Making the most of the mosaic: facilitating post-school transitions to higher education of disadvantaged students

Joan Abbott-Chapman

Abstract
Research studies of post-school education and training conducted in Australia and internationally have revealed a mosaic of students' education and employment experiences, with a multiplicity of nonlinear pathways. These tend to be more fragmentary for disadvantaged students, especially those of low socio-economic background, rural students, and mature aged students seeking a 'second chance' education. Challenges faced by students in their transitions to higher education are made more complex because of the intersection of vertical stratification created by institutional and sectoral status hierarchies and segmentation, especially relating to 'academic' and 'vocational' education and training, and the horizontal stratification of regional, rural and remote locations in which students live. If we are to achieve the equity goals set by the Bradley Review (Bradley et al., Review of Australian Higher Education Final Report, 2008) we need to acknowledge and work with the complex realities of disadvantaged students' situations, starting at the school level. Interrelated factors at the individual, community and institutional level which continue to inhibit student take-up of higher education places are discussed in the context of discursive constructions of 'disadvantage' and 'choice' in late modernity. Research highlights the need to facilitate students' post-school transitions by developing student resilience, institutional responsiveness and policy reflexivity through transformative education.

Keywords Post-school transitions; Higher education; Access; Equity; Widening participation; Discursive practices

The continuing challenge of widening participation in higher education

This paper reviews issues surrounding the continued under-representation of equity group students (Australian Education Council 1991) in higher education, especially those of low socio-economic status (SES) and students living in rural and remote areas, in relation to findings from research in Australia and internationally. The under-representation of disadvantaged students in higher education persists in Australia, as in other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations (OECD 2008), despite two decades of policies and programs designed to promote their inclusion, following the Commonwealth Government's 1988 Higher Education Policy Statement (Dawkins 1988). This highlights the need to address interrelated factors and discursive practices at the individual, community and institutional level which continue to inhibit student take-up of higher education places (Abbott-Chapman 2007). The paper suggests policies and strategies which improve higher education access, retention and course completion of disadvantaged students should target the 3 'Rs'—student resilience, institutional responsiveness and policy reflexivity, within the context of broad societal changes.

Evidence shows that post-compulsory participation has increased across all the target equity groups and that in terms of subsequent occupational status and earnings ''education and training make a substantial contribution to social mobility in Australia'' (Marks 2008, p. 53). There has been an upward trend in education levels across all OECD nations, with an inter-generational increase in the proportion of populations achieving upper secondary or tertiary qualifications and a concomitant reduction in the proportion of populations who are employed in unskilled or semi-skilled jobs (OECD 2008). However, it may be argued that at least some of the gains in widening participation to non-traditional groups are due to what has been called ''contingent equity'' resulting from overall increases in higher education participation rather than a genuine redistribution of educational opportunity (Abbott-Chapman 1991, p. 16; Adnett and Tlupova 2008). There is considerable evidence that ''students' socio-economic status remains one of the strongest predictors of educational success and life chances'' (Allard and Santoro 2008, p. 204).

The Bradley Review of Higher Education (Bradley et al. 2008) noted that the equity groups which remain under-represented in Australian higher education, to a degree which has changed little over the last decade, ''are students from remote parts of Australia, indigenous students and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds'' (p. 10), and participation rates of regional and remote students ''have worsened in the last five years'' (p. 31). Other data confirm that students living in rural or remote areas and from low SES backgrounds ''are highly under-represented and their participation shares have not changed markedly despite 15 years of equity policy'' (Centre for the Study of Higher Education 2008, p. 15) emphasising that ''the provision of higher education opportunities for people who live outside the major cities is a matter of high priority'' (Dawkins 1988, p. 21).

Reasons for under-representation of disadvantaged groups are complex and socio-cultural as well as economic. Statistics show that students from more advantaged backgrounds whose fathers completed higher education are substantially more likely to enter higher education themselves. Previous schooling ''plays an important role in preparing the ground for equal opportunities in higher education'' (OECD 2008, p. 140), as does the extent to which school systems are stratified. Under-representation of non-traditional groups reflects lower literacy and numeracy levels at secondary school (Rothman 2002) and lack of tertiary entry qualifications which ''in turn are based almost entirely on staying-on rates in schools and colleges'' (Gorard 2008, p. 431).

Australian studies have shown that ''Year 12 completion rates are significantly lower for low SES students than for students from middle and high SES backgrounds'' (Centre for the Study of Higher Education 2008, p. 26). Those least likely to complete school include indigenous young people, those whose parents work in blue-collar occupations or are other than university educated, those from non-metropolitan locations, low academic achievers and those who attend government schools. Nearly 30% of non-completers did not enter full-time employment, education or training in the initial post-school years (Curtis and Macmillan 2008). Since unequal access to higher education is due to ''a lack of prerequisites reflecting inequalities at a much earlier stage of the education life

cycle'' even revisions of the student finance system ''are likely to have only marginal effects on widening participation'' (Adnett and Tlupova 2008, p. 252). Therefore, in order to increase the participation in higher education of students from disadvantaged groups the efforts to promote educational engagement, raise school achievement and discourage early leaving must start much earlier in the education life cycle. There are life-long implications ''because research demonstrates that getting a university degree brings increased income, but also better health and wellbeing and greater civic participation'' (Walker 2008, p. 268; Gall et al. 2010).

