

# **“I would’ve been so overwhelmed...”: The importance of TAFE in supporting success for low SES students in HE**

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## **Abstract**

*The Federal Government Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program includes a renewed push to redress the persistent under-representation of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds in higher education in Australia. The discipline of Social Work at Deakin University has been successful in attracting a wide range of students into the Bachelor program and is committed to giving students the best chance of success. This paper presents findings from qualitative research aimed at building two-way bridges between The Gordon (formerly The Gordon Institute of TAFE) and Deakin University to widen access and to support and retain students. The research presented here illuminates the experiences of students who commenced university following studies at TAFE, as well as the multiple, complex and intersecting factors impacting on this particular cohort’s educational opportunity. Our findings suggest that the TAFE pathway functions as an equity mechanism in our particular study site. Further, findings regarding students’ support needs underpin our argument that universities must do more to meet their responsibilities towards students.*

## **Introduction**

This paper ventures two main contributions to the debate over higher education equity for students from a low socio-economic status background in the Australian context. Firstly, it furthers the debate begun by Wheelahan (2009) who problematises the TAFE pathway as an equity mechanism. Secondly, it does this by adopting the success-focused approach promoted by Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith & McKay (2012) in their work with students from low socio-economic status backgrounds. This paper will present findings from recent interviews with past and present Deakin University students who had transitioned to university from a TAFE pathway (completed Diploma of Welfare/Community Services at The Gordon). These interviews are one subset of the data gathered in a wider program of research.

The paper presents a collective portrait of the interview participants, showing that while they might not all be defined by university statistics as being ‘low SES’ each had experienced multiple factors constraining educational access/opportunity. It will also

discuss the support they drew on and found useful at university. This includes one-on-one support provided by lecturers and evidence of student agency in developing peer support networks. Many of the students highlighted their prior TAFE experience as strongly supporting their learning in the university context. Finally the paper will discuss ways in which equity in vocational education and training (VET) and higher education (HE) is interlinked. Of interest is that our findings reflect diversity within the cohort in that no two students drew on the same set of learning supports for their university studies.

## **Background context**

The research findings presented in this paper were undertaken as part of a project funded by the Australian federal government's Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) which aims to 'ensure that Australians from low SES (socio-economic status) backgrounds who have the ability to study at university get the opportunity to do so' (DIISRTE 2013, HEPPP Website Homepage). The project, "*It's my dream to be a ...*": *Building bridges between Gordon TAFE and Deakin University staff and students*, aimed to strengthen the pathway from the Diploma of Community Services to the Degree in Social Work. One aspect of this was to interview students who were either considering attending university after completing their diploma at The Gordon or who had already completed their bachelor's degree following a transfer from The Gordon.

The key concern of this paper, and of many in the educational research sector, is the under-representation of students categorised as low SES in the tertiary education field and ways to redress this. A key insight developed from previous research (Clarke, Zimmer and Main 1999; Ferrier & Heagney 2000), further nuanced to underpin this study, is the view that education is allocated or 'rationed' to people in structurally determined ways (Preston, 2007, p. 19). While access to higher education in Australia has widened since the 1960s, particularly for women, rates of access and participation for low SES background students has remained persistently low, at approximately 15% rather than 25% where it should be (Scull & Cuthill, 2010). This is 'despite many initiatives', such as HECS<sup>1</sup> and 'school-targeted programs', including university outreach to schools, which have 'failed to achieve any significant breakthrough' (Scull & Cuthill, 2010, p. 62). It is also important to note that widening access and participation has not necessarily led to widening retention, so that in the UK, for instance, 'the universities with the most success in widening participation also have the highest drop-out rates' (Crozier, Reay, Clayton, Colliander, & Grinstead, 2008, p. 2).

It is well established that under-representation of those from low SES backgrounds is due to factors other than ability (Devlin, et al., 2012, Scull & Cuthill, 2010). These factors are understood as complex, intersecting and cumulative; being the 'first in family' to attend university or having disrupted schooling is increasingly recognised as an indicator of educational disadvantage (Scull & Cuthill, 2010).

## **Details of the study**

The research employed mixed methods, and used both existing and new data. It drew on existing non-identifiable data from Deakin University on access, participation, retention and success of low SES students. However, the emphasis has been on qualitative methods. The

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<sup>1</sup> HECS is problematised by the low SES students we talked to but not by Scull and Cuthill (2010, p 60).

project team (hereafter called the team), comprising Deakin social work and Gordon TAFE teaching staff and one non-teaching research member conducted focus groups with 18 current Gordon TAFE students (in five small groups) and semi-structured one-on-one interviews with 12 present Gordon TAFE students and 11 current and graduated Deakin University ‘TAFE pathway’ students. In addition, a series of focus groups with the teaching members of the project team was conducted, and notes taken at project meetings and testimony shared via email treated as data.

