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Published

2009

Journal Title

Higher Education Quarterly

DOI

[10.1111/j.1468-2273.2009.00438.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2273.2009.00438.x)

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# The Significance of Australian Vocational Education Institutions in Opening Access to Higher Education

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## Abstract

Australian vocational education institutions offer a higher proportion of higher education than English analogues using the standard international understanding of 'higher education'. However, the divisions between vocational and higher education are deeper in Australia than in England, partly because each sector has a different curriculum model and because of Australia's different constitutional arrangements by which State governments have a major role in financing and managing vocational education while the national government is predominantly responsible for higher education.

Vocational education provides an educational but not a social ladder of opportunity to Australian higher education. The five dual-sector universities with significant enrolments in both vocational and higher education admit about twice the proportion of students transferring from vocational education than other universities. However, since the students in the upper levels of vocational education have a socio-economic composition similar to higher education students, vocational education does not provide a social ladder of opportunity by increasing access by students from a low socio-economic status background. Nevertheless, the article argues for the extension of dual-sector universities and other measures to articulate vocational and higher education and that more needs to be done to improve the representativeness of the upper levels of vocational education.

## Introduction

In England, Australia and many other countries two purposes are served by educational pathways that facilitate student transfer from institutions in the lower-status, vocationally oriented 'second' tier of tertiary education to 'first' tier higher education, particularly to universities. The first purpose is to align educational outcomes with national economic goals and to maximise the efficiency of education systems. Individuals need to be able to move readily between different types of qualifications and different occupational sectors to allow them to respond flexibly to different labour force needs. They should transfer with credit for prior learning to minimize the time and costs to them and to governments and to minimize their delay in meeting new labour needs. The second purpose is to promote equity. Pathways are meant to provide opportunities for disadvantaged groups in society by mediating access to higher levels of education (Santiago *et al.*, 2008, p. 49). The first purpose can be described as providing an educational ladder of opportunity, while the second as a social ladder of opportunity. This paper finds that vocational education institutions in Australia are successful in providing an educational ladder of opportunity but not a social ladder of opportunity.

The first section of the paper gives a brief description of Australian tertiary education in comparison with England. The second section introduces a typology to distinguish between tertiary education institutions by characterising them as a single-, mixed- or dual-sector institution. The following two sections analyse the extent to which student transfers between vocational education and higher education in Australia provide an educational and social ladder of opportunity.

### **Australia tertiary education**

Australia's federation results in arrangements of further and higher education quite different to English arrangements, which are the product of the UK's unitary government. Parry (2008) and others make 'home international' (Raffe, 1998) comparisons of higher education in the constituent countries of the United Kingdom; England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. However, the UK national government's devolution of powers to the constituent countries is relatively recent, discretionary and is less extensive than the powers exercised by states in most federations. Furthermore, England has 87 per cent of the United Kingdom's population and dominates national arrangements in the way that no state dominates most federations.

Australia is a federation, like Canada and the USA, and also like those and most other federations the Australian constitution allocates responsibility for education to the State governments. On the other hand, Australia is unlike Canada, the USA and other federations in having shifted the main financing responsibility and thus power over higher education from the States to the national government. This is in contrast to vocational education, which is managed through 'co-operative federalism' in which the national government sets the overall framework and the States retain important shared responsibility for policy and funding and sole responsibility for its management. So, in the UK both further and higher education is mainly the responsibility of one level of government, the national government, although countries shape limited aspects of their further and higher education. In most federations, further and higher education are mainly the responsibility of one level of government, state or provincial governments, although national governments typically shape aspects of the educational system. In contrast, in Australia vocational education is mostly the responsibility of state governments while higher education is mostly the responsibility of the national government. This is one, but not the only, reason for the deep divide between vocational and higher education in Australia, a divide that has started to be addressed by the national government since about 2005 and is being addressed to different extents by the States.

Most Australian higher education students occupy places subsidised by the national government and pay tuition fees that are at about the same level as those paid by English higher education students, which may be deferred with an income-contingent loan similar to the income-contingent loan scheme that England adopted from Australia. In addition, five per cent of students are enrolled in places offered by private institutions that the government does not subsidise. However, unlike the UK, full-fee students have access to income-contingent loans guaranteed and subsidised by government. Domestic student fees are an average of 23 per cent of universities' income. Government grants are a low 41 per cent of universities' funding compared to the UK and universities' other major source of revenue is international student fees, which are 15 per cent of revenue.