From a societal perspective, widening as well as increasing participation in higher education serves national goals of social justice and socio-economic development. The funding of higher education represents a significant investment for governments, and the underpinning rationale for increasing participation in the knowledge economy, as expressed in a raft of policy documents, is the development of human capital, the broadening of the social and talent pool, the up-skilling of the population and the increase in national productivity (Schuller et al. 2002). The Delors Report (Delors et al. 1996) pointed out that ''the most successful countries in the globalised and post-information era are countries that have favoured investment in human capital and equalitarian policies'' (p. 179). These policies yield both societal and individual benefits. We should not lose sight of the personhood of those who, by virtue of their background, are denied the opportunity to develop their potential to the highest levels. Marginson (1997) has argued that the impact on students of policies and practices in schools and universities is profound—not only in providing the credentialing which rations scarce economic, social and status goods but also in shaping students' sense of themselves as valued human beings. Marginson asserts that education matters because students ''are formed as social beings in the social systems of education; the models of inclusion and exclusion; the relations of equality and justice; the relations of power; the mono and mini cultures; the systems of value and its measurement'' (p. 5). The forming through education of

self-governing individuals ''underlines the importance of the stakes in education policy'' (p. 6).

The mosaic of study and employment: outcomes of opportunity and choice

When one moves from the 'bird's eye view' of public policy to the lived experience of students from disadvantaged backgrounds the concept of students' post-school pathways, even alternative pathways, begins to unravel in light of the constraints and complexity of students' daily lives in a fast-changing world. An examination of the links between education, training and employment of disadvantaged students, reveals the enormous complexity and uncertainty of students' post-school career paths, and the part played by education in opening up new horizons and improving life chances. Over 20 years ago the longitudinal analysis of post-school outcomes of a cohort of 6,822 Year Ten leavers in Tasmania (Abbott-Chapman et al. 1986) highlighted the complexity of study and work destinations and the movements in between, as students navigate their way over obstacles and keep their options open, within the 'Mosaic of Study and Employment'. Six main pathways identified then, as shown below, have been observed in more recent research (Abbott-Chapman and Kilpatrick 2001). Pathways one to three below represent fairly stable post-school careers. Pathways four to six represent 'fragmentary' careers which look more like a mosaic than a set of pathways.

1. Continuous full-time study (which may also include unpaid work, including for family, such as in family business, or farm, or as carer for family member).

2. Continuous full-time study and part-time work (which may be casual and not continuous).

3. Mainly full-time employment (which may include vocational education and training (VET), combining work with training or apprenticeship).

4. Mainly part-time employment (made up of either a mixture of part-time, casual or paid work; short term full-time job; or short term full-time or part-time work, which may involve periods of unemployment).

5. Late starters into study and/or employment (reasons for delay may include periods of travel, ill-health, pregnancy or home duties).

6. Mainly unemployed (continuous or almost continuous unemployment with no study or training).

Abbott-Chapman and Kilpatrick's (2001) findings showed that a declining proportion of students proceed along 'stable' pathways from school through to University and that most disadvantaged students follow 'fragmentary' pathways. The complexity of study and work trajectories has also been demonstrated by more recent research findings from the longitudinal Life Patterns Then and Now project as exemplified by the work of Dwyer et al. (1999) and Stokes and Wyn (2007). Young people living in rural and remote areas have some of the most fragmentary careers, reflecting lower levels of higher education access and participation and also limited labour market opportunities (Corbett 2007). Local jobs are usually in short supply and transport facilities to urban areas are limited.

Inequity in education provision in rural and regional areas is linked to the metrocentric nature of Australian teacher education and further and higher education provisions (Green and Reid 2004); and it is difficult to attract and retain teaching staff, especially specialist staff, in rural locations (Mills and Gale 2003; Anderson et al. 2007). Rural youth who are also of low SES backgrounds, and/or are indigenous, suffer compound disadvantage. Their life courses are ''strongly shaped by local contexts'' (Quinn et al. 2008, p. 191), and they suffer the twin disadvantages of horizontal and vertical stratification of opportunities, since spatial and social distance reinforce one another (James 2001). Their strong sense of belonging to the locality means that ''young people's stories are enmeshed in the stories of their communities'' (Wierenga 2009, p. 27), but this has both positive and negative connotations. For the categories 'rural' and 'remote' present to the urbancentric gaze ''a plethora of definitional possibilities'', which are often associated with a deficit view of geographical remoteness and the rural/urban binary (Moriarty et al. 2003, p. 134; McConaghy 2006). As a result, rural students are often perceived, and perceive themselves, in terms of these negative social constructs, particularly when they move into urban educational institutions at the postcompulsory level.

