medicine, having the highest level of completion (97%). Education courses have completion rates of 66% for students enrolling in a university course for the first time (Marks, 2007).

Data concerning course status for students is provided according to the following designated categories: “Completed Course” if a candidate completed the course in the recommended timeframe, “Completed Another Course” if a candidate transferred and completed another course within the university, “Still Studying Course” if a candidate was still enrolled in their course, “Studying Another Course” if a candidate was undertaking another course at the

university, or “Left University” if the candidate had withdrawn from the university before completing their course.

Results from this study did not show a relationship to SES background as there was no discernible difference between students from a lower SES background and students from a mid SES or a high SES, according to course completion rates. However, differences were found for Course and ATAR scores.

*a) Course Completion and Course of Study*

Students who were listed as “Course Completed” or “Still Studying” (that is students who were one semester away from completing their course) were grouped together and data were analysed according to course of study. These students were grouped together because the students who were “still studying” comprised less than 5% of the total cohort. Results showed that the overall completion rate for all courses was over two-thirds (68.3%), and those in secondary programs had a higher completion rate (72.0%). These results are shown in Table 9.

**Table 9: Course Completion and Course Status**

Course	Course Status		
	Course Completed	Left University	Total
Early Childhood/Primary	264 (66.9%)	132 (33.3%)	396 (100%)
Secondary	126 (72.0%)	49 (28.0%)	175 (100%)
Total	390 (68.3%)	181 (31.6%)	571 (100%)

*b) Course Completion and ATAR Scores*

It was of interest to this study to compare course completion rates for students with a high ATAR score and the course completion rates for students with an ATAR score below 70. For candidates who had entered with an ATAR, data were analysed according to ATAR band scores and course completion.

Students who were listed as “Course Completed” or “Still Studying” category were grouped together and data were analysed according to those with an ATAR score 70 or above and those students with an ATAR score below 69. Results showed little difference between the group with 70-100 ATAR scores and the group with ATAR scores below 69, with over two-thirds of students from both groups in the course completed category (76.4% and 68.1%, respectively). This result is shown in Table 10.

**Table 10: Course Completion and ATAR**

ATAR Group	Course Status		
	Completed Course	Left University	Total
70-100	91 (76.4%)	28 (23.5%)	119 (100%)
Below 69	205 (68.1%)	96 (31.8%)	301 (100%)
Total	296	124	420



(70.4%)	(29.5%)	(100%)
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*c) Course Completion and Admission Category*

Course completion data for candidates based on admission category were analysed. Results showed that student completion rate were above 60% for all admission categories. The category TAFE had the highest completion rate (77.7%). These completion rates are comparable with completion rates reported by Marks (2009), except for the category “Other”. Table 11 shows this information in rank order according to completion rates as percentages.

**Table 11: Course Completion in Percentage Rank Order and Admission Category**

Admission Category	Course Status			
	Completed Course	Left University	Total	Total % Category
TAFE	91 (77.7%)	26 (22.2%)	117 (100%)	117 (20.5%)
Higher Education	65 (72.2%)	25 (27.7%)	90 (100%)	90 (15.7%)
Year 12	89 (66.9%)	44 (33.0%)	133 (100%)	133 (23.3%)
Special Entry	72 (66.0%)	37 (34.0%)	109 (100%)	109 (19.1%)
Other	73 (60.3%)	48 (39.6%)	121 (100%)	121 (21.2%)
Total/% (Course)	390 (68.4%)	180 (31.7%)	570 (100%)	570 (100%)

*d) Course Completion and School Attended*

Data from the LSAY indicates that students who had attended Catholic secondary schools are more likely to complete a university course, with little difference in university course completion between students who attended government and independent schools (Marks, 2007).

Students who were in the “Course Completed” category and the “Still Studying” category were grouped together and data were analysed according to School Attended. Results showed that course completion rates were similar across all groups, regardless of the school attended, as shown in Table 12.