Some 94 per cent of Australian higher education is offered by 37 public universities that have the familiar coinciding gradations of age, status, funding level and research intensity. The remaining six per cent is offered by a range of private institutions, which includes two small

private not for profit universities, private-for-profit colleges, religious colleges and preparatory colleges established by public universities and private companies. Ten public vocational education and training institutes, known as technical and further education (TAFE) institutes, offer associate and baccalaureate degrees but this is very small and in early stages of development. Until 2010, these have not been funded publicly and so are private enrolments, being two per cent of all private students in 2007.

In stark contrast to the UK and US, the large majority of Australian students commute to higher education from their parents' or their own home and correspondingly few Australian students travel to another city to attend higher education. Only 16 per cent of Australasian first year and seven per cent of later year students report living on campus in a university college or hall of residence (ACER, 2008, p. 16). In addition, students live in private accommodation away from home but many and possibly most students living in both university and private accommodation attend a higher education institution in the same city as their permanent home location. This geographical immobility means that institutions' recruitment of domestic students is mostly restricted to their immediate region.

Some 85 per cent of Australian publicly funded vocational education is offered by 59 technical and further education institutes (the analogues of British further education colleges); five per cent of publicly funded vocational education is offered by numerous small community education providers and 10 per cent is offered by 'other' registered providers, mostly small private-for-profit providers. Some 84 per cent of full-time equivalent vocational education is funded by government, 12 per cent from domestic students' full fees and five per cent from international fee-paying students (NCVER, 2008, p. 14-15). Vocational education students pay much lower tuition fees than higher education students but most don't (yet) have access to income-contingent loans.

Australian national vocational qualifications are defined not by content but by workplace outcomes. So there is no such thing as curriculum in Australian national vocational education qualification statements. Teachers, departments and some institutions develop curricula, often without the support of curriculum experts and collaboration with colleagues in other institutions, but these are not formally part of the national qualification and employers, government policy makers and funders vigorously resist attempts to institutionalise a curriculum.

All Australian vocational qualifications' outcomes are defined by competences, which are called competencies. To put this in English terms, Australia's only vocational education qualifications are NVQs (National Vocational Qualifications). In Australia competence is defined as the application of specified knowledge, skill and attitudes needed to undertake a work role or task to the required standard in the workplace. While it may appear that there is a role for knowledge in vocational education qualifications, it is limited because knowledge 'should only be included if it refers to knowledge actually applied at work' (DEST, 2006, p. 114). This means that the focus is on contextually specific applications of knowledge rather than the academic or applied academic disciplines. Australian vocational qualifications' outcomes are thus behaviourist. They are also atomised. All qualifications with a nominal duration of one year specify at least a dozen competences and many specify over 100, which have to be assessed and reported separately. Third, the competences are those of the workplace and must be assessed either in the workplace or in a simulated workplace. So developing study skills and the skills and theoretical knowledge to proceed to further education in the field are not workplace competences and so are not included as outcomes in

vocational education qualifications. They are consequently irrelevant to training packages and thus are mostly not funded by government (Wheelahan and Carter, 2001).

Compared to the UK and other Anglo countries, Australia has a strong coincidence of programmatic and institutional designations of tertiary education sectors. This is beginning to change as a consequence of government policies that have contributed to ‘blurring’ the sectoral divide so that educational sectors are increasingly defined by the qualifications that are accredited in each sector and not by the type of institutions that comprise those sectors. The number of private providers in vocational education and higher education has grown considerably over recent years to be a small, if growing, component of both sectors and many of these institutions offer both vocational education and higher education qualifications (Watson 2000).

However, Australia still mostly defines institutions by their primary sectoral location: vocational education is understood as the education that is predominantly offered by vocational education institutions and higher education is understood to be the education that is predominantly offered by higher education institutions (Moodie, 2003). This understanding will be followed in most of this article but, for the purposes of an appropriate international comparison with the UK (Parry, 2008) and with the figures for Canada and the USA, UNESCO’s (2007) commonly accepted *International standard classification of education* will be used. This classifies Australian diplomas and advanced diplomas as ISCED level 5B, which is considered higher education in most countries, although in Australia they are predominantly offered by vocational education institutions and are based on competences.

By this classification Australian vocational education and training institutions, the analogues of British further education colleges, enrol 15 per cent of Australian higher education equivalent full-time students (Table 1). Almost all - 99 per cent - of higher education students in Australian vocational education institutions are enrolled in sub-graduate programmes (Table 1).

Table 1 about here

Australian vocational education institutions have a somewhat bigger share of higher education enrolments (15 per cent) than English further education colleges (11 per cent). Community colleges’ share of higher education enrolments range from 15 per cent to almost 70 per cent in US States but average 35 per cent nationally in the US and under 40 per cent in Canada. So vocational education institutions offer a moderate proportion of Australian higher education.

