EVALUATION OF THE QUEENSLAND TERTIARY ADMISSIONS CENTRE TELEPHONE APPLICATION PILOT PROJECT

REPORT PREPARED BY

TEPA

SONJA WHITELEY

CLAIRE FIELD

FOREWORD

The tertiary entrance innovations triggered by the implementation of reforms outlined initially by Professor Nancy Viviani following her review of the Queensland process have been wide-ranging and resulted in a system which is profile-based and now well accepted and understood. This latest development by the Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre Ltd advances yet another step towards ensuring that the tertiary entrance process is accessible to all and, more importantly, easily used by anyone interested in pursuing tertiary studies in Queensland.

This cooperative project with QTAC is the first of what I hope will be many joint research ventures. It is a concrete and practical example of the `on the bridge' role which TEPA can, and should, play with respect to tertiary entrance in Queensland.

I thank both the QTAC and TEPA staff members involved for their thorough and efficient evaluation of the telephone application pilot and look forward to the implementation of this application mode for the 1997–98 admissions round.

BERNADETTE ROBERTS
Executive Director
Tertiary Entrance Procedures Authority

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In recent years, Queensland Year 12 students have used a computer program from the Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre (QTAC) to lodge an 'electronic' application of their preferences for tertiary study. In line with other interstate tertiary admissions centres, QTAC is seeking to streamline the tertiary application process by allowing applications to be lodged through a touchtone interactive telephone system.

Aside from a survey undertaken by the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) there is a considerable lack of research in this area. In order to ensure that potential users of the QTAC interactive telephone system find it an appropriate and readily understandable method of applying for tertiary courses, QTAC decided an evaluation, prior to the statewide introduction of the telephone application system, was necessary. As one of TEPA's objectives is to keep tertiary entrance policies, practices and issues under continuous and responsive review, TEPA was approached to undertake this independent evaluation for QTAC.

The aims of the investigation, as identified by QTAC and TEPA, were to:

- determine the satisfaction of students, guidance officers, principals, and interstate applicants with the new application process

- obtain information that may be used to address concerns held about the new system by guidance officers and principals

- identify student groups who may have difficulty accessing or using an interactive telephone system.

In October all 50 schools participating in the evaluation received surveys for the school principal and the guidance officer. In addition to this, 20 schools received a package of questionnaires to be distributed to students. Concurrently 400 questionnaires were mailed from QTAC to interstate applicants who had been sampled from the QTAC database.

Findings

Overall it was evident that principals, guidance officers, Queensland school students and interstate applicants were satisfied with the telephone application service provided by QTAC.

School principals

The majority of comments made by principals in relation to the new process were positive, with almost all supporting the introduction of telephone applications. Many had read the telephone application guide and discussed the new approach with staff. More than two-thirds believed that the new system allowed school personnel to spend more time helping students make decisions about tertiary courses. Few modifications to the system were suggested, aside from minor alterations to the interactive system or the information materials provided by QTAC.

School guidance officers

Survey responses and comments made by guidance officers indicated high levels of satisfaction with the telephone application process. It appeared to be the case that the application guide was rated more highly and found to be easier to understand than the audiotape, with many indicating that the audiotape was not used extensively. Guidance officers suggested a range of minor modifications to these materials and to the telephone system. In the event that it became necessary to use the QTAC Help Line, almost all guidance officers reported a high level of

satisfaction with the manner in which their queries were handled. Difficulties in relation to the verification of student lodgement details, pin or application numbers, and technical problems with the system were, for the most part, perceived to have been dealt with quickly and efficiently.

School students

Responses to the survey indicated that students were satisfied with the information supplied about the telephone application process and with the telephone application system. Any problems that arose appeared to have been handled either by the guidance officer or the students with minimum difficulty.

Interstate applicants

The major difficulty faced by interstate applicants in relation to the application process appeared to be obtaining a copy of the application guide. For the most part, this group of applicants were satisfied with the application package and confident with using the telephone application system.

Concerns about the telephone application process

The preliminary survey, undertaken by QTAC prior to the initiation of the pilot project, detailed a number of concerns relating to the telephone application process as identified by school principals, including:

- the possibility that applicants may lack the responsibility or maturity necessary to successfully utilise such a system
- the perception that applicants may need assistance and, without it, may make poor choices
- the possibility that some students may not have access to the service, may fail to use it effectively, feel intimidated, or be concerned that costs in country areas will be inflated.

As would be expected given the high levels of reported satisfaction, many of these concerns were either addressed by the information provided by QTAC or found to be of lesser importance than anticipated when the system was actually accessed.

The majority of school principals were pleased that students were taking more responsibility for their applications and only a small number were concerned that they were not mature enough to successfully utilise the system. School guidance officers made few comments about students' maturity in relation to the telephone application system and the students themselves agreed that they liked the idea of being responsible for their own application.

Responses from principals and guidance officers indicated that, for the most part, the telephone application system allowed school staff to spend more time assisting students with making course choices. Students were also of the opinion that they had received sufficient assistance and were satisfied with the information provided in relation to telephone applications.

Despite the fact that some students experienced difficulties accessing and using the system, the quick and efficient manner in which problems were resolved ensured that students and guidance officers were satisfied. Both students and guidance officers were concerned that the cost of making an application was high, with calls estimated to cost between $4.70 and $5.40. Problems for country students and those without 0055 access were easily overcome, with a number of schools choosing to allow students to apply from school for a fee.

Experiences of specific student groups with the application process

Analyses were performed to compare students across a range of demographic variables associated with the schools (location of school, type of school, schools in low socioeconomic areas, and schools with boarders) and other perceived moderating variables such as language background and decision to lodge an

application. The results indicated that there were a number of differences between groups of students in relation to the telephone application process.

There appeared to be differences for Queensland school students and interstate applicants between those who spoke a language other than English at home and those who did not. Overall, students who spoke a language other than English at home seemed to have more difficulty understanding and applying the instructions in the application guide and were also less confident when using the system. This group were also more likely to seek assistance when making an application and, possibly because of this, reported fewer difficulties.

The relationships between type, location, socioeconomic status, and presence of boarders at schools does not allow for a straightforward interpretation of the findings with regard to the influence of these factors. Increased student responsibility for the application process emerged as a significant difference between groups of students, as did the perception that sufficient information on the application system had been distributed. Certain student groups, such as those at independent schools and those with boarders, appeared to be more likely to seek assistance when telephoning in applications. It may be the case that the increased availability of staff as a result of the alterations to the application process may allow for increased opportunities for assistance.

Recommendations

The high levels of satisfaction reported by all groups, and the efficient resolution of difficulties in relation to the telephone application process, highlight the merit of updating the method of applying for tertiary study. As would be expected, QTAC has already chosen to adopt telephone applications for all Year 12 students in 1997, and to ensure that the high level of service is maintained with the increase in application numbers. It has also already been resolved that school access to student lodgement details be facilitated and that Help Line access be continued. In light of this, there are a limited number of recommendations to be made in addition to those already endorsed.

1. Based on feedback from guidance officers and interstate applicants, it is recommended that the application guide be included as an insert to the Queensland Tertiary Courses book and, if possible, be made available earlier in the year to allow guidance officers the maximum time to discuss the application process with students.

2. Based on feedback from guidance officers and students, it may be beneficial to clarify information regarding the cost of calls to ensure that any misconceptions about the cost of making an application do not influence perceptions of the application system.