**Table 12: Course Completion and School Attended**

School Attended	Course Status			
	Completed Course	Left University	Total	Total % School
Government	219 (69.3%)	97 (30.6%)	316 (100%)	316 (69.1%)
Catholic	71 (68.9%)	32 (31.1%)	103 (100%)	103 (22.5%)
Independent	26 (68.4%)	12 (31.5%)	38 (100%)	38 (8.3%)
Total/% (Course)	316 (69.1%)	181 (31.9%)	457 (100%)	457 (100%)

**School Attended**

CSU has established close relationships with schools in the regional area from which candidates are drawn. A high percentage of undergraduate students are drawn from towns in regional NSW from areas such as the Central West, Murrumbidgee, Murray, and North-West NSW. The ratio of students in Year 12 in 2010 in NSW, according to school type, was

approximately 61.0% students in government schools, 22.0% of students in Catholic schools and 16.0% in Independent schools (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011).

*a) School Attended and Course of Study*

Information regarding school attended and course of study was analysed. Results show that 67.7% of students attended a government school, with highest percentage of students from government schools in the secondary courses (68.2%). These results differ from the NSW Year 12 ratio of school type and student attendance, with a higher percentage of students from government schools (67.4%) and a lower percentage of students from independent schools (9.4%). This information is shown in Table 13.

**Table 13: School Attended and Course**

School Attended	Course		
	Early Childhood/Primary	Secondary	Total %
Government	230 (67.4%)	101 (68.2%)	331 (67.7%)
Catholic	74 (21.7%)	38 (25.7%)	112 (22.9%)
Independent	37 (10.9%)	9 (6.1%)	46 (9.4%)
Total	341 (100%)	148(100%)	489 (100%)

*b) School Attended and ATAR Scores*

Edwards, Birrell & Smith (2005) found that the median Equivalent National Tertiary Entrance Rank (ENTER) score for government school students was 61 compared with 68 for Catholic school students and 84 for independent school students. Examining the ENTER scores of Victorian government school students, Edwards (2006) found that students from government schools were about 10 per cent below students from other school sectors.

Data concerning school attended and ATAR scores was examined. ATAR scores were collapsed into two groups (scores of 70 and above and 69 and below) and analysed according to school attended. Results for all three types of schools showed a greater percentage of students (71.2%) received an ATAR of below 70, but there was a higher percentage from Independent schools who had achieved an ATAR between 70 and 100 (32.5%), than the percentage of students from either Government schools or Catholic schools (28.4% and 28.0%, respectively). These results are shown in Table 14.

**Table 14: School attended and ATAR scores**

ATAR	School Attended			Total % ATAR
	Government	Catholic	Independent	
70-100	74 (28.4%)	26 (28.0%)	13 (32.5%)	113 (28.8%)
Below 69	186 (71.5%)	67 (72.0%)	27 (67.5%)	280 (71.2%)
Total/% (School)	260 (100%)	93 (100%)	40 (100%)	393 (100%)

**Gender**

The gender distribution of candidates who entered the five Bachelor of Education courses in this study in 2006 was 26.6% male and 73.3% female. The data is provided in Table 15 and illustrates that the undergraduate teacher education programs at CSU continues to attract

women. For the two courses with the largest enrolment, primary and early childhood (413), the ratio shifts more in favour of females with 23.3% males and 76.6% females. The gender ratio of the students in this research study of undergraduate teacher education students reflects the national gender ratio with approximately three quarters of the intake for the five courses being investigated being female and one quarter male men (Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations, 20011).

**Table 15: Gender Distribution**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Total in Group</b>	<b>Percentage in Group</b>
Male	162	(26.6%)
Female	447	(73.3%)
Total	609	(100%)

### **Discussion**

Results of this study raise some interesting issues regarding SES targets, course completion rates and admission pathways for students entering undergraduate programs. The profile of the 2006 intake into five undergraduate teacher education courses indicates that CSU was already fulfilling the targets identified in the Bradley Review (2008) regarding the percentage of candidates from low SES backgrounds admitted to these courses (Dobson and Birrell 1997). The greatest number of candidates (68.9%) entering undergraduate teacher education programs at CSU came into early childhood and primary programs, a pattern that is consistent with national trends (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011).

