THE FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE IN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES:
FINDINGS FROM TWO DECADES, 1994-2014

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THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

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ISBN: 9780992297480

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Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the first year students who participated in the 2014 study, and the academic and professional staff from the eight participant universities who assisted with the surveys.

This report is built on a solid foundation of previous CSHE surveys on the first year experience in Australian higher education. We thank the researchers involved in the earlier work, in particular, Richard James who co-designed the original study two decades ago, and who has contributed to every study since. We thank Richard for his advice on the design of the 2014 study.

Special thanks also go to our colleagues at Melbourne CSHE, in particular, Malcolm Anderson who performed the statistical analyses for this study, Douglas Proctor for his careful editing of drafts, Hamish Coates for his assistance with sampling, and Gregor Kennedy and Linda Corrin for their advice on new items related to eLearning.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides an analysis of trends over a twenty year period in the attitudes and experiences of first year students in Australian universities. It is based on the national survey of first year students undertaken by the Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education at five-yearly intervals since 1994.

Dramatic changes have taken place in the Australian higher education sector since the last First Year Experience Study in 2009. The student body has continued to diversify with the introduction of the demand driven funding system and the provision of government funding to increase the inclusion and support of students from under-represented groups. Advances in technology, among other trends, have continued to alter the modes of student participation, the structures of course delivery, and relationships between students and teachers.

The 2014 First Year Experience survey is the first study of the 'post Bradley review' cohort and as such, provides insight into some of the possible effects of the demand driven system on the experience of first year students. The data offer important reference points for monitoring the expectations and experiences of a larger and more diverse group of students, and the effectiveness of university efforts to cater for them.

Key Findings

The first year students in 2014 were generally very positive in outlook, significantly more positive than first year students surveyed in the past two decades. Most students were clear about their reasons for going to university, had a strong sense of purpose and identity, were excited to be at university, and were very satisfied with their course experience.

Students in 2014 were also better prepared for the transition to university than students in previous studies. Concerted efforts to improve the links between school and university have had positive effect, as school leavers in 2014 report feeling better prepared to choose a course, and believe the final year of school prepared them well for university. The gap between school and university identified in earlier surveys has been narrowed considerably.

However, while students in 2014 had a stronger sense of purpose and a smoother transition to university life than students surveyed in the past, they were less socially engaged in the university community, spent less time on campus, and more students tended to keep to themselves. For a significant proportion of students (approximately 30%), getting motivated and coping with university study remains challenging.

Major trends over two decades, 1994-2014 (percentage of students in agreement)

	1994	1999	2004	2009	**2014**
Sense of purpose and transition to university					
Clear about the reasons for coming to university	74%	72%	85%	88%	**89%**
Seriously thought of deferring or discontinuing	33%	33%	28%	22%	**19%**
University subjects clearly build on study at school	34%	33%	42%	51%	**55%**
Generally keep to myself	26%	27%	28%	32%	**44%**
Less than 16 hours contact time per week	42%	48%	54%	60%	**62%**
Quality of teaching					
Quality of teaching is generally good	66%	67%	78%	77%	**89%**
Staff are enthusiastic about the subjects they teach	53%	56%	72%	75%	**80%**
Teaching staff are good at explaining things	47%	48%	63%	62%	**73%**
Teaching staff usually give helpful feedback on progress	28%	25%	33%	35%	**56%**
Staff try hard to make the subjects interesting	50%	50%	61%	58%	**74%**
Overall course experience					
Finding course intellectually stimulating	63%	63%	75%	76%	**79%**
Overall really enjoying course	61%	64%	71%	72%	**80%**
Overall satisfied with university experience	61%	63%	70%	71%	**75%**

First year students in 2014

There is growing expectation for school-leavers to attend university

One of the major trends over the past decade is around societal (school, family) expectations of school-leavers to attend university. There has been a significant rise in the proportion of students (65% from 50% in 2009) who experienced considerable pressure at school to go to university, and an equally significant rise in the proportion of students who were strongly influenced by their parents'/family's expectations.

Significantly fewer first year students in 2014 considered deferring or discontinuing than in previous years

There has been a significant drop in the proportion of students indicating that they seriously thought of deferring or discontinuing since the last study in 2009 and over the past two decades, from 33 per cent in 1994, to 22 per cent in 2009, and 19 per cent in 2014. While there are various reasons for students considering discontinuing, in 2014, the majority of students (72%) cited emotional health as an important reason in considering deferring. This represents a sharp rise from 56 per cent of students in 2009, and may be the result of growing public awareness of mental and emotional health issues among young people.

Student satisfaction with the quality of teaching has risen dramatically

Over the two decades of First Year Experience studies, students' perceptions of the quality of teaching have become significantly more positive, from 66 per cent agreeing in 1994 that the quality of teaching in their courses is generally good, to 89 per cent in 2014. In 2014, only 2 per cent of surveyed students disagreed that the quality of teaching was generally good. For the vast majority of students in 2014, teaching staff were enthusiastic about the subjects they are teaching (80%), good at explaining things (73%), and put great effort into making the subjects interesting (74%).

Student interaction with staff has improved significantly
Student engagement with academic staff has improved significantly over the past five years. A significantly larger proportion of students believed that staff were available to discuss their work (59% in 2014, compared to 48% in 2009), made a real effort to understand difficulties students were having with their work (58% in 2014 compared to 45% in 2009), and more students regularly sought the assistance of teaching staff.

Most students are highly engaged with their university and courses
The 2014 study reveals important trends in the ways students are engaging with their studies and the university community. Time spent studying and average course contact hours have remained the same since 2009, but the indicators of engagement with studies show a significant rise in the proportion of students feeling satisfied with their subject choices and with their course design.

Classroom engagement and engagement with peers remain challenging for many students
Challenges remain in terms of classroom engagement, with approximately 30 per cent of students reporting that they never ask questions in class and never make class presentations. In addition, approximately one in ten students frequently skipped classes, a slight increase from 2009. This may be related to the increased use of lecture recordings and the availability of class notes and materials online.

While there has been a significant rise in the proportion of students believing that there is a positive attitude to learning among fellow students (66% in 2014 compared to 57% in 2009), not much has changed in terms of peer engagement of first year students over the past decade. In 2014, there was still a large proportion of students who reported never working with classmates outside of classes (26%), never working with other students on projects during class (21%), and never studying with other students (26%). Fewer than one in five students frequently studied with other students. This meant they were less satisfied with their university experience overall, and less likely to achieve high marks in the first semester.

Online technologies are ubiquitous but their effects on student engagement remain unclear
Use of online technologies is ubiquitous with nearly all students in the 2014 study having used an online management system (99%), internet-based resources designed for their course (96%), and lecture recordings (91%). The majority of students (63%) thought that online resources and educational technologies allowed them to spend less time on campus.

There has been a growth in the proportion of students undertaking subjects/units wholly online, from 8 per cent in 2009 to 11 per cent in 2014. However, even with the growth in online learning and ubiquity of online technologies, students' appreciation of the campus-based experience has

increased, with two thirds of students reporting that they really like being on campus, a significant rise in the past ten years.

Despite the hype surrounding Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) when these arrived on the higher education landscape in 2012, for the first year students in our study, MOOCs played a negligible role. Only 1 per cent enrolled in MOOCs as part of their course and 2 per cent enrolled in MOOCs for personal interest.

Students in 2014 were less socially engaged with the university community than students in the past

Some indicators of engagement with the university community have dropped substantially since 2009. Fewer than half the students surveyed in 2014 reported feeling a sense of belonging to the university community, and significantly more students kept to themselves, from 32 per cent in 2009 to 44 per cent in 2014. In addition, compared to 74 per cent of students who had made at least one or two close friends at university in 2009, only 65 per cent had in 2014. These are important findings, as making friends is positively associated with overall satisfaction with the university experience.

Worrying about money interfered with study for many students

A major trend over the last 20 years has been an increase in the number of hours students spend in paid employment. The proportion of employed students who work 21 or more hours per week has risen from 8 per cent in 1994 to 18 per cent in 2014, and those working 31 hours or more has risen from 2 per cent in 1994 to 9 per cent in 2014. Although fewer students worked during their studies in 2014 than in 2009, there has been an increase in the proportion of students for whom worrying about money interferes with their study, from 33 per cent to 39 per cent. This is a cause for concern as financial stress correlates with a poor student experience and can lead students to seriously consider deferring or withdrawing from their studies.

Students are getting better at balancing their study and other commitments

While there has been a growth in the proportion of students worrying about their finances, there has also been a decrease in the proportion reporting that they often find it stressful to manage their commitments (52% from 57% in 2009). This trend was consistent with the significant decrease in the proportion of students who said their course workloads were too heavy.

Overall, students in 2014 were enjoying their courses and more satisfied with their university experience than students in the past

The large majority of first year students in the 2014 study (80%) reported that were enjoying their courses, and satisfied with their university experience (75%). This represents a significant increase from previous years.

Distinctive student subgroups

Students with low ATAR scores were less prepared for university, less able to cope with university study and report lower levels of academic engagement than other students

Students with low ATAR scores were less prepared for university, experienced less enjoyment of their courses, and had lower levels of academic engagement than their peers. Although nearly a third of low ATAR students exceeded their own expectations for assessment grades in first year, students in this group were more likely to have difficulties with their studies, and more likely to have considered deferring or withdrawing (26%, compared to 17% of high ATAR students). Low ATAR students were also less likely to enjoy the intellectual challenge of studying, less likely to be enjoying their course, less likely to find their subjects intellectually stimulating, and find it more difficult to get motivated to study.

Low SES students felt less academically prepared and experienced more financial stress than high SES students

Although students from low SES backgrounds showed strong clarity of purpose in enrolling in university, they generally felt less academically prepared for university than high SES students, and were more concerned about their results and the possibility of failure. Significantly more students from low SES backgrounds felt financial stress, or that their work commitments interfered with their study, than high SES students (75% and 59%, compared to 60% and 50% respectively).

Social integration of international students continues to improve, but they experience difficulties with studies and are less satisfied with the quality of teaching

International students were more likely than domestic students to seek assistance from staff, and more likely to believe that staff made an effort to understand their difficulties. They were, however, also more likely to have difficulties with their studies such as comprehending the material. Although the majority of international first year students were satisfied with their university experience, they were less satisfied than domestic students with the quality of teaching and were more likely to feel university had not lived up to their expectations.

Other key findings from subgroups:

- Indigenous students were highly motivated and engaged with their studies but experienced a range of pressures in studying;
- For a large proportion of students from regional and remote backgrounds financial considerations were frequently a source of stress;
- Women report more stress during first year, but did not have a significantly different student experience overall.

Implications

Much has improved in the first year experience of students over the past two decades. The majority of students are more engaged with their studies, more satisfied with the choice of subjects offered at their institutions, significantly more satisfied with the quality of teaching and have far better interactions with teaching staff. These trends are positive signs of the effect of university efforts to improve the experience of first year students. However, while there has been much improvement in the first year experience over the past two decades, for a significant proportion of students, getting motivated to study is difficult and coping with university study remains challenging. This is particularly the case for students who enter university with low ATAR scores.

The study shows that students with low ATAR scores are less prepared for university, less able to cope with university study, and have lower levels of academic engagement than other students—based on their own self-reports. The higher education sector is now increasingly alert to the greater risk of attrition or poor academic performance for these students and the intense support needed in the first year if they are to succeed.

The findings from the 2014 study point to a number of implications for institutional policy and practice:

- Students with low ATAR scores are a particular 'at risk' group. They are more likely to be disillusioned with their course and are at greater risk of attrition. For students who enter higher education with a low ATAR, the issues are complex. Because low ATAR students tend to end up in less sought after courses and institutions, they may have lower intrinsic interest in their courses, and a weaker sense of purpose, and are consequently less committed to their studies. While most institutions offer a range of programs to develop foundational academic skills, it will be essential for institutions to continue to develop new initiatives specifically to support low ATAR students' adjustment to university life.

- Supporting low ATAR students' transition into university means more than addressing the gaps in study skills. It also means rethinking the role of preparatory pre-bachelors programs, so they support students not only to develop necessary academic skills, but also help them shape new student identities and develop personal objectives.

- As the student population continues to diversify, it will be essential for institutions to monitor routinely the experience of distinctive student subgroups. Early identification and intervention of 'at risk' students can contribute significantly to improving retention.

- Worrying about money interferes with study for many students. As students are increasingly being asked to contribute to the cost of their higher education, the number of hours spent at work will likely rise, leading to students devoting insufficient time to study. One option for

providing financial support for students, while at the same time acknowledging the numerous benefits of gaining work experience, would be for institutions to provide more opportunities for first year students to work on campus (of course some universities are already doing this).

- With the growth in online learning, there is a risk that students will become more disengaged from their university communities. It will be increasingly important for universities to provide environments where social interaction is encouraged – not only for its own sake, but for the informal learning opportunities that emerge in conversations. Fostering student engagement means structuring opportunities for students to interact with each other and with teaching staff outside of class. The benefits of incidental learning in social settings should not be underestimated in any discussion of course delivery in higher education.

Snapshots: The views of first year students in 2014, compared with 2009 (percentage of students in agreement)

	2009	2014
Overall course experience		
Very satisfied with the university experience so far	71%	**75%**
Find course intellectually stimulating	76%	**79%**
Quality of teaching generally good	77%	**89%**
The university community and sense of belonging		
Feel sense of belonging to the university community	50%	**47%**
Find it exciting to be at university	62%	**67%**
Really like being on campus	63%	**66%**
Feel part of a group of students committed to learning	53%	**56%**
Involved in university extra-curricular activities	17%	**23%**
Adjusting to university: Specific challenges		
Find it difficult to get motivated to study	36%	**36%**
Feel uncomfortable in group discussions	21%	**24%**
Find it really hard to keep up with the volume of work	32%	**34%**
Often stressful to manage study with other commitments	57%	**52%**
Change and uncertainty		
Seriously considered deferring or discontinuing	23%	**19%**
Changed course during first year	7%	**8%**
Hope to change course after first year	26%	**14%**
Hope to change institution after first year	8%	**8%**
Interacting with teaching staff and peers		
Staff are enthusiastic about the subjects they teach	75%	**80%**
Most of the academic staff are approachable	73%	**74%**
Teaching staff usually give helpful feedback on progress	35%	**56%**
Feel confident that at least one of my teachers knows my name	58%	**60%**
Sometimes or frequently study with other students	76%	**74%**
Feel there is a positive attitude to learning among peers	57%	**66%**
The university curriculum		
Subjects fit together well	78%	**79%**
Subjects give an awareness of the latest research	50%	**53%**
Getting a chance to learn about research in the university	31%	**42%**
Planning an international study experience	27%	**28%**
Presently studying or planning to study a language	23%	**23%**
See connection between subjects and future career prospects	75%	**73%**
Expecting to undertake industry placement	–	**49%**
Engaging online		
Used internet-based resources and information designed for course	98%	**99%**
Used lecture recordings	75%	**88%**
Used social networking for study purposes	61%	**72%**
Had discussions online with other students	64%	**65%**
Enrolled in a MOOC	–	**1%**

1. CSHE NATIONAL STUDIES OF THE FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE, 1994 TO 2014

Since 1994, the Centre for the Study of Higher Education of the University of Melbourne has conducted national studies into the experience of first year undergraduate students at Australian universities at five-year intervals. In 2014, the fifth in this series of studies was conducted. The five national studies, spanning two decades, provide a unique database on the changing character of first year students' attitudes, expectations and experiences of university.

The original 1994 study was commissioned by the Committee for the Advancement of University Teaching (CAUT) at a time of growing awareness about the impact of student diversity in a 'mass' higher education system, and the important formative role of the first year experience in shaping student attitudes and approaches to learning. There were 37 universities in Australia at that time, and seven were selected as representative of the system and invited to participate in the project.

The 1999 study was conducted for the Evaluations and Investigations Programme of the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA). It provided an opportunity to repeat the 1994 research, with a slightly modified questionnaire administered to a student sample selected from the original seven universities. The study established new benchmarks to monitor changes in patterns of teaching and student study habits.

For the 2004 study, the project team increased the number of participating universities to capture the growing diversity of the higher education sector. Two additional universities agreed to participate in the study. This improved the representation of Indigenous students in the sample and the geographical distribution of the participating universities. The 2004 study was funded through the Higher Education Innovations Programme of the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST), and provided the opportunity to examine in more depth the issue of student engagement identified in 1999, as well as changes in the use of information and communication technology. Most questionnaire items from the earlier surveys were retained for continuity.

The 2009 survey involved the nine institutions that participated in 2004 and was undertaken with the support of the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). The 2009 study provided insights into the first year experience of students prior to the implementation of the recommendations from the 2008 Review of Australian Higher Education. The 2009 study provided important benchmarks for monitoring the reforms designed to universalise participation in higher education, with a focus on increasing participation levels of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds. On the whole, the survey instrument remained unchanged from previous years. However, a small number of items considered to be dated were discarded, and some items were added to assess how students manage their various commitments, and to explore their

engagement with community engagement activities, international study experiences, and online technologies.

Since the 2009 study, there have been major changes in the Australian higher education sector. The student body has continued to diversify with the introduction of the demand driven funding system and the provision of government funding to increase the inclusion and support of people from under-represented groups. The increasingly deregulated higher education sector and advances in technology, among other trends, have continued to alter the modes of student participation, the structures of course delivery, and relationships between students and teachers.

The *2014 First Year Experience survey* is the first study of the 'post Bradley review' cohort and, as such, provides insight into some of the possible effects of the demand driven system on the experience of first year students. The data offer important reference points for monitoring the expectations and experiences of a larger and more diverse group of students, and the effectiveness of university efforts to cater for them. While the majority of items from the 2009 survey were retained, new items were added to reflect the changing context. Details of these changes are outlined below in the survey method section.

Key findings from previous studies

To examine trends and significant changes in first year students' attitudes and experiences over two decades, and to provide the context for interpreting the 2014 study, we outline the key findings from the four studies conducted since 1994 across the Australian higher education sector.

The 1994 study

The findings of the original first year study in 1994 study were reported in *First Year on Campus*[1].

A number of questions were posed for the first study:

- What do first year students expect of university when they commence their undergraduate studies?
- How do their initial experiences vary?
- How well do students adjust to the teaching styles and academic demands of university?
- How have universities responded to the needs of greater numbers of students from diverse backgrounds?

The students surveyed at the time were generally positive in outlook. Most expected and enjoyed the opportunity for intellectual challenge. They were generally sure of their reasons for attending university, and had a strong desire to do well. Most had clear aims, a strong sense of purpose and were not narrowly vocational. The overwhelming majority attached considerable importance to studying in fields in which they had an intrinsic interest.

[1] McInnis and James 1995.

However, the survey also found that many students had negative views of teaching and their courses. In particular, it was notable that:

- Barely half the students surveyed found their subjects interesting;
- Only 53 per cent of students thought academic staff were enthusiastic about the subjects they were teaching;
- Less than half thought that teaching staff were good at explaining things;
- Only 41 per cent of students thought there was a positive attitude towards learning among their fellow students, and
- Over a quarter of the students worked in isolation from their peers and were not interested in extra-curricular activities.

The female students in the sample tended to have stronger academic orientation and application towards their studies, a stronger sense of purpose, and were more likely to be satisfied with their courses. The mature age students in the sample generally reported more positive attitudes and experiences than school-leavers. School-leavers appeared to be a problematic group. As the report noted,

> [t]hey were relatively less certain of their roles than older students, less diligent in their study habits, and less academically oriented. Just over a third said they were not ready to choose a university course, two thirds thought university was more demanding than school, and 45 per cent believed that the standard at university was higher than they had expected. (p. xi)

The authors concluded in 1994 that greater attention should be given to the specific needs of first year students, both in the classroom and beyond. The findings documented in *First Year on Campus* provided the impetus for renewed attention to the quality of the transition to university and the quality of teaching and learning in the first year.

The 1999 study

The findings of the 1999 study were reported in *Trends in the First Year Experience*[2].

The aim of this study was to replicate the original study in the seven institutions that had participated five years previously with a view to examining trends during this period. Major questions that guided the study included:

- Had the problems of transition and adjustment experienced by students changed during the five years?
- Had the goals, study habits and level of commitment of students changed?
- Were there any notable changes with respect to the quality of experience for the diverse groups identified in the 1994 study?
- Was there evidence of the impact of changes in institutional policies and practices on the quality of the first year experience?

[2] McInnis, James and Hartley 2000.

The report of the 1999 study highlighted the following patterns in the responses of first year students:

- Students' reasons for coming to university remained quite stable. Intrinsic interest in a field of study was high on the agenda of most first year students.
- There had been little change in the number of students who had an uncertain start at university. One in five of the 1999 first year students hoped to change to a different course after first year, and, as in 1994, approximately one third seriously considered deferring during first semester.
- One third of the students who had gone direct from school to university did not feel they were ready to choose a course, and two thirds were of the view that they were not well-prepared for university study.
- However, compared with 1994, a larger proportion of students in 1999 found university study more fulfilling than school and a smaller proportion believed it was more demanding than school.
- On the whole, there was little change in the level of students' academic orientation or their academic application between 1994 and 1999. However, the proportion of students who reported they got a great deal of satisfaction from study decreased from 43 per cent to 40 per cent; and the proportion who found it difficult to motivate themselves to study had increased significantly, from 42 per cent to 48 per cent.
- There was a striking difference between the 1994 and 1999 responses in the increased proportion of students who were enrolled full-time and engaged in part-time work, and the increase in the average number of hours students were employed. There was a nine per cent increase in the proportion of full-time students who were working part-time, and a 14 per cent increase in the mean number of hours they worked. Fewer students were spending five days per week at university and average course contact hours dropped slightly from 1994 to 1999.
- Despite some of the negative perceptions of specific aspects of the first year experience reported in the 1999 study, there were small but significant increases in the proportions of students who were enjoying their course overall and in those who were very satisfied with their initial university experience.