3. As it appears to be the case that the audiotape was not found to be as important an information source as the guide when explaining the application process, it is recommended that the audiotape be made available only on request.

4. As the main problems faced by interstate students are the difficulty in acquiring an application guide and obtaining help with the application process, it is recommended that interstate guidance officers be made aware of the services provided by the Help Line and the methods by which additional application guides may be obtained.

5. To ensure that principals, guidance officers, and students remain satisfied with the application service when it becomes available to all Year 12 students, it is recommended that a small-scale survey be completed at the end of the application period in 1997

CONTENTS

List of tables and figures

Tables

Figures

1: INTRODUCTION

At present Year 12 students in Victoria, New South Wales, and South Australia are able to lodge their preferences for tertiary study through interactive telephone systems. The Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) introduced a telephone system, known as the Infoline, during the 1995–96 selection period. The VTAC Infoline allows tertiary applicants to lodge course preferences, obtain end-of-year results, respond to an offer of a tertiary place, and access other tertiary entrance information. Other interactive telephone application systems offered by interstate tertiary admissions centres are of a similar nature.

Little prior research has been undertaken in order to determine the effectiveness of such systems, and student satisfaction with them is largely unknown. The only admissions centre which has gathered such information is VTAC. In late February 1996, VTAC surveyed 1000 randomly selected students who had applied for tertiary study using the Infoline. The survey sought information about students' experiences and their level of satisfaction with the Infoline and, of the 356 respondents, the majority reported satisfaction with their experiences.

In recent years, Queensland Year 12 students have used a computer program from the Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre (QTAC) to lodge an 'electronic' application of their preferences for tertiary study. In line with other interstate tertiary admissions centres, QTAC is seeking to streamline the tertiary application process by allowing applications to be lodged through a touchtone interactive telephone system.

Aside from the survey undertaken by VTAC, there is a considerable lack of research in this area. In order to ensure that potential users of the QTAC interactive telephone system find it an appropriate and readily understandable method of applying for tertiary courses, QTAC decided an evaluation, prior to the statewide introduction of the telephone application system, was necessary. As one of TEPA's objectives is to keep tertiary entrance policies, practices and issues under continuous and responsive review, TEPA was approached to undertake this independent evaluation for QTAC.

2: BACKGROUND TO THE EVALUATION

QTAC preliminary survey

In early December 1995 a survey was distributed by QTAC to all Queensland secondary schools to assess their support for further investigation of a telephone application system. The survey sought the opinions of the school principals with respect to changing to a telephone system for tertiary applications. The principals were also asked if they would be interested in participating in the development of an information package to assist Year 12 students, parents, and guidance officers in their use of the interactive telephone application system.

Of the 67 surveys that were returned indicating a willingness to be involved in developing an information package, 58 (87%) also indicated their support for the

introduction of a telephone application system, the remaining nine principals (13%) wished to retain the current 'electronic' application system.

It was later decided by QTAC that in preference to developing an information package, a project would be undertaken to pilot the use of the telephone application system before its implementation on a statewide basis. All Queensland schools were provided with the opportunity to express interest in participating in the trial and were encouraged to respond to QTAC before the deadline.

QTAC approached TEPA in mid-June 1996 to ask for assistance with conducting the evaluation of the interactive telephone system for tertiary study, which was to be trialled with 50 volunteer schools. The project brief was later amended by QTAC to include an evaluation of the experiences of interstate applicants, as this group would also lodge their 1996 tertiary applications by telephone.

The aims of the investigation, as identified by QTAC and TEPA, were to:

- determine the satisfaction of students, guidance officers, principals, and interstate applicants with the new application process

- obtain information that may be used to address concerns held about the new system by guidance officers and principals

- identify student groups which may have difficulty accessing or using an interactive telephone system.

Pilot study

In the preliminary stages of the evaluation (during early September) an interview schedule was developed to survey the guidance officers from the schools participating in the trial of the new system. The telephone interviews served to introduce the research team to the guidance officers and explain TEPA's role in evaluating the telephone application project. The information gained during the course of the interviews allowed for a preliminary assessment of guidance officers' initial perceptions of the telephone application process. Responses to the questions in the telephone interviews also facilitated the identification of appropriate schools for the student evaluation and ensured that the questions asked in the survey were face valid.

Telephone interviews were conducted with guidance officers from 46 of the 50 schools. The overwhelming majority of the guidance officers interviewed (45: 98%) were pleased with the support materials received from QTAC (an audiotape and application guide), with a number commenting that they had not felt the need to listen to the audiotape because they found the guide self-explanatory. Of those who did listen to the tape, 12 (26%) indicated that although it was thorough, it was too long to use in class.

All of the guidance officers (18: 39%) who had called QTAC on the QTAC Help Line with queries in early September were pleased with the help they received from QTAC staff. Eighteen guidance officers (39%) expected that they would have extra work to do with students applying for special consideration, but a number commented that this was not different from previous years. Similarly, although 40 (87%) of the guidance officers thought that they would have to follow up students who were late in applying, this would also be similar to previous years.

Other questions in the interview focused on how the guidance officers presented tertiary application and course information to their students, as well as how they

intended to present (or in some cases how they had presented) the telephone application process to students.

3: THE STUDY

Measures

Questionnaires were developed based on the information gained from the telephone interviews with the guidance officers, the VTAC investigation, and the preliminary survey undertaken by QTAC. The questionnaires were distributed to four groups of respondents including students from schools involved in the evaluation, school guidance officers, school principals, and interstate applicants.

The principals and guidance officers were asked to provide information about their involvement with, and their awareness of, the support materials provided by QTAC, any changes the telephone application system had caused to school procedures for dealing with tertiary applications, and recommendations for future use of the system.

The student questionnaires obtained demographic information as well as ratings of student understanding and satisfaction with the application process and support materials. The questionnaire for interstate applicants was based on the Queensland students' questionnaires. It examined applicants' experiences with, and understanding of, the application process and related materials, in addition to information about their experiences with other application centres, and demographic data.

Procedure

In October all 50 schools participating in the evaluation received surveys for the school principal and the guidance officer. In addition to this, 20 schools received a package of questionnaires to be distributed to students. Students who had not lodged a telephone application at the time of the survey were asked to complete a separate questionnaire. Guidance officers were given detailed instructions about the administration of the questionnaire and were asked to distribute it during class time to one of their Year 12 class groups.

Concurrently 400 questionnaires were mailed from QTAC to interstate applicants who had been sampled from the QTAC database.

Sample

Schools

Findings from the preliminary investigation undertaken by QTAC indicated that 46 (92%) of the secondary schools making up the sample for this evaluation had previously indicated their support for the introduction of an interactive telephone application system. The schools involved in the evaluation (although self-selected) were fairly representative of those in the Queensland secondary school system.

Slightly more than half (26: 52%) were state schools and 27 (54%) were located in the Brisbane metropolitan area. Additionally, eight (16%) of the schools in the

sample were boarding schools which compares with the statewide average of approximately ten per cent. Three of the schools included in the sample had also

been identified as socioeconomically disadvantaged schools by the Queensland Department of Education.

It should be noted that within the sample of schools, the perceived moderating variables of school type, school location, socioeconomic status, and the presence in a school of boarders were not independent. For the schools that participated in the evaluation, there was a relationship between school type, location and boarders such that independent schools were more likely to be in the metropolitan area and independent schools were more likely to have boarders. There were also relationships between socioeconomic status, school type and school location such that schools identified by the Department of Education as being socioeconomically disadvantaged were more likely to be state schools and were also more likely to be in non-metropolitan areas. These observations should be taken into account when interpreting the analysis of between-group differences.

