

# Admission into higher education

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Just because our suburb and school have a reputation, does that mean nothing good can come from them? ... We constantly get rejected because we come from the Western suburbs and, eventually, we believe it is our fault that we didn't get in, because we live in the Western suburbs. But it is not our fault and we should never accept that as an excuse to fail or give up.<sup>494</sup>

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Each year, eligible applicants miss out on the offer of a place in higher education. The proportion of applicants selected for admission into a university course varies across different geographical and social groups. Variable success in selection processes therefore helps to explain geographical differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education.

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## The admission process

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The process of admission into higher education begins with the application for a place and concludes when the student commences study. Before being considered for selection, students must meet institutional and course eligibility requirements. Institutional eligibility requirements vary across universities, but typically include completion of the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) or an equivalent qualification, and a minimum standard of competence in English. Some universities make provision for admitting students who do not meet general eligibility requirements in some special circumstances. As well as meeting institutional eligibility requirements, students must also satisfy any relevant course requirements, such as prerequisite VCE subjects. Students who meet both institutional and course requirements do not gain automatic entry, but are eligible to be considered in selection processes.

Student selection is a crucial stage in the higher education admission process. For most undergraduate courses at Australian universities, the pool of eligible applicants is larger than the number of available places in the course. This surplus of eligible applicants necessitates a selection process by which successful students can be chosen from the total pool.

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<sup>494</sup> Mr M. Bertolacci, Senior Leader, Kealba College, Written Submission, March 2008, 2.

In selecting students for admission, universities are guided by a number of underpinning principles. Merit, assessed by reference to prior academic achievement, is a primary principle that guides student selection. This notion of merit is related to the aim of selecting those students who are most likely to succeed in the higher education course. Recognising that disadvantage may have affected prior academic achievement, universities also take account of equity principles in selecting and admitting students. Finally, universities have a stated commitment to fairness, openness and transparency in selection and admission.

Universities' selection and admission practices are also influenced by the broader context of supply of, and demand for, higher education places. Student demand for university places fluctuates over time, and varies considerably between institutions, courses and campuses. At the same time, to remain financially viable, universities must attract students. Hence, while selection and admission can be viewed as a 'screening-out' process in which the most desirable applicants are chosen from a pool of eligible applicants, competition for students also places pressure on universities to actively recruit.<sup>495</sup> This recruitment pressure can influence selection and admission practices, with universities that struggle to fill places broadening selection criteria and opening access opportunities to a wider range of applicants.

Throughout the inquiry, the Committee received evidence about the range of pathways and processes by which students can enter higher education. For current and recent school leavers, the Equivalent National Tertiary Entrance Rank (ENTER) is the dominant selection mechanism, although this is often complemented with other selection tools. A number of students also gains entry to higher education through participation in an enabling program, or on the basis of prior Vocational Education and Training (VET) study.

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## **ENTER-based selection**

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In Victoria, the main mechanism by which school leavers are selected to receive a university offer is the ENTER. The ENTER is a tertiary entrance rank (TER) system that provides a single measure of performance in an applicant's VCE studies. It is important to note that the ENTER is a ranking rather than a score, and represents an individual's performance relative to other students in their cohort. TER systems are also a main selection mechanism in other Australian states.

The precise way in which the ENTER is used in selection varies across institutions and courses. The director of the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre estimated that approximately half of the courses for which the centre administers applications select students on a non-ENTER basis (e.g. an audition or folio), or use the ENTER in conjunction with such mechanisms. For the other 50 per cent of courses, the ENTER is 'pretty much the sole selection criterion'.<sup>496</sup> In these courses, applicants are ranked according to ENTER, and approximately 80 per cent of places are automatically allocated to the applicants at the top of this ranking. The ENTER above which all applicants receive an offer is referred to as the 'clearly-in' ENTER. Applicants with an ENTER below a certain point are then automatically rejected, leaving a 'middle band' of applicants who are considered for the remaining course places. Depending on the university, middle-band applications may be evaluated against a range of criteria, including performance in prerequisite subjects and

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<sup>495</sup> Robert Pascoe, Avril McClelland and Barry McGaw, *Perspectives on Selection Methods for Entry into Higher Education in Australia*, Commissioned Report 55 (Canberra: Higher Education Council, 1997), 1.

<sup>496</sup> Ms E. Wenn, Director, Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 25 February 2008, 3.

consideration of any disadvantage experienced. Middle-band criteria for each course are published in the annual *VTAC Guide*.

### Advantages of ENTER-based selection

The ENTER and other TER systems are an attractive selection mechanism for universities as they are generally seen as a fair measure of prior achievement, as well as a useful predictor of academic success. They are also relatively simple to administer.

#### *Selection based on merit*

Perhaps the most fundamental principle underlying the selection of students is that of merit—the idea that benefits should be directed towards those who display excellence or worth. With regard to higher education, this means that higher education places should be allocated to those who demonstrate academic merit in the form of school grades or other educational achievements.<sup>497</sup>

As a single measure that summarises comparative achievement in year 12 studies, the ENTER facilitates merit-based selection. The ENTER allows universities to use one figure to directly compare students who have completed widely varied combinations of subjects, providing a seemingly objective way of ranking applicants for selection. The Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre has highlighted this point, arguing that without the ENTER, ‘selection would be more complex, less equitable and difficult to administer’.<sup>498</sup> In this way, the ENTER produces selection and admission decisions that are defensible on the grounds of merit—an especially important feature in relation to courses that are in high demand.

#### *Selection of those most likely to succeed*

Closely related to the concept of merit is the central principle of selecting those applicants who appear most likely to succeed in the course. The 2002 Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee publication *Universities and their Students: Principles for the Provision of Education by Australian Universities* states that selection criteria should ‘maintain the university’s academic standards and maximise the likelihood of success’.<sup>499</sup> Most university selection policies and regulations make repeated reference to this principle.

Selecting applicants who appear the most likely to succeed can be justified on a number of grounds. Importantly, it promotes the most efficient use of resources, reducing the wastage that occurs when students commence but do not complete a qualification. Selecting students on this principle might also be seen as the most ethical way of treating applicants who are not well-suited to the academic pathway. This point was highlighted by two representatives of the university sector, who argued that selecting and admitting students who lack the requisite capabilities does them a disservice by setting them up for failure.<sup>500</sup>

The ENTER has been shown to be a reasonably reliable, if imperfect, predictor of success in higher education. Its use is in line with the important selection principle of allocating

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<sup>497</sup> Professor R. James, Director, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 3 March 2008, 11–12.

<sup>498</sup> Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre, *ENTER into Tertiary Study: A Guide to the Equivalent National Tertiary Entrance Rank* (Melbourne: VTAC, 2004), 6.

<sup>499</sup> Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee, *Universities and their Students: Principles for the Provision of Education by Australian Universities* (Canberra: AVCC, 2002), 3.

<sup>500</sup> Mr M. Gallagher, Executive Director, Group of Eight, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Canberra, 17 June 2008, 3; Professor R. Larkins, Chair, Universities Australia, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 3 March 2009, 23.

places to those most likely to succeed. This argument in favour of the ENTER has been set out by the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre:

The ENTER makes the selection process manageable, and is needed simply on practical grounds. However, for a great many courses, there is another reason for its use. Generally, overall performance in the VCE is a good indicator of future tertiary success, and course selection officers are trying to pick students who are most likely to succeed.<sup>501</sup>

Indeed, a number of studies over many years have found academic performance in year 12 to be a good predictor of success in higher education. Studies specifically examining the usefulness of the ENTER as a predictor of student performance have also tended to show a positive correlation between ENTER and university performance.<sup>502</sup> Looking at students at the University of Western Australia, one study found that students' entry scores were a strong predictor of success, with a one percentage point increase in TER resulting in a one percentage point increase in first year marks.<sup>503</sup> Another study analysed the results of 12,543 domestic, full-time Monash University students in their first year of study (2000 to 2003) to examine the relationships between ENTER, school sector and university performance. In line with the findings from earlier studies, it found a strong linear correlation between university performance and year 12 achievement with ENTERs of 80 and above, although the correlation below this point was negligible.<sup>504</sup> It also found that ENTERs are a better predictor of success in some disciplines than in others. While ENTERs were found to be good for predicting success in the fields of engineering, agriculture and science, they were weaker in the health and education fields.<sup>505</sup>

### Limitations of ENTER-based selection

Despite its strengths, the ENTER has been subject to criticism on equity grounds. This is because the ENTER reflects geographical and socioeconomic differences in academic achievement at school, and therefore reduces access to higher education for prospective students from particular areas and groups. This was acknowledged in the Review of Australian Higher Education, which noted that heavy reliance on the ENTER as a selection mechanism has tended to replicate the existing student profile.<sup>506</sup>

### *Socioeconomic differences in average ENTER*

Research has consistently found that students from higher socioeconomic status backgrounds tend to achieve higher ENTERs. One 2001 study used data from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth to investigate the relationships between ENTER and socioeconomic status, examining parental occupational status, parental education, family wealth and a composite socioeconomic status measure. The study found positive correlations between ENTER and socioeconomic status on all four measures.<sup>507</sup>

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<sup>501</sup> Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre, *ENTER into Tertiary Study: A Guide to the Equivalent National Tertiary Entrance Rank* (Melbourne: VTAC, 2004), 6.

<sup>502</sup> Several of these studies are reviewed in Ian R. Dobson and Eric Skuja, 'Secondary Schooling, Tertiary Entry Ranks and University Performance,' *People and Place* 13, no. 1 (2005) and in Elisa Rose Birch and Paul W. Miller, 'Tertiary Entrance Scores: can we do better?' *Educational Research and Perspectives* 34, no. 2 (2007).

<sup>503</sup> Elisa Rose Birch and Paul W. Miller, 'The Influence of Type of High School Attended on University Performance,' *Australian Economic Papers* 46, no. 1 (2007): 9.

<sup>504</sup> Ian R. Dobson and Eric Skuja, 'Secondary Schooling, Tertiary Entry Ranks and University Performance,' *People and Place* 13, no. 1 (2005): 55–56.

<sup>505</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>506</sup> Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report* (Canberra: DEEWR, 2008), 38.

<sup>507</sup> Gary N. Marks and others, *Tertiary Entrance Performance: The Role of Student Background and School Factors*, Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research Report 22 (Camberwell: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2001), 15–18.

