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Exploring the Foundations for Successful Transition: Trends in Commencing Australian Students' Understanding of their Education-Employment Pathways

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Abstract

Understanding students' expectations of university study is a foundational requirement for successful transition practice. However, research regarding students' knowledge of the education-employment pathways they are about to commence remains limited. Exploratory research has shown that many Australian university students have limited or inaccurate knowledge about how to reach their career goals and that levels of student knowledge vary across course type rather than demographic group. The present study expands upon this work to determine whether such patterns are consistent over time by using survey responses from 1096 commencing university students over a four-year period. Key findings show that most patterns are consistent over time, and that students commencing specific courses may be at greater risk of having limited or inaccurate knowledge than others. This research provides a strong foundation for universities seeking to support students from different courses as they transition into and through university.

***Keywords**:* Student transitions; employability; commencing students; student expectations.

Introduction

In an era of increasing financial pressure and growing debate regarding the value of higher education, supporting student success is an ongoing challenge for higher education providers (Department of Education, 2024a). The challenge is especially pronounced for students transitioning into their first year of university. A key aspect of Kift's (2015) transition pedagogy is the need for whole-of-institution responses to supporting student transition. This includes understanding and responding to what students think about university prior to their commencement (Reid & Davidson, 2022). However, research has consistently shown that one of the hurdles that commencing students face is a mismatch between their expectations and the experience of the course in which they have enrolled (Kift, 2015; Krause et al., 2005). One important factor that impacts students' successful transition into university is their possession of an accurate understanding of what higher education is for, what it will be like, and how it relates to future work (Tymon, 2013). While it is not the only driver for student enrolment, most students enrol in higher education courses with a future career in mind (Baik et al., 2015; Lock & Kelly, 2020). A better understanding of student knowledge of the education-employment pathways on which they are embarking should therefore be a key goal for those interested in enhancing student transition to, through and out of university.

In 2020, Lock and Kelly conducted a research study that aimed to capture commencing students' knowledge about the education-employment pathways that they were about to embark on, and this yielded some concerning findings. Findings confirmed that approximately 75% of Australian students were commencing university with a career goal in mind but showed that approximately 50% of them had a less than accurate understanding of the requirements required to reach this goal. This proportion was substantially lower when looking at students who were commencing a dual degree (courses that culminate in the awarding of two university qualifications upon completion). Furthermore, when asked about the careers associated with their course, more than 50% of students had only a limited or somewhat limited understanding. In reporting these findings, this study categorised courses into three types. Generalist degrees (such as a Bachelor of Arts) support broad fields of study, and specialised degrees (such as a Bachelor of Nursing) are narrow in structure and lead to a specific career outcome. The final category, mixed degrees (such as a Bachelor of Psychological Science), may appear to be linked to a single outcome, but in practice offer multiple vocational outcomes.

When considering the findings in relation to course type, Lock and Kelly (2020) found that students commencing mixed courses had the lowest rates of having a career goal and of having an accurate understanding of how to reach that goal, and students commencing generalist courses had the lowest levels of knowledge of careers associated with their course. In comparison, students commencing specialised courses had the highest rates of accuracy, knowledge, and goals. While this study identified concerning patterns of student knowledge, its cross-sectional nature limited the generalisability of findings. Such a limitation is not unique to this research as much literature on employability in higher education is cross sectional in nature. In an era characterised by significant societal pressures (such as a pandemic and economic crisis), further investigation of student knowledge regarding education-employment pathways will be key in aiding universities intent on supporting the transition of students. This research aimed to collect data from commencing students over a period of four years to identify whether student expectations regarding their education-employment pathway vary, especially given the potential for variation during this period in the pathways and outcomes themselves. Findings from this longitudinal study will enable higher education providers to act with confidence in tailoring employability curricula to the knowledge and expectations of commencing students.

Literature Review

Research regarding students knowledge in relation to education-employment pathways has tended to be organised around phases of the journey into and along these pathways. Existing literature has paid particular attention to those phases related to students' initial course choice and their experience of enrolment in university, with very little research focusing on the crucial period between enrolment into and commencement of those studies.

Knowledge of Students Making Decisions Regarding Course Choice

An important body of research has emerged regarding the knowledge and decision-making of high school students in the UK, Australia and Europe with respect to university and course choice as these relate to future employment. Skatova and Ferguson (2014) explored motivational drivers for student choice, and their study showed the importance of career-related motivations for students entering particular courses (e.g., medicine and engineering), however, the extent and accuracy of students' knowledge regarding these motivations was not considered. While some might assume that student choice regarding courses is logical, well researched and, therefore, likely to be accurate (Bovill, 2012), Parks and colleagues (2017) identified that Australian high school students are often uncertain about where to source information related to university courses and how to judge the merit of the information that is available. This is due to the pressured and time sensitive environment in which final year high school students are required to make their choices and also because they often feel that support is limited during this process. Germeijs and Verschueren (2007) articulate why the quality of decision-making of high school students about course choice is so important, noting that enrolment in a course that did not match expectations held at the point of decision increased the risk of attrition during a student's first year of study. Given this risk, higher education providers have an interest in understanding the expectations of students before they enter their chosen course as this will allow them to meet or manage those expectations and support successful transition.