While it is recognized that the generalisability of qualitative studies may be limited, the depth that studies such as this provide is particularly valuable in understanding the reasons behind, and the gaps between, the findings on larger quantitative studies, which provide the majority of studies in this area (Ballantyne 2012). The team suggests that success in widening participation will require universities to recognise, value and resource the local and particular that often sits in tension with, or becomes subsumed under, the standardised and categorised processes that inhere in most large sized institutions (Hosken, 2010). It became apparent to the team how factors including physical location, hierarchy, status, and corporate practices combine to discourage university funders, government, policy makers, education managers, senior and junior education staff from working together to recognise the value of engaging with the ‘... complexity beyond the plan’ (Lea 2008 cited in Hosken, 2010, p. 4).

### **Findings and discussion in context of the literature**

The present research has generated compelling evidence of the impact on university experience of factors that are widespread amongst TAFE graduates. Experiencing such factors may not place students into the defined ‘equity groups’ which have been the focus of public policy since 1990 (Scull & Cuthill, 2010, p. 60). Nevertheless, these factors are often co-present with each other and sometimes with low SES background. They include being first in family to attend university, having a low income, being a single parent, being from a refugee background, having caring responsibilities for a family member with high needs, having past or current mental illness experiences and having an interrupted schooling.

Our research has also revealed information about the supports TAFE pathway students drew on or established at university (lecturers, peers, study groups), and sources of support outside university (work colleagues, spouse, children). Crucially, in our study students regarded their prior TAFE studies as a major enabler of success at university. This allows us to highlight the importance of the work of TAFE in support of low SES background students for higher education equity. Further, it is evidence of the significant existing expertise within the VET sector in supporting low SES students. VET is regarded as outperforming HE in almost every area of disadvantage and under-representation; this is demonstrated by the fact that TAFE, in proportional terms, reaches nearly twice as many low SES students, more than twice as many rural students, and four times as many Indigenous students (Mackenzie, 2012). However, there is a gap in literature inspired by the widening participation agenda about TAFE as a site of existing expertise and as an important potential partner in attracting, supporting and preparing low SES students. This paper in part aims to move towards filling that gap.

#### *TAFE pathways and equity*

The present study speaks to the question of whether TAFE pathways work as an equity mechanism in the particular case of the welfare/community services diploma to social work

degree pathway. While the number of students with prior TAFE studies as a basis for admission to university has risen, this does not necessarily result in improved access for key equity groups. Wheelahan (2009, p. 262) problematises the ‘assumption that VET to HE transfers in Australia are able to act as an equity mechanism.’ Firstly she finds that, ‘Pathways provide VET students with access to lower status universities rather than the elite universities’ (Wheelahan, 2009, p. 262).<sup>2</sup> The team does not take issue with this. Secondly, ‘the socio-economic composition of VET student transfers reflects the socio-economic composition of students in the HE sector’ (Wheelahan, 2009, p. 262).

Our study indicates that the socio-economic composition of students who transfer from The Gordon is distinct from the overall composition of the degree course, in that it consists of a much higher proportion of low SES students than the degree course as a whole. Overall the Deakin Social Work course is 27.8% low SES (Deakin University 2012), which is significantly higher than the 13.2% low SES participation rate for Deakin University (Deakin University 2012). (Deakin University uses the student’s home location to define socio-economic status employing the Australian Bureau of Statistics, SEIFA, Index of Education and Occupation from the 2006 census). Although TAFE does not collect similar SES data using SEIFA, a close examination of the demographic identity of the eleven students who have taken the Gordon-Deakin pathway reveals that of the eleven students from this participant group in the study, all were in the first generation of their family – if not the first person in their family ever – to attend university. Five of the eleven had a sibling who had enrolled before or after them. Two explicitly stated that they were the first in their families to have completed high school, let alone enrolled in TAFE or university. One student had experienced minimal and interrupted education in a refugee camp; an additional five of the eleven students had left school early. Eight of the eleven described family backgrounds which were low-income or ‘working-class’. Two had a disability. Eight had a low income while studying, with two revealing experiences of homelessness, having to use emergency relief, or not always having enough food for their family. One had experienced mental illness and four disclosed other difficulties such as problems in their family of origin or adverse, traumatic experiences. The detail of many of the students’ life experiences would make them immediately identifiable to teaching staff on the project team, so for ethical reasons it is not possible to provide a holistic sketch of each participant. However, given the above collective portrait relates to only eleven people, the intersectional nature of their life experiences, in terms of multiple and complex factors impacting on educational opportunity, is undeniable.

