https://studentsuccessjournal.org/
Advance online publication https://doi.org/10.63608/ssj.4016

Can Early Offer Schemes Play a Role in Widening University Participation and Attainment in Undergraduate Health and Science Courses?

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Abstract

Early offer schemes have become increasingly popular in Australia, allowing school leavers to secure a place at university before final Year 12 exams. Motivations for universities to offer, and students to apply for, early offers are varied. Through analysis of applicants to science and health programs at a regional Australian university, this research investigates whether there is a role for early offer schemes in widening participation and attainment for equity students. The research also investigates whether students who enter through early offer schemes differ from the rest of the cohort in terms of academic success, and the impact of early offer criteria. The analysis found that a high proportion of equity students use early entry schemes, and that their attainment, measured by first year success and retention, is on par with the rest of their cohort. Benefits of early offer schemes were found to outweigh any perceived or actual disadvantages.

***Keywords**:* Early offer; early entry; basis of admission; school leavers; first year success; widening participation; higher education.

Introduction

There is a global focus on making tertiary education more accessible for people from non-traditional backgrounds to enrol more students from underrepresented groups (Atherton, 2022; Sit, 2024; United Nations, 2015). Australia has a strong focus on increasing university participation and attainment for people from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds, Indigenous Australians, people from regional and remote Australia, and people with disabilities (O'Kane et al., 2024). Additionally, first in family students (first generation students who do not have a parent or immediate family member with a university qualification) are often included as a group of students who are underrepresented at university (O'Shea, 2020; Patfield et al., 2022). As far back as 1990, the Australian Government was advocating for a more equitable higher education system, one in which the university student population would reflect the composition of society as a whole (Department of Employment & Training, 1990). Moving on several decades to the present time, the Australian Universities Accord Panel states that only "by expanding access to tertiary education to currently under-represented groups… can the nation meet its projected skills needs" (O'Kane et al., 2024, p. 111)

Diverse admissions pathways are one approach to attract students who may not have previously considered university, including those belonging to one or more equity group (Blyth, 2014; Diamond & O'Brien-Malone, 2018; Dodd et al., 2023; O'Kane et al., 2024). Early offer schemes (sometimes referred to as early entry) have become widely adopted since the COVID-19 pandemic (O'Kane et al., 2024; Patfield, 2026), targeting school leavers with university offers prior to completion

of Year 12 (the final year of secondary education in Australia). The Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) was established in 2009 as a consistent way to assess academic capability in school leavers (Pilcher et al., 2025). The proportion of school leavers in Australia entering university based solely on ATAR has decreased from 67 per cent in 2021 to 60 per cent in 2024 (Department of Education, 2025a), driven by an increase in the proportion of early offers (Barnes et al., 2024; Jackson et al., 2023; Whitsed & Gonzalez, 2023). Early offers can be assessed through a variety of criteria, including Year 11 results, a personal statement, and extracurricular achievements and contributions (Patfield, 2026; Sattler & Pech, 2024). A predicted ATAR can be calculated from Year 11 results (Universities Admissions Centre [NSW & ACT], 2026), and this is often used as the primary ranking factor for early offers.

Criticisms of early offer schemes include that they undermine formal schooling, cause students to be unmotivated in their final year of school, are largely subjective, and are merely designed to meet university recruitment targets (Carroll, 2023; Department for Education, 2025; Harvey, 2014; McInerney, 2022; Patfield, 2026). There is limited published research on early offer schemes in Australia (Patfield, 2026; Whitsed & Gonzalez, 2023). However, emerging evidence indicates that the largely negative sentiment in the press and from the secondary education sector is unwarranted, and that these entry pathways can in fact increase access for students belonging to equity groups (Patfield, 2026). Benefits of early offers for applicants include alleviating pressure during final secondary school exams and the valuing of a student's accomplishments beyond just the academic (Patfield, 2026; Sattler & Pech, 2024).

This research examines the experience and success of students studying at a regional Australian university who entered through an early offer scheme in comparison to other students. The research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Do early offer schemes widen participation for equity groups?
2. Do early offer students experience different rates of success and retention compared to the rest of their cohort?
3. Do early offer criteria select students appropriately?
4. What are university staff and students' perceptions of the influence of early offer schemes on student success?

