

Easy university entry a good or bad thing?

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It has never been easier to get into an Australian university. But not everyone agrees that this is a good thing. Is it a sign of declining standards? Are students making the right choices?

Easier university entry reflects a policy change. Until recently, the government kept the supply of university places below student demand. Scarce student places were allocated to university applicants according to academic ability, for school leavers measured by ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank). The practical effect was to largely exclude lower-scoring ATAR applicants from university.

Most government caps on public university enrolments have now been abolished. As a result, the supply of higher education places exceeds demand at some universities. These universities are discounting their ATAR requirements to maintain enrolments and revenues.

Since 2009, the chance of a university applicant with an ATAR below 50 receiving an offer has doubled to one in four. For applicants with ATARs between 50 and 60, nearly three-quarters received offers in 2012, up from over half in 2009. These lower-ATAR students are still a small proportion of all enrolling students, but the trend is clear.

Critics of declining ATARs worry this will lead to unsuitable people entering the professions. Creating minimum course ATARs has been suggested, including by the NSW government for teaching. Nobody disputes that graduates must meet the entry requirements for their profession. But this does not necessarily mean prospective professionals must reach minimum standards before starting their course.

Many studies have shown the link between school and university academic results is surprisingly weak. Especially below an ATAR of 80, large numbers of students get higher marks at university than expected given their school results, while others get lower marks. Above an ATAR of 80, school and university results are more closely related, but ATAR is still only a rough guide.

The link between ATAR and marks is complex but there is a stronger association with completion of a course. For students with 90-plus ATARs starting in 2005, more than 80 per cent had completed a course by 2010. For students starting in the same year on ATARs between 30 and 59, fewer than half had completed by 2010. Another 10 per cent were still enrolled.

Every year the government publishes data on fail rates. Fail rates increase when commencing student numbers go up, probably because there are more low ATAR students among them. Since an enrolment boom began in 2009, fail rates have been edging up. But during enrolment declines in 2003 and 2004 fail rates went down, probably because entry into university became more competitive.

To protect the professions, universities must ensure that all graduates reach the required standards. There is no neutral checking of academic performance to ensure that universities are maintaining minimum standards. But given what we know about fail and completion rates, many of the people who are not meeting academic standards are leaving university without a degree.

This screening out of weaker students is good news for maintaining entry standards into the professions. But it could be bad news for the students who leave without a degree. They have incurred the time and money costs of study, in exchange for unclear benefits.

We need to know more about the students who leave without completing a qualification. Do they regret enrolling? Do they get some benefits despite not obtaining a degree? If there are few regrets or some benefits, then perhaps there is little harm in giving university a try.

If there are regrets or few benefits, we need to find ways to make better enrolment decisions. We know that ATAR cannot tell us all we need to know about completion prospects, but can other indicators do better? Alternative academic tests seem to be only moderately useful, but other indicators could help. Personality traits such as persistence and self-discipline might reveal more about who can make it through a three-year degree than academic tests.

In a higher education system in which the supply of university places exceeds demand, we don't need to worry as much about distributing places fairly. The issue is more whether we are treating applicants ethically if their completion prospects are about 50-50.

We should not use arbitrary minimum ATARs to deny some the opportunity to get a degree. But we owe it to them to find out more about what predicts success. They can then make decisions about what their best option is.

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