

2024

Early Entry Report

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studyworkgrow



Executive Summary

Early entry programs have become increasingly prevalent in Australian universities and this report, based on surveys of 64 Careers Advisors and 110 past students, examines the impact of these programs on student wellbeing, academic performance, and equity in higher education access.

Key findings indicate that 98.5% of Careers Advisors believe early offers positively impact students' mental health, while 52% of students report reduced stress and anxiety after receiving an early offer. Contrary to concerns about academic disengagement, 63% of students maintain their level of effort after receiving early offers, with some evidence suggesting improved performance due to reduced stress.

Early entry programs also show potential for widening participation in higher education, particularly for underrepresented groups. However, careful consideration is needed to ensure these programs don't inadvertently create new inequities.

The report concludes that early entry programs significantly benefit student wellbeing while largely maintaining academic standards. They also reflect a positive shift towards more holistic assessment of student potential, aligning with workforce requirements and global trends in higher education.

Recommendations include enhancing support systems for early offer recipients, implementing additional school performance metrics alongside ATAR, improving equity measures, enhancing communication about these programs, and conducting ongoing evaluation. These findings and recommendations aim to inform policy and practice, encouraging the continuation and refinement of early entry programs to maximise benefits for students, schools, and universities.

Early Entry Overview

Early entry programs are reshaping the landscape of Australian higher education, offering students a path that balances academic achievement with mental well-being.

Early Entry Programs are growing

17 in 2019

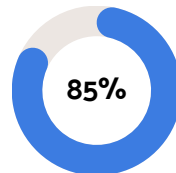
34 in 2024

Over **three-quarters** of Australian universities now make early offers to school leavers...

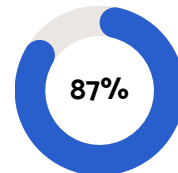


...and around **one third** of all offers are made **early**.

But there are conditions on offers



Most programs release offers after **September**



And most make their offers **conditional**

Students are assessed on a range of criteria:



Year 11
Results



School's
Recommendation

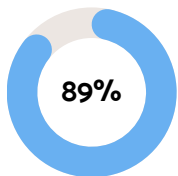


Transferable
Skills

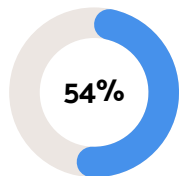


Community
Participation

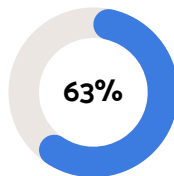
Early offers can reduce stress without impacting on academic performance



Most students found Year 11 and 12 **stressful**



But for many, early offers **reduced** their stress levels



And the majority worked at the **same level or higher** with an offer

"Early offers just gave me a sense of security. I still worked just as hard after receiving an offer so that I could get a good ATAR for myself."

And Careers Advisors agree

Just about all Careers Advisors believed that early offers improved mental health...

...and the majority thought early offers had an overall positive impact for students...

...even with academic achievement: two thirds felt early offers improved academic outcomes.

98.5%

72%

71%

Introduction

The landscape of university admissions in Australia has undergone a rapid and significant transformation in recent years, with the rise of early entry programs emerging as a prominent and dynamic feature (Whitsed & Gonzalez, 2023).

Rather than a university relying on an ATAR to offer a university place (at the end of Year 12), they can now offer a place based on something 'other'.

More often than not, that 'other' tends to be Year 11 grades.

This shift has been dramatic and potentially confronting for some in the education sector (Clare, 2024).

This **rapid expansion has sparked debates** about the implications for the broader education system, but it cannot be isolated from its profound impact on student wellbeing. Being able to plan ahead makes us feel safer, gives us a sense of structure, direction, and purpose.

In a climate where **declining rates of wellbeing across teenagers**, increasing rates of mental health problems, increasing rates of anxiety and depression, increased rates of loneliness are prevalent concerns, the potential of early entry programs to alleviate student stress becomes significant.

These programs hold the promise of **increasing equity** in access to higher education.

As one student from a low-socioeconomic area noted, early entry allowed them to compete more fairly with students from wealthy selective private schools. This potential to level the playing field and broaden our ideas of student success is a crucial aspect of the early entry phenomenon.

The purpose of this study is to **examine the multifaceted impacts of early entry programs** on students and the education system.

We aim to provide insights into how these programs affect student stress levels, academic engagement, and overall educational outcomes. Additionally, we explore the potential implications for the ATAR system and school performance metrics.

As educators and policy makers grapple with these changes, it's crucial to understand the full spectrum of impacts, particularly on student wellbeing.

This report seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis to inform decision-making and policy development in this evolving landscape, with a focus on balancing academic achievement with student mental health and broadening our definition of student success.

Methodology

To gather comprehensive insights into the impact of early entry programs, we conducted two surveys and adopted a mixed-methods approach which aimed to capture both quantitative data for statistical analysis and qualitative data to provide rich, contextual understanding of personal experiences.