Related to socioeconomic status, there are also marked differences in average ENTER across school sectors. A study of Victorian school leavers in 2000 found that the median ENTER for students from independent schools was 84.20, in comparison with 69.95 at Catholic schools and 62.80 for government school students.<sup>508</sup> More recent studies show this disparity continues. Similar differences have also been observed in other Australian states.<sup>509</sup>

On this topic, two participants drew the Committee's attention to recent research that used greater Melbourne as a case study to examine the relationship between competition for and access to university places for disadvantaged students.<sup>510</sup> The research found that between 1996 and 2004, the number of offers made to school leavers declined, while the number of students completing senior secondary school increased. This increase in competition for places led to a rise in entry requirements at universities that had traditionally been more academically accessible, meaning that students with university aspirations who were unable to achieve a high ENTER in 2004 were less likely to gain access than similar students in 1996. The analysis found that this dynamic impacted disproportionately on students from government schools and low socioeconomic status areas.<sup>511</sup>

Investigation of school sector differences in ENTER have also highlighted concerns about the usefulness of the ENTER as a predictor of success. Various studies have found that once admitted, students from government schools do better than would be expected on the basis of ENTER.<sup>512</sup> One study of Monash University undergraduates estimated that students from non-selective government schools performed at a similar level as students from Catholic and independent schools who attained an ENTER five points higher.<sup>513</sup>

These relationships between socioeconomic status, achievement and ENTER were also widely acknowledged by inquiry participants.<sup>514</sup> The lower average ENTER achieved by students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds suggests that access to higher education will be restricted for this group. It also indicates that students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds who gain admission to university will not be as well represented in more prestigious institutions with higher entry thresholds. This was acknowledged by Mr Michael Gallagher, Executive Director, Group of Eight, who remarked on the implications for member universities:

... when you look at school success, educational attainment in school, which correlates pretty much with student readiness which correlates pretty much with parental means, the Group of Eight draws disproportionately from the more affluent families. We are conscious of that.<sup>515</sup>

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<sup>508</sup> Cited in Ian R. Dobson and Eric Skuja, 'Secondary Schooling, Tertiary Entry Ranks and University Performance,' *People and Place* 13, no. 1 (2005): 53–54.

<sup>509</sup> Gary N. Marks, 'School sector differences in tertiary entrance: Improving the educational outcomes of government schools' *Australian Social Monitor* 7, no. 2 (2004): 43.

<sup>510</sup> Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development (Victoria), Written Submission, May 2008, 12–13; Dr J. Oriel, Head, Student Equity Unit, Deakin University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 52.

<sup>511</sup> Daniel Edwards, 'What happens when supply lags behind demand? Disadvantaged students and the ever-increasing competition for university places,' *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 30, no. 1 (2008): 3–13.

<sup>512</sup> A number of these studies are reviewed in Ian R. Dobson and Eric Skuja, 'Secondary Schooling, Tertiary Entry Ranks and University Performance,' *People and Place* 13, no. 1 (2005): 56–57.

<sup>513</sup> Ian R. Dobson and Eric Skuja, 'Secondary Schooling, Tertiary Entry Ranks and University Performance,' *People and Place* 13, no. 1 (2005): 59.

<sup>514</sup> For example, Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development (Victoria), Written Submission, May 2008, 12; Mr D. Conley, Youth Services Coordinator, Mornington Peninsula Shire Council, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Rosebud, 12 May 2008, 5; Mr T. Barton, Careers Coordinator, Orbest Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Bairnsdale, 20 May 2008, 40; Mr G. McLean, General Manager, Youth Transitions Division, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (Victoria), Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 23 July 2008, 4; Gippsland Education Precinct, Written Submission, May 2008, 3.

<sup>515</sup> Mr M. Gallagher, Executive Director, Group of Eight, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Canberra, 17 June 2008, 3.

## *Inquiry into Geographical Differences in Participation in Higher Education in Victoria*

The Committee also heard from one school captain who expressed her frustration and resentment with this situation, comparing herself and her classmates to students from wealthier families and stating 'we want the marks and universities they get'.<sup>516</sup>

### *Geographical differences in average ENTER*

Schools, students, universities, researchers and others who participated in the inquiry also highlighted the lower average ENTERs attained in non-metropolitan Victoria.<sup>517</sup> The Committee also heard that students from the interface municipalities achieve lower ENTERs.<sup>518</sup> Data from the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) confirms these observations, showing substantial differences in average ENTER attained in metropolitan, interface and non-metropolitan areas of Victoria (refer Table 5.1).

Table 5.1: School leaver ENTER distribution, by home location (%) (2007–08)

	<10	10s	20s	30s	40s	50s	60s	70s	80s	90s
Metropolitan	2.5	2.6	2.5	7.5	10.1	11.8	13.2	14.4	16.2	19.1
Interface	4.6	4.2	3.7	11.1	13.8	15.3	15.7	12.5	11.3	7.8
Non-metropolitan	2.7	3.0	3.3	10.3	14.3	14.6	15.9	15.0	12.3	8.5
All Victoria	3.0	3.1	2.9	8.9	12.0	13.2	14.4	14.2	14.2	14.1

Source: Education and Training Committee analysis of 2007–08 VTAC data, May 2009.

In 2007, year 12 completers from metropolitan areas were over-represented in the highest ENTER bands, with almost one-fifth of the cohort (19.1%) attaining an ENTER in the 90s. The percentage in this band was much lower in both interface (7.8%) and non-metropolitan (8.5%) areas. For non-metropolitan areas, the largest percentage of students fell in the ENTER bands of the 60s (15.9%) and 70s (15.0%), while in the interface areas, the largest percentages achieved ENTERs in the 50s (15.3%) and 60s (15.7%). Larger percentages of students from the non-metropolitan and, particularly, the interface areas received an ENTER of less than 30.

As discussed in Chapter 2, university applicants from interface areas had lower offer rates than university applicants in either metropolitan or non-metropolitan areas. It can be surmised from VTAC data that lower average ENTERs on the part of students from these areas is largely responsible for this low offer rate. Students from interface areas may also be disadvantaged because they are competing for places at the same universities and in the same courses as higher achieving metropolitan applicants. This highlights the point that access to higher education requires both academic and geographical accessibility.<sup>519</sup>

In contrast to interface applicants, university applicants from non-metropolitan Victoria have access to less competitive entry at non-metropolitan campuses, and receive offers at a similar rate to their metropolitan counterparts. Nevertheless, lower average ENTERs among non-metropolitan students will limit access to high-demand courses and institutions.

<sup>516</sup> Ms D. Hamoud, School Captain, Isik College, Written Submission, March 2008, 1.

<sup>517</sup> For example, Ms K. Leadbeater, Second Year Student, RMIT University, Written Submission, April 2008, 2; RMIT University, Written Submission, March 2008, 2; Deakin University, Written Submission, March 2008, 6; Gippsland Education Precinct, Written Submission, May 2008, 4; Mr R. Juratowitch, Campus Principal, Kurnai College, Gippsland Education Precinct, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Churchill, 19 May 2008, 4; Ms R. Moore, Student, RMIT University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 23 March 2009, 4–5; Orbost Secondary College, Written Submission, May 2008, 1, 4; Mr P. Dryden, Written Submission, May 2008, 2; Australian Council for Educational Research, Written Submission, March 2008, 2.

<sup>518</sup> Human Services Directors of the Interface Councils, Written Submission, May 2008, 5.

<sup>519</sup> Daniel Edwards, 'Keeping it local: geographical patterns of university attendance,' *Australian Universities Review* 51, no. 1 (2009): 69.

## Improving equity in ENTER-based selection

Underlying the calculation and use of the ENTER is the assumption that VCE students compete on a level playing field.<sup>520</sup> Participants in the Committee's inquiry, however, questioned this assumption, highlighting some of the factors that may make it more difficult for students from under-represented areas and groups to attain high ENTERs. In particular, participants suggested that achievement in the VCE can be affected by the range of subjects offered and the academic environment within a school, opportunities to participate in extension and revision activities, and a range of personal barriers to achievement (refer Chapter 3 for further discussion of these issues).

Most universities have recognised the impact of previous educational disadvantage by incorporating equity considerations into their selection practices. The Committee considered two key approaches taken by universities to improve equity in ENTER-based selection. The first approach is to recognise and compensate for any disadvantage experienced, through modifications to ENTER-based selection. In Victoria, the Special Entry Access Scheme (SEAS) is the main mechanism for re-ranking and the allocation of 'bonus' points. In the second approach, universities complement the use of the ENTER with other selection tools, such as aptitude testing or recommendation-based selection. The Committee considered the potential of each of these approaches to make ENTER-based selection more equitable. A third approach to addressing inequities reflected in the ENTER involves implementing strategies to lift achievement at school, as discussed in Chapter 3.

### *Special Entry Access Scheme*

The Special Entry Access Scheme is an umbrella program, administered by the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre, which enables applicants to apply for a range of special entry and scholarship schemes at participating universities. The Special Entry Access Scheme incorporates two distinct schemes: Equity and Access and Year 11/12 Special Consideration. Equity and Access deals with longer-term educational disadvantage, while Year 11/12 Special Consideration targets applicants who experienced adverse circumstances during year 11 and/or 12 which have impacted on the applicant's ENTER.<sup>521</sup> SEAS applicants provide a written statement and/or documentary evidence demonstrating either long-term educational disadvantage and/or factors that have impacted on year 11 and/or 12 results. This information is examined by the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre, which assesses the level of disadvantage experienced and its impact on the applicant. These VTAC determinations are forwarded to institutions which may take them into consideration in selection decisions.<sup>522</sup>

Typically, information from SEAS applications is used in selection as part of the middle-band process described above.<sup>523</sup> It appears that some universities apply 'bonus' points to the ENTER of SEAS applicants, while others may simply re-rank middle band applicants based on information from the SEAS application. Some universities, including RMIT University, the University of Melbourne and Monash University, publish information for each course in the *VTAC Guide* as to whether SEAS applications are considered for middle-band selection to

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<sup>520</sup> Daniel Edwards, 'What happens when supply lags behind demand? Disadvantaged students and the ever-increasing competition for university places,' *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 30, no. 1 (2008): 6.

<sup>521</sup> Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre, *Special Entry Access Schemes: SEAS* (Melbourne: VTAC, 2008), 3.

<sup>522</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>523</sup> Dr J. Oriel, Head, Student Equity Unit, Deakin University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 56.

the course. For some other institutions and courses, it is unclear how SEAS information is used.

Evidence received by the Committee suggests that there is strong awareness of the Special Entry Access Scheme amongst upper secondary school staff and students. This is reflected in the high number of SEAS applications received by the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (refer Table 5.2).

Table 5.2: SEAS applications received by the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (2006–07 and 2007–08)

Component	Category	Number of applications	
		2006–07	2007–08
Year 12 Special Consideration		1,607	1,749
Equity and Access		9,124	10,437
	Mature age	1,068	980
	Non-English Speaking Background	700	873
	Indigenous	63	74
	Family circumstances	1,636	2,051
	Disadvantaged socioeconomic background	1,981	1,976
	Rural/Isolated	3,973	4,650
	Under-represented schools	2,035	3,197
	Women in non-traditional courses	87	102
	Disability/long term medical condition	1,123	1,170

Note: The total number of applications made under the various Equity and Access categories does not match the total for the Equity and Access component of SEAS as applicants can apply under multiple categories.

Source: Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (unpublished).