### **Single-sector, mixed-sector and dual-sector institutions**

Many Australian universities are different from UK universities and are perhaps distinctive internationally in offering vocational education programmes, either as vestiges of history or to provide pathways for international students. However, most Australian universities’ vocational education programmes are offered for full tuition fees, are small in size, confined to one campus (Australian universities have an average of 3.4 campuses), are in one or two disciplines and many are offered through separate organisational units rather than through the faculties and schools that offer higher education programmes. They, therefore, have little if any impact on the university outside their immediate area. Some five or 13 per cent of Australia’s 37 public universities are designated as dual-sector universities because they include substantial proportions of full-time equivalent students in both vocational and higher

education. Dual-sector universities first identified themselves as being distinctive in having to manage dual systems and processes to report to two levels of government; vocational education to the State government and higher education to the national government. Where vocational education is a small part of a university's operations it can be handled as an exception to the structures, systems and processes established to handle higher education. Where vocational education is a substantial part of the university's operations a separate system has to be established to handle it. Vocational education must also be a substantial proportion of the university's full-time equivalent students to affect higher education (Moodie, 2009).

Dual-sector universities have never specified the proportion of load needed in each sector to be considered 'substantial' and classified as a dual-sector university. The issue can be put formally by asking: how high a proportion of total student load must the smaller sector be before it is no longer considered an exception and is generally accepted as a normal part of the institution? Moodie (2009) related this to the concept of 'tipping point' (Grodzins, 1958) and referred to a number of empirical studies of different tipping points to posit that an institution is dual-sector when its student load in each sector ranges from a minimum of 20 per cent and a maximum of 80 per cent. A tripartite classification of institutions by their mix of sectoral student load is thus proposed:

- *single-sector institutions* : those with more than 97 per cent of their student load enrolled in one sector;
- *mixed-sector institutions* : those with at least three per cent but no more than 20 per cent of their student load enrolled in their minority sector;
- *dual-sector institutions* : those with at least 20 per cent but less than 80 per cent of their student load enrolled in each sector.

While five universities meet the above criteria for a dual-sector institution, there are no data readily available that would allow one to calculate the number of mixed-sector universities. At the most 10 per cent of Australian universities are mixed-sector and therefore 77 per cent are single-sector on these definitions. Because of the lack of data the rest of this paper will compare dual-sector with other universities to consider the extent to which dual-sector and other universities provide educational and social ladders of opportunity from vocational to higher education.

### **Educational ladder of opportunity**

There is an educational ladder of opportunity where students who perform satisfactorily at one level of education may transfer readily to a higher level of education. One perspective on whether vocational education provides an educational ladder of opportunity is given by examining the destination of vocational education graduates. Diplomas are the main vocational education qualification students use to apply for entry to higher education and just over 10 per cent of vocational education students were enrolled in diplomas and advanced diplomas in 2003 (NCVER, 2004, Table 18). Stanwick (2006, pp. 31–2) reports that around 32 per cent of students aged under 25 in 2003 who completed a vocational education diploma or above proceeded to study a degree, as did around 14 per cent of vocational education diploma graduates aged over 25. In some fields of education, such as banking and accountancy over 50 per cent of vocational education diploma graduates aged under 25 proceed to study at degree level, which shows that these students were using their vocational education qualification primarily as a pathway to higher education (Stanwick, 2006, pp. 31–2).

Another perspective on the educational ladder of opportunity is the chance of vocational education applicants being selected for admission. Wheelahan (2009) reported that of the 1862 applicants for an undergraduate place in Queensland who had completed TAFE studies 95 per cent were offered a higher education place in 2008 and 78 per cent enrolled in it. Applicants with completed TAFE studies in Queensland have the highest acceptance and enrolment rates of any applicant type. The offer rate for applicants with completed TAFE studies is somewhat lower in Victoria but it is nonetheless similar to or above those for all other applicant types except school leavers (Table 2).

Table 2 about here

A third perspective on the educational ladder of opportunity is given by examining the basis of admission of domestic students commencing a programme at bachelor level. Some 11 per cent of students were admitted to a bachelor degree or below on the basis of a vocational education qualification, which is a major source of commencing undergraduate students after secondary education (49 per cent) and higher education (24 per cent) and the 'catch-all' category of 'other' (12 per cent) (Wheelahan 2009). Institutional studies at one university have shown that the 'other' category includes many students with prior vocational education studies (Cao and Gabb 2006). One explanation for what may seem to be an unusually high 24 per cent of commencing students being admitted on the basis of previous higher education studies is that the data are for students beginning a programme at an institution, not necessarily at first year. So a student transferring from a bachelor of arts to a bachelor of laws at the same institution is a commencing student and a student transferring from a bachelor of arts at one institution to a bachelor of arts at another institution is also a commencing student. Dual-sector universities admitted 17 per cent of their undergraduate students on the basis of a vocational education qualification, thus providing considerably more access for vocational education students than other universities (Table 3).