Knowledge of Currently Enrolled University Students

Knowledge possessed by students who are currently enrolled in university courses has also been explored by researchers. Foundational work in this field was carried out in the UK by Tymon (2013), who found evidence of only limited alignment between the views regarding employability of students in comparison to other stakeholders (such as employers and educators). In particular, attitudes regarding the importance of skills development were found to vary between first and final year students, with the former seeing only limited relevance of employability skills development to their current needs. More broadly, research has shown that attitudes towards, and engagement with, employability-related content differ from discipline to

discipline and course to course (Sethi et al., 2018). Lock and Kelly (2022) confirmed that attitudes towards education-employment pathways of current Australian university students vary across course type. This study also highlighted some of the negative consequences associated with students' lack of awareness of the importance of employability skills development during their early years. Interviews with first year students suggested that they saw education and employment as being separate phases of their lives, whereas those with final year students found that frustration and concern arose as students realised their need for more than merely a university qualification if they were to transition successfully to employment. Greenbank (2014) generated similar findings and suggested that such outcomes may result from students' focus on the present rather than the future, and their reliance on intuitive rather than rational decision-making processes when choosing when and how to engage with employability-related content and opportunities in their courses.

Knowledge of Commencing University Students

Despite its importance, there is a lack of research into the knowledge regarding education-employment pathways of commencing students'; that is, during that challenging yet pivotal period between application and commencement (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015; Winterton & Turner, 2019). This is an important period of decision-making, particularly given that less than a quarter of Australian university students receive their first preference (University Admissions Centre, 2023) and so must grapple with decisions about pathways other than their primary choice. What little research we do have suggests that we should be concerned about the accuracy of the knowledge commencing students have about their education-employment pathways (Bovill, 2012; Lock & Kelly, 2020; 2022). Such research has shown that most students may have inaccurate knowledge of how to pursue the career goals that they associate with university study (Lock & Kelly, 2020).

In general, the research above highlights that we know little about the knowledge that commencing students have regarding the education-employment pathways that they are about to follow, but that such knowledge may well be characterised by concerning levels of inaccuracy. We know that high school students often feel rushed in their decision-making processes and would welcome further support, and that currently enrolled students can hold understandings of where their courses are leading that differ markedly from those of staff. A deeper understanding of the knowledge and expectations commencing students hold in relation to their education-employment pathways is fundamental for higher education providers. Such understanding can help institutions to design effective curricula and tailor transitional approaches that better support students as they transition into and through university.

The Present Study

This study examines trends in commencing Australian university students' knowledge of education-employment pathways across four intake periods between 2020 and 2023. Building on the findings of Lock and Kelly (2020), the study focuses on the extent and accuracy of student knowledge, particularly as such knowledge is patterned across students enrolled in generalist, mixed and specialised course types. It is with this purpose and this foundation that the following research questions were developed.

RQ1: Do the types of courses students are choosing to pursue at university change over time?

RQ2: Does the proportion of students commencing university with a career goal vary over time and by course type?

RQ3: Does student knowledge of their education-employment pathway vary over time and by course type?

RQ4: How accurate are students' understandings of their education-employment pathway and does this vary over time and by course type?

Method

Participants

Data was collected in February of each year from 2020-2023 from a total of 3285 individuals. To be eligible for inclusion participants needed to have accepted an offer for a bachelor level university course, but not yet commenced it. Participants needed to be studying at an Australian institution and be over the age of 18. Participants were excluded from the study if they were commencing postgraduate studies or TAFE certifications.[1] Participants were also removed if they failed to complete

[1] TAFE (Technical and Further Education) is a government-funded system of public vocational education providers in Australia.

80% of the relevant questions in the survey. Following screening, the final sample comprised 1096 participants. Collectively, participants were enrolled at 15 different universities across Australia. Table 1 presents descriptive data.

Table 1

Summary of Sample Characteristics for Each Year

Variable	2020 (n=202)	2021 (n=495)	2022 (n=261)	2023 (n=167)
Age	*M* = 21.50, *SD* = 8.20	*M* = 21.15, *SD* = 7.66	*M* = 19.60, *SD* = 4.81	*M* = 23.17, *SD* = 8.89
Sex	F = 78.2%	F = 75.2%	F = 74.3%	F = 76.6%
	M = 21.8%	M = 24.8%	M = 25.7%	M = 23.4%
First language English	77.2%	79.3%	80.5%	72.5%
First-in-Family	35.91%	45.46%	47.13%	45.22%

Materials

An online survey was developed using Qualtrics. The survey comprised 32 questions across three categories. The first category included questions regarding participants' demographic information. The second category included a series of questions related to the participants' course preferences and choices. The third category included questions related to career goals, outcomes, students' understanding of education-employment pathways, and their expectations of university. Survey questions were designed to mirror those utilised in Lock and Kelly (2020) to allow for comparison of data. All data was collated and analysed using JASP version 0.95.3 (JASP Team, 2025).

Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC-17-192). To recruit participants, a research flyer and link were posted on university-related social media groups. Individuals interested in participating could click the link which would take them to a plain language statement with a consent button. If the participant provided consent, they were then taken to the survey. Participants were required to complete the survey in a single session and no incentives were offered.