For the 2007–08 year, there were 10,437 applications made under the Equity and Access component of the scheme. Under this component, categories most often listed by applicants were: Rural/isolated; Under-represented schools; Family circumstances; and Disadvantaged socioeconomic background. A further 1,749 applications were made for Year 12 Special Consideration.<sup>524</sup>

While interest in the Special Entry Access Scheme among university applicants is strong, the Committee found it difficult to assess the effectiveness of the scheme. Published information about how SEAS information will be used in selection and the degree to which it increases the applicant's chances of selection is generally vague. Neither the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre nor participating universities publish the number or proportion of applicants who receive an offer on the basis of their SEAS application.

The Committee sought information about the outcomes of SEAS applications directly from universities, receiving a range of figures that are not directly comparable across universities. Monash University provided the most detailed information about the number of SEAS applicants and the outcomes of their applications over the period 2007 to 2009 (refer Table 5.3).

<sup>524</sup> Note that there will be some overlap between the 'Year 12 Special Consideration' and 'Equity and Access' applicants, as applicants can apply for both categories.

Table 5.3: SEAS applications and outcomes at Monash University (2007 to 2009)

Year	Total SEAS applicants	Received SEAS bonus	Total SEAS applicant offers	SEAS applicant offers due to SEAS	Total SEAS applicants enrolled or deferred
2007	4,469	3,391	1,172	257	240
2008	4,981	3,864	1,406	433	1,084
2009	5,238	3,596	Not yet available	Approx. 400	Not yet available

Source: Supplementary information provided by Monash University, March 2009.

As shown in Table 5.3, a majority of SEAS applicants to Monash University received a bonus due to that application (68.6% in 2009). However, a relatively small percentage received an offer due to their SEAS application that they would not otherwise have received: 5.7 per cent of SEAS applicants in 2007 and 8.7 per cent in 2008. The large majority of SEAS applicants who were offered a place at Monash University would have received their offer even without making a SEAS application. Of all SEAS applicants to Monash University in 2008, a total of 1,084 (approximately 21%) enrolled or deferred a place at the university. Information from the University of Melbourne indicates that approximately 21 per cent of offers for undergraduate Commonwealth supported places were made to SEAS applicants in 2009.<sup>525</sup> However, it is unclear what proportion of these students would have received these offers regardless of their SEAS application.

Also of note is the proportion of offers to SEAS applicants across different campuses of the same institution. At Deakin University, for example, in 2008 and 2009, SEAS offers as a proportion of Commonwealth supported place offers were highest at the Warrnambool campus and lowest at the Burwood campus in Melbourne.<sup>526</sup> This is likely to reflect, at least in part, the characteristics of the population catchments surrounding each campus. For example, students living in and around Warrnambool are eligible to make a SEAS application based on rural location alone. However, this data may also indicate a greater willingness among universities to embrace special entry provisions in areas with lower student demand.

Some participants in the Committee's inquiry suggested a more systematic award of ENTER loading or 'bonus points' for VCE students from non-metropolitan areas. The Gippsland Education Precinct argued that all universities should be required to have special entry schemes whereby students from non-metropolitan locations receive an ENTER bonus.<sup>527</sup> Such a scheme is in place at Charles Sturt University, where applicants from regional Australia receive an automatic 5 point TER bonus.<sup>528</sup> The Committee heard suggestions that such bonus points should be given in recognition of the effects of more limited subject choice and lack of access to extension and revision opportunities in non-metropolitan areas.<sup>529</sup> The Committee also heard the view that students who have completed their VCE in non-metropolitan areas have a greater capacity to succeed than is indicated by their ENTER.<sup>530</sup>

<sup>525</sup> Supplementary information provided by the University of Melbourne, March 2009.

<sup>526</sup> Supplementary information provided by Deakin University, March 2009.

<sup>527</sup> Gippsland Education Precinct, Written Submission, May 2008, 4.

<sup>528</sup> Professor R. Chambers, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Academic, Charles Sturt University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Benalla, 3 March 2009, 48.

<sup>529</sup> Ms S. Wills, Year 11 Student, Ouyen Secondary College, Written Submission, April 2008, 2; Ms T. Wilson-Brown, Parent, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Bairnsdale, 20 May 2008, 20.

<sup>530</sup> Ms M. Barton, Parent, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Bairnsdale, 20 May 2008, 28–29; Ms C. Alphey, Deputy President, MONSU Peninsula, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Rosebud, 12 May 2008, 32.

The Committee believes that the Special Entry Access Scheme is an important modification to ENTER-based selection, providing access to higher education to some disadvantaged applicants who would not otherwise have received offers. The Committee urges the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre and the universities to take a more consistent and transparent approach to implementation of the scheme. This would mean ensuring that any ENTER bonuses awarded by an institution are applied by that institution consistently across all courses and campuses. In the Committee's view, there can be little justification for acknowledging an individual's experience of disadvantage for one course, while disregarding it for another.

Additionally, the Committee believes that where ENTER bonuses are awarded, universities should provide clear and specific information about the magnitude of these bonuses (the maximum number of points, for example) and the point in the selection process at which they are applied. If information from SEAS applications is to be used as part of the middle-band process, applicants should be aware of how it is weighted against other middle-band criteria. Currently, information is vague, such as an indication that such applications 'will' or 'may' be considered as part of the middle-band process.<sup>531</sup> Transparency is an important selection principle for universities, meaning that selection principles and criteria should be stated clearly and openly.<sup>532</sup> By providing more specific information about the use of SEAS applications, universities can improve transparency in the selection process.

While recognising universities' attempts to address educational disadvantage, several school-based participants highlighted the substantial time and effort demanded of career educators, students and parents in applying for the Special Entry Access Scheme and other alternative entry programs.<sup>533</sup> One career educator described the scheme as 'the most time-consuming and unwieldy feature of kids applying for higher education'.<sup>534</sup> The Committee believes that more specific information and greater transparency will help students to make a realistic assessment of their chances of gaining entry to a particular course and the value of making a SEAS application.

## **Complements to ENTER-based selection**

Another way in which universities have sought to make ENTER-based selection more equitable is by complementing it with other mechanisms. Through mechanisms such as recommendation-based selection and aptitude testing, universities consider a wider range of ways in which an applicant might demonstrate the capacity to succeed.

### ***Recommendation-based selection***

In recent years, recommendation-based entry schemes have been developed as an alternative selection process for some school leaver applicants. Recommendation-based entry relies on teacher or principal assessment of the student's capacity to succeed at

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<sup>531</sup> Based on a review of information contained in Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre, *VTAC Guide 2009: A guide to tertiary courses* (Melbourne: VTAC, 2008).

<sup>532</sup> Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, *Universities and their Students: Principles for the Provision of Education by Australian Universities* (Canberra: AVCC, 2002), 2.

<sup>533</sup> Orbst Secondary College, Written Submission, May 2008, 2; Ms C. Torpey, Careers Coordinator, Ouyen Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Ouyen, 3 June 2008, 5; Mr G. Cameron, Managed Individual Pathways Coordinator, Sunshine College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Sunshine, 12 August 2008, 6; Ms M. O'Shea, Careers Coordinator, Copperfield College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Sunshine, 12 August 2008, 7.

<sup>534</sup> Ms C. Torpey, Careers Coordinator, Ouyen Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Ouyen, 3 June 2008, 5.

university. Recommendation-based schemes form part of several Australian universities' access strategies. In Victoria, these include: Schools Access La Trobe (SALT) at La Trobe University; the Regional Education Entry Program at the University of Ballarat; the Portfolio Partnership Program at Victoria University; and the Schools Network Access Program (SNAP) at RMIT University.

Recommendation-based selection schemes generally target students at schools that are selected by universities on the basis of low socioeconomic status area, low rate of transition to higher education, and/or the institution's mission to serve a particular region. Applicants provide a statement detailing their interest in the course, their achievements and extracurricular activities. This is supported by a teacher's or principal's assessment of the applicant's ability to succeed in the course. While such schemes facilitate selection on a non-ENTER basis, generally students must nevertheless satisfactorily complete year 12, meet a minimum ENTER threshold and satisfy any prerequisites or additional requirements. Subject to later meeting these requirements, successful applicants generally receive a provisional offer in November or December.

RMIT University's Schools Network Access Program was mentioned during the inquiry by a number of participants who considered the program to be effective in broadening access to higher education.<sup>535</sup> Orbost Secondary College labelled the program 'an unqualified success in terms of uptake and completion'.<sup>536</sup> Ms Kate Leadbeater, an RMIT University student and former school captain at Yea High School, received her place at university through the program:

The awarding of my SNAP place at RMIT University means I have a place in a course with a required ENTER 13 points higher than the ENTER I achieved. Despite this, I am incredibly pleased with my results that indicate I am achieving at a level as high or higher than the students who achieved the required ENTER score. Across the State there are year 12 students missing out on university places because they haven't achieved the required ENTER. For students from rural and regional schools this can be a result of circumstances beyond their control.<sup>537</sup>

Ms Leadbeater applauded the Schools Network Access Program and suggested that similar schemes be replicated at other under-represented schools.<sup>538</sup> The Victorian Farmers Federation also argued for the expansion of recommendation-based entry programs as a means of expanding access to higher education for rural and regional young people.<sup>539</sup>

The Committee reviewed information about the performance of students admitted through recommendation-based entry programs. A report on the 2004 Schools Network Access Program intake found that on average, the 602 students who were admitted via the program performed at a slightly lower level than their counterparts: 16 per cent of results received by SNAP-entry students were failing grades, compared to 12 per cent of all domestic undergraduate results at the university.<sup>540</sup>

On the other hand, a recent Universities Australia review of access and equity programs included a case study of one particularly successful scheme, which had seen the proportion of low socioeconomic background students at the university increase approximately four per

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<sup>535</sup> For example, Orbost Secondary College, Written Submission, May 2008, 7; Ms K. Leadbeater, Second Year Student, RMIT University, Written Submission, April 2008, 3, 4; Mr G. Cameron, Managed Individual Pathways Coordinator, Sunshine College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Sunshine, 12 August 2008, 7.

<sup>536</sup> Orbost Secondary College, Written Submission, May 2008, 7.

<sup>537</sup> Ms K. Leadbeater, Second Year Student, RMIT University, Written Submission, April 2008, 3.

<sup>538</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>539</sup> Victorian Farmers Federation, Written Submission, March 2008, 5.

<sup>540</sup> RMIT University, *RMIT Schools Network Access Program Report 2003/04* (Melbourne: Academic Registrar, RMIT University, 2004), 5.

cent over a few years. Comparison of students' academic outcomes indicated comparable success rates to those of other students.<sup>541</sup> On the basis of this limited evidence, it is not possible to draw any definitive conclusions about the success of students admitted via recommendation-based programs. However, results from existing programs indicate that they have the potential to select students who do as well, or nearly as well, as other students.

