

## EQUITY IN ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION REVISITED

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*No progress has been made over the past decade in improving equity of access to higher education for young people from low socio-economic backgrounds. New evidence indicates that both family income and cultural factors explain this situation. The cultural factor is particularly strong for boys from blue collar backgrounds. Current Government equity policy ignores these findings.*

The Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) has recently analysed the socio-economic status of students enrolled in higher education in Australia. The data used are based upon the postcode of their home address. These show that there has been no improvement in access to higher education during the 1990s as far as young people from a low socio-economic background are concerned.<sup>1</sup>

The Australian Government has an equity policy in place, the objective of which is to make the student population representative of the wider society. The foundation for this policy was laid in 1990 with the publication of *A Fair Chance for All*.<sup>2</sup> The policy aims to promote a more equal representation of students who come from various categories of people considered to be under-represented. These include women (in certain fields), persons of non-English-speaking-Background (NESBs), residents of rural and remote areas, people from Indigenous backgrounds, and those from low socio-

economic backgrounds. In a broad sense, there is no longer a problem for NESBs and women. As a general category, NESBs are over-represented, though there are wide variations in higher education participation levels between different language groups.<sup>3</sup> In the case of women, the only field where there is a serious under-representation of women is engineering. For those from rural, Indigenous and low socio-economic backgrounds, there is a continuing problem. There is a high degree of overlap in these three categories in that young people of Indigenous and rural background tend to come from low income families. For this reason our focus is on the socio-economic dimension.

### **FAMILY RESOURCES AND ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION**

The main issue pursued here is the extent to which low participation in higher education on the part of young people from low socio-economic backgrounds is shaped by the financial resources of the

families in question.

Surprising though it may seem, this is a controversial proposition. It would appear obvious that young people who wish to study full-time at university must have access to financial support while doing so. Where are they to find the income required? There are few scholarships available to bright or otherwise deserving low-income students.

Government financial assistance, which is now incorporated within the Youth Allowance system is available, but it involves a stringent means test based on the family income of the student. This precludes payment to all but those students from families with annual incomes of less than around \$35,000. As of September 1998, only a third of full-time undergraduate students were receiving the Youth Allowance.<sup>4</sup> Many of the recipients were getting only a partial allowance. Those receiving a part rate, plus most other full-time students, must either work part time or rely on parental assistance. An analysis of the expected source of funds of commencing students at Monash and La Trobe Universities showed that most were reliant upon their parents.<sup>5</sup>

If parents are the main source of a student's living expenses while studying, it follows that the financial resources of their family will be an important factor in their educational decisions. In particular, for young people coming from clerical and blue collar families in the \$30,000 to \$50,000 range, their ability or otherwise to receive the Youth Allowance may be decisive in their decisions about attending university. Our hypothesis is that the over-representation of students from high socio-economic backgrounds in Australia's universities is attributable in

part to their parent's capacity to provide financial support.

#### **ALTERNATIVE VIEWS**

A prominent alternative view is that the over-representation of students from high-socio economic class backgrounds is not due to their families' financial resources but to the likelihood that affluent families have other characteristics which favour the participation of their children in higher education. These characteristics include a high proportion of parents with tertiary education and robust aspirations for their children's educational achievement. These latter characteristics (along with those of the child's peers, who mostly share the same social background) are said to shape the child's own career and study objectives. In addition, the 'intellectual capital' of such families is thought to give their children an advantage in reaching year 12 and in their university entrance performance. Finally it is argued that such parents are more willing to make financial sacrifices for their children's education than are other parents with similar family incomes.

Studies conducted on behalf of the Australian Council of Education Research (ACER) and DETYA have indicated that when all the factors of income, family values, family encouragement and peer group support are taken into account, family income can be shown to be of limited significance in shaping the social make-up of the higher education student population.<sup>6</sup>

DETYA has responded warmly to these studies, as can be seen in the most recent work emerging from the Department's Higher Education Division which is discussed below. This is not surprising,

given that the Division is responsible for administering the government's equity policy. This requires DETYA to promote equality of opportunity, yet at the same time implement other policies which require students to pay a higher share of the costs of their university courses (through differential HECS) and which have toughened the criteria for access to the Youth Allowance.

