

VET as a provider of an educational and social ladder of opportunity

Many assume that pathways from vocational education and training to higher education increase access to university for students from low socio-economic backgrounds. This is because VET is over-represented by students from low socio-economic backgrounds, whereas higher education is over-represented by students from high socio-economic backgrounds.

Overall this is true, but it does not account for the diversity within VET and higher education. If the student population reflected the Australian population there should be 25% low SES students, 50% medium SES students, and 25% high SES students in higher education and VET. Both sectors have a long way to go.

In tables I commissioned from DEEWR I found that in 2007 just over 17% of commencing domestic under-graduate students at public universities were from a low SES background. This differs from the 15.23% reported by DEST for 2005, but that was for all commencing domestic students, under-graduate and post-graduate. I found that there were 16.6% *under-graduate* low SES students in 2005, and just over 17% in 2007.

Reports on equity in higher education usually report only the percentage of low SES students, and not middle and high SES students, yet doing so reveals the dimensions of the equity problems. Table 1 shows the composition of Australia university groups. Low SES students are under-represented in all groups, but medium SES students are also under-represented particularly in the Group of Eight, but also in the Australian Technology Network universities. Only the regional universities had their fair share of low and medium SES students.

**Table 1: Socio-economic background of
2007 under-graduate commencing students at Australian university groups**

| University group | %SES | | |
|----------------------------|------|--------|------|
| | Low | Medium | High |
| Group of Eight | 10.9 | 36.4 | 50.9 |
| ATN | 16.3 | 45.4 | 37.3 |
| 1960s & 1970s universities | 21.1 | 52.3 | 25.4 |
| Post 1988 universities | 19.7 | 55.3 | 22.9 |
| Regional universities | 26.1 | 57.2 | 14.9 |
| All universities | 17.4 | 48.0 | 33.1 |
| Parity | 25.0 | 50.0 | 25.0 |

Privileged access is even more pronounced at the eight universities that admitted 50% or more high SES students in 2007 as shown in Table 2. ANU, Macquarie and the University of Canberra hold the dubious honour of being the most inequitable universities in admitting around two thirds of their students from high SES backgrounds. This deserves as much attention as does the low level of participation of low SES students.

Table 2: Shame file - Australia's most inequitable universities in 2007

| University | %SES commencing under-graduate students | | |
|---------------|---|--------|------|
| | Low | Medium | High |
| U of Canberra | 3.8 | 27.3 | 68.2 |
| ANU | 4.0 | 22.7 | 67.8 |
| Macquarie | 6.1 | 25.6 | 66.8 |
| Sydney | 6.4 | 30.0 | 61.6 |
| UTS | 8.2 | 33.4 | 57.5 |
| Melbourne | 10.2 | 33.3 | 55.1 |
| UNSW | 8.3 | 35.5 | 54.0 |
| UWA | 8.7 | 38.1 | 51.5 |

At the other end of the scale there were only seven universities that admitted 25% or more low SES students in 2007 as is shown in Table 3, and of these only two are metropolitan universities. Central Queensland does the most of any university to redress socio-economic disadvantage.

Table 3: Honour roll - universities that supported low SES student participation in 2007

| University | %SES | | |
|---------------------|------|--------|------|
| | Low | Medium | High |
| CQU | 40.7 | 51.1 | 5.6 |
| Tasmania | 34.9 | 38.5 | 24.9 |
| Newcastle | 31.2 | 56.9 | 11.3 |
| Southern Queensland | 28.4 | 56.7 | 12.0 |
| James Cook | 27.8 | 65.6 | 3.8 |
| U of SA | 27.3 | 47.2 | 24.8 |
| VU | 25.2 | 48.7 | 22.0 |

In a 2007 NCVER report on the socio-economic profile of 2001 VET students, Paul Foley reported that low SES students are under-represented in VET diplomas and advanced diplomas and over-represented in lower VET qualifications. Using his data, I found that only around 19% of students in diplomas and advanced diplomas were from a low SES background, while around 53% and 27% were from medium and high SES backgrounds respectively.

Table 4 shows that this is reflected in the profile of VET articulators to higher education. It shows the percentage of commencing under-graduate low SES students at each university group, followed by the percentage admitted on the basis of prior VET studies, and the SES profile of those VET articulators. These pathways are not an effective mechanism for redressing socio-economic disadvantage in higher education because the profile of VET articulators is similar to higher education students. Discounting the Group of Eight because they admit so few VET articulators, the percentage of low SES VET articulators within each university group matches pretty closely their percentage of low SES students overall. There are only five universities that admit at least 5% more low SES VET articulators than their overall percentage of low SES students, and they are Monash, Curtin, Flinders, Tasmania and Charles Darwin.

Table 4: How university groups compare in admitting low SES VET students

| University group | % All low SES students | % admitted prior VET | % VET low SES | % VET medium SES | % VET high SES |
|----------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|---------------|------------------|----------------|
| Group of Eight | 10.9 | 2.7 | 15.7 | 43.9 | 39.8 |
| ATN | 16.3 | 10.9 | 17.9 | 46.4 | 34.8 |
| 1960s & 1970s universities | 21.1 | 10.6 | 23.6 | 52.8 | 22.6 |
| Post 1988 universities | 19.7 | 15.8 | 19.0 | 54.5 | 24.9 |
| Dual-sectors | 18.2 | 17.4 | 19.2 | 45.6 | 33.2 |
| All universities | 17.4 | 10.1 | 20.0 | 51.8 | 27.0 |

VET pathways to higher education establish an educational ladder of opportunity and contribute to *deepening* participation in higher education by existing social groups, but they do not really establish a social ladder of opportunity and contribute to *widening* participation for low SES students. One problem is that low SES students are not a designated equity group in VET because VET has a high proportion of low SES students overall. There is a lot of equity research on low SES students in higher education, and we need to do the same for VET to ensure equitable access to diplomas and advanced diplomas and the outcomes they bring, but also so VET pathways *can* provide low SES students with access to higher education.

Researchers from Victoria University found that school students from low and medium socio-economic backgrounds (68% and 71%) in Melbourne's western suburbs had high levels of aspirations to attend university, even if this was lower than high SES students (81%). However, they found that low SES students were less confident that they would go to university than high SES students, and in fact they were less likely to do so with many going to TAFE. What happens to these students in TAFE and how does this shape their aspirations for higher education? We don't know. We can't redress social inequality in higher education without doing something about it in VET and to do this we need research and we need coherent tertiary education equity policies that consider VET and higher education together.

Dr Leesa Wheelahan is a senior lecturer in adult and vocational education at Griffith University. Copies of the paper on which this article is based and the paper by VU researchers can be accessed from the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education

from <http://www.unisa.edu.au/hawkeinstitute/ncsehe/publications.asp>