

Missing Out on a Higher Education Place in Queensland

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More than 11000 of the 44,000 applicants for undergraduate entry to Queensland universities in 1990 and more than 19000 of the 52,000 for 1991 were unsuccessful.

With financial support from the Queensland Office of Higher Education and the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Training, admissions agency data on unsuccessful applicants' course preferences, ability (estimated from tertiary entrance scores), geographical location and socio-economic status (estimated by home postcode) were analysed along with survey responses on current studies, work, satisfactions with aspects of life, and intentions to reapply for higher education courses.

The paper summarizes the report on the 1990 study, updates information on the level of unmet demand for entry to Queensland higher education in 1991, and raises implications for State education planning authorities and institutions.

Of the more than 52,000 applicants for a higher education place in Queensland in 1991, some 19,000 (or 37%) received no offer of enrolment. These figures represent an 18% increase in applications over the 44,000 for the previous year, and an increase of some 75% in the number of unsuccessful applicants (some 11,000 for 1990).

As applications for 1992 entry are already 8,000 up on the figures for the corresponding period last year (four months before classes commence), total applications for 1992 are expected to exceed 60,000 (for a 15% increase again). As the number of places for commencing students is expected to remain essentially steady at around 24,000 (given institutional commitments to avoid recurrence of 1991 over-enrolments) and offers to enrol are unlikely to exceed 32-33,000, the prospect of there being up to 27,000 unsuccessful applicants to entry to Queensland higher education courses (or 45% of applicants) may realistically have to be faced in the very near future by Queensland's institutions, community and government.

UNMET DEMAND

Unmet demand for entry to courses has been a serious and growing problem in

Australian higher education for some years, particularly in Queensland, Victoria and New South Wales. The Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee's (AVCC) annual reports¹ on the level of demand for entry to undergraduate courses have taken a particular interest in the level of "unmet demand" by qualified applicants willing to commence studies but unable to be accommodated in any relevant course of study.

Table 1 draws upon AVCC data from State admissions centres on the number of applicants, the number offered places and the number unsuccessful.

Table 1: Applicants for 1988-91 Entry, by State

Year	1988	1989	1990	1991
NSW	65,188	68,060	73,418	77,608
VIC	39,474	43,242	45,715	48,843
QLD	39,525	41,118	43,089	50,480
WA	13,883	17,557	15,767	16,899
SA	18,021	19,238	18,060	18,801
Other	10,060	8,431	2,627	-
TOTAL	186,151	197,646	198,676	212,627
No Offer	52,147	53,757	48,917	63,732
% No Offer	28%	27%	25%	30%

Table 2 shows the percentage of applicants receiving no offer in each State, with Queensland having the highest "unsuccessful" rate, averaging over 30% of applicants.

Table 2: Applicants Receiving No Offer 1988-91, by State

Year	1988	1989	1990	1991
NSW	30%	27%	25%	28%
VIC	25%	25%	25%	32%
QLD	35%	31%	24%	35%
WA	11%	32%	19%	21%
SA	26%	21%	22%	29%

After applying a number of discounting factors relating to applications to separate centres in different States for similar courses and to the probability of an applicant's declining an offer to enrol, AVCC estimates of unmet demand across Australia were in the range 13,500 - 20,100 for 1990 and 19,700 - 29,100 for 1991.

Table 3 presents AVCC unmet demand estimates for 1988-1991, by State. The greatest unmet demand is in Queensland and Victoria and would have been greater still but for State government funding of additional places (e.g. 1500 in Queensland in 1990).

Table 3: AVCC Unmet Demand Estimates 1989-91, by State

Year	1988	1989	1990	1991
NSW	3,700 - 5,800	3,500 - 5,500	3,700 - 5,400	4,700 - 6,900
VIC	3,500 - 5,400	3,800 - 5,900	4,200 - 6,300	6,000 - 8,800
QLD	4,200 - 6,200	4,000 - 5,900	3,300 - 4,800	5,900 - 8,800
WA	1,000 - 1,600	1,200 - 1,700	1,100 - 1,700	1,200 - 1,800
SA	500 - 800	1,200 - 1,900	1,200 - 1,900	1,900 - 2,800
TOTAL	13,000 - 20,000	13,700 - 20,900	13,500 - 20,100	19,700 - 29,100

The lower bound in the AVCC estimates excludes all school-leavers with a tertiary entrance score (or equivalent) below the 70th percentile, all interstate applicants under 21, all single preference applicants, 50% of applicants with only two preferences, and 50% of applicants on the grounds of likelihood of rejecting an offer to enrol. (For the higher bound, 80% (rather than 100%) of interstate applicants under 21, along with 80% of single preference applicants and a 30% offer rejection rate are assumed in discounting).