In summary, the Committee believes that recommendation-based entry is a useful alternative to traditional ENTER-based selection for some groups of students. This selection method enables universities to select school leavers who have a capacity to succeed that is not necessarily reflected in their ENTER. By specifically targeting schools with low transition into higher education, recommendation-based schemes can enhance access for students from under-represented groups and areas. Recommendation-based schemes may be particularly beneficial for students seeking entry to popular courses in which high 'clearly-in' ENTERs reflect strong student demand, rather than the difficulty of the course. This is because unlike the Special Entry Access Scheme, recommendation-based entry may result in the selection of students with ENTERs substantially below the 'clearly-in' ENTER. The Committee therefore encourages universities to extend recommendation-based entry schemes for students from under-represented areas and groups.

### *Aptitude testing*

Aptitude testing plays a role in student selection for some courses and some types of applicant at most universities. Aptitude testing can provide useful information for selection decisions where information about prior academic achievement is not available. For example, the Special Tertiary Admissions Test assesses critical thinking, understanding and written communication skills for mature age students who do not have recent educational results or qualifications. Aptitude testing as a complementary selection tool can also allow universities to assess specific skills or qualities relevant to a particular course. For example, the Undergraduate Medical Admissions Test is a cognitive ability test developed to determine aptitude for study in health science, and is used by both Monash University and the University of Melbourne as a component of the selection process. In another example, Deakin University uses a custom admissions test as part of selection to its law degrees.

Aptitude testing may also be used specifically as an equity measure for school leaver applicants. Some Victorian universities have recently begun using results from the General Achievement Test (GAT), a test of general knowledge and skills undertaken during VCE studies, as part of middle-band selection processes.<sup>542</sup> In some cases, consideration of GAT results may be restricted to students who have made a SEAS application.

A representative of the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) advised the Committee that complementing traditional selection methods with aptitude testing may help universities to identify 'hidden talent'.<sup>543</sup> For this purpose, ACER has developed and piloted UniTEST, a test which assesses the generic reasoning and thinking skills that underpin

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<sup>541</sup> Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne, for Universities Australia, *Participation and Equity: A review of the participation in higher education of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds and Indigenous people* (Melbourne: CSHE, 2008), 63.

<sup>542</sup> For example, Monash University, 'Monash trials use of GAT for middle band selection,' Monash University, <http://www.monash.edu.au/news/newsline/story/1241> (accessed 29 June 2009); La Trobe University, 'General Achievement Test,' La Trobe University, <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/study/apply/undergraduate-study/general-achievement-test> (accessed 29 June 2009).

<sup>543</sup> Dr H. Coates, Principal Research Fellow, Australian Council for Educational Research, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 3 March 2008, 4.

successful study at the higher education level. UniTEST has been developed as a complement to traditional TER selection methods to facilitate selection of school leavers who otherwise may not have gained a place, potentially including students from groups usually under-represented in higher education.<sup>544</sup> UniTEST is still being trialled, and research is also beginning into the relationship between uniTEST results and first year undergraduate achievement.<sup>545</sup>

While welcoming a broadening of university selection processes, the Committee notes that aptitude testing may have limited usefulness as an equity strategy. GAT scores are known to be positively correlated with socioeconomic status. As reported for On Track, almost half (47.2%) of the highest quartile of GAT achievers are from the highest socioeconomic status group, while just 10.9 per cent of top GAT achievers are from the lowest socioeconomic status group.<sup>546</sup> Similarly, preliminary analysis of uniTEST's validity, based on UK data, indicates that students from more advantaged backgrounds and with higher achievement at school tend to score more highly on the test, although there are students from deprived areas and who are not in the top group of school achievers who attain high uniTEST scores.<sup>547</sup> Experience with aptitude testing in the United States and Canada has also shown that test design and greater access to tutoring has seen high socioeconomic status students more likely to achieve high scores.<sup>548</sup> It therefore appears that, at least in relation to the socioeconomic and geographical backgrounds of selected students, aptitude testing will tend to produce a similar result to ENTER-based selection.

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### Enabling programs

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Enabling programs (also referred to as 'foundation', 'preparatory' or 'bridging' courses or programs) are one or two semester courses that help to prepare students for higher education study. At the same time, enabling programs allow prospective students to demonstrate their potential to succeed through their achievement in the course, thereby gaining entry to a degree program.

The following enabling courses are currently offered within Victoria: Foundation for Academic Studies (FAST) program at the University of Ballarat; the University Bridging Program at La Trobe University's Wodonga campus; and the Diploma of Tertiary Studies at Monash University's Gippsland and Berwick campuses. The Committee received a great deal of positive evidence about the Diploma of Tertiary Studies. The Committee also heard about enabling programs run by the University of Newcastle in New South Wales. With its Open Foundation and Newstep courses, the university is Australia's biggest provider of publicly funded enabling programs.<sup>549</sup> These programs are recognised as among the best in the country.<sup>550</sup>

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<sup>544</sup> Australian Council for Educational Research, 'uniTEST – Four universities take part in a national student aptitude test trial,' ACER, <http://www.acer.edu.au/1/index.php/news-item/unistest> (accessed 9 January 2009).

<sup>545</sup> Australian Council for Educational Research, 'uniTEST: Research,' uniTEST, [http://unistest.acer.edu.au/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=blogcategory&id=26&Itemid=51](http://unistest.acer.edu.au/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=26&Itemid=51) (accessed 22 May 2009).

<sup>546</sup> Sheldon Rothman and others, *The On Track Survey 2008: The Destinations of School Leavers in Victoria; Statewide Report* (Melbourne: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009), 27.

<sup>547</sup> Cambridge Assessment and the Australian Council for Educational Research, *Initial Report on Phase Two of the uniTEST Validity Study* (n.p.: Cambridge Assessment and ACER, 2006), 17–18.

<sup>548</sup> Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report* (Canberra: DEEWR, 2008), 38.

<sup>549</sup> University of Newcastle, *Submission to the Review of Australian Higher Education* (Canberra: Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008), 1.

<sup>550</sup> Professor R. James, Director, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 3 March 2008, 15; Ms G. London, Academic Director, University of Canberra, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Canberra, 17 June 2008, 33.

## **Characteristics of enabling programs**

Enabling programs share the common aim of providing alternative entry into higher education while building academic skills. At the same time, the Committee found that eligibility and admissions processes, content and the subsequent pathway into further studies varies between enabling programs.

### *Eligibility and admission*

Eligibility criteria and application and selection processes for enabling programs vary, but are generally grounded in the principle of selecting students who demonstrate a potential to succeed in higher education. In the University of Ballarat's FAST program, this capacity to succeed is assessed at an interview.

While enabling programs are generally designed and viewed as equity measures, membership of a designated equity group is not typically required for eligibility. During the application process, applicants generally have an opportunity to outline any circumstances that have impacted on their prior academic achievement. This information is taken into account in selection decisions.

For most of the programs the Committee examined, year 12 completion is not a prerequisite for entry. In fact, some programs, such as the University Bridging Program at La Trobe University, specifically target students who have not completed year 12. The University of Ballarat and the University of Newcastle both state that applicants should have capabilities approximately equivalent to year 10.

Eligibility requirements for the Diploma of Tertiary Studies are stricter, perhaps reflecting the higher entry standards of Monash University generally. To be eligible, students need to have successfully completed the VCE, achieving a minimum ENTER of 50. In addition, eligible applicants will have achieved a minimum study score of 25 in VCE English, with additional subject prerequisites for some degrees. Prospective students make a direct application for a Diploma of Tertiary Studies pathway into their preferred undergraduate degree, detailing their reasons for applying, their academic interests and career aspirations, as well as any disruptions to their studies. Additionally, applicants supply two references and a report from their school which describes the applicant's characteristics and educational achievements.

### *Content of enabling programs*

Enabling programs are designed to build students' skills in research and information literacy, critical analysis, project development, academic writing and oral presentation. Most enabling programs contain core units of study focused on the development of these skills. These core units are often combined with elective discipline-based units that offer an introduction to specific fields of study. In Monash University's Diploma of Tertiary Studies, these discipline-based units are chosen from standard undergraduate units. More often, units are specific to the enabling program. Some enabling programs, such as Open Foundation at the University of Newcastle, consist entirely of elective units, although the university advises students on the combinations of units considered most helpful for success in different undergraduate degree programs. Figure 5.1 shows the units that comprise the enabling programs that the Committee examined.

Figure 5.1: Units in selected enabling programs

<b>Diploma of Tertiary Studies, Monash University</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding University Learning</li> <li>• Discipline-based electives (x6)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge and Context</li> </ul>
<b>Foundation for Academic Studies, University of Ballarat</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction to Tertiary Study</li> <li>• Oral Communication and Presentation Skills</li> <li>• Mathematics and Introductory Statistics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research and Information Literacy</li> <li>• Academic Writing</li> <li>• Using Computers and the Internet</li> </ul>
<b>Newstep, University of Newcastle</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• English: Literacy and Communication</li> <li>• Discipline-based electives (x6)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• English: Reading, Writing, Research</li> </ul>
<b>Open Foundation, University of Newcastle</b>	
Electives such as:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foundation Concepts for Chemistry and Life Sciences</li> <li>• Basic Quantitative Methodology</li> <li>• Social Enquiry</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aboriginal Studies</li> <li>• Studies in Law</li> <li>• English Literature and Film</li> </ul>
<b>University Bridging Program, La Trobe University</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction to Adult Learning</li> <li>• Introduction to Maths</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction to Social Science</li> <li>• Introduction to Science</li> </ul>

Source: Compiled by the Education and Training Committee based on analysis of program websites, 16 June 2009.

In addition to specific academic skills, enabling programs support students to develop broader skills and attributes. Graded assessment and study loads are generally similar or equivalent to undergraduate units, encouraging the development of self-discipline and organisational and time management skills. Students have an opportunity to familiarise themselves with the range of courses and services available at the university, and to develop an understanding of expected academic standards in higher education. For those who are unsure of their career and study direction, participation in an enabling program is an opportunity to explore academic options and confirm the decision to undertake university study.

### *Admission to degree programs*

While all enabling programs facilitate entry into an undergraduate degree program, selection and admission processes differ substantially. Students who successfully complete Open Foundation or Newstep programs at the University of Newcastle have a Universities Admission Index (UAI, equivalent to the ENTER) calculated on the basis of their achievement in the course. Open Foundation students can attain a UAI of up to 99, while the highest possible UAI for Newstep graduates is 93. Using this UAI, students can apply for admission to any University of Newcastle undergraduate degree (with the exception of Medicine), as well as courses at most other Australian universities.