In consequence, rural students' aspirations may be limited by these constructs (Kilpatrick and Abbott-Chapman 2002). Such students look towards study options and locations where they feel comfortable and will 'fit in', so tending to exclude themselves from some study opportunities and locations (Crozier et al. 2008). They feel deeply the competing pressures, on the one hand, to leave home to access education and employment opportunities in the town and, on the other hand, to stay in the community to be near supportive family and friends. Push/pull factors affect not only choices made but emotional responses to them, in situations of cost and benefit which are by no means clear cut (Christie 2009). The rich social and cultural capital of close-knit communities, which strengthen resilience at times of drought, disaster (such as bushfires) and economic downturn, also lock individuals into networks of trust, interdependence, and belonging which accentuate a sense of dislocation when the individual moves to the town for study or employment. Placebased education ''focuses curriculum on the local place and community as a means of engaging students in learning relevant to their lives'' and raises aspirations and attainment by valuing both their regional and globalised world (Bartholomaeous 2009, p. 68).

Students' values, aspirations and priorities influence work and study choices as do knowledge, social and identity resources linking individuals with local and/or cosmopolitan networks and opportunities. While parents of low SES backgrounds, who left school early themselves, may encourage their children to continue with their education at the post-compulsory level their sights are normally set upon local, practical and attainable education and employment goals, with a preference for VET options. A study of reasons given by Canadian working class students for attending university and their reactions once they got there, found their strongly 'utilitarian' and vocational orientation helped their transition as cultural 'outsiders' into the new environment and that they were 'more likely to insist on learning useful skills, becoming credentialed, gaining an advantage in the labour market and ''getting their money's worth'' (Lehman 2009, p. 146).

Strengthening student *Resilience* and study persistence: a discourse of welfare or a discourse of rights?

Those assisting disadvantaged students to make informed choices about their educational futures must recognise that choices may be limited by circumstances, and by students' economic, social and cultural capital (Archer 2007). For many rural, low SES students ''deciding which way to go is a bit of a lottery'' involving considerable trial and error (Abbott-Chapman and Kilpatrick 2001, p. 44). The need to navigate one's own path successfully within the fast changing social landscape of the 'risk' society has resulted in complex 'choice' biographies (Beck 1992; Furlong and Cartmel 2007; Abbott-Chapman and Robertson 2009). A study of year 12 students in nine rural Queensland state schools (Alloway and Dalley-Trim 2009) demonstrated that the neo-liberal discourse ''with its imperative of individualism'' (p. 51) makes the search for independence more acute and the risk of failure more intense, especially for young people whose life experience inadequately prepares them to assess the positive and negative risks involved in life decisions. While Generation Y students adopted the discourse of the entrepreneurial self, the 'do-it yourself' biography, and the need to be mobile, adaptable and flexible, they underestimated the risks of not achieving one's goals due to the possible intervention of external factors, such as geography and distance. This high-risk approach means the ''do-it-yourself' biography'' may become the ''breakdown biography'' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, p. 4)—something already experienced by many of the students surveyed. This underlines the role of schools and teachers in equipping students ''with the skills and attributes required for success under such circumstances'' (Alloway and Dalley-Trim 2009, p. 56), and in helping them cope with wider social circumstances which shape their opportunities and sense of self efficacy, or lack of it (Quinn et al. 2008).

Barriers to higher education access mean ''barriers and constraints to genuine freedom and fair access to opportunities, and the barriers and constraints to a life of genuine and valuable choices for each individual'' (Walker 2008, p. 268). Walker proposes that in widening participation we move beyond paradigms of developing human capital, which circumscribe choice, to one of enabling and widening

individuals' 'capability' as strong evaluators able to make reflexive and informed choices for themselves about what makes a good life. This inclusive approach challenges discursive practices which position disadvantaged students as excluded 'other' (Foucault 1965), a cost to the system and perhaps unable to help themselves. A survey of university students with physical and sensory disabilities demonstrated that ''Once people who are disabled, or disadvantaged in other ways, become labeled as such, even targeted by compensatory programs, they become a 'problem', although the crucial issue of individual needs may have been avoided'' (Abbott-Chapman and Easthope 1998, p. 102).

Abbott-Chapman and Easthope's research (1998) found that university students with a disability demonstrated high levels of Perceived Personal Control in Education, which was positively correlated with their level of academic attainment, irrespective of the severity of their disability. In many cases the students refused to see themselves as disabled, and in the practice of day-to-day living as a student, disability was regarded as neither a medical nor welfare problem. The students stressed the importance of self-help groups, institutional responsiveness to their needs, in terms of resources and equipment, and being helped to help themselves, within a framework not of 'welfare' or 'being done good to' but of ''their rights to maximize their potential through education'' (Abbott-Chapman and Easthope 1998, p. 110). Findings showed that in terms of academic achievement (controlling for student load) these students performed on a par with the able-bodied students in the control group. These findings are supported by other evidence regarding study persistence of low SES, rural and 'alternative entry' students at university (Abbott-Chapman 2006; Marks 2007; Bradley et al. 2008).