Trends in the First Year Experience concluded that 'the findings suggest a trend of less attachment and commitment to a range of aspects of university life and academic work on the part of those [students] who work longer hours in paid employment'[3]. The report foreshadowed the likely impact on teaching, learning and the curriculum that might arise from a significantly new orientation of first year students towards the place of university in their lives:

> It appears that university study occupies a smaller proportion of a growing number of students' lives. The slight but noteworthy decline in motivation to study, the increase in the hours of paid work, and the trend towards less

[3] McInnis et al 2000, p. xii.

engagement with the university have implications for policy and practice ... (p. xii)

The 2004 study

The findings of the 2004 study were reported in *The First Year Experience in Australian Universities: Findings from a decade of national studies*[4].

The purpose of the 2004 study was two-fold: to report on the current status of the first year experience for students and to document ten-year trends since the first year experience surveys commenced. In addition to the seven institutions that participated in 1994 and 1999, another two institutions participated in 2004 in order to reflect the diversity of the Australian higher education system.

The authors reported the following findings:

- First year students continued to rate both interest-related and job-related reasons as important in their decision to enrol in university. An increasing number of students also identified parental expectations as an important factor.
- While the proportion of students withdrawing from at least one subject increased, fewer students reported deferral or discontinuing with their study.
- There was a significant decline, compared with the previous study, in the proportion of students feeling that university had not met their expectations. However, international students were less satisfied than domestic students that their expectations had been met.
- Students believed there was room for improvement in the role school played in preparing them for university: 60 per cent of students reported that school was not sufficient preparation for university, and just under one third felt ill-prepared to choose a university course on leaving school.
- A key indicator of student engagement, the time devoted to academic endeavours, revealed that students were spending less time on campus and had fewer hours of class contact time each week compared with the 1994 students. There was also a significant rise in the number of full-time students undertaking paid work.
- In 2004, students had more positive perceptions of the quality of teaching, although the majority of students reported they did not believe teaching staff took an interest in their progress or provided them with helpful feedback.
- Online technologies played a significant role in changing the character of teaching, learning and interaction in the first year. The majority of students in first year accessed online course resources; however, only a minority participated in online discussion.

The report concluded in 2004 that while there were still areas of concern in the first year student experience, on the whole the 2004 students were more positive about their university experience than students in previous surveys. At the time, the authors speculated that this was partly because 'universities have become

[4] Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis 2005.

more responsive to the needs of first year students during their transition to university and their first year on campus'[5].

One continuing source of concern, however, was the differing experiences of demographic subgroups, particularly equity groups. The report of the 2004 study concluded:

> First year students in 2004 have a clearer sense of how university study will help them achieve career goals. They are typically more satisfied with their university experience as a whole than were first year students ten years ago. However, there is strong evidence of demographic subgroup differences that warrants close monitoring and further investigation. (p. v)

The 2009 study

The purpose of the 2009 study was to build a picture of the overall character and quality of the first year experience across the nation in 2009, and to explore changing attitudes and experiences of first year students in Australian universities across a period of 15 years. The findings were reported in *The First Year Experience in Australian Universities: Findings from 1994 to 2009*[6].

The authors reported the following key findings:

- The first year students in 2009 were more organised, pragmatic and focussed than their 2004 counterparts. More believed they were ready to choose a university course, fewer considered deferring and fewer planned to change course or institution after first year. Parental expectations figured more highly in their decision to go to university.
- School-leavers reported an easier academic transition to university. They were more likely to believe the final year of school prepared them well for university and they were more satisfied with the advice they received on subject choices.
- In 2009, first year students reported spending fewer days and less time on campus. Fewer were involved in extra-curricular activities around campus, and fewer said they had made close friends. More indicated they kept to themselves at university. Yet, in apparent contradiction, more reported involvement in group work for study purposes, both in and out of class, than in previous years.
- The trend towards part-time work during semester continued. A growing proportion were undertaking paid work and working longer hours on average: 61 per cent of full-time students were working compared with 55 per cent in 2004. Despite this, significantly fewer students reported that work interfered significantly with their study than students of 2004.
- Indicators of key staff-student interactions were down from the 2004 figures. Fewer students believed one of their teachers knew their name, and fewer believed academic staff showed an interest in their progress.
- Students were embracing the various forms of online technology for study-related purposes and were highly positive about the benefits. More

[5] Krause et al 2005, p. v.
[6] James, Krause & Jennings 2010.

students reported that it was possible to skip classes because notes were on the web.
- 'Time on task' dropped for the 2009 students compared with their 2004 peers. Students' self-reported course contact hours declined significantly, from 16 to 15 hours per week on average. At the same time, the hours spent in private study had decreased to 10.6 hours per week.

The report concluded that good progress had been made in improving the transition to university and the quality of the educational experience for first year students. However, with the Australian Governments' national targets, by 2025, of 40 per cent of all 25-34 year-olds attaining a qualification at bachelor level or above, and by 2020, of 20 per cent of undergraduates being people from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, the authors concluded:

> The emphasis of the higher education sector on the first year must intensify as the student population grows and diversifies. …During the next decade, the first year will be a critical time for retention and for establishing sound patterns of study and academic engagement, perhaps even more so than now. (p. 4)

The present study: context, aims and methods

There have been dramatic changes in the Australian higher education sector since the previous study in 2009, and indeed over the two decades since the original First Year Experience survey in 1994. The student body has continued to diversify with the introduction of the demand driven funding system and the provision of government funding to increase the inclusion and support of people from under-represented groups.

There have also been several high-profile reviews into the higher education sector, including Bradley's *Review of Australian higher education*[7], the *Review of higher education access and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people*[8], and the *Review of the demand driven funding system*[9]. Over the past five years, higher education has been part of the national discourse in a way that has rarely been seen over the last twenty years.

The increasingly deregulated higher education sector and advances in technology, among other trends, have continued to alter modes of student participation, the structures of course delivery and relationships between students and teachers. As well, the much-hyped arrival of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) in Australian higher education in 2012 fuelled the debate on the value of campus-based traditional methods of teaching and learning in universities.

The 2014 study took place at an extremely important period in Australian higher education. It is the first study of the first year experience after the Bradley review, and as such provides an insight into some of the possible effects of the

[7] Bradley, Noonan, Nugent and Scales 2008.
[8] Behrendt, Larkin, Griew and Kelly 2012.
[9] Kemp and Norton 2010.

demand driven funding system on the experience of first year students. In the year the study was conducted, the Australian government had proposed major reforms to the funding of higher education – namely, fee deregulation along with an average 20 per cent cut in the Commonwealth contribution per student place. If the Government achieves its goal of fee deregulation, there will be profound effects on the experience of first year students.

The 2014 First Year Experience survey is therefore a timely investigation of how the changes in the context of higher education have affected the experience of first year students across Australia. As the landscape of higher education continues to change rapidly, the 2014 study, like the previous studies, provides an important barometer for the sector.

The survey method

The purpose of the 2014 study was two-fold: to report on the current status of the first year experience for students, and to document five- and twenty-year trends since the first year experience surveys commenced.

Institutions that had participated in the 2009 First Year Experience survey were invited to participate in the 2014 survey. Eight institutions agreed.

The project team employed a similar protocol to previous First Year Experience surveys. We asked institutions to provide a randomly selected sample of 30 per cent of students who were:

- commencing higher education, and
- enrolled in bachelor, associate degree or undergraduate award programs (excluding students in non-award or enabling or foundation programs).

This included both domestic and international students, full- and part-time students, and those studying on or off campus. The sample was stratified by gender, by international or domestic status, and by the 11 Broad Field of Education categories. Once samples were selected, we gave institutions the option to send students' details to the project team, or to distribute a request to participate internally. One institution chose to contact students directly for privacy reasons.

As in the 2009 study, we sought to ensure a sufficient number of responses were collected from Indigenous students. Because of the relatively small proportion of Indigenous students in higher education, we decided to invite all first year Indigenous students in any undergraduate program (including non-award, enabling and foundation programs) at participating universities to participate in the study.

Unlike in previous years, the 2014 survey was conducted entirely online. The survey was open for a three-week period in late July or August, depending on institutional semester or trimester dates. Students were sent three email reminders during the period. Unlike in previous years, incentives to participate were not offered. A total of 1739 surveys were completed from an initial sample

of 13882, for a total response rate of 13 per cent. Institutional response rates varied from 7 per cent to 21 per cent.

The response rate has dropped significantly since the original survey in 1994, when an overall response rate of 57 per cent was obtained. In 1999, the response rate dropped to 37 per cent, and then to 33 per cent in 2004 and 24 per cent in 2009. While declining response rates are of obvious concern in terms of representativeness and generalizability of findings, they are consistent with similar trends described in the literature and observed from other national research organisations. The response rate is most likely also affected by an increase in survey demands on first year students, including the University Experience Survey, which unavoidably overlapped in its collection period in two institutions.

Further details of the design of the study and the characteristics of this sample of first year students are described in Appendix 1.

We retained the questionnaire used as the basis for the previous studies, although changes were made to capture some of the changing dimensions of the first year experience. We discarded a small number of items that were considered to be too dated to use, and we added several new items relating to pre-university experience, the changing curriculum and the role of technology. Specifically, we included items exploring:

- The influence of outreach programs on students' decision to enrol;
- The changing curriculum and student engagement with Work Integrated Learning;
- The role of technology – perceived benefits and influence on student engagement, and
- Student participation in MOOCs.

Interpreting the findings

Appendix 2 contains a glossary of terms used for demographic student groups in this report. For the most part, we have adopted DET and Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) classifications for the purposes of analysing and interpreting the data, but in some cases it has been necessary to adapt the nomenclature. The glossary supplements definitions provided in the text.

Throughout the report we note statistically significant relationships between and among subgroups and across the different survey years. In all cases these relationships are significant at $p < 0.05$ or higher unless otherwise stated. Specific data on the respective significance levels are provided in the tables.

The 2014 sample compared with the national first year population

While we endeavoured to sample a representative proportion of the first year population, our sample differs in a number of important ways from the national student population. Given the 2014 student census data were not available at the time of writing this report, subgroup populations are compared to the Department of Education's 2013 national data (see Table 1.1).

Table 1.1 Proportionate comparisons between 2014 study sample and the 2013 commencing undergraduate population (% of total number of students after weighting, except where specified)

Demographic subgroups	Proportion of 2014 study sample (%)	Proportion of 2013 commencing undergraduate population [a] (%)
Age		
19 years and younger	65	52
20-24 years	22	28
25 years and older	13	20
Gender		
Female	57	56
Unweighted	69	–
Male	42	44
Unweighted	31	–
Did not specify	1	–
Equity groups		
ATSI	2	2
Unweighted	4	–
Disability	7	5
NESB	3	4
Low SES (by postcode)	18	18
Regional/remote	28	22
Student type		
International	12	27
Domestic	88	73
Broad Field of Education		
Society/Culture	14	21
Management/Commerce	8	26
Education	7	7
Health	16	15
Sciences	9	9
Creative Arts	6	9
Engineering	6	7
Information Technology	2	4
Agriculture	1	1
Architecture/Building	2	2
Food/Hospitality	0	0
Cross-disciplinary/combined degree	30	–

[a] Figures are for commencing undergraduate students enrolled in Bachelors (including Graduate entry), associate degree, diploma and other award courses unless otherwise specified.

As with previous studies, women were over-represented among respondents, comprising 69 per cent of the sample, compared to 56 per cent of the sector. As noted above, Indigenous students were intentionally over-sampled to ensure sufficient response rates to draw robust conclusions. Unlike in previous reports, both of these groups have been weighted in this report (except where noted) to account for this over-representation. This did not have a substantial effect on most items, and was done to increase the rigour of the study. However, this is an important methodological divergence from previous studies.

Historically, the majority of survey respondents have been school leavers. This trend was also observed in this study, with those aged 19 and under comprising 65 per cent of respondents and 52 per cent of the sector. The proportion of students aged 25 years and older has increased in both the sample and the

national statistics, while the proportion aged 20 to 24 years has remained constant in both. International students continue to be under-represented in the sample. Stratifying the sample by Broad Field of Education has resulted in a reasonably representative distribution, although Creative Arts, Society and Culture and (particularly) Management and Commerce are under-represented. This was also seen in 2009.

In terms of equity group representation, students with a disability affecting their studies comprise 7 per cent of the sample, compared to 4 per cent nationally. Students from low socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds and non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) were well represented in the survey, although the number of students reporting they spoke a language other than English at home was considerably higher than those fitting the formal definition of NESB as an equity group (see Appendix 2). Students from regional and remote backgrounds were slightly over-represented. These provisos aside, the sample is therefore broadly similar to the distribution of subgroups expected from national statistics. Where differences are seen, these are consistent with previous First Year Experience surveys, allowing us to comment on historical trends.

The 1994-2014 samples compared

- There has been a slight downward trend in the proportion of students aged 19 years and under since 1994 (1994: 71 per cent; 1999: 74 per cent; 2004: 67 per cent; 2009: 67 per cent; 2014: 65 per cent).

- In previous years, the proportion of 20 to 24 year olds increased (1994: 17 per cent; 1999: 13 per cent; 2004: 20 per cent; 2009: 22 per cent), while the proportion of students aged 25 years and over remained relatively stable (1994: 12 per cent; 1999: 10 per cent; 2004: 13 per cent; 2009: 11 per cent). This trend has been reversed in 2014, with 22 per cent of students being aged 20 to 24 years old, while those aged 25 and over has increased to 13 per cent.

- The proportion of women in the 1994 sample was 63 per cent. This rose to approximately two thirds of the sample in 1999 and 2004, and rose again in 2009 to 69 per cent. This has fallen back to 67 per cent in this sample.

- The proportion of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds has risen to 18 per cent, from 15 per cent in 2009 (using the postcode measure). The proportion of students whose parents do not have a university degree has fluctuated over the past 20 years (1994: 64 per cent; 1999: 57 per cent; 2004: 64 per cent; 2009: 60 per cent; 2014: 60 per cent). The proportion of parents with postgraduate university degrees has continued to rise over the past five years (mothers: 2009: 12 per cent; 2014: 14 per cent; fathers: 2009: 17 per cent; 2009: 19 per cent).

- The proportion of students born in Australia has declined slightly since 1994, with approximately 72 per cent of respondents born in Australia, compared to 75 per cent in 1994 and 74 per cent in 2009. As in 2009,

45 per cent of mothers (compared with 40 per cent in previous studies) and 46 per cent of fathers were born overseas.

- The proportion of students who speak a language other than English at home has remained constant since 2009, having returned to the levels observed in 1994 from lower levels in 1999 and 2004 (1994: 28 per cent; 1999: 23 per cent; 2004: 25 per cent; 2009: 29 per cent; 2014: 29 per cent). Fifty-nine per cent of the current sample migrated to Australia within the last ten years. This is a significant increase on previous years (1999: 24 per cent; 2004: 46 per cent; 2009: 51 per cent).

- Chinese students continue to represent the largest proportion of overseas born students (4 per cent). The proportion of students from Malaysia has decreased since 2009 from 4 per cent to 2 per cent, with students from the UK and Ireland replacing them as the second largest subgroup of international students in this sample (3 per cent). There has also been significant change in the proportion of students from New Zealand over the last five years (2009: 1 per cent; 2014: 2 per cent).

- After remaining stable at approximately 53 per cent in the first three studies, the proportion of government schooled students dropped to 49 per cent in 2009. In 2014, this has remained steady at 50 per cent. The proportion of Catholic school students has decreased slightly, from 21 per cent (where it was constant from 1994 to 2009) to 18 per cent. The proportion of independently schooled students has changed slightly over 20 years (1994: 24 per cent; 1999: 21 per cent; 2004: 23 per cent; 2009: 26 per cent; 2014: 26 per cent).

The institutions

The eight institutions that participated in the 2014 study are briefly described below. As with the earlier studies, it is not our intention to provide comparisons of performance or to rank institutions but to emphasise system-wide issues concerning the first year experience.

Universities included in the five national studies

Established University is a large and old university offering a wide range of professional programs. Most programs have high entry scores for admissions. International fee-paying students form a significant proportion of the student body. The student population is younger than other institutions in the study because of the high intake of school-leavers.

New University was created to service a large industrial suburban region of a capital city. It has a number of campuses in the area, and a significant city campus. New University has made a point of developing courses to serve the local area and has a policy of open access.

Suburban University had its origins in the expansion of higher education in the 1960s. It is a mid-sized university offering a wide range of courses. It includes a main campus some 30-40 minutes travel from the city and a number of smaller campuses, including several in rural areas.

International University is also a well-established university. It has a large student population and is well-known for the sizeable numbers of students from Asia that is attracts.

Regional University is a medium-sized university in a rural location. A distinctive feature of this university is the high proportion of first year students who live in residential colleges in or near the campus, and the high proportion of distance education students in the overall student population.

The *University of Applied Studies* has a reputation for practical courses and applied courses, partly the result of its origins as an institute of technology. It is medium to large in size, has strong industry-education links and offers courses in many professional areas. The student population profile is close to the national average.

Universities included in the 2004, 2009 and 2014 studies

Evolving University was established as a university in the 1980s. It is a relatively small institution, but serves a large constituency that includes both an urban region and a dispersed rural region. It has a large proportion of part-time students in its undergraduate population.

Traditional University is a long-established institution with a wide range of degree programs. It is known for its highly competitive entry and the relatively high proportion of school-leavers in its first year intake.

2. SENSE OF PURPOSE AND ADJUSTMENT TO UNIVERSITY STUDY

The first year students surveyed in 2014 were generally very positive in outlook, significantly more positive than first year students surveyed in the past two decades. Most students were clear about their reasons for going to university, had a strong sense of purpose and identity, and were excited to be at university.

In the two decades since the 1994 First Year Experience study[10], concerted efforts to improve the links between school and university have had positive effects, as school leavers in 2014 reported feeling better prepared to choose a course, and believe the final year of school prepared them well for university. The gap between school and university identified in earlier surveys has been narrowed considerably. This may have contributed to a significant drop in the proportion of students considering deferring or discontinuing than in past years, from 33 per cent in 1994, to 22 per cent in 2009, and 19 per cent in 2014.

Another major trend over the past decade relates to societal (school, family) expectations of school-leavers to attend university. There has been a significant rise in the proportion of students (65%, from 50% in 2009) who experienced a lot of pressure at school to go to university, and an equally significant rise in the proportion of students who were strongly influenced by their parents/family's expectations.

Notable trends between 2009 and 2014

	In 2009	**In 2014**
There was a lot of pressure at my school to go to university	50%	**65%**
The expectations of my parents or family was important in my decision to go to university	35%	**41%**
I received good advice from teachers at my school about choosing my course	58%	**64%**
I regularly seek the advice and assistance of the teaching staff	29%	**37%**
It is exciting to be at university	62%	**67%**
University life really suits me	63%	**58%**

Differences between 2009 and 2014 statistically significant at 0.01

Sense of purpose

Students' success at university depends on a number of factors including their sense of purpose. Students who are clear about their reasons for coming to university are more likely to be committed and engaged in their studies. Over the two decades, a growing proportion of students have become clear about their reasons for coming to university, and in 2014, close to 90 per cent of first year students indicated they were clear about the reasons they came to university.

[10] McInnis and James 1995.

Table 2.1 Sense of purpose 1994-2009 (% of students)
(1994, N=4028; 1999, N=2609; 2004, N=2344; 2009, N=2422; 2014, N=1559)

		Disagree		Agree
I am clear about the reasons I came to university	1994	10	16	74
	1999	12	17	72*
	2004	4	11	85**
	2009	3	9	88*
	2014	4	7	89
I know the type of occupation I want	1994	21	18	62
	1999	24	17	59
	2004	17	16	67**
	2009	15	19	66
	2014	16	19	65
University is just marking time while I decide my future	1994	72	17	11
	1999	69	18	13*
	2004	69	18	13
	2009	66	19	15
	2014	62	18	20**

Asterisks denote a significant change from the finding five years earlier (* = significant at 0.05, ** = significant at 0.01)

While students appear on the whole to be clear about their reasons for coming to university, one in five students in 2014 reported that university was just marking time while they decided their future (see Table 2.1). This represents a significant increase from 15 per cent in 2009 and suggests that, while some students report being at university simply to 'mark time', this does not necessarily mean they lack a sense of purpose for being at university. Indeed 74 per cent of those who said university was marking time also indicated that they were clear about their reasons for enrolling. This could mean that more first year students are taking time to explore their options at university and to develop greater clarity about their interests and the type of occupation they want to pursue.

There were slight differences according to field of study, with a third of the students who were marking time enrolled in cross-disciplinary fields of study and 15 per cent enrolled in the Society and Culture field of study. International students were more likely than domestic students to see university as marking time while they decided their future (40% of international students compared to 18% of domestic students).