As noted, a key feature differentiating Monash University's Diploma of Tertiary Studies from other enabling programs is that students undertake units from the degree at the same time as completing the diploma's academic skills units. After satisfactory completion of the first year of study, the students then move directly into the second year of their degree. A representative of the university told the Committee that this structure means that Diploma of

Tertiary Studies students 'do not feel any different from people who have come in via the normal pathway'.<sup>551</sup>

At the University of Ballarat, students who successfully complete the FAST program are guaranteed entry into one of the university's undergraduate programs. Students make a direct application and receive an offer in the university's early offer round. In 2008, 80 per cent of students successfully completed the program, and 72 per cent were then offered a place in an undergraduate course.<sup>552</sup>

### **Benefits of enabling programs**

As a selection and admission process, enabling programs have particular strengths. Rather than simply facilitating entry, these courses enable students to enhance their skills, confidence and familiarity with the university environment. This is generally thought to increase the likelihood of successful degree completion.

A study of the Diploma of Foundation Studies (the predecessor to the Diploma of Tertiary Studies) examined the outcomes for students admitted over four years from 2000 to 2003.<sup>553</sup> All diploma students had lower ENTERs, and would be considered at risk of non-completion in mainstream entry. For each intake, around 84 per cent of entrants completed the first year of study. For those who enrolled in the degree program after completing the diploma, year-to-year retention rates were quite high. For the 2000 cohort, there was no attrition during the second year of study, all went on to third year, and by 2003 (their fourth year) 84 per cent had either graduated or were continuing. It was argued that the success of diploma students suggests the presence of a 'large and untapped' market of students who, given appropriate support, have the capacity for successful tertiary study.<sup>554</sup>

The Committee also heard anecdotal evidence about the positive outcomes of the Diploma of Tertiary Studies.<sup>555</sup> The principal of Kurnai College at the Gippsland Education Precinct told the Committee that the program was having 'a major impact on the number of our students who have gone on to university', particularly for those who may not otherwise have seen university as an option.<sup>556</sup> In addition to providing an entry pathway into university, Mr Sean Murphy, Education Vice-President, Monash University Gippsland Student Union, told the Committee that most diploma students report that participation in the academic skills units is 'extremely beneficial' throughout the course of their studies.<sup>557</sup>

Professor Richard James, Director, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne, described the University of Newcastle's enabling courses as among the best in Australia, noting impressive outcomes in terms of the numbers participating in the

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<sup>551</sup> Professor P. Steele, Pro Vice-Chancellor, Campus Coordination and Academic Director, Berwick and Peninsula Campuses, Monash University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Rosebud, 12 May 2008, 42.

<sup>552</sup> Supplementary information provided by the University of Ballarat, March 2009.

<sup>553</sup> Stuart Levy and Julie Murray, 'Tertiary Entrance Scores Need Not Determine Academic Success: An analysis of student performance in an equity and access program,' *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 27, no. 1 (March 2005): 129-140.

<sup>554</sup> *ibid.*, 139.

<sup>555</sup> Mr R. Juratowitch, Campus Principal, Kurnai College, Gippsland Education Precinct, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Churchill, 19 May 2008, 4; Ms T. Johnson, Year 12 Student, Kurnai College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Churchill, 19 May 2008, 49; Mr S. Murphy, Education Vice-President, Residential Association, Monash University Gippsland Student Union, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Churchill, 19 May 2008, 70.

<sup>556</sup> Mr R. Juratowitch, Campus Principal, Kurnai College, Gippsland Education Precinct, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Churchill, 19 May 2008, 4.

<sup>557</sup> Mr S. Murphy, Education Vice-President, Monash University Gippsland Student Union, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Churchill, 19 May 2008, 70.

programs and their achievement in higher education and subsequent careers.<sup>558</sup> These successful outcomes were also acknowledged by the Australian Universities Quality Agency in its most recent quality audit of the University of Newcastle.<sup>559</sup>

The Committee believes that there is room for expanded provision of enabling courses for mature age and school leaver applicants. In this regard, it is worth noting that there are no enabling programs currently offered in metropolitan Melbourne. An analysis of university application and offer rates (refer Chapter 2) shows that there are relatively large numbers of prospective students in interface areas and low socioeconomic areas of Melbourne who express an interest in higher education (by applying), but who are failing to gain entry. The success of enabling programs in other, predominantly non-metropolitan, areas suggests that many of these students have the capacity for success in university study, provided they have access to appropriate academic skill building and support. The Committee therefore encourages universities to consider introducing or expanding enabling programs, particularly in interface and metropolitan areas.

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### Admission into higher education on the basis of VET studies

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Movement from VET into higher education is an important alternative pathway that attracted a great deal of comment during the inquiry. By undertaking a VET qualification, students who were initially unable to gain entry to university may build their skills and increase their chances of selection. Alternatively, successful participation in VET can prompt some students to seriously consider higher education for the first time. The Committee examined data on the extent and nature of articulation and credit transfer from VET to higher education. In doing so, the Committee gave particular attention to the ways in which pathways from VET may increase participation in higher education by people from under-represented groups and areas. The Committee also considered potential strategies for increasing the pathways from VET into higher education.

#### Articulation and credit transfer

In its most recent National Policy and Guidelines on Credit Arrangements, the Australian Qualifications Framework Council defines articulation as 'a process that enables students to progress from one completed qualification to another with credit in a defined pathway'.<sup>560</sup> However, the term is also used more broadly by commentators to refer to a number of related concepts that have to do with the flow of students between education sectors. Just as TAFE graduates may move into a higher education qualification, university graduates may go on to undertake further study in the VET sector. However, the former type of movement—articulation from VET into higher education—receives greater attention in policy and research. A further type of articulation involves concurrent study towards both a higher education and VET qualification. The existence of a formal articulation pathway does not imply automatic admission into a higher education degree; prospective students are still required to apply for a place and be selected into the course.

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<sup>558</sup> Professor R. James, Director, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 3 March 2008, 15.

<sup>559</sup> Australian Universities Quality Agency, *Report of an Audit of the University of Newcastle* (Melbourne: AUQA, 2008), 23.

<sup>560</sup> Australian Qualifications Framework Council, *AQF National Policy and Guidelines on Credit Arrangements: Final Draft* (Adelaide: AQF Council, 2009), 23.

'Credit transfer' refers specifically to the granting of exemption, status or advanced standing in a course on the basis of relevant previous or concurrent formal studies. Such an exemption means that the student is not required to study the relevant unit or units. Importantly, this involves 'establishing and recognising equivalence of learning outcomes' between parts of a VET qualification and a higher education qualification.<sup>561</sup> Credit may be granted in the form of block credit (for a stage of a course), specified credit (for nominated units), or unspecified credit (for nominated credit points applied to different units for different students).<sup>562</sup> Credit transfer arrangements may be individual and unstructured—that is, individual students may negotiate credit on a case-by-case basis with the institution. Alternatively, credit transfer arrangements may be structured, with participating institutions determining agreed amounts of credit between specific VET and higher education qualifications.<sup>563</sup>

### *Extent of articulation and credit transfer*

It is difficult to assess the extent of movement from the VET sector into higher education due to the quality of available data. Self-reporting by students, and different methods of data collection at different universities, mean that the percentage of higher education students with prior TAFE experience is often underestimated.<sup>564</sup> Nevertheless, Australian Government data gives some indication of the extent of movement from VET to higher education.

According to Australian Government data, in 2004, 15.5 per cent (6,130) of commencing students<sup>565</sup> at Victorian universities had a VET qualification as their highest previous qualification.<sup>566</sup> However, the number and proportion of students that are selected and admitted to higher education courses on the basis of these qualifications appears to be lower. Table 5.4 shows the number and proportion of commencing students admitted on the basis of a TAFE award at Victorian institutions in 2006.

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<sup>561</sup> Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority, *Discussion Paper: Determining Credit Transfer Arrangements from VET to Higher Education* (Melbourne: VRQA, 2008), 4.

<sup>562</sup> Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority, *Discussion Paper: Determining Credit Transfer Arrangements from VET to Higher Education* (Melbourne: VRQA, 2008), 4; PhillipsKPA for the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training, *Giving Credit Where Credit is Due: A National Study to Improve Outcomes in Credit Transfer and Articulation from Vocational and Technical Education to Higher Education: Final Report* (n.p.: PhillipsKPA Pty Ltd, 2006), 32.

<sup>563</sup> PhillipsKPA for the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training, *Giving Credit Where Credit is Due: A National Study to Improve Outcomes in Credit Transfer and Articulation from Vocational and Technical Education to Higher Education: Final Report* (n.p.: PhillipsKPA Pty Ltd, 2006), 32.

<sup>564</sup> Leesa Wheelahan, 'What kind of access does VET provide to higher education for low SES students? Not a lot' (paper presented to the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education Launch and Forum, University of South Australia, Adelaide, 25–26 February 2009), 4–5.

<sup>565</sup> Domestic students commencing a higher education course at bachelor level or below.

<sup>566</sup> Tom Karmel, 'Reflections on the tertiary education sector in Australia' (paper presented at the LH Martin Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Management Conference, Melbourne, 27–28 November 2008), 13–14.

Table 5.4: Commencing undergraduate higher education students admitted to Victorian institutions on the basis of a TAFE award (2006)

Institution	No.	%
Deakin University	797	12.4
La Trobe University	799	13.1
Monash University	676	8.1
RMIT University	1,216	21.1
Swinburne University of Technology	724	25.8
The University of Melbourne	89	1.6
University of Ballarat	0	0.0
Victoria University	460	10.0
Other higher education providers	26	3.3
<b>Total Victoria</b>	<b>4,787</b>	<b>11.5</b>

Source: Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Selected Higher Education Statistics* (Canberra: DEEWR, 2008).

As Table 5.4 shows, 11.5 per cent of commencing higher education students in Victoria were admitted on the basis of previous TAFE study in 2006, with substantial variation across institutions. In general, the rate of admission on the basis of TAFE study was high at dual-sector universities. At Swinburne University of Technology, approximately one-quarter (25.8%) of commencing students gained entry through a TAFE route. According to data provided to the Committee by the university, this figure was even higher in 2008, at 29.1 per cent.<sup>567</sup> The lack of TAFE articulators at the University of Ballarat is puzzling, and may be the result of specific admission and data collection practices. Information provided to the Committee by the University of Ballarat indicates that in 2008, 185 commencing students were admitted through a TAFE pathway.<sup>568</sup>

The level of TAFE-based admission was variable at non-dual sector universities. The percentage was relatively high at La Trobe University (13.1%) and Deakin University (12.4%), both of which have strong partnerships with TAFE institutes. Notably, Monash University admitted 8.1 per cent of commencing students on the basis of prior TAFE study in 2006. This was more than double the average for Australia's Group of Eight research-intensive universities.<sup>569</sup> Excluding the University of Ballarat, the figure was lowest at the University of Melbourne, where only 1.6 per cent of admissions were on the basis of prior TAFE studies.

Not all of the higher education students who have undertaken prior TAFE study, or who have been admitted on this basis, receive credit for their TAFE study towards a higher education qualification. In 2006, approximately 10.1 per cent of commencing undergraduate students nationwide were admitted on the basis of prior TAFE study, but only 3.4 per cent received credit for this study.<sup>570</sup> Research has shown that relatively low levels of credit transfer remained almost unchanged over 1999 to 2004, despite increases in the proportion of students admitted on the basis of TAFE study.<sup>571</sup>

<sup>567</sup> Supplementary information provided by Swinburne University of Technology, March 2009.