Widening participation to under-represented groups and ensuring course completion is not just a matter of providing special services, resources and personnel, but ''depends on the ways in which we enable students to become full members of the learning community'' (Abbott-Chapman and Easthope 1998, p. 103). This enables positive student interactions outside as well as inside the classroom in ways which assist acculturation and strengthen social capital and learner identity (Crozier et al. 2008). It also highlights the role of teachers to inform,

encourage and facilitate learners rather than to direct. Professional development for teachers and lecturers to help them become more aware of, and sensitive to, cultural and social diversity is provided in many institutions, since classroom teachers have a great responsibility to facilitate their disadvantaged students' learning and promote social justice (Mills and Gale 2002).

As Allard and Santoro (2008) found ''good teachers continually interrogate their own assumptions about students in order to improve their teaching'' in adopting an inclusive model of education which respects and celebrates cultural diversity, and gives students a voice and a sense of control over their own destiny (p. 211). Nevertheless, even experienced and effective teachers are captive to their own values and beliefs regarding groups distinguished by their 'otherness', such as students from low SES backgrounds, Non-English-Speaking backgrounds and refugees. Teachers' tendency to categorise students as 'other' overlooked their diverse life experiences, educational experiences and social class positions within ethnic groups. What teachers saw as a positive pedagogic focus on the 'unique individual' was found to mask how school practices may discriminate against groups who are not positioned for whatever reason as part of the 'norm' and may make invisible collective group experiences of inequalities which are discursively produced (Allard and Santoro 2008). So we should not write off students who have 'dropped out' of schooling to take up 'dead end' jobs without training, for research has shown many to be 'making a life' for themselves involving workplace learning (Quinn et al. 2008). Further down the track they may take up the mosaic possibility of becoming a late entrant into further education.

Institutional *Responsiveness* to student diversity

Late entrants into further and higher education—who perhaps postponed taking up formal study until they decided to upgrade their skills in the pursuit of a better job, or to seek qualifications and employment after they have raised their family—are sometimes called 'second chance' students. There are increasing numbers of them, comprising over 40% of Australian university students. It is now widely recognised that ''university enrolments of mature and alternative entry students from

disadvantaged regions provide a way to redress equity group imbalances within higher education and deserve more support'' (Abbott-Chapman 2006, p. 15). The review of the participation in higher education of people from low SES backgrounds and indigenous people by the Centre for the Study of Higher Education (2008) has revealed the very wide range of programs, services and facilities being provided by Australian universities to help increase the participation and successful course completion of members of disadvantaged groups, both direct-from-school and mature-age. These include outreach programs, special admissions schemes, transition preparation and bridging programs, school based tutoring or mentoring, scholarships, financial support, study induction and support programs, flexible delivery and distance education. Research suggests that disadvantaged students do better in universities which liaise closely with schools and the VET sector in preparing students before they make the transition to university, provide induction and orientation programs at the beginning of the first year, and continuing study support throughout the degree or a least in the first year (McInnis and James 1995). Research has shown that ''getting the students in and leaving them to it does not work for those who have no prior experience of universities'' (Crozier et al. 2008, p. 176). Responsive institutions help to equip students with the skills, competencies and study expectations necessary to participate successfully in higher education. They also recognise and accommodate the competing demands on students of study, paid work and family commitments, through flexible delivery and timetabling arrangements (Centre for the Study of Higher Education 2008).

Institutional responsiveness to student diversity and degree of inter-sectoral collaboration varies between institutions since ''institutional performance in facilitating access for under-represented groups is not uniform across the sector'' (Bradley et al. 2008, p. 33). Proportionally more technical and further education (TAFE) students transfer to the 'regional' and 'technological universities' and fewer to the elite Sandstone and Group of Eight universities (Abbott-Chapman 2007). The 'academic' or 'vocational' subjects chosen at school influence future education and training pathways, employment, earnings and life chances (Hoelscher et al. 2008) and VET students are under-represented in professional faculties such as medicine, dentistry

and law and over-represented in engineering, technology, business and education. These distributions reflect the unequal relationship between universities and VET institutions and the hierarchical structure of degree courses within them (Wheelahan 2009). The Bradley Review (2008) highlighted the importance of universities ''building an integrated relationship with Vocational Education and Training (VET)'' (p. 179), echoing the Dawkins (1988) Report's call for stronger university links with other sectors (pp. 61–70).