Methods

A mixed methods approach was implemented, using quantitative analysis on student records, as described below, and both qualitative and quantitative analysis on staff and student surveys. Deidentified data were collected on domestic students enrolled in Bachelor programs of study in the Faculty of Science and Health, commencing in 2022, 2023, or 2024 at a regional Australian university. Disciplines included allied health, nursing, paramedicine, oral health, pharmacy, radiography, agricultural science, environmental science, biomedical science, exercise and sport science, and science and technology. Competitive programs (those relying on interviews for admissions — medicine, dentistry, and veterinary science) were excluded from the analysis. Databases used in this analysis included admissions, enrolments, success rates, attrition rates, and early offer data. Records with unknown values in any of the fields were excluded from the analysis.

Basis of admission does not neatly translate to admission channel, and early offers are not adequately captured in national and university data collections. The basis of admission from recent secondary education is classified into three main categories, "ATAR only", "ATAR plus other criteria", and "only other criteria, ATAR not considered". While the first category is clear-cut, the second can include conditional early offers as well as interviews for competitive courses. The final category can include early offers as well as other entry pathways such as the Schools Recommendation Scheme and other non-ATAR pathways. Admissions analysis showed that at this university, 97 per cent of all early offer enrolments are coded as "only other criteria, ATAR not considered" and 77 per cent of all enrolments in this basis of admission category are early offer enrolments. Therefore, in order to link early offer status to other student data, "only other criteria, ATAR not considered" was used as a reasonable proxy for early offer students, recognising that this group does contain some non-early offer students.

The analyses described below were implemented in R (R Core Team, 2022).

Do Early Offer Schemes Widen Participation for Equity Groups?

To answer this question, a subset of school leavers was used (n = 2,529), with 987 entering on the basis of ATAR and 1,542 entering through early offer (as defined above). A two-sample proportional test with Yates continuity correction (Newcombe, 1998) was used to test whether proportions of equity students differed between these two cohorts.

Do Early Offer Students Experience Different Rates of Success and Retention Compared to the Rest of Their Cohort?

To assess student performance, data were collated for all students on first year success (n = 8,082) and first year retention (n = 8,156). First year success was recorded as positive if a student passed at least half of the units they attempted. First year retention is the complement of first year attrition, and records whether a student was retained at the university from first to second year. Both variables were coded as binary.

Generalised linear models (GLM) with binomial link function, converted to odds ratio (Venables & Ripley, 2002), were used to evaluate the influence of basis of admission on student success and retention. The predictor variables included in the models were attendance mode (on campus/online), study load (full time/part time), gender (female/male), age (<19, 20–24, 25+), first in family status (first in family/not first in family), Australian First Nations status (Australian First Nations/not Australian First Nations), disability status (disability/no disability), SES (low SES/not low SES), remoteness status (rural, regional, or remote [RRR]/metro), and basis of admission (early offer/ATAR/vocational education and training [VET]/higher education [HE], work or life experience [WLE], or enabling). All these categories are as defined by the *Tertiary Collection of Student Information Data Element Dictionary* (Department of Education, 2025b). To calculate unadjusted odds, each predictor variable was used on its own to predict both success and retention. To calculate adjusted odds (the odds once all other relevant variables have been taken into account), a single success model and a single retention model were developed. Akaike Information Criterion was used to select the best models (Sakamoto et al., 1986) and as a result, not all predictor variables were used in the final model.

Do Early Offer Criteria Select Students Appropriately?

For some early offer students commencing in 2023, both predicted ATAR (based on Year 11 results) and final ATAR were available, as well as their grade point average (GPA) achieved through study from 2023 to 2025 (n = 432). GPA was recorded as a value from 0 (fail) to 7 (high distinction), with 4 representing a pass average. Pearson's coefficient of correlation was calculated between predicted and final ATAR, between predicted ATAR and GPA, and between final ATAR and GPA. To test the influence of both predicted and final ATAR on GPA, students were classified into four quadrants (Table 1), and a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA; Chambers et al., 2017) was used to test whether GPA means between these groups were statistically different. ATAR of 65 was chosen as the threshold for high/low because 65 is the most commonly published ATAR requirement for programs in science and health at this university.