In 1998 the Government-initiated West Review of higher education seized on the ACER work to justify its decision to ignore student complaints about the low level and inaccessibility of Austudy (now the Youth Allowance).<sup>7</sup> In an important study of the impact of differential HECS, entitled *Does HECS Deter?*, Les Andrews of the DETYA's Higher Education Division concludes that the new HECS policy has had no significant effect on access to higher education. The reasons he advances are largely those spelled out in the 'alternative' perspective above. In addition, the study offers some new statistical work on higher education participation rates based on DETYA's post-code based socio economic classification of students. No data were collected on parents' attitudes to education (but rather were imputed from their residential location). Despite this, Andrews asserts:

When the influence of financial and attitudinal influences derived from educational/occupational influences (of family) were separately examined it appears that attitudinal influences have the strongest effect on the participation of 17-24 year olds. Indeed financial influences were found to have an insignificant effect on educational participation when analysed in company with attitudinal factors. Financial factors were found to have an influence when analysed separately. This may be, however, the consequence of the asso-

ciation of educational and occupational status with income level.<sup>8</sup>

If this alternative argument is correct then a tough minded analyst could argue that if the objective is to improve access to higher education there is no point in providing further financial assistance to people from low socio-economic backgrounds. What is required is a value change on the part of their parents or peers. So far the only attempt to engineer a value change of this sort has been to encourage young women to tackle the full range of tertiary education options.

#### **RECENT DEVELOPMENTS RELEVANT TO HIGHER EDUCATION ATTENDANCE**

The reason for the preparation of the present paper is that several new sources of data relevant to the issue have now become available. These include 1999 statistical data from Centrelink on the Youth Allowance, an important new report from ACER and previously unpublished Census and higher education enrolment data procured by the Centre for Population and Urban Research.

#### **Data on Youth Allowance recipients**

Our argument owes much to the claim, stated above, that the Youth Allowance is only accessible to a minority of students. The Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) has argued in response to this claim that our analysis of recipients, as of September 1998, underestimated the level of access to the benefit.<sup>9</sup> FACS officials indicate that at this time the new system had not been fully implemented and that subsequently recipient rates have increased.

A comparison of the situation for higher education recipients as of September 1998 and September 1999 is shown in Table 1. This shows that there has been a

**Table 1: Youth Allowance Recipients enrolled in full-time higher education courses, September 1998 and September 1999**

Age	Sept 1998	Sept 1999	Percentage change 1998 to 1999
<19	18,644	16,771	-10.0
19	18,500	20,715	12.0
20	18,354	21,726	18.4
21	14,131	17,175	21.5
22	9,223	11,613	25.9
23	6,512	7,819	20.1
24	6,294	5,845	-7.1
25+	2,078	3,779	81.8
Total	93,736	105,443	16.0

\*Does not include persons receiving Austudy  
 Source: 1998 data: Centrelink records held by the Centre for Population and Urban Research, 1999 data: FACS, unpublished

significant increase in the numbers receiving the award amongst students aged 20 and above. This development reflects the full implementation of more generous rules governing the work experience and income criteria for persons claiming the award as Independents,<sup>10</sup> that is those students assessed according to their own income and assets as distinct from those of their parents. Unfortunately, the new rules have minimal effect on the assessment criteria that affect school leavers and thus have resulted in only a tiny increase in the number of the recipients under 20 years old. As a consequence, the financial situation facing school leavers when making choices about study has not improved.

**A new report by the Australian Council of Education Research**

The work undertaken by ACER on the issue has been pivotal in the equity debate. ACER has followed the post school outcomes of successive cohorts of young people aged 19 in 1980, 1984 and 1989. One of the major findings of their report on the 1989 cohort was the contin-

uing gulf between the proportion of young people with fathers holding professional occupations who go on to higher education and those whose fathers held clerical or blue collar positions (see Table 2). But when this difference is analysed the authors claim that family wealth or financial resources is not a contributing factor.<sup>11</sup> Rather, they argued that the various factors under the 'alternative' perspective described above are responsible.

