Do educational pathways contribute to equity in tertiary education in Australia?

Abstract

A key assumption of equity policies in Australia, as in many countries, is that pathways from lower-status, vocationally oriented 'second' tiers of tertiary education to 'first' tier higher education are able to act as an equity mechanism. This is because students from low socio-economic backgrounds are over-represented in former and under-represented in the latter. The assumption that pathways support equity is tested in this paper through an analysis of the socio-economic profile and institutional destination of student transfers from vocational education and training to higher education in Australia. It finds that educational pathways deepen participation in education by existing social groups but do not effectively widen participation for groups that do not have equitable access. This is as a consequence of the hierarchical structuring of qualifications within VET as well as in higher education.

Keywords: vocational education and training; higher education; educational pathways; equity

Biographical notes

Leesa Wheelahan is a senior lecturer in the School of Education and Professional Studies at Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia. Email: UUL.wheelahan@griffith.edu.au

Introduction

Tertiary education equity policies emphasise the importance of educational pathways that facilitate student transfers from institutions in lower-status, vocationally oriented 'second' tiers of tertiary education to institutions in higher status 'first' tiers of higher education, particularly universities. This is because students from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to go to the former, whereas more privileged students are more likely to go to the latter. Consequently, in a recent Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report on tertiary education, Santiago *et al.* (2008, p.49) argue that formal and institutionalised arrangements between institutions that facilitate student transfers can help to promote equity by increasing opportunities for disadvantaged students to access higher status tertiary education institutions.

Australian government policies emphasise pathways between the vocational education and training (VET) and higher education (HE) sectors as an important component of equity policies (Gillard 2009). Australia has two sectors of tertiary education; a VET sector which mostly consists of publicly funded institutes of technical and further education (TAFE), and a HE sector, which mostly consists of public universities. It is assumed that pathways are able to act as an equity mechanism because VET is over-represented by students from low socio-economic backgrounds, whereas HE is over-represented by students from high socio-economic backgrounds (Foley 2007; James 2007). Consequently, the key problem for policy has been how to increase pathways from VET to HE rather than examining the extent to which pathways effectively act as an equity mechanism.

This paper tests the assumption that VET to HE student transfers in Australia are able to act as an equity mechanism. It analyses the socio-economic background and institutional destinations of VET to HE student transfers at Australian public universities. It finds that these pathways are shaped by and enacted within a tertiary education sector that is differentiated by status and they do little to act as an equity mechanism as a consequence. This is because, first, pathways provide VET students with access to lower status universities rather than the elite universities, thereby reinforcing the exclusivity of the elite universities. Second, VET pathways deepen participation in tertiary education by existing groups because the socio-economic composition of VET student transfers reflects the socio-economic composition of students in the HE sector and in individual universities. They thus do little to widen participation of students from low socio-economic backgrounds in HE.

The first section locates pathways as an equity mechanism within debates about social inclusion in education. The next section outlines the methods used in the research reported here, while the findings are reported in the following sections. The first outlines the access to HE that is available to VET articulators and their socio-economic profile. The second explores their institutional destinations within a stratified HE system. The discussion defends the methods used to measure SES in this paper, and it argues that VET to HE pathways do not challenge existing sectoral hierarchies or act as an effective mechanism for social inclusion. It also discusses the policy implications of these findings.

Educational pathways & social inclusion

Social inclusion policies in Australian tertiary education focus on the under-representation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and rarely call attention to the over-representation of students from more privileged backgrounds. This casts disadvantage as attributes that are lacking in students from disadvantaged backgrounds, thus obscuring the social conditions that structure disadvantage and privilege. As an example, the Australian government routinely publishes statistics on access and participation levels of students from low socio-economic backgrounds in HE, but it does not do so for students from middle or high socio-economic backgrounds. Pathways are seen as one mechanism to redress disadvantage because of the 'second chance' they provide to those who do not have the necessary levels of achievement to access HE, and in so doing, reinforces the notion that students need a second-chance because of their presumed deficits, rather than the institutional practices of universities and the extent to which they are prepared to accept such students.

A focus on deficits is part of the shift in government policy from traditional concerns about social justice to policies that promote social inclusion. There are different policy implications arising from each. Social justice emphasises distributive justice, the structuring of relations of privilege and disadvantage, and the way education mediates access to high status occupations (such as the professions) and to social power. In contrast, social inclusion emphasises social exclusion and the deficits of those who are excluded. It is less concerned with the nature of participation by those who are excluded, only that they have a 'place' within education. While it may be recognised that educational disadvantage is cumulative and has complex roots which includes unequal access to the resources needed for educational success, educational 'failure' is nonetheless understood as individual, family and community deficits so that culture of poverty arguments are implicitly if not always explicitly invoked (Avis 2006).

In contrast, this paper seeks to redress the focus on students' deficits to focus on institutions, their positioning in relation to each other and the way this positioning mediates access to HE. It uses Bourdieu's notion of 'field' to analyse the structure of the tertiary education field in Australia. Bourdieu defines a field 'as a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between fields' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p.97). Positions in the field are objectively defined by the way it is structured and the way power and resources are distributed. There are contests within the field 'aimed at preserving or transforming the configuration of these forces' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p.101). It is important, as Reay *et al.* (2001) argue, to understand specific institutional effects within the HE field as part of the structuring of power relations. It allows us to analyse institutional admissions practices, the way they interact with government policies, and the access that is mediated to students from different social backgrounds so that relations of privilege are reproduced and reinforced.