Data Analysis - Classification of Variables

A text entry box was used for the following questions to reduce bias or influence from the research team.

1. What is the name of the degree that you accepted an offer for?
2. What careers can your degree lead to? (Name as many as you can)
3. What is your career goal? (Only if participants indicated having a goal)
4. Are there additional training/short courses/qualifications that you expect to pursue during or after your degree to reach your career goal? If yes, what do you think you will need to/plan to pursue? (Only if participants indicated having a goal).

In order to address the research questions, these responses needed to be categorised to allow for comparisons between groups, following the method outlined in Lock and Kelly (2020). The name of the degree was categorised into two variables that described course types. Firstly, the course was categorised as either singular (where a student undertakes a single qualification e.g., Bachelor of Law) or dual (where a student undertakes two separate qualifications at the same time e.g., Bachelor of Law/Bachelor of Psychology). Secondly, courses were categorised as generalist, mixed or specialised. This coding followed the method used in Lock and Kelly (2020), with specialised courses being those with a named profession in their title constituting the predominant employment option available to graduates, generalist courses offering students a wide array of career outcomes linked to choices of majors, and mixed courses often having a named profession in their title, but in practice supporting skill development applicable to a wide range of vocational outcomes (e.g., Bachelor of Psychological Science).

To evaluate the level of knowledge and accuracy of participants' understandings of the career pathways linked to their chosen course, participant responses needed to be compared to known sources. Data was collected from the websites of all universities present in the sample. Each course was searched and potential career outcomes associated with the course listed on the website were collated within an Excel spreadsheet. Answers the participants provided for relevant questions were then compared to

the aggregated data on career pathways compiled in the spreadsheet. To determine level of knowledge participants' responses to the second question above were placed in one of four categories:

- Limited knowledge (response was blank or a variation of "I don't know")
- Somewhat limited knowledge (response was one answer or very few answers with little variation)
- Somewhat extensive knowledge, (response had multiple answers, with some variation present between job roles or discipline fields)
- Extensive knowledge (response contains multiple career outcomes that for generalist/mixed degrees extend beyond the namesake of the degree and where appropriate beyond the discipline, and for specialised degrees demonstrate an awareness of further specialisations that exist).

Finally, participants' accuracy of their education-employment pathway was determined based on their response to the fourth question detailed above. Each response was coded using the following categories:

- Accurate (if there was a clear similarity between the participant's response and the requirements stipulated on university websites)
- Inaccurate (if little to no connection was present)
- Somewhat accurate/somewhat inaccurate (if they could identify correctly if additional training/qualifications were required but were unable to articulate what specifically).

All coding was completed independently by the two researchers. Any conflicts were resolved through discussion.

As this study aimed to present trends, to allow for comparisons all frequency-based data was converted to percentages.

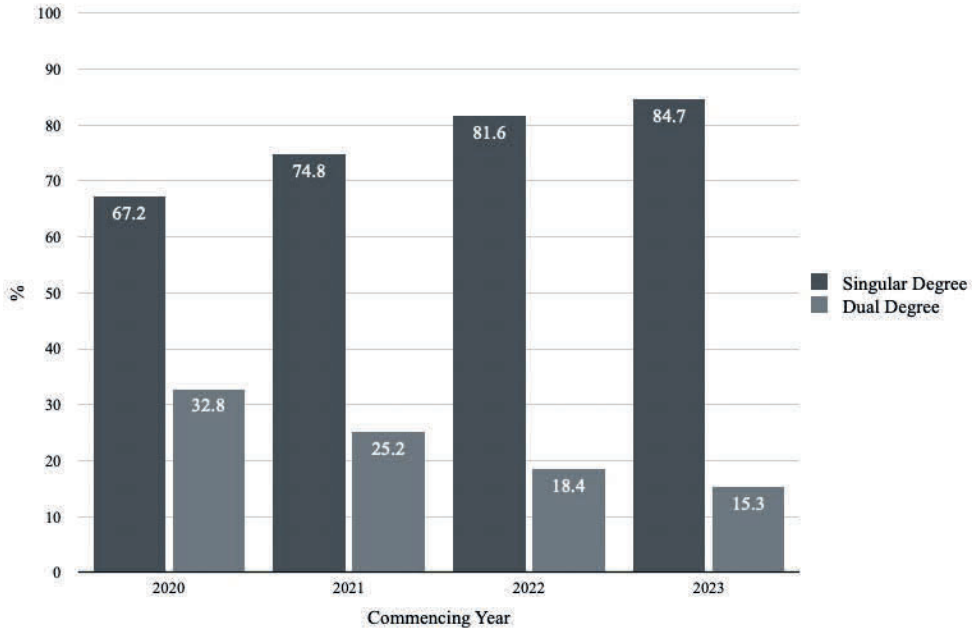
Results

RQ1: Do the types of courses students are choosing to pursue at university change over time?

To address RQ1 the proportion of students entering singular and dual courses were first examined. Figure 1 shows how this data changes over time.

Figure 1

Proportion of Students Enrolled in Singular and Dual Courses (2020-2023)



It can be seen from Figure 1 that an increase in the number of students enrolling into singular courses was observed. Subsequently, this has resulted in a decrease in the number of students enrolling into dual courses.