Twenty schools, whose guidance officers were in a position to distribute questionnaires to class groups, were chosen to participate in the student evaluation of the telephone application process.

Queensland school students

Of the 564 Queensland school students who completed the questionnaires, 330 (59%) were female and 231 (41%) were male; three students did not supply data. Approximately three-quarters of the students in the sample were aged 17 (74%), a further 60 students (11%) were 16 years old, 79 (14%) were 18 years old and the remaining four (1%) were older than 18. The mean age was 17 years.

When questioned about their place of birth, 468 (83%) of the students stated that they were born in Australia, 27 (5%) were born in Europe, 23 (4%) in the Pacific and 18 (3%) in Asia. The remainder (28: 5%) were born in either North or South America, the Middle East or Africa. Fifty-six (10%) of the students spoke a language other than English at home (90% spoke only English). Twenty-three students (4%) spoke an Asian language at home, and 19 (4%) spoke a European language. The remaining 14 (2%) students spoke either a Pacific Island, an Aboriginal, or Torres Strait Islander language.

Interstate applicants

The interstate sample of 400 was drawn at random from the QTAC database. Of the 251 respondents 76 (30%) were male and 175 (70%) were female. The large majority (244: 96%) were either 17 or 18 years of age (mean age = 17.5 years), one (1%) interstate applicant was 16 years old, five (2%) were 19 years old, and one (1%) was 35 years old.

Interstate respondents were also asked where they were born. Two hundred and twenty-one (88%) were born in Australia, 12 (5%) in Asia, a further six (3%) were born in Europe and the rest (10: 4%) in either the Pacific, North or South America, the Middle East, or Africa. In response to a question about their language background, 229 (91%) respondents said that they spoke only English at home, with 22 (9%) speaking a language other than English in their home.

Response rates

Forty-four (88%) responses were received from the 50 school principals (of these responses four were from principals who had not completed the questionnaire and provided only verbal feedback). Forty-seven (94%) responses were obtained from

the 50 school guidance officers. The actual number of returned student questionnaires was 564, with 497 (88%) from those who had already lodged an application and 67 (12%) from those who had not yet lodged a telephone application.

Two hundred and fifty-one (63%) of the 400 interstate questionnaires were returned, along with student questionnaires from 19 of the 20 schools[1].

Figure 1:   Response rates to questionnaires.
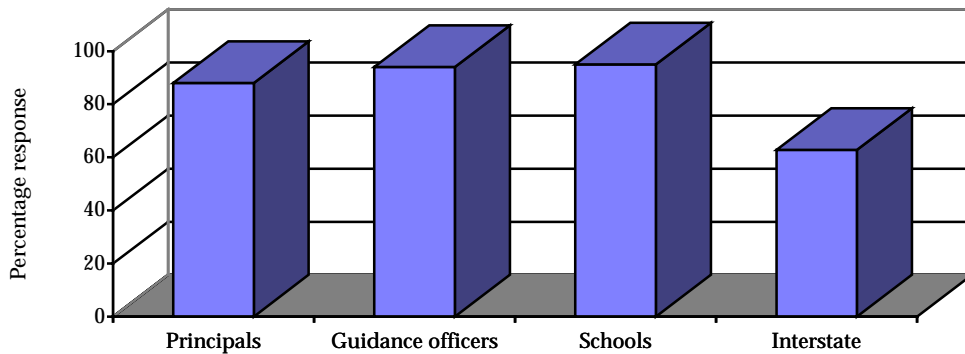
It should be noted when interpreting responses to each of the questionnaires that not all respondents answered all questions. Thus the percentages that are given for responses to the individual questions are valid percentages which exclude any non-responses.

4: RESULTS

School principals

Of the principals who responded to the questionnaire, 26 (65%) had read the application guide, but only 12 (31%) had listened to the audiotape provided by QTAC on the telephone application process.

More than two-thirds of principals (27: 69%) had discussed the telephone application process with staff and 14 (36%) had discussed the new methods of application for tertiary study with students.

Almost all of the school principals who responded to the survey (39: 98%) were pleased that students were encouraged to take more responsibility for their tertiary applications with the telephone system and only nine (25%) were concerned that students lacked the maturity to successfully complete their applications for tertiary study at home. A few principals (8: 21%) anticipated that the students would have difficulty understanding the telephone application system, with a similar number (7: 30%) indicating that some students may need more assistance than in previous years to lodge an application.

---

[1] The school that did not return any of the student questionnaires had distributed them to their students, but did not arrange collection before the end of the school semester.

More than three-quarters of the school principals who responded to the questionnaire (32: 84%) believed that the telephone application system allowed school personnel more time to concentrate on helping students to make decisions about tertiary courses.

Seven (23%) school principals indicated that administrative changes were made at the school in response to the new telephone application system. Comments in relation to administrative changes made at the school as a result of the trialling of the telephone application system mainly involved school staff. As can be seen from Table 1, many principals reiterated that no administrative changes were made, with others detailing increases in the time guidance officers spent with students and decreases in time commitments by other staff.

Table 1: Administrative changes made as a result of the telephone application system.

	Frequency
No changes necessary	8
Increase in time spent by guidance officer	5
Increase in time spent by other staff	4
Decrease in time spent by other staff	2

When asked to comment on any possible changes or improvements which could be made to the telephone application process, most principals indicated that they would not make any alterations or did not feel that they were in a position to comment. Others made suggestions about the materials, the telephone system and the cost of lodging an application, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Suggested modifications to the telephone application system.

	Frequency
No changes necessary/unable to comment	8
Changes to the telephone system	4
Changes to materials	3
Other	3
Changes to cost of calls	2

Almost all (36: 97%) of the school principals who responded to the questionnaire supported the introduction of an interactive application system in Queensland, based on their experience in trialling telephone applications.

School guidance officers

Responses to the survey for guidance officers indicated that they all used the telephone application guide to explain the new system to students, but only 33 (73%) used the audiotape. Most guidance officers made use of a variety of forums to communicate information about the telephone application process. As can be seen in Table 3, students were informed about telephone applications in large groups, class groups and individually.

Table 3:   Manner in which guidance officer discussed application process with students.

	Frequency
Large groups	22
Individually	20
Class groups	19
Small groups	7

Note: It was possible for responses to be made in more than one category.

Guidance officers were also asked to comment on whether there was anything they would do differently next year with regard to explaining the application process to students. As shown in Table 4, the majority indicated that they would do nothing differently next year. Others felt that they would start explaining the process earlier in the year and check course choices more thoroughly.

Table 4:   Proposed future changes to explaining the application process.

	Frequency
No changes to explanation process	11
Start explanation process earlier	10
Check course choices more thoroughly	10
Other	8
Alter size of student group during explanation process	4
Use audiotape differently	3

As shown in Figure 2, all guidance officers either agreed (56%) or strongly agreed (44%) that the application guide was easy to understand. Responses were more mixed in relation to whether the guide was interesting, half (50%) of the guidance officers agreed that the guide was interesting, but 13 (30%) either indicated a neutral response or disagreed.

