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## **The Role of TAFE as an Equity Pathway to Social Inclusion, Employment, and to University**

**A submission from The Deakin University Social Work/Gordon TAFE Community Services Work, Geelong Based Project Team.**

### **Table of Contents**

Executive Summary .....	3
Context.....	5
The development of opportunities for Australians to improve themselves and increase their life and employment prospects. ....	6
Findings and discussion in context of the literature.....	6
TAFE pathways and equity.....	7
Supporting success.....	7
Prior TAFE studies .....	8
TAFE graduates and peer support.....	8
Feeling out of place: A sense of social dislocation.....	9
Sense of identity as different from the dominant ‘mainstream’ .....	10
Intimidation.....	10
Support and teachings styles .....	10
The delivery of services and programs to support regions, communities and disadvantaged individuals to access training and skills and through them a pathway to employment. ....	12
Questioning the University-TAFE hierarchy .....	12
The value of diversity in the student body at TAFE.....	13
Distinct sectors complementing each other .....	14
Those jurisdictions in which State Governments have announced funding decisions which may impact on their operation and viability, and the development of skills in the Australian economy.....	15
Conclusion and Recommendations.....	17
References.....	19

## Executive Summary

The Deakin University Social Work/Gordon TAFE Community Services Work Geelong Based Project Team (the Project Team) was assisted by Higher Education Partnership and Participation funding made available through Deakin University Participation and Partnerships Program (DUPPP) to carry out research and project work in 2012/13.

In the following submission to the House of Representatives Inquiry into the role of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) system and its operation, this Project Team seeks to establish a case for:

### 1. Funding to enable TAFE to continue as:

- a) an equity pathway to social inclusion, employment, and to university, particularly in regional areas.
- b) an integral complement to the University education sector to deliver on the ambitious objectives of the Federal Government's widening participation agenda, as a mechanism to deliver the skills, knowledge and workforce needed now, and in the future, in the Australian economy.

### 2. Increased resources for separate and joint sector development

- a) **Publicly funded TAFEs** need funding to be restored and increased to enable them to maintain the high quality education they provide and to maintain their successful work in supporting communities, regions and disadvantaged individuals to gain skills, training and employment.
- b) **Universities** need increased funding to increase staffing levels and therefore free up teaching staff to spend the necessary time to develop relationships with and provide support to students. This is important for the achieving the goals of the widening participation agenda of increasing access without increasing attrition at the same time.
- c) **TAFEs and Universities** need funding to do the work required to further develop and formalise diploma-degree pathways so that disadvantaged individuals can exit into employment at the diploma level or be supported in an efficient and seamless way to undertake further study.

### 3. Active use of localised and nuanced partnership approaches by education institutions. This includes:

- Cross teaching by TAFEs and Universities in courses that can be articulated, such as professional practice diplomas and degrees

- Programs negotiated and designed according to the needs of students in each location. TAFEs and Universities need resources in order to do this work
- Focus on regional centres where there is a particular opportunity for government to make an impact on TAFE pathways to employment and/or further education
- Workforce development in regional areas due to new industries is a particular area of need

4. Recognise and capitalise on the complementary and symbiotic nature of each sector's skills, strengths and capacities.

The submission responds to the second, third and fifth points of the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry and is based on the research work carried out by the Project Team in 2012/13.

We provide evidence of Gordon TAFE in Geelong working as an equity mechanism in the particular case of the welfare/ community services diploma to social work degree pathway. The project team considers that there is a strong case for additional resourcing of TAFE to enable it to continue what it does well. TAFE is the key training and education sector—the 'education and social hub'—that can successfully attract, retain, and graduate people who may not otherwise access education due to one or more combinations of:

1. having a low SES current or past background;
2. living in regional areas;
3. receiving interrupted primary and secondary education;
4. having disabilities;
5. being sole parents;
6. being from refugee backgrounds;
7. having English as an additional language/culture;
8. retrenchment from employment in dying industries;
9. short, medium and long term unemployment;
10. past and/or current caring roles;
11. marriage/relationship breakdowns;
12. domestic violence;
13. gender, class, age, race/ethnicity and dis/ability discriminations; and
14. socialised expectations and fears.