Courses were then classified as generalist, mixed, or specialised. Figure 2 depicts the proportion of participants enrolled into each type of course over time.

Figure 2

Proportion of Students Enrolled in Generalist, Mixed and Specialised Courses (2020-2023)

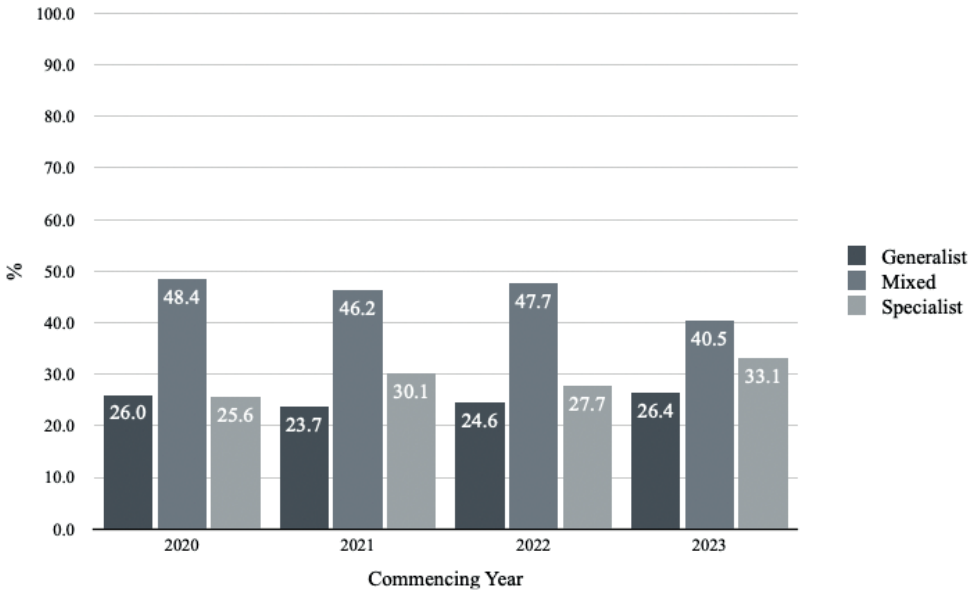


Figure 2 indicates that course choice remains relatively consistent from year to year. Some variability is seen in 2020 with generalist and specialised courses having similar enrolments and in 2023 when a decrease in mixed courses and an increase in specialised courses is observed.

RQ2: Does the proportion of students commencing university with a career goal vary over time and by course type?

To address RQ2, participants were asked whether they were commencing university with a career goal in mind. Figure 3 shows the results of the overall sample over time.

Figure 3

Proportion of Students Commencing Their Course with a Career Goal in Mind (2020-2023)

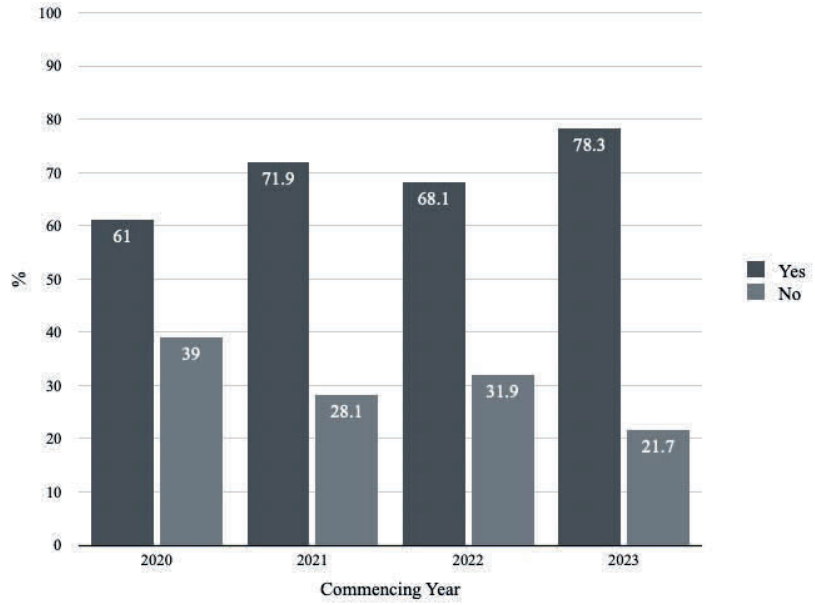


Figure 3 indicates that most students are entering university with a career goal, with an increase being seen between 2020 and 2023. This data was then categorised based on course type to determine if variability was present.