One of the outcomes of this paper is that equity in HE cannot be considered independently of equity in VET. We thus need to rethink the nature of VET and HE as separate and distinct fields and to reconsider the nature of the boundaries between them. Bourdieu explains that 'Every field constitutes a potentially open space of play whose boundaries are *dynamic borders* which are the stake of struggles within the

field itself' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.102). An analysis of VET and HE as one differentiated tertiary education field rather than two separate fields with skirmishing at the borders helps to reveal the important role that VET plays in the hierarchical structuring of HE.

Considering VET and HE as a differentiated tertiary education field shows that a similar logic structures both – the logic of positional goods (Marginson 1997). Tertiary education is structured so that universities are hierarchically differentiated by status, prestige and resources. HE is characterised by student competition for positional goods (social position, status, power and jobs), and students compete for the limited supply of the high status goods at high status universities (Marginson 1997). This competition structures relations between universities and between the sectors. It creates a hierarchy between HE and VET so that the latter is lower status, and within HE so that elite universities are at the top.

The logic of positional goods mediates other logics, in particular, the role of universities in creating knowledge and in playing an important role in 'society's conversation' by helping to define 'what matters', how society should change and what it should be like (Bernstein, 2000). The logic of positional goods mediates and distributes access to the institutions that play this role. However, Bourdieu's analysis of fields demonstrates that the stakes in the field cannot be reduced to instrumentalism either by institutions or by individuals. He explains that:

To be interested is to accord a given social game that what happens in it matters, that its stakes are important...and worth pursuing... This is to say that the concept of interest, as I construe it, is totally different from the transhistorical and universal interest of utilitarian theory." (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.116)

This is why the stakes in the tertiary education 'game' matter so much – the outcomes are not reducible to instrumentalism because they also mediate access to 'society's conversation'. A fair and socially just education system which uses VET to HE pathways as a mechanism to widen participation of working class students would need to not just ensure that these pathways provide access to the 'newer' more vocationally oriented universities; they would also need to provide working class students with access to the elite universities if they are to have a role in shaping that conversation.

Method

This paper analyses the socio-economic profile of VET to HE student transfers and their institutional destination. The primary data used are published and commissioned unpublished statistics on commencing domestic under-graduate students at public universities in Australia produced by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR 2008). The paper makes more limited use of data on VET students published by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER).

The paper examines the basis upon which students were admitted to their undergraduate studies and the prior highest qualification they reported at admission. Students can be admitted to universities on the basis of, among other things, their senior school results, a prior VET qualification, or as a mature-aged entrant. The basis of admission category underestimates the percentage of students with prior experience in VET or those with VET qualifications in universities because not all VET students are admitted on the basis of their VET qualification, and it does not take into account students' multiple enrolments in both sectors (Moodie 2008).

The Australian government uses the 'postcode' method to determine socio-economic status (SES). Postcodes are four digit numbers that are assigned to particular geographic areas to assist Australia Post in delivering mail. Each postcode is a relatively large geographic region and contains several thousand people. Students' SES is determined by applying the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 'Index of Education and Occupation'¹ to the postcodes of students' home residence. Postcodes in the wealthiest top 25% of the index are classified as high SES, those in the middle 50% as medium or middle SES, and those in the last 25% as low SES (James *et al.* 2004, p.13). The aim of equity policy is to ensure that this population profile is reflected in the composition of students in HE. There is much debate about the efficacy of this measure and this is discussed later in this paper.

Overall, the data permit only a broad-brush analysis so that differences of a couple percentage points cannot be taken to represent substantive differences in results. Where we start to see differences of 4% to 5% or more we can cautiously begin to consider that these differences may reflect different outcomes. Notwithstanding the limitations of the data, they do permit an analysis to be undertaken, as long as it is remembered that it is a broad brush analysis. The data show big and important differences by SES and that these are differentiated by institutional type.

Who are VET articulators?

Students with VET diplomas and advanced diplomas are in the main provided with levels of access to HE that are similar to other non-school leaver applicants such as those with prior HE studies (Wheelahan 2009). Until recently, the strong labour market in Australia resulted in less demand for places in universities which meant that universities other than the elite universities had to cast their net more widely to fill their student load. This meant that those VET graduates seeking a place in a university had a reasonable chance of securing one.

In 2003, just over 10% of all VET students were enrolled in diplomas and advanced diplomas (NCVER 2004, Table 18). Stanwick (2006, pp.31-32) reports that around 32% of young students aged under 25 years in 2003 who completed a VET diploma or advanced diploma went on to study a degree, as did around 14% of graduates aged over 25 years. In some fields of education such as banking and accountancy, over 50% of young VET diploma/advanced diploma graduates went on to study a degree which shows that these students are using their VET qualification primarily as a pathway to HE (Stanwick 2006, pp.31-32). However, it may be with the worsening economy and increasing demand for HE places that VET students' access to HE may

decline which will reduce the capacity of VET to higher pathways to act as a ‘second-chance’.