The recommendations in this submission are based on research findings about important similarities and differences between Gordon TAFE welfare and Deakin University social work students in Geelong, and their respective institutional organisations and contexts. The two institutions employ a repertoire of diverse administrative, teaching, learning and support approaches to meet different mission goals, requirements and needs.

## Context

The Federal Government Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program includes a renewed push to redress the persistent under-representation of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds in higher education in Australia. The discipline of Social Work at Deakin University has been successful in attracting a wide range of students into the Bachelor program and is committed to giving students the best chance of success. This submission presents findings from qualitative research aimed at building two-way bridges between The Gordon (formerly The Gordon Institute of TAFE) and Deakin University to widen access and to support and retain students. We investigated TAFE and University students' perceptions of and/or experiences of the pathway to University in research undertaken as part of a wider project aimed at strengthening the diploma-degree pathway.

We conducted interviews and focus groups with a total of 41 students. There were two participant groups and several subsets of data in the research we draw from here. The participant groups were current TAFE students, and current and past University students from the TAFE pathway. Those students who made the transition from TAFE through to university are referred to as 'TAFE-University pathway' students. Those students who went from university to the TAFE system are termed 'University-TAFE pathway' students.

The research presented here illuminates the experiences of students who commenced university following studies at TAFE, as well as the multiple, complex and intersecting factors impacting on this particular cohort's educational opportunity. Our findings suggest that the TAFE pathway functions as an equity mechanism in our particular study site. Further, findings regarding students' support needs underpin our argument that universities must do more to meet their responsibilities towards students. These findings have profound implications for the ethics and future development of widening participation strategies.

This submission presents evidence in support of the case we make about two key policy questions that relate to higher education equity for students from a low socioeconomic status background in the Australian context. Firstly, it furthers the debate begun by Wheelahan (2009) who problematises the TAFE pathway as an equity mechanism. Secondly, it does this by adopting the success-focused approach promoted by Devlin et al (2012) in their work with students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds.

We note that a persistent challenge for policy-makers is the difficulty of identifying those groups and individuals who face barriers to educational opportunities. 'Equity group' categories, measures and statistics do not always succeed in identifying groups and individuals due to the complexities of people's lives and individual circumstances.

However, our fine-grained research is able to show what lived reality is for many students and how important TAFE has been for them. The research presents a collective portrait of the interview participants, showing that while they might not all be defined by university statistics as being 'low SES' each had experienced multiple factors constraining educational access/opportunity. Many of the students highlighted their prior TAFE experience as strongly

supporting their learning in the university context. Finally we discuss ways in which equity in vocational education and training (VET) and higher education (HE) is interlinked.

## **The development of opportunities for Australians to improve themselves and increase their life and employment prospects.**

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

It is well established that under-representation of those from low-SES backgrounds is due to factors other than ability (Devlin, et al., 2012, Scull & Cuthill, 2010). These factors are understood as complex, intersecting and cumulative; being the 'first in family' to attend university or having disrupted schooling is increasingly recognised as an indicator of educational disadvantage (Scull & Cuthill, 2010, p. 61).

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

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

Crucially, in our study students regarded their prior TAFE studies as a major enabler of success at university. This allows us to highlight the importance of the work of TAFE in support of low-SES background students for higher education equity. There is significant existing expertise within the VET sector in supporting low-SES students. VET is regarded as outperforming HE in almost every area of disadvantage and under-representation, in

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

proportional terms reaching nearly twice as many low-SES students, more than twice as many rural students, and four times as many Indigenous students (Mackenzie, 2012).

### **TAFE pathways and equity**

The present study speaks to the question of whether TAFE pathways work as an equity mechanism in the particular case of the welfare/community services diploma to social work degree pathway. While the number of students with prior TAFE studies as a basis for admission to university has risen (Watson, 2006), this does not necessarily result in improved access for key equity groups. Wheelahan (2009, p. 262) problematizes the ‘assumption that VET to HE transfers in Australia are able to act as an equity mechanism.’ Firstly she finds that, ‘Pathways provide VET students with access to lower status universities rather than the elite universities’ (Wheelahan, 2009, p. 262).<sup>2</sup> We do not take issue with this. Secondly, ‘the socio-economic composition of VET student transfers reflects the socio-economic composition of students in the HE sector’ (Wheelahan, 2009, p. 262).