Table 3 about here

The dual-sector universities admit distinctly different proportions of students transferring from vocational education, reflecting different institutional priorities and practices (Table 4). The percentage of students admitted on the basis of prior vocational education by the University of Ballarat stands out for being so low but this seems to be a problem with reporting. The University's vice-chancellor (Battersby, 2008) reported that around one in six or almost 17 per cent of students in higher education at the university had either studied at TAFE or had a prior vocational education qualification and this brings it into line with the other dual-sector universities.

Table 4 about here

All three perspectives show that Australian vocational education provides an educational ladder of opportunity to higher education. The dual-sector universities provide a much better educational ladder than other universities and this is affected by institutional practices and policies.

## **Social ladder of opportunity**

There is a social ladder of opportunity when a person's chances of participating in any level of education are not affected by their social circumstances and this section examines participation in Australian higher education by socio-economic status. Socio-economic status is measured by postcode area in Australian education and low socio-economic status is defined as the lowest 25 per cent of postcodes, medium as the middle 50 per cent and high socio-economic status as the top 25 per cent of postcodes. Wheelahan (2009) found, replicating many previous findings, that Australian universities' undergraduate admissions are biased to high socio-economic status, with 33 per cent of admissions, which is eight per cent above their representation in the population of 25 per cent. Conversely, low socio-economic status students are significantly under represented in Australian higher education, being only 17 per cent and thus eight per cent below their proportionate representation of 25 per cent. Low socio-economic status students are 20 per cent of students admitted on the basis vocational education, only slightly above the rate for all students. While low socio-economic status students are over represented amongst special entry applicants, these are only four per cent of total applicants (Table 5).

Table 5 about here

Vocational education doesn't provide a better social ladder of opportunity at most dual-sector universities than at other universities (Table 6). The proportion of low socio-economic status students that most dual-sector universities admit on the basis of vocational education reflects very closely the proportion of low socio-economic students they admit by all other means. The two exceptions are the University of Ballarat, which as was noted above has probably not reported accurate data and Charles Darwin University (Table 6). Charles Darwin University seems to be an exception to the general pattern, which warrants further examination.

Table 6 about here

Vocational education does not provide a broad social ladder of opportunity because as Foley (2007, p. 27) found, the socio-economic status of students in the upper levels of vocational education approximates the socio-economic status of students in higher education. While vocational education has a broadly representative student population overall, low socio-economic status students are concentrated in lower-level vocational qualifications (Table 7). Foley's index of socio-economic status is somewhat different from the index used in higher education but he used the same postcode method and set the thresholds for low, medium and high socio-economic status at the same levels as for higher education, so his results are broadly comparable to higher education.

Table 7 about here

Pathways from vocational education to Australian higher education thus deepen participation in higher education by existing social groups but do not widen participation for students from low socio-economic backgrounds. These findings suggest that equitable access to higher education cannot be considered independently of equitable access to higher-level vocational education qualifications. Researchers from Victoria University found that high proportions of school students from low and medium socio-economic backgrounds in Melbourne's western suburbs aspired to attend university (68 per cent and 71 per cent), although this was lower than students from high socio-economic backgrounds (81 per cent) (Bett, Doughney and Vu



2008). However, they found that students from low socio-economic backgrounds were less confident that they would go to university than those from high socio-economic backgrounds and, in fact, they were less likely to do so with many going to TAFE. However, there has been very little research that investigates these students' experiences in TAFE and the extent to which their aspirations for higher education are 'warmed up' or 'cooled out' (Clarke 1983; Grubb 2006).

## **Conclusion**

Notwithstanding that Australia has bigger constitutional, curriculum and financing differences between vocational and higher education than England, Australian vocational education institutions provide a good educational ladder of opportunity to higher education. This may be due in part to Australian vocational education institutions having a somewhat higher share of higher education students than their English counterparts. Australian dual-sector institutions provide a better educational ladder of opportunity than other institutions. Furthermore, dual-sector institutions have improved their educational ladder of opportunity since 2000 (Moodie, 2007) and there remain differences in the strength of the educational ladder provided by different dual-sector universities. This suggests that the organisational and other differences between vocational and higher education are a significant, but not overwhelming, factor in the educational ladder of opportunity.