Figure 2:   Guidance officer perceptions of the application guide.
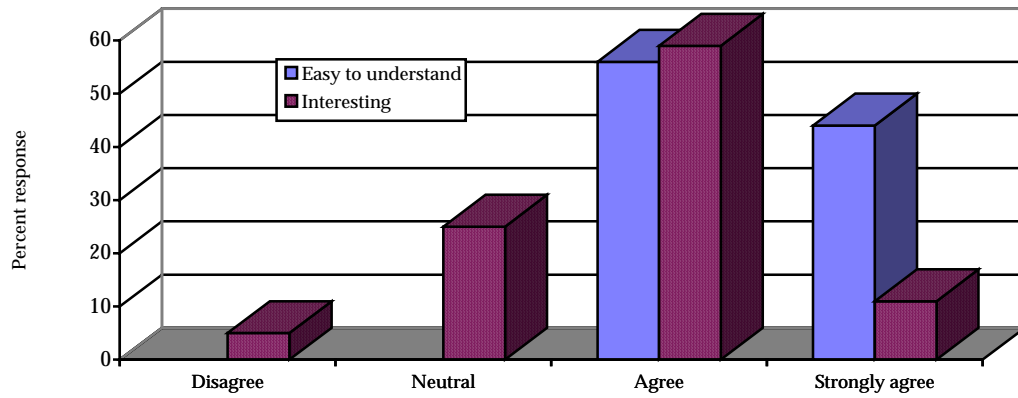
Despite the fact that not all guidance officers used the audiotape to explain the application process to students, the majority either agreed (52%) or strongly agreed (36%) that it was easy to understand, as can be seen from Figure 3. Fewer guidance officers agreed (59%) or strongly agreed (11%) that the audiotape was interesting. Most guidance officers either agreed (21: 49%) or strongly agreed (12: 28%) that the audiotape was the right length for use with students.

Figure 3:   Guidance officer perceptions of the audiotape.
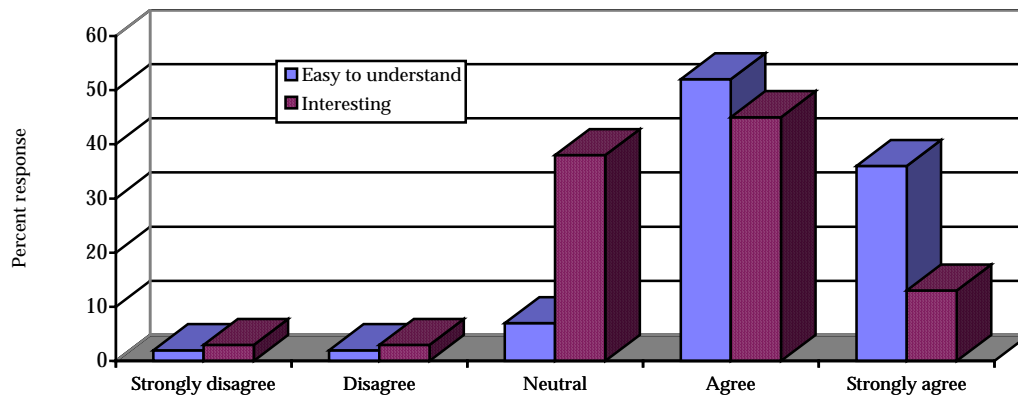
Guidance officers were asked to comment on whether there were any changes or improvements that could be made to either the telephone application guide or the audiotape. Most felt that no changes were necessary, with others suggesting modifications to the content or format of the application guide, changes to the audiotape, and alterations to the interactive telephone system, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5:   Suggested changes to the telephone application guide and audiotape.

	Frequency
No changes necessary	14
Alterations to the content of the guide	7
Alterations to the length or quality of the audiotape	7
Alterations to the format of the guide	6
Alterations to the interactive telephone system	3
Other	4

As can be seen from Table 6, guidance officers did not have a large range of suggested improvements to the telephone application process. Most indicated that no alterations should be made to the process, with a smaller number offering suggestions about the materials (application guides, audiotape etc.), telephone access and updates on student applications.

Table 6:   Suggested changes or improvements to the telephone application process.

	Frequency
No changes necessary	13
Student application updates	9
Telephone access	9
Alterations to materials (guides, audiotape etc.)	7
Other	7

Of the guidance officers who responded to the survey, 37 (79%) indicated that they had contacted QTAC on the Telephone Application Pilot Help Line. As shown in Figure 4, the majority of respondents (30: 71%) were of the opinion that their queries were dealt with quickly and efficiently.

Figure 4:   Agreement that queries were dealt with quickly and efficiently.
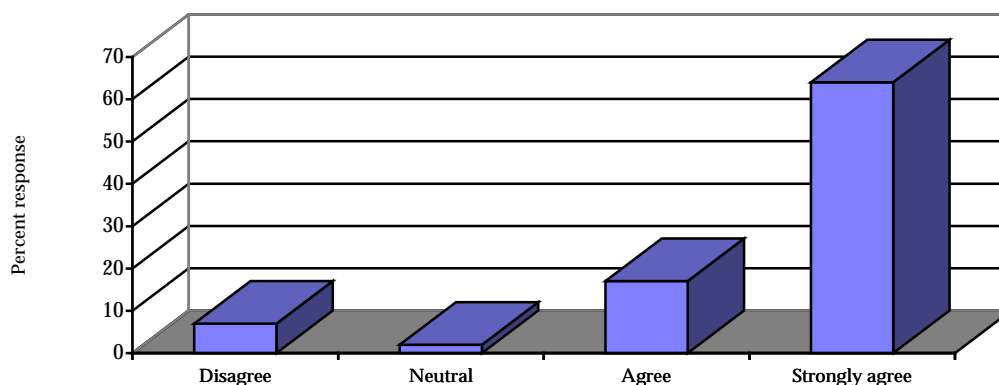
Those who contacted the QTAC Help Line were also asked to specify their reasons for using this service. As shown in Table 7, the reason most frequently offered for contacting the Help Line was to clarify lodgement details and status of Year 12 students. Guidance officers also contacted QTAC when students experienced difficulties with personal identification numbers (PINs) and application numbers, had problems using the system, and had queries relating to special entry or special consideration.

Table 7:   Reasons for contacting the QTAC Help Line.

	Frequency
Verification of student lodgement details	10
Problems with PINs or application numbers	9
Technical difficulties with the system	9
Other	9
Enquires about special entry or special consideration	8
Problems accessing the system	2

As can be seen from Figure 5, almost the same number of guidance officers agreed (13: 28%) as disagreed (12: 26%) with the statement that the telephone application system was inexpensive for students. Despite the possible perception that telephone applications were expensive, guidance officers estimated the average call cost to be only $4.70.

Figure 5:   Extent to which guidance officers agree that the telephone system is inexpensive for students.
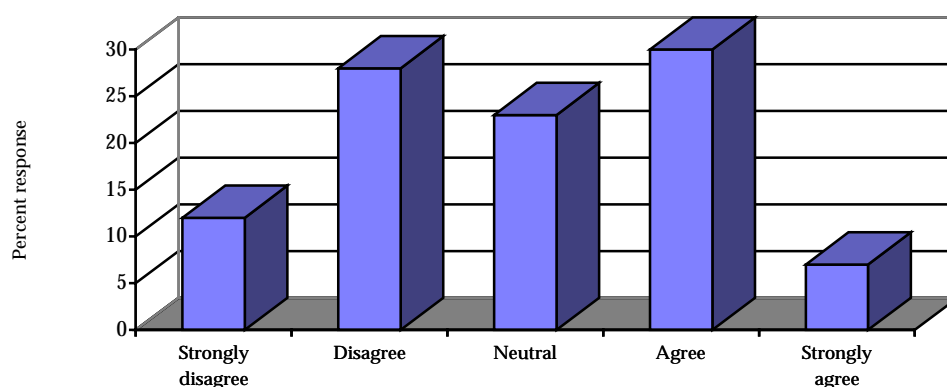
Queensland school students

Of the 564 Queensland school students who completed the questionnaire, 497 (88%) had already lodged an application for tertiary study at the time the survey was distributed. Sixteen students (24%) who had not yet lodged an application indicated that they intended to do so in the future.