Figure 4

Proportion of Students Commencing Their Course with a Career Goal in Mind by Course Type

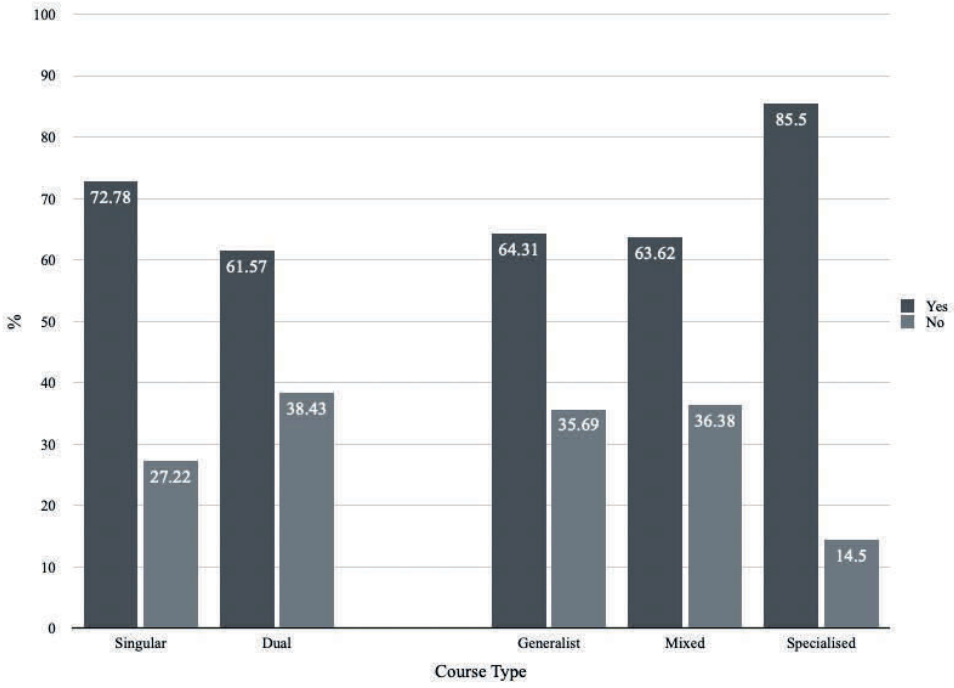


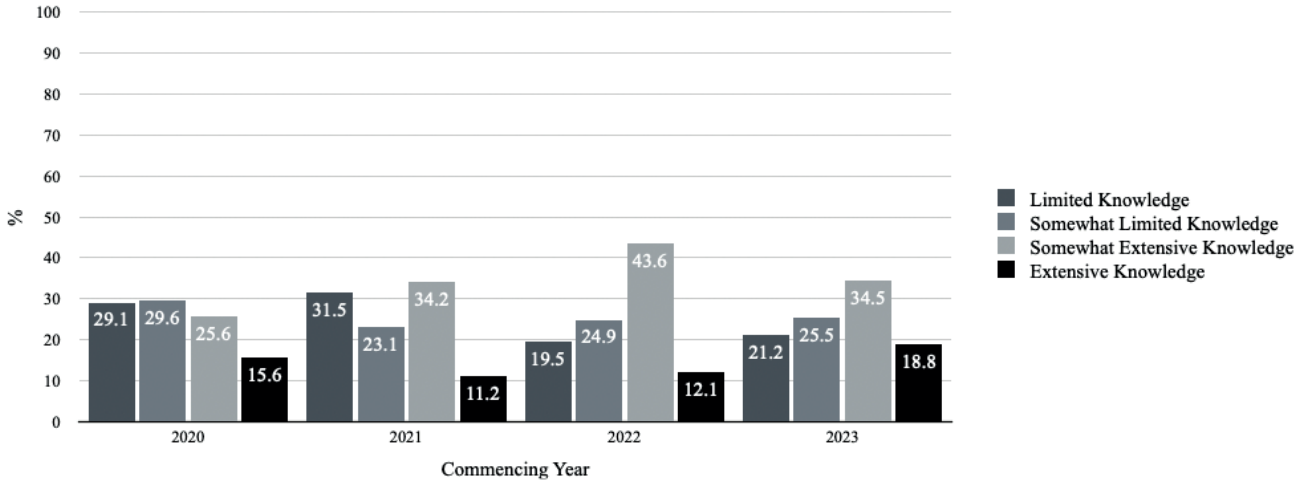
Figure 4 shows that participants pursuing singular degrees were more likely to commence university with a career goal than those pursuing dual degrees. It can also be seen that students commencing specialised degrees are more likely to have a career goal than those pursuing generalist and mixed courses, which were similar to each other.

RQ3: Does student knowledge of their education-employment pathway vary over time and by course type?

To address RQ3, students who identified a career goal were asked a series of questions about the education-employment pathway to reach said goal in order to examine knowledge and accuracy. Participants were first asked to articulate all the associated careers that they were aware of being linked to their chosen course. This data is depicted in Figure 5.

Figure 5

Student Knowledge of Careers Linked to Their Chosen Course (2020-2023)



It can be seen from Figure 5 that very few participants are commencing their course with extensive knowledge of the careers associated with their course. Over time we can see an increase with participants commencing with somewhat extensive knowledge and this coincides with a decrease in those entering with limited knowledge.

Figure 6 depicts data describing participants' knowledge as delineated by course type.

Figure 6.