VET to HE pathways are thus able to act as an educational ladder of opportunity for VET students, but it is less clear that they are able to act as a social ladder of opportunity for low SES students. Low SES students are formally designated as an equity group in HE in Australia, but they are not designated as an equity group in VET. This is because low SES students are over-represented in VET (Foley 2007). While this is true, it does not take into account the differentiation *within* VET. Research by Foley (2007), which used an approach similar to that used in HE to measure the participation levels of low, middle and high SES students, shows that low SES students are over-represented in lower level VET certificates, but under-represented in higher level VET diplomas and advanced diplomas. Drawing on Foley’s data, I ascertained that 19.4% of students in 2003 who were enrolled in diplomas and advanced diplomas were from a low SES background, 53.4% were from a middle SES background and 27.2% were from a high SES background (Foley 2007, p.27). If the profile of VET diploma and advanced diploma students reflected the population as a whole, there should be 25% low SES, 50% middle SES, and 25% high SES students.

The profile of students in VET diplomas/advanced diplomas is similar to the profile of commencing under-graduate students in public universities where low SES students are also under-represented. Table 1 shows that just over 17% of all commencing domestic under-graduate students were from low SES backgrounds in 2007, compared to 48% and 33% of middle and high SES students respectively.

Table 1: Basis of admission of commencing under-graduate students in public universities by SES 2007

Basis for admission	% in category*	% low SES	% middle SES	% high SES
Other basis	11.6	20.0	49.5	28.3
Prior HE	23.2	14.7	46.1	37.1
Prior school	46.8	16.2	47.1	35.6
Prior VET	10.1	20.0	51.8	27.0
Mature age special entry	5.5	27.0	52.1	20.0
Total	97.1	17.4	48.0	33.1

*Basis of admission categories and SES do not equal 100% because very small categories were excluded
Source: unpublished DEEWR (2008) student statistics basis of admission & highest prior qualification for domestic commencing under-graduate students 2005 – 2007.

Table 1 also shows the SES profile of commencing under-graduate students by basis of admission. Around 10% of all commencing under-graduate students in 2007 were admitted on the basis of prior VET studies, and of these 20% of students were from a low SES background, which is not much higher than the 17% for all commencing under-graduate students. The SES profile of those admitted on the basis of ‘other’, which is a catch-all category, is similar to VET articulators, and institutional research at least one university at least has shown that the ‘other’ category includes students who have prior VET studies (Cao and Gabb 2006). The category of ‘mature-aged’ shows the highest percentage of low SES students and this is a promising possibility, but only a small percentage of students are admitted in this category. This category is also likely to include students who have prior VET studies.

The profile of VET student transfers to under-graduate programs in public universities is thus similar to that of students enrolled in VET diplomas and advanced diplomas. It provides modest access to low SES students while it provides more access to middle SES students. This is not to under-estimate the importance of VET articulation for middle SES students, but it seems that VET diplomas and advanced diplomas will not be an effective mechanism to redress socio-economic disadvantage for low SES students in HE until the socio-economic profile of students enrolled in VET diplomas and advanced diplomas is more representative of the population.

What is the institutional destination of VET to higher education student transfers?

MacLennan *et al.* (2000) distinguish between ‘selecting’ universities and ‘recruiting’ universities and this provides a useful framework for considering the way access to HE is differentially distributed between different kinds of universities. Selecting universities are high demand elite universities, while recruiting universities are lower demand and must actively compete with each other for students. Selecting universities are more likely to focus on school leavers with high tertiary entrance scores based on their senior school certificate results, while recruiting universities must provide more flexible entry, market for prospective students, and draw from a wider and more diverse pool.

This is demonstrated in Table 2 which shows that VET diplomas and advanced diplomas provide access to public universities, but it is not equal access. There are 37 public universities in Australia and they are formally and informally differentiated into groupings by status and resources (Marginson 1997). The elite universities are the Group of Eight universities, the middle-ranking groups of universities are the Australian Technology Network (ATN) universities and the 1960s and 1970s universities, while the lowest ranking (and lowest status) universities are the post-1988 universities. Australia’s regional universities are part of the 1960s and 1970s universities and the post-1988 universities. The ATN universities were also designated as universities after 1988, but they form a distinct group of ‘institutes of technology’ with long histories and central city locations in their respective capital cities. Table 2 shows the percentage admitted to each university group on the basis of admission categories. Some 10% of students were admitted on the basis of prior VET studies in 2007, and this is an increase from 2000 where around 7% of students were admitted on the same basis (Moodie 2007, p.3). It shows that the dominant category for basis of admission in the Group of Eight is the school leaver category, with a negligible percentage admitted on the basis of prior VET studies and mature age special entry. If we express this as a ratio, the Group of Eight admit 23 school leavers for every one prior VET student, while the other universities admit just over three school leavers for every one prior VET student.