Preparation for completing a telephone application

As can be seen from Figure 6, most students found out about the application process as part of either year (50%) or class group discussions (45%). Fewer students had the application process explained to them individually or in another manner.

Figure 6:   Manner in which the application process was explained to students.

Note: It was possible for responses to be made in more than one category.

As shown in Table 8, students expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the materials provided by QTAC to explain the applicat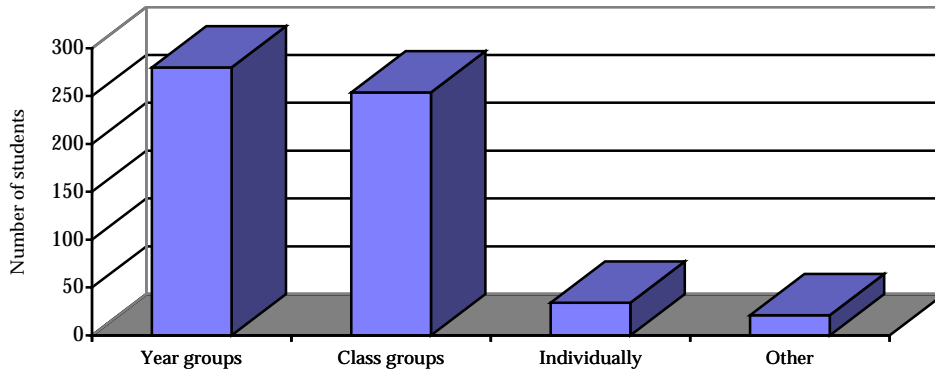ion process. This is indicated by the high, positive ratings of the clarity of instructions in the QTAC audiotape and application guide. Students also rated the availability of their school guidance officers highly and felt that they had been provided with sufficient information to complete their application.

Table 8:   Extent to which students agreed with statements about the preparation for telephoning in their application.

	Average
I was able to approach my guidance officer if I had any questions	5.26
The instructions in the application guide were not difficult to understand	5.23
The QTAC application guide provided clear and detailed instructions	5.16
I received sufficient information and assistance	5.14
The QTAC audiotape provided me with clear and detailed instructions	5.07
I liked the idea of being responsible for my own application	4.90

Note: Ratings were made on a six-point scale, with six reflecting the most positive response.

After receiving information about the telephone application process, 481 (85%) students discussed their application with another person. As shown in Table 9, students were most likely to discuss their applications with parents, friends and guidance officers. Fewer consulted other family members, teachers or other sources of information.

Table 9:   People with whom students discussed applications.

	Frequency
Parents	338
Friends	283
Guidance officer	266
Other family members	91
Teacher	63
Other	14

Note: It was possible for responses to be made in more than one category.

Prior to telephoning in their application, 503 (89%) of the students who responded to the survey filled in the application guide. Of this group, 250 (48%) indicated that they had received some help when completing the guide, and from Table 10, it is evident that the majority of students were assisted by their school guidance officer. Fewer students obtained help from parents, teachers, friends and family.

Table 10:   People who assisted with filling in application guide.

	Frequency
Guidance officer	112
Parents	37
Teacher	24
Friends	10
Other	10
Other family members	4

Note: Not all students specified who had assisted them.

Lodging a telephone application

Based on survey responses, nearly three-quarters of the students who had lodged an application (357: 72%) accessed the 0055 telephone application system from home. Fewer students (114: 23%) indicated that they had applied from school or from another location (24: 5%).

Students were also asked to comment on whether they had obtained any assistance when telephoning in their tertiary application to QTAC. Of the 497 students who had already lodged an application 125 (25%) had sought assistance with using the 0055 system to apply for tertiary study. Those who had sought assistance were then requested to specify who had helped them with telephoning in their application and, as can be seen from Table 11, the majority were assisted by their school guidance officer.

Table 11:   People who assisted with telephoning in the tertiary application.

	Frequency
Guidance officer	62
Parents	26
Other	10
Teacher	9
Friends	8
Other family members	3

Note: Not all students specified who had assisted them.

Students expressed a high degree of confidence in the telephone application system, as indicated by the pattern of responses in Table 12. They gave high average ratings to questions about their readiness to key in their responses and their understanding of the actions they had carried out. They also found the instructions given on the 0055 line easy to follow and had little difficulty in accessing the application line.

Table 12:   Extent to which students agreed with statements about the lodgement of a telephone application.

	Average
I was always ready to key in my response	5.34
I clearly understood all the actions I carried out on the application line	5.31
The questions and instructions on the 0055 line were easy to understand	5.23
The 0055 application line was never busy	5.14
It didn't take long for me to lodge an application	5.06

Note: Ratings were made on a six-point scale, with six reflecting the most positive response.

Of the students who had lodged an application, 394 (79%) were able to lodge their application with only one telephone call. The remaining 106 (21%) indicated that they had to lodge their application more than once. As can be seen in Figure 7, 75 of these students (15%) needed two attempts to lodge an application, with only 31 (6%) making more than two calls.

Figure 7:   Number of attempts to lodge application.

14
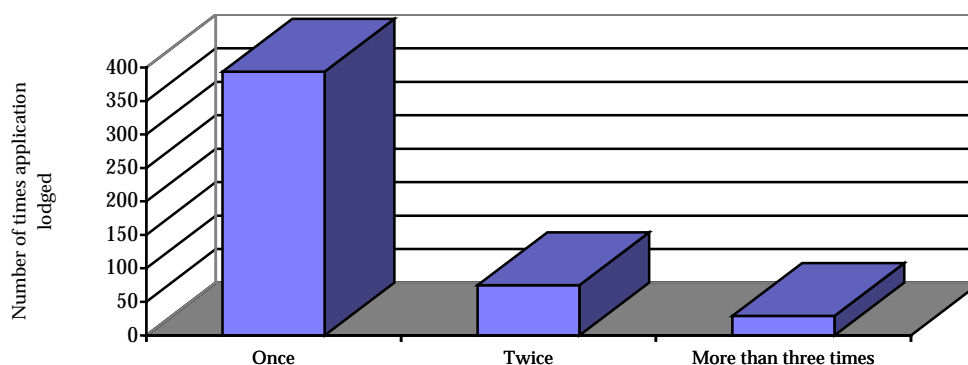
As would be expected based on the number of students who had to lodge an application more than once, 103 (21%) responded that they had encountered some difficulties with the telephone application system. Table 13 shows the most frequently reported difficulty with the 0055 application system was technical difficulties or the unavailability of the service. Students also appeared to be uncertain as to how to correct errors when in the system and how to ensure the telephone was in 'touchtone mode'.

Table 13: Student difficulties with the telephone application system.