Student Knowledge of Careers Linked to Their Chosen Course Delineated by Course Type

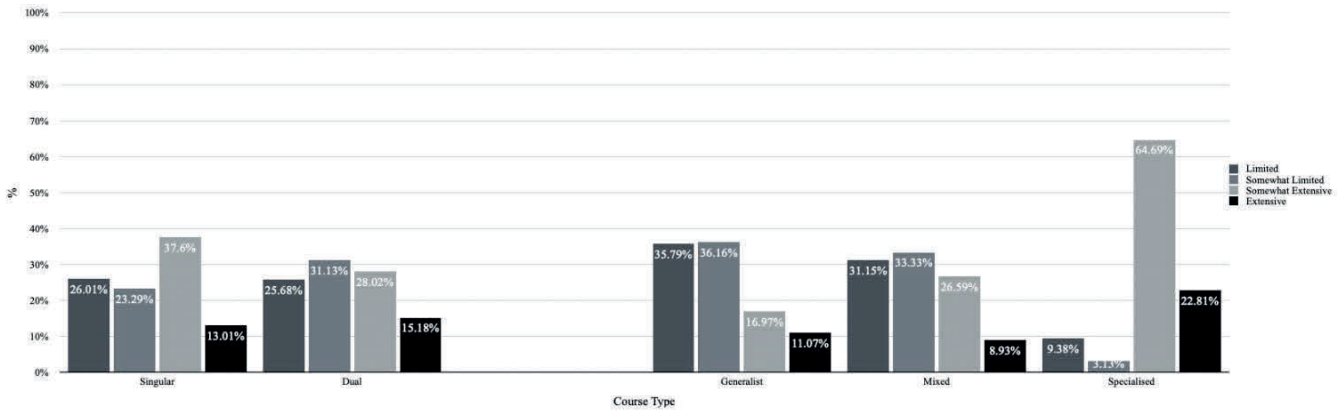


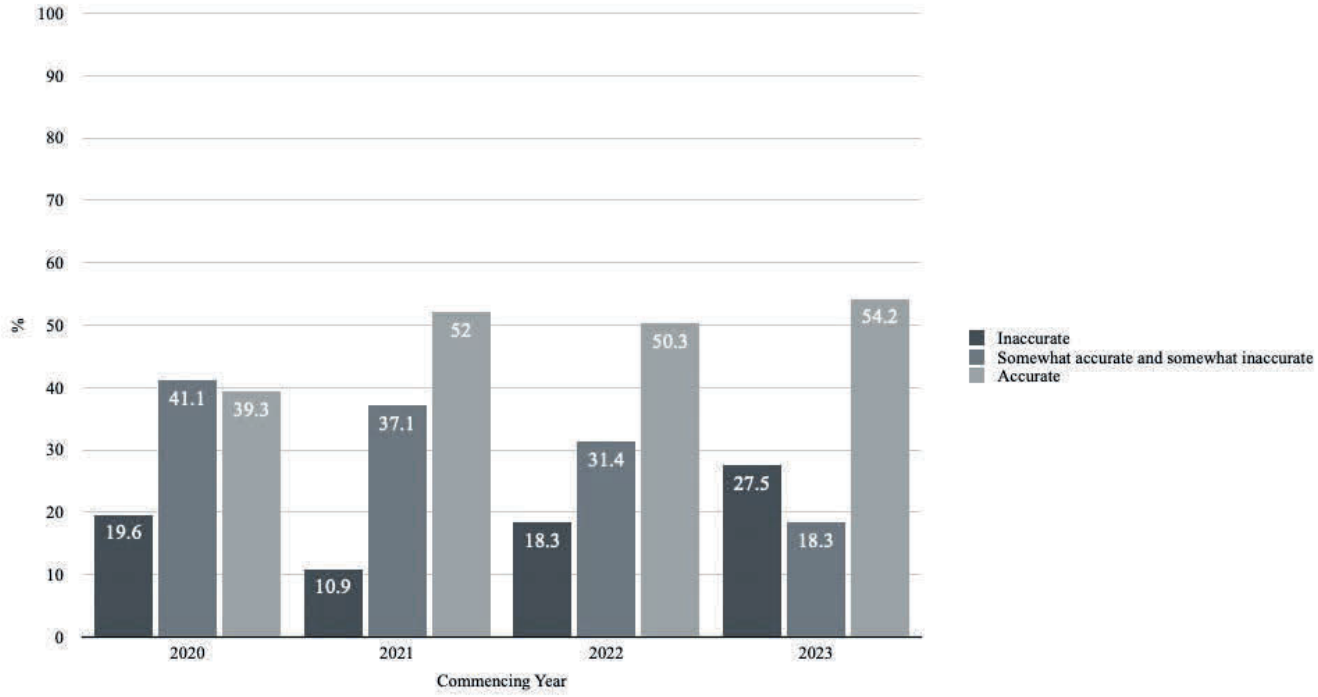
Figure 6 indicates that students commencing specialised courses are the only type where a greater proportion lay in the extensive rather than the limited ranges. In comparison, students commencing generalist courses had the most limited understanding, closely followed by those entering mixed courses. Interestingly, when it came to singular and dual courses, a similar number of students were commencing with limited knowledge, while those in singular courses trended towards the somewhat extensive group and those commencing dual courses the somewhat limited group.

RQ4: How accurate are students' understandings of their education-employment pathway and does this vary over time and by course type?

The final research question focused on investigating the accuracy of participants' understandings of their education-employment pathways. Figure 7 shows the trends in these responses over time.