The team believes it is fair to characterise this group of students as firmly ‘non-traditional.’ This is not to say that they would all be categorised as low SES according to current measurement techniques; these techniques are increasingly recognised as inadequate (Wheelahan, 2009). This collective portrait suggests that the question of whether or not TAFE pathways function as an equity mechanism can be greatly nuanced by attention to particular contexts (including socio-economic composition of the TAFE course and discipline of study at university).

### *Supporting success*

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<sup>2</sup> This is similar in the UK, where students entering universities on the basis of further education college rather than high school studies ‘move to study at less selective institutions, known in the UK as the post-92 universities’ (Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell, & McCune, 2008, p. 569).

The present study notes that Devlin et al (2012) employ a success-focussed approach that is easily translated into guidance for policy and practice aimed at teaching academics and institutional leaders within universities. The team had a similar success-focused outlook, asking students about people and relationships that had supported their education, as well as how their prior TAFE studies had supported their learning at university. The team also asked about any university or government programs that had enabled students to embark on or continue on at university. This wide view of the possible range of supports drawn on by students can reveal factors related to educational opportunities that are in the remit of ostensibly separate policy areas.

### Prior TAFE studies

Students reported a range of supports for their studies at university, as we discuss in this section. Amongst these, the importance of prior TAFE studies for students' success at university was particularly evident. This included academic skills such as essay writing, referencing conventions and research that success in university study requires, as explained by a TAFE-university pathway student:

You'd better know how to write a good essay before you get here! ...I could write a good essay before I got to uni *because* of The Gordon. I think I would've been just so totally overwhelmed if I hadn't had The Gordon background <student emphasis> (147)

Further, some TAFE pathway students said they found themselves at an advantage relative to other university students in terms of underpinning knowledge. A student who emailed following the interview explained:

I thought the TAFE students had an edge and were able to more confidently articulate practice and theory, from my own vantage point this was due to doing earlier community volunteer work in the lead up and consolidating the TAFE skills through placement experience, however I believe this may be true for many other TAFE to Uni students, that earlier placements put them in a good position to make the transition to Uni with a sound grasp of key concepts (135)

Overall, prior TAFE studies gave many students confidence in themselves as learners. Another important support for TAFE pathway students was that their TAFE studies had provided them with a qualification to work in the welfare sector after two years of study. For those who had university in their sights prior to enrolling at TAFE, one factor they considered was that gaining a social work qualification would take four years. The ability to re-skill and return to work more quickly is important for many low-income students given the financial strain, and in some instances debt levels, produced by studying. It was common amongst the TAFE graduates interviewed to combine any further study with work in the sector.

### Peer support

Five of the students said that students from The Gordon supported each other through their further studies at university. Three students established their own study groups, which met either in person or online. As well as existing familiarity with each other, peer support networks amongst graduates of The Gordon were grounded in their commonality. For instance, several students referred to a shared experience for TAFE background students of having little time to participate socially in university life as the middle-SES or high-SES university students are seen to:

We all had families and we were working and we were studying... we didn't have time to go out partying and socialising in the same context as the young ones would have or may have, some of them (120 – see also 147)

Another student (who studied off-campus) talked about the impact of the emotional complexity that enrolling at university represented:

I was so stressed... It was really interesting, I really closed down... I didn't know where to go to get help even though it was everywhere, how to do it, I still couldn't work out how to do that because it wasn't a physical location... I made an appointment with a study skills person, I couldn't do it the first trimester because I was too stressed, so I did it in the break... (150)

Later in the interview the student talked about the meaning of university for someone of her background in terms of ingrained class values: 'It was just a big place that you had to be privileged to get into.' She reflected during the interview that this was what made her initial experience at Deakin so overwhelming, stressful and difficult (150).