ACER has now published a new Report (in 1999) by Long et al. this time based on a survey of 19 year olds as of 1994.<sup>12</sup> This portrays a different picture. The study shows that between 1989 and

**Table 2: Year 12 completion rates, rates of entry from year 12 to higher education and rates of participation in higher education by age 19, by parent's occupation, 1980, 1984, 1989, 1994**

Cohort aged 19 in	1980	1984	1989	1994
<b>Year 12 completion rates (%)</b>				
Professional	61	65	76	90
Managerial	45	49	61	79
Clerical	36	42	61	83
Skilled	30	29	48	76
Semi-skilled	21	24	50	71
Unskilled	28	24	44	73
<b>Entry rates (%) to higher education from year 12</b>				
Professional	59	64	69	68
Managerial	49	49	50	56
Clerical	54	46	57	53
Skilled	48	44	41	39
Semi-skilled	47	36	40	26
Unskilled	40	40	45	33
<b>Higher education participation rates (%)</b>				
Professional	38	42	52	62
Managerial	23	24	31	44
Clerical	24	20	35	44
Skilled	18	13	20	30
Semi-skilled	11	11	20	18
Unskilled	13	10	20	24

Source: M. Long, et al., *Participation in Education and Training*, ACER, 1999, pp. 57-58

1994 there was a major increase in retention rates to year 12 (Table 2), especially amongst young people coming from households whose fathers were in clerical and blue collar jobs. This is good news from the point of view of access to higher education. The 1999 ACER study also shows that most young people, including those from working class backgrounds, now complete year 12. The reason for staying on to year 12 may reflect job market difficulties rather than higher education aspirations, but they at least get to the last hurdle before entry to university. Thus whatever their parents' attitudes, they have experienced some exposure to year 12 culture, mixed with students who intend to go on to university and therefore are more likely to have become aware that they too now have the option of taking this step.

However, Table 2 shows that a much lower proportion of students from clerical and blue collar background who complete year 12 go on to higher education than do those from professional and managerial backgrounds. The net effect of the somewhat lower year 12 completion levels and much lower movement to higher education is that the gulf between the participation rates in higher education for young people from high socio economic family backgrounds and others (particularly those from semi-skilled and unskilled backgrounds) widened in 1994 relative to the earlier years shown in Table 2. Whereas 62 per cent of the 1994 cohort with professional fathers were enrolled as higher education students, only 44 per cent of those from clerical backgrounds, 30 per cent from skilled and 18 per cent from semi-skilled backgrounds were enrolled.

It is clear that, by the 1990s, it is the step from year 12 to university which is the main hurdle when it comes to improv-

ing access to higher education. Why is this so? For the 1994 cohort, Long et al. acknowledge that family wealth does seem to be implicated. They had to use a proxy measure for wealth based on household size and possessions (it was deemed too sensitive to ask their survey population about their parents' income). When they examine the extent to which participation rates in higher education are linked to family wealth they find that there is widening gap between the participation rates of the high 25 per cent, middle 50 per cent and low 25 per cent of groups based on their measure of wealth. Moreover most of this gap is attributable to the relatively low proportion of the middle and low wealth groups who enter higher university after completing year 12.<sup>13</sup> After adjustments for the influence of other factors associated with family income (such as occupation) Long et al. conclude that, unlike the situation for the 1989 and earlier groups, family wealth is an influential factor in explaining participation in higher education for the 1994 cohort. They conclude:

Family wealth (and lack of it) has re-emerged during the early 1990s as a factor that influences entry to higher education from year 12, independently of other family background characteristics.<sup>14</sup>

Long and his colleagues do not acknowledge that this finding is contrary to that of earlier ACER studies, nor do they point out that the policy implications drawn by the West Review and by DETYA's Higher Education Division (most recently stated in Andrews' work) may now be outdated. While the ACER has nothing to say about how the Youth Allowance system relates to their findings it seems obvious that if family wealth does affect participation rates it is likely to do so via the capacity of wealthier families to provide financial support to their children.