**Table 2: Commencing under-graduate students by university group
by % SES & % admitted in each basis of admission in 2007**

University group	%SES			Other	Prior HE	Prior school	Prior VET	Mature age
	Low	Middle	High					
Group of Eight	10.9	36.4	50.9	6.9	24.4	62.2	2.7	1.2
ATN	16.3	45.4	37.3	8.3	22.1	52.9	10.9	3.4

1960s & 1970s universities	21.1	52.3	25.4	9.1	25.3	43.2	10.6	9.4
Post 1988 universities	19.7	55.3	22.9	20.2	20.5	33.2	15.8	6.3
All regional universities	26.1	57.2	14.9	23.3	25.5	26.4	11.6	7.7
All universities except Go8	19.5	51.9	27.2	13.1	22.8	41.7	12.6	6.9
All universities	17.4	48.0	33.1	11.6	23.2	46.8	10.1	5.5

Table 2 also shows the SES profile of commencing under-graduate students in 2007 in each university group. It shows that high SES students are most over-represented at the Group of Eight universities, while the regional universities admit the fewest high SES students and the most low SES students. The similarity between the SES profile of the 1960s and 1970s universities and the post-1988 universities is counter-intuitive if it is accepted that the 1960s and 1970s universities are higher status than the post-1988 universities. This is indeed something that would require further research but one possible explanation is that low SES school leavers who achieve higher tertiary entrance ranks are more likely to go to the 1960s and 1970s universities than the post-1988 universities. The 1960s and 1970s universities admit more school leavers than the post-1988 universities (see Table 2), and the *Good Universities Guide 2009* (Hobsons Australia 2008) shows that student demand for the 1960s and 1970s universities is higher than for the post-1988 universities, and that they are more research intensive and have more research income.

There are differences in the SES profile within the Group of Eight and within the rest of the university system. While high SES students are over-represented in all Group of Eight universities, they are most over-represented in the five Group of Eight universities and the three other universities in Australia that admit more than 50% high SES students, as is shown in Table 3.² While the three non-Group of Eight universities in Table 3 have a similar socio-economic composition as the Group of Eight, they differ because they admit more students on the basis of prior VET studies and on the basis of 'other'. There are only seven universities that admit more than 25% of low SES students; five of these are regional universities and two are metropolitan. While data about participation levels of low SES students at individual universities is routinely available, the data about participation levels of middle and high SES students is not routinely published, yet it reveals that the concentration of privilege is such that students from middle SES backgrounds are also significantly under-represented at these universities (they should be 50%).

Table 3: Universities that admitted more than 50% high SES commencing domestic under-graduate students by % SES & % admitted in each basis of admission category in 2007

University	%SES			Other	Prior HE	Prior school	Prior VET	Mature age
	Low	Middle	High					
U of Canberra*	3.8	27.3	68.2	19.7	23.1	37.4	13.0	4.8
ANU#	4.0	22.7	67.8	8.3	31.9	52.8	2.4	2.3
Macquarie+	6.1	25.6	66.8	18.3	22.1	45.6	6.1	5.9
Sydney#	6.4	30.0	61.6	7.2	23.2	66.1	0.9	1.6
U of Technology, Sydney^	8.2	33.4	57.5	11.1	19.2	53.8	14.3	1.4
Melbourne#	10.2	33.3	55.1	8.0	25.6	64.7	1.6	0.2
UNSW#	8.3	35.5	54.0	15.6	16.7	59.7	4.6	1.6
UWA#	8.7	38.1	51.5	4.5	27.4	61.1	0.3	0.4

*Post 1988 university; #Group of Eight university; +1960s & 1970s university; ^ATN university

Table 4 shows the percentage who were admitted to each university group on the basis of prior VET studies and it examines the socio-economic composition of VET articulators. It shows that, with the exception of the Group of Eight which should be excluded because their percentage of VET articulators is negligible, the percentage of low SES VET articulators in the remaining groups of universities is similar to the percentage of low SES students in that group overall. For example, it shows that 16% of all under-graduate students admitted to the ATN universities in 2007 were from a low SES background. Almost 11% of students were admitted to the ATN universities on the basis of prior VET studies, and of these almost 18% were from a low SES background.

**Table 4: University groups by overall low SES,
% admitted on basis of prior VET & SES of those admitted on basis of prior VET**

University Group	% All low SES students	% admitted prior VET	% VET low SES	% VET middle 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
All universities	17.4	10.1	20.0	51.8	27.0

Five of Australia's 37 public universities are dual-sector universities which comprise both a HE and a TAFE division. They require particular examination as one of the rationales for dual-sector universities is that they can support student articulation from VET to HE because they contain both sectors within the one institution (Garrod and Macfarlane 2009). All of the dual-sectors are in the post-1988 universities group with the exception of RMIT which is an ATN university.³ Just over 17% of students were admitted to dual-sector universities on the basis of prior VET studies as is shown in Table 5, and this is a considerable improvement from 2000 when the dual-sectors reported admitting only 9% on the basis of prior VET studies (Moodie 2007, p.3). The percentage of students admitted on the basis of prior VET reported by the University of Ballarat stands out for being so low. This seems to be a problem with reporting and alternative sources indicate that the profile of the University of Ballarat is similar to the other dual-sectors, however, they are discounted from further discussion here because of this issue (Battersby, 2008).⁴ Table 5 shows that the dual-sectors admit more VET articulators than all other universities and this shows that there is scope for increasing the level of student articulation at these other universities, should this become an institutional priority as it has at the dual-sectors. However, overall, there is virtually no difference between the percentage of low SES students at the dual-sectors and their percentage of low SES VET articulators, with the exception of Charles Darwin University which has a difference of around 10%. There are only four other universities out of Australia's 37 universities that admit five percent more low VET SES articulators than their overall low SES commencing under-graduate student enrolments.

