Broadening Post School Options through Curriculum Engagement

Report to the Queensland Studies Authority

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1 The Study