Table 1
Quadrants Based on Predicted and Final ATAR

Quadrant	Predicted ATAR	Final ATAR
High-high	At or above 65	At or above 65
High-low	At or above 65	Below 65
Low-high	Below 65	At or above 65
Low-low	Below 65	Below 65

Other criteria used to assess early offer applications were not analysed in this research.

What are University Staff and Students' Perceptions of the Influence of Early Offer Schemes on Student Success?

Analysis was also carried out in the form of surveys. Both staff and students were asked, via an anonymous survey, whether they were aware of any early offer students in their cohorts and whether they thought these students were well prepared for their course of study. Students were asked to comment on both themselves and their perceptions of other students of whom they were aware. The survey was open for a month from 10 September 2025 to 10 October 2025, with 26 valid staff responses and 80 valid student responses (of which 23 were early offer students). If we consider all eligible staff and students, this corresponds to response rates of approximately five per cent and two per cent, respectively. However, surveys were shared via email and staff and student noticeboards and will not have reached the entire staff and student body, so response rate is ultimately uncertain. Students and staff were asked whether they thought different admissions criteria accurately reflected requirements for a student to succeed in their program, and why they rated admission pathways as they did. Students were

also asked to rate whether they felt their own admission pathway set them up for success, and explain why they applied through that pathway. Descriptive statistics and thematic analysis, using inductive coding to develop themes (Naeem et al., 2023), were used to analyse responses.

This project received ethics approval from the university's Human Research Ethics Committee with protocol number H25291.

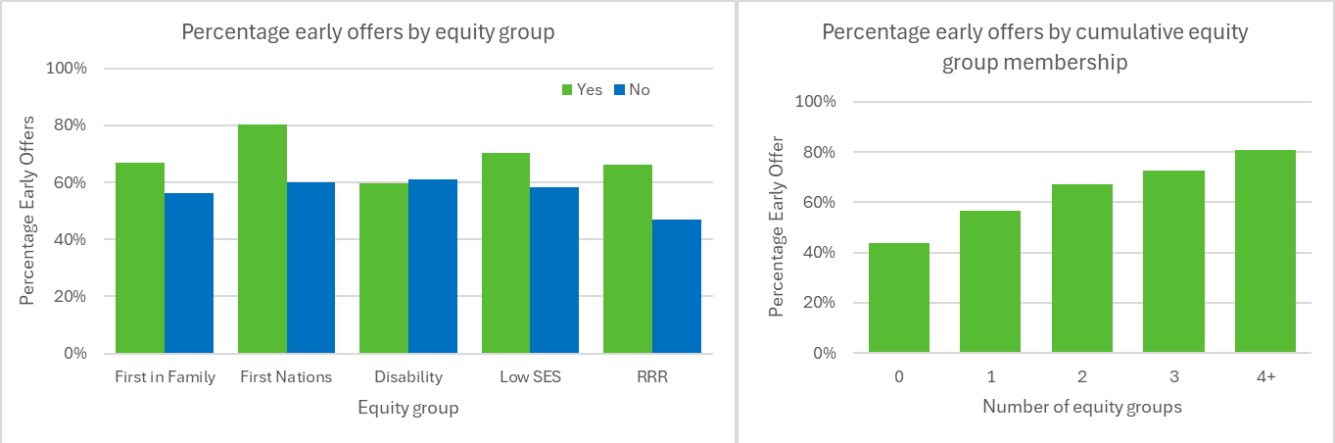
Results

Do Early Offer Schemes Widen Participation for Equity Groups?

Students belonging to equity groups were more likely to be admitted through early offer schemes than on the basis of ATAR (Figure 1, left). When comparing early offer students as a proportion of all students admitted on the basis of secondary education, 66.9 per cent of first in family students used early offer compared to 56.2 per cent of not first in family students (χ^2 = 29.2, p < .001), and 80.2 per cent of Australian First Nations students used early offer compared to 60.2 per cent of not Australian First Nations students (χ^2 = 16.3, p < .001). Looking at low SES students, 70.3 per cent used early offer compared to 58.3 per cent of not low SES students (χ^2 = 25.8, p < .001), and 66.3 per cent of RRR students used early offer compared to 46.8 per cent of metro students (χ^2 = 79.4, p < .001). In the disability equity group, there was no statistically significant difference between the proportions (59.6 % and 61.1 %).