<sup>568</sup> Supplementary information provided by the University of Ballarat, March 2009.

<sup>569</sup> Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Selected Higher Education Statistics* (Canberra: DEEWR, 2008).

<sup>570</sup> Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Review of Australian Higher Education: Discussion Paper: June 2008* (Canberra: DEEWR, 2008), 42.

<sup>571</sup> Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission to the Review of Australian Higher Education* (Canberra: Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008), 7.

The Committee notes federal and state government efforts to promote and increase credit transfer. Given the substantial attention to this issue by policymakers over a number of years, the Committee is disappointed to see that credit transfer remains limited. While acknowledging the range of factors that universities consider in granting credit for VET studies, the Committee believes that higher education institutions can do more to ensure that policy changes are translated into benefits for students articulating from VET to higher education.

#### *Arrangements supporting articulation and credit transfer*

The Committee received a great deal of evidence about the arrangements that facilitate movement from VET into higher education in Victoria. Swinburne University of Technology has the highest level of articulation from TAFE to higher education of any Australian university.<sup>572</sup> Supporting articulation has been a major institutional strategic direction, with programs being developed in the university's TAFE and higher education divisions.<sup>573</sup> Articulation is facilitated by the Swinburne Pathways Program, which enables students from Swinburne University of Technology's TAFE division and other TAFE institutes with a minimum credit average in their final year of TAFE study to apply for entry into a higher education course.<sup>574</sup> These students may also be eligible for credit transfer, with guidelines on credit transfer between a range of qualifications set out in an online Credit Transfer Database. A representative of Swinburne University of Technology advised the Committee that implementing such arrangements has financial implications and requires strong inter-sectoral collaboration and modifications to course design and teaching. She suggested that reproducing the university's success would not be feasible for all institutions.<sup>575</sup>

Some universities that are not dual-sector institutions have nevertheless put in place strong TAFE articulation pathways. Professor Sally Walker, Vice-Chancellor, Deakin University, told the Committee that the university has 'extraordinarily good relationships with TAFE', particularly in its catchment areas.<sup>576</sup> These relationships are supported by a four-way strategic alliance with Box Hill Institute of TAFE, Gordon Institute of TAFE and South West Institute of TAFE. Through this alliance, articulation pathways are in place from a wide range of certificate IV, diploma and advanced diploma courses at partner institutes into undergraduate degrees at Deakin University.<sup>577</sup> Credit transfer is also available, with an indication of available credit for different pathways provided through an Advance Standing (Credit Transfer) database on the Deakin University website.<sup>578</sup> Less extensive arrangements have also been made with other TAFE institutes and VET providers.

Similarly, La Trobe University has a focus on increasing articulation arrangements, part of a broader strategy of greater cooperation with TAFE institutes. This is particularly the case at the university's regional campuses in Mildura, Shepparton and Wodonga, which are co-located with TAFE institutes and which have higher levels of TAFE articulation than the

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<sup>572</sup> Australian Universities Quality Agency, *Report of an Audit of Swinburne University of Technology* (Melbourne: AUQA, 2008), 17.

<sup>573</sup> Ms J. Edwards, Manager, Equity and Disability Support Services, Swinburne University of Technology, Written Submission, March 2008, 7.

<sup>574</sup> Swinburne University of Technology, 'Pathways: TAFE to University,' Swinburne University of Technology, <http://www.future.swinburne.edu.au/pathways/programs/> (accessed 25 May 2009).

<sup>575</sup> Ms J. Edwards, Manager, Equity and Disability Support Services, Swinburne University of Technology, Written Submission, March 2008, 7.

<sup>576</sup> Professor S. Walker, Vice-Chancellor, Deakin University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 March 2009, 17.

<sup>577</sup> South West Institute of TAFE, Written Submission, April 2008, 7.

<sup>578</sup> Deakin University, 'Advanced Standing (credit transfer) Search,' Deakin University, <http://www.deakin.edu.au/courses/advanced-standing/search.php> (accessed 7 July 2009).

university's metropolitan campus.<sup>579</sup> Mr Kent Farrell, Executive Director, Mildura Campus, La Trobe University, told the Committee that these arrangements are mutually beneficial for TAFE institutes and the university, feeding students to the university and providing opportunities for TAFE students who want to 'take that extra step'.<sup>580</sup>

The higher rate of articulation at Monash University in comparison to other Group of Eight universities also appears to be related to specific efforts to develop articulation pathways. In its submission, Monash University outlined pathways currently in place from TAFE into nursing, early childhood education and business at the university's non-metropolitan campuses.<sup>581</sup> Once enrolled, TAFE articulators at Monash University are able to apply for credit towards their degree for completed TAFE study. Opportunities for articulation and credit transfer are publicised locally through brochures and information sessions.<sup>582</sup>

### *Outcomes and benefits for students moving from VET study to higher education*

The Committee heard that as an entry pathway into higher education, TAFE study has some important benefits. TAFE study can allow students to rebuild their confidence as learners.<sup>583</sup> At the same time, successful participation in TAFE can prompt the development of higher education aspirations, as illustrated by the story of one inquiry participant:

I took a year doing TAFE. It was a pathway to Monash University. I didn't actually realise until I was there that it was something I always wanted to do: complete a university degree, majoring in accounting and finance. I found that out at TAFE, which was great.<sup>584</sup>

Some inquiry participants pointed out that TAFE pathways into higher education can be less expensive for students who receive credit for their TAFE study, for which fees are lower.

The Committee also heard that students who enter from the VET sector do 'particularly well' in higher education.<sup>585</sup> A review in 2006 of credit transfer and articulation for the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs found that students moving from TAFE to higher education with credit 'perform as well or better than other student cohorts', and indeed, that retention rates for this group of students may be higher.<sup>586</sup> To examine this issue, the Committee sought information from Victorian universities about the academic outcomes of TAFE articulators in comparison to other students. Data on pass rates, average marks and retention provided by Deakin University, Monash University, La Trobe University and Swinburne University of Technology showed that TAFE articulators often perform at a slightly lower level than school leaver entrants, but at a similar or higher level to other students.<sup>587</sup> Hence, it appears that in general, students entering higher education through a VET pathway are well prepared for university study.

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<sup>579</sup> La Trobe University, Written Submission, March 2008, 9.

<sup>580</sup> Mr K. Farrell, Executive Director, Mildura Campus, La Trobe University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 45.

<sup>581</sup> Monash University, Written Submission, March 2008, 4.

<sup>582</sup> Ms S. Webb, Campus Manager, Peninsula Campus, Monash University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Rosebud, 12 May 2008, 41–42.

<sup>583</sup> Professor R. Teese, Director, Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning, The University of Melbourne, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 25 February 2008, 17.

<sup>584</sup> Mr M. Keates, President, MONSU Peninsula, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Rosebud, 12 May 2008, 33.

<sup>585</sup> Ms H. McNamara, Manager, Strategic Planning, Rosebud Campus, Chisholm Institute of TAFE, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Rosebud, 12 May 2008, 57.

<sup>586</sup> PhillipsKPA for the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training, *Giving Credit Where Credit is Due: A National Study to Improve Outcomes in Credit Transfer and Articulation from Vocational and Technical Education to Higher Education; Final Report* (n.p.: PhillipsKPA Pty Ltd, 2006), ii.

<sup>587</sup> Supplementary information provided by Deakin University, Monash University, La Trobe University and Swinburne University of Technology, March 2009.

## Admission on the basis of VET studies as an equity strategy

A number of participants in the Committee's inquiry, including researchers, TAFE institutes, Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) and others, argued that increasing and enhancing movement from VET to higher education may be a useful strategy for increasing access to higher education for students from under-represented groups.

### *Equity in VET participation*

Compared to the higher education sector, the VET sector does well in terms of access and equity,<sup>588</sup> and has made greater improvements over time.<sup>589</sup> Being Indigenous, having a disability, having parents who work in a non-professional or managerial occupation, and having attended a government school do not reduce an individual's likelihood of participation in VET to the same extent as they do in higher education.<sup>590</sup>

At the same time, participation in VET tends to be higher in areas of low socioeconomic status.<sup>591</sup> A 2007 study examined the relationship between socioeconomic status and VET participation by applying ABS Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) to data on students' home addresses. The study found that people from low socioeconomic status areas were over-represented in the VET sector. It also found that people from low socioeconomic status areas tended to undertake lower level qualifications, but that they completed qualifications at an above average rate.<sup>592</sup>

In part related to this, participation in VET is also relatively high in non-metropolitan areas. In Victoria, VET provision is spread relatively widely throughout the state, such that in 2006, the VET participation rate among 15- to 19-year-olds in regional Victoria was approximately 17 per cent, compared to 11 per cent in metropolitan Melbourne.<sup>593</sup>

Because of the higher representation in VET of people from low socioeconomic status backgrounds and non-metropolitan areas, it is often thought that increasing opportunities for articulation from VET into higher education can be a mechanism for increasing the participation of these groups in higher education.<sup>594</sup> This point was made by a number of participants in the Committee's inquiry.<sup>595</sup> Professor Richard James, Director, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne, told that Committee that articulation from VET is one significant way of tackling the problem of under-representation.<sup>596</sup>

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<sup>588</sup> Tom Karmel, 'Reflections on the tertiary education sector in Australia' (paper presented at the LH Martin Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Management Conference, Melbourne, 27–28 November 2008), 1.

<sup>589</sup> Gillian Considine, Ian Watson and Richard Hall, *Who's missing out? Access and equity in vocational education and training* (Adelaide: National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2005), 7.

<sup>590</sup> *ibid.*, 22–23.

<sup>591</sup> Australian Education Union (Victorian Branch), Written Submission, May 2008, 9.

<sup>592</sup> Paul Foley, *The socio-economic status of vocational education and training students in Australia* (Adelaide: National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2007), 6.

<sup>593</sup> Office of Training and Tertiary Education, *Victoria's Vocational Education and Training Statistics: A Pocket Guide*, 2007 ed. (Melbourne: Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development, 2007), 11.

<sup>594</sup> Leesa Wheelahan, 'What kind of access does VET provide to higher education for low SES students? Not a lot' (paper presented to the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education Launch and Forum, University of South Australia, Adelaide, 25–26 February 2009), 3.

<sup>595</sup> For example, Professor R. Larkins, Chair, Universities Australia, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 3 March 2009, 20; Dr L. Wilkinson, Executive Officer, Gippsland East LLEN, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Bairnsdale, 20 May 2008, 14; Dr A. Harvey, Acting Executive Director, Bendigo Campus, La Trobe University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Benalla, 3 March 2009, 38; Mr G. McLean, General Manager, Youth Transitions Division, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (Victoria), Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 23 July 2008, 5.

