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Early offer students – how do they fare compared to other cohorts? An analysis of early offer students at a regional university

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Early offer programs have been increasing across the higher education sector in Australia in recent years, allowing school leavers to be assessed on criteria other than ATAR. There are mixed opinions on the value of early offer programs. This research evaluates the performance and experience of early offer students in the Faculty of Science and Health at Charles Sturt University, NSW. We found that in most fields of education, early offer students have lower progress rates than students who entered based on ATAR, but not compared to the cohort as a whole. In addition, we found that predicted ATAR is often significantly lower than final ATAR. This paper forms the beginning of a work in progress, but these early results suggest that the early entry process needs to be carefully managed to ensure equity in the offers process and appropriate supports for this cohort to increase their probability of success.

Keywords: Higher education; early entry; first year progress; ATAR

Introduction

Most students entering undergraduate degrees from secondary school in Australia gain entry through the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR), but increasingly, alternative pathways are being used including early offer programs (Jackson, Li and Carroll, 2023). The Bradley (2008) Review of Australian higher education recommended that the Australian Government adopt a target that 20% of university enrolments comprise students from low socio-economic backgrounds. To achieve this target, changes were needed to institutional selection and admission processes (Harvey, 2014). Early offer programs allow applicants to apply directly to universities, assessed on criteria other than ATAR. The number of early offers has been steadily increasing across the sector, and in 2022, more than 43,000 early offers were made in Australia (Carrol, 2023). There are mixed opinions on the value of early offer programs. Proponents say that early offers ease anxiety and stress and enhance diversity while critics claim they can lead to disengagement in Year 12 and cause confusion around ATAR cut offs (White and Carrol, 2022; Blyth 2014; UAC, 2023).

Even though Year 12 students, including early offer, account for only a third of all undergraduate offers (Australian Government, 2021), ATAR is still seen as an important predictor of success at university (Anderton et al., 2016; Diamond and O'Brien-Malone, 2018; Norton and Cherastidtham, 2018). Early offers based on criteria other than ATAR (typically Year 11 results, principals' recommendations and/or skills and aptitude assessment) can admit students with final ATAR below published cut-off. This has led to questions in some cases around equity in admissions as well as the quality, and likelihood of success, of early offer students.

In response to these and other concerns, universities across Australia have now agreed to delay early offers until September at the earliest, and to make offers conditional upon completion of Year 12 and sometimes final ATAR (Carrol, 2023; UAC, 2023). However, early offers will continue to form a significant cohort, with growing demand for more holistic assessment of students and a desire to increase the range of pathways into higher education (UAC, 2023).

Charles Sturt University is a regional university based across several campuses in New South Wales, Australia and online. In 2020, the university expanded its early offer program from school recommendations to also offer admission to selected courses based on predicted ATAR (derived from year 11 results) and soft skills assessment.

Our aims are to evaluate the performance and experience of early offer students. This paper presents early findings from this work in progress. Initial quantitative results are shown here. Future work will also examine attitudes and experiences of admissions staff and academics, to examine the diverse perspectives of different

people involved.

Methods

Our cohort for this study is early offer students studying in the Faculty of Science and Health (“the faculty”) at Charles Sturt University in NSW, Australia. Data sources include admissions and progress data for first year undergraduate students in the faculty, as well as an internal database of early offers, which includes predicted ATAR, and, where known, actual ATAR. Progress rate is defined as the proportion of units that a student passes in a year.

All statistical tests were carried out in the package `stats` in R version 4.2.1 (R Core Team, 2022). To test for differences between predicted and actual ATAR, we used a paired Student’s *t*-test (*t.test*). To test for differences between progress rates for different cohorts, we used Pearson’s chi-squared test statistic to test for equal proportions (*prop.test*). To test the hypothesis that non-ATAR secondary students have a lower progress rate than other cohorts, we used a one-sided test. To test for trends in progress rates over time, we used a chi-squared test for trend in proportions (*prop.trend.test*), applied to the five years 2018-2022. In order to investigate broad differences between sets of courses, we grouped courses in the faculty into seven categories based on Field of Education. This created groupings of sufficient size and discrimination to make analysis useful.

Analysis planned but not yet carried out includes evaluation of first year attrition and other measures of success such as GPA for early entry cohorts compared to other cohorts, and a qualitative analysis of attitudes and experiences of staff and students, including lecturers, course directors, admissions staff, and early entry students themselves.

Results

The proportion of students entering through Basis of Admission “Secondary Education – criteria other than ATAR” has increased year on year in the Faculty (Fig 1).