Our study indicates that the socio-economic composition of students who transfer from The Gordon is distinct from the overall composition of the degree course, in that it consists of a much higher proportion of low-SES students than the degree course as a whole. Overall the Deakin Social Work course is 27.8% low-SES. In contrast, a close examination of the demographic identity of eleven students who have taken the Gordon-Deakin pathway reveals that of the eleven students from this participant group in the study, all were in the first generation of their family – if not the first person in their family ever – to attend university. Five of the eleven had a sibling who had enrolled before or after them. Two explicitly stated that they were the first in their families to have completed high school, let alone enrolled in TAFE or university. One student had experienced minimal and interrupted education in a refugee camp; an additional five of the eleven students had left school early. Eight of the eleven described family backgrounds which were low-income or ‘working-class’. Two had a disability. Eight had a low income while studying, with two revealing experiences of homelessness, having to use emergency relief, or not always having enough food for their family. One had experienced mental illness and four disclosed other difficulties such as problems in their family of origin or adverse, traumatic experiences.

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

### **Supporting success**

There is a gap in literature about TAFE as a site of existing expertise and as an important potential partner in attracting, supporting and preparing low-SES students. This research has

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

moved towards filling that gap. The persistence of under-representation of low SES students may not be significantly shifted if this widening participation goal continues to be viewed in a siloed manner, separating education policy and practice from other policy areas (such as health, welfare, employment) that co-create the rationing of life advantages and disadvantages.

### **Prior TAFE studies**

The importance of prior TAFE studies for students' success at university was evident. This included academic skills such as essay writing, referencing conventions and research that many universities take for granted in first year students:

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

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

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

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

### **TAFE graduates and peer support**

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

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

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

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

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

### **Feeling out of place: A sense of social dislocation**

Other students reflected on their distinct experiences of social place, specifically social hierarchy due to class, at university compared to TAFE. A student, who discontinued studies at a 'Group of Eight' university and enrolled at TAFE decades later, expressed feelings of social exclusion as a result of being locked out of friendship circles:

My background is I started off one of six kids living in [an area which is] very working class, lower socioeconomic, yeah. So when I went to Uni it was so different to anything I'd experienced and I found that really hard, really, really hard because a lot of the kids had come from these private schools and I had come on my own to Uni and it was just- the whole situation was very difficult to break into, friendship wise... (University-TAFE student 116)

This student also experienced social alienation due to the different physical presentation of the other students and a resulting sense of difference due to this. The student mentions 'elitism', implying that expensive attire and superiority were connected to identity in the university setting, leaving the student feeling stressed and 'less than'. In addition, the student expressed a reluctance to invite people to their private residence as their house and neighbourhood would not live up to the standard:

being very stressed, yeah, and not- feeling like a bit of a square peg in a round hole, yeah... Even the way that people dressed you know, there was just a lot of elitism there [] So yeah, it was basically just that I felt different. I felt really different. And I'd probably be embarrassed [to bring] anyone back to my house as well, you know because it was always a bit chaotic...(University-TAFE student 116)

The same student explained that despite doing well with assignments at university, the social alienation and social discomfort experienced impacted on their overall wellbeing – preventing them from thriving:

I went really well, like as far as my assignments went I managed that really well, loved it, but it was that social side of things that - because that - I didn't feel secure socially there. I didn't feel comfortable. I don't think I thrived there, yeah. (University-TAFE student 116)



### **Sense of identity as different from the dominant ‘mainstream’**

Carrying off a student identity as a mature student in a university setting where the majority of other students are school leavers can also be challenging, as explained by the following university student:

I think when you are– I mean, yeah, I think when- if there’s just sort of a group of young people, most definitely. And I find too, sometimes when I go in to the library, there’s a lot of young people in there and you really feel a little bit old or sometimes I come in here with my little girl, and yeah, just feel like a mum more than a student, type of thing. (TAFE-University student 132)

Another student, who had two experiences of studying at university (both courses incomplete) prior to enrolling at TAFE, felt withdrawn from the younger students:

Sort of, from my, from when I was there, I was there as a mature age student as well and I actually found it – I’m quite introverted – I found it hard- harder at [University] because I was in a classroom with predominantly 18 year olds. And they formed – like, they were quite close, and because I’m not a people person I was a little bit removed from everyone, so, I didn’t do the happy hour at the [regional location] Hotel and stuff <laughing>. So they sort of helped each other through their work a little and because I was withdrawn from the group – my own doing – I didn’t have as- you know, they had more supports because they sought more supports as well I suppose. (University-TAFE student, Focus group 110)