Figure 7

Accuracy of Students' Understanding of their Education-Employment Pathway (2020-2023)



It can be seen from Figure 7 that, following 2020, accuracy in pathway knowledge increased and has since remained stable with approximately 50% of students having an accurate understanding of their education-employment pathway from 2021-2023.

Figure 8 depicts this data following categorisation by course

Figure 8

Accuracy of Students' Understanding of their Education-Employment Pathway by Course Type

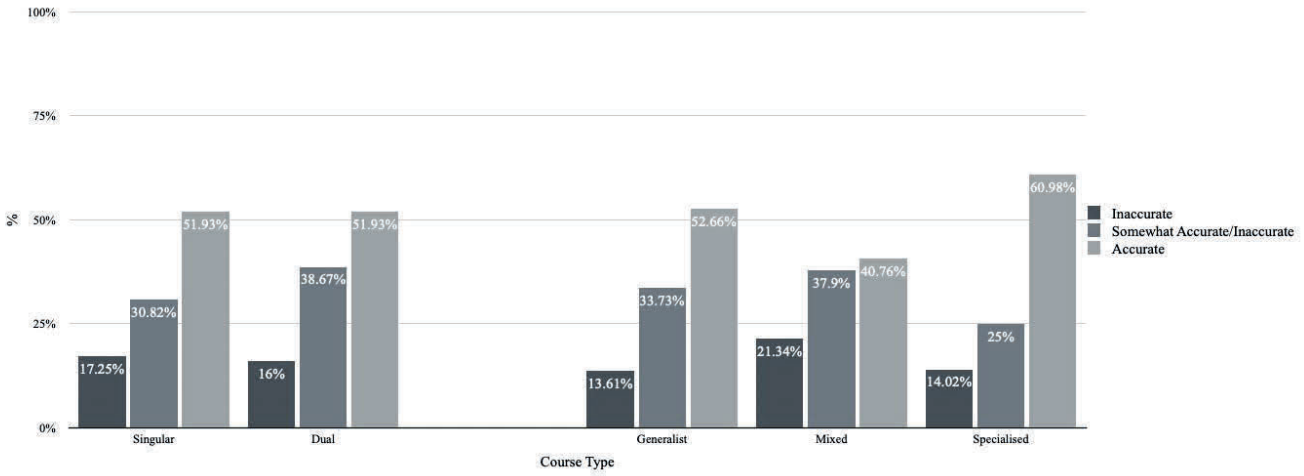


Figure 8 highlights that students commencing mixed courses show the lowest levels of accuracy of understanding of their education-employment pathways and students commencing specialised courses have the highest levels of accuracy. There is little difference between students commencing singular or dual courses.

Discussion

Summary of Findings

This study, building on the findings of Lock and Kelly (2020), sought to examine patterns in student knowledge and accuracy regarding education-employment pathways. The importance of this study rests on our knowledge that students who have a strong understanding of their course tend to have a greater sense of belonging, which in turn leads to greater engagement and retention (Kift, 2015).

RQ1 sought to examine whether students' course choice changed over time. Findings suggest an upward trend in the number of students enrolling into singular rather than dual courses, suggesting a preference for more focused and often quicker to complete qualifications. Findings also show that, in terms of generalist, mixed and specialised courses, patterns have remained largely stable over time, with mixed courses consistently showing the highest proportion of enrolments, followed by specialised and then generalist degrees. This shows a significant shift from Lock and Kelly's (2020) findings, where students commencing specialised courses represented the highest proportion of their sample. Consistency in enrolments shown in the current study suggests that the findings can be used to plan and support students in the coming years. Furthermore, government data suggests that student proportions for characteristics such as equity group, have remained stable over the past four years (Department of Education, 2024b). The present sample mirrors these proportions, suggesting that this sample is a valid representation of the population.

RQ2 explored whether the proportion of students commencing university with a career goal changed over time or as a function of course type. When considering the overall sample, approximately two-thirds of students were commencing with a goal in 2020-2022 and this then increased to approximately three-quarters of students in 2023. In terms of course type, similar to Lock and Kelly (2020), students pursuing singular courses were more likely to have a career goal than those pursuing a dual course. Students commencing specialised courses were by far the most likely students to have a career goal, with students commencing generalist and mixed courses showing lower rates. Tymon (2013) acknowledged that most students pursue higher education with a career goal in mind. The findings of the present study suggest that this holds true more than a decade later, but they also offer detail regarding the course types in which students who do or do not have such a goal in mind are likely to be found. Such detail can empower universities to identify and support students, particularly those who do not have a clear vocational destination in mind when they commence study.