The more equity groups a student belonged to, the more likely they were to be admitted through early offer (Figure 1, right). For students belonging to no equity groups, 44 per cent were admitted through early offer. This increased to 57 per cent for students belonging to a single equity group, 67 per cent for two equity groups, 73 per cent for three equity groups, and 81 per cent for four or more equity groups.

Figure 1
Percentage of Early Offers



Note. Left panel: Percentage of early offers by equity group membership. Right panel: and Percentage of early offers by cumulative equity group membership.

Do Early Offer Students Experience Different Rates of Success and Retention Compared to the Rest of Their Cohort?

The predictor variables, unadjusted odds, and adjusted odds for each model are shown in Table 2. As mentioned in the methods section, some potential predictor variables were excluded in each model, as they did not improve the final model. The main variable of interest in this research is the early offer cohort. For basis of admission, the cohort of students entering through higher education, work or life experience, or enabling was taken as the reference cohort. Once all other relevant variables were taken into account, students in the early offer cohort were 1.29 times as likely to progress into second year than the reference cohort. Whilst not statistically significant, the adjusted odds show that the early offer cohort were the most likely to be retained into second year compared to other cohorts.

Table 2

Unadjusted Odds and Adjusted Odds for Predictor Variables Used in the Success Model and the Retention Model

Predictor Variable	Odds of Success[a]		Odds of Retention[a]	
	Unadjusted odds	Adjusted odds	Unadjusted odds	Adjusted odds
Basis of Admission				
HE, WLE, Enabling	Reference			
Early offer	2.11 [1.72-2.59] ***	1.29 [1.03-1.62] *	1.94 [1.65-2.27] ***	1.12 [.94-1.34] n/s
ATAR	2.76 [2.13-3.63] ***	1.87 [1.42-2.48] ***	1.46 [1.21-1.75] ***	.97 [.80-1.18] n/s
VET	.86 [.75-.98] *	.95 [.83-1.10] n/s	.79 [.70-.88] ***	.85 [.75-.96] **
Mode				
Internal	Reference			
Online	.38 [.34-.44] ***	.62 [.52-.74] ***	.41 [.37-.45] ***	.66 [.57-.76] ***
Load				
Full time	Reference			
Part time	.41 [.36-.46] ***	.59 [.51-.69] ***	.39 [.35-.44] ***	.53 [.47-.60] ***
Gender				
Female	Reference			
Male	1.00 [.87-1.15] n/s	*Not in final model*	.98 [.87-1.10] n/s	.90 [.80-1.02] n/s
First in family status				
Not first in family	Reference			
First in family	.76 [.67-.86] ***	.91 [.80-1.03] n/s	.87 [.79-.97] **	*Not in final model*
Australian First Nations status				
Not First Nations	Reference			
First Nations	.50 [.40-.64] ***	.51 [.40-.65] ***	.77 [.61-.96] *	.72 [.58-.92] **
Disability status				
No disability	Reference			
Disability	.78 [.64-.95] *	.76 [.62-.94] **	.89 [.73-1.08] n/s	*Not in final model*
Socio-economic status				
Not low SES	Reference			
Low SES	.94 [.83-1.06] n/s	*Not in final model*	1.10 [.99-1.22] n/s	*Not in final model*
Remoteness				
Metro	Reference			
RRR	1.15 [1.01-1.29] *	*Not in final model*	1.36 [1.23-1.50] ***	1.18 [1.06-1.31] **

[a] Odds, 95% confidence interval, significance.