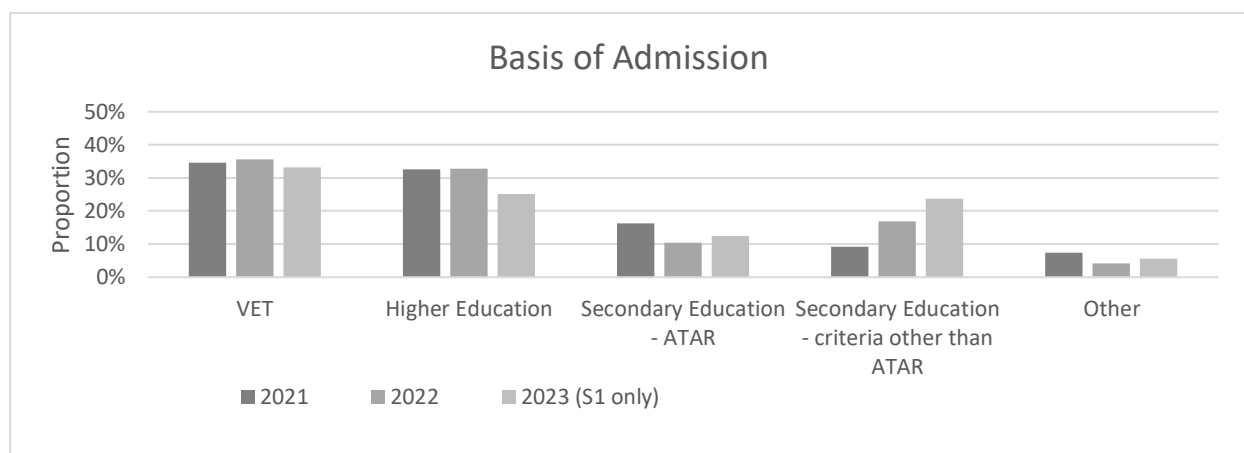


Figure 1: Proportion of students by Basis of Admission in the Faculty of Science and Health at Charles Sturt in 2021, 2022 and 2023 (session 1). The “other” category includes Work and Life Experience, and Enabling and Bridging courses.

An analysis of 2022 data for predicted ATAR against final ATAR (where known), for applicants who accepted offers, shows that actual ATAR is 1.4% lower than predicted ATAR (Fig 2). This difference is also evident, and statistically significant, for all course groupings (albeit in the opposite direction for Natural and Physical Sciences, i.e., students obtained on average a higher than predicted ATAR). This difference is greatest for Nursing (actual ATAR 4.6% lower than predicted, $p \leq 0.001$), Paramedical Studies (actual ATAR 2.6% lower than predicted, $p \leq 0.01$) and Veterinary Studies (actual ATAR 2.6% lower than predicted, $p \leq 0.05$).

Comparing first year progress between secondary students admitted on basis of ATAR, and secondary students admitted on criteria other than ATAR, there is evidence of a statistically significant difference with the non-ATAR cohort almost 5% lower ($p \leq 0.001$) (Figure 3). However, this is not consistent across all course groupings. Courses in Agriculture, Environmental and Related studies show a 6% decrease ($p \leq 0.001$) as do

courses in Health (excluding Nursing, Paramedical Studies, Rehabilitation Therapies and Veterinary Studies) (6% difference, $p \leq 0.001$). Paramedical studies 4% ($p \leq 0.01$) and Nursing 3% ($p \leq 0.05$) also show a decrease but to a lesser extent. Differences for Natural and Physical Sciences, Veterinary Studies and Rehabilitation Studies were not statistically significant. However, across all course groupings, secondary students admitted on criteria other than ATAR do not have lower progress rates than the rest of the cohort – that is, where progress is lower when compared against other school leavers, it is not lower when compared with the cohort as a whole.