Reasons for enrolling

Students' reasons for coming to university have remained stable over two decades. Table 2.2 shows that intrinsic interest in the field of study remains the most often cited reason (96%) for students coming to university, followed by improving their job prospects (87%) and developing their talents and creative abilities (77%).

The response pattern is relatively uniform across demographic groups; however, international students were more likely than their domestic student counterparts

to indicate that developing their talents and creative abilities was an important reason for enrolling, and they were more likely to indicate that getting training for a specific job was an important reason.

Table 2.2 Reasons for enrolling 1994-2014 (%)
(1994, N=4028; 1999, N=2609; 2004, N=2344; 2009, N=2422; 2014, N=1559)

Reason		Not important		Important
Studying in a field that really interests me	1994	0	6	94
	1999	1	3	96**
	2004	1	4	95
	2009	1	3	96
	2014	1	3	96
Improving my job prospects	1994	5	11	84
	1999	4	10	86*
	2004	6	11	83*
	2009	5	10	86
	2014	4	9	87
Developing my talents and creative abilities	1994	6	20	74
	1999	6	21	73
	2004	6	19	75
	2009	5	19	77
	2014	8	15	77
To get training for a specific job	1994	9	18	73
	1999	9	17	74
	2004	9	17	74
	2009	7	17	75
	2014	7	16	77
The expectations of my parents or family	1994	52	23	25
	1999	51	26	23
	2004	44	26	30**
	2009	38	28	35**
	2014	36	23	41**

Asterisks denote a significant change from the finding five years earlier (* = significant at 0.05, ** = significant at 0.01)

A significant change over the past two decades has been in the growing proportion of students saying that 'the expectations of my parents or family' influenced their enrolment decisions, from 25 per cent in 1994 to 30 per cent in 2004 and 41 per cent in 2014. The majority of international students (64%) gave this as a reason influencing their enrolment decisions (compared to 38% of domestic students). Students from high SES backgrounds (45%) were also more likely than low SES students (38%) to cite this as a reason for enrolling.

The influence of outreach programs

Many universities provide outreach programs to schools and communities to encourage school leavers and adults to consider a university education, to provide information about enrolment, and to reduce psychological or motivational barriers to participation. 'Non-traditional' students, such as adults

and those likely to be members of formal equity groups, are often specific targets for these programs. While these programs are growing in number, little is known about their effectiveness. For the 2014 First Year Experience study, we added two questions about outreach programs: 1) Did you participate in any outreach programs? 2) How influential was it in your decision to enrol? Although we chose not to define what these programs might entail for students, we provided two clarifying examples: school visits by university staff and visits to universities organised by a school.

More than half of the students who responded to the survey (56%) reported that they had participated in outreach programs. Of these, almost half (46%) said this was very influential in their decision to enrol, and 28 per cent said it was not influential (26% were neutral). While many outreach programs are targeted at students from low SES backgrounds, more high SES students participated in outreach programs than low SES students (58% compared to 51%). However, the programs influenced a greater proportion of low SES students that high SES students. Of the low SES students who participated in outreach programs, more than half (50%) said it influenced their decision to enrol, compared to 40 per cent of high SES students who participated in the programs.

Students from regional/remote backgrounds were also more likely to be influenced by outreach programs than students from metropolitan areas (52% compared to 41%). This suggests that the outreach programs conducted by universities are having some positive effect in influencing low SES student participation in higher education; however, given that half the low SES students in the sample had not participated in outreach programs, there is room for improvement in the ways universities design these programs to reach and influence the target groups, particularly students from low SES backgrounds.

Student experiences prior to first year enrolment in 2014

Previous study experiences

Approximately 15 per cent of the respondents in the 2014 study had completed a university course, university enabling course or a VET course before 2014. As Table 2.3 shows, there has been growth in the proportion of students who have completed a course prior to their first year enrolment. The largest growth has been in the proportion of students who had completed a university degree or diploma course, from 5 per cent in 2009 to 8 per cent in 2014. The majority of these were international students.

Table 2.3 Previous completed courses (% of 2014 respondents) (N=1734)

Type of course commenced or completed before 2009		% of all respondents
Completed a university degree/ diploma course	2009	5
	2014	8*
Completed a university enabling course	2009	3
	2014	4
Completed a VET course	2009	7
	2014	9
	Total in 2009	14
	Total in 2014	15[11]

Asterisks denote a significant change from the finding five years earlier (* = significant at 0.05)

Of those students who had completed a university enabling course, the majority were international students or students from regional/remote areas. Most of the students who had completed a VET course were from low SES backgrounds and regional/remote areas. They were significantly more likely to have completed a VET course than their metropolitan student counterparts.

In addition to the 9 per cent of respondents who completed a VET course prior to 2014, 2 per cent indicated that they had commenced a VET course before entering university. Together with the 9 per cent who had completed a VET course, 11 per cent of the first year students in the 2014 study entered university through a VET pathway. While this seems a relatively small proportion, it has increased from 8 per cent in 2009 and suggests that VET may increasingly serve as a pathway to university. With the growing diversity of students entering higher education under the demand driven funding system, further work is needed to promote strategies for enabling pathways from VET into university, and to increase the proportion of students undertaking university enabling courses.

Returning to study after deferring first enrolment

Ten per cent of the students who responded to the survey had deferred their entry to university in the previous year. This was significantly lower than in 2009 (13%) and similar to the proportion in the 2004 study (11%). Students from regional/remote areas were considerably more likely to have taken a gap year (15%) compared to students from metropolitan areas (7%). Unlike the participants in the 2009 study, students from high SES backgrounds in 2014 were no more likely than their peers to have taken a gap year.

While the overall experience of those who deferred was comparable to other students, the findings suggest that there may be benefits to students taking a gap year and broadening their experiences before commencing university studies. Students who had taken a gap year were more enthusiastic about being a university student, more likely to have made close friends at university, more

[11] Seven per cent of students indicated they had completed more than one course.

likely to feel a sense of belonging to the university community, more likely to be studying a language, and more actively involved in extra-curricular activities than their peers. While they tended to have a more well-rounded experience of university compared to their first year peers, they also tended to find it stressful managing their studies with other commitments.

Course preference

Getting into a course of first preference is an important factor in students' motivation and attitudes to university study. Students who are not in their course of first choice are likely to have less intrinsic motivation to study and less persistence to continue with their university studies.

As in 2009, approximately three quarters of the students in 2014 got into their first preference, and approximately 16 per cent got into their second preference. In other words, over 90 per cent of students in the study reported getting into their first or second course preference. There were no significant differences in demographic subgroups; however, students with ATAR scores below 60 stood out as being considerably less likely than their peers to be in the course of first preference.

ATAR scores and expectations

In the 2014 study, we added a question about students' expectations of offers after receiving their ATAR scores. Almost nine out of ten students (88%) reported that they expected to receive a university offer after receiving their ATAR. The remaining 12 per cent of students was comprised largely of those with low ATAR scores (based on self-reported ATAR scores). Significantly lower proportions of students with low ATAR scores expected to receive an offer of a university place. Of low ATAR students, 40 per cent reported not expecting to receive an offer, compared to only 4 per cent of high ATAR students. This proportion rose to 65 per cent of those students with an ATAR less than 60.

Change and uncertainty

While many students settle into their studies and life at university fairly smoothly, some students have a much more uncertain start. In the 2014 study, only a quarter of the students agreed that they were ready to choose a university course when they left secondary school, and 22 per cent of students agreed that they would have preferred a general first year at university before choosing a specific course. Uncertain starts can occur when students find themselves in courses which were not their first preference, or when the course does not match their earlier expectations.

Course and enrolment changes in 2014

Each of the FYE surveys over the last two decades has included questions to explore change and uncertainty in students' directions about their courses and subjects. The findings have been fairly stable over the two decades, with the majority of students deciding to stick to the courses and institutions in which they are enrolled. However, a large proportion of students in the 2014 study

commenced their university study in a somewhat uncertain way, with approximately one in ten students having changed course or institutions in first semester, and one in five hoping to change course or institutions in their second year:

- 8% changed courses (7% in 2009)
- 3% changed institution (3% in 2009)
- 14 % were hoping to change course next year (16% in 2009)
- 8% were hoping to change to a different institution next year (8% in 2009)
- 14% withdrew from subjects (14% in 2009).

In terms of subgroup differences, a higher proportion of mature age students reported that they had changed course (12%, compared to 5% for school leavers) or institutions (5%, compared to 1% school leavers) during first year; however, they were more likely than school leavers to be satisfied with their subject choices.

Students with low ATAR scores were more likely to want to change institutions in second year, with 14 per cent indicating they hoped to move to a different university, compared to 7 per cent of high ATAR students. In addition, students with low ATAR scores were slightly more likely, although not statistically significantly, to want to change to a different course after first year (17%, compared to 14% for other students), although they were no more likely to have withdrawn from any subjects in first year.

Thinking about deferring

A positive finding from the 2014 study was a drop in the proportion of first year students indicating that they seriously considered discontinuing or deferring, from 22 per cent in 2009 to 19 per cent in 2014. Over the two decades, this represents a significant downward trend, from 33 per cent in 1994 and 1999, to 28 per cent in 2004 and 22 per cent in 2009. The reasons for this are unclear, although institutional efforts around transition programs, including academic skills support, may be a contributing factor. Also this trend is matched by increasing student satisfaction with their course. As more students are satisfied with their courses and university, fewer seriously consider deferring.

In 2014, as in previous years, those students with financial worries tended to think more of deferring. Female students were significantly more likely to think of deferring (22%, compared to 17% for male students; $p < 0.01$), as were part-time students (27%, compared to 19% for full-time students; $p < 0.01$) and students from regional backgrounds (25%, compared to 19% for metropolitan students; $p < 0.01$). Students studying in the Agriculture and Architecture fields of study were more likely to consider deferring than students in other fields of study. There was also an association between students who seriously considered discontinuing or deferring and low achievers (based on self-reports of grades from first semester).

These findings generally confirm those reported in the 2009 study; however, unlike in previous years, emotional health stood out in 2014 as a very important

reason for the majority of students who were seriously considering deferring (see Table 2.4).

Table 2.4 Reasons for considering deferring, 1999-2014 (% of students)
(1999, N=840; 2004, N=638; 2009, N=548; 2014, N=279)

		not relevant	neutral	important/ very important
Emotional health	1999	42	12	46
	2004	36	12	52
	2009	35	10	56
	2014	19	9	72**
I wanted to change courses	1999	47	11	42
	2004	45	13	42
	2009	50	13	37
	2014	47	12	41
Financial reasons	1999	55	11	34
	2004	46	15	39
	2009	47	13	40
	2014	46	10	44
I thought I might fail	1999	48	15	37
	2004	51	13	36
	2009	44	15	41
	2014	35	15	50*
University wasn't what I expected	1999	45	19	36
	2004	48	24	28
	2009	43	23	34*
	2014	42	20	38
Physical health	1999	64	10	26
	2004	62	11	27
	2009	59	11	30
	2014	53	11	36
Paid work commitments	1999	71	8	21
	2004	78	10	12
	2009	74	8	18**
	2014	72	11	17
Family commitments	1999	75	9	16
	2004	73	10	17
	2009	65	10	25**
	2014	63	11	26
I found employment	1999	82	8	11
	2004	83	7	10
	2009	76	7	17**
	2014	74	13	13

Asterisks denote a significant change from the finding five years earlier (* = significant at 0.05, ** = significant at 0.01)

A significantly larger proportion of female than male students (78% compared to 61%; $p < 0.1$) and students from regional areas (82.5%, compared to 66.4% from metropolitan areas; $p < 0.01$) reported emotional health as an important reason in considering deferring. This finding points to the growing need for initiatives to support the mental and emotional wellbeing of first year students. It also confirms recent studies showing that university students are a very high risk population for psychological distress[12].

Other notable changes from the 2009 survey were an increase in the proportion of students rating 'I thought I might fail' as an important reason in seriously considering deferring, and a significantly smaller proportion of students saying that disliking study was an important consideration. Students from low SES backgrounds were more concerned about failing than their peers (59%, compared to 36% for high SES students; $p < 0.05$), and only domestic students thought about deferring because they disliked studying (29% compared to 0% international students; $p < 0.01$).

In terms of other demographic subgroup differences, students from low SES backgrounds were far more likely than those from high SES backgrounds to cite financial reasons as important for considering deferring (47%, compared to 39% of high SES students; $p < 0.05$), and part-time students were substantially more likely to say that paid work commitments (48%, compared to 14% of full-time students; $p < 0.01$) and family commitments were important reasons for thinking about deferring (49%, compared to 23% of full-time students; $p < 0.01$).

Expectations and preparedness for university study

How students prepare for the tasks of university study is important, as students who do better academically early in their studies are consequently more satisfied and persistent. As well, first year students' expectations about what their university courses will like influence their early attitudes towards study, and the quality of their experience. In 2014 almost one in five students (18%) said that university had not lived up to their expectations. This has not changed since the 2004 and 2009 studies.

Further analysis shows some important differences in the subgroup categories. Students with low ATAR scores were significantly more likely than their peers to say that university had not lived up to their expectations (27%, compared to 19% for other students; $p < 0.05$), as did international students (24%, compared to 18% of domestic students; $p < 0.5$) and low achievers (25%, compared to 12% of high achievers; $p < 0.5$).

[12] Stallman's (2010) survey of nearly 6500 students in two Australian universities, for example, showed high levels of psychological distress in 84 per cent of the participants, compared to only 29 per cent of the overall Australian population reporting such levels.

From school to university

Table 2.5 shows items relating to expectations and preparedness for university study. The data show a significant increase over the past decade in the proportion of students reporting that they had received good advice about courses from their teachers at school, from 52 per cent in 2004, to 58 per cent in 2009 and 58 per cent in 2014. This shows that schools are doing more to prepare students for university study. The findings also show that there is an increased expectation at school for students to attend university, as seen in the sharp rise in the proportion of students saying that there was a lot of pressure at school to go to university, from 50 per cent in 2009 to 65 per cent in 2014. This pressure was felt more acutely by students from high SES backgrounds than their low SES student counterparts (70% compared to 59%; $p < 0.01$).

Table 2.5 From school to university, 1994-2014 (% of students agreeing that a statement is important)
(1994, N=2897; 1999, N=1910; 2004, N=1620; 2009, N=1610; 2014, N=843)

	1994	1999	2004	2009	2014
I would have preferred starting with a general first year at university before choosing a specific course	28	23**	25	20**	22
The standard of work expected at university is much higher than I expected	45	43	41	40	38
I was not really ready to choose a university course on leaving secondary school	34	34	30*	26**	25
My final school year was a very good preparation for the study I am now doing	36	34	43**	51**	50
My parents have little understanding of what I do at university	31	31	32	32	37*
The subjects at university clearly build on my study at school	34	33	42**	51**	55
I received good advice from teachers at my school about choosing my course	–	–	52	58**	64**
There was a lot of pressure at my school to go to uni	–	–	–	50	65**

Asterisks denote a significant change from the finding five years earlier (* = significant at 0.05, ** = significant at 0.01)

While students from low SES backgrounds were less likely to feel pressure from their schools to attend university, they were more likely to report that their parents had little understanding of what they did at university (48%, compared

to 25% of high SES students; $p < 0.01$). This may suggest that they have less ability to find help and support at home.

University orientation programs

Universities devote a considerable amount of energy and resources into orientation programs aimed at helping first year students form an identity as students, as well as develop a sense of affiliation with their institution and their course. Many programs also focus on raising students' awareness about academic expectations and standards, and the kinds of academic skills needed to perform well at university. While most, if not all, universities offer a range of orientation programs, surprisingly little is known about their effectiveness in helping students transition smoothly into university life.

In 2014, we added a question about university orientation programs to examine students' perceptions and experiences with the programs offered at their universities. Three out of ten students reported that they had actively engaged with university orientation programs and fewer than half of these students (42%) believed that the programs helped them get off to a good start. These findings indicate that only a small proportion of students are engaging with orientation programs. It is therefore important for universities to continue evaluating their orientation programs and (re)direct resources into programs that are shown to be effective.

Adjusting to university study

University assessment and standards

Over the two decades of First Year Experience studies, there has been a slight decline in the proportion of students saying that the standard of work expected at university is much higher than they expected. Two thirds of students in the 2014 study reported that the average marks they achieved in semester one were the same or higher than what they had expected, with 23 per cent reporting that their marks were higher than expected, and 44 per cent saying they were the same as expected. A third of the students received average marks lower than they had expected. This is the same as students in 2009, although there has been an increase in the proportion of students reporting higher than expected marks (from 17% in 2009), and a decrease in the proportion of students reporting marks the same as they expected (from 51% in 2009).

In terms of marks achieved for first semester, two thirds of the respondents reported average marks between 61-80 per cent. This was slightly lower than in 2009 when 70.2 per cent of the respondents reported achieving average marks between 61-80 per cent. However, the proportion of students reporting high average marks of over 80 per cent increased from 14 per cent in 2009 to 21 per cent in 2014. This may suggest that more high achievers participated in the study in 2014 than in the past. In 2014, 3 per cent of the survey participants received average marks below 50 per cent. This is slightly higher than in 2009, when only 2 per cent of the students reported average marks below 50 per cent.

Academic application

The three items in Table 2.6 make up the academic application scale, which identifies students who are conscientious in their approach to study. Being motivated to study and working consistently are core items relating to academic application to studies. While the item 'regularly seeking advice and assistance from staff' could be interpreted as meaning students are anxious and dependent, it is an example of help-seeking behaviour and indicates that students are resourceful and proactive in managing the challenges they may be facing with their studies.

Table 2.6 Academic application, 1994-2014 (% of students)
(1994, N=4028; 1999, N=2609; 2004, N=2344; 2009, N=2422; 2014, N=1559)

		Disagree		Agree
I find it difficult to get myself motivated to study	1994	28	31	42
	1999	23	29	48**
	2004	36	28	36**
	2009	33	31	36
	2014	36	28	36
I regularly seek the advice and assistance of the teaching staff	1994	49	30	20
	1999	50	31	19
	2004	36	36	29**
	2009	32	39	29
	2014	29	34	37**
I worked consistently throughout first semester	1994	39	26	37
	1999	38	25	37
	2009	29	28	43
	2014	28	25	47*

Asterisks denote a significant change from the finding five years earlier (* = significant at 0.05, ** = significant at 0.01)

Just under half the students in the 2014 study worked consistently throughout first semester. While there is still much room for improvement, it is a significant increase from 43 per cent in 2009, and 37 per cent in 2004, with part-time students much more likely to say they worked consistently throughout semester than full-time students (62%, compared to 46% of full-time students; $p < 0.01$). There has also been a large increase in the proportion of students saying that they regularly seek the advice and assistance of teaching staff, from 29 per cent in 2009 to 37 per cent in 2014.

Being motivated to study is critical for persistence and achievement. While there has been a slight drop over the two decades in the proportion of students saying they find it difficult to get motivated to study, over a third of the students in the 2014 study indicated difficulty in getting motivated. This is a concern as low motivation can lead to disengagement, which places students at greater risk of poor academic performance or discontinuing their studies.

There were significant subgroup differences in students' academic application in the first year. Students who entered university with low ATAR scores were more likely to report being less motivated (43%, compared to 34% of high ATAR

students), as were those who were low achievers based on first semester marks (52%, compared to 16% of higher achievers; $p < 0.01$). Female students were also more like to say they found it difficult to get motivated (39%, compared to 33% of male students; $p < 0.05$), and international students stood out as being far more likely than domestic students to seek advice and assistance regularly from teaching staff (52%, compared to 35% of domestic students; $p < 0.01$).

Being a university student

The first year is an important time for students to develop their identity as university students and to determine whether or not university life is for them. For some students, the transition to university is extremely difficult and one of the reasons for this is because it challenges their views of themselves and their place in the world[13]. While many of these students will revise their expectations and learn to adjust to university life, for some, the mismatch between what they expected and what they experience early in the first year is too great and they may decide not to persist with their studies.

Table 2.7 shows the responses to three questions that make up the student identity scale. In the 2014 study, almost three quarters of the students (72%) reported that they really liked being a university student, and over two thirds (67%) said that it was exciting to be at university. While over half the students (58%) in the 2014 study believed that university life really suited them, this was significantly lower than in 2009. Full-time students, male students and students from high SES backgrounds were more likely than their peers to report that university life suited them.

Students with low ATAR scores in the 2014 study were significantly less likely than their peers to say that it was exciting to be at university or that university life really suited them. As noted earlier in this chapter, students with low ATAR scores were also far more likely to report that university had not lived up to their expectations, and that they were seriously considering discontinuing or deferring.

Table 2.7 Student identity, 1994-2014 (% of students)
(1994, N=4028; 1999, N=2609; 2004, N=2344; 2009, N=2422; 2014, N=1486)

		Disagree		Agree
I really like being a university student	1994	8	18	74
	1999	7	19	74
	2004	8	17	75
	2009	7	19	74
	2014	7	21	72
It is exciting to be at university	2009	12	26	62
	2014	10	23	67**
I think university life really suits me	1994	15	36	49
	2009	11	26	63
	2014	12	30	58**

Asterisks denote a significant change from the finding five years earlier (** = significant at 0.01)

[13] Krause and Coates 2008.