*** = $p < .001$. ** = $p < .01$. * = $p < .05$. n/s = not significant.

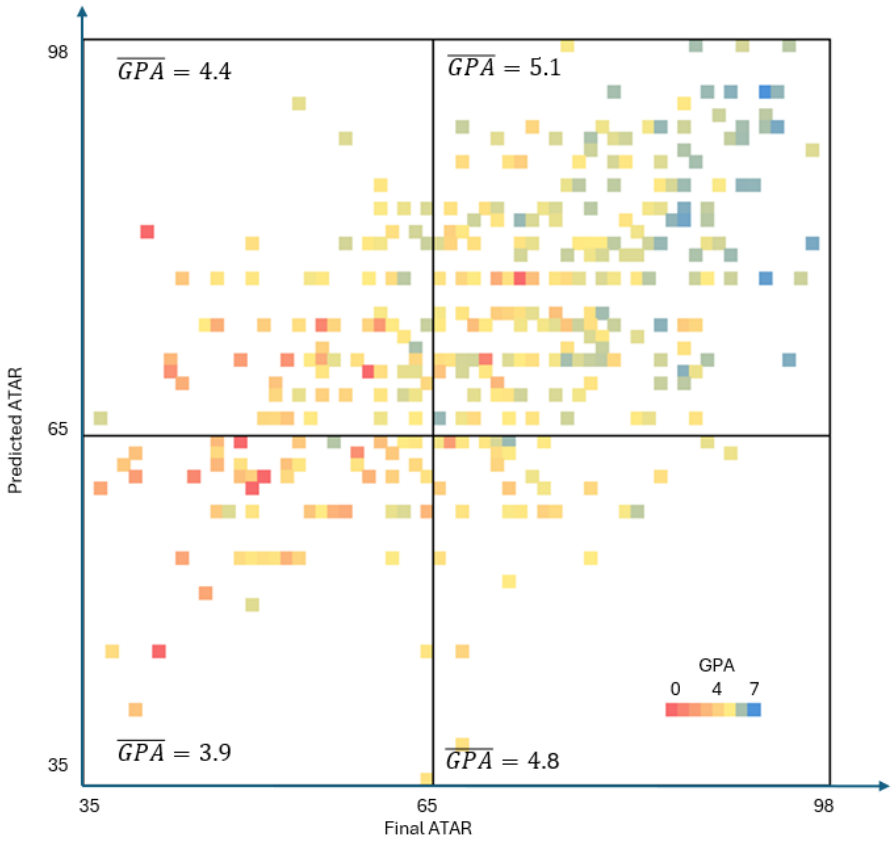
Do Early Offer Criteria Select Students Appropriately?

Predicted ATAR and final ATAR were positively correlated ($r(430) = .54$, $p < .001$). Predicted ATAR was also positively correlated with GPA ($r(430) = .35$, $p < .001$), but final ATAR was more strongly correlated with GPA ($r(430) = .53$, $p < .001$). These correlations can be seen in Figure 2, with the diagonal trend showing positive correlation between predicted and final ATAR, and the higher GPA values (blue) being more frequently represented in the upper right quadrant ("high-high") and low GPA values (red) in the lower left quadrant ("low-low").

The one-way ANOVA test confirmed that there was a significant effect of quadrant on GPA ($F = 29.15$, $p < .001$). A post hoc Tukey test confirmed that the differences were significant between all pairs of quadrants except for between high-high and low-high quadrants (similar GPA if final ATAR is high, regardless of whether predicted ATAR was high or low) and between low-high and high-low quadrants (if predicted ATAR was low and final ATAR high, or vice versa, GPA is similar).

Figure 2

Average GPA by Predicted ATAR and Final ATAR



What are University Staff and Students' Perceptions of the Influence of Early Offer Schemes on Student Success?

Staff viewed ATAR and early offer students as similarly prepared. Both early offer students and ATAR students viewed themselves as more prepared than other students did (Table 3).