A longitudinal study of mature age university students from a disadvantaged region revealed the positive contribution made by inter-sectoral collaboration and university support for 'alternative entry' students (Abbott-Chapman 2006). Findings showed that TAFE transfer students who persisted over 3 years overall performed academically on a par with other members of the cohort, but experienced more study problems and less satisfaction in the first year. Induction programs and study support through the UNISTART program were essential in assisting the first-year transition and were associated with later academic success. The transfer from TAFE to university proved very challenging for some alternative entry students but their results 3 years later, and their own feelings of satisfaction and self efficacy, demonstrated that they overcame early challenges and problems. Learning skills development assistance, supported by study workshops especially for mature age students, built competence and confidence, and reduced performance anxiety, especially in writing essays, making presentations and sitting examinations. Students also found particularly helpful lecturers' early feedback on their work.

Responsive institutions also seek actively to help students overcome the combined barriers of horizontal and vertical stratification by connecting schools and communities to universities as 'learning hubs', in partnerships designed to bridge the social and cultural divide in ways which are mutually beneficial (Billet et al. 2005). Regional universities are building on the fact that ''in Australia, as elsewhere, regional university campuses have been used as a policy instrument for regional development'' (Allison and Eversole 2008, p. 96), with special relevance for VET, and that universities with regional campuses have higher levels of 'equity group' participation (Bradley et al. 2008). Partnerships in education and training are

also strengthened by the rapid development of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) through the provision of flexible, on-line and distance learning. By breaking free from physically located teaching and learning, these increase opportunities for rural and remote students to participate in further and higher education and e-learning networks in Australia and internationally. They also contribute to student autonomy and self-direction and shorten both geographical and social distance (Williams et al. 2007).

The combination of face-to-face workshops and online delivery in 'blended learning' have been found to be most appropriate for non-traditional learners, especially when there is a need to accommodate cultural sensitivities, especially of indigenous students (Anderson et al. 2007; Latham et al. 2009). The embedding of ICT in teaching and learning demands new pedagogies and new curricula so that ''teachers still need support in implementing these strategies and measuring their impact'' (Reading 2007, p. 11). University Faculties of Education have a special role in providing professional development in this area for preservice and in-service teachers. The jury is still out on how far flexible and on-line learning are widening higher education participation (Sampson 2005), especially in view of the 'digital divide' between the 'haves' and 'have nots'-a discrepancy the Commonwealth Government is seeking to address by providing computers to all secondary school students, and rolling out the National Broadband Network (NBN).

Reflexivity in policy on higher education: rethinking the role of universities

Policy reflexivity designed to achieve social justice requires ''an ongoing commitment to re-thinking and reworking accepted wisdom'' (Gale and Densmore 2000, p. 151). This may mean questioning the status quo, as the Bradley Review (Bradley et al. 2008) has done, through its renewed vision of the purposes, structures and processes of tertiary education, and a rethink of the role and mission of universities within a globalizing and fast-changing world. At time of writing this paper it remains to be seen which, if any, of the review's recommendations the government will adopt. The stated intention of the recommendations is to create a

more flexible and responsible tertiary and training system with closer links between VET and higher education. This collaboration demands a shared information base, integrated response to workforce needs, especially in localities such as 'outer Metropolitan' and 'regional' areas, efficient regulatory and accountability frameworks and ''clearer and stronger pathways between the sectors in both directions'' (Bradley et al. 2008, p. 179). The Review also argues for better mechanisms for credit transfer and cross accreditation, since the current system is too complex for both direct entry and mature age 'second chance' students to navigate, The review recommends a national approach in which the Federal government takes primary responsibility for VET as well as universities in terms of regulation and funding ''within a new funding and regulatory framework'' (Bradley et al. 2008, p. 190).

Rethinking the role of universities, especially by the elite, research-intensive universities, will not be easy for it may seem to threaten their market share of a competitive international education industry. Hierarchical systems of higher education institutions not only promote diversity in teaching and learning which facilitates choice but also ''facilitate a smoother matching between social power and education scarcity'' (Marginson and Considine 2000, p. 179). However, while the re-alignment of broader tertiary education relationships may appear to some institutions to threaten a loss of social power it may potentially re-position them to benefit from global shifts in individual and societal education and training demands. The international trend to closer integration of 'academic' and 'vocational' learning is to some extent inevitable, since the global demand by potential employers for graduates with work-integrated learning has placed pressure on higher education institutions to revise curricula and delivery modes. An increasing vocational thrust in university education is evident in Australia, UK, USA and Europe and graduate employability is now a key performance indicator in university league tables (Bridgstock 2009). Resulting changes have helped to improve student retention and participation (Patuck et al. 2008), and reflect a re-contextualising of learning in second modernity which is ''formal, non-formal and informal learning and ultimately neither discrete nor mutually exclusive'' (Chisholm 2008, p. 144). Changes also reflect a need for highly skilled, mobile and adaptable workers who are able to

''integrate a patchwork of contract, part-time and self employment opportunities as the labour market and their personal circumstances require'' (Bridgstock 2009, p. 37).

