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School-leavers need improved guidance about viable options

- By: *Andrew Harvey*
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MORE than half of all Year 12 university applicants in Victoria changed their tertiary preference last year in the five months between July and December. In December alone, nearly 26,000 of the 49,000 school-leavers altered their intentions about where or what to study this year.

This pattern is broadly replicated in other states. Why do so many applicants change their minds and what does this mean for university recruitment and retention? The primary reason appears to be underachievement. Year 12 students complete their initial applications in midyear, but most alter their intentions after the release of their Australian Tertiary Admission Rank. If their ATAR is below expectations, they need to reassess their options.

If this explanation is correct, the implications are profound. Why are so many students performing below their expectations? Many schools informally forecast ATARs for their students at the beginning of Year 12, and tertiary application forms allow multiple preferences.

In Victoria, applicants can choose up to 12 courses, which should enable students to cover for potential underachievement.

Indeed, tertiary rankings should be relatively predictable. In Britain it is the predicted results of final-year school students that are usually the basis for university entry. If thousands of our Year 12 students are overestimating their likely achievement, more realistic academic advice is required to inform them and their parents.

Similarly, students could be advised to select at least one preference that covers them in case their result is worse than expected. And work could continue at school to address the gap between aspiration and achievement.

Research indicates many students need their aspirations managed rather than raised. Aspirations are often higher than teachers' expectations. It is important that students should be encouraged to set academic goals that are ambitious yet achievable.

Underachievement is not the only reason for the mass oscillation of school-leavers. US academic Vincent Tinto has argued that about 50 per cent of commencing students are uncertain about their educational futures. There are lessons here for recruitment and retention.

December is a critical time for universities. But from application to offer to recruitment is a long journey. Many students do not convert their offers to enrolments. Most enrol in January but do not arrive for classes until March, while many withdraw from university before incurring their course fees in May. A change of mind is often in the student's best interest, but

it generates a loss for universities. Institutions may need to devote more resources to keeping students engaged across the summer period.

Similarly, indecision often leads to attrition. Students enrolled in their course of first preference are likelier to stay than those enrolled in their third or fourth preference. Many commencing students soon find they want to change their major, course or university as they develop new ideas about career options. Vacillation is reasonable and it may also be manageable.

In the US, some universities have established specific programs for advising new students who are undecided. North Carolina State University has created a first-year college of options to assist students in choosing the right major. Academic advisers run transition and orientation courses and guide students' career pathways and subject streams throughout first year. Ongoing academic and career advice has led to improved retention across courses and institutions.

Among the ranks of commencing students lie uncertain hopes and unfulfilled dreams. Recruiting these students requires perseverance, and keeping them requires advice and support.

Andrew Harvey heads the access and achievement research unit at La Trobe University.