Table 3

Likert Scale Average Response and Percentage of "Strongly Agree" or "Somewhat Agree" for the Statement "You/Students who Enter Through Early Offer/ATAR are Prepared for Their Course"

Basis of Admission	5-point Likert scale average	%"Strongly Agree" or "Somewhat Agree"
Early offer students self-rating	3.6	52.4
All students rating of early offer students	3.3	42.9
Staff rating of early offer students	3.1	45.0
ATAR students self-rating	3.8	69.2
All students rating of ATAR students	3.3	44.0
Staff rating of ATAR students	3.0	48.0

The themes identified here emerged from data-driven coding, by identifying shared patterns, meanings, and relationships among open text survey responses from students and staff. In response to the question of why students choose early offer applications, the most common theme (n = 16) was the fact that early offers relieve final exam (High School Certificate [HSC]) stress:

> The [early offer] program means that they don't need to worry as much about their HSC marks - I think this is good for their mental health. (Academic staff)

> I liked the idea of early entry, getting in before I'd done my HSC took a lot of pressure off doing my HSC meaning I did very well in it too. (Early offer student)

Some respondents (5 responses) raised the risk of disengagement in HSC if an unconditional offer is made, with one academic arguing that all early offers should be conditional on final ATAR:

> I do not believe predicted ATARs are reliable based on my experience and also believe that giving firm offers based on a predicted ATAR leads to students becoming disengaged before their final year 12 exams. (Faculty-based professional staff member)

> Many of these [early offer] students did not achieve as high of an ATAR as students who missed out on admission and dropped out early in the course. (Non-school leaver student)

However, for early offer students, this sentiment tended to be an assumption about other students and not about the student themselves:

> I believe early entry can be both beneficial and challenging. For some students, it can lead to them taking their foot off the pedal once they receive an offer. For me, that wasn't the case, and I think my academic results reflect that. (Early offer student)

Another potential downside mentioned was the lack of recency of predicted ATAR based on Year 11 results (2 responses). Three respondents also thought that early offers set the bar too low.

However, many respondents (8 responses) thought that early offer students performed just as well as any other student, and that basis of admission essentially had little bearing on their performance at university:

> If you have good results in year 11, it shows you have the initiative and the results to be able to be successful in this course even if you happen to flunk the HSC. (Early offer student)

> Once enrolled, students are all equal. (Academic staff)

> Most students with early entry perform as good students. (Academic staff)

One respondent argued that early offer students may be better suited to their future career:

> The early admission students I have met show many personality traits that I associate with wanting to learn and traits that I believe would be beneficial for a career in healthcare. (Early offer student)

Discussion

The Equity Initiatives Framework 2.0 (Bennett et al., 2024) includes a call for alternative selection criteria, pathways, and schemes for school leavers. This research has demonstrated that early offer schemes can be a valuable pathway to widen participation for equity students. Low SES, first in family, RRR, and First Nations school leavers are all more likely to be admitted through early offer than through ATAR. While it is impossible to say whether these students would have applied through ATAR if that had been the only avenue open to them, it is clear that many equity students prefer the early offer option.

Early offers remove perceived or actual barriers of needing to achieve a certain ATAR and the associated exam stress, factors which may prevent some potential students from applying based on their ATAR at the end of Year 12. Tomaszewski et al. (2025) found that students with average academic performance at school (i.e., those who might be undecided about attending university) are less likely to attend if they are first in family and low SES students. This constitutes a large proportion of the cohort to which early offers are appealing; indeed, at this university, equity students including first in family and low SES students were more likely to avail themselves of this admission pathway. Furthermore, the more equity groups to which a school leaver applicant belongs the more likely they are to apply through early offer instead of through ATAR.
There are anecdotal concerns that school leavers entering through early offers are not as capable as school leavers entering through ATAR, which was reflected in some of the survey responses. However, this analysis shows that while success rates are slightly lower for early offer students compared to ATAR students, when compared to the rest of the cohort of non-school

leaver students, early offer students have higher first year success rates. While not statistically significant, early offer students appear to be the most likely basis of admission cohort to be retained into second year. This may indicate that they may have high intrinsic motivation to remain at university once they have achieved the milestone of admission. While further analysis is needed, it is also notable that gender, SES, and remoteness are not included in the success model, and first in family status, disability status, and SES are not included in the retention model. This could be due to variable correlation as well as relative importance of variables in each model.