Yet another student talked about what it was like to study alongside traditional, school-leaver students with a much higher disposable income, able to afford to buy lunch, and for whom university seemed to be 'the continuation of their high school life':

With a lot of The Gordon students... they see it as such a privilege to go and study not as an expectation... it means a lot, as opposed to this young guy [who left class early] I saw [him later] coming out of the cafeteria with food... if they don't come to classes it's not as big of a deal, or just sitting in class on fucking Facebook... (141)

### One-on-one support from lecturers

Many students in our study said they met with their lecturers one-on-one for personal support, academic support, discussion of experiences in class, and in particular, support with applying for recognition of prior learning (RPL) for placements completed during the TAFE course and/or in recognition of current employment in the field. Some lecturers were regarded as particularly proactive in reaching out to students. However, compared to The Gordon, getting one-on-one support from a lecturer at university was experienced as more difficult:

A When I needed support there were people at The Gordon who you could sit with. You could even sit with the teacher if something was not understandable...

Q And at Deakin did you find the same support?

A It was not like The Gordon ...where you could get one to one, which at the uni is really difficult. You could get someone to *sit* with you <student emphasis> (145)

Support to apply to get RPL for a placement was a particularly valued type of support given by social work lecturers to prior TAFE students, given low-income students generally regarded the required placements as a particular barrier to completing and/or continuing their education in this field of study. Placements entail significant periods of unpaid work, representing loss of income for students who are working to support their studies, and increased travel costs and increased challenges for students who have children or others that they care for.

From a staff perspective, TAFE pathway students from The Gordon requesting individual meetings have had situations with one or more of the following factors: English as an

additional language and culture; ongoing poverty often exacerbated or created by sole parent status, housing instability issues and/or discrimination; disability relating to physical, learning and/or mental health needs; and complicated individual, family and/or community stress. Financial issues affecting study included not being able to afford books, internet and parking, and led to students approaching lecturers to ask whether there was any help available from the university to address them. Further, students under pressure due to often interlinked family, personal, discrimination and/or financial issues needed to discuss extensions of assessment due dates and/or get support regarding unit/course progression. Academic issues included students approaching lecturers regarding discussion of key concepts and additional explanation of assessment tasks, mainly from TAFE graduates who have English as an additional language/culture; questions about field education; and getting information about timetables and how the university's on line learning works. A variety or combination of the issues already mentioned at times led to students approaching a lecturer about making links with other social work lecturers and university support staff.

The explanation for TAFE graduates from The Gordon and elsewhere requesting support from lecturers is complex. As discussed, while students in our study attested to the support provided by The Gordon for their learning at Deakin University (academic skills, underpinning knowledge, confidence as a learner and, in general, an active, participative learning style), they still face situations related to having a low-income or a low SES background and/or current day-to-day life experience (see Crozier, et al., 2008, p. 6). This produces a university experience, connected to broader societal experiences, which are distinct from that of more privileged students.

While this is not a quantitative study, it was noticeable that half of the current or past university students participating talked about one-on-one support as important during their university studies, including several off campus students who had been supported to apply for RPL. In the experience of the teaching members of our research team, students from The Gordon seemed to know they could ask for support, what support to ask for and when to ask for help to get the most out of their learning experience. There was a strong relational aspect to this, in that students tended to approach lecturers they knew in the first instance. For example, TAFE graduates – both from The Gordon and other TAFEs – approached a former TAFE teacher in the social work school, even for help with units taught by other lecturers. This may reflect TAFE graduates' view that a TAFE-based culture of teachers providing support to students would be shared by this former TAFE teacher. Six of the students in this subset of our study mentioned a former TAFE teacher by name as a significant supporter.

#### University support services and programs

One student had been involved in a mentor program and, like another student, had tried out, but not persisted with, the 'PASS Class' (Peer Assisted Study Session). Two students had received help with essay skills from the Division of Student Life or the 'skills unit'. Another had taken a helpful 'return to study' unit in a prior enrolment in a different course (which she did not complete). A student with a disability had used a note-taker and accessed the Disability Resource Centre. One student with a disability was disappointed by the complete lack of technical and financial assistance available to students with disabilities to meet their needs. One off-campus student said she missed 'actual interaction' despite Deakin's arrangements for virtual interaction. The low up-take of traditional learning support services by many in the widening participation cohorts is well known and supported by our research;

this is often related to a lack of awareness of their existence or difficulty in access (Devlin et al 2012; Harris & Marlowe, 2011; Lindsay, 2012).

### Support outside of university

Students found support for their learning outside of university. Five of the students said their spouses gave them support in one form or another. For instance, praise and encouragement, financial support while studying or on placement, in one case help with assignments (reading over for grammatical errors) and in another, help with operating the computer. In the case of a student with a disability, the spouse gave significant support with transport to and from campus and taking on an additional share of caring for their children. Several students also made note of their children's support and sacrifices children made in terms of time lost with the studying parent. Some students also found it very helpful to discuss their studies with their placement supervisor or their colleagues at work (many were working in the sector). A small number of students also made note of the support of their workplaces in the form of flexible hours or study leave.