RQ3 examined student knowledge regarding their education-employment pathways. When considering the broad sample over time, patterns in knowledge were relatively consistent. The proportion of the sample with extensive knowledge remained smaller than other categories in each of the four years. This aligned with the findings of Lock and Kelly (2020). Promisingly, from years 2021-2023, the somewhat extensive category had the highest proportion of students, suggesting that students' understanding of the career opportunities associated with their courses may be increasing, especially in comparison to 2020 and 2019 (Lock & Kelly, 2020). Despite this promise, findings do suggest that just under 50% of students are commencing their courses with a limited or somewhat limited understanding of where they lead. Extent of knowledge continues to vary across course type. More than 85% of students commencing specialised courses have a somewhat extensive or extensive understanding of the careers associated with their course, indicating that this population may be skewing the overall data. On the contrary, less than 30% of students commencing generalist courses and less than 40% of students commencing mixed courses have this same level of understanding. Inversely, this finding suggests that in these cohorts nearly 70% and 60% of students respectively, have limited knowledge. While this is a slight improvement when compared to Lock and Kelly's (2020) findings, this suggests that students commencing these courses need explicit and timely support (Lock & Kelly, 2022) to better understand the career opportunities and pathways available to them.

Finally, RQ4 investigated the accuracy of students' understanding of their education-employment pathways. The findings from 2021-2023 mirror the prior study (Lock & Kelly, 2020) with approximately 50% of students commencing with accurate knowledge and approximately 50% with somewhat accurate or inaccurate knowledge. When examining course type, students commencing singular, dual or generalist courses all showed similar rates in accuracy which mirror that of the overall sample. Specialised courses had a higher proportion of students commencing with accurate knowledge than the others. Students commencing mixed courses had by far the lowest levels of accuracy, with less than 40% of students having accurate knowledge of how to achieve their career goal. This finding, coupled with the RQ3 findings, further highlights that students in these cohorts need high levels of support in understanding their education-employment pathway to successfully transition them into and through university. This finding aligns with those of Greenbank (2014) that suggest that students are focusing on the present, trusting that the future will work out. Given that Lock and Kelly (2022) identified the negative impacts of such approaches both in terms of satisfaction and career readiness, this provides further evidence of the need for timely and supportive intervention.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the importance and consistency of the findings, this study is not without limitations. Perhaps the biggest limitation is the nature of the data collected. Data collection was designed to support the plotting of trends in knowledge and accuracy over time, however, in doing this it was not possible to run parametric analyses that may allow for the determination of causal relationships. Nonetheless, these findings provide a baseline of knowledge that can serve as a platform for higher education providers. Findings highlight the consistency of responses over time and this stability lends itself well to further investigation at an institution or course level. A second limitation relates to the potential for bias as a result of the recruitment process. Gaining access to university students after acceptance but prior to commencement is challenging and thus the decision was made to draw on social media communities to target these students. While this was deemed the best available recruitment method, it must be acknowledged that students' engagement with these platforms was self-selected. This may have skewed the data in one of two ways. Firstly, it is possible that the students engaging with these platforms are more driven and proactive regarding their education. Secondly, it is possible that these students are more uncertain and using these platforms to seek assurance or information. Either of these approaches would impact the findings of the present study. Future research may seek to gather data from a more representative sample.

Implications

The results of this study support and expand upon those first articulated by Lock and Kelly (2020). To date this is the only longitudinal study tracking prospective student trends regarding their understanding of education-employment pathways in an Australian context. The findings have clear and practical implications for higher education providers and educators intent on supporting students as they enter higher education and commence their journey along these pathways.

Transitioning students into university in a careful and purposeful manner will result in increased retention and student satisfaction, two factors that are primary objectives for higher education providers. While much work targeted at supporting students rests on the assumption that demographic characteristics aid in the identification of at-risk students, these students are typically distributed in a wide array of courses located across the university. The findings of this study can complement these efforts by encouraging institutions to concentrate support for students in particular types of courses. Thus, while contemporary work on transition pedagogy highlights the need for a whole-of-institution approach to the support of first year

students (Kift, 2015), findings from this study reiterate the importance of course teams playing an active role in operationalising transition pedagogy so it suits the knowledge and needs of their students.

These findings can be applied by individuals at various levels in a university. Course and subject designers can use these findings to inform where and how employability curriculum is implemented with consideration given to the distinct needs of students in different course types. Teachers in the classroom can then operationalise this design to tailor their learning activities related to education-employment pathways. For example, generalist students may benefit from learning activities located early in their courses that facilitate the exploration of career outcomes which may inform choices about majors in later years. Alternatively, learning activities in specialist courses may focus on specific and authentic case examples that confirm students' knowledge and expectations about their chosen pathway. A challenge may arise in the delivery of employability-related learning activities in mixed courses, as these students often come with a career goal in mind, but have limited or inaccurate knowledge. Learning activities for these students could draw on their underlying motivations that led to their career goal, while guiding their exploration of potential alternative pathways. More generally, these findings highlight the need for institutions and the sector more broadly to develop strategies that are supportive of nuanced responses to the expectations and needs of students across different types of courses.

Finally, it is important to note the stability of trends noted here. Even during a period marked by a global pandemic, significant governmental changes regarding fee structures for higher education and a cost-of-living crisis, findings related to course choice, knowledge and accuracy remained largely consistent. While it is concerning that many students may be beginning university with limited and inaccurate knowledge of where they are heading, the persistence of these patterns means institutions can act to address this issue with some confidence. Society still sees higher education as a pathway to career and economic security and it is therefore our responsibility as providers to transition students effectively into and through university and out into the workforce. Effectively supporting students requires us to first understand them, and to understand the knowledge they bring with them, so we can target our support towards those who most need it.

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