Predicted ATAR is usually calculated from Year 11 results for early offer applicants and offers are then partly based on this predicted value. This analysis shows that while predicted ATAR and final ATAR are correlated, predicted ATAR is not as strong a predictor of student success (evidenced by GPA) as final ATAR. Students with low final ATAR are less likely to succeed, even if their predicted ATAR is higher, therefore there is some merit in the calls for early offers to be conditional on final ATAR (McInerney, 2022). However, if all early offers are conditional, then the benefits for students largely disappear, namely the removal of stress and reliance on final ATAR. A recommendation is therefore that students with predicted ATAR at the lower end (for example, within five points of their program threshold) should be made offers conditional on final ATAR, but applicants with higher predicted ATAR should receive firm offers.

In the survey responses, staff and students had more positive than negative attitudes towards early offer admissions. Early offer students themselves found the experience of early offer overwhelmingly beneficial and believed they had fairly earned their place in their program. Many of the negative sentiments appeared to be based on assumptions, perhaps reinforced by the negative narrative in the media. Both the quantitative and qualitative analyses of the survey responses suggest that early offer students themselves believe the admission channel is appropriate, but other students and particularly staff are less likely to agree that students who enter through early offers are prepared for their course.

Limitations and Future Directions

This research only analysed students in a single faculty in one regional Australian university. It is likely that the results would translate to other disciplines in regional contexts, but the experience at metropolitan universities may be different. Universities apply various criteria to early offers, so early offer students may experience different levels of success at different universities. More transparency in reporting for different admissions channels, including early offer, would allow national analysis and a deeper understanding of how early offers impact university participation and success across Australia. While the definitions used here were based on those used for government reporting (Department of Education, 2025b), there are different interpretations of the definitions of low SES, regionality, and part-time status, for example, which would produce different results. This analysis was also limited to first year success and retention and would benefit from an expansion to graduation success (time to graduation and GPA) influenced by basis of admission.

This research only examined students in science and health courses, and similar studies should be conducted on other disciplines. More work is also needed to address the ambiguity of criteria for enrolment to more readily identify students admitted to university through early offer schemes.

A number of recommendations can be made to more fully understand, and therefore support, early offer students. Firstly, early offer schemes should be coded in national databases such that early offer admission is linked to a student's other data (including demographics, equity characteristics, and success data). Secondly, in some cases, early offers should be made conditional on final ATAR, but only where predicted ATAR is borderline. The majority of early offers should remain as firm offers, to provide students with the certainty of their place at university. Finally, academics should be provided with the analysis to reassure them that early offer students are just as capable of success as any other student. This research contributes to this aim and calls for further research on early offer students at universities across Australia.

Conclusion

The early offer cohort has been under-researched and, arguably, misunderstood and not recognised as an avenue to widen participation. This author joins Patfield (2026) in calling for further research on this topic across a wider range of universities. Early offers appear to be beneficial for school leavers, in particular those belonging to equity groups. Making all early offers conditional would remove the benefits for applicants, and there is little evidence that students disengage from Year 12 after receiving a firm early offer. Even if some do "slack off", if they have shown themselves capable in Year 11, they generally perform adequately at university.

Early offer schemes do appear to play a role in widening participation for equity groups. While early offer students do appear to have slightly lower odds of success compared to students entering through ATAR, they are still above the overall cohort average. Entering through early offer does not appear to influence odds of retention — if anything, students who accept an early offer are more likely to remain at university compared to the rest of the cohort. Early offer criteria — in particular, predicted ATAR — do mostly select students appropriately, but caution should be exercised with students with a predicted ATAR closer to the required ATAR, and conditional offers should be considered for these applicants. Staff and student perceptions of the influence of early offer schemes on student success are mixed, but largely positive. In particular, early offer students themselves found this admission pathway beneficial.

Early offer schemes should be retained by universities as a valuable admission pathway for equity students and other applicants, removing perceived or actual barriers to application without decreasing the likelihood of student success and retention.

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Please cite this article as:
Whitsed, R. (2026). Can early offer schemes play a role in widening university participation and attainment in undergraduate health and science courses? *Student Success.* Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.63608/ssj.4016

This article has been accepted for publication in *Student Success.* Please see the Editorial Policies under the 'About' section of the Journal website for further information.

Student Success: ***A journal exploring the experiences of students in tertiary education.***