Summary

First year students continue to have a strong sense of purpose and their reasons for coming to university have remained stable, despite the radically changing context of Australian higher education in the past decade. The findings show that students are increasingly entering universities feeling well prepared and informed about what to expect at university. For the majority of students, university is living up to their expectations. While the pattern is not uniform across all subgroups, there seems to be less of a marked disparity than there has been in prior surveys in the expectations of students from certain demographic subgroups. Notably, the group that stood out in 2014 as more likely to feel that university had not lived up to their expectations was students with low ATAR scores.

Overall, most of the students who responded to the 2014 survey appeared to have adjusted quite well to university, with 72 per cent saying they enjoy being a university student, and over two thirds (67%) saying that it is exciting to be at university. However, fewer than half of the students reported working consistently throughout, and motivation to study remains challenging for over a third. Again, students with low ATAR scores and low achievers were more likely than their peers to struggle with motivation to study. Providing clear information and early advice on subject selection seems crucial to help with student motivation, as does offering individualised course advice on specialisations and pathways.

3. STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN LEARNING AND THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

This chapter outlines several aspects of student engagement with learning and their university community. There have been some significant shifts in attitudinal and behavioural dimensions of student engagement. Most students report that they are highly engaged with their subjects and courses, and enjoy the intellectual challenge of the subjects they study. In 2014, student interaction with academics had increased significantly from previous years. A growing proportion of students believe it is exciting to be at university and report that they like being on their university campus.

However, challenges remain in terms of students' social and academic engagement. There is an increase in the proportion of students who keep to themselves and a decrease in students who report that they have made one or two close friends during their first year at university. There has also been a decrease in the proportion of students who are confident that at least one of their teachers knows their name. While in 2014 the majority of students were satisfied with their university experience, they were less socially engaged with the university community than students in previous studies.

Notable trends between 2009 and 2014

	In 2009	**In 2014**
My university offered me a good range of subjects/units from which I could choose this year	58	**68****
Satisfied with the subject choices made in their study	68	**75****
Enjoy intellectual challenge of subjects studied	62	**68****
There is a positive attitude to learning among my fellow students	57	**66****
Generally keep to myself at university	32	**44****
Made at least one or two close friends at university	74	**65****
I regularly seek advice or help from academic staff	29	**37****

Differences between 2009 and 2014 statistically significant at 0.01

Engagement with the University

Advice to students about program and subject choices is an important factor that contributes to student engagement. There has been minimal increase in student satisfaction with course advice, with 39 per cent indicating that they were satisfied, compared with 37 per cent in 2009. This was consistent across all subgroups of students. This is an area that universities can improve on, as it is important that students receive guidance in navigating subject choice in the first year of their studies. On the other hand, students are increasingly satisfied with the subjects offered by their institutions. Over two thirds of the respondents (68%) thought that their university offered a good range of subjects from which they could choose, and three quarters were satisfied with the subject choices that they had made. This indicates that, although the majority of students believed they did not receive personalised advice regarding their subject choices, they remained satisfied with the subjects they selected.

Table 3.1 Indicators of student engagement at the institutional level, 1994-2014 (% of students)
(1994, N=4028; 1999, N=2609; 2004, N=2344; 2009, N=2422; 2014, N=1486)

		Disagree		Agree
I was given helpful advice when choosing my subjects/units	2004	34	33	33
	2009	31	32	37**
	2014	31	30	39
I am satisfied with the subject choices I made this year	2004	12	27	61
	2009	9	23	68**
	2014	6	19	75**
My university offered me a good range of subjects/units from which I could choose this year	2004	25	26	49
	2009	17	26	58**
	2014	9	23	68**

Asterisks denote a significant change from the finding five years earlier (** = significant at 0.01)

Time on campus

In 2014, over half the students reported spending four to five days on campus. Since 2009, there has been a slight drop in the proportion of students who attend on campus four to five days per week (59% in 2014, compared with 63% in 2009). The percentage of students who reported spending two to three days per week on campus has remained the same in the last five years at 32 per cent. The 2014 survey also indicated that students spend more hours studying online. There is evidence from the study that students who reported that they missed classes because the lectures and materials were available online spent less time on campus than their peers. However, the general hours spent on study has not changed significantly (as discussed later in this chapter). There is greater flexibility around the learning environment that is not necessarily marked by hours spent on campus. Student patterns of behaviour are changing and the large majority are highly satisfied with their university experience.

Table 3.2 Number of days per week usually spent on campus, 1994-2014 (% of students)
(1994, N=4028; 1999, N=2609; 2004, N=2344; 2009, N=2422; 2014, N=1493)

	1 day	2 days	3 days	4 days	5 days	6 days	7 days
1994	1	4	12	31	47	2	4
1999	3	6	21	31	36	1	3
2004	3	4	16	34	39	2	2
2009	1**	6*	26**	32	31**	2	2
2014	2*	8	24	32	27**	2	5**

Asterisks denote a significant change from the finding five years earlier (* = significant at 0.05, ** = significant at 0.01)

Engagement with learning

Course contact hours

In 2014, the mean average of course contact hours for students was about 15 hours per week. This has remained largely the same as the 2009 study, although subtle changes have emerged in patterns of engagement in 2014. There was an increase in the number of students indicating one to five course contact hours

per week (7% in 2014; $p < 0.01$) and six to ten hours (18%; $p < 0.01$), and a decrease in the proportion of students who reported 11 to 15 contact hours per week (37%; $p< 0.05$).

Table 3.3 Course contact hours per week, 1994-2014 (% of students)
(1994, N=4028; 1999, N=2609; 2004, N=2344; 2009, N=2422; 2014, N=1334)

	1-5 hrs	6-10 hrs	11-15 hrs	16-20 hrs	21-25 hrs	26-30 hrs	31+ hrs
1994	2	10	30	24	21	9	2
1999	2	10	36	24	20	7	2
2004	4	11	39	25	16	4	1
2009	4	14**	42*	21**	13*	4	2
2014	7**	18**	37**	21	14	2*	2

Asterisks denote a significant change from the finding five years earlier (* = significant at 0.05, ** = significant at 0.01)

Time spent on private study

There has been no change in the average hours per week students spend on their study. They reported spending less time on private study; nine hours per week compared with 10.6 hours in 2009. However, they also indicated that they spend nine hours per week using the internet for study and research, an increase of two hours per week compared with the findings from 2009. In total, students spend 18 hours per week on average on study related activities. There are no major differences between those who spend less/more than average time in Internet study. However, for the students who reported spending less than the average time in private study, they were:

- Less likely to be getting 80% or above;
- More likely to be marking time while deciding their future;
- More likely to have difficulty with motivation;
- Less likely to enjoy the intellectual challenge;
- Less likely to have worked out how to manage their workload;
- Less likely to have worked consistently over semester 1;
- Less likely to have made a close friend, and
- More likely to be at risk of deferring.

Academic engagement

Table 3.4 comprises of two items that give an indication of students' intellectual engagement. There is an increase in the proportion of students who enjoy the intellectual challenge of the subjects they are studying (68% in 2014). Over half of the students reported that they got a lot of satisfaction from studying (compared with 49% in 2009). In 2014, students were more engaged with their studies than students in previous surveys.

Table 3.4 Intellectual engagement, 1994-2014 (% of students)
(1994, N=4028; 1999, N=2609; 2004, N=2344; 2009, N=2422; 2014, N=1559)

		Disagree		Agree
I enjoy the intellectual challenge of subjects I am studying	1994	12	27	61
	1999	12	27	61
	2004	12	25	63
	2009	11	27	62
	2014	9	23	68**
I get a lot of satisfaction from studying	1994	22	35	43
	1999	25	35	40*
	2004	18	33	49**
	2009	18	33	49
	2014	18	29	53*

Asterisks denote a significant change from the finding five years earlier (* = significant at 0.05, ** = significant at 0.01)

Students who are deeply engaged in learning actively contribute to and take responsibility for their own learning. Table 3.5 includes four items used in the survey to indicate student classroom engagement behaviour. The majority of students (88%) reported that they asked questions and contributed in class. Around 71 per cent of students had made class presentations in the first semester of their course, largely unchanged from 2009. These trends have not changed significantly since 2004, indicating that student patterns of engagement with their studies have not altered on these two measures as the sector has widened participation in higher education.

The majority of students reported that for some of the time they attended classes unprepared, with a small percentage of students (14%) reporting that they frequently attended classes unprepared. These numbers have varied slightly since 2004, but largely remain consistent. This is also the case for the number of students who indicated that they missed classes. In 2014, the majority of students indicated that they missed classes, and, as in 2009, many of the students acknowledged that they this was due to the availability of lecture recordings and notes online. Disabled students were more likely to skip classes, while international and mature age students were less likely to skip classes. In general terms, patterns of classroom engagement which include asking questions, class presentations, preparation for classes and missing classes have not dramatically changed since 2004.

Table 3.5 Frequency of selected classroom engagement/disengagement behaviours in the first year, 2009-2014 (% of students)
(2009, N=2422; 2014, N=1559)

Selected classroom engagement/ disengagement behaviours		Never	Sometimes	Frequently
Ask questions in class or contribute to class discussion	2004	10	54	36
	2009	11	58	31
	2014	12	58	30
Make class presentations	2004	31	55	14
	2009	28	56	16
	2014	29	55	16
Come to class without completing readings or assignments	2004	27	60	13
	2009	29	58	13
	2014	31	55	14
Skip classes	2004	41	51	8
	2009	40	51	8
	2014	42	48	10

Engagement with academic staff

Studies into the student experience have found that students who find academic staff available and helpful are more engaged with their studies than those who do not. In 2014, two thirds of first year students felt confident that one of their teachers knew their name. There has also been a significant increase in the number of students who regularly seek advice or help from academic staff. This, coupled with increased levels of satisfaction with feedback on their work (see chapter 6), indicates that students are much more engaged with their higher education studies. However, about 30 per cent of students do not seek advice from academic staff. Importantly, this group of students was most likely to report low achievement levels in the first semester of their studies. This could have implications for student retention.

Table 3.6 Indicators of student engagement with academic staff (% of students)
(1994, N=4028; 1999, N=2609; 2004, N=2344; 2009, N=2422; 2014, N=1559)

		Disagree		Agree
I feel confident that at least one of my teachers knows my name	2004	23	11	66
	2009	28	14	58**
	2014	23	17	60
I regularly seek advice or help from academic staff	1994	49	30	20
	1999	50	31	19
	2004	36	35	29**
	2009	32	39	29
	2014	30	33	37**

Asterisks denote a significant change from the finding five years earlier (** = significant at 0.01)

Engagement with peers

First year students in the 2014 study were less engaged with their peers in academic and social contexts. Table 3.7 has five items that offer an indication of the extent to which students work with peers within and beyond formal learning contexts. There has been a significant rise in the proportion of students reporting that there is a positive attitude to learning among their fellow students (66% in 2014, compared with 57% in 2009; $p < 0.01$). Apart from this finding, not much has changed in terms of peer engagement of first year undergraduates over the last ten years. The proportion of students who believe that they felt a part of a group of students committed to learning has remained consistent across the past ten years. While the majority of students indicated that they studied with other students, worked with other students on projects during class, and worked with classmates outside of class on group assignments, at least one quarter of students reported that they had not engaged in these activities in the first semester of their studies.

Of the students who said they never studied with others, 49 per cent said they never worked with other students during class, and 56 per cent said they never worked with others outside of class on group assignments, which is about double what it is for the groups as a whole. Just under 70 per cent of students who never worked with others in class also never worked with others outside of class. These patterns indicate that there is a small percentage of students who simply do not engage academically with their peers. They are more likely to be low SES background, Indigenous students, studying arts, education or science, and have withdrawn from subjects. There is no correlation with either high or low achievers, indicating that engagement with peers did not positively or negatively influence their first semester academic results. However, while peer engagement was not correlated with achievement, those who reported never studying with other students were significantly less satisfied with their overall university experience (64%) than students who had studied with peers (79%; $p < 0.01$). The findings only offer a snapshot of first year student experiences after one full semester of university study. It is unclear what the longer-term influence of lack of peer engagement on students' academic results or retention might be.

Table 3.7 **Peer engagement scale (% of students)**
(2009, N=2422; 2014, N=1347)

		Never	Sometimes	Frequently
Work with classmates outside of class on group assignments	2004	29	50	21
	2009	23	48	29
	2014	26	47	27
Work with other students on projects during class	2004	21	59	20
	2009	19	54	27
	2014	21	52	27
Study with other students	2004	29	51	17
	2009	24	59	17
	2014	26	56	18
I feel part of a group of students committed to learning	2004	14	31	55
	2009	14	33	53
	2014	15	29	56
There is a positive attitude to learning among my fellow students	2009	10		57
	2014	7		66**

Asterisks denote a significant change from the finding five years earlier (** = significant at 0.01)

Beyond classroom engagement

Research into the first year experience highlights the importance of peer engagement beyond the classroom. Table 3.8 includes items that offer some insights into the behaviours and attitudes of students beyond the classroom.

Whilst there has been a slight increase in the percentage of students who really like being on campus (66% per cent in 2014, compared with 63% in 2009), there has also been a slight decrease in the students who felt that they belonged to their university community (47 % in 2014, compared with 50% in 2009). The groups of students less likely to feel that they belong to their university community have not changed since the 2009 report. They are:

- Students planning to defer;
- Low achievers;
- Part-time students;
- Mature age students over 25 years, and
- Full-time students in paid work 16 or more hours per week.

The only addition is students who are studying at least one subject online.

Table 3.8 Beyond class engagement (% of students)
(2009, N=2422; 2014, N=1347)

		Disagree		Agree
I have made at least one or two close friends on campus	2009	14		74
	2014	20		65**
Coming to campus is important for making friends	**2014**	9		73
Social media is important for making friends on campus	**2014**	16		48
I really like being on my university campus	2004	12		60
	2009	11		63*
	2014	10		66
I feel like I belong to the university community	2004	16		51
	2009	18		50
	2014	20		47
I am not particularly interested in the extra-curricular activities or facilities provided	1994	44		28
	1999	43		27
	2004	37		32**
	2009	34		34
	2014	38		30**
I generally keep to myself at university	1994	-	-	26
	1999	-	-	27
	2004	50	22	28
	2009	43	25	32
	2014	29	27	44**
I am actively involved in university extra-curricular activities	2004	63	17	20
	2009	68	15	17
	2014	58	19	23

Asterisks denote a significant change from the finding five years earlier (* = significant at 0.05, ** = significant at 0.01)

In 2014 we asked two new questions regarding social peer engagement. Nearly three quarters of the students believed that coming to campus was important for making friends. Just under half of the students indicated that social media was important for making friends on campus, revealing that students see the importance of social media as a tool to assist with social engagement on campus. However, in 2014, the proportion of students who had made one or two close friends at university had decreased. About one fifth of first year students had not made one or two close friends in their first year. Two fifths of students reported that they kept to themselves at university (44% in 2014; $p < 0.01$, compared with 32% in 2009). While students reported increased levels of satisfaction with their university experience, these indicators reveal that students are less engaged with their peers outside the classroom.

One important avenue for peer engagement outside of class is through activities offered by sports, clubs and societies. In 2014, just under one quarter of students indicated that they were actively involved in university extra-curricular activities, and 38 per cent were interested in extra-curricular activities provided by their university, compared with 34 per cent in 2009. These findings indicate

that students are increasingly engaging with university life via extra-curricular activities, and these provide an important avenue for social integration, particularly given the increasing number of students who are not making friends or engaging with peers in academic contexts.

Summary

The 2014 study has revealed subtle but important trends in how first year students have engaged with their studies and their university community. Average contact hours have remained the same as 2009, and there has been a significant increase in the proportion of students who felt satisfied with their subject choices, course design and with their interactions with teaching staff. However, the study also revealed that classroom engagement and engagement with peers remained challenging for many students. The picture that emerged is one where students are increasingly satisfied with their university experience, but are not engaging academically or socially with their peers. This is cause for some concern for institutions as students' social engagement with peers is a strong predictor of student retention. The issues concerning peer engagement are complex and institutions may need to gather more detailed patterns of academic and social engagement at the discipline level.

4. THE CHANGING CURRICULUM AND THE INFLUENCE OF ONLINE TECHNOLOGIES

Curriculum renewal has been a focus within universities in recent years. Work integrated learning, the teaching-research nexus and internationalisation of the curriculum are examples of curriculum diversification, aimed at preparing students for future workplace roles. This section will explore the extent to which first year students are aware of and engage with some of these changes to university curriculum.

The most significant trends have been in the area of online technologies. Nearly all the students surveyed in 2014 were using online technologies. This is not unexpected given the increased use of these technologies for learning. However, less than two thirds of students thought that online resources and educational technologies allowed them to spend less time on campus. In addition, there has been an increase in the proportion of students who believed that they can miss out on classes because materials are available online (40% in 2014, compared with 34% in 2009). One of the main trends over the last decade relates to the increased use of online technologies meaning that first year students spend less time on campus.

Notable trends between 2009 and 2014

	In 2009	**In 2014**
In my studies, I am getting a chance to learn about the research being done in my university	31	**42****
Average hours per week spent using the Internet for study or research	6.5	**9****
Utility of online learning management systems for learning	92	**99****
Utility of lecture recordings for learning	75	**91****
Utility of social networking for learning	61	**81****
You can miss a lot of classes in this course because most notes and materials can be found online	34	**40****
Enrolled in subjects/units delivered totally online	8	**11****

Differences between 2009 and 2014 statistically significant at 0.01

The changing curriculum

Table 4.1 presents the findings from five items which focus on students' perceptions of the curriculum in relation to research, and the cohesion of subject studies as they relate to future study and employment. There has been a significant increase in the proportion of students who reported that their studies offered opportunities for them to learn about the research that is undertaken at their institution (42% in 2014, compared with 31% in 2009; $p < 0.01$). There has also been a slight increase in the percentage of students who indicated that their subjects had given them some awareness of the latest research (53% in 2014, compared with 50% in 2009).

Given the focus on graduates' knowledge and skills for professional work in the Australian Qualifications Framework[14], many universities are developing

[14] Australian Qualification Framework 2013.

programs that focus on this aspect. Underlying this curriculum development is the view that students benefit from planning their post-university careers and taking responsibility for their own professional identity from the first year of their studies[15]. Nearly three quarters of the students believed that their subject provided a good basis for future study and career prospects. These figures have not changed since 2009, and the indications are that students are making the connections between their current studies and future goals.

Table 4.1 Perceptions of curriculum, 2009-2014, 5-point scale collapsed to 3 points (% of students)
(2009, N=2422; 2014, N=1347)

		Disagree		Agree
My subjects are giving me an awareness of the latest research	2009	16	34	50
	2014	17	30	53
In my studies, I am getting a chance to learn about the research being done in my university	2009	38	31	31
	2014	28	30	42**
My subjects are providing a good base for my future studies	2009	7	18	75
	2014	5	19	76
I can see the connection between my subjects and future career prospects	2009	9	16	75
	2014	9	18	73
Overall the subjects I am studying fit together well	2009	5	17	78
	2014	4	17	79

Asterisks denote a significant change from the finding five years earlier (** = significant at 0.01)

A feature of many universities' curriculum is work integrated learning. First year students were asked about their intentions to undertake such programs, with 54 per cent indicating that industry placements were offered as part of their degree. Approximately a third of students had not yet considered placements. In contrast, there were no differences in the proportion of students based on equity group members, marks or ATAR achieved, although women were slightly over-represented (60%, compared to 55% of those not considering placements).

Table 4.2 Intentions for industry placements and study abroad (% of students)
(N=1739)

	Yes	No	Haven't considered	Not offered
Are you expecting to undertake industry placements?	49	11	31	9
Are you intending to study abroad or go on an exchange program?	28	33	39	-

Across the cohort, 9 per cent of students indicated that industry placements were not offered as part of their degrees, although there was some institutional variation in this. Only 5 per cent of students at Applied University and 4 per cent at Evolving University believed placements were not offered, and 61 per cent of

[15] Arkoudis, Baik, Bexley and Doughney 2014.

students at Applied University and 62 per cent at Evolving University were intending to undertake an industry placement. In contrast, 18 per cent of students at Traditional University were not intending to undertake a placement, and 47 per cent had not considered it yet. As might also have been expected, there were substantial differences based on Broad Field of Education (Table 4.3). Students in Education, Agriculture and Health were most likely to be considering a placement, whereas those in Society and Culture, Information Technology and Science were least likely, as well as being among the most likely to have not yet considered it.

Table 4.3 Students intending to undertake an industry placement by Broad Field of Education (% of students)

	Yes	No	Have not considered	Not offered
Society and culture	32	18	37	13
Management and commerce	41	13	34	13
Education	74	8	14	4
Health	72	8	15	6
Science	28	14	48	10
Creative arts	32	10	39	19
Engineering	64	9	24	3
Info technology	31	15	38	15
Agriculture and environment	73	5	18	5
Architecture	35	4	54	8

Only 28 per cent of students reported that they intended to undertake a study abroad or exchange program. The most popular intended destinations for studying abroad were Europe (53% of those intending to study abroad), North America (31%) and Asia (15%), perhaps indicating less desire to engage with the Asia-Pacific region.