While harmonising the relations between vocational and higher education would make it easier for students and institutions to manage the educational ladder of opportunity from vocational to higher education, it would contribute little if anything to improving the social ladder of opportunity. One possibility for improving the social ladder of opportunity from vocational to higher education is for higher education institutions to establish 'early outreach' (Datta, 1973, p. 22; Office of Relations with Schools and Colleges, 1977) programmes in vocational education institutions as they are starting to establish in lower-secondary and upper-primary schools. However, this proposal is speculative since there has been little solid evaluation of early outreach programmes. Further comparative studies between England and similar countries would be valuable in identifying different practices that have the potential to produce better outcomes.

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Table 1: Domestic higher education full time equivalent students by level of study and location of teaching, Australia, 2006

<i>Institutions</i>	<i>Undergraduate</i>		<i>Postgraduate</i>	<i>All full time equivalent students</i>
	Diploma, Assoc degree	Bachelor		
Higher education	373	415,502	82,173	498,048
Vocational education	89,246	861	261	90,360
All institutions	89,619	416,363	82,434	588,408

Sources: DEST (2007), NCVER (2008b)

Table 2: Applications, offer and enrolment rates for undergraduate programmes in Queensland and Victoria for admission in 2008

<i>Applicant type</i>	<i>Applicants</i>		<i>% offered</i>		<i>% enrolled</i>	
	<b>Qld</b>	<b>Vic</b>	<b>Qld</b>	<b>Vic</b>	<b>Qld</b>	<b>Vic</b>
School leaver	28,175	51,181	92	86	66	66
Completed HE studies	4,261	3,438	92	76	62	53
Incomplete HE studies	9,454	8,046	86	75	75	70
Completed TAFE studies	1,862	8,372	95	74	78	71
Incomplete TAFE studies	1,128	1,973	80	71	76	73
Other non school leaver qualified	6,967	378	85	57	75	72
No qualification		1,310		52		63
<b>Total</b>	<b>51,847</b>	<b>74,698</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>67</b>

Sources: QTAC (2007-2008), VTAC (2007-2008)

Table 3: Basis of admission of domestic students commencing a programme at bachelor level or below by type of university, 2007 (%).

<i>University type</i>	<i>Secondary education</i>	<i>Higher education</i>	<i>Vocational education</i>	<i>Special entry</i>	<i>Other</i>
Dual-sector universities	47	22	17	3	9
Single- and mixed-sector universities	47	23	9	6	12
<b>All public universities</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>12</b>

Source: DEEWR (2008)

Table 4: Basis of admission of domestic students commencing a programme at bachelor level or below for dual-sector universities, 2007 (%).

<i>University</i>	<i>Secondary education</i>	<i>Higher education</i>	<i>Vocational education</i>	<i>Special entry</i>	<i>Other</i>
Ballarat	61	12	1	4	21
Charles Darwin	19	29	15	8	28
RMIT	60	20	19	1	0
Swinburne	46	21	27	0	3
Victoria University	40	24	16	6	11
<b>All dual-sectors</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>9</b>

Source: DEEWR (2008)

Table 5: Socio-economic status of commencing undergraduate students by basis of admission, 2007 (%)

<i>Basis for admission</i>	<i>Share of admissions</i>	<i>Socio-economic status</i>		
		Low	Medium	High
Secondary education	49	16	47	36
Higher education	24	15	46	37
Vocational education	11	20	52	27
Special entry	4	27	52	20
Other	12	20	50	28
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>33</b>
Parity		25	50	25

Source: DEEWR (2008)

Table 6: Dual-sector universities: overall low socio-economic status (SES), % admitted on basis of prior vocational education and SES of those admitted on basis of prior VET, 2007

<i>University</i>	<i>% All low SES students</i>	<i>Admitted on the basis of prior vocational education</i>			
		Low SES	Medium SES	High SES	All
RMIT	17	17	42	39	19
Swinburne	12	11	42	46	27
Ballarat	22	38	63	0	1
Victoria University	25	28	47	21	17
Charles Darwin	12	23	61	13	15
<b>Dual-sectors total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>17</b>

Source: DEEWR (2008)

Table 7: Socio-economic groups' share of each vocational education qualification level, 2001.

<i>Qualification</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>High</i>
Diploma and higher	19	53	27
Certificate IV	26	51	22
Certificate III	28	53	19
Certificate II	33	51	16
Certificate I	34	52	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>19</b>
Parity	25	50	25

Source: Derived from Foley (2007, p. 27) Table 3: AQF level by socio-economic group, 2001