Careers Advisor Survey

Participants: 64 Careers Advisors from different schools across New South Wales

Demographics:

- 37% from state schools,
- 52% from independent schools,
- 11% from Catholic schools
- 73% of the represented secondary schools were co-educational

The survey included both closed-ended questions for quantitative analysis and open-ended questions to capture nuanced perspectives and experiences.

Student Survey

Participants: 110 past students who had received an early offer to study at university

The survey design mirrored that of the Careers Advisor survey, combining quantitative and qualitative elements.

This approach aligns with the methodology used by Dr Sally Patfield from the University of Newcastle, which also utilised a combination of

surveys and interviews to gather data from both institutional perspectives and student experiences. Like Dr Patfield's study, our research sought to understand the broader implications of early entry programs while also delving into individual stories and outcomes.

Limitations

It's important to note several limitations of our study:

Sample size: While providing valuable insights, our sample sizes (64 Careers Advisors and 110 students) may not be fully representative of all Careers Advisors or students across Australia.

Geographic focus: The Careers Advisor survey was limited to New South Wales, which may not reflect experiences in other states and territories.

Self-selection bias: Participants who chose to respond to our surveys may have stronger opinions about early entry programs than the general population.

Future research could aim to expand the scope of the surveys to a broader cohort of students and educators, capture experiences of other stakeholders including higher education institutions and families, and examine longitudinal data.

Findings

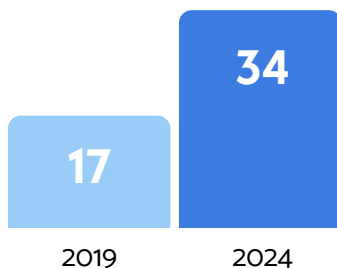
From our research, we identified four key findings which are of significance. First, early entry programs are becoming **more prominent** - there are more of them, offered by more universities, and more students are applying for them. Next, it's clear that an early offer has an impact on both **student wellbeing** and **academic performance**. Finally, there are important **equity and access implications** as a result of these changes to the standard university admissions process.

In this section, we examine each Key Finding in detail.

Growth of Early Entry Programs

The growth of early entry programs in Australia has been remarkable.

The number of universities offering these programs has increased from 17 in 2019 to 34 in 2024. This represents over three-quarters of Australian universities now participating in early entry schemes.



The Universities Accord Final Report (Department of Education, 2024) acknowledges the significance of this trend, noting that "tens of thousands of early offers were made to students" in recent years.

This rapid expansion underscores the growing importance of early entry in the university admissions landscape.

In 2024, we identified 47 different early entry programs from 34 different universities.

34

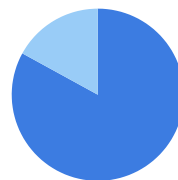
Universities

47

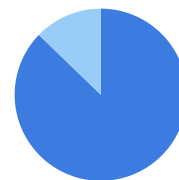
Programs

To gain an early offer, programs generally state that students must meet certain criteria, such as gaining a high school certificate, completing certain subjects, or meeting a minimum ATAR.

There are also some programs which give weight to equity considerations, and some programs ask for alternative evidence of suitability, such as a Principal's Recommendation or leadership activity.



39 out of 47 programs don't release offers until **September** at the earliest



41 out of 47 programs send **conditional** offers

Impact on student wellbeing

One of the most striking findings from our research is the **overwhelmingly positive impact** of early entry programs on student mental health and wellbeing.

An astounding 98.5% of Career Advisors surveyed felt that early offers had a positive impact on their students' mental health.

Furthermore, 69% of Career Advisors reported that their students stressed much less as a result of receiving an early offer.

The student survey corroborated these findings, with 54% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement "The early offer reduced my stress and/or anxiety levels in Year 12."

These statistics are supported by personal testimonials from students. One student shared:

"Early entry saved my mental health, by taking some pressure off the requirement to do well in the exams. I excelled in project-based learning that did not reflect well under stressful exam settings."

Having a positive impact on mental health can be a real win-win, and when we see this for our students this can have far reaching impacts.

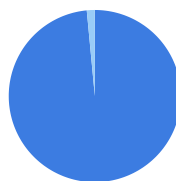
It is not just about a student getting an early offer of a place into a university.

What it tends to signify to that student (even if the course is not their first preference) is that **a university wants them.**

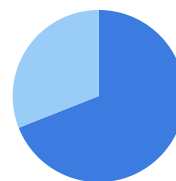
It says 'Yes, you can come to our place'. 'You are University-worthy'. It is a small win during a demanding year.

It also allows the students to diversify and apply for a range of different options and different scenarios.