**Table 5: Dual-sector universities: overall low SES,
% admitted on basis of prior VET & % SES of those admitted on basis of prior VET in 2007**

Dual-sector university	% All low SES	% admitted prior VET	% VET low SES	% VET middle SES	% VET high SES
------------------------	---------------	----------------------	---------------	------------------	----------------

	students				
RMIT	17.0	18.8	17.1	42.0	39.3
Swinburne	11.5	27.0	11.2	42.3	45.9
Ballarat	22.1	0.6	37.5	62.5	0.0
Victoria University	25.2	16.5	28.4	47.3	20.9
Charles Darwin	12.2	14.7	22.9	60.6	12.9
All dual-sectors	18.2	17.4	19.2	45.6	33.2

The first key finding is that while pathways are meant to act as an equity mechanism they are shaped by and replicate existing hierarchies within HE in Australia. They do not provide access to the elite universities and this contributes to the exclusivity of these universities. This is well known in Australian tertiary education policy circles, but it does not lessen its importance. The next key finding, which was unexpected and new, is that pathways do not act as a mechanism for low SES students to increase their representation in HE because the socio-economic profile of VET articulators is similar to that of university groups and individual universities, with only a small number of exceptions. They thus deepen participation by existing social groups but do not widen participation for low SES students.

Discussion

The above findings concerning the concentration of privilege in Australian universities caused considerable controversy when they were first published in different forms in March 2009. Most serious criticism was directed at the ‘postcode’ method on two grounds (James 2009; Kayrooz and Fleming 2009). The first was that postcodes are not a good measure of SES and the second was that universities intakes are largely determined by their catchments. Each is dealt with in turn.

James *et al.* (2004, p.19) argue that the postcode method has been adequate to now because it is a ‘cost-effective mechanism for the purposes of broad classification.’ However, they argue that it is a very blunt instrument and that it is ‘inadequate for measuring both the aggregate patterns and the potential educational disadvantage of individuals, especially for some universities’ (James *et al.* 2004, p.19). In other work James (2007) suggests that the current method of calculating SES under-estimates the percentage of low SES students in universities. In argument that is not inconsistent with this, James (2009) has most recently argued that ‘the postcode measure must be replaced, and fast, if the higher education sector is to take an evidence-based approach to understanding and improving social inclusion’ in part because he felt that the use to which this data had been put in criticising some universities was unfair.

In a study of the association between SES, health status and use of health services in Western Australia, Glover *et al.* (2004) found that the postcode level (and the larger Statistical Local Area) provided ‘a reliable indication of socioeconomic disadvantage of area’. However, they found that the postcode level was an ‘understatement of the extent of disadvantage in the most disadvantaged areas, as well as an understatement in inequality between the most well off and the poorest areas.’

Similarly, Sinclair *et al.* (2003) found that the postcode method was reliable at the institutional level and could be regarded as a cost-effective measure of socio-

economic status at an aggregated level (Sinclair *et al.* 2003). Sinclair *et al.* (2003, p.11) argue 'area measures are useful at the institutional level. They can tell us about an institution's catchment area and its student population taken as a whole or on average.' Consequently, while the postcode method will not tell us about individual students, it is appropriate for broad brush analysis and this analysis shows considerable differences between institutions. The point is not to identify individual students; it is to identify systemic relations of, and the distribution of, privilege and disadvantage.

All measures of social disadvantage must use proxies and these will always be controversial (Foley 2007). Ball (2006, p.6) explains that educational research often settles for what is available and this may not always be meaningful. This means we need to be aware of the pitfalls of different kinds of measures and understand the complexity of social class and the way class is implicated in constant processes of renegotiation and reforming of boundaries, practices and identities. But we still need proxy indicators of disadvantage and privilege if only to understand the way the field is structured, the different positions in it, and the outcomes that ensue for different 'players' as a starting point for more complex analyses of social relations within the field.

It would be preferable to have more sophisticated and accurate measures of social disadvantage in Australia. The point is that we don't – not yet. The Australian Government has announced that it will begin work on new indicators to replace the postcode method with a method based on family and individual circumstances (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p.57). This is welcome, but it will take some time, perhaps several years, for it to be developed and implemented. In the meantime, while the postcode method is imperfect it still provides insights into the distribution of advantage and disadvantage. Disadvantage and advantage is associated with geographic location (Vinson 2007) and this is why some areas are classified as low SES and others high SES.