### **Intimidation**

For TAFE students who had not attended university, the accepted wisdoms of what is expected at university caused anxiety, creating barriers which might influence a choice to attend in the future:

I’m really daunted by it [Uni], I think. It’s this unknown quality at the moment, or quantity. It’s just, um – I imagine that the workload’s going to be a lot harder, and I don’t know whether this is true or not, but I’m thinking that we might not get as much, or I might not get as much, support at Uni. (TAFE student 108)

The following TAFE student elaborated more on the cause of such discomfort – explaining a perception of the culture at university where the power differential between lecturer and student make approachability and effective communication unlikely:

So, I think that would be a struggle for me if I was going into- from this environment and getting used to it, to going to the lecturer kind of environment where I think there’s a difference of power as well. And how you approach them and how you can communicate with the teacher. (TAFE student, Focus group 110)

### **Support and teachings styles**

Many students in our study said they met with their lecturers one-on-one for personal support, academic support, discussion of experiences in class, and in particular, support with applying for recognition of prior learning (RPL) for placements completed during the TAFE

course and/or in recognition of current employment in the field. Some lecturers were regarded as particularly proactive in reaching out to students. However, compared to The Gordon, getting one-on-one support from a lecturer at university was experienced as more difficult:

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

Q           And at Deakin did you find the same support?

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

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

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

## **The delivery of services and programs to support regions, communities and disadvantaged individuals to access training and skills and through them a pathway to employment.**

Many students in our study who had experienced both the TAFE and the University sectors testified to being well prepared as a university learner by their prior TAFE studies. Yet tacit messages about the superiority of the university sector produced perceptions amongst TAFE students that made the experience of transition to university more intimidating than necessary.

### **Questioning the University-TAFE hierarchy**

A number of participants in our study explored some aspects of the differences between university and TAFE which problematized a sense of social and spatial hierarchy and undermined the idea of binaries of superiority/inferiority between the TAFE and university sectors. The following extracts show students troubling the binary of high/low workload and hard/easy work which might be imagined between the ‘easy’ TAFE and a ‘rigorous’ university sector:

Focus group member one: And while it’s not as stringent here, it still- the work seems to be more overwhelming. (University-TAFE student)

Focus group member two: Which, I would have thought the opposite, but... (University-TAFE student, Focus group 110)

A TAFE student who had previously completed a course at university troubled the notion of ‘standards’ and how much you learned at each institution:

TAFE, the model of teaching is actually better than a uni. I feel at a uni – I did six years at a uni and I didn’t learn much because you could just go into a hall of 600 people and not pay attention... at TAFE level you’re more watched. You’ve only got very few people, one-to-one time, it’s very intense so you probably take a lot more in at a TAFE level... (University-TAFE student 103)

Another student troubled the perception of lecturers’ competence and superiority as well, applying a critical view to the utility of university lecturers’ endeavours and style:

Well, a lot of the things that I’ve read, I just... some of it’s written too academically, like, say, for this industry you want people to... I don’t know... to empower them to help others, it’s written so that most people wouldn’t understand it. So, like some of the books, I think, are of no use in helping somebody, because unless all you do is spend your whole life in a book, you’re not going to understand what they’re writing anyway. That, I just think, yeah, maybe, if they speak that way too <laughs>, it might be a bit... hmm. (TAFE student 106)

The TAFE student’s perception of university academics’ teaching as not useful or relevant, and which might be alienating, enables the student to again unsettle the idea that a university educated graduate is of higher quality than one who has graduated from TAFE. Nevertheless, the perception that TAFE is a stepping stone or preparation for university further reinforces some students’ perceived status hierarchy between university and TAFE. The student below

challenges the binary of status, providing a more nuanced experience of the quality of TAFE education:

so I think there can be a bit of a perception that TAFE's sort of down here and Uni's up there, but having studied at both I feel that this course has, yeah, really prepared me well for uni studies, yeah. I feel quite confident about it... (University-TAFE student 116)

Amongst our research participants there were several cases of TAFE students who had previously attempted university studies yet did not experience success at university. These students took a pathway to TAFE, where they were supported to achieve high degrees of success. Having graduated from TAFE, in some instances they then took a pathway back to university where they experienced high degrees of success.