<sup>596</sup> Professor R. James, Director, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 3 March 2008, 12.

Nevertheless, some inquiry participants highlighted the relatively small proportion of students that take up this opportunity. Ms Carmel Murphy, Deputy Principal, Office of Admissions, The University of Melbourne, argued against the assumption that TAFE students wish to continue on to higher education, claiming that there is not always demand from students for increased movement between the sectors.<sup>597</sup> Similarly, Professor Elizabeth Harman, Vice-Chancellor, Victoria University, noted that while the university offers a range of articulation pathways, only a small number of these see a lot of movement.<sup>598</sup> The relatively low overall level of student demand for articulation pathways was also highlighted in a recent Australian Government review of credit transfer outcomes, which suggested that this may be due to a lack of understanding of pathways, or limited marketing efforts on the part of universities.<sup>599</sup> The Committee notes that it might also reflect a distinct preference among TAFE students for vocationally oriented learning.

On the other hand, research has found relatively high levels of movement among some VET students. According to the VET Student Outcomes Survey conducted by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research, in 2007, 6.3 per cent of all VET graduates at certificate I or above went on to university within a short period.<sup>600</sup> Among diploma and advanced diploma graduates, 17.0 per cent moved into higher education. Both of these figures were substantially higher for students aged 15 to 24. Among this age group 9.9 per cent of VET graduates went on to higher education, including 27.9 per cent of diploma or advanced diploma graduates.<sup>601</sup> This relatively high rate of articulation to higher education among younger VET students may indicate that some school leavers who miss out on a place in higher education instead begin a VET course, with the intention of later moving into university. At Sunshine College in Melbourne's west, the Committee heard from young people who were considering TAFE study as a pathway should they not receive an offer for their preferred university course.<sup>602</sup>

### *Backgrounds of students moving from VET to higher education*

As discussed above, existing data relating to the extent and nature of movement from VET to higher education is limited and problematic. This makes it difficult to examine the characteristics of these students. The limited data and research that is available, however, does not necessarily support the assumption that pathways from VET to higher education function as an equity mechanism. For example, the VET qualifications most likely to provide entry to higher education are at the diploma and advanced diploma level. However, one recent Australia-wide study found that while low socioeconomic status students comprised approximately 29.2 per cent of total VET enrolments, they made up only 19.4 per cent of VET students enrolled in a diploma or advanced diploma.<sup>603</sup>

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<sup>597</sup> Ms C. Murphy, Deputy Principal, Office of Admissions, The University of Melbourne, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 March 2009, 31.

<sup>598</sup> Professor E. Harman, Vice-Chancellor, Victoria University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 March 2009, 31.

<sup>599</sup> PhillipsKPA for the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training, *Giving Credit Where Credit is Due: A National Study to Improve Outcomes in Credit Transfer and Articulation from Vocational and Technical Education to Higher Education: Final Report* (n.p.: PhillipsKPA Pty Ltd, 2006), 11.

<sup>600</sup> Tom Karmel, 'Reflections on the tertiary education sector in Australia' (paper presented at the LH Martin Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Management Conference, Melbourne, 27–28 November 2008), 15.

<sup>601</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>602</sup> Mr A. Meyers and Ms R. Elliot, Year 11 Students, Sunshine College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Sunshine, 12 August 2008, 10–11.

<sup>603</sup> Paul Foley, *The socio-economic status of vocational education and training students in Australia* (Adelaide: National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2007), 27.

Another recent study went further by examining the socioeconomic background of commencing undergraduate students admitted on the basis of earlier TAFE study. While data limitations were emphasised, the study found that the proportion of low socioeconomic background students admitted on the basis of TAFE study was similar to the proportion of low socioeconomic background students in the overall commencing student cohort. The researcher concluded that while TAFE study is a pathway into higher education for some students, the socioeconomic profile of VET articulators is very similar to students already in higher education and, therefore, the VET pathway is not, at present, an effective equity mechanism.<sup>604</sup>

The Committee supports moves to improve and increase articulation and credit transfer from TAFE to higher education, providing greater options to students. Nevertheless, the Committee cautions against the assumption that TAFE pathways into higher education are likely to be of particular benefit to students from under-represented groups. For this to occur, attention must also be given to the level of participation by equity groups in advanced VET qualifications, which are the most likely to provide a basis for university study.

The Committee notes that the Victorian Government has outlined its intention to expand training places in the state's VET system, with a focus on encouraging higher level skill development. Under the Victorian Training Guarantee, individuals will have an entitlement to a government subsidised place in a recognised VET course, with this entitlement sustained for any subsequent training towards a higher qualification. For students aged under 20, government subsidised places will be available at any VET qualification level.<sup>605</sup> The Committee supports the general goal of promoting participation in advanced VET qualifications, and believes that particular attention should be paid to supporting students from under-represented groups to progress to higher level TAFE qualifications. For some students, this may provide an entry point into higher education.

### **Barriers to increased articulation from VET to higher education**

The Committee heard that there are a number of impediments to the development of improved pathways from VET to higher education. Even where both parties are willing to cooperate, establishing articulation and credit transfer arrangements between TAFE and higher education can be complex. The Committee notes, however, that a range of recent policy developments are aimed at addressing these difficulties.

#### ***Curriculum and assessment***

In the TAFE sector, training and assessment is competency-based, meaning that it focuses on skills and knowledge applied in the work context. While universities assess learning outcomes through graded assessment, TAFE students demonstrate competency in the ability to apply knowledge and skills to successfully complete work activities, including the performance of specific tasks, management of tasks to complete whole activities, dealing with contingencies and wider work environment skills.<sup>606</sup> In its submission to the Review of Australian Higher Education, the Victorian TAFE Association argued that higher education

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<sup>604</sup> Leesa Wheelahan, 'What kind of access does VET provide to higher education for low SES students? Not a lot' (paper presented to the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education Launch and Forum, University of South Australia, Adelaide, 25–26 February 2009), 4, 13.

<sup>605</sup> Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development (Victoria), *Securing Jobs for Your Future: Skills for Victoria* (Melbourne: DIIRD, 2008), 15.

<sup>606</sup> Victorian TAFE Association, 'What is Competency Based Training and Assessment?' Victorian TAFE Association, [http://www.vta.vic.edu.au/?Name=VET\\_Introduction\\_to\\_the\\_Australian\\_Training\\_System](http://www.vta.vic.edu.au/?Name=VET_Introduction_to_the_Australian_Training_System) (accessed 2 March 2009).

selection officers often lack a deep understanding of competency standards within Training Packages, and may assume that the competency-based approach is a 'lesser learning model'.<sup>607</sup> Furthermore, while Training Packages used in TAFE are nationally accredited, higher education curriculum is developed separately by individual university faculties.

These differences increase the complexity of negotiating articulation and credit transfer arrangements. First, they mean that TAFE institutes must negotiate articulation and/or credit transfer arrangements separately with each university faculty, examining the components and outcomes of each relevant course. TAFE representatives participating in the Committee's inquiry described this process as 'difficult and complex', 'very time consuming', and 'the biggest impediment' to increased articulation and credit transfer.<sup>608</sup> One suggested that TAFE institutes may even need to modify their courses to make them resemble university subjects.<sup>609</sup> To facilitate the formation of new pathway arrangements, Sunraysia Institute of TAFE has created a Pathways Coordinator position. Representatives of the institute contrasted this more strategic approach with that which TAFE institutes have taken in the past, where arrangements have been made on an 'as-needs' basis, and have been the responsibility of individual managers.<sup>610</sup>

Another way in which these issues are being addressed in Victoria is through the development of the Credit Matrix by the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority. Development of the Credit Matrix began in 2002 with the aim of providing a common way of describing and comparing learning outcomes across senior secondary, VET and higher education courses and qualifications. Over a number of years, the Credit Matrix has been developed and refined through extensive research, testing and trialling.

The Credit Matrix describes the complexity (or 'level') of learning outcomes and the volume (number of 'points') of learning in the component units of Victorian courses and qualifications.<sup>611</sup> The 'levels' refer to student outcomes of varying complexity, from 'Enabling' (lowest) to level 8. Detailed descriptors of each level of learning describe the type of knowledge and skills, the kinds of issues or problems and ways of addressing them, and the degree of independence typically associated with outcomes at that level.<sup>612</sup> Summary descriptors draw these elements together in a shorter description focused on the main features of the activity or tasks involved at each level.<sup>613</sup> To date, all senior secondary units and more than 27,000 VET units have been assigned levels and points.<sup>614</sup> In late 2009, the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority will launch the Qualifications Navigator, a website which will allow users to view the levels and points of qualifications offered in Victoria.

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<sup>607</sup> Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission to the Review of Australian Higher Education* (Canberra: Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008), 7.

<sup>608</sup> For example, Mr R. Cadmore, Pathways Coordinator, Sunraysia Institute of TAFE, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 70–71; Ms H. McNamara, Manager, Strategic Planning, Rosebud Campus, Chisholm Institute of TAFE, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Rosebud, 12 May 2008, 57; South West Institute of TAFE, Written Submission, April 2008, 7; Dr L. Wilkinson, Executive Officer, Gippsland East LLEN, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Bairnsdale, 20 May 2008, 15.

<sup>609</sup> Ms H. McNamara, Manager, Strategic Planning, Rosebud Campus, Chisholm Institute of TAFE, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Rosebud, 12 May 2008, 57.

<sup>610</sup> Mr R. Cadmore, Pathways Coordinator and Ms J. Grigg, Manager, Rural Business, Sunraysia Institute of TAFE, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 70–71.

<sup>611</sup> Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority, 'About the Credit Matrix,' VRQA, <http://www.vrqa.vic.gov.au/cmatrix/about.htm> (accessed 3 March 2009).

<sup>612</sup> Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority, *The Credit Matrix: Building the Bridges* (Melbourne: VRQA, 2008), 3.

<sup>613</sup> *ibid.*, 2.

<sup>614</sup> Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority, 'The Credit Matrix newsletter: September 2008,' VRQA, <http://www.vision6.com.au/em/message/email/view.php?id=357233&u=14894> (accessed 7 July 2009).