	Frequency
Technical difficulties or unavailability of service	36
Unsure of next step	17
Student made an error	14
Problems with telephone	12
Other	8
Problems with BSSSS, QTAC or PINs	4

Note: Not all students specified the problems they had had.

Students gave a variety of responses when asked how they resolved their difficulties with the telephone application system. As can be seen in Table 14, they found it relatively easy to solve their problems, with most either calling the application line again or requesting assistance from someone else. Students also commented that in some cases they listened to the prompts, read the instructions or did nothing when problems arose.

Table 14: Manner in which students resolved difficulties.

	Frequency
Called the 0055 application line again	44
Sought help	18
Followed instructions	10
Did nothing	6
Altered the telephone settings	5
Other	5

Note: Not all students specified how they had resolved the problems.

Despite the fact that there were a number of students who phoned in their application more than once, the average call cost was estimated to be only $5.40, with estimates ranging from less than $1 to more than $30.

Interestingly, only 99 (18%) students had used an interactive telephone system prior to lodging their QTAC telephone application. As shown in Table 15, some students had experience using 0055 numbers to enter competitions, to access information/services, and for banking or paying bills.

Table 15:   0055 services previously accessed by students.

	Frequency
Competitions	29
Banking	28
Information/services	21
Paying bills	9
Tertiary applications to another state	4
Other	2

Note: Not all students gave examples of services previously accessed.

When responding to more general questions about the telephone application system, students had high levels of satisfaction with the 0055 service, and appeared confident that they had entered the correct data during their telephone calls. They were slightly less confident, but still positive, about using other QTAC 0055 services (see Table 16).

Table 16:   Extent to which students agreed with statements about the telephone application system.

	Average
No difficulty understanding the questions or instructions	5.24
Overall, I was satisfied with the 0055 application service	5.10
Confident that the data entered were correct	5.08
Now feel confident about using QTAC's other 0055 numbers	5.03

Note: Ratings were made on a six-point scale, with six reflecting the most positive response.

Differences between students who did and did not lodge an application

There were a number of significant differences between students who had lodged an application at the time of the survey and those who had not yet lodged an application. Students who had not yet lodged an application were significantly less likely to agree with the statement that the QTAC Application Guide provided them with clear and detailed instructions on how to use the 0055 telephone application line ($F=45.00$, $p<.01$), they were also significantly less likely to agree that they had sufficient information on using the application line ($F=6.32$, $p<.05$). Those students who had not yet lodged an application were also more likely to disagree with the statement that they liked being responsible for telephoning in their own application ($F=39.50$, $p<.01$). Interestingly there was also a significant gender difference between these two groups, with male students more likely to have not yet lodged an application ($F=30.04$, $p<.01$) than female students.

Differences between students who spoke a language other than English at home and those who did not

A discriminant analysis showed that students who spoke a language other than English at home (LOTE) were significantly more likely than English-speaking students to have had assistance when lodging their telephone application (F=5.35, p<.05). LOTE students were also significantly more likely to disagree with the statements that they were always ready to key in their response to a question on the 0055 telephone application line (F=6.25, p.<0.5) and that they understood the actions they had carried out on the 0055 application line (F=5.63, p<.05). Interestingly, students with a LOTE background reported significantly less problems when making their application than did other students (F=3.68, p<.05).

Students at non-metropolitan schools

Questionnaires were received from 266 (47%) students at metropolitan schools and 298 (53%) students from non-metropolitan schools. Survey responses indicated that there were few meaningful significant differences between these two groups of students. Students from non-metropolitan schools were significantly more likely to disagree that they had sufficient information on using the application line (F=6.52, p<.01). Interestingly, students from non-metropolitan regions were also significantly less likely to seek assistance when telephoning in their application (F=4.73, p<.05).

Students at independent schools

Students who responded to the questionnaires were also grouped according to the type of school they attended. Responses were obtained from 344 (61%) state school students and 220 (39%) students who were completing their secondary education at independent schools.

A discriminant analysis revealed a number of significant differences between these two groups. Students who attended independent schools were significantly more likely to disagree with the statements that they received sufficient information and assistance on using the 0055 application line (F=4.93, p<.05), that they liked the idea of being responsible for their own application (F=10.27, p<.01), and that they received sufficient information before they made their application (F=5.32, p<.05). Students at independent schools were also significantly more likely to have obtained assistance when telephoning in their application (F=13.39, p<.01).

Students at schools with boarders

Of the 564 students who replied to the survey, 116 (21%) were identified as being from schools with boarders. Results from a discriminant analysis indicated that there were some significant differences between student responses from schools with boarders and those without boarders.

Students who attended schools where boarders were present were significantly less likely to agree that they liked the idea of being responsible for their tertiary application (F=11.04, p<.01). Students at schools with boarders were also significantly more likely to seek assistance when telephoning in their application (F=5.93, p<.01).

Students from schools identified as socioeconomically disadvantaged

Only 41 (7%) of the students who responded to the survey came from schools that were identified as socioeconomically disadvantaged. A discriminant analysis revealed that there were significant differences between students from socioeconomically disadvantaged schools and from those who were not.

Students from socioeconomically disadvantaged schools were significantly more likely to agree that they received sufficient information and assistance on using the 0055 application line ($F=7.73$, $p<.01$) and that they were able to approach the school guidance officer if they had any questions about their application ($F=18.82$, $p<.01$). Those from schools identified as socioeconomically disadvantaged were also significantly more likely to discuss their application before telephoning it in ($F=7.71$, $p<.01$), to seek assistance when telephoning in the application ($F=8.40$, $p<.01$) and to report problems when attempting to use the 0055 service ($F=4.93$, $p<.05$).

Interstate applicants

Preparation for completing a telephone application

Interstate applicants were asked whether they had received an Interstate Application Guide[2] to assist them in the application process. More than two-thirds of the applicants (169: 68%) had received a guide and the vast majority (151: 92%) of this group found it helpful when applying. Before lodging their telephone application, 217 (87%) of the interstate applicants indicated that they had discussed their application with another person. As shown in Table 17, the people that they were most likely to discuss their application with were parents, friends, or the school guidance officer.

Table 17:   People with whom interstate applicants discussed applications.

	Frequency
Parents	338
Friends	283
Guidance officer	266
Other family members	91
Teacher	63
Other	14

Note: Responses were made to more than one category.

---

[2] Some students indicated that they received a flowchart on request from QTAC, in addition to the *Queensland Tertiary Courses (1997)* book.

Lodging a telephone application

As would be expected amongst this group of applicants, the majority lodged their application from home (222: 90%). A much smaller number telephoned from school (5: 2%) or elsewhere (21: 8%).

Interstate applicants were also asked if anyone had assisted them in making their telephone application. Only 41 (16%) of the applicants indicated that they had received help in telephoning in their application with the majority of these receiving assistance from their parents (see Table 18).

Table 18:   People who assisted with telephoning in the tertiary application.

	Frequency
Parents	19
Friends	7
Guidance officer	5
Other family members	4
Other	2
Teacher	1

Note: Not all students specified who had assisted them.

Interstate applicants responded to further survey questions about their preparation for lodging their telephone application, their level of satisfaction with the application process, and their feelings about the application system in general. As shown in Table 19, interstate applicants were clearly pleased to take responsibility for their applications, and were also satisfied with the materials provided by QTAC to assist with the application process.

Table 19:   Extent to which interstate applicants agreed with statements about their preparation for telephoning in their application.