The proportion of students coming from independent, catholic and government schools differs from the ratio of students attending schools in NSW, with higher numbers of students being drawn from government schools. This difference may be due to the location of CSU as a regional university. Nevertheless, there was no difference in course completion rates regardless of school attended, which differs from research by Marks (2007) who found higher completion rates for students from Catholic schools.

Admission categories for the whole group showed that, except for the category Higher Education, students were admitted via four categories, (Year 12, TAFE, Special Entry and Other), in fairly similar proportions, and that around forty percent were admitted via the two categories of “Special Entry”, which includes non-Year 12 ‘leavers’ and “Other” which includes the Principal’s Report Entry Program (PREP) for Year 12 ‘leavers’. The spread of students across all categories suggests that the importance given to the Year 12 pathway for entry into undergraduate courses may not be reflected in the reality of the way students gain admission to undergraduate university courses.

The level of ATAR scores for commencing students at an undergraduate level has been highlighted in recent media reports as an issue (Macdonald, 2012). The results of this research indicate considerable variation in the way candidates are accepted into undergraduate teacher education courses at CSU. Although three-quarters of students had achieved an ATAR score, only a little over one-quarter of students were admitted via the “Secondary Entry” Year 12 category, with more students with an ATAR from early childhood/primary than secondary. The largest category for admission for secondary students with an ATAR was “Special Entry” which is a pathway for non-Year 12 leavers. Therefore concerns generated around entry requirements need to be contextualised and clarified in regard to entry pathways into university. The information in the data for this study did not distinguish between applicants who came directly from high school and applicants who did not.

For all students with an ATAR, as well as for each of secondary and early childhood/primary groups, three categories of admission (Year 12/Special Entry/Other) accounted for over seventy three percent of student admission, with similar proportions

across all three categories. This result is interesting considering the public preoccupation regarding the need for secondary school students to have an ATAR for entry into university, and the assumption that these students will enter via the Year 12 pathway, with significant publicity given each year to ATAR and Year 12 entry that focuses upon schools, students and parents.

The unexpected result was the percentage of students admitted with an ATAR below seventy, just over two-thirds of students, the score perceived by universities as the minimum score for success (Hourigan, 2011), at a time when universities had restrictions on their intake numbers. It could be argued that CSU admitted students with an ATAR lower than the cut-off scores used by other universities; however, further scrutiny revealed that the majority of these students entered through the categories of “Other” and “Special Entry”, with less than one-fifth admitted via Year 12 entry. Further, for the admission categories “Other” and “Special Entry” factors other than the ATAR score are taken into consideration, such as Principals Recommendation and other criteria for non-Year 12 leavers.

In the 2006 cohort in this study, less than 30% had an ATAR score of 70 or above, but the course completion rate for the cohort was 70.4%. Students with an ATAR over 70 had higher completion rates than students with an ATAR below 70, but the difference was not great. Students with an ATAR below 69 had a completion rate of 68.1%, which is above the expected completion rate for other teacher education students in Australian universities (Marks, 2007).

The purpose of this study was to map a perspective on university entry for a cohort of students that entered university prior to changes on enrolment restrictions. The major finding in this study shows that for all the concern about entry standards and ATAR, there was little difference in course completion rates between entry pathways. This confirms similar research studies that have shown that entry scores are often not a predictor of university success (Geiser & Studley, 2002). Continual research in this area is required especially as government policies continue to impact on the different pathways that a student can use to enter university as well as the changing characteristics of who is now applying to come in to university.

**Dr Sally Knipe** is the Course Director for secondary programs at Charles Sturt University. In this role she manages curriculum development, course development and course reviews, as well as course accreditation of initial teacher education programs. Her research interests include teacher education and data mining.

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