As shown above, many students in our study displayed strong agency in requesting or establishing support, such as peer support, approaching lecturers, talking with work colleagues, and in distinctly fewer cases, using the university study skills unit. Most testified to being well prepared as a learner by their prior TAFE studies.

The TAFE pathway students in this study drew on a range of strengths and supports to navigate their university studies. Consistent with the findings from previous research, the data revealed 'complexities of help seeking' with limited usage by students of help from more formal university avenues (see Clegg, Bradley & Smith 2006, p. 102). This resonates with the framing of students invoking agency through 'situated self-esteem' (Clegg, Bradley & Smith 2006, p.102) preferring relational based peer, family and known lecturer supports, rather than more visible, appointment or tutorial-style formal supports. In making these choices low SES, TAFE pathway background students exercise agency to preserve their esteem and sense of purpose in coming to university.

### **Implications for policy makers**

There are several key implications for policy makers that we wish to highlight and/or discuss in the remainder of this paper. Firstly, the significant issue for staff resourcing presented by the level of requests for one-on-one support reported in this study. Secondly, the implication of the apparent relational basis of students' help-seeking, namely that universities may need to develop forms of learning support that give time and space to developing working relationships with students. Thirdly, potential for recent extensive cuts to TAFE funding in Victoria (AEU 2012) to undermine TAFE capacity to continue with provision of the level of preparedness for transition to university to which students in our study attested. Finally, the need for greater recognition of interdependence between equity in secondary schools, in VET, in HE and in broader society.

The experience of Deakin project team members indicates that many TAFE background students (or pairs or small groups of students) request one-on-one support from academic staff. The lack of recognition in workload allocations of the time required to sustain the level of support and interaction with students who request this is a cause of deep distress for some



staff (DUPPP team data-email). One of Australia's most famous sociologists, Professor Raewyn Connell, argues that the 'performance management, online surveillance systems, and closed decision-making' embedded in corporate style management processes work against academics having the skill, knowledge and time to adequately recognise and support the increased multiplicity of student needs, expectations and experiences in the widening participation era:

Our glossy brochures don't admit this, but around half the undergraduate teaching in Australia is now done by temporary staff... From an educational point of view, it means a mass of teaching done by staff who can't build up the experience, depth of knowledge, or confident relationship with students that are needed for the very best teaching (Connell, 2013, p. 2).

As Devlin et al (2012, p. 34) says, 'No university, to our knowledge, has yet formally acknowledged the extra time required to teach LSES students in workload models.'

The role of prior TAFE studies in supporting the learning of non-traditional and low SES students at university, and the expertise of TAFE teachers and other TAFE student support workers in supporting low SES students deserves recognition in the current push to develop universities' work in this area. Devlin et al's approach – to learn from those with existing expertise, where that expertise is concentrated – is important, and could be enhanced by extending the search for expertise outside of universities. Further, there is a 'broad range of "social" policies that affect the policy and practice of education equity' (Hosken, 2010, p. 2 of 12).

The policy context and financial situation of the TAFE sector in the State in which the project has taken place changed dramatically during the project with the State government announcing extensive funding cuts (Best, 2012). This directly impacted the implementation of project due to increased pressure on TAFE teachers involved in the project. To the extent that this context results in fewer low SES students completing the diploma, recent changes to TAFEs must be recognised as potentially impacting on equity in both TAFE and higher education in this State. As Weelahan (2009, p. 263) has demonstrated, 'Equity in HE cannot be considered independently of equity in VET'.

## **Conclusion**

The findings regarding higher education equity and support for the learning of diverse students presented in this paper are based on a subset of the data gathered in a project that spoke to current TAFE students and current and past university students from a TAFE pathway. The paper has demonstrated how attention to the experiences of students and staff in an institution- and course-specific case can reveal factors which support the success of cohorts of diverse students and that may be more widely applicable. Our study highlights ways in which prior TAFE studies have supported low SES students' learning at university in building academic skills, confidence as learners and a strong foundation of underpinning knowledge. Yet our 'TAFE pathway' cohort still faced financial, personal, family and community-related challenges and for this there was significant reliance on support from lecturers. As discussed in this paper, students' approaches to staff for support are strongly relational. Therefore, strategies which enable relationship development appear as an important factor in meeting the challenges presented by universities' success in widening participation, such as possible increases in attrition.

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