THE 1990 STUDIES

With funding from DEET's Evaluations and Investigations Program and the Queensland Office of Higher Education, studies² were undertaken in Queensland and Victoria to "shed further light on the nature and impact of unmet demand", specifically:

"How was unmet demand distributed across social and demographic groups?

Were unsuccessful applicants more selective or less realistic than successful applicants in their nomination of course preferences?

How many of those who were unsuccessful in 1990 had also applied in previous years? How many of those who had been unsuccessful in previous years re-applied later?

What impact did being unsuccessful have on those effected, and what were their intentions regarding future study?"

The Victorian and Queensland reports drew upon data from the relevant admissions centre and responses to mailed surveys of unsuccessful applicants. Although they followed similar procedures, the reports are essentially free-standing. They had to be, moreover, given the differences in the characteristics and comprehensiveness of the admissions centre data in the two States, university and college entry requirements, and variations in the pattern of provision of secondary and TAFE education which precluded direct comparability.

There were common findings:

applicants from non-government schools were relatively over-represented amongst successful applicants and applicants overall;

applicants from non-metropolitan areas, although generally under-represented amongst applicants overall, were relatively more successful;

individuals from less-affluent backgrounds were less likely to apply, but about as likely to receive an offer as were applicants from more affluent backgrounds;

patterns of preference amongst unsuccessful and successful applicants did not differ markedly, and the preferences of unsuccessful applicants did not appear unrealistic in terms of the scores required for entry;

most unsuccessful applicants do not reapply in the year or two following an unsuccessful application, (but of those who do reapply, some three quarters receive an offer;

some 12% of unsuccessful applicants were enrolled at mid-year in a higher education course, (typically one in which they were studying when they applied unsuccessfully to change, or a course other than the specific ones for which they had applied).

There were also considerable differences:

females were more successful than males in Victoria, but equally successful in Queensland;

younger applicants were more successful than the older in Victoria, but less successful in Queensland;

applicants who had partially completed a tertiary course were less successful than applicants overall in Victoria, but more successful in Queensland;

Victorian applicants tended to be from two groups - school-leavers and individuals with some experience of tertiary education, while Queensland applicants were older on average than Victorian applicants and could not be readily categorized into such distinct groups.

The remainder of this paper concentrates on the Queensland data which indicate greater apparent diversity (than in the Victorian data) in the educational and experiential backgrounds and current study patterns of applicants. The data suggest that the unmet demand problem is of greater complexity and likely continuing magnitude in Queensland.

UNSUCCESSFUL APPLICANTS FOR 1990 ENTRY IN QUEENSLAND

Analysis of QTAC data on the applications in 1988-90 by the 11,127 applicants unsuccessful in 1990 showed that 1,012 had applied for 1989 (with 568 unsuccessful) and that 570 had applied for 1988 (with 296 unsuccessful). Some 450 had applied and received an offer for 1989 but now

sought (unsuccessfully) to change courses to one of higher preference, as did more than 250 receiving an offer for 1988. Moreover, 64 applicants had applied unsuccessfully in all three years.

Table 4 summarizes the outcomes of 1988-89 applications by persons applying unsuccessfully for 1990.

Table 4: Application Status 1988-89 for Unsuccessful Applicants in 1990

Unsuccessful 1990		Outcome 1989		Outcome 1988	
11,127	U	568	U	64	U
				31	S
		444	S	47	U
				71	S
		353	N	185	U
				172	S
Applied	1,012		570		
Not Applied (N)		353		795	
(applied in the other two years)					
Successful (S)	444		274		
Unsuccessful (U)		568		296	

Further analysis of data for unsuccessful applicants in the three years 1988-90 indicated that 80% of unsuccessful applicants in any one year do not reapply. Of those who do reapply, however, some three-quarters receive an offer, which some 85% of the offer recipients accept (although it may not have been one of their more highly preferred courses).

Unsuccessful "Qualified" Applicants for Entry in Queensland in 1990

Consistent with the funding brief, we surveyed by mail more than 6,000 of the 11,000 unsuccessful applicants, namely the Queensland residents with a selection score in the upper 70% of TE scores obtained by year 12 school-leavers. (The group selected more than met the AVCC's first two criteria for consideration as unmet demand but, as we were seeking to establish the characteristics and reactions of "unmet demand" applicants (and not to determine "correct" levels of unmet demand) we did not proceed to exclude applicants with only one or two preferences, as required by further AVCC criteria).

Cross-tabulations of data on applicant characteristics (age, sex, qualifications, geographical location, type of school attended, and socio-economic status (SES)), ability as estimated by TE score, and their course preferences indicated that almost two-thirds of the survey group were under 20 years of age; almost half were school leavers; almost half were from the upper SES quartile; and some three-quarters were from the Brisbane and Moreton statistical divisions in Queensland's south-east corner.