Two important aims of the Credit Matrix are to provide consistent but flexible university entrance requirements for students without an ENTER, and to improve credit transfer arrangements through the creation of a common, uniform approach to accumulating credit.<sup>615</sup> South West Institute of TAFE and Sunraysia Institute of TAFE expressed cautious optimism about the potential of the credit matrix to enhance opportunities for students to move from TAFE into higher education.<sup>616</sup>

In partnership with three TAFE institutes, Deakin University recently conducted a trial project designed to assess the usefulness of the Credit Matrix as a tool in the development of credit transfer arrangements and concurrent programs. With regard to credit transfer, findings from the trial project were that the Credit Matrix enables a student's learning to be quantified in a clear and fair manner through a more transparent, objective and consistent process.<sup>617</sup> Nevertheless, the project team found that the Credit Matrix did not reduce workload or documentation requirements involved in negotiating credit transfer arrangements.<sup>618</sup> In its submission to the inquiry, South West Institute of TAFE noted that while the Credit Matrix has the potential to increase pathway opportunities, progress nevertheless remains 'at the whim of individual universities'.<sup>619</sup>

The Committee notes that encouraging the development of flexible pathways for students to move between the sectors was also a key objective of the current Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). However, many commentators have argued that in its present form, the AQF is limited in its capacity to support credit transfer arrangements.<sup>620</sup> The AQF differentiates between the qualifications offered by each sector, which are described as recognising 'different types of learning reflecting the distinctive educational responsibilities of each sector'. Consequently, ranking of qualifications or ascribing equivalence to them is explicitly avoided.<sup>621</sup> This lack of equivalence increases the difficulty of negotiating credit transfer arrangements.

Moves to update the AQF may encourage further development of articulation arrangements. The Australian Government has commissioned the Australian Qualifications Framework Council to improve articulation and connectivity between VET and higher education. The Council's recently released consultation paper proposes a number of changes aimed at strengthening the AQF. The proposal suggests modifications to the AQF so that it recognises a hierarchy of qualifications based on explicit reference levels. The modified AQF would also provide measurement of the volume of learning for each qualification type at each level.<sup>622</sup> The Committee supports moves to update the AQF and enhance its ability to support articulation and credit transfer. The Committee believes that the experiences of the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority in developing the Credit Matrix should be of value to the Australian Qualifications Framework Council in its work to strengthen the AQF.

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<sup>615</sup> Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority, 'About the Credit Matrix,' VRQA, <http://www.vrqa.vic.gov.au/cmatrix/about.htm> (accessed 3 March 2009).

<sup>616</sup> Mr R. Cadmore, Pathways Coordinator, Sunraysia Institute of TAFE, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 71; South West Institute of TAFE, Written Submission, April 2008, 7.

<sup>617</sup> Deakin University, South West Institute of TAFE, Gordon Institute of TAFE and Box Hill Institute of TAFE, *Credit Matrix Trial Project: Final Report* (Geelong: Deakin University, 2008), 3; Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority, *Discussion Paper: Determining Credit Transfer Arrangements from VET to Higher Education* (Melbourne: VRQA, 2008), 11.

<sup>618</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>619</sup> South West Institute of TAFE, Written Submission, April 2008, 7.

<sup>620</sup> Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority, *Discussion Paper: Determining Credit Transfer Arrangements from VET to Higher Education* (Melbourne: VRQA, 2008), 5.

<sup>621</sup> Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board, *Australian Qualifications Framework Implementation Handbook*, 4th ed. (Carlton South: AQF Advisory Board, 2007), 2.

<sup>622</sup> Australian Qualifications Framework Council, *Strengthening the AQF: A Proposal: Consultation Paper* (Adelaide: AQF Council, 2009), 4.

*Accreditation, governance and funding*

Articulation and credit transfer arrangements are also affected by sectoral differences in accreditation, governance and funding. Dr Glenn Withers, Chief Executive Officer, Universities Australia described existing circumstances as 'a mess of federal-state fees, policies and jurisdictions'.<sup>623</sup> A recent Australian Government review of credit transfer outcomes similarly identified differences in funding and accountability as 'one of the greatest impediments' to credit transfer. The review described the situation as one in which VET and higher education are 'governed by different policies and decision making processes, have different imperatives, are subject to different drivers, pressures and directions, are seeking different outcomes and are accountable in different ways'.<sup>624</sup> While the VET system is largely controlled and funded by the states, higher education is predominantly funded by the Australian Government. There are also anomalies in funding, student fees and student access to financial assistance.<sup>625</sup> These differences mean that higher education institutions and VET providers, even where they wish to strengthen links, may find that they are speaking a 'different language' due to their differing structures and regulations.<sup>626</sup>

The Committee heard that these sectoral differences create difficulties even within dual-sector institutions. Professor Elizabeth Harman, Vice-Chancellor, Victoria University, noted that different industrial relations systems mean the university cannot employ staff to work across sectors.<sup>627</sup> Similarly, in its submission to the Review of Australian Higher Education, the Victorian TAFE Association noted that TAFE institutes in Victoria that offer higher education courses are inhibited by duplication and regulatory burden at both the state and federal level, ineligibility for Australian Government funding to meet quality reporting requirements, and an inability to access Commonwealth supported places and FEE-HELP.<sup>628</sup>

The complexity within Australia's tertiary education system was also given detailed consideration in the recent Review of Australian Higher Education. The review made a number of recommendations aimed at enhancing links and coherency between the higher education and VET sectors. Key among recommended reforms was the development of a national regulatory and quality assurance agency covering VET and higher education, and that the Australian Government assume responsibility for the whole tertiary education system. In relation to funding and income support, the review recommended the introduction of a tertiary entitlement funding model across both higher education and VET, as well as the introduction of HECS-style income contingent loans for students undertaking VET diplomas and advanced diplomas. The review also recommended the development of a single ministerial council with responsibility for all tertiary education and training in Australia.<sup>629</sup>

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<sup>623</sup> Dr G. Withers, Chief Executive Officer, Universities Australia, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Canberra, 17 June 2008, 14.

<sup>624</sup> PhillipsKPA for the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training, *Giving Credit Where Credit is Due: A National Study to Improve Outcomes in Credit Transfer and Articulation from Vocational and Technical Education to Higher Education; Final Report* (n.p.: PhillipsKPA Pty Ltd, 2006), 12.

<sup>625</sup> Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Review of Australian Higher Education: Discussion Paper; June 2008* (Canberra: DEEWR, 2008), 42.

<sup>626</sup> Dr K. Ferguson, Pro Vice-Chancellor, Equity and Student Services, La Trobe University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 March 2009, 30.

<sup>627</sup> Professor E. Harman, Vice-Chancellor, Victoria University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 March 2009, 30.

<sup>628</sup> Victorian TAFE Association, *Submission to the Review of Australian Higher Education* (Canberra: Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008), 6.

<sup>629</sup> Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report* (Canberra: DEEWR, 2008), 191.

In responding to the Review of Australian Higher Education, the Australian Government has signalled its intention to work closely with the states and territories to develop cohesive national regulatory arrangements for VET.<sup>630</sup> The Australian Government has also announced that it will form a single ministerial council for tertiary education and training (Ministerial Council for Tertiary Education and Employment).<sup>631</sup> The Victorian Government is working with the Australian Government to extend income contingent loans for diploma and advanced diploma VET students.<sup>632</sup> The Committee strongly supports these moves to increase coherency across the higher education and VET sectors.

The Committee also welcomes recent moves to streamline the regulatory framework for dual-sector universities. Under the Australian Government's Diversity and Structural Adjustment Fund, Swinburne University of Technology and the University of Ballarat have recently been awarded a grant to fund research into an alternative regulatory model.<sup>633</sup> The research will investigate possibilities for more streamlined regulation that will enhance efficiency. This may include proposals for a single industrial relations regime across universities and TAFE institutes, which could facilitate greater collaboration between staff. These changes have the potential to remove some of the hindrances that currently stand in the way of pathways arrangements.<sup>634</sup>

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## Conclusion and recommendations

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While Victorian universities have in place a range of selection processes and entry pathways, the ENTER remains the dominant selection method for school leavers. As a selection mechanism, the ENTER has the advantages of being simple to administer and a comparatively good predictor of success. However, the Committee found that ENTER-based selection can disadvantage young people in non-metropolitan, outer urban and low socioeconomic status areas. The Committee therefore believes that universities should complement ENTER-based selection with other mechanisms, including recommendation-based selection and the development and expansion of alternative entry pathways. This will be essential if participation in higher education among under-represented groups is to be increased.

The Committee heard that entry pathways into higher education that provide opportunities for a student to improve their academic skills, including enabling programs and articulation from TAFE, can be particularly effective in addressing the needs of under-represented groups. These pathways should be supported and further developed. Within this, the Committee sees a need for expanded access to enabling programs for students from under-represented groups.

The Committee believes that, as a priority, the Victorian Government should require and support increased articulation from VET to higher education through further development of the Credit Matrix, and by working with the federal, state and territory governments to set deadlines and targets to address differences in accreditation, governance and funding. To ensure that these arrangements translate into real benefits for students, the Committee

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<sup>630</sup> Australian Government, *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2009), 43.

<sup>631</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>632</sup> The Hon Brendan O'Connor, Minister for Employment Participation, 'TAFE meets Parliament Skills Innovation 2020 forum,' Speech, 16 September 2008. Ministers' Media Centre, Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Portfolio, [http://www.deewr.gov.au/Ministers/OConnor/Media/Speeches/Pages/Article\\_081009\\_091942.aspx](http://www.deewr.gov.au/Ministers/OConnor/Media/Speeches/Pages/Article_081009_091942.aspx) (accessed 7 July 2009).

<sup>633</sup> Andrew Trounson, 'Dual sector forges ahead,' *The Australian*, 27 May 2009.

<sup>634</sup> *ibid.*

sees a need for strengthened monitoring and reward of universities' performance in this area. In addition, the Victorian Government should actively support TAFE institutes to negotiate and implement articulation and credit transfer arrangements with universities. Finally, improved data collection on articulation and credit transfer would be useful in monitoring overall progress and informing future policy and programs.

### Recommendations

- 5.1 That the Victorian Government work with the Australian Government to provide incentives for universities to increase access to enabling programs for students from under-represented groups.
- 5.2 That the Victorian Government undertake research on the limitations of the ENTER as a selection tool for students from non-metropolitan and low socioeconomic status areas. The research should:
  - clarify the relationships between location, population density and ENTER, identifying any systemic measurement bias;
  - investigate the effects, if any, of VCE subject availability and choice on ENTER attainment; and
  - identify any modifications in the calculation or use of the ENTER required to make it more equitable.
- 5.3 That the Victorian Government require increased articulation and credit transfer from VET to higher education by:
  - prioritising development of the Credit Matrix through the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority as a matter of urgency;
  - setting deadlines and targets to address differences in accreditation, governance and funding between the VET and higher education sectors, through the Ministerial Council for Tertiary Education and Employment;
  - advocating to the Australian Government that it monitor and reward universities' performance in relation to credit transfer; and
  - funding TAFE institutes to employ pathways coordinators responsible for negotiating and promoting articulation and credit transfer arrangements.
- 5.4 That the Victorian Government develop and implement measures aimed at increasing participation in upper level VET qualifications specifically among students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds.

- 5.5 That the Victorian Government work with the Australian Government to improve and align data collection about articulation from VET to higher education in order to improve knowledge about transitions, including:
- numbers of articulating students;
  - basis of admission for articulating students;
  - geographic, economic, social and cultural characteristics of articulating students;
  - particular pathways taken;
  - credit granted; and
  - academic outcomes of articulating students.