The second criticism is that universities' intakes are in large part determined by their catchments and so if they are situated in a high SES area they are most likely to recruit from that area. Australia is unusual compared to other Anglophone countries because most students will go to a university in their home state (and often home city) rather than move to another state. James (2009) argues that 'geographical contexts ... [play] a central role in determining the composition of student bodies beyond the policies and programs of the institutions'. He argues therefore that we need 'equity targets that are carefully nuanced for differing geographical contexts'. Arguably, this means that while universities that are over-represented by high SES students still have equity obligations, they can't be expected to reach 25% of low SES students within their institution, or even the more modest 20% low SES students by 2020 which is a policy goal of the current government (see Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p.12). Presumably, this argument about catchments would also be extended to explain the differences in the socio-economic profile of VET articulators between universities.

The logic of this argument is ironically an indirect endorsement of the postcode method, but it also seeks to deny agency to universities with concentrations of privilege. While students are not likely to move states to study at university, they are less restricted within their state, particularly in the capital cities. Five of the eight

universities with more than 50% high SES students are centrally located in or near the city and thus are accessible to low SES students, even if they may have to travel somewhat more than students from middle and high SES areas. The logic of this argument is that universities in wealthy areas will draw their students from those areas, and universities in working class areas will draw from those areas. And nothing changes. Institutional research at Victoria University, which is one of only two metropolitan universities with more than 25% of low SES students, shows that its main source of students is from its location in Melbourne's western suburbs, but it also draws from low SES areas that are, in some cases, considerable distances away (Messinis *et al.* 2008). This shows that low SES students will travel to attend a lower ranked university, and there is no reason to think that they would not do the same for a higher ranked university.

Rethinking the tertiary education field

The implications of the above findings overall are that we need to rethink the notion that VET is for low SES students and that pathways are an equity mechanism that increases their participation in HE. Thompson has found similar results on research into the socio-economic composition of further education colleges in England, which are the analogue of TAFE institutes in Australia. He argues that:

Whilst the issue of social class in relation to higher education is the subject of vigorous debate, the social composition of FE colleges has received very little attention. This lack of attention to class in FE may arise from a perception that its working-class nature is both obvious and unproblematic; if FE colleges are full of working-class students then they are doing their job in providing for social inclusion and global competitiveness. (Thompson 2009, p.32)

Thompson found that there was an increasing likelihood of attending further education colleges with descending class position; however, he found that middle class students had a disproportionate share of upper level qualifications in further education (Thompson 2009, p.39). In other words, the structure of the field is not as we thought it was: TAFE and further education colleges are not just for 'other people's children', they are also for middle class students. Middle class students are using further education as a 'second chance' to progress to HE, so that 'It may be argued, then, that to a significant extent FE college provision for young people is constructed from middle-class failure' (Thompson 2009, p.39). It is clear that this is also occurring in Australia. It is important not to under-estimate the importance of pathways from VET to HE for middle class students (who are also under-represented at elite universities); the issue is to ensure working class students have equitable access to these pathways.

Unless we understand the configuration of the tertiary education field and the structure of objective relations within it (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p.97) we will not be able to understand how disadvantage is reproduced in *both* VET and HE, and the way in which VET is part of the structuring of inequality in HE. The implications for equity policy are that socio-economic disadvantage needs to be problematised in VET as well as HE to take account of the complexity within VET. Problematising socio-economic disadvantage also demonstrates a hitherto less visible need to build

pathways for low SES students from lower level VET qualifications to higher level VET qualifications. Research by Bett *et al.* (2008, Table 6) in the western suburbs of Melbourne in Victoria found that school students from low and middle SES groups had high levels of aspirations to attend university (68% and 71% respectively), even if this was lower than high SES students (81%). Low and middle SES students are thus expressing a strong desire to go to university. Low SES students were also less confident that they would go to university than high SES students (Bett *et al.* 2008), and in fact, they were less likely to do so with many going to TAFE (Teese *et al.* 2006). Because socio-economic disadvantage has not been problematised in VET, we do not know what happens to these students in TAFE, and what happens to their aspirations for HE.

The extent of the similarity between the socio-economic profile of VET articulators and the overall socio-economic profile of university groups and individual universities was not expected. In part, this is attributable to the socio-economic profile of VET advanced diploma and diploma students which is similar to HE overall, but the symmetry between VET articulators' socio-economic profile and the universities they subsequently enrol in is startling. These findings show that a more complex understanding is needed of the relationship that the VET sector has with the HE sector and the relationship that individual TAFEs have with universities. Another implication for policy that is indicated by these findings is that it is necessary to distinguish between measures that *deepen* participation in education by providing more opportunities and access for particular social groups already represented in education, and those that *widen* participation by including groups that are under-represented (Stuart 2002).

The above findings also show that VET to HE pathways cannot overcome the power relations and the structuring of the HE field; rather pathways are shaped by the field so that the exclusivity of the elite universities is reinforced. Moodie (2008) compared the level of student transfers in several states in the United States and found that the elite doctoral universities admitted one community college graduate for every two the less selective universities admitted. In contrast, the elite Australian universities admitted one TAFE student for every four the remaining universities admitted. The difference between Australia and the US states that Moodie studied is that legislation in those states specifies the number of transfer students the elite universities are expected to take. While quotas for community college transfers do not challenge the exclusivity of the elite universities, they still result in more access compared to that for TAFE students in Australia. Challenging power structures within the HE field means drawing attention to universities' admissions policies and the extent to which they support TAFE students in making the transition to HE. It is clear that the elite universities will either have to be bribed or coerced to take VET articulators, as they are in the United States (Moodie 2008).