The evidence reviewed in this section that we collected from students shows that in the context of our research, TAFE is providing high standards of education, enabling students with diverse life experiences to undertake pathways to either employment or further study with confidence.

### **The value of diversity in the student body at TAFE**

Status and superiority was also discussed in relation to the physicality of the university compared to TAFE. In this excerpt there is a suggestion that the student finds the university campus superior in a physical sense compared to TAFE but on the other hand the demographic at university appears less diverse, which is seen as a drawback:

I love going over to the university library and it's just such a nice place! So yeah I think there is a bit of a difference with the crowd ...just from my perceptions of going over to the uni, it does feel like a different demographic over there, yeah... [At TAFE] you go into the cafeteria and you see such a range of people, which- I kind of like that. (University-TAFE student 116)

This quote is evidence of the relatively poorer physical appearance of TAFE compared to university, which does not help to break down the perceived inferiority of TAFE education. It is also evidence of the potential impact that differences in the demographic mix at university compared to TAFE can have. As this student observed, the TAFE student population was more diverse economically and socially than the university population. This was positive both for students' sense of belonging and for students as learners. Importantly, in welfare and social work education, students with diverse life experiences enrich learning experiences for the course cohort. In addition, academically strong students enrich the experiences of the wider course cohort.

A lack of diversity or concentration of privilege in student populations at some universities, which may be the result of exclusive admissions and selection policies combined with inequalities in secondary education, can be a disadvantage for students. A less diverse student body can produce a sense of not belonging for students from low SES and English as an additional language/culture backgrounds, and a socially homogeneous student population can also produce an impoverished educational experience for ostensibly more privileged students.

Diversity of both kinds within university and TAFE student populations is therefore of pedagogical value and should be supported.

## Distinct sectors complementing each other

Our project has demonstrated that teaching staff at TAFEs and Universities are able to collaborate in the interests of low SES and diverse students and should be supported to do so. This important program development work is being impeded by the cuts to the TAFE, and now university, sectors. These are the beneficial programs that need to be defended and extended:

1. Gordon TAFE has existing expertise and track record in supporting educational equity and will continue to have an important role supporting disadvantaged student to achieve success and become confident learners.
2. Diploma-Degree pathways can function as a mechanism for increasing equity in higher education in this regionally-specific context.
3. There is knowledge about how to further develop such pathways and student success within them on both sides of the TAFE-University bridge
4. Both Gordon TAFE Community Services and Deakin University Social Work courses are well regarded, with very strong graduate employment outcomes.
5. The option for students to complete an accredited two year diploma which will give them a job and qualify them for membership of the relevant professional association is extremely valuable.
6. Under the diploma-degree pathway students may build on their diploma with substantial credit towards a degree course which is also accredited with the relevant professional association.

## **Those jurisdictions in which State Governments have announced funding decisions which may impact on their operation and viability, and the development of skills in the Australian economy.**

The policy context and financial situation of the TAFE sector in the State in which the Geelong-based project referred to in this submission has taken place changed dramatically during the project with the State government announcing extensive funding cuts (AEU 2012; Best, 2012; Gordon, 2012). This directly impacted the implementation of project due to increased pressure on TAFE teachers involved in the project. To the extent that this context results in fewer low-SES students completing the diploma, recent changes to TAFEs must be recognised as potentially impacting on equity in both TAFE and higher education in this State. As Weelahan (2009, p. 263) has demonstrated, 'Equity in HE cannot be considered independently of equity in VET'. There is a need for greater recognition of interdependence between equity in secondary schools, in VET, in HE and in broader society.

The impact on TAFE observed during 2012/13 research project includes:

- Library hours cut. Students often have morning and evening classes and used to study in between times. Now they have nowhere to study in between classes.
- Learning support staff and services cut.
- Management and coordination staff cut (at the same time, compliance and bureaucratic requirements have been increased)
- Freeze on hiring new staff. Teaching staff on fixed-term contracts or departing for any reason not replaced.
- Teacher's duties massively increased (management and coordination duties added. Increased demand on teachers to provide learning support due to cut backs in that area. Increased demand on teachers to fill in for staff not replaced).
- Communications budgets cut – no funding to advertise course information or enrolment sessions in order to inform prospective students about the existence of courses nor when to attend or enrol. This is one factor which has caused a reduction in commencing student numbers.