Unsuccessful school leavers did not differ from successful in number of

preferences expressed, but they appeared to differ in changing preferences less often than successful school leavers, (although the nature and timing of changes has not been considered here and would seem to be important).

The major difference between successful and unsuccessful applicants obviously was in their scores for entry to preferred courses, although the size of this difference was not particularly substantial and did not appear to be based on a lack of realism by applicants in expressing their course preferences. The mean gap between the TE score of unsuccessful applicants and the minimum score required for entry (the "cut-off" score) was for many courses between one and three times the standard deviation of the entry scores of successful applicants. As the standard deviation was in many cases between half a percentile (5 TE points) and one percentile (10 TE points), most unsuccessful applicants could well have gained entry to one of their preferred courses if the TE score cutoff for entry had been two or three percentiles (i.e. 20 or 30 TE points) lower.

Applicants' Reactions and Intentions

Responses (from some 54% of the survey group) to a mailed survey on their current activities, reactions to their failure to gain a place in higher education, and intentions regarding reapplication indicated no particular under-or-over representation by social sub-groups in those unsuccessful. Some 55% of respondents were in employment (with more than half still in employment they held when applying). Some 17% were studying in Queensland or interstate postsecondary institutions or other "colleges" and over 10% had returned to full-time secondary education.

Some 40%-50% reported satisfaction with their studies, work, or future prospects, while some 60% reported satisfaction with their social life and life in general. Some one in eight reported dissatisfaction with their current studies, and a similar proportion expressed dissatisfaction with their current employment.

Almost two-thirds intended to reapply in the next four years (60% at the earliest opportunity), although patterns of reapplication over 1988-90 suggest that perhaps fewer than one in four or five will reapply at all (but that three-quarters of those who do reapply will receive an offer).

Those not intending to reapply gave as their reasons their poor prospects of success or their satisfaction with their current employment about equally, with about one-third as many indicating that TAFE offered them better prospects than higher education courses, and a similar number indicated they were sick of study. Others gave a variety of reasons related to employment and family pressures, the pointlessness of applying, or their satisfaction with their current studies in private institutions, their cadetship, or their intention to travel overseas.

Of the 60% of respondents who commented on their failure to gain entry to higher education, most were critical of the system - of the TE score system

for what it promised but failed to provide (in their particular cases at least), of the lack of places and of the lack of information when an offer did not eventuate.

A significant number were not happy with guidance officers and their counsel, especially the absence of advice as to what to do when no offer was received. Many had high expectations as a result of their counselling and no pre-conceived plans for alternative action.

To a greater extent than expected, the survey responses had highlighted three aspects for the study team:

the complexity perceived by unsuccessful applicants in the overall application - offer/no-offer - enrolment/readjustment process;

the extent of disappointment experienced by unsuccessful applicants; and

the stoicism with which they had restabilised their lives and adjusted to their new circumstances, at least in the short term.

THE 1991 STUDY

Our initial analysis of QTAC data for all 52,000 applicants for 1991 indicated that applications from school leavers rose 3% from 1990 to 1991, but the increase in applications from other than school leavers was 33%. Some 40% of applicants for 1991 were over 19 years (compared with 35% for 1990). School leavers (almost half the 1990 total) constituted 43% (55% of them being women, up from 53%). There were no major variations in the proportions of applicants from the various geographical regions, socio-economic groups, and independent schools.

The 1991 applicants can be summarized as:

54% were women and 46% men, with 43% being school leavers (55% women, 45% men);

60% were under 20 years; 17% aged 20-24; 9% aged 25-29; 14% aged 30 or over;

for 65%, Year 12 or equivalent was the highest educational qualification; 35% had some TAFE or higher education studies (including 13% with completed qualifications);

89% were from Queensland, with 70% from the south-east corner statistical divisions of Brisbane and Moreton;

60% of school leaver applicants were from State schools;

39% of applicants were from socio-economic quartile 1 (highest), 21-22% from each of SES quartiles 2 and 3, and 18% from SES quartile 4 (lowest);

56% of applicants were from urban areas, 32% from rural, and 12% from remote (with urban applicants tending to have higher qualifications and be in higher TE deciles).

Applicants' course preferences can be summarised as:

degree studies were the first preference for 89% of applicants; diploma for 5%; and associate diploma 6%;

24% of first preferences were for Business courses; 17% for Arts; 16% for Education; 10% for Applied Medical areas; 11% for Science; 6% for Engineering and Law; and 3% or less for other fields of study;

course preferences for men and women differed along traditional lines;

Apart from a tendency for fewer school leavers (53% against 59% for 1990) to express all six available preferences, the number of preferences expressed by school leavers and others continued as for 1990:

53% of school leaver (Form A) applicants (as against 24% of others (Form B)) expressed six preferences, while 3% of Form A (and 27% of Form B) expressed only one preference;

only one or two preferences were expressed by 41% of applicants aged 20-24; 53% of applicants aged 25-29; and 65% of applicants aged 30 or more;

applicants in TE deciles one (highest) and two declared fewer preferences than in lower deciles;

