



## **Consultation on Higher Education Admissions Processes**

### **Box Hill Institute Response**

The following is a submission authored by Box Hill Institute (BHI) to the Higher Education Standards Panel – Consultation on Higher Education Admissions Processes. This paper outlines current BHI admission practices in the context of improvement to the transparency of higher education student admissions policies, while minimising regulatory impact. The aim of this contribution is to share information that may improve the accessibility and comparability of information about the diversity of course entry pathways by ensuring greater transparency of admissions processes and standards.

BHI is a TAFE, and a government-funded Registered Provider (Registered Training Organisation) of vocational education and training (VET). The Institute is approved by the Victorian Department of Education and Training pursuant to the Victorian Tertiary Education Act 1993 as a private provider of higher education courses. Further, BHI has been approved by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training under the Higher Education Support Act 2003 as a Non Self-Accrediting Higher Education Provider (NUHEP).

BHI's mission is to provide an applied learning environment characterised by innovation, quality and teaching excellence, which enables students to acquire skills, knowledge and attributes relevant to industry needs and achieve employment goals in the global economy.

### **Pathways to Higher Education**

BHI uses a variety of mechanisms to determine which applicants are accepted to study the undergraduate courses on offer. Selection criteria and methods take account of the different ways through which the desired characteristics may be demonstrated and take into consideration the abilities, aptitudes, skills, qualifications, work and life experience of applicants that would indicate their potential to succeed in the program for which they apply. The mechanisms vary according to the course, and the applicant. Entry to BHI's higher education courses is based on English proficiency and academic record. Students may apply through Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC), where

entry is determined by a student's Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR) or, for many programs, direct to the Institute. Many courses also require the prospective student attend for an interview, during which time, if relevant, they may be asked to audition or show a folio of work.

The close proximity to vocational education in mixed sector institutions such as BHI makes the Institute perfectly placed to offer pathways from VET qualifications into higher education courses and this is certainly, another strength of BHI. We can support students throughout their education from certificate, diploma, advanced diploma, to succeed in higher education and graduate with a bachelor degree. This is possible because BHI provides small class sizes that offer a personalised learning environment, where education programs can be tailored to individual needs; this is an important advantage of the mixed sector higher education setting. It offers benefits to students transitioning from vocational to higher education in terms of the prospects of obtaining the academic and pastoral support that they require, as well as for staff being able to deeply engage in their chosen discipline with each student.

Transition pathways from VET programs within our own TAFE organisations offer students readily achievable opportunities to articulate directly into, and engage with, higher education either within the same institution or its affiliate or to another mixed sector institution or even university.

This has been recognised in research publication for example Wheelahan et al. (2009 p.5) argue that '[m]ixed-sector TAFE institutes aim to help their students negotiate the boundaries between VET and higher education qualifications and adapt to learning in university'. The intensive support available to students within the mixed sector creates an enabling environment, especially as some teachers teach across both VET and higher education; it is not uncommon for VET students to follow their teachers into degree courses. Norton (2013 p.8) argues that for students who

use their results from a TAFE or a pathways college as their basis of admission [to higher education], [w]ith this additional preparation, on average . . . get higher marks than students who were admitted directly on higher ATARs

which, it could be argued, is testament to the intensive support that is offered students within the mixed sector, both within VET programs and higher education. Norton contends that sub-bachelor courses, such as diploma or associate degree qualifications offer positive pathways to higher education, and to students who might be daunted by the prospect of committing to a three year

program. The students in this customary TAFE cohort, while eminently capable of high achievement given the right support, are often first-in-family to attempt post-secondary study and where preparedness for such study varies, from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, and from low SES circumstances that make the consideration of study as an option extremely challenging.

Universities Australia states that in 2008 universities admitted nine per cent of their domestic undergraduate students on the basis of a vocational award course and that they ‘increased the proportion of domestic students they admitted on the basis of a vocational qualification from 6.6 per cent in 2000’ (UA 2013 19). As this graph shows, the basis of admission for higher education undergraduate commencements in 2014 included 12% from VET pathways, which is a significant increase in this cohort.