Women were more likely to wish to study abroad, comprising 63 per cent of those intending to do so, compared to 55 per cent of those not intending or not having considered studying abroad. Although no differences were seen based on marks achieved in first semester, only 11% of students considering studying abroad had an ATAR less than 70, compared with 22% of those who were not considering exchange. Conversely, 81% of students considering studying abroad had an ATAR of 81 or above, compared with 65% of those not considering exchange. Part-time students, students from regional and remote backgrounds, and low SES students were less likely to intend to study abroad. This may be due to different financial situations or family or other responsibilities.

Language competence could be one of the factors which prevents students from undertaking study abroad programs in Asian countries. Only 23 per cent of students planned to or were studying a language as part of their course, which remains the same from the 2009 study. Studying a language was less common among students with a disability (3%, rather than 6% of those not studying a language), part-time students (4%, compared to 9%), students from regional backgrounds (25%, compared with 30%), low SES students (30%, compared with 43%) and low ATAR students (13%, compared with 41%).

Use of technology for study purposes

Traditional views of the on campus university experience are changing as students engage more with online technologies. Mobile and social networking technologies have become a feature of how information is accessed and communicated, and for first year university students an essential aspect of engaging with learning and teaching. Universities are investing more in understanding students' patterns of behaviour and engagement with online technologies as part of their learning[16]. In this report we discuss some of the broad observations as they relate to students' use and experiences of learning technologies.

As noted in Chapter 3, there has been no overall change in the amount of time students reported spending in private study, at an average of 18 hours per week. However, there has been a notable shift towards spending this time studying using the Internet. The average weekly hours spent using the Internet for study have increased from 4.2 in 2004, to 6.5 in 2009, to 9 in 2014 ($p < 0.01$). This is the first time that at least half of an average student's study time has been spent using the Internet. While there was considerable individual variation reported in this factor (Table 4.4), there was also some relationship seen with specific student subgroups. International students (average 11 hours per week; $p < 0.05$), students from regional backgrounds (average 10 hours per week; $p < 0.05$) and women (average 10 hours per week, compared to 8 hours per week for men; $p < 0.01$) spent significantly more time in Internet-based study than others. Mature age students, those who spoke a language other than English at home, and Indigenous students all spent an average of 11 hours per week studying on the Internet, but this difference wasn't statistically significant for these groups.

Table 4.4 Estimated time spent using the Internet for study or research per week, 2004-2014 (% of students)
(2004, N=2344; 2009, N=2422; 2014, N=1334)

	None	1-5 hrs	6-10 hrs	11-15 hrs	16-20 hrs	21-25 hrs	26-30 hrs	31+ hrs
2004	3	77	16	2	1	0	0	0
2009	2**	60**	25**	7**	4**	1**	1**	1**
2014	4**	42**	32**	8	7**	3**	2*	3**

Asterisks denote a significant change from the finding five years earlier (* = significant at 0.05, ** = significant at 0.01)

As well as estimating the amount of time spent using technology to study, students were asked about their use of a number of different technologies (Table 4.5). Online learning management systems were used on a daily basis by the overwhelming majority of students, but strikingly, more than half of students reported using Internet-based course-specific resources, lecture recordings, social networking technologies, as well as more traditional face-to-face study groups, on at least a weekly basis.

[16] Corrin, Bennett and Lockyer 2013.

Table 4.5 Frequency of technology usage (% of students)
(N=1347)

	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Once a semester	Never
Online learning management systems	83	15	1	0	1
Course-specific Internet-based resources	40	48	8	0	4
Lecture recordings	14	49	18	7	12
Social networking technologies for study purposes	23	29	14	7	28
Online discussion groups	8	26	21	12	35
Face-to-face discussion with other students	13	40	20	8	19

Interestingly, face-to-face discussion groups were used more frequently, and regarded as more useful by users, than online discussion groups (Table 4.6). This indicates that while there has been a sharp increase in the use of technology, students appear to value the face-to-face interactions in terms of supporting their learning. While the survey did not ask students to give reasons for this, it would be useful for institutions to explore the reasons for such responses to enhance their online learning strategies.

Table 4.6 Online technology access and utility for learning in the first year
(1999, N=2609; 2004, N=2344; 2009, N=2422; 2014, N=1347)

Form of online technology		% reporting online technology availability	Utility for learning (expressed as % of those who had used)
Online learning management system	2009	96	92
	2014	100**	99**
Internet-based resources designed for course	1999	75	64
	2004	95**	80**
	2009	99**	98**
	2014	99	96*
Lecture recordings	2009	91	75
	2014	97**	91**
Social networking for study purposes	2009	90	61
	2014	97**	81**
Subjects offered online with no face-to-face classes	2009	76	30
	2014	77	48**
Online discussion with other students	1999	25	19
	2004	44**	46**
	2009	95**	64**
	2014	94	70**
Getting together with other students to discuss subjects/units face-to-face	2009	98	84
	2014	97	85

Asterisks denote a significant change from the finding five years earlier (* = significant at 0.05, ** = significant at 0.01)

It is clear that educational technologies, both formal and student-organised, are now ubiquitous, and generally highly regarded by users. A possible exception to this is purely online classes, which, along with the lower usage of online discussion groups compared to face-to-face discussion groups, may demonstrate that despite their familiarity with online technologies and lower social engagement with universities (see Chapter 3), students still prize face-to-face interaction with their teaching staff. This would appear to be consistent with the high levels of satisfaction with teaching reported in Chapter 6. In general, completely online teaching still appears to be a niche, although increasing, component of the university experience for these students (Table 4.7). MOOCs, despite their much-hyped influence over the traditional university experience, are not a significant feature of the student experience for the overwhelming majority of students in the 2014 First Year Experience sample.

Table 4.7 Enrolment in online and external units
(2009, N=2422; 2014, N=1347)

Are you enrolled in	2009	2014
Subjects/units delivered totally online	8	11**
Online subjects/units offered by Open Universities Australia	2	1
Subjects/units in another institution	2	1
MOOCs as part of your course	-	1
MOOCs outside your course for personal interest	-	2

Asterisks denote a significant change from the finding five years earlier (** = significant at 0.01)

Students reporting that they had enrolled in MOOCs as part of their courses were distributed across five of the eight universities sampled; the maximum proportion in each institution was 2 per cent.

Availability of online technologies by institution

For the first time in the First Year Experience survey, students were asked about their perceptions of the availability of online technologies and related technology support at the institutions. Interestingly, the levels of reported agreement with the following statements (Table 4.8) did not vary significantly with gender, membership of formal equity groups, study load, average marks in first semester or ATAR, whereas responses did vary by institution.

The purpose of this section is to illustrate the variation in the provision of online technologies and effective support across the sector. It is not our intention to rank institutions; in general, two thirds to three quarters of students were satisfied with the availability of online technologies regardless of institution, and there was little consistency between items for most institutions.

Table 4.8 Availability of ICTs (% of students agreeing with statement in the sample, and the institutions with the highest and lowest proportions of agreement)
(2009, N=2422; 2014, N=1347)

		Cohort	High	Low
I have good Wi-Fi access on campus	2014	77	88**	49**
Student support services at my institution can be accessed online	2014	68	87**	61*
Most administrative tasks (enrolling in classes, submitting assignments etc) that I want to do, I can do online	2014	87	90	81*
My institution provides enough support for me to understand how to use the technologies needed in my course	2014	73	83**	68*
Teaching staff use the appropriate types of technology to enhance my learning	2014	78	85*	74
Lecturers make good use of technology to support my learning	2014	77	84*	69*
Most of the resources I need to study are able to be accessed online	2014	81	88*	75*
Online resources and educational technology allow me to spend less time on campus	2014	63	80**	49**
You can miss a lot of classes in this course because most notes and materials can be found online	2009	34	45**	27**
	2014	40**	55**	35*

Asterisks denote a significant change from the finding five years earlier (* = significant at 0.05, ** = significant at 0.01)

Summary

While there has been an increased focus on curriculum renewal within the sector, students were more likely to consider work integrated learning opportunities that related to industry placements. Approximately a third of students intended to study abroad, although their desired destinations do not align well with plans to engage with the Asia-Pacific region. Half of students intended to undertake a work placement, particularly those studying Education, Agriculture and Health (where work placements, in many cases, form part of the course requirements), and there were clear differences based on institution.

The use of online technologies in teaching is now ever-present and, although there are some exceptions, generally well-regarded by students as useful to their learning. Although access to these technologies and extent of use was widespread among all students, there were institutional differences—in some cases, large differences—in the availability of services and support. In general, however, between two thirds and three quarters of students were satisfied with the use of technology in their institutions.

5. MANAGING WORK AND STUDY

Since 2009, the proportion of students in paid work has decreased, as well as the reported time spent in class or in private study, although the amount of time spent using the Internet for study or research has increased substantially, resulting in little change to the overall time spent studying. This change is reflected in a broader disengagement from university communities, although there has been no corresponding increase in negative reports of isolation or dissatisfaction.

Fewer students work during their studies in 2014 than in 2009. However, there has been an increase in the proportion of students who report that worrying about money interferes with their study, from 33 per cent to 39 per cent. Regardless of employment status, financial stress correlates with an increased risk of a poor student experience on a number of factors, including considering deferring or withdrawing from their studies. However, higher proportions of students report being able to manage their commitments (48%, from 43%). Students' main motivations for working are affording extras and becoming financially independent. Nearly two thirds of those working do so to afford basic needs. These are consistent with the findings from the 2009 survey.

Notable trends between 2009 and 2014

	In 2009	**In 2014**
Students in any paid work	61	**53****
International students in any paid work	29	**14****
Worrying about money has made it difficult to concentrate on my study	33	**39****
I often find it stressful managing my study with other commitments in my life	57	**52****

Differences between 2009 and 2014 statistically significant at 0.01

Financing of study

As shown in Table 5.1, the majority of students finance their study with the support of a HECS-HELP loan. This has risen slightly since 2009 (64%) and 2004 (63%). The proportion of students in Commonwealth Supported Places who pay their fees up-front has dropped substantially from 25 per cent since 2004, and 14 per cent in 2009. This trend away from paying fees up-front has also been repeated for Australian fee-paying students. Although the proportion of total fee-paying students has remained stable since 2009 at 13 per cent, the proportion paying their fees up-front has dropped from 9 per cent to 6 per cent, and the proportion supported by FEE-HELP loans has risen correspondingly. These changes are likely to reflect changes in national economic circumstances since 2009.

Table 5.1 Students' fee status, 2014 (% of all students)
(N=1734)

Fee status	Proportion of students sampled
Commonwealth Supported Place (CSP), paid up-front	8
CSP, deferred payments (HECS-HELP loan)	66
Australian fee-paying student, paid up-front	6
Australian fee-paying student with FEE-HELP loan	7
International fee-paying student	11

Sources of income

There have been few clear trends in students' sources of income over the last 10 years. The proportion of students receiving Austudy or Youth Allowance and those working appear to have followed converse paths. The proportion of students receiving Austudy or Youth Allowance as their main or only source of income fell heavily in 2009 (Table 5.2), but has since risen back to similar proportions to those seen in 2004. The proportion of full-time students in paid work appeared to peak in 2009 and has since returned to approximately 2004 levels, although the number of part-time students in part-time or casual work has remained high. Generally speaking, however, fewer students are working while studying now than was the case five years ago, and slightly more than ten years ago (Table 5.3). A lower proportion of school leavers report working in Year 12 compared to 2009 (42%, compared with 48%; $p < 0.01$), indicating this trend is not unique to higher education.

Some sources of income have remained more consistent over the last five years. The proportion of students being supported by their parents or family has remained consistent with 2009 figures, and significantly lower than in 2004. The proportion of full-time students supporting themselves via savings has continued to grow over the last ten years, although again, among part-time students, the proportion has fallen from a peak in 2009.

Overall, there may have been a shift since 2004 to students being more financially independent of their families. Instead, higher proportions of students are supporting themselves through personal savings, work or Youth Allowance, with the balance between the latter two depending on broader economic conditions. These changes are likely to be due to demographic shifts in the student population, with an increasing proportion of mature age students over the last ten years.

Table 5.2 Percentage of full-time and part-time enrolled students saying that source of income was their main or only source, 2014
(2004 n = 2344; 2009 n = 2422; 2014 n = 1611)

Main or only source of income		Enrolled full-time (%)	Enrolled part-time (%)
Youth Allowance/Austudy/Abstudy	2004	26	15
	2009	19**	4**
	2014	24**	11**
Part-time/casual work	2004	32	32
	2009	41**	40**
	2014	33**	42
Full-time work	2004	3	23
	2009	3	29**
	2014	4	24**
Parents/family	2004	43	22
	2009	34**	14**
	2014	36	16
Savings	2004	10	6
	2009	13	12*
	2014	19**	14
Scholarship/Cadetship	2004	3	12
	2009	3	11
	2014	9*	5**
Loans	2004	-	-
	2009	2	0
	2014	3	3
Spouse/partner	2004	3	12
	2009	3	11
	2014	3	11
Any form of unemployment benefit	2004	-	-
	2009	0	2
	2014	1	1
Pension or equivalent	2004	-	-
	2009	1	2
	2014	1	4*

Asterisks denote a significant change from the finding five years earlier (* = significant at 0.05, ** = significant at 0.01)

Table 5.3 Paid work as a source of income, 1994-2014 (% of all students)

		Only source	Main source	Minor source	Not a source
Full-time work	1994	3	2	0	94
	1999	2	2	1	95
	2004	2	3	2	94
	2009	2	3	1	94
	2014	3	3	1	93
Part-time/ Casual work	1994	4	22	22	52
	1999	9	27	23	40
	2004	7	25	28	40
	2009	7	33	23	37
	2014	5	28	22	45

Despite these changes, the main sources of income for different age groups have not changed over the last five years. Students aged 24 years old or less are primarily supported by their families or part-time work, whereas those aged 25 and over are more likely to be supported by their partners or full or part-time work (Table 5.4).

Table 5.4 Most common income sources across age groups 2014
(N=1611)

Under 19 years	20-24 years	25 years and over
Parents or family (40%)	Parents or family (36%)	Youth Allowance (28%)
Part-time work (37%)	Part-time work (30%)	Partner (23%)
Youth Allowance (21%)	Youth Allowance (26%)	Full-time work (23%)
		Part-time work (23%)

Reasons for undertaking paid work

The vast majority of students aged 19 years old and younger who work do so to afford extras, or to be more financially independent of their families. Half of these students do so to meet basic needs. For older students, working to meet basic needs is the most common reason, although working to afford extras and, for those aged 20-24 years old, to be more financially independent of their families remains important. These have remained the most important reasons for working by a substantial margin over the last ten years. Overall, nearly two thirds of students work to afford basic needs.

Table 5.5 Reasons for different age groups undertaking paid work (% of different age groups responding to the question)

	aged 19	aged 20-24	aged 25+
To afford 'extras' (such as travel, entertainment)	77	68	40
To be more financially independent of family	72	54	22
To meet basic needs (such as rent, food, transport)	51	75	79
To improve employability after university	45	34	23
To save for repaying future HECS-HELP or FEE-HELP debts	37	28	12
To gain work experience relevant to the course	21	16	18
To pay off current loans or debts	7	18	32
To support family	7	10	43

Unlike in 2009, there were no differences observed between the proportions of students in part-time work based on their SES status, although low SES students were more likely to be working full-time (9%, compared with 2%; $p < 0.01$). As previously reported, low SES students were more likely to be working to meet basic needs (73%, compared with 48%; $p < 0.01$) and to support their families (22%, compared with 6%; $p < 0.01$), and less likely to be working to afford extras (63%, compared with 77%; $p < 0.01$). They are approximately twice as likely to have Youth Allowance or Austudy as their only or main income source (34%, compared with 12%; $p < 0.01$), and nearly half as likely to be supported by their families (24%, compared with 45%; $p < 0.01$). They were also less likely to be supported by saving, and more likely to be supported by a partner. Low SES students were also more likely to be older than high SES students, so there may be an interaction between age and SES status in these differences. Low SES students were more likely to be deferring their HECS-HELP payments than to have paid them up-front (74% deferred and 6% paid up-front, compared to 56% and 10% respectively for high SES students; $p < 0.01$).

International students were far less likely to be employed than domestic students, with only 14 per cent employed (compared to 45% of domestic students; $p < 0.01$). This is nearly half that reported in 2009 (29%; $p < 0.01$), and represents a continuing downward trend since 1999 (1999: 29%; 2004: 23%). International students are much less likely to work to afford extras (37%, compared with 70%; $p < 0.01$), which was also observed in 2009. Unlike the 2009 sample, in 2014 fewer international students worked to be financially independent of their families (26%, compared with 61%; $p < 0.01$). The 2009 First Year Experience report raised some concerns about a downward trend in the financial circumstances of international students in Australia. Based on these findings, this trend does not appear to have continued, and may in fact have reversed. International students do not report financial stress in more significant proportions than domestic students, although the increasingly small proportions of international students in employment may remain a matter for concern.

Coping with study, employment and other commitments

A major trend over the last 20 years has been an increase in the number of hours students spend in paid employment. Although the proportion of students in paid employment overall has decreased since 2009, this trend is still apparent among those working (Table 5.6). In 2009, working students reported an estimated average of 13.7 hours per week in employment; in 2014, this has risen slightly to 14.5 hours per week. The proportion of students working 21 or more hours per week has risen from 8 per cent in 1994 to 18 per cent in 2014, and those working 31 hours or more has risen from 2 per cent in 1994 to 9 per cent in 2014. Particularly concerning is the finding that 5 per cent of full-time students are working more than 20 hours per week (and 2% working more than 30 hours per week) on top of their study commitments.

Table 5.6 Hours spent in paid work in a typical university week, 1994-2014 (% of full-time enrolled students in paid employment for at least one hour per week)
(1994 N=1572; 1999 N=1253; 2004 N=1341; 2009 N=1373; 2014, N=1347)

	1-5 hrs	6-10 hrs	11-15 hrs	16-20 hrs	21-25 hrs	26-30 hrs	31 hrs or more
1994	22	38	20	12	4	2	2
1999	16	32	25	17	5	2	3
2004	19	32	22	17	5	2	3
2009	18	32	25	14	5	3	4
2014	**21**	**27**	**20**	**14**	**5**	**4**	**9**

Despite this slight increase in the average numbers of hours worked since 2009, there has been no change in the proportions of working students who report that their financial situation is a source of worry (66%), or that work interferes with their study (55%) – although the fact that work commitments interfere with study for more than half of students who work is of concern. There has been an increase in the proportion of working students who report missing classes to attend work, from 18 per cent in 2009 to 24 per cent in 2014 ($p < 0.01$). It is unclear whether the rise in the use of online technologies and online resources such as lecture recordings (see Chapter 4) has contributed to this increase, enabling students to feel they can miss classes but catch up later. The finding that a quarter of working students miss class in order to work, and half of working students find that work interferes with their study, is concerning, particularly for those students who must work to meet basic needs and cannot afford to prioritise their education. Although the majority of students appear to be able to meet their commitments, the educational outcomes for these students may be compromised, and universities and governments should consider this issue carefully.

A further trend has been the shift from campus-based study to Internet study. There has been a shift towards fewer course contact hours per week since 1994 (Table 4.4 in Chapter 4), although the estimated average number of course contact hours per week in 2009 and 2014 remained stable at 15 hours. Since 2009, the average number of hours spent in private study has fallen from 10.5 to 9 ($p < 0.01$), while the number of hours spent using the Internet for study or research has risen from 6.5 to 9 ($p < 0.01$). Students are therefore still spending no less time studying (33 hours per week on average), but the balance has shifted to spending this time using the Internet, rather than more traditional study.

Work commitments and the student experience

Work commitments appear to cause some stress for students, but do not reduce their overall satisfaction with their university experience. Since 2009, the number of students reporting that they often find managing their commitments stressful and that their course workloads are too heavy has decreased significantly (Table 5.7). Employed students do not show the same reduction; 58 per cent of those students report stress, while 31 per cent agree that their course workload is too heavy. These proportions are even higher among those working more than 20 hours per week; 68 per cent report stress in managing their commitments, and 36 per cent agree that their workload is too heavy. However, working students

were no more likely to report that they were frequently overwhelmed by their commitments, or that they found it hard to keep up with the volume of work in their courses. For all students, both of these indicators have remained consistent since 2009, with a third of students agreeing. No difference was observed in satisfaction with the quality of teaching, overall enjoyment or overall satisfaction of working students compared to those who were not working, or between those who worked less than 10 hours per week and those who worked more than 10, or 15, hours per week. Those working more than 20 hours per week were actually more satisfied than others (85%, compared with 75% for all other students; $p < 0.01$).

Table 5.7 Managing commitments (% of all students)

		Agree
I frequently feel overwhelmed by all I have to do	2009	33
	2014	34
I often find it stressful managing my study with other commitments in my life	2009	57
	2014	52**
My course workload is too heavy	1994	32
	1999	32
	2009	33
	2014	27**
I find it really hard to keep up with the volume of work in this course	2009	32
	2014	34

Asterisks denote a significant change from the finding five years earlier (** = significant at 0.01)

The increase in the number of students seemingly managing their commitments may be attributable to greater efforts on behalf of universities to accommodate working students, or different expectations from students themselves about working while studying. It is clear that working still increases stress for students, but, as many students are working to afford basic necessities, balancing these commitments remains necessary. Since 2009, the proportion of students reporting that financial stress interferes with their study has risen from 33 per cent to 39 per cent ($p < 0.01$); conversely, 37% disagreed that worrying about money interfered with their studies. Employment status did not affect this finding. Reporting financial stress was found to correlate much more closely with being unable to manage commitments than employment status. Students reporting financial stress were more likely to feel overwhelmed (47%, compared with 26%), often found managing commitments stressful (72%, compared with 39%), found their course workload too heavy (39%, compared with 20%), had difficulties comprehending material (33%, compared with 14%), and found it hard to keep up with the volume of work (47%, compared with 25%; all $p < 0.01$). Although they were no less satisfied with the quality of teaching, they were more likely to consider deferring (27%, compared with 15%; $p < 0.01$), less likely to enjoy their courses (76%, compared with 81%; $p < 0.01$) and less satisfied overall (71%, compared with 78%; $p < 0.01$). Reported financial stress, irrespective of whether students are working or not, therefore remains an

important area of concern for universities and governments to manage, and has profound influence on the student experience.