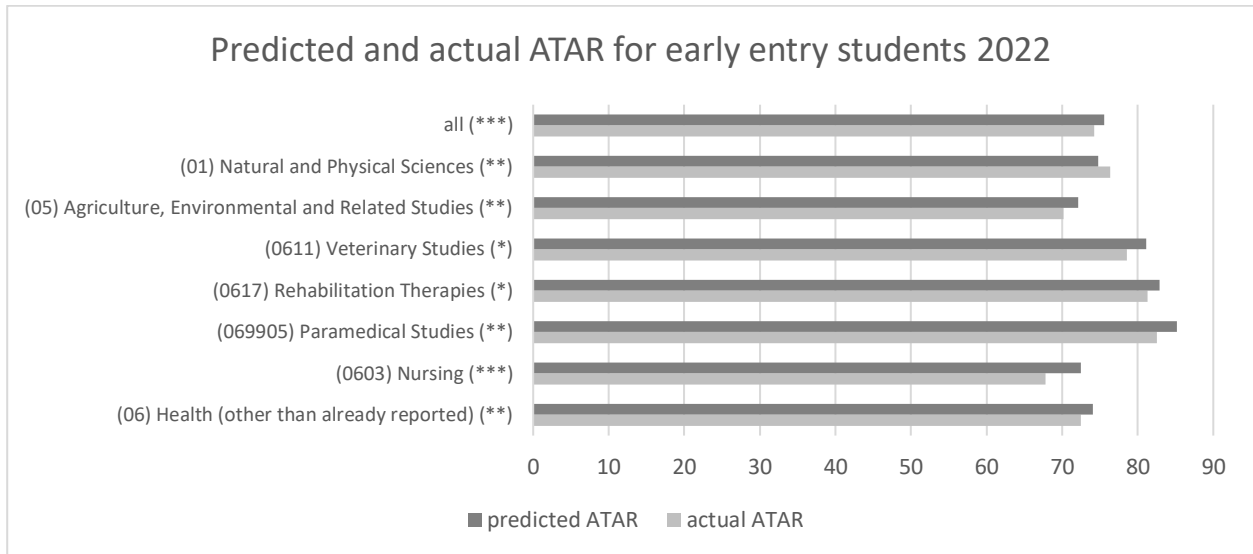


Figure 2: Predicted and actual ATAR by course groups for early entry students in the faculty in 2022. Statistical difference between paired values * $p \leq 0.001$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, * $p \leq 0.05$, ns $p > 0.05$**

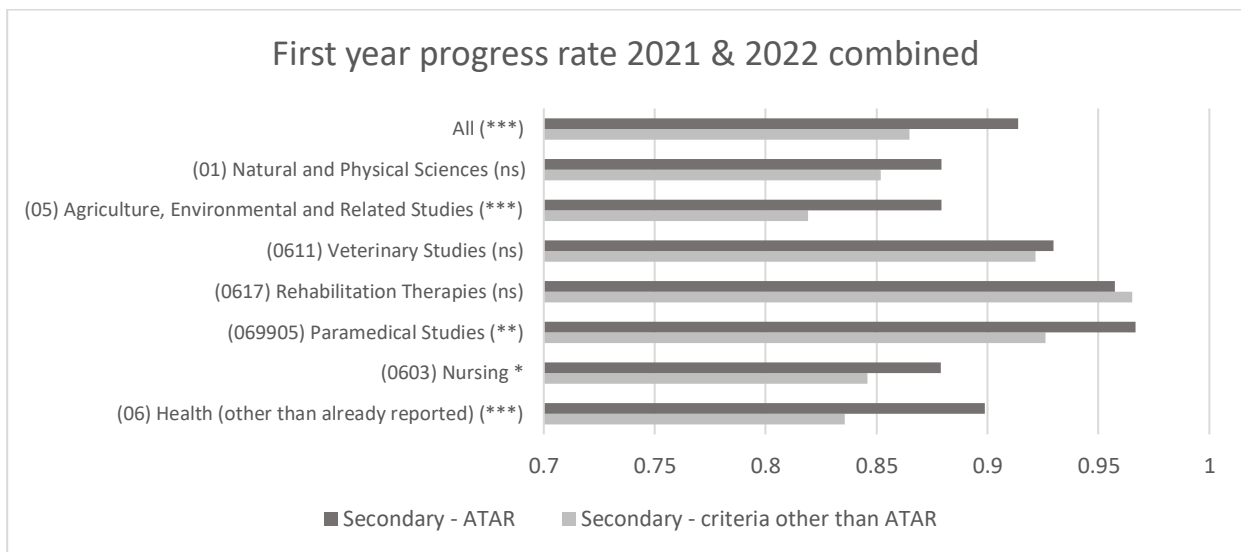


Figure 3: First year progress rate for undergraduate courses in the Faculty of Science and Health, 2021 & 2022 combined. Statistical difference between progress rates * $p \leq 0.001$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, * $p \leq 0.05$, ns $p > 0.05$**

First year progress rates show a slight downward trend over the last five years, and especially in 2022, for all secondary basis of admission students (whether based on ATAR or on criteria other than ATAR) for all disciplines, but this is not always the case when looking at the entire cohort (Figure 4). In particular, Agriculture, Environment and Related Studies; Nursing; and Paramedical Studies show a statistically significant decline in progress rates for school leavers but not for other cohorts.