The relationship between rural and urban communities and educational institutions also demands a re-think. While it remains true that place matters in provision and accessing of education and training opportunities, the digital revolution has shrunk the world and provides new e-learning opportunities for disadvantaged and advantaged alike, if access to hardware and software can be assured, and student take-up and engagement encouraged. Allison and Eversole (2008) argue that regional development policy has shifted away from externally driven models to ones which ''view the region itself as a key locus of activity, capable of driving both innovation and effective governance'' (p. 105). Therefore, universities need to 'reconfigure' themselves as institutions 'traversing place' and as Communities of Practice providing 'demand-driven' services (Wenger et al. 2002). This cuts across the notion of systems vertically tiered in provision and status. The borderless world has no centre and no periphery, just a complex network of connections with hubs.

Conclusions: helping disadvantaged students make the most of the mosaic

The knowledge economy of the 21st century demands flexible, responsive institutions of higher learning which are interdisciplinary and inter-sectoral, within a fast-changing highly technological environment. The increasing participation of students in post-compulsory education and training, especially from previously under-represented groups, is required to achieve both social justice and national competitiveness in international markets. Evidence reveals that over the last 20 years previously under-represented 'equity groups' have increased their share in higher education, but inequities remain, especially among those of lower SES, those living in rural and regional areas and indigenous students, who are often both. This is despite a raft of policies and practices designed to increase participation and retention. Governments' twin goals of increasing and widening higher education participation are being pursued around the world and it remains to be seen whether, and in what ways, global economic and environmental crises may impact upon these goals and their outcomes at the grass roots.

Research has shown that unequal education and training access and learning outcomes start in the school years and are linked to literacy and numeracy proficiency, school engagement and achievement, and students' aspirations for themselves. The role of schools and teachers, in partnership with parents, in raising students' expectations and providing them with the learning tools to achieve these expectations is crucial. Transition to higher education of disadvantaged students can therefore be facilitated by schools and universities working together to ensure the best possible learning outcomes for each student. Preparation before university entrance, orientation and induction at entry and study support until course completion all play their part, but of even greater importance is the encouragement of individuals to become resilient, independent learners, and entrepreneurial managers of their own learning career.

We live in changing, highly uncertain times, when the days of unilinear education pathways and lifelong careers are over. Increasing numbers of students, especially disadvantaged students, will experience fragmentary careers within a mosaic of study and work destinations and face a smorgasbord of choices. Encouraging students to make informed education and employment choices, by providing guidance on how to decide critically between them, is one of the primary functions of the teacher and educator. This includes helping students to overcome financial, social and cultural barriers to participation and achievement.

The increasing complexity and unpredictability of life circumstances mean that ''successful transition to adulthood depends on being able to engage reflectively and continuously in the processes of constructing oneself as a choice-maker'' (Wyn 2009, p. 47). This requires tertiary educators to help students to develop capability to become strong evaluators of their own reflexive and informed choices. Many low SES and rural students aim first for vocational education and training, which provides a 'safe' option leading to 'steady' employment, and not all students are able or want to attend university. But this should not obviate the possibility of their being able to enter a degree course later. Pathways between higher education and VET institutions should assist rather than hinder this through closer collaboration between universities and VET providers, and removal of some of the structural

barriers resulting from institutional hierarchies. Universities will probably always remain 'primus inter pares' of tertiary institutions—first among equals—in development and transmission of highly specialised knowledge and research—but this does not preclude strong inter-sectoral partnerships at many levels.

Re-shaping existing vertical and horizontal stratification in delivering learning opportunities presents enormous challenges for reflexive policy, since education for diversity is transformative education. McWilliam (2008) proposes the need to educate a diverse, digitally literate and creative workforce, through not just more education and training, but different education and training. This different education will optimise students' creative capacities through the co-creation of knowledge. As partners in educational transformation, universities and VET institutions must become learning hubs, rather than silos, connected with each other at many levels, and with the communities in which they are set. Flexible and online delivery means that globally connected learning spaces are activated by the learner rather than the teacher, as facilitator, preparing and supporting them, enabling them to create their own learning biographies. ''The new model depicts young people's ability to link leisure, study and work activities in a seamless and productive mix of tasks and apparently successful outcomes. In formal education there is increasing recognition of these blurred boundaries'' (Abbott-Chapman and Robertson 2009, p. 247). Facilitating successful student transitions, and associated equity goals, requires commitment by secondary and tertiary institutions to a shared holistic vision of the purposes of education. Universities should therefore be prepared for the resulting testing of social constructs and stretching of organisational boundaries.

\

References

Abbott-Chapman, J. (2006). Moving from technical and further education to university: An Australian study of mature students. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 58(1), 1–17.

Abbott-Chapman, J. (2007). Improving participation of disadvantaged youth to post-compulsory education and training—a continuing challenge. In R. Maclean & UNESCO-UNEVOC (Eds.),*Learning and teaching for the twenty-first century. Festschrift for Professor Phillip Hughes* (pp.275–292). New York: Springer.

Abbott-Chapman, J., & Easthope, G. (1998). Participation and Inclusion: A discourse of welfare or a discourse of rights? *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 33(2), 99–118.