It is likely that the recent extensive cuts to TAFE funding in Victoria (AEU 2012) will undermine TAFE capacity to continue with provision of the level of preparedness for transition to work, and to university, to which students in our study attested. The 2012 budget cuts in Victoria were estimated to remove \$1.2 billion out of TAFE over the next four years, including significant cuts to TAFE libraries, student learning, counselling and disability support. The nature and quality of TAFE teaching in combination with student support services were cited by students in our study as significant enablers of their successful completion of TAFE diploma level studies, and of their aspirations for university. Private

providers/RTOs in Geelong don't have the resources or skill base to support students with additional or different learning needs. Our public TAFEs have these skills, resources and built up infrastructure to do this. However this expertise is currently under grave threat of being lost.

The cuts will not be remedied by the (new) Premier Napthine's announcement of a \$200 million re-investment over the same four year period for TAFEs. Details about this funding indicate the money is to assist TAFEs to reorganise their operations to cope with the budget cuts, and suggest that TAFEs in regional areas may need to develop ways to "share management and governance arrangements" to cope with the cuts (AEU 2013).

This is particularly concerning for the Geelong Community who are struggling with significant job losses and redundancies from four of its major regional employers, Avalon, Alcoa, Ford and most recently, Shell. Shell, selling the Geelong refinery has put the jobs of 470 people on site and hundreds of contractors in limbo (Caldwell 2013). Gordon TAFE has traditionally played a major role in retraining workers (Caldwell 2013, Bebb 2012).

The role of prior TAFE studies in supporting the learning of non-traditional and low-SES students at University, and the expertise of TAFE teachers and other TAFE student support workers in supporting low-SES students deserves recognition in the current push to widen participation at universities, skill workers, and develop the Australian workforce. Devlin et al's approach – to learn from those with existing expertise, where that expertise is concentrated – is important. Further, there is a 'broad range of "social" policies that affect the policy and practice of education equity' (Hosken, 2010, p. 2 of 12).

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings regarding the importance of TAFE as an equity pathway to social inclusion, employment, and to university, particularly in regional areas presented in this submission are based on research undertaken with current TAFE students and current and past university students from a TAFE pathway. Our institution- and course-specific research has revealed factors which support the success of cohorts of diverse students and that may be more widely applicable. Prior studies at TAFE have supported low-SES students' learning at University by building academic skills, confidence as learners and a strong foundation of underpinning knowledge.

This Project Team recommends:

### 1. Funding to enable TAFE to continue as:

- c) an equity pathway to social inclusion, employment, and to university, particularly in regional areas.
- d) an integral complement to the University education sector to deliver on the ambitious objectives of the Federal Government's widening participation agenda, as a mechanism to deliver the skills, knowledge and workforce needed now, and in the future, in the Australian economy.

### 2. Increased resources for separate and joint sector development

- d) **Publicly funded TAFEs** need funding to be restored and increased to enable them to maintain the high quality education they provide and to maintain their successful work in supporting communities, regions and disadvantaged individuals to gain skills, training and employment.
- e) **Universities** need increased funding to increase staffing levels and therefore free up teaching staff to spend the necessary time to develop relationships with and provide support to students. This is important for the achieving the goals of the widening participation agenda of increasing access without increasing attrition at the same time.
- f) **TAFEs and Universities** need funding to do the work required to further develop and formalise diploma-degree pathways so that disadvantaged individuals can exit into employment at the diploma level or be supported in an efficient and seamless way to undertake further study.

### 3. Active use of localised and nuanced partnership approaches by education institutions. This includes:

- Cross teaching by TAFEs and Universities in courses that can be articulated, such as professional practice diplomas and degrees
- Programs negotiated and designed according to the needs of students in each location. TAFEs and Universities need resources in order to do this work



- Focus on regional centres where there is a particular opportunity for government to make an impact on TAFE pathways to employment and/or further education
- Workforce development in regional areas due to new industries is a particular area of need

4. Recognise and capitalise on the complementary and symbiotic nature of each sector's skills, strengths and capacities.

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