### Census data on the 'wealth effect'

Debate on the relative effect of family resources versus 'alternative' factors such as parental values and aspirations has been devilled by the lack of good data on family income. As noted, Long et al. did not ask the young people they surveyed for family income information, nor has DETYA in its student returns. However, there is access to this information by Census data. For this study we purchased from the ABS a Census-based matrix of information on all 18 and 19 year olds in Australia in 1996. The matrix provided data on the household situation of each person by whether they lived at home or not and whether they were at school, TAFE, a higher education institution or in the labour force. Some 65 per cent of all 18 and 19 year olds were living in the parental home in 1996. For each of these persons the matrix provides information on the occupation of the reference person in the household (usually the father) and the total family income (that is, the income of both parents and the children where relevant). No data on parental income was available for the 35 per cent minority of 18 and 19 year olds not living at home.

For the 65 per cent living at home, the

data make possible a comparison of the family circumstances (parental occupation and family income) of those attending a higher education institution versus those in some other form of education or in the labour force. The data set was designed to help resolve the interpretive issues discussed above. If family income is important in facilitating participation in higher education one might expect to find that, whatever the parental occupation, more of those in richer households would be in higher education than those from poorer households. As argued earlier it was expected that the income effect would be less noticeable for those households where income was less than \$30,000 per year because prospective students from this background would have been eligible for Austudy. If the cultural or 'alternative' theorists were correct most of variation in enrolment levels would be reflected in differences related to parental occupation rather than family income levels.

The results for higher education participation levels by father's occupation and family income are shown in Table 3. They give partial support both to our hypothesis and to that of the 'alternative' proponents. Looking down the columns there is clearly a strong family income effect for young people from administrative and

**Table 3: Total dependent students/non-dependent children aged 18-19 living at home by percentage who attend university by parental occupation and weekly family income, 1996**

Family Income	Manager/Administrator	Professional	Clerks	Trades	Labourers	Occupation not applicable <sup>a</sup>	Total <sup>b</sup>
<\$500	19.6	31.4	21.2	19.0	13.9	17.8	19.0
\$500-699	19.9	31.0	21.8	19.9	15.1	15.2	19.1
\$700-999	23.4	32.6	20.8	19.3	15.4	16.5	21.2
\$1000-1499	27.6	33.8	21.7	17.0	13.5	18.2	22.9
\$1500-1999	30.2	37.0	22.8	16.3	13.0	21.6	26.9
>\$2000	40.0	47.3	29.4	17.3	13.2	31.7	38.5
Total <sup>b</sup>	30.3	36.6	22.1	17.8	14.1	17.0	23.6

<sup>a</sup>Occupation not applicable includes those employed, unemployed and those not in the labour force.

<sup>b</sup>Totals includes those who did not state income or occupation

Source: Centre for Population and Urban Research, 1996 Census customised matrix

professional (which includes para-professionals) backgrounds. The higher the family income the greater the higher education participation rate. The effect is particularly strong at the upper income levels, especially in families earning \$2000 plus per week. Table 3 also provides partial confirmation of the Austudy effect, since with the exception of young people from managerial and professional backgrounds, higher education participation rates for low income households are almost the same as for those in the middle income ranges.

However, there is no such income effect for 18 and 19 year olds coming from blue collar backgrounds. This is consistent with the cultural proponents' position that even where family income is high it does not lead to increased participation in higher education because there is no family encouragement for such participation. This point can also be made through examining the family income category with the largest number of higher education students, that is the middle income group where the weekly family income is \$1000-1499. Students from such families would not be eligible for Austudy, therefore our hypothesis predicts similar higher education participation rates regardless of parents' occu-

pation. Looking along the row covering such families, it is evident that higher proportions of young people from administrative and, particularly, professional homes are enrolled in higher education than are their counterparts from clerical and blue collar backgrounds. Since the family income is the same it is reasonable to attribute the differences to the cultural and other related factors covered by 'alternative' theorists.

Another point which emerges very strongly from the Census data set is that the cultural factor is much stronger for males than females. Table 4 shows that rates of participation in higher education for males and females by parent's occupation and family income. Female participation is much higher for all occupations and levels of family income. But the gulf is most acute in the blue-collar families.