Summary

There has been little change in the reasons students seek paid work since 2009. Understandably, given the high proportion of school leavers in the First Year Experience cohort, most respondents work to afford extras and to become financially independent. However, nearly two thirds do so to afford basic needs, particularly those who are older or from low SES backgrounds. It is clear that, for those students, financial stress, much more so than work status, contributed to a poor university experience. The finding that the proportion of students reporting financial stress has increased from a third to nearly 40 per cent is worrying. While financial stress and employment were not closely correlated, the proportion of students, particularly international students, in paid work has decreased since 2009. Although the flexibility afforded by online resources and learning technologies may attenuate some of the negative impacts of work on the student experience, student employment and financial stress must remain closely watched by institutions and the government.

6. PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHING AND OVERALL COURSE EXPERIENCE

First year students' satisfaction with the quality of teaching has risen significantly over the two decades of First Year Experience surveys. For the vast majority of students in the 2014 study, teaching staff are enthusiastic about the subjects they are teaching (80%), good at explaining things (73%), and put great effort into making the subjects interesting (74%). On all the indicators of teaching quality, students in the 2014 study report higher levels of satisfaction than in previous years. This contributed to large majority of students reporting that they were enjoying their courses (80%), and satisfied with their university experience (75%). These trends are positive signs of the effect of university efforts to improve the experience of first year students.

Notable trends between 2009 and 2014

	In 2009	**In 2014**
The quality of teaching in my course is generally good	77%	**89%**
Staff try hard to make the subjects interesting	58%	**74%**
Teaching staff usually give helpful feedback on my progress	35%	**56%**
Staff are usually available to discuss my work	48%	**59%**
Most academic staff take an interest in my progress	26%	**39%**
Lecturers often capture my imagination through their teaching	35%	**46%**
Overall, I am really enjoying my course	72%	**80%**
Overall, I am very satisfied with my university experience so far	71%	**75%**

Differences between 2009 and 2014 statistically significant at 0.01

The quality of teaching

Table 6.1 summarises the findings of students' perceptions relating to important dimensions of teaching. Overall, the findings show that students in 2014 were far more positive about the quality of teaching than students in previous studies.

Over the past two decades of Australian First Year Experience studies, students' views about the quality of teaching has become significantly more positive, from 66% agreeing in 1994 that the quality of teaching in their courses was generally good, to 78% in 2004 and 89% in 2014. In 2014, only 2% of the students surveyed disagreed that the quality of teaching was generally good. The vast majority of students in the 2014 study also believed that staff were enthusiastic about the subjects they were teaching (80%, compared to 75% in 2009), good at explaining things (73%, compared to 62% in 2009), and put great effort into make the subjects interesting (74%, compared to 58% in 2009).

Notably, there has also been a significant increase in the proportion of students indicating that teaching staff usually give helpful feedback, from 35 per cent in 2009 to 56 per cent in 2014. This is an encouraging finding given that feedback has been a perennial problem for the sector.

In addition, for a significantly larger proportion of students than in previous surveys, teaching staff were perceived to be understanding of the difficulties

students may have with their work (58% in 2014 compared with 45% in 2009), and most academic staff took an interest in students' progress (39% in 2014, compared to 26% in 2009).

Table 6.1 Perceptions of teaching, 1994-2014, 5-point scale collapsed to 3 points, (% of students)
(1994, N=4028; 1999, N=2609, 2004, N=2 334, 2009, N=2422; 2014, N=1347)

		Disagree		Agree
The quality of teaching in my course is generally good	1994	9	25	66
	1999	9	24	67
	2004	5	17	78**
	2009	5	18	77
	2014	2	9	89**
Staff are enthusiastic about the subjects they teach	1994	13	34	53
	1999	12	32	56*
	2004	5	23	72**
	2009	6	19	75*
	2014	3	17	80**
Most of the academic staff are approachable	1994	12	26	62
	1999	12	26	62
	2004	8	20	72**
	2009	7	21	73
	2014	6	20	74
The teaching staff are good at explaining things	1994	16	38	47
	1999	17	35	48
	2004	9	28	63**
	2009	10	28	62
	2014	5	22	73**
Staff try hard to make the subjects interesting	1994	17	34	50
	1999	17	34	50
	2004	11	28	61**
	2009	12	30	58
	2014	5	21	74**
Staff are usually available to discuss my work	1994	21	34	45
	1999	25	37	38**
	2004	15	36	49**
	2009	15	37	48
	2014	10	31	59**
Staff make a real effort to understand difficulties students may be having with their work	1994	28	36	36
	1999	28	35	37
	2004	17	36	47**
	2009	21	35	45
	2014	13	29	58**
Teaching staff usually give helpful feedback on my progress	1994	40	32	28
	1999	40	34	25*
	2004	31	36	33**
	2009	30	36	35
	2014	16	28	56**

		Disagree		Agree
Most academic staff take an interest in my progress	1994	44	32	24
	1999	47	32	21*
	2004	34	36	30**
	2009	39	35	26**
	2014	27	34	39**
Lecturers often capture my imagination through their teaching	2009	28	38	35
	2014	18	36	46**

Asterisks denote a significant change from the finding five years earlier (* = significant at 0.05, ** = significant at 0.01)

An analysis of the findings based on demographic subgroups showed little difference in the views of students. There was a slight difference between the views of international students and domestic students about the quality of teaching. While the large majority of both groups believed that the quality of teaching was good, international students were less likely to agree that teaching quality was generally good (84%, compared to 89% domestic students; $p < 0.05$). However, international students were far more likely to say that staff made real efforts to understand the difficulties students may be having (69% international students, compared with 57% domestic; $p < 0.01$). This difference may be explained by the finding that international students were far more likely to seek assistance and advice regularly from teaching staff (see Chapter 3).

The SES subgroups reported near identical levels of satisfaction with the quality of teaching, and expressed the same levels of enjoyment of their course and satisfaction with their university experience. As in previous years, no significant differences were observed between the groups on these scales.

Overall course experience

Consistent with the trend in students' perceptions of teaching, there has been a substantial increase in the proportion of students reporting overall satisfaction with their course and university experience over the past two decades (see Table 6.2). Approximately four fifths of students in the 2014 study reported finding their course highly enjoyable and intellectually stimulating, and three quarters of respondents said they were satisfied with their university experience so far. Of note, only 9 per cent of all respondents reported being dissatisfied with their university experience.

Again, there was a significant difference in the views of international and domestic students, with 66 per cent of international students agreeing that they were satisfied with their university experience, compared to 76 per cent of domestic students ($p < 0.01$). There was also a difference between the responses of students with low ATAR scores and their high ATAR peers. A lower proportion of low ATAR students reported that they were really enjoying their courses (71%, compared with 80% high ATAR; $p < 0.05$), although there were no significant differences in satisfaction with their university experience overall.

Table 6.2 Satisfaction with course of study, 1994-2014 (% of students)
(1994, N=4028; 1999, N=2609; 2004, N=2334; 2009, N=2422; 2014, N=1347)

		Disagree		Agree
I am finding my course intellectually stimulating	1994	12	25	63
	1999	10	26	63
	2004	6	19	75**
	2009	5	19	76
	2014	4	17	79*
Overall, I am really enjoying my course	1994	15	24	61
	1999	13	23	64*
	2004	9	20	71**
	2009	7	21	72
	2014	6	14	80**
Overall, I am very satisfied with my university experience so far	1994	15	23	61
	1999	14	24	63
	2004	10	20	70**
	2009	9	20	71
	2014	9	16	75**

Asterisks denote a significant change from the finding five years earlier (* = significant at 0.05, ** = significant at 0.01)

Summary

The findings in this chapter show that improvements in students' perceptions of teaching and their course experience that were reported in the 2009 study have been maintained. On all the important dimensions of teaching, students reported higher levels of satisfaction compared with students in the previous four studies. These trends are encouraging signs that indicate major advances in the quality of first year teaching since 1994. The challenge for the sector will be to maintain this positive trend in a rapidly changing higher education context. As the student population grows and diversifies further, it will be important for universities to continue their efforts to improve the quality of teaching and the students' experience, particularly in relation to the provision of feedback, staff availability to discuss student work, and in showing concern for the progress of students as individuals.

7. DISTINCTIVE STUDENT SUBGROUPS UNDER THE DEMAND DRIVEN SYSTEM

This chapter describes the major findings for a number of subgroups within the university community: student with low ATAR scores; students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (low SES); Indigenous students; students from regional and remote backgrounds; students with disabilities; the effect of gender and of age on student responses, and international students.

Students with low ATAR scores

In the 2014 study, we examined the student experience of school leavers who received an ATAR of 70 or less to those who received an ATAR of 71 or higher. A "low ATAR" cut off of 70 was chosen to allow a sufficiently large cohort for rigorous analysis. Where possible, we have also reported findings from students with an ATAR of 60 or less, although the small size of this cohort limits such analysis. The 2014 First Year Experience survey is the first to perform an ATAR-based analysis in this way.

The findings show that students with low ATAR scores were less prepared for university, experienced less enjoyment of their courses and lower levels of academic engagement. Although nearly a third of low ATAR students exceeded their own expectations for assessment grades in first year, students in this group were more likely to have difficulties with their studies, and more likely to have considered deferring or withdrawing (26%, compared to 17% for high ATAR students).

Table 7.1 Notable differences in the experience of students with high and low ATAR scores

	High ATAR	Low ATAR
I enjoy the intellectual challenge of subjects I am studying	69	**48****
I find it quite difficult to comprehend a lot of the material I am supposed to study	17	**25***
I never study with other students	22	**31***

Asterisks denote a significant difference between the indicated subgroups (* = significant at 0.05, ** = significant at 0.01)

Demographic differences between students with low and high ATAR scores

It is clear that there has been substantial growth in the size of the low ATAR cohort. In the 2009 sample, 3 per cent of school leavers reported having a tertiary entrance ranking (or equivalent) of 60 or less, while 10 per cent had a ranking of 70 or less. In 2014, 8 per cent of school leavers reported an ATAR of 60 or less, and 18 per cent had an ATAR of 70 or less. Although students from these lower ATAR groups were clearly present prior to the uncapping of student places and the introduction of the demand driven funding system, the growth in these groups provides some measure of the effect of these changes on the national student body.

Low ATAR students were more likely to belong to a number of different formal equity groups. They were more likely to report having a disability that affected their study, with 9.1 per cent of low ATAR students and 4.5 per cent of high ATAR students ($p < 0.05$) reporting a disability. Forty-five per cent came from rural backgrounds, compared to 19 per cent of high ATAR students ($p < 0.01$). They were also more likely to be from low SES backgrounds (57%, compared with 30%; $p < 0.01$ using the parents' education measure; or 28%, compared with 14%; $p < 0.01$ using a postcode measure), and more likely to be the first in family to attend university (45%, compared with 22%; $p < 0.01$).

In terms of their previous education, 64 per cent attended government schools, 21 per cent, Catholic schools, and 17 per cent, independent or private schools (compared to 48%**, 19% and 32%** respectively for high ATAR students; $p < 0.01$ as indicated). They were also far more likely to have previously completed a VET course (18%, compared with 6%; $p < 0.01$), but no differences were observed in the proportions of low ATAR students who had previously completed a university degree or diploma course, or a non-award preparatory course.

A significantly higher proportion of low ATAR students enrolled in the field of Education (21%, compared with 1%; $p < 0.01$). This was particularly notable for the students with ATARs less than 60, in which 29 per cent enrolled in Education, compared to 3 per cent of those with an ATAR greater than 60 ($p < 0.01$). There were significantly lower proportions of low ATAR students enrolled in Science (6%, compared with 12%; $p < 0.05$) and Engineering (1%, compared with 7%; $p < 0.01$). Nearly 90 per cent of low ATAR students, and over 95 per cent of those with an ATAR less than 60, were enrolled in three of the eight participating institutions.

The average estimated ATAR for the low ATAR group was 59, whereas the average estimated ATAR for the high ATAR group was 88. The average estimated ATAR for the students reporting an ATAR of less than 60 was 52.

Preparation and experience with university study

Significantly lower proportions of low ATAR students expected to receive an offer of a university place. Forty per cent of low ATAR students reported not expecting to receive an offer, compared to only 4 per cent of high ATAR students ($p < 0.01$). This proportion rose to 65 per cent of those students with an ATAR less than 60. However, despite both their low rankings and lower expectations, there were no significant differences in the proportions of students receiving their first preference for course enrolments (Table 7.2). Larger differences were seen for students with an ATAR of less than 60, although because of the small numbers in this group, they were not statistically significant.

Table 7.2 Course preferences for students based on ATAR (% of students)

Course preference	Low ATAR (<70)	High ATAR (>70)	Low ATAR (<60)
First	71	75	64
Second	20	18	24
Third	5	4	7
Fourth	2	2	1
Other	2	1	3

Low ATAR students were no less likely than high ATAR students to want to change to a different course after first year (17%, compared with 14%; not significant), although only 92 per cent said that they were studying in their field of interest (compared to 97% of high ATAR students). However, they were more likely to want to change institution, with 14 per cent (17% of those with an ATAR less than 60) indicating they wanted to move to a different university, compared to 7 per cent of high ATAR students ($p < 0.01$). Interestingly, they were no more likely to have withdrawn from any subjects in first year.

Although the low ATAR students received lower marks than the higher ATAR students, as might have been expected, they tended to outperform their expectations of the marks they would receive (Table 7.3). Most notably, 8 per cent of low ATAR students and 1 per cent of very low ATAR students reported achieving marks of 81 per cent or higher. As self-reported marks, these figures should not be over-interpreted; however, these findings may indicate that some low ATAR students excel at university.

Table 7.3 Average marks obtained in first semester, and expectations of marks, by ATAR group (% of students)

Overall average mark in semester 1	Low ATAR (<70)	High ATAR (>70)	Low ATAR (<60)
Less than 50%	5*	2	9**
50-60%	18**	6	28**
61-70%	40**	25	38*
71-80%	29*	40	23*
81-100%	8**	27	1**
Average estimated mark	67	75	63
Is the mark what you expected?			
Higher	27*	19	24
About the same	36*	47	46
Lower	37	34	40

Asterisks denote a significant difference between the indicated subgroups (* = significant at 0.05, ** = significant at 0.01)

Although nearly a third of low ATAR students exceeded their expectations for grading in first year, students in this group were more likely to report having difficulties with their studies. They were more likely to report difficulties in comprehending subject material (25%, compared with 17%; $p < 0.05$), less likely to have worked out how to manage their workloads (48%, compared with 38%; $p < 0.05$), and more likely to have considered deferring or withdrawing (26%, compared with 17%; $p < 0.05$). The most common reason for considering deferring was fear of failure, with 77%** of low ATAR students, and 86%** of those with an ATAR of less than 60, reporting this as a major reason, compared to 42 per cent of high ATAR students. The next most common reasons for

considering deferral were emotional health (72%), financial reasons (55%*) and university not being what they expected (52%). In contrast, emotional health (69%), fear of failure (42%), wanting to change courses (39%), and university not being what they expected (36%) were the most common reasons for high ATAR students. Low ATAR students were also more likely to report family commitments as a reason for considering deferring (29%, compared with 14%; $p < 0.05$).

Perhaps because of the higher proportion of low SES students among the low ATAR students, low ATAR students were more likely to report that worrying about money interfered with their studies and that their finances were frequently a source of worry (49%** and 39%** respectively, compared to 30% and 17%). Low ATAR students, like low SES students, were more likely to work to meet basic needs, and less likely to do so to afford extras or to be independent of their family. They were also more likely to have worked in Year 12 than high ATAR students. However, they were no more likely to miss classes due to paid work.

Academic engagement for low ATAR students

Low ATAR students reported lower levels of academic engagement on a number of different measures. They were less likely to enjoy the intellectual challenge of studying, less likely to feel they had been encouraged to be an independent learner, less likely to be enjoying their course, less likely to find their subjects intellectually stimulating, and found it more difficult to get motivated to study. They were also less likely to have been actively involved in their university orientation programs, and less likely to feel orientation got them off to a good start.

Particularly low proportions of students with an ATAR of less than 60 reported that they enjoyed the intellectual challenge of university, and they reported lower levels on measures of intellectual engagement with their studies (Table 7.4). These students were also more likely to indicate they felt insufficiently academically prepared for university. Students from both low ATAR groups were less likely to believe that Year 12 was good preparation for university, but this was particularly the case for those with an ATAR less than 60 (ATAR less than 60: 27%**; less than 70: 41%**; 71 or higher: 55%).

Table 7.4 Intellectual engagement and academic preparation for students with ATAR < 60 (% of students)

	ATAR < 60	ATAR > 60
I get a lot of satisfaction from studying	36*	51
I enjoy the intellectual challenge of subjects I am studying	48**	69
I am finding my course intellectually stimulating	65**	82
My final school year was very good preparation for the study I am now doing	27**	54
The standard of work required at university is much higher than I expected	56**	37
The subjects at university clearly build on my study at school	45*	59

Asterisks denote a significant difference between the indicated subgroups (* = significant at 0.05, ** = significant at 0.01)

Low ATAR students in 2014 had fewer course contact hours and spent less time in private study (Table 7.5). Conversely, they spent significantly more time socialising with friends and family (ATAR less than 60: 16** hours per week; less than 70: 18* hours per week; 71 or greater: 12 hours). No differences were seen in the amount of time spent using the Internet for study, or in the number of hours spent in paid work.

Table 7.5 Number of course contact hours and time spent in private study per week, by ATAR group (% of students and number of hours)

	Low ATAR (<70)	High ATAR (>70)	Low ATAR (<60)
Course contact hours			
1 to 5	6*	3	9**
6 to 10	30**	12	38**
11 to 11	44	38	35
16 to 20	11**	26	9**
21 to 25	5**	18	5*
26 to 30	1	2	2
31 or more	3	1	3
Private study			
None	9	6	9
1 to 5	48*	38	63**
6 to 10	26	30	18
11 to 11	5*	11	3
16 to 20	6	7	4
21 to 25	2	4	1
26 to 30	2	3	2
31 or more	2	2	3
Estimated average hours per week			
Course contact	13**	16	12**
Private study	8*	9	7

Asterisks denote a significant difference between the indicated subgroups (* = significant at 0.05, ** = significant at 0.01)

Low ATAR students were also more likely to report that they never study with other students (31%, compared with 22%; $p < 0.05$) or work with other students on group assignments (38%, compared with 24%; $p < 0.01$). They are also less likely to be considering studying abroad, with only 20% (compared to 35%; $p < 0.01$) reporting that they did. Only 17 per cent of low ATAR students were

studying a language as part of their course, compared to 26 per cent of high ATAR students ($p < 0.05$).

As well as reporting lower levels of academic engagement, low ATAR students also reported lower levels of engagement with their university communities. Low ATAR students were less likely to feel part of a group committed to learning, less likely to believe that coming to campus or using social media was important for making friends, and more likely to keep to themselves at university. They were also less likely to be interested in extra-curricular activities at university.

Satisfaction with teaching

Seventy per cent of low ATAR students felt that their subjects fitted together well, compared to 81 per cent of high ATAR students ($p < 0.05$), Similarly, 62 per cent of low ATAR students agreed that their universities offered them a good range of subject choices (compared with 73%; $p < 0.05$). However, despite these considerations, low ATAR students were generally more satisfied with the quality of their teaching, with higher proportions agreeing that their teachers provided good feedback, and made an effort to understand the difficulties their students faced (63% and 64% respectively, compared with 52% and 54%; $p < 0.05$). However, only 73 per cent believed staff were enthusiastic about the subjects they taught, compared to 81 per cent of high ATAR students ($p < 0.05$). There were no significant differences observed in the proportions of low ATAR students reporting that they were satisfied overall with their university experience, although lower proportions reported that they were really enjoying their courses (71%, compared with 80%; $p < 0.05$).

Taken together, these data suggest that low ATAR students are generally satisfied with the quality of their teaching, but that other concerns—anxiety about failing, a lack of academic engagement, and dissatisfaction with their institution and course design—impact upon their overall enjoyment of their course.

Students from low SES backgrounds

The Australian higher education sector has had a sustained focus on improving access for people from low SES backgrounds for many years, although the Bradley review[17] particularly focused attention on this issue. Although there has been some progress in addressing these imbalances through a national equity policy framework, and the efforts of universities in offering a variety of access programs, disparities continue to exist.

The First Year Experience findings provide some guidance in identifying possible responses in the first year that will assist students once enrolled. However, it must be emphasised that these students are those who successfully gained access to university, and have remained enrolled for at least two thirds of their first year. They are already successful students by the measures of access and equity policy. As such, differences in responses between them and high or medium SES students may not be completely representative of people from low SES backgrounds overall.