	Average
I liked the idea of being responsible for my own application	5.12
The instructions in the application guide were not difficult to understand	4.93
The QTAC application guide provided clear and detailed instructions	4.89
I received sufficient information and assistance	4.43

Note: Ratings were made on a six-point scale, with six reflecting the most positive response.

Responses to questions about the lodgement of their telephone application show a similarly high degree of satisfaction. As shown in Table 20, applicants found the instructions and questions on the 0055 application line easy to understand. They also rated their readiness highly and appeared to have few problems accessing the 0055 line.

Table 20:   Extent to which interstate applicants agreed with statements about the lodgement of a telephone application.

	Average
I clearly understood all the actions I carried out on the application line	5.26
The questions and instructions on the 0055 line were easy to understand	5.21
I was always ready to key in my response	5.20
The 0055 application line was never busy	5.11
It didn't take long for me to lodge an application	4.88

Note: Ratings were made on a six-point scale, with six reflecting the most positive response.

Interstate applicants' responses to more general questions about the telephone application system show a high overall level of satisfaction with the 0055 service (see Table 21). It also appears that they were confident about data entered during their telephone calls and about using other QTAC 0055 services.

Table 21:   Extent to which interstate applicants agreed with statements about the telephone application system.

	Average
No difficulty understanding the questions or instructions	5.21
Overall, I was satisfied with the 0055 application service	5.15
Confident that the data entered were correct	5.06
Now feel confident about using QTAC's other 0055 numbers	5.04

Note: Ratings were made on a six-point scale, with six reflecting the most positive response.

One-third of the interstate respondents indicated that it took them more than one telephone call to lodge their application (83: 33%), while the remaining 167 applicants were able to lodge their application with just one call. Figure 8 shows that 44 applicants (18%) took two telephone calls to make their application, with a further 35 (14%) taking three calls or more to lodge their application.

Figure 8:   Number of attempts to lodge application from interstate.
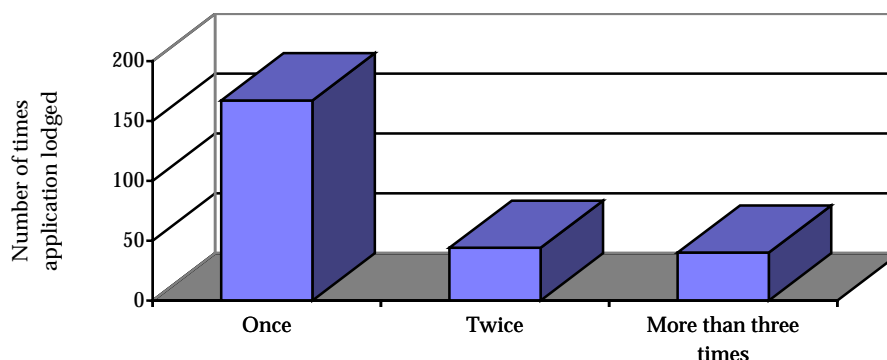
As it took a number of applicants more than one telephone call to lodge their application it is not surprising that 101 respondents (41%) reported problems when

telephoning in their application, as shown in Table 22. The most frequently reported difficulties were those associated with the computer system or the unavailability of the service. Interstate applicants also appeared to have problems with the numbers they needed to access the system, ensuring that their telephones were set to 'tone' dialling, as well as uncertainty about some of the questions.

Table 22:   Interstate applicant difficulties with the telephone application system.

	Frequency
Computer problems or unavailability of service	25
Problems with QTAC or PINs	22
Problems with telephone	20
Unsure of next step	20
Applicant made an error	11
Other	4

Note: Some respondents specified more than one problem.

Interstate applicants gave a variety of responses when asked how they had resolved their difficulties with the telephone application system. As can be seen in Table 23, applicants did not appear to find it difficult to resolve their problems, with most either calling the application line again or requesting assistance from someone else. They also commented that in some cases they listened to the telephone prompts, read the instructions or did nothing when problems arose.

Table 23:   Manner in which interstate applicants resolved difficulties.

	Frequency
Called the 0055 application line again	30
Sought help	24
Followed instructions	20
Did nothing	10
Altered the telephone settings	8
Other	6

Note: Not all applicants specified how they had resolved the problems.

Given that a number of applicants took more than one telephone call to lodge their application, the average estimated call cost was $7.16, with estimated costs ranging from $1 to more than $30.

Nearly half (107: 43%) of the interstate applicants indicated that they had used an interactive telephone system before. Table 24 shows that the overwhelming majority of applicants had gained experience with an interactive system when lodging their tertiary application in another state.

Table 24:   0055 services previously accessed by interstate applicants.

	Frequency
Tertiary applications to another state	91
Banking	14
Information/services	11
Competitions	9
Paying bills	6
Other	1

Note: Responses were made to more than one category.

Two hundred and six (82%) of the interstate applicants had lodged a tertiary application with the admissions centre in their own state. A further 54 (22%) respondents had also lodged an application with another interstate admissions centre. Given their experiences with the interactive telephone systems used by other tertiary admissions centres, interstate applicants were asked to comment on the easiest telephone system to use. As can be seen from Figure 9, almost half of them (91: 43%) found the QTAC system the easiest to use. A number of applicants (74: 35%) rated the NSW system as the easiest, and 36 applicants (17%) stated that the systems they had accessed were equally easy to use.

Figure 9:   Easiest application system to use.
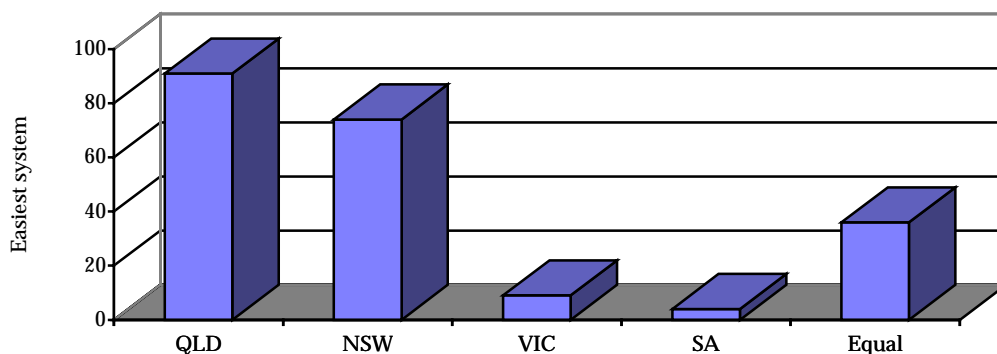
Differences between interstate respondents who spoke a language other than English at home and those who did not

A number of significant differences emerged between the interstate respondents who spoke a language other than English at home and those who did not. LOTE applicants from interstate were significantly less likely than other interstate applicants to agree that they had no difficulty in understanding and applying the instructions in the QTAC application guide ($F=9.07$, $p<.01$). They were also significantly less likely to agree that they were confident that the data they had entered on the 0055 application line were correct ($F=4.34$, $p<.05$). The LOTE applicants from interstate were less likely than other interstate applicants to have lodged an application in their own state ($F=5.65$, $p<.05$) and were more likely to have lodged an application to another interstate application centre ($F=8.06$, $p<.01$).