One possible explanation for the male/female disparity in higher education participation rates for young people of blue-collar background is that the males prefer to attend TAFE courses. This could be read as a 'cultural' factor, reflecting long traditions within working-class communities about appropriate career aspirations for boys. Table 5 tests this idea by showing the proportion of all 18 and 19 year olds living at home who attended

**Table 4: Total dependent students/non-dependent children aged 18-19, living at home, percentage who attend university by sex and parental occupation and weekly family income, 1996**

	Mgr/Admin.		Prof.		Clerks		Trades		Labourers		Occupation not applic. <sup>a</sup>		Total <sup>b</sup>	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
<\$500	26.0	14.7	37.1	26.4	25.3	17.4	24.7	13.9	18.6	9.9	21.7	14.6	23.4	15.3
\$500-699	26.6	14.9	35.1	27.5	26.4	17.6	25.7	14.8	19.7	11.5	20.1	11.2	24.1	15.0
\$700-999	30.1	18.5	38.7	27.4	26.5	15.9	25.8	13.7	20.1	11.6	21.9	12.3	27.0	16.4
\$1000-1499	34.4	22.0	40.0	28.4	27.6	16.9	23.6	11.7	19.0	9.2	22.4	14.8	29.0	17.9
\$1500-1999	37.2	24.6	44.5	30.7	29.2	17.8	22.4	11.7	18.0	9.3	28.1	16.1	33.8	21.4
>\$2000	47.4	33.5	54.8	40.9	35.8	24.3	22.5	13.1	18.5	9.1	37.0	27.2	45.6	32.5
Total <sup>b</sup>	37.5	24.5	43.2	31.0	27.5	17.4	24.1	12.7	19.1	10.1	21.6	13.4	29.5	18.8

<sup>a</sup> Occupation not applicable includes those unemployed and those not in the labour force.

<sup>b</sup> Totals includes those who did not state income or occupation

Source: Centre for Population and Urban Research, 1996, Census customised matrix

**Table 5: Total dependent students/non-dependent children aged 18-19 attending TAFE by weekly family income, parental occupation and sex, 1996**

Family Income	Parental Occupation											
	Managerial/Administration		Professional		Clerks		Trades		Labourers		Total <sup>a</sup>	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
1-500	13.9	16.2	13.9	17.0	17.3	16.1	21.7	17.1	17.6	14.2	16.4	15.2
500-699	14.5	16.7	17.4	16.8	18.0	17.6	19.1	20.8	17.8	17.1	17.1	17.2
701-999	15.4	19.3	15.6	17.3	16.7	19.5	19.0	22.4	17.3	17.7	16.7	18.6
1000-1499	15.4	20.9	14.1	20.2	16.1	20.2	17.9	24.5	17.0	18.7	15.8	20.6
1500-1999	15.7	21.6	12.5	20.5	14.8	23.1	15.3	26.8	16.1	19.9	14.4	21.9
2000+	12.8	19.0	10.4	17.0	14.4	19.4	16.4	26.4	14.0	21.0	12.3	18.8
Total <sup>b</sup>	14.6	19.7	13.5	18.7	16.4	19.5	18.0	23.6	17.0	18.1	15.6	18.9

<sup>a</sup> Total includes no occupation and occupation not stated

<sup>b</sup> Total includes family income not stated

Source: Centre for Population and Urban Research, 1996 Census customised matrix

TAFE by sex, parental occupation and family income. The highest proportion of males attending TAFE is to be found amongst those from a trades background. But when the proportions of males and females attending higher education and TAFE are added there remains a big gap between males and females, especially amongst those from blue collar backgrounds. It was thought that this gap might diminish if the 35 per cent of 18 and 19 year olds not living at home were included in the analysis. Perhaps more boys who had left home were attending TAFE than girls? The results of this analysis are not detailed in this paper, but they showed that the inclusion of those not living at home made only a marginal difference to the above conclusion.

#### **Private school enrolment and the transition from school to university**

So far, the focus has been on the way in which family income affects higher education participation via access to parental financial assistance. Another way wealth can affect the transition from school to university is through the impact of private schooling. This issue is not taken up in the ACER studies. The argument depends on the dual assumptions that attendance

at private school (particularly at the more expensive Independent schools) largely depends on family income and that private school education produces better examination results than the less expensive Catholic and Government schools (and perhaps more encouragement to go on to university through teachers and student peers). If these assumptions are correct it is easy to see how, via the agency of private school enrolment, students from wealthy families could have a major advantage in gaining access to university places.