Conclusion

Bourdieu's (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.102) insight that borders between boundaries are dynamic and part of the struggle within fields shows us that the borders are not just between VET and HE, they are part of the positional structuring within HE. One of the key players within the tertiary education field is government,

and while it is clear that governments cannot overcome institutional logics within fields very easily, they do have influence. Gale (2009, p.1) argues that 'being so variously and variably placed, institutions and agents have different stances available to them, including the positions they can take on student equity.' This applies also to government.

Gale (2009, p.1) argues that equity researchers need to try to reposition equity within the HE field so that concerns about equity are at the centre of debates about HE and that the equity practices of institutions and governments are more accountable. There is a new opportunity to do so in Australia because equity was a key concern of the recent *Report of the Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley 2008), and many of the recommendations of the Review have been endorsed by government and are now becoming part of policy (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). However, the Government's equity policies will be enacted within a worsening economy and within a university system in which there are some very powerful players. Government equity policies will also be contextualised within broader tertiary education policies that seek to encourage greater competition and marketisation through the introduction of 'student-centred' funding in both VET and HE. The policies of marketisation and competition in education of the previous conservative government failed to result in more equitable outcomes in HE, and if anything, neo-liberal policies have increased the stratification of HE by emphasising the competition for status, resources and positional goods (Gale 2009).

There is no reason to think that marketisation under a Labor Government will result in better outcomes. Nonetheless, by designating equity as a key priority of government HE policy, the government has opened an opportunity to raise equity as a central concern within the tertiary education field. It allows us to point to the contradiction between market and equity policies and to challenge the extent to which the former can support the latter, which is a problem that did not concern the previous conservative government.

Further, Gale (2009, p.1) argues that an important part of repositioning equity within HE 'involves naming the logic that informs this field, the nature of its competition and the extent to which it is influenced by the logics of other fields or is the subject of cross-field effects.' This paper is a contribution to naming the logic that informs the VET and HE fields. It demonstrates that the logic of positional goods structures both and enmeshes them in interdependent relationships so there is *one* differentiated tertiary education field. Issues of equity can only be addressed by considering the relationship between the sectors and not by considering equity in each sector separately. Socio-economic disadvantage has to be problematised in VET because there is inequitable access to higher level VET qualifications for low SES students, but also because it contributes to reproducing socio-economic disadvantage in HE as evidenced by the socio-economic profile of VET articulators. VET to HE student transfers provide an important ladder of opportunity for middle SES students and this should remain an important part of what pathways do, but if concerns about distributive justice are to be met they need to do the same for low SES students. Understanding the complexity of socio-economic disadvantage in tertiary education requires the repositioning of equity concerns from discourses about social inclusion to discourses about social justice. This is needed because equitable outcomes from pathways matter less within a discourse about social inclusion and exclusion because

the key concern is whether access is provided for low SES students, and not the destinations they make possible.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Gavin Moodie for his advice on this and earlier versions of this paper. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

Notes

¹ This is one of four indices in the ABS 'Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas 2006' (SEIFA). The other three indexes are the Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage, Index of Relative Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage and the Index of Economic Resources Source: ABS <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/2039.0> accessed 30 March 2009.

² The other three Group of Eight universities are: Monash University with 43.3% high SES, the University of Queensland and the University of Adelaide with 41.6% and 37.6% high SES students respectively.

³ RMIT is also a post-1988 university but it is differentiated because it is in the ATN group of universities.

⁴ The Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ballarat Professor Battersby (2008) reported that around one in six or almost 17% of students in higher education at the University had either studied at TAFE or had a prior VET qualification, and this brings it into line with the other dual-sectors.

References

- Avis, J. 2006. From reproduction to learning cultures: Post-compulsory education in England. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 27, no.3: 341-54.
- Ball, S. 2006. The necessity and violence of theory. *Discourse: studies in the cultural politics of education* 27, no. 1: 3-10.
- Battersby, D. 2008. Dual the success. *Campus Review*, 1 April 2008.
- Bernstein, B., 2000. *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity*, 2nd ed. ed. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Bett, D., J. Doughney and C. Vu. 2008. Fostering the dream in Melbourne's working-class west: Student aspiration, confidence and university entry. In *Crossing Borders: Diversity in Higher Education, 17th Annual Education Access Network Conference*. Technische Universitat Berlin.
- Bourdieu, P. and L.J.D. Wacquant. 1992. *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bradley, D.C. 2008. *Review of Australian higher education final report*. Canberra: Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations, viewed 8 March 2009, http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Review/Documents/PDF/Higher%20Education%20Review_one%20document_02.pdf.
- Cao, Z. and R. Gabb. 2006. *Patterns of progress and attrition in commencing higher education students at Victoria University*. Melbourne: Postcompulsory Education Centre, Victoria University, viewed 26 April, 2009, http://tls.vu.edu.au/PEC/PEC_docs/PEC%20Patterns%20of%20attrition%20final%20report.pdf.
- Commonwealth of Australia, 2009. *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System*. Canberra.
- Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations. 2008. *Unpublished student statistics: SES, basis of admission & prior highest qualification for domestic under-graduate commencing students 2005-2007*. Canberra: DEEWR.
- Foley, P. 2007. *The socio-economic status of vocational education and training students in Australia*. Adelaide: National Centre for Vocational Education Research, viewed 7 April 2009, <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1690.html>.
- Gale, T. 2009. More towards the centre: Searching for field position for student equity in Australian higher education. In *Keynote Address to the NCSEHE Forum 'What we know. What we need to know'* University of South Australia, Adelaide, viewed 13 March 2009, <http://www.unisa.edu.au/hawkeinstitute/ncsehe/student-equity-forum-2009/gale-keynote-feb09.pdf>.
- Garrod, N. and B. Macfarlane. 2009. Further, higher, better? In *Challenging boundaries: Managing the integration of post-secondary education*, 3-12. London: Routledge.
- Gillard, J. 2009. Speech. *Australian Financial Review - Higher Education Conference* Sydney, viewed 27 March 2009, http://www.deewr.gov.au/Ministers/Gillard/Media/Speeches/Pages/Article_090310_141130.aspx.
- Glover, J., Rosman, D. & Tennant, S., 2004. Unpacking analyses relying on area-based data: are the assumptions supportable? *International Journal of Health*