Differences between Queensland students and interstate applicants

A discriminant analysis showed that there were a number of significant differences between the Queensland students who had lodged a telephone application and the interstate applicants. As would be expected, given the fact that the information materials differed greatly for both groups, the interstate applicants were significantly less likely to agree with statements that they had sufficient information on using the application line ($F=99.64$, $p<.01$) and that they were ready to key in their responses when using the application line ($F=5.74$, $p<.05$). However, the interstate respondents also indicated that it took them significantly less time than did the Queensland students to complete their requests on the application line ($F=6.08$, $p<.05$). Additionally the interstate applicants were significantly more likely to agree that they liked the idea of being responsible for telephoning in their application ($F=6.74$, $p<.01$).

When responding to statements about the QTAC Application Guides, interstate applicants were significantly more likely than the Queensland students to disagree that they found the instructions in the guide clear ($F=26.67$, $p<.01$), and that they had no difficulty in understanding and applying the instructions in the guide ($F=19.27$, $p<.01$). Even with these difficulties the interstate applicants were significantly more likely to have completed their application with fewer calls than Queensland students ($F=11.21$, $p<.01$).

A further significant difference between the interstate applicants and the Queensland students was in their estimates of the cost of the telephone call to lodge their application. Interstate applicants' estimates were significantly higher than those of the Queensland students ($F=17.12$, $p<.01$).

5: CONCLUSIONS

Satisfaction with the telephone application process

Overall, it was evident that principals, guidance officers, Queensland school students, and interstate applicants were satisfied with the telephone application service provided by QTAC.

School principals

The majority of comments made by principals in relation to the new process were positive, with almost all supporting the introduction of telephone applications. Many had read the telephone application guide and discussed the new approach with staff. More than two-thirds believed that the new system allowed school personnel to spend more time helping students make decisions about tertiary courses. Few modifications were suggested, aside from minor alterations to the interactive system or the information materials provided by QTAC.

School guidance officers

Survey responses and comments made by guidance officers indicated high levels of satisfaction with the telephone application process. It appeared to be the case that the application guide was rated more highly and found to be easier to understand than the audiotape, with many indicating that the audiotape was not used extensively. Guidance officers suggested a range of minor modifications to these materials and to the telephone system. In the event that it became necessary to use the QTAC Help Line, almost all guidance officers reported a high level of satisfaction with the manner in which their queries were handled. Difficulties in relation to the verification of student lodgement details, PIN or application numbers and technical problems with the system were, for the most part, perceived to have been dealt with quickly and efficiently.

School students

Responses to the survey indicated that the students were satisfied with the information supplied about the telephone application process and with the telephone application system. Any problems that arose appeared to have been handled either by the guidance officer or the students with minimum difficulty.

Interstate applicants

The major difficulty faced by interstate applicants in relation to the application process appeared to be obtaining a copy of the application guide. For the most part, this group of applicants were satisfied with the application package and confident with using the telephone application system.

Concerns about the telephone application process

The preliminary survey, undertaken by QTAC prior to the initiation of the pilot project, detailed a number of concerns in relation to the telephone application process as identified by school principals, including:

- the possibility that applicants may lack the responsibility or maturity necessary to successfully utilise such a system

- the perception that applicants may need assistance and, without it, may make poor choices

- the possibility that some students may not have access to the service, may fail to use it effectively, feel intimidated, or be concerned that costs in country areas will be inflated.

As would be expected given the high levels of reported satisfaction, many of these concerns of school principals were either addressed by the information provided by QTAC or found to be of lesser importance than anticipated when the system was actually accessed.

The majority of school principals were pleased that students were taking more responsibility for their applications and only a small number were concerned that they were not mature enough to successfully utilise the system. School guidance officers made few comments about students' maturity in relation to the telephone application system and the students themselves agreed that they liked the idea of being responsible for their own application.

Responses from principals and guidance officers indicated that, for the most part, the telephone application system allowed school staff to spend more time assisting students with making course choices. Students were also of the opinion that they had received sufficient assistance and were satisfied with the information provided in relation to telephone applications.

Despite the fact that some students experienced difficulties accessing and using the system, the quick and efficient manner in which problems were resolved ensured that students and guidance officers remained satisfied with the application process. Both students and guidance officers in all areas were concerned that the cost of making an application was high, with calls estimated to cost between $4.70 and $5.40. Problems for country students were overcome by a number of schools choosing to allow students to apply from school for a fee. It was also the case that many students who did not have 0055 access made their application from school.

Experiences of specific student groups with the application process

Analyses were performed to compare students across a range of demographic variables associated with the schools (location of school, type of school, schools in low socioeconomic areas, and schools with boarders) and other perceived moderating variables such as language background and decision to lodge an application. The results indicated that there were a number of differences between groups of students in relation to the telephone application process.

While it appears to be the case that students who did not lodge an application felt they had insufficient information or that the instructions were not clear, the fact that they also indicated they were less likely to want to take responsibility for their own application may have influenced these responses. It is possible that, in relation to this group of students, the method of application may not have influenced their decision to apply for tertiary study.

There appeared to be differences for Queensland school students and interstate applicants between those who spoke a language other than English at home and those who did not. Overall, students who spoke a language other than English at home seemed to have more difficulty understanding and applying the instructions in the application guide and were also less confident when using the system. This group were also more likely to seek assistance when making an application and, possibly because of this, reported fewer difficulties.

The relationships between type, location, socioeconomic status, and presence of boarders at schools does not allow for a straightforward interpretation of the findings with regard to the influence of these factors. Increased student responsibility for the application process emerged as a significant difference between groups of students, as did the perception that sufficient information on the application system had been distributed. Certain student groups, such as those at independent schools and those with boarders, appeared to be more likely to seek assistance when telephoning in applications. It may be the case that the increased availability of staff as a result of the alterations to the application process may allow for increased opportunities for assistance.

6: RECOMMENDATIONS

The high levels of satisfaction reported by all groups, and the efficient resolution of difficulties in relation to the telephone application process, highlight the merit of updating the method of applying for tertiary study. As would be expected, QTAC has already chosen to adopt telephone applications for all Year 12 students in 1997, and to ensure that the high level of service is maintained with the increase in application numbers. It has also already been resolved that school access to student lodgement details be facilitated and that Help Line access be continued. In light of this, there are a limited number of recommendations to be made in addition to those already endorsed.

1. To facilitate a smooth and informed transition to the new application system, it is recommended that the survey feedback sheet, prepared by TEPA for those schools involved in the trial, be distributed to all schools who will be involved in the tertiary application process in 1997.

2. Based on feedback from guidance officers and interstate applicants, it is recommended that the application guide be included as an insert to the *Queensland Tertiary Courses* book and, if possible, be made available earlier in the year to allow guidance officers the maximum time to discuss the application process with students.

3. Based on feedback from guidance officers and students, it may be beneficial to clarify information regarding the cost of calls to ensure that any misconceptions about the cost of making an application do not influence perceptions of the application system.

4. As it appears to be the case that the audiotape was not found to be as important an information source as the guide when explaining the application process, it is recommended that the audiotape be made available only on request. This may assist QTAC with minimising the costs associated with providing an audiotape as part of the information package.

5. As the main problems faced by interstate students are the difficulty in acquiring an application guide and obtaining help with the application process, it is recommended that interstate guidance officers be made aware of the services provided by the Help Line and the methods by which additional application guides may be obtained.

6. To ensure that principals, guidance officers, and students remain satisfied with the application service when it becomes available to all Year 12 students, it is recommended that a small-scale survey be completed at the end of the application period in 1997.