Abbott-Chapman, J., & Kilpatrick, S. (2001). Improving post-school outcomes for rural school leavers.*Australian Journal of Education*, 45(1), 35–47.

Abbott-Chapman, J., & Robertson, M. (2009). Leisure, place and identity. In A. Furlong (Ed.),*International Handbook of Youth and Young Adulthood* (pp. 243–248). New York: Routledge International.

Abbott-Chapman, J., Hughes, P., & Wyld, C. (1986). *Participation and retention rates and social and educational factors which are associated with them in Tasmania.* (Australian Secondary Education Project). Canberra: Commonwealth Schools Commission.

Abbott-Chapman, J., Hughes, P., & Wyld, C. (1991). *Improving Access of Disadvantaged Youth to Higher Education.* Department of Employment, Education and Training, Higher Education Division, Evaluations and Investigations Program. Canberra: AGPS.

Adnett, N., & Tlupova, P. (2008). Informed choice? The new English funding system and widening participation. *London Review of Education*, 6(3), 243–254.

Allard, A. C., & Santoro, N. (2008). Experienced teachers' perspectives on cultural and social class diversity: Which differences matter? *Equity and Excellence in Education*, 41(2), 200–214.

Allison, J., & Eversole, R. (2008). A new direction for regional university campuses: Catalysing innovation in place. *Innovation the European Journal of Social Science Research*, 21(2), 95–109.

Alloway, N., & Dalley-Trim, L. (2009). It's all about 'I': Gen Ys and neo-liberal discourse in 'new times'. *Youth Studies Australia*, 28(1), 51–56.

Anderson, N., Timms, C., & Courtney, L. (2007). And twelve months later we are still waiting: Insights into teaching and use of ICT in rural and remote Australian schools. *Seminar Net: International Journal of Media, Technology and Lifelong Learning*, 3(3), 1–11.

Archer, L. (2007). Diversity, equality and higher education: A critical reflection on the ab/uses of equity discourse within widening participation. *Teaching in Higher Education,* 12(5–6), 635–653.

Australian Education Council. (1991). *Young people's participation in post-compulsory education and training*. (Report of the Australian Education Council Review Committee). Canberra: AGPS.

Bartholomaeous, P. (2009). The Potential of Place-based Education to Enhance Rural Students' Educational Experience. *Proceedings of the International Symposium for Innovation in Rural Education*. University of New England, Armidale, NSW, 11–14 February, 2009, pp. 68–75.

Beck, U. (1992). *Risk society: Towards a new modernity*. London: Sage.

Beck, U., & Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2002). *Individualization*. London: Sage.

Billet, S., Clemens, A., & Seddon, T. (2005). *Developing and sustaining social partnerships*. Adelaide: NCVER.

Bradley, D., Noonan, P., Nugent, H., & Scales, B. (2008). *Review of Australian Higher Education Final Report.* Canberra: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

Bridgstock, R. (2009). The graduate attributes we've overlooked: Enhancing graduate employability through career management skills. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 28(1), 31–44.

Centre for the Study of Higher Education. (2008). *Participation and equity: A review of the participation in higher education.* Melbourne: University of Melbourne.

Chisholm, L. (2008). Re-contextualising learning in second modernity. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 13(2), 139–147.

Christie, H. (2009). Emotional journeys: Young people and transitions to university. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 30(2), 123–136.

Corbett, M. (2007). *Learning to leave: The irony of school in a coastal community*. Halifax: Fenwood Publishing.

Crozier, G., Reay, P., Clayton, J., Colliander, L., & Grinstead, J. (2008). Different strokes for different folks: Diverse students in diverse institutions-experiences of higher education. *Research Papers in Education*, 23(2), 167–177.

Curtis, D., & Macmillan, J. (2008). *Non school completers: Profiles and initial destinations (LSAY Report. no. 54)*. Camberwell: ACER.

Dawkins, J. (1988). Higher education: A policy statement. Canberra: AGPS.

Delors, J., et al. (1996). *Learning: The treasure within. Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the twenty-first century*. Paris: UNESCO.

Dwyer, P. J., Harwood, A., & Tyler, D. (1999). *Seeking the balance—risk, choices and life priorities: The life patterns project 1998 to 1999* (Working Paper no. 19). Parkville: University of Melbourne,Youth Research Centre.

Foucault, M. (1965). *Madness and civilisation* (R. Howard, Trans). New York: Pantheon, Abridged Edition.

Furlong, A., & Cartmel, F. (2007). *Young people and social change: New perspectives* (2nd ed.).Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Gale, T., & Densmore, K. (2000). *Just schooling: Explorations in the cultural politics of teaching.* Buckingham: Open University Press.

Gall, S., Abbott-Chapman, J., Patton, G. C., Dwyer, T., & Venn, A. (2010). Intergenerational educational mobility is associated with cardiovascular disease risk behaviours in a cohort of young Australianadults: The childhood determinants of adult health (CDAH) study. *BMC Public Health*, 10(55),1–10.