In 2014, low SES students felt less academically prepared and experienced more financial stress than high SES students. Significantly more students from low SES backgrounds felt financial stress, or that their work commitments interfered with their study, than high SES students (75% and 59%, compared to 60% and 50% respectively). Financial stress was also a problem for large proportions of students from regional and remote backgrounds. Women and Indigenous students are also more likely to report high levels of stress, despite an otherwise satisfactory student experience.

Table 7.6 Notable differences in the experience of students from high and low SES backgrounds

	Low SES	High SES
I think university really suits me	**50****	67
My work commitments interfere with my university performance	**75****	60
I work to afford basic needs	**73****	48

Asterisks denote a significant difference between the indicated subgroups (** = significant at 0.01)

Demographic differences between low and high SES students

Although low SES students are currently formally identified by their permanent home address (through census statistical areas, and formerly through postcode), this was not possible for this study. Primarily, ethical issues prevented the gathering of address details beyond the level of postcode, thereby preventing students from being assigned SES codes based on SA1. Additionally, location-based SES coding has previously been found to be less accurate for non-school leavers[18]. Given the trend for increasing proportions of older students observed in successive First Year Experience surveys, and for low SES students to tend to be older as well, it was judged inappropriate to use location-based SES coding. Instead, SES was identified via parents' education levels (see Appendix 2).

[17] Bradley et al. 2008.
[18] James et al. 2008; Palmer, Bexley and James 2011; Naylor, Baik and James 2013.

Students from low SES backgrounds were more likely to be older than those from high SES backgrounds, and more likely to be the first in their family to attend university (Table 7.7). They were also significantly ($p < 0.01$) more likely to have dependents (13%, compared to 4% of high SES students), and more likely to have completed a VET course before enrolling in university (13%, compared to 4%; $p < 0.01$). As might be expected, there was also considerable overlap between low SES background, Indigeneity, and regional or remote backgrounds. Only 26 per cent of low SES students spoke a language other than English at home, compared to 36 per cent of high SES students ($p < 0.01$). Ten per cent of low SES students were undertaking part-time study, compared to 5 per cent of high SES students ($p < 0.01$). Low SES students were also more likely to have attended government and Catholic schools, and less likely to have attended independent and private schools, than high SES students.

Table 7.7 Demographic composition of students by SES (% of students)

	Low SES	High SES
Aged 19 and under	55**	72
20 to 24 years	23	21
25 and older	22**	7
Indigenous	2.5**	1
Metropolitan	65**	81
Regional/remote	35**	19
First in family	59**	6

Asterisks denote a significant difference between the indicated subgroups (** = significant at 0.01)

Common stresses for low SES students

Although students from low SES backgrounds show strong clarity of purpose in enrolling in university, they generally appear to feel less academically prepared for university than high SES students, and are more anxious about their results and the possibility of failure.

As in 2009, lower SES students were more likely to say that they had difficulty comprehending the material (25%, compared with 20%; $p < 0.05$), and more likely to be considering deferring or withdrawing from their studies (22%, compared with 16%; $p < 0.05$). Emotional health was the most frequently reported reason for considering deferral, regardless of SES status, but a significantly higher proportion of low SES reported fear of failure as a reason (59%, compared with 36%; $p < 0.05$). Thirty per cent also report that their course workload was too heavy, compared to 23 per cent of high SES students, and only 50 per cent felt that university life really suited them (compared with 67%; $p < 0.01$). Low SES students may also have less ability to find help and support at home, with 48 per cent of low SES students reporting that their parents had little understanding of what they did at university, compared to 25 per cent of high SES students.

Significantly more students from low SES backgrounds reported feeling financial stress, or that their work commitments interfered with their study, than high SES students (75%** and 59%*, compared to 60% and 50% respectively). This interference was both more frequent, and more severe; 10 per cent of low SES

students reported that their work severely interfered with their study, compared to 2 per cent of high SES students. Low SES students were also more likely to have been employed during high school. These factors may well contribute to the academic difficulties low SES students reported above. More information is provided in Chapter 5.

Despite these difficulties, low SES students demonstrated greater clarity of purpose than their high SES peers. They were less likely to be influenced by the expectations of their parents (with 38% reporting this as a major reason for going to university, compared to 45% of high SES students; $p < 0.05$), and were less likely to be marking time while they decided their future (16%, compared with 23%; p , 0.05). Fifty-nine per cent reported that there was a lot of pressure at school to go to university, compared to 70 per cent of high SES students ($p < 0.01$). Interestingly, however, although a lower proportion of low SES students reported participating in university outreach programs (51%, compared with 58%, $p < 0.05$), a higher proportion reported that these programs were important in their decision to go to university (50%, compared with 40%; $p < 0.05$).

Satisfaction with teaching

Low SES students were less likely to demonstrate social engagement with their universities in a number of different ways. Lower rates of agreement were observed in a number of different factors:

- I really like being on my university campus
- I have made one or two good friends at university
- Coming to campus or social media are important for making friends at university
- Interested or involved in extra-curricular activities offered
- I feel I belong to the university community
- At least one teacher knows my name.

Higher proportions of low SES students also reported never studying with others, not asking questions in class, and never working with others on group projects. A higher proportion of low SES students also reported feeling uncomfortable in group discussions.

These factors may be due to the higher proportion of low SES students studying subjects delivered totally online (16%, compared to 7%), or due to the older average age of low SES students, which has previously been reported to contribute to social distance in postgraduate students.

However, it should be noted that, as in previous years, the SES subgroups reported near identical levels of satisfaction with the quality of teaching, and expressed the same levels of enjoyment of their course and satisfaction with their university experience. No significant differences were observed between the groups on these scales.

Indigenous students

National figures continue to indicate that access, retention and completion rates remain lower for Indigenous students than for other students. This is a major challenge for education policy and practice at all levels.

The 2014 First Year Experience sample had 65 students who identified as an Indigenous person. While this is a relatively small number, and survey findings must therefore be considered carefully, this is an increase on the 2009 sample, and, at 3.9 per cent of the total sample, is above the proportional share across the sector, which is estimated to be 1.6 per cent. Although the responses of Indigenous students have been weighted in other chapters of the report to account for this oversampling, they are presented unweighted in this section.

The significant finding from the 2014 First Year Experience survey is how little the student experience has changed for Indigenous students over the last 20 years. During this period, the Bradley review[19] and the Behrendt review[20] have both drawn attention to the disparities in university achievement for Indigenous students, and considerable government and institutional focus has been brought to bear on the problem. Although Indigenous students have been shown to be highly motivated and committed to their studies over many years, they continue to experience isolation, increased rates of subject withdrawal, financial stress and doubts about their own capacity to do well.

Table 7.8 Notable differences in the experience of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students

	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous
I feel I belong to the university community	**66****	46
Worrying about money has made it difficult for me to concentrate on study	**56***	38

Asterisks denote a significant difference between the indicated subgroups (* = significant at 0.05, ** = significant at 0.01)

Demographic differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students

On average, the Indigenous student sample was older and more likely to be from regional or remote areas than non-Indigenous students (Table 7.9). They were also more likely to have a disability that affects their study, and more likely to be the first in their family to attend university. Indigenous students were more likely to have dependents than non-Indigenous students (21%, compared with 9%; $p < 0.01$). Their parents were much more likely to be educated to only the primary school level than other students (12% and 22% for mother and father respectively, compared to 4% and 5%; $p < 0.01$), and Indigenous students were therefore more likely to be classed as low SES, and less likely to be high SES, based on parents' education levels. The Indigenous cohort was also predominantly female; after weighting for gender, 72 per cent of Indigenous students were female, compared to 57 per cent of non-Indigenous students ($p < 0.05$).

[19] Bradley at al. 2008.
[20] Behrendt et al. 2012.

Thirteen per cent of Indigenous students had completed a non-award preparatory course in order to qualify for university entrance, compared to 3 per cent of non-Indigenous students ($p < 0.01$). There were no differences in the proportions who had completed a university degree or diploma course, or completed a VET course, or who had participated in a university outreach program, prior to this year. However, the proportion of Indigenous students who said participating in an outreach program had been very influential on their decision to enrol was significantly higher, at 39 per cent compared to 16 per cent for non-Indigenous students ($p < 0.01$).

Table 7.9 Demographic composition of students by Indigeneity (% of students)

	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous
Aged 19 and under	52*	65
20 to 24 years	19	22
25 and older	29**	13
High SES	16**	33
Low SES	63**	40
Metropolitan	49**	73
Regional/remote	51**	27
First in family	45**	29
Disability	12*	6

Asterisks denote a significant difference between the indicated subgroups (* = significant at 0.05, ** = significant at 0.01)

Engagement with study

Indigenous students appeared to be highly engaged, motivated and satisfied with their studies compared to non-Indigenous students. Indigenous students were more likely to report that university life really suited them (72%, compared with 58%; $p < 0.05$), that they found staff approachable (88%, compared with 74%; $p < 0.05$), and that they felt there was a positive attitude to learning among their fellow students (84%; compared with 66%; $p < 0.05$). Substantially higher proportions said that they felt they belonged to the university community (66%, compared with 46%; $p < 0.01$). These findings are consistent with previous First Year Experience surveys.

However, despite this positive attitude towards their learning, a larger proportion of Indigenous students reported having withdrawn from subjects in their first year (25%, compared with 14%; $p < 0.05$). Although Indigenous students were somewhat more likely to report considering withdrawing or deferring their studies (26%, compared with 19%), this difference was not statistically significant. Emotional health, fear of failing, and financial stress were the most commonly reported reasons for considering withdrawing for both groups of students; family commitments were also a major concern for Indigenous students. Fifty-six per cent of Indigenous students reported that worrying about their finances had made it difficult to study, compared to 38 per cent of non-Indigenous students ($p < 0.05$); these difficulties may be compounded by fewer Indigenous students undertaking paid work during their studies. These findings were also consistent with those reported in 2009.

Indigenous students were less likely to report engaging with the social aspects of university. Significantly higher proportions of Indigenous students reported never studying with other students, never working with others on group assignments and never using discussion boards to study, and significantly lower proportions reported using lecture recordings or social networking for study purposes. Higher proportions of Indigenous students reported feeling uncomfortable in group discussions (37%; compared with 23%; $p < 0.05$).

Interestingly, however, a larger proportion of Indigenous students reported that they received higher marks in first semester than they expected (36%, compared to 23% for non-Indigenous students; $p < 0.05$). In 2009, a similar pattern was observed, although the proportions were smaller, with 27 per cent of Indigenous student and 16 per cent of non-Indigenous students receiving higher grades than expected.

Students from regional and remote backgrounds

Students from regional and remote backgrounds are under-represented in higher education. Indeed, the proportion of students from remote backgrounds participating in higher education has decreased relative to their population share since the last First Year Experience survey[21]. The engagement of universities with non-metropolitan Australians continues to be a major policy issue for the nation.

Students from regional and remote backgrounds in the study sample were identified by the postcode of the students' permanent home addresses, coded according to the ABS remoteness structure (see Appendix 2).

Demographic differences between metropolitan and regional/remote students

Like students from low SES backgrounds and Indigenous students (with whom they show a large degree of overlap), students from regional and remote backgrounds were more likely to be older than students from metropolitan backgrounds (Table 7.10). They were more likely to be the first in their family to go to university, more likely to have dependents (12%, compared with 7%; $p < 0.01$) and more likely to be studying part-time (12%, compared with 7%; $p < 0.01$).

As has been reported in previous First Year Experience surveys, students from regional and remote backgrounds were more likely to have deferred their enrolment prior to first year than other students (15%, compared with 7%; $p < 0.01$), although this is down from 2009's figure of 26 per cent. This change in deferral rates may be due to changes in the broader economic environment since 2009.

Table 7.10 Demographic composition of students by regional/remote status (% of students)

	Regional/remote	Metropolitan
Aged 19 and under	61**	73
20 to 24 years	21**	15
25 and older	18**	12
High SES	21**	34
Low SES	52**	37
Indigenous	3*	1
First in family	37**	27

Asterisks denote a significant difference between the indicated subgroups (* = significant at 0.05, ** = significant at 0.01)

Experience with study

There is some evidence that students from outside the major cities may be slightly less academically prepared than other students. Although they are not statistically significantly less likely to report feeling pressure at school to attend university (61%; compared with 68%), the average ATAR score of students from regional and remote backgrounds was estimated to be lower than estimates for students from major cities (76, compared with 84; $p < 0.01$). Correspondingly,

[21] Naylor, Baik and James 2013.

80 per cent of regional and remote students expected to receive an offer for university study based on their ATAR, compared to 92 per cent of other students ($p < 0.01$). However, students from regional and remote backgrounds are more likely to have completed VET courses or non-award preparatory courses prior to enrolling in university (16% and 5% respectively, compared to 8% and 2%; $p < 0.01$).

Despite these findings, non-metropolitan students did not report any significant differences in their ability to adjust to university study or in comprehending the material. In contrast to the 2009 study (although consistent with the 2004 study), students from regional and remote backgrounds were generally more positive about the quality of teaching and overall satisfaction than their urban peers. Students from non-metropolitan backgrounds were more likely to report that they had engaged positively with university orientation programs, that the subjects they studied were relevant to their interests, and that teaching staff were interested in their progress, provided helpful feedback, and made efforts to understand any difficulties they may have had. The reasons for the lower levels of satisfaction reported in 2009 compared to this study and to previous samples are unclear.

Students from regional and remote backgrounds displayed strong clarity of purpose regarding their university study. Ninety-one per cent of non-metropolitan students were clear about why they came to university, compared to 87 per cent of their peers ($p < 0.05$). Seventy-one per cent knew the occupation they wanted after finishing university, compared to 62 per cent of students from metropolitan backgrounds ($p < 0.01$). They were less likely to be motivated by the expectations of their parents (32%, compared with 41%; $p < 0.01$), and less likely to feel that university was just marking time while they decided their future (13%, compared with 20%; $p < 0.01$). Many of these differences may be due to the older average age of these students. Although both groups of students were equally likely to have participated in outreach programs, students from regional and remote backgrounds were more likely to report that these programs had been influential on their decision to attend university (52%, compared with 41%; $p < 0.01$).

Common stresses for regional and remote students

Forty-four per cent of students from regional and remote backgrounds reported that their financial situations were frequently a source of stress for them, compared to 24 per cent of their peers ($p < 0.01$), that work commitments severely interfered with their study (12%, compared with 6%; $p < 0.01$), and that they often or frequently had to miss class in order to work (31%, compared with 22%; $p < 0.05$). Higher proportions also reported having worked during high school (54%, compared to 44%; $p < 0.01$).

Students from these backgrounds reported seriously considering withdrawing from their studies in higher proportions than their peers (25%, compared with 19%; $p < 0.05$). Although financial pressure was significantly more likely to influence this decision (54%, compared with 50%; $p < 0.05$), the largest contributing factor, and the largest disparity with metropolitan students, was

due to their emotional health, with 84 per cent of non-metropolitan students who had considered deferring or withdrawing naming emotional health as a significant factor, compared to 66 per cent of metropolitan students.

Both of these factors may be due to the higher rates of regional and remote students who have to move to attend university, thus separating them from the financial and emotional supports of their communities. Fifty-seven per cent of students from regional and remote backgrounds moved to attend university (particularly within the same state), whereas only 27 per cent of metropolitan students did so ($p < 0.01$).

Students with disabilities

Since 2009, one of the fastest growing equity groups has been students with disabilities affecting their study, growing by 0.2 per cent per year—a rate second only to the growth in students from low SES backgrounds. Students with disabilities now comprise 5 per cent of the national student body.
In light of this growth, it is appropriate to investigate the university experience of these students. This is the first time that the First Year Experience survey has examined this question; students in previous samples were not asked to disclose their disability statuses. It was therefore surprising to discover that 7 per cent of the 2014 sample reported having disabilities, compared to the 5 per cent expected from national statistics.

Demographic differences between students with and without a disability

As a cohort, students who reported having a disability which interfered with their study were typically older than those without (Table 7.11). Interestingly, they were the only equity group to have an increased proportion of students from a medium SES background; the proportion of students from a high SES background was reduced, compared to students without a disability, while the proportion from low SES backgrounds was largely consistent for the two groups. Not surprisingly, a higher proportion of students with a disability were pursuing their studies part-time (14%, compared with 7%; $p < 0.05$). A higher proportion of students with a disability had completed a non-award preparatory course or completed a VET course prior to enrolling at university (8% and 15% respectively, compared with 3% and 9%; $p < 0.05$).

Table 7.11 Demographic composition of students by disability status (% of students)

	Students with a disability	Students without a disability
Aged 19 and under	47**	66
20 to 24 years	27	21
25 and older	26**	13
High SES	22*	33
Medium SES	39**	27
Low SES	39	40

Asterisks denote a significant difference between the indicated subgroups (* = significant at 0.05, ** = significant at 0.01)

A largely typical student experience

The cohort of students with a disability expressed some difficulties with their studies during first year. A much higher proportion of this group estimated receiving an average mark in first semester of less than 50 per cent (13%, compared with 2%; $p < 0.01$), resulting in a significantly lower estimated average mark for the cohort as a whole, of 69 per cent, compared to 73 per cent for those without a disability ($p < 0.05$). Similarly, 30 per cent of students with a disability reported having withdrawn from a subject during first semester, while only 13 per cent of those without a disability had done so ($p < 0.01$).

A larger proportion of disabled students reported difficulties with maintaining their motivation or with comprehending the material. They were also more

likely to feel overwhelmed by their workloads, to frequently skip classes and to frequently come to class without completing readings or assignments. Frequent financial stress was also reported by 53 per cent of this cohort, compared to 28 per cent of their peers.

There were also some indications that students with a disability may experience higher levels of social isolation at university. A higher proportion of students reported keeping to themselves in class, and never making presentations or asking questions in class. Although students with a disability were less likely to believe that the standard of work required was higher than expected (23%, compared with 39%; $p < 0.05$), they were also less likely to report that the quality of teaching in their institutions was good (81%, compared with 89%; $p < 0.05$), although it should be noted that students with a disability were no less satisfied with the overall quality of their teaching or their student experience.
Students with a disability were less likely to have enrolled in university due to the expectations of their parents, or to seeking training for a specific job (24%** and 66%* respectively, compared to 42% and 77%). They were more likely to seek help and advice from teaching staff (48%, compared with 36%; $p < 0.05$).
Students with disabilities therefore largely report a positive experience at university. Although, as might have been expected, they are more likely to report having difficulties studying than students without disabilities, the finding that their student experience is largely typical of mainstream students is pleasing.

Gender differences

As with previous First Year Experience surveys, our ability to analyse differences in student experience based on gender is constrained by the relatively lower number of male respondents. Similar patterns of lower male response rates are common in the higher education sector and are not limited to this study.

Women are more likely to be studying part-time (10%, compared with 5%; $p < 0.01$). There were also significant gender imbalances across the major fields of study (Table 7.12). As with national patterns of enrolment by discipline, women in the sample were concentrated in Health and Education, and relatively excluded from Engineering and Information Technology. These discipline differences may further influence interpretation of the survey findings.

Table 7.12 Enrolment in Broad Field of Education (BFOE) by gender (% of students)

BFOE	Male	Female
Agriculture and environment	1	2
Architecture	1	2
Creative arts	6	7
Education	4**	9**
Engineering	11**	3**
Health	11**	20**
Info Technology	3**	1**
Management and commerce	9	7
Society and culture	13	15
Science	10	8
Cross discipline	33*	28*

Asterisks denote a significant difference between the indicated subgroups (* = significant at 0.05, ** = significant at 0.01)

As in 2009, men were more likely to come from a high SES background (37%, compared with 29%; $p < 0.01$), and were less likely to have participated in an outreach program (51% of male students, compared to 59% of female students; $p < 0.01$). Women also continued to display some differences in their reasons for attending university, with a lower proportion wanting to develop their talents, and more wanting training for a specific job (74% and 80% respectively, compared to 79% and 75% for male students; $p < 0.05$).

Women reported spending less time on campus overall, as has also been reported in previous First Year Experience samples. This may be due to disciplinary differences, although it might reflect additional pressures on women's time. Women were more likely to report having more difficulties with their studies, and feel stress managing their commitments, than men on a large number of different measures. Women were more likely to feel overwhelmed by all they had to do, more likely to find their workload to be too heavy, more likely to think seriously about deferring or withdrawing, more likely to having difficulty motivating themselves or comprehending the material, more likely to feel uncomfortable in group discussions, less likely to ask questions in class, and more likely to have trouble adjusting to university study. They were also less

likely to feel the university lifestyle suited them, to enjoy the intellectual challenge of their studies or to find being a student exciting. They also reported higher levels of financial stress than men.

Women were also less satisfied overall with the quality of teaching at university. They were less likely to feel that they were given good advice regarding their subjects, that they had been offered a good range of subjects or that their subjects fit together well. They were less likely to feel that staff were available to help them. Despite these problems, however, a larger proportion of women reported receiving marks that were higher than they expected at university (26%, compared with 19%; $p < 0.01$), although the grade distributions were similar for both genders. Women did not rate their overall experience at university significantly differently to men, despite these challenges and pressures on their time. These findings are consistent with those reported in previous First Year Experience surveys.