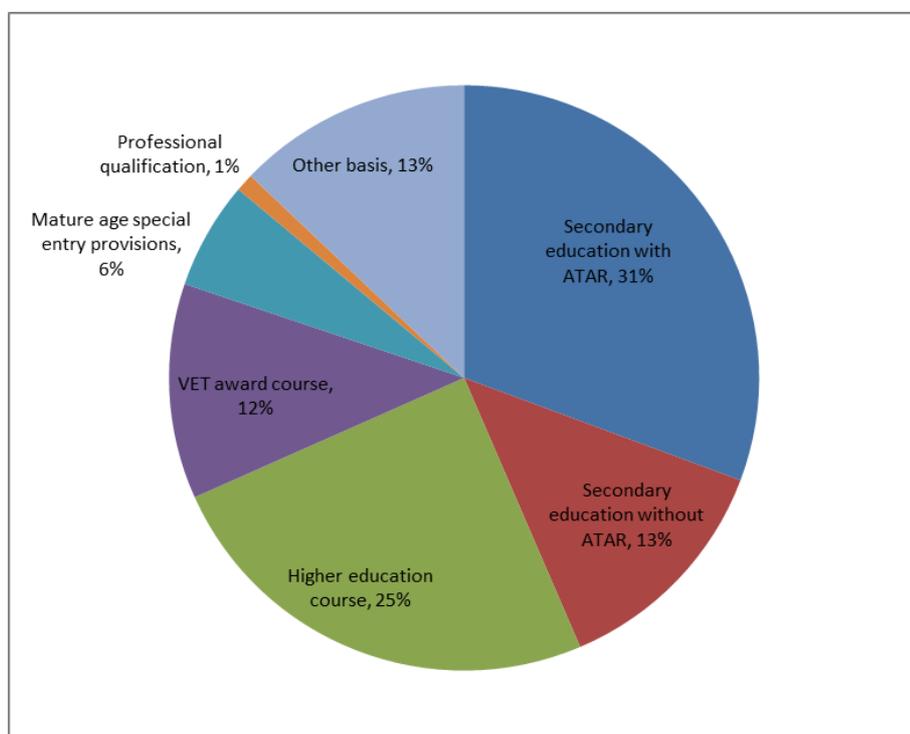


Figure 1: Basis of admission for higher education undergraduate commencements 2014  
(Source: Department of Education and Training)

As a direct result of universities offering Commonwealth support places (CSPs) to, and accepting, students with low ATARs, the number of students enrolling in vocational diplomas is declining, which could lead to a skills gap of diploma-qualified graduates. BHI contends that students with low ATARs struggle at university, drop out, are lost to the education system, and are at risk of ending up with no post-secondary education. This cohort can then become a drain on the economy as these people cannot find work in an environment wherein they compete with others who have achieved higher educational qualifications.

## **Improving Admission Access for Students from Low Socio-Economic Status Backgrounds and Rural and Regional Communities**

In 2009, the Australian Government set a target for the higher education sector that, by 2020, 20% of university students were to come from low SES backgrounds. The government acknowledged that 'students from disadvantaged backgrounds [often] require higher levels of support to succeed, including greater academic support' (Commonwealth Government 2009, p14).

TAFE higher education providers are best suited to attract students from low SES backgrounds. This is an area of strength for TAFEs, where the student cohort has the opportunity to transition from vocational qualification into higher education academic studies within a supportive environment. In order to facilitate student success, intensive academic support is offered to individual students, in an ongoing engagement with quality specialist teaching staff who offer an inclusive teaching practice. An emphasis on employability skills at TAFEs offer these students practical skills that equip them for life and work post study.

Rural and regional communities suffer from a dearth in post-secondary educational provision. There are limited opportunities for rural and regional Australians to access a university education locally, which would appear to offer a wider opportunity for higher education provision through rural and regional TAFE campuses. Prospective students in this cohort can be disadvantaged in multiple ways: lack of physical access to educational opportunities, high unemployment in regional and rural areas means that they can also be from low SES backgrounds that then exerts significant pressure on their likely success in pursuing higher education. This cohort requires particular attention if Australia is to achieve its target of increasing the participation of low SES students in higher education. It is an opportunity that could be seen as an investment into rural and regional areas, where climate change, and the dynamic global economy has direct impact on communities which lack easy access to the resources more generally available in larger population centres.

The draining of students from vocational to higher education has the potential to leave the Australian economy with a skills gap; low ATAR students are at high risk of failing at university, becoming disengaged with the education system and achieving no tertiary qualifications at all. Thus there would be a 'double negative' effect on the economy – lack of diploma-qualified vocational graduates leading

to a skills crisis *and* those who have exited university without a qualification would find it difficult to obtain a job, thus leading to greater unemployment and a compounding of the effect of low SES.

Demand-driven funding may have increased competition amongst universities, but in terms of offering diversity of admission, much more could be achieved by opening CSPs to the NUHEP sector because of the greater variety of niche/vocational/pathway degrees offered by TAFEs.

As an approved higher education provider, BHI must comply with the regulatory and reporting requirements of all higher education providers, whether public or private. However as a TAFE institute BHI is ineligible to access:

- CSP for TAFE higher education students under the Commonwealth Grant Scheme (CGS)
- Commonwealth funds to support mandatory quality reporting requirements, (for example course evaluations, graduate destination surveys and outcomes reporting requirements)
- Commonwealth funds for providing equality of opportunity programs to undergraduate students in the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program

BHI's higher education students lack the access and equity advantage of CSP. These students accordingly pay full fees although, since 2009, they are able to access the student loan program, Fee-help, which, while indexed to the Consumer Price Index (CPI), attracts a 25% loan fee, which is especially onerous to low SES students.

As mentioned above, TAFE HEPs service a very distinct student cohort, which will usually not find their way into university because they could be first-in-family, and low SES, for example. These students benefit significantly from the VET-pathway admissions model, where they are gradually prepared for academic success in higher education. With no CSPs on offer for TAFE HEPs, this already disadvantaged student cohort is further marginalised. So we would argue that 'diversity and greater responsiveness to student demand' is not being serviced by the current restrictions on CSPs for TAFE students; indeed admission diversity is actually foreclosed by this restriction.

BHI offers students a viable and transparent admissions model, whereby they can graduate through the VET system and pathway seamlessly into higher education courses while being provided with academic and pastoral support to ensure academic success.

## Reference List

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