Gorard, S. (2008). Who is missing from higher education? *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 38(3), 421–437.

Green, B., & Reid, J. (2004). Teacher education for a rural—regional sustainability: Changing agendas, challenging futures, chasing chimeras? *Asia Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 32(3), 255–273.

Hoelscher, M., Hayward, G., Ertl, H., & Dunbar-Goddet, H. (2008). The transition from vocational education and training to higher education: A successful pathway? *Research Papers in Education*, 23(2), 139–151.

James, R. (2001). Participation disadvantage in Australian higher education: An analysis of some effects of geographical location and socio-economic status. *Higher Education,* 42, 455–472.

Kilpatrick, S., & Abbott-Chapman, J. (2002). Rural young peoples' work/study priorities and aspirations: The influence of social capital. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 29(1), 43–68.

Latham, H., Hamilton, M., Manners, J., & Anderson, J. (2009, March 26). An innovative model improving success at university for regional Australians suffering education and social disadvantage. *Rural and Remote Health*, 9, Article 1128. Retrieved March 31, 2009, from http://www.rrh.org.au/publishedarticles/article_print_1128.pdf.

Lehman, W. (2009). University as vocational education: Working-class students' expectations for university. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 30(2), 137–149.

Marginson, S. (1997). *Educating Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Marginson, S., & Considine, M. (2000). *The enterprise university*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Marks, G. N. (2007). *Completing university: Characteristics and outcomes of completing or noncompleting student (LSAY Report. no. 51)*. Camberwell: ACER Ltd.

Marks, G. N. (2008). *The occupations and earnings of young Australians: The role of education and training (LSAY Report. no. 55).* Camberwell: ACER Ltd.

McConaghy, C. (2006). Schooling out of place. *Discourse: Studies in the cultural politics of education*, 27(3), 325–339.

McInnis, C., & James, R. (1995). *First year on campus: Diversity in the initial experience of Australian undergraduates*. Canberra: AGPS.

McWilliam, E. (2008). *The creative workforce: How to launch young people into high flying careers*. Sydney: UNSW press.

Mills, C., & Gale, T. (2002). Schooling and the production of social inequality: What can and should we be doing? *Melbourne Studies in Education*, 27(1), 65–78.

Mills, C., & Gale, T. (2003). Transient teachers: Mixed messages of schooling in regional Australia. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 18(3), 145–151.

Moriarty, B., Danahar, P. A., & Danahar, G. (2003). Situating and interrogating contemporary Australian rural education research. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 18(3), 133–138.

OECD. (2008). *Education at a glance 2008*: OECD Indicators. Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Patuck, C.-J., Peach, P., Pocknee, C., Webb, F., Fletcher, M., & Pretto, G. (2008). *The WIL (Work Integrated Learning) report: A national scoping study (Australian Learning and Teaching Council Final Report).* Brisbane: Queensland University of Technology.

Quinn, J., Lawy, R., & Diment, K. (2008). Dead end kids in dead end jobs? Reshaping debates on young people in jobs without training. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 13(2), 185–194.

Reading, C. (2007). Embedding ICT in Learning: Engaging indigenous students and their teachers. *Narrowing the Gap: Addressing Educational Disadvantage Conference*. 26–28 April, 2007. The National Centre of Science, Information and Communication Technology and Mathematics Education for Rural and Regional Australia, University of New England, NSW, pp. 11–18.

Rothman, S. (2002). *Achievement in literacy and numeracy by Australian 14-year-olds 1975–1988 (LSAY Report no. 29).* Melbourne: ACER.

Sampson, O. (2005). E-learning, democracy and social exclusion: Issues of access and retention in the UK. In A. Carr-Chellman (Ed.), *Global perspectives on E-learning, rhetoric and reality* (pp. 89–100). London: Sage.

Schuller, T., Brasset-Grundy, A., Green, A., Hammond, C., & Preston, J. (2002). *Learning, continuity and change in adult life*. London: Institute of Education.

Stokes, H., & Wyn, J. (2007). Young people's identities and making careers: Young people's perspectives on work and learning. *International Journal of Lifelong Education,* 26(5), 495–511.

Walker, M. (2008). Widening participation, widening capability. *London Review of Education*, 6(3), 267–279.

Wenger, E., McDermott, R., & Snyder, W. (2002). *Cultivating communities of practice: A guide to managing knowledge*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Wheelahan, L. (2009). Do educational pathways contribute to equity in tertiary education in Australia? *Critical Studies in Education*, 50(3), 261–275.

Wierenga, A. (2009). *Young people making a life*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Williams, A., Tanner, D., & Jessop, T. (2007). The creation of virtual communities in a primary initial teacher training program. *Journal of Education for Training*, 33(1), 71–82.

Wyn, J. (2009). The changing context of Australian youth and its implications for social inclusion. *Youth Studies Australia*, 28(1), 46–50.