Age differences

The effect of age on the student experience was also investigated. The sample was divided into two groups: those aged 19 years old or less, who were school leavers or had deferred in 2013, and those aged 20 or older, who were not typically school leavers and are classified as mature age students for the purposes of this analysis. Half of the non-school leavers in this sample went to two of the universities in the sample.

Demographic differences between school leavers and non-school leavers

There were notable demographic differences between school leavers and non-school leavers in this sample. Even after weighting for gender and Indigeneity, those groups were over-represented among the mature age students (67%** and 5%** respectively, compared to 58% and 1% of school leavers). Students with a disability, rural students, low SES students, first in family, part-time and international students were all more likely to be older. Nineteen per cent of mature age students reported having dependents, whereas only 4 per cent of school leavers did ($p < 0.01$).

Table 7.13 Demographic composition of students by age (% of students)

	School leavers	Non-school leavers
Students with a disability	4	9*
International students	7	19**
Metropolitan students	75	63**
Regional/remote	25	38**
High SES	36	24*
Medium SES	29	25
Low SES	34	51**
First in family	27	35**
Part-time	5	15**

Asterisks denote a significant difference between the indicated subgroups (* = significant at 0.05, ** = significant at 0.01)

Engagement and the effect of age

Significantly higher proportions of mature age students were enrolled in the fields of Health and Education (22% and 11% respectively, compared with 14% and 5%; $p < 0.05$ for both), and lower proportions in Science (6%, compared with 10% of school leavers; $p < 0.05$). These differences are likely due to demographic factors such as SES and first in family status, rather than age per se. However, a difference that is likely to be due to a difference in age is that non-school leavers were more likely to have previously completed a university diploma, preparatory course or VET course than school leavers (20%**, 8%**, and 12%* respectively, compared to 2%, 2% and 8%). Although non-school leavers were less likely to have participated in an outreach program (35%, compared with 68%; $p < 0.01$), they were more likely to say that the program had been influential on their decision to enrol (52%, compared with 44%; $p < 0.05$).

Mature age students reported high levels of academic motivation. Higher proportions of mature age students reported being clear about their reasons for enrolling in university, enrolling in university to develop their talents or to get

training for a specific job, and they were more likely to see a connection between their studies and their future career prospects. They were also more likely to know what occupation they expected to pursue. School leavers were conversely more likely to report enrolling due to the expectations of their parents or that they were marking time while they decided their future. Mature age students were more likely to report taking satisfaction in their studies, finding university exciting, and enjoying the intellectual challenge. They were potentially also more likely to demonstrate agency in their decisions about their enrolment, with higher proportions of mature age students reporting that they had changed course (12%, compared with 5%; $p < 0.05$) or institution (5%, compared with 1%; $p < 0.05$) during first year, and lower proportions hoping to change courses after first year (11%, c.f 16%; $p < 0.05$). They were more likely than school leavers to be satisfied with their subject choices.

Despite these high levels of motivation and clarity of purpose, mature age students may be more likely to have some anxieties about their academic performance, with lower proportions reporting that they expected to receive an offer to university based on their ATAR, and higher proportions achieving higher marks than expected. Higher proportions experienced difficulty comprehending subject material, but that may also be due to demographic factors such as SES status, which affect academic preparation, rather than age. Although no differences in the likelihood of seriously considering deferring during first year were observed between student age groups, there were differences in their reasons for considering deferring. Emotional health and fear of failure were most frequent for both groups, but selected by a higher proportion of mature age students (81%** and 56%*, compared with 69% and 47% of school leavers). Financial reasons were the next most common reasons for mature age students, whereas for school leavers, it was wanting to change courses.

As well as higher reported levels of motivation, mature age students reported higher levels of academic engagement on a number of different items. They were more likely to seek help, more likely to have worked out how to manage their workloads, more likely to have worked consistently in first semester, and less likely to have skipped classes or come to class unprepared. They were more likely to find staff approachable, interested in their progress, willing to discuss their work, more likely to provide feedback and more likely to try hard to capture students' imaginations. They reported higher levels of enjoyment and overall satisfaction with their university experience (85% and 80% respectively, compared with 77% and 73%; $p < 0.01$), and were less likely to feel that university hadn't lived up to their expectations.

However, mature age students were less likely to engage with their university communities. They were less likely to study with others, or work with others in class or on group assignments. They were less likely to feel that university life suited them, less likely to enjoy being on campus, less interested in extra-curricular activities, and less likely to have made friends during first year.

Finally, mature age students were more likely to report higher levels of stress in balancing their commitments, as well as financial stress, and those working were more likely to frequently miss classes than school leavers. Approximately three quarters of those school leavers working did so to afford extras or to be financially independent of their family, whereas a similar proportion of mature age students worked to meet basic needs.

International students

The wellbeing, academic success and satisfaction of international students are major priorities for the Australian higher education sector. The 2014 First Year Experience sample had 205 international students. Twenty-eight per cent were from China, 12 per cent from Malaysia, and 11 per cent from elsewhere in Asia. A large proportion was studying in the field of Management and Commerce (18%, compared to 7% of domestic students; $p < 0.01$) and Health (13%, compared with 16%, n.s.). Eighty per cent speak English as an additional language, compared to 23% of domestic students. Sixty-nine per cent completed their secondary schooling in Australia. These findings are all broadly consistent with those from previous First Year Experience surveys.

The findings from the 2014 First Year Experience survey show that the social integration of international students continues to improve, but they experience difficulties with studies. Although two thirds of international students are satisfied with the quality of teaching, they are less satisfied than domestic students.

Table 7.14 Notable differences in the experience of international and domestic students

	International	Domestic
I find it quite difficult to comprehend a lot of the material I am supposed to study	**39****	20
Overall, I am very satisfied with my university experience so far	**66****	76

Asterisks denote a significant difference between the indicated subgroups (** = significant at 0.01)

International students were more likely to be in their early twenties than their teens (52% compared to 39%), whereas domestic students were more likely to be younger (68%, 19 years and under, and 18%, 20 to 24 years old). They were more likely to come from high SES backgrounds, and less likely to come from low SES backgrounds (47% and 29% respectively, compared with 31% and 42% for domestic students; $p < 0.01$). They were more likely to have previously completed a university degree or diploma (15% compared with 8%) or a non-award preparatory course (9% compared with 3%), but less likely to have completed a VET course (2%, compared with 10%; $p < 0.01$ for all).

The motivations for undertaking university study were significantly different for international students compared to domestic students. Parental expectations were significantly more important for international students (64%, compared with 38%; $p < 0.01$). International students also sought training for a specific job or wanted to develop their talents in higher proportions than domestic students (84%* and 90%** respectively, compared with 76% and 76%). However, 40 per cent of international students also said that university was marking time while they decided their future, as opposed to 18 per cent of domestic students ($p < 0.01$).

International students were more likely to report that they applied themselves to their studies. They were more likely to seek assistance from staff, and to believe that staff made an effort to understand their difficulties. They were more likely

to take satisfaction in their studies, and to believe that their subjects were giving them an understanding of the latest research. They were also more likely to believe that university orientation programs got them off to a good start.

However, they were also more likely to report having difficulties with their studies, and, although 66 per cent were satisfied with their university experience, this was significantly lower than the 76 per cent found for domestic students. A higher proportion of international students reported difficulties comprehending the material. They were also more likely to report that university hadn't lived up to their expectations, and less likely to report that their subjects fitted together well or had a clear connection with their future career prospects. Although the majority of international students were satisfied with the quality of teaching and with their university experience overall, these proportions were significantly lower than reported for domestic students (84%* and 66%** respectively for international students; 89% and 76% for domestic students). International students were also more likely to report that university hadn't lived up to their expectations (24%, compared with 18%, $p < 0.05$). Although a higher proportion of international students reported that they had worked out how to manage their workloads or never felt overwhelmed by their commitments, they were also more likely to report that their workload was too heavy and that it was hard to keep up with the volume of work.

Although, generally, satisfaction with teaching and the university experience was high, the difference observed from domestic students may be of concern. This dissatisfaction with the quality of teaching in Australian universities was not observed in 2009, and may present an important change for policy and practice in the sector.

In 2004, a large proportion of international students reported an apparently lower level of social integration. The 2009 study pointed to substantial improvements in the experience of international students in this regard. Pleasingly, the 2014 study indicates that these gains have been maintained, and improved for both international and domestic students in some regards (Table 7.15). Nevertheless, international students report being less willing to ask questions in class, more uncomfortable working in groups, and more likely to keep to themselves, indicating that there are still some challenges in the social integration of international and domestic students.

Table 7.15 Sense of belonging of international and domestic students (% of students agreeing with statement)

		International	Domestic
I feel part of a group committed to learning	2004	46	56**
	2009	56	53
	2014	57	56
I feel I belong to the university community	2004	35	52**
	2009	48	50
	2014	46	47
I am confident that at least one teacher knows my name	2009	58	58
	2014	59	60
Academic staff take an interest in my progress	2009	32	25*
	2014	39	39

Asterisks denote a significant difference between the indicated subgroups (* = significant at 0.05, ** = significant at 0.01)

8. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Australian higher education has undergone many transformations in the twenty years since the 1994 First Year Experience survey. The commencing undergraduate population has more than doubled, from just over 159,000 students in 1994 to over 405,000 students in 2014[22], and the student body has continued to diversify with large growth in international students and increased participation of Indigenous students and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Changes in the academic workforce and advances in technology, among other trends, have continued to alter the modes of student participation, the structures of course delivery, and relationships between students and teachers. The higher education landscape for commencing students today is radically different to what it was 20 years ago.

In this context, the 2014 First Year Experience study provides insights into the changing character of first year students' attitudes, expectations and experiences of university over two decades. The study shows that students in 2014 are generally very positive in outlook, significantly more positive than first year students surveyed in the past two decades. Most students are clear about their reasons for going to university, have a strong sense of purpose and identity, are excited to be at university, and are very satisfied with their course experience.

First year students in 2014 are also better prepared for the transition to university than students in previous studies. Concerted efforts to improve the links between school and university have worked as school leavers in 2014 report feeling better prepared to choose a course, and believe the final year of school prepared them well for university. The gap between school and university identified in earlier surveys has been narrowed considerably. One of the contributing factors to this may be the rise in societal expectations of school-leavers to attend university. A significantly higher proportion of students in 2014 reports experiencing pressure at school to go to university, and being strongly influenced by their parents'/family's expectations.

One of the positive trends over the two decades has been in the drop in the proportion of students who seriously thought of deferring or discontinuing (from 33% in 1994 to 19%). However, of concern is the huge rise in the proportion of students citing emotional health as an important reason in considering deferring. Almost three quarters of the students who are considering deferring cite emotional health as an important reason. This may be the result of growing public awareness of mental and emotional health issues among young people, and is in line with recent studies showing that university students are a very high risk population for psychological distress. There are implications for institutions in providing adequate support for the mental and emotional wellbeing of first year students.

[22] Department of Education and Training, 2015. *Summary of the 2014 first half year higher education student statistics*.

Another major trend over the last 20 years has been the increase in the number of hours students spend in paid employment, as well as in the proportion of students who report that worrying about money interferes with their study. However, the findings from the 2014 study suggest that, despite working more, students on the whole are getting better at balancing their study and other commitments. A higher proportion of students in 2014 report being able to manage their commitments, and significantly fewer students say their course workloads are too heavy or that managing their commitments is stressful.

The 2014 study reveals important trends in the ways students are engaging with their studies and the university community. Time studying and average course contact hours have remained the same since 2009, but the indicators of academic engagement show a significant rise in the proportion of students feeling satisfied with their subject choices, their course design, and with their interactions with teaching staff. On all the indicators of teaching quality, students in 2014 report higher levels of satisfaction than in previous years. These trends are positive signs of the effect of university efforts to improve the experience of first year students.

While much has improved in the experience of first year students over the past two decades, for approximately a third of students, getting motivated to study is difficult and coping with university study remains challenging. This is particularly the case for students who enter university with low ATAR scores. In the 2014 study, students with low ATAR scores stand out as being less prepared for university, less able to cope with university study and having lower levels of academic engagement than other students.

Another cause of concern relates to students' social engagement with the university. The 2014 study shows that a large proportion of students are not particularly connected – academically or socially – to the university. Over a quarter of students report never studying with other students, and approximately a third have not made one or two close friends at university. Fewer than half (44%) feel a sense of belonging to the university community. What role online technologies have had on student engagement with their peers and university remains unclear; however, the pervasiveness of online resources has contributed to more flexibility and choice for students. A large proportion of students report that they can miss classes because of the availability of notes and materials online.

Implications

The findings from the 2014 study point to a number of implications for institutional policy and practice:

- Students with low ATAR scores are a particular 'at risk' group. They are more likely to be disillusioned with their course and are at greater risk of attrition. For students who enter higher education with a low ATAR, the issues are complex. Because low ATAR students tend to end up in less sought after courses and institutions, they may have lower intrinsic

interest in their courses, and a weaker sense of purpose, and are consequently less committed to their studies. While most institutions offer a range of programs to develop foundational academic skills, it will be essential for institutions to continue to develop new initiatives specifically to support low ATAR students' adjustment to university life.

- Supporting low ATAR students' transition into university means more than addressing the gaps in study skills. It also means rethinking the role of preparatory pre-bachelors programs, so they support students not only to develop necessary academic skills, but also help them shape new student identities and develop personal objectives.

- As the student population continues to diversify, it will be essential for institutions to monitor routinely the experience of distinctive student subgroups. Early identification and intervention of 'at risk' students can contribute significantly to improving retention.

- Worrying about money interferes with study for many students. As students are increasingly being asked to contribute to the cost of their higher education, the number of hours spent at work will likely rise, leading to students devoting insufficient time to study. One option for providing financial support for students, while at the same time acknowledging the numerous benefits of gaining work experience, would be for institutions to provide more opportunities for first year students to work on campus (of course some universities are already doing this).

- With the growth in online learning, there is a risk that students will become more disengaged from their university communities. It will be increasingly important for universities to provide environments where social interaction is encouraged – not only for its own sake, but for the informal learning opportunities that emerge in conversations. Fostering student engagement means structuring opportunities for students to interact with each other and with teaching staff outside of class. The benefits of incidental learning in social settings should not be underestimated in any discussion of course delivery in higher education.

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APPENDIX 1

Survey method and data analysis

The Vice-Chancellors of the nine institutions that participated in 2009 were contacted in March 2014 to invite them to participate in the fifth First Year Experience survey. Eight agreed to participate.

The project retained similar instructions for sample selection to previous surveys. In order to select a representative sample of first year students, we asked for the selected sample to meet the following specifications: first year, first-time students at bachelor and 'other undergraduate' level, stratified by gender, domestic/international status and the DET Broad Fields of Education (BFOE). In 1994, we sought a 20 per cent sample from the population of first year students. In 1999 and 2004, we requested a 25 per cent sample in order to ensure a sample of reasonable size. Due to concerns associated with decreasing response rates, the sample size in 2009 and 2014 was increased to 30 per cent. Where the sample selected for a BFOE was less than 50 students, institutions were asked to increase the sample to 50, and if total enrolments for the BFOE were less than 50, to include all first year students within scope in that field.

The sampling instructions differed slightly for Indigenous students, where we asked for a population sample of Indigenous first year students at each institution, including those students enrolled in enabling or non-award courses. This protocol was started in 2004, to obtain enough responses from this small population to allow for a reasonable level of confidence in the statistical analyses.

Institutions had the choice of sending invitations to participate in the study themselves or providing the CSHE with an electronic list of the sample. One institution elected to invite students themselves for privacy reasons. The initial sample of 13882 students were sent a link to an online survey. Non-responders were emailed three times during a three week period, reminding them to participate. At the end of the three weeks, the online survey was closed.

Response rates varied across the institutions, from a low of 7 per cent at New University to a high of 21 per cent at Regional University (see Table A.1). These responses have dropped considerably from the 2009 survey, as part of a broader trend in decreasing survey response rates. Overlapping collection periods between the First Year Experience survey and the University Experience Survey at some universities may account for the decrease in response rate observed.

Table A.1 Response rates by institution, 1994-2014

	1994 Effective response rate (%)	1999 Effective response rate (%)	2004 Effective response rate (%)	2009 Effective response rate (%)	2014 Effective response rate (%)
Established	65	42	31	26	17
New	54	32	23	16	7
Suburban	57	39	27	29	11
International	57	23	27	19	15
Regional	57	43	28	19	21
Applied	63	44	30	17	12
Evolving	N/A	N/A	23	16	17
Traditional	N/A	N/A	29	26	11
Total	57 (N=4028)	37 (N=2609)	28 (N=2344)	24 (N=2422)	13 (N=1739)

Table A.2 provides an overview of the proportion of students by Broad Field of Education classification across institutions. It also enumerates the relative proportion of students enrolled in combined degrees, illustrating that these students typically account for around a third of the sample of respondents from institutions in this study.

Table A.2 Proportion of respondents by Broad Field of Education and institution, 2014

	Agriculture	Architecture	Society and Culture	Management and Commerce	Education	Engineering	Health	Science	Creative Arts	IT	Food and Hospitality	Combined Degree
Established	2	3	18	9	0	3	9	17	8	1	0	32
New	0	0	18	4	19	0	25	3	2	3	0	27
Suburban	3	0	15	9	9	2	29	3	5	3	0	24
International	0	4	13	7	1	16	5	9	6	1	0	38
Regional	3	0	13	5	21	2	14	9	3	3	0	28
Applied	0	0	10	12	5	7	19	6	10	3	0	28
Evolving	0	1	16	5	19	7	36	4	1	2	0	8
Traditional	3	3	14	7	0	7	9	15	3	1	0	40

Survey respondents across institutions, 1994-2014

Table A.3 provides details of gender breakdown, the percentage of younger and older students, the proportion of international students and the percentage of part-time first years in the 1994 and 2014 samples.

Women continue to be over-represented in the sample compared to the proportions expected from national figures. The proportion of female respondents in New and Regional Universities is particularly high (80% and 78% respectively). For the majority of institutions, the proportion of students aged 19 years or younger has decreased compared to 1994, which is consistent with the national trend, and has been observed in previous First Year Experience reports. The decrease in the proportion of respondents of school leaver age is particularly notable at Suburban University. The proportion of international students has

risen markedly since 1994 at Established and Applied Universities (as was also observed in 2009), although other universities have remained relatively stable. International students have been under-represented in all the surveys, compared to national statistics. A high proportion of part-time students from Evolving and Regional Universities participated in the study.

Table A.3 Selected respondent demographic characteristics by institution compared with previous samples, 1994-2014 (%)

	Females*		19 years and under		25 years and over		International^		Part-time study	
	1994	2014	1994	2014	1994	2014	1994	2014	1994	2014
Established	62	60	86	78	4	2	6	23	2	3
New	66	80	70	81	12	0	1	2	8	8
Suburban	68	72	74	46	13	27	3	5	8	11
International	60	62	77	86	7	3	11	12	4	6
Regional	66	78	64	59	12	23	3	3	2	18
Applied	61	71	66	57	13	19	5	14	9	7
Evolving	--	67	--	33	--	44	--	4	--	28
Traditional	--	62	--	72	--	7	--	13	--	2

* Unweighted

^ In 1994, the proportion of international students was based on the percentage of students who reported they were an international fee paying student. In 2009 and 2014, students were asked directly if they were an international student.

Statistical analyses

The data analysis and coding procedures used in 2014 were identical to those of the previous studies. SPSS software enabled the production of descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations. Independent t-tests were used to determine significance levels of relationships between nominated variables. Significance levels are reported at $p < 0.01$ (*) and $p < 0.05$ (**).

APPENDIX 2

Glossary of Terms

Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (ATSI)	A student self-identifying as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin. These students are referred to as Indigenous students in the report.
Broad Field of Education (BFOE) classification (known as Broad Field of Study prior to 2001)	A classification of courses based on similarity in terms of the vocational field or specialisation or the principal subject matter of the course.
Commencing student	A student who is enrolled after the census date and has enrolled for the first time in a given course at the institution since the last census date.
High and low achieving students	Based on self-reported average grades. High achievers are those with an overall average mark of 70% or higher in first semester, low achievers reported a grade of 70% or below.
Languages Other Than English (LOTE)	See NESB
Low socioeconomic status (SES) classification	A designated equity group category – formally classified by applying the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Socioeconomic Index for Areas of Education and Occupation to Statistical Areas (SA1s) of students' home residence. SA1s in the lowest quartile of the Index are defined as low SES. For the purposes of this report, low SES students are instead defined by postcode rather than SA1 (postcode measure), or by parents' education level (where neither parent has a university education.
Mature age student	For the purposes of comparing the experience of school-leavers (aged 19 years and younger) with older students in the cohort, we define students aged 20 years and older as belonging to the non-traditional age category for first year undergraduate study. In some contexts, these students are known as 'mature age' students.

Non-English Speaking Background students (NESB)	Students from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) are a designated equity group category. NESB students are those i) born in any country overseas; ii) who speak any language other than English at home; iii) who have been in Australia for less than ten years. In this study we asked students to identify whether they speak a language other than English (LOTE) at home.
Regional and remote students Rural and isolated students	A designated equity group category – classified in this study as having a permanent home address in a postcode that is classified as regional or remote using the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS).
School-leavers	Those who completed secondary education in the year prior to the survey. Typically aged 19 years or younger.
Type of attendance	Full-time or part-time enrollees