We explored the first assumption concerning the links between family income and type of school attended through 1996 Census data for the family income and parental occupation (as with the 18 and 19 year olds discussed above it is usually the father who is the reference person in the household) for all Australian secondary students by type of school attended. It comes as no surprise that enrolment levels at private schools, particularly for Independent schools, are in fact closely linked to parental income. Table 6 shows the percentage of all secondary school students enrolled in Independent schools by family income. For all the occupational groups, with the

partial exception of blue collar workers, the higher the family income the higher the proportion of children attending these schools. Families in each of the income categories where the parental occupation

is in the managerial or professional category are more likely to put their children into Independent schools. Again, with the exception of the blue-collar labouring group, it is family income

**Table 6: Proportion of secondary school students attending independent schools, by parental occupation and weekly family income, 1996**

Occupation of family reference person	Weekly family income	Per cent attending Independent schools <sup>a</sup>	Total secondary school students
Managers and Administrators	Neg/nil-\$499	11.6	12,359
	\$500-\$699	12.9	11,192
	\$700-\$999	14.7	20,633
	\$1,000-\$1,499	18.2	34,893
	\$1,500+	32.3	48,333
	Total <sup>b</sup>	21.9	128,670
Profess. and Assoc. Professionals	Neg/nil-\$499	15.9	22,984
	\$500-\$699	14.7	27,623
	\$700-\$999	15.5	59,421
	\$1,000-\$1,499	17.6	87,232
	\$1,500+	33.1	89,103
	Total <sup>b</sup>	21.6	288,406
Trades	Neg/nil-\$499	7.1	13,775
	\$500-\$699	6.2	24,999
	\$700-\$999	6.7	41,562
	\$1,000-\$1,499	7.9	37,299
	\$1,500+	12.0	13,183
	Total <sup>b</sup>	7.5	132,194
Clerical, Sales and Services	Neg/nil-\$499	9.5	35,136
	\$500-\$699	9.1	29,948
	\$700-\$999	9.2	37,209
	\$1,000-\$1,499	11.0	35,885
	\$1,500+	20.3	17,011
	Total <sup>b</sup>	10.9	156,462
Intermed. production and transport workers; Labourers	Neg/nil-\$499	4.5	26,161
	\$500-\$699	4.2	34,211
	\$700-\$999	4.7	44,551
	\$1,000-\$1,499	5.4	34,703
	\$1,500+	7.1	11,774
	Total <sup>b</sup>	4.9	153,018
Unemployed or not in labour force	Neg/nil-\$499	6.6	140,464
	\$500-\$699	6.5	39,693
	\$700-\$999	7.9	25,528
	\$1,000-\$1,499	11.6	12,143
	\$1,500+	27.2	5,318
	Total <sup>b</sup>	7.5	229,824
Total <sup>c</sup>	Neg/nil-\$499	7.9	254,665
	\$500-\$699	8.2	170,953
	\$700-\$999	9.8	233,745
	\$1,000-\$1,499	13.1	246,806
	\$1,500+	28.3	187,461
	Total <sup>b</sup>	13.0	1,108,970

<sup>a</sup> Excludes Catholic Schools

<sup>b</sup> Occupation totals include those who did not state their income.

<sup>c</sup> Total includes inadequately described occupations and not stated labour force status.

Source: Centre for Population and Urban Research, 1996 Census customised matrix

which appears to be the main determinant

of this decision.

On the second assumption concerning tertiary entrance ranks by type of school attended, we have used 1999 Victorian data for students who previously attended a secondary school and who succeeded in gaining a university place. Unfortunately, no data were available for those who did not succeed in their application or did not apply at all. However, it is likely that if the scores from all students had been included, the difference between Government and private school students would have been much greater. This is because a much higher proportion of Government school students go on to TAFE (where scores are much lower than for those who enrol at university) or do not apply at all (partly because of the expectation of low scores).

Table 7 shows the results of all year 12 students from the Catholic, Independent, Government and TAFE sector who successfully applied to enter a Victorian university. Some 67 per cent of Independent school students scored in the 80 plus category, compared with 47 per cent of Catholic school students, 44 per cent of Government school students and 34

per cent of the TAFE students. These scores explain why Independent school students in particular are disproportionately enrolled at Melbourne and Monash Universities, and within these universities in the more selective courses of law, medicine and accounting.