(a) Reapplicants

Just over 8,000 of the 52,000 applicants had also applied for enrolment for 1990, of whom some 5,700 (71%) had received an offer (which over 1,100 had declined, 400 had accepted but discontinued the course within a few weeks, 3,000 had accepted and continued their studies but now sought to enrol in a different course, and 1,100 had sought and received approval to defer their studies for a year and were now confirming their intentions to commence the deferred studies or seeking to study in a different course). Some 1,600 of the 8,000 had been "qualified but unsuccessful" applicants for 1990 and for more than a third of them the outcome was the same for their 1991 application. Of the 700 who had been both unsuccessful and "unqualified" (i.e. in the lower 30%) for 1990 and reapplied for 1991, almost half received an offer, a third had the same outcome as for 1990 and the remainder moved into the "qualified but unsuccessful" group.

(b) Unsuccessful but qualified

The almost 80% rise in the number of qualified but unsuccessful applicants involved a 32% rise for school leavers but a 137% rise for other than

school leavers (who constitute almost 60% of unsuccessful qualified applicants for 1991, as against 45% for 1990). Correspondingly, the pattern of age groups and highest qualifications of unsuccessful qualified applicants changed markedly from 1990, with those aged 20 or more rising from 34% to 46%, and those who had completed or commenced post-secondary studies (TAFE certificates, diplomas or degrees) rising from 29% to 41% of the group, (with 17% commenced and 24% completed). There was also a slight increase (54% to 55%) in the proportion of women in the group and in the proportion of applicants living in Queensland's south-east corner but not within the capital city (Moreton statistical division had 24% (23% for 1990) while Brisbane had 54% (55% for 1990)).

With financial support again from the Queensland Office of Higher Education, we are again surveying qualified but unsuccessful applicants for 1991. Preliminary analyses⁴ indicate similar patterns to the 1990 data on reactions to being unsuccessful, perceptions of limited prospects for the future and frustration at the inability of "the system" to provide sufficient places. There has been a sizeable increase reported in the number repeating year 12 studies or commencing TAFE courses with a view possibly to transferring to higher education later.

THE CURRENT SITUATION AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

Demand for entry to Australian universities has risen sharply in recent years, from school leavers and others, with an annual growth of 8% since 1987 in those admitted. The rate of participation in the final two years of secondary school has doubled to 70% of the age group in the past 10 years, while the proportion of the 15 - 19 year old population in full-time employment has fallen from 40% to 30%³. The prospects for persons who have less than a full secondary education are for immediate and long term unemployment as it becomes increasingly recognised that Australia's international competitiveness will depend on an increasingly educated workforce.

Industry restructuring, a depressed economy, the need for higher levels of employment-related skills and a recognition of the benefits of lifelong learning have each motivated large numbers of community members in their 20s and 30s to seek entry to higher education throughout the past decade as external students or part-time on-campus students or for full-time study.

State government decisions to fund universities directly to increase intakes particularly of school leavers have had a definite impact on slowing the growth in "unmet demand" amongst school leavers. In Queensland in 1991, however, the bulk of the unmet demand problem relates to persons other than school leavers: persons with experience of post-secondary studies and employment, but now seeking higher or different qualifications; and persons who left school some years ago and now seek to study in a university.

Given Australia's economic situation, industry restructuring, increasing

school retention rates, pressures for higher levels of qualifications and skill, demand for entry or re-entry to higher education is unlikely to decline. Institutions, governments and their planning authorities face questions on the relative benefits of providing places for school leavers or other persons, of undergraduate or postgraduate education, of places in universities or TAFE, and of places in particular disciplines of perceived national importance.

Our studies have indicated the resilience of applicants who missed the opportunity to start a preferred course of higher education. While their capacity to adjust their aspirations, career plans and short-term goals to the changed situation arising from their unsuccessful application may function to lessen the demand in the short term while other ambitions and directions are pursued in getting on with one's life, it is unlikely that the the quest for a preferred higher education in the future will really be set aside while the desire and the perceived need, rather than the demand perhaps, remains unmet.

1. Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee. Press Releases and Reports on Unmet Demand 1988-91. Canberra.
2. Department of Employment, Education and Training. Unmet Demand for Higher Education Places in Victoria and Queensland Canberra. AGPS. 1991
3. Young People's Participation in Post-Compulsory Education and Training Report of the Australian Education Council Review Committee, July 1991.
4. Cameron, B., Pope, B. & McClelland, A. "Getting Over Not Getting In? : unsuccessful applicants for higher education courses in Queensland". Paper presented at 1991 AAIR Forum. Australasian Association for Institutional Research. Melbourne. 1991.

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