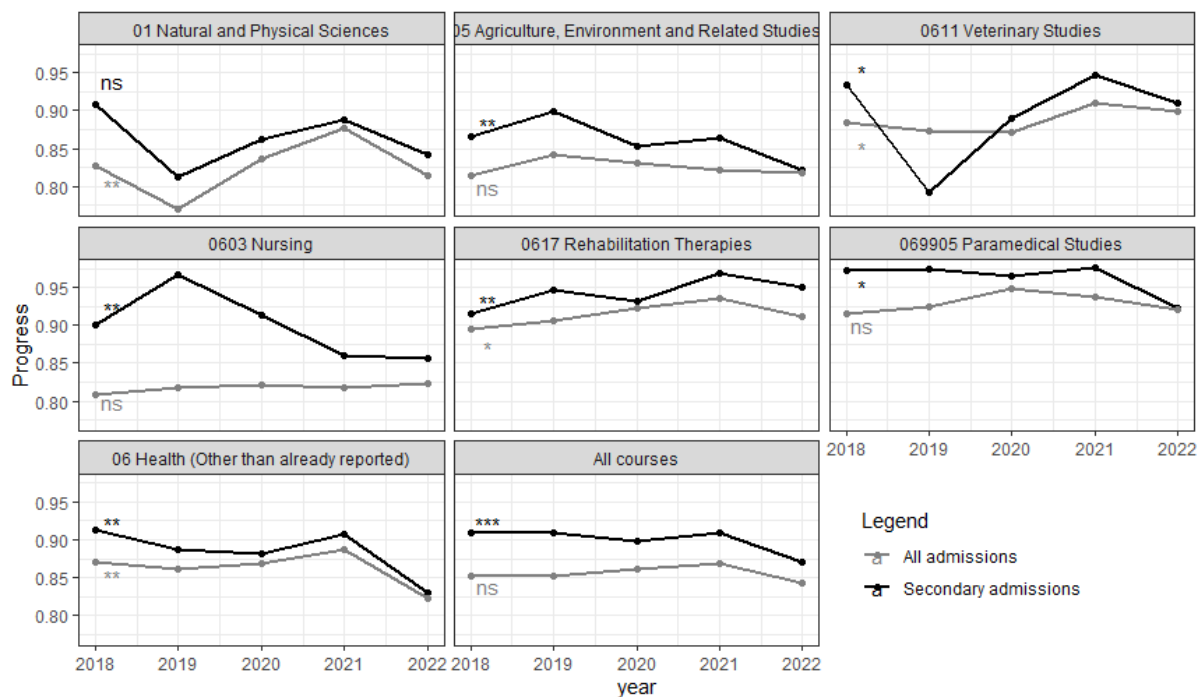


Figure 4. Progress rates for secondary basis of admission (black) and all admissions (grey) by field of education, 2018-2022. Statistical significance of trend * $p \leq 0.001$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, * $p \leq 0.05$, ns $p > 0.05$**

Discussion

The mix of students entering into undergraduate courses in Australia is changing, and an increasing volume of early offers to school leavers is one of these changes. While there is no clear evidence of causality, progress rates for the school leaver cohort have simultaneously been declining in the courses examined in this research, with progress rates for secondary students admitted through early entry on the whole lower than for secondary students admitted on basis of ATAR. Other factors likely play a role in the recent decline of first year progress rates, such as transition to university during and in the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic (Pownall et al., 2022).

Support in transitioning to and succeeding at university is critical for all students, but there does appear to be a growing cohort of students who need more support to progress through their studies. There is also emerging evidence that the early entry process needs to be carefully managed to account for the discrepancies observed between predicted and actual ATAR, to ensure equity of admissions, particularly for competitive courses. While the ATAR provides a relatively transparent admissions ranking system, the selection process for alternative pathways such as early entry programs is more opaque (Harvey, 2014). More research is needed to determine whether this has an impact on progress and success at an individual level, but this finding supports the recommendation to continue with early offers but to make them conditional on final ATAR, particularly for lower predicted ATAR scores (UAC, 2023).

This research will help to frame what needs to be understood by course designers, admissions departments, academics and managers on where we need to focus in order to support this cohort of students, through the admissions process and for their success at university. It is likely that that early entry programs are achieving the aim of widening higher education participation by providing alternative pathways for school leavers (Jackson, Li and Carroll, 2023), but we need to understand the needs and experiences of this cohort to ensure that appropriate supports are put in place. The qualitative components of this work in progress will allow us to better understand these students and inform strategies to improve their success at university.

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