As we have been at pains to point out, the decisions young people make about whether to go on to university are not just a product of their school achievement levels. They also reflect the ability and willingness of parents to finance their living costs. Private school students (especially those from Independent schools) are doubly advantaged in that their school background contributes to achieving the required entrance scores and their parents tend to be wealthier than those of other students. The combination of these advantages shows up in much higher rates of progress to university.

In the case of Victorian schools, according to ABS estimates, in 1998 there were 45,364 students enrolled in year 12 at Victorian schools. Of these 58.6 per cent were in Government schools, 22.5 per cent in Catholic schools

**Table 7: Proportion (%) of students enrolled in universities in 1999 by Tertiary Education Rank<sup>a</sup> and type of school attended in 1998**

ENTER Group	Catholic	Government	Independent	Other	TAFE	Total
0.00-9.95	-	-	-	-	-	-
10.00-19.95	0.1	0.1	-	-	-	-
20.00-29.95	0.2	0.5	-	-	1.1	0.3
30.00-39.95	0.7	1.2	0.2	-	2.2	0.8
40.00-49.95	3.0	4.0	1.0	6.2	3.8	3.0
50.00-59.95	9.1	10.7	3.6	9.2	12.6	8.5
60.00-69.95	16.1	17.2	9.9	24.6	22.5	15.2
70.00-79.95	24.0	21.9	17.8	26.2	22.5	21.4
80.00-89.95	25.7	24.5	27.5	23.1	24.7	25.5
90.00-99.95	21.2	20.0	40.0	10.8	10.4	25.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Number	6,509	12,882	5,494	83	253	25,290

<sup>a</sup> Now known as ENTER

<sup>b</sup> Total includes a few who did not have a score or their school type is unknown.

Source: VTAC Admissions record

and 18.8 per cent in other schools (primarily Independent schools).<sup>15</sup> But as Table 7 shows, of those who succeeded in gaining a university place in Victoria in 1999 who were at school in 1998 only 47.5 per cent came from Government schools. On the other hand 25.7 per cent came from Catholic schools and 25.1 per cent from Independent schools.

This cross-over effect in Victoria, whereby more year 12 students of private school origin are now gaining entry to Victorian universities, has been observed before.<sup>16</sup> It is an alarming situation for those concerned about equality of opportunity in the higher education system.

#### **WHAT IS TO BE DONE?**

The Coalition Government's policy on equity of access to the higher education system is in disarray. The evidence collected by the Government's experts in DETYA shows that there has been no improvement in access for people of low socio-economic background during the 1990s. Our Census-based evidence, now backed up by ACER, shows that family income is a contributing factor in the choice to enter university. Furthermore, the impact of family income is reinforced by relatively high rates of attendance in private secondary schools by children from more affluent backgrounds. However, DETYA is yet to acknowledge this relationship. The Government's higher education advisors have had nothing to say about rectifying one source of the problem, which is the restrictive nature of the Youth Allowance. Our Census-based evidence indicates that this restrictiveness is a

factor in limiting opportunity for some students, particularly those from middle to low income white-collar backgrounds.

Another issue is the gap in the performance of public and private school students. We face the disturbing prospect that when it comes to examination results in year 12, students who come from less affluent backgrounds are being left behind by their private school counterparts. The danger is that more parents with the means to do so may respond by taking their children out of the Government system. This will make it even more difficult for the state system to compete. To rectify this situation will require a major additional investment in teaching resources in the public system.

The research reported above supports aspects of the 'cultural proponents' case. Our results suggest that this case is particularly strong for boys from working class backgrounds. Given that the Higher Education Branch of DETYA is a strong supporter of the 'cultural' thesis, we question why the Branch has not supported initiatives consistent with their case. The progress of young women in taking up higher education opportunities over the past decade or so has been spectacular. This achievement is partly attributable to the gender equity programs which successive governments have supported. Perhaps it is time that some parallel programs directed at encouraging young men to think about new post-school educational options were initiated. Such programs should begin in Government schools serving predominantly working-class background communities.

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