- Geographics*, 3, online, viewed 23 June 2009,
<<http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/articlerender.fcgi?artid=543455>>.
- Hobsons Australia. 2008. *The good universities guide 2009*. Melbourne: Hobsons Australian Pty Ltd.
- James, R. 2007. *Social equity in a mass, globalised higher education environment: The unresolved issue of widening access to university*. Melbourne: Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne, viewed 26 April 2009,
<http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/downloads/Richard%20James,%20Dean%27s%20Lecture%20Series%20Sept2007.pdf>.
- . 2009. Postcodes a poor guide. *The Australian Higher Education Supplement*, 18 March 2009.
- James, R., G. Baldwin, H. Coates, K.-L. Krause and C. Mcinnis. 2004. *Analysis of equity groups in higher education 1991-2002*. Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training.
- Kayrooz, C. and M. Fleming. 2009. Bludgeoned by a postcode. *Campus Review*, 16 March 2009.
- MacLennan, A., K. Musselbrook and M. Dundas. 2000. *Credit transfer at the FE/HE interface: Widening opportunities*: Scottish Higher Education Funding Council/Scottish Further Education Funding Council.
- Marginson, S. 1997. *Markets in education*. St Leonards: Allen & Unwin.
- Messinis, G., P. Sheehan and Z. Miholcic. 2008. *The diversity and performance of the student population at Victoria University: A preliminary analysis*. Melbourne: Centre for Strategic Economic Studies, Faculty of Business and Law, Victoria University, viewed 26 April 2009,
http://www.vu.edu.au/library/scripts/objectifyMedia.aspx?file=pdf/605/72.pdf&siteID=4&str_title=CSES%20Student%20Segment%20Report%20final.pdf.
- Moodie, G. 2007. Improving transfer from vocational to higher education: Lessons from abroad. *4th International Conference, Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning, 'The Times they are a-changin - researching transitions in lifelong learning'*. University of Stirling, Scotland.
- . 2008. *From vocational to higher education: An international perspective*. Berkshire, England: Open University Press.
- National Centre for Vocational Education Research. 2004. *Australian vocational education and training statistics. Students and courses 2003*. Adelaide: National Centre for Vocational Education Research.
- Reay, D., M. David and S. Ball. 2001. Making a difference?: Institutional habituses and higher education choice. *Sociological Research Online* 5, no. 4.
- Santiago, P., K. Tremblay, E. Basri and E. Arnal. 2008. *Tertiary education for the knowledge society volume 2 special features: Equity, innovation, labour market, internationalisation*. Paris: Organisation for Economic Development and Co-operation.
- Sinclair, G., J. Doughney and J. Palermo. 2003. Equity indicators: Measures of socio-economic status in an Australian university. *Journal of Institutional Research* 12, no. 2: 1-16.
- Stanwick, J. 2006. *Outcomes from higher-level vocational education and training qualifications*. Adelaide: National Centre for Vocational Education Research, viewed 26 April 2009, <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1702.html>.
- Stuart, M. 2002. *Collaborating for change? Managing widening participation in further and higher education*. Leicester: NIACE.

- Teese, R., T. Nicholas, J. Polesel and S. Helme. 2006. *The destinations of school leavers in Victoria*. Melbourne: Communications Division for the Department of Education & Training, viewed 8 March 2007, http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/voced/ontrack/pdfs/destinations_2005.pdf.
- Thompson, R. 2009. Social class and participation in further education: Evidence from the youth cohort study of England and Wales, *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 30, no.1: 29 - 42.
- Vinson, T. 2007. *Dropping off the edge: The distribution of disadvantage in Australia, a report of Jesuit Social Services and Catholic Social Services* Melbourne, viewed 9 May 2008, <http://www.australiandisadvantage.org.au/index.html>.
- Wheelahan, L., 2009b. What kind of access does VET provide to higher education for low SES students? Not a lot. *Student equity in higher education: What we know. What we need to know*, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. University of South Australia.