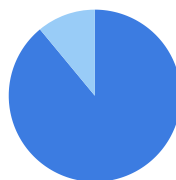
For example, one of the students we worked with acquired ten different early offer places from a broad range of institutions. By applying widely, it allowed them to keep a range of career options on the table, including competitive courses such as Law, Media and Commerce, so they could choose once they left school.



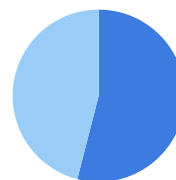
98.5% of Career Advisors felt early offers had a **positive impact** on students' mental health



69% of Career Advisors said their students **stressed less** after receiving an offer



89% of students found Year 11 and 12 **stressful**

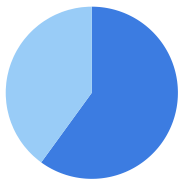


54% of students said early offers **reduced** their stress levels

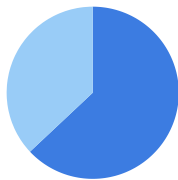
Academic performance considerations

One of the primary concerns surrounding early entry programs is their potential impact on academic performance.

Our research **reveals a nuanced picture**, as while the majority of respondents (both Career Advisors and students) felt they performed to the same level or higher, some also acknowledged that they worked less effectively once they received an early offer.



60% of Career Advisors felt students' performed at the same academic level or higher with an offer



63% of students agreed that they worked at the same level or higher with an offer

Importantly, the reduced stress felt by students with an early offer could actually improve their performance, as they could focus on their study without being overwhelmed by it.

"Overall, my early offer allowed me to study a course I wanted to study which I may have not have got into with my ATAR. It took pressure off my performance in my exams - though I was a student that was going to work hard anyway."

By getting a course offer – students realise that tertiary study is now a reality. And that can have a very positive impact on the students' wellbeing and general positive outlook about the future.

Equity and access implications

Early entry programs have shown **significant potential to widen participation** in higher education, particularly for underrepresented groups.

These programs offer alternative pathways that can encourage participation from students who might not have considered university as an option.

Many early entry schemes are specifically designed to target underrepresented groups, including First Nations people and those from regional and rural backgrounds, and these are the programs with more relaxed admission requirements. Some programs even allow students to secure a place without finishing school, which can be particularly beneficial for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

However, it's important to note that concerns have been raised about potential inequities.

The Universities Accord notes:

"...there is a risk that early offers can favour students who have existing personal or socio-economic advantages such as strong school performances, principal and parent advocacy, school culture and career guidance, and community and extracurricular claims."

Balancing these concerns with the potential for increased access will be crucial as early entry programs continue to evolve.

Discussion

Implications for the ATAR

The rise of early entry programs has sparked significant discussions about the future relevance of the ATAR system (Clare, 2024).

Apart from the early offer process, other Universities have opened up lots of variation in how they offer places, for example, schemes that allow students to discuss their community involvement and leadership opportunities have become increasingly common.

Importantly, the methods used by early entry programs to evaluate student potential for university more accurately reflect the methods used by employers in the workforce (Patfield, 2024). These programs encompass a wider range of skills, strengths, interests, and experiences than the ATAR is capable of measuring.

This shift aligns with the evolving needs of both higher education and the job market, where soft skills, diverse experiences, and personal attributes are increasingly valued alongside academic achievements (Learning Creates Australia, 2023).

This trend towards more holistic assessment methods aligns with longstanding critiques of the ATAR. Even back in 2018, it was noted that 60% of undergraduate university offers were made on a basis other than ATAR (Pilcher & Torii, 2018).

This suggests that the education sector has long recognised the limitations of a single numerical ranking in predicting university success or future potential.

Balancing academic achievement and student wellbeing

Our findings suggest that early entry programs can significantly reduce student stress without necessarily compromising academic performance.

In fact, the reduced stress and increased confidence resulting from early offers may actually enhance academic performance for many students.

This raises a crucial question: Where do we draw the line when sacrificing student wellbeing for the sake of academic grades, especially when there is a viable, working alternative available?

“My early offer was exactly what I wanted to go into, and so I felt confident taking my foot off the gas pedal in year 12. It led to a worse ATAR than I could have got, but a much much much more enjoyable year 12, even to the point that I enjoyed learning itself.”

The traditional high-pressure environment of Year 12, with its singular focus on ATAR, has long been criticised for its negative impact on student mental health (Cooney, 2001).

Early entry programs offer a potential solution, allowing students to showcase their abilities and secure their future plans without the extreme stress often associated with final exams.

But this fear may not be justified, our data shows that the majority of students continue to work as they would have, and this is corroborated in the results of Dr Patfield's study (2024):



“...many students described still wanting to prove their ‘worth’ by doing well in their exams and others wanted to ensure they didn’t let their peers down.”

Moreover, the confidence boost provided by early offers can lead to improved academic performance.

Students report feeling more motivated and focused, knowing that their hard work has already been recognised. This challenges the notion that high stress is necessary for academic excellence and suggests that a more supportive, less pressured environment could actually lead to better outcomes for students (Eisenberg et al., 2009).

The impact on school performance metrics

The potential impact on school performance metrics is a key concern for educators (Carroll, 2023). Currently, many schools use ATAR results as a primary measure of success.

However, as early entry programs become more prevalent, there is a pressing need to develop measures that capture a broader range of post-school outcomes.

Encouragingly, progress is being made in this area, for example, the University of Melbourne is currently working on the New Metrics project, which aims to help the education sector move past the ATAR and away from standardised testing (The University of Melbourne, 2023). Big Picture Learning are also working on ways to redefine how we measure educational achievement (O’Connell et al., 2019).

These projects recognise the need for more comprehensive measures of student achievement and potential, aligning with the broader focus of early entry programs.

New metrics could include factors such as the number of early offers received, the diversity of post-school pathways chosen by students, and measures of student wellbeing and personal growth throughout their senior years.

By expanding our definition of educational success, we can create a more holistic and supportive environment for all students, regardless of their chosen path.

What does this mean for the future of university admissions?

The evolving landscape of university admissions, with early entry programs at the forefront, signals a positive shift towards more inclusive and comprehensive evaluation of student potential.

This trend towards a broader focus is extremely encouraging and aligns with global movements in higher education (Michel & Pollard, 2020).

For example, UNSW has implemented the Faculty of Engineering Admission Scheme (FEAS), allowing prospective students to demonstrate their engineering potential through a video audition.

This approach provides an opportunity for students who might fall short on ATAR requirements to showcase their specific aptitude for engineering.

Similar initiatives are emerging across a range of institutions, utilising portfolio submissions, auditions, and other supplementary methods to assess talent and suitability for particular degrees and career paths.

Even traditionally ATAR-focused programs like Law at UNSW now employ additional entry schemes, such as the Law Admission Test (LAT), to gauge applicant suitability beyond academic scores.



“Your future success as a UNSW Law student reflects more than just your ATAR.”

- University of New South Wales

This shift reflects a growing recognition that success in higher education – and in life beyond – requires more than just academic ability.

Universities are increasingly seeking students who are well-rounded, resilient, and capable of contributing to their communities in diverse ways.

The future of university admissions looks set to continue in this direction, with an increasing emphasis on holistic assessment. This could lead to more diverse and dynamic student cohorts, better prepared for the challenges of both university life and future careers.

Recommendations

As experienced Careers Advisors and researchers deeply embedded in the Australian education system, we have a unique perspective on the impact of early entry programs. Our recommendations are based on extensive data from both Careers Advisors and students, as well as our professional experiences guiding students through their educational journeys.

We believe these recommendations will help optimise early entry programs, addressing concerns while maximising benefits for students, schools, and universities.

Enhance support systems for early offer recipients

To address concerns about potential "slacking off" and to help students maintain motivation, we recommend implementing robust support systems that focus on both academic and personal development. This could include mentorship programs, alumni panels, workshops on university preparation, and targeted resources for early entry students.

Implement additional school performance metrics alongside ATAR

While completely overhauling school performance metrics is challenging, schools can commit to adding additional metrics alongside ATAR to provide a more comprehensive picture of student success. This could include tracking early offers, diverse post-school pathways, and measures of student wellbeing.

Enhance equity measures within early entry programs

To ensure early entry programs improve access for underrepresented groups without creating new inequities, targeted measures can help level the playing field. This could involve outreach programs for low SES and regional schools, resources for first-in-family university students, and efforts to reduce bias in application processes.

Improve communication about early entry programs

Clear, consistent communication can help students and families navigate these programs effectively, reducing stress and ensuring equal access to information. Standardised guides, informational resources, and accessible support channels could be developed to achieve this.

Conclusion

The rapid growth of early entry programs in Australian universities marks a significant shift in higher education.

Our research demonstrates these programs offer substantial benefits for student wellbeing and stress reduction, while largely maintaining academic standards and widening participation opportunities.

Early entry programs challenge traditional notions about stress and academic performance, suggesting that reduced anxiety and boosted confidence can create an environment more conducive to learning and achievement. This aligns with the need for new approaches to education and reflects evolving workforce requirements.

While challenges remain in ensuring equity and maintaining academic rigour, the overall trend is promising. By refining these programs, we can create a more inclusive, supportive, and effective pathway for students transitioning to tertiary education.

The future of university admissions in Australia is moving towards holistic assessment, presenting an opportunity to reshape our understanding of educational success.

As we continue to evolve and improve these programs, we would do well to keep in mind the words of one student participant:

“Early offers just gave me a sense of security. I still worked just as hard after receiving an offer so that I could get a good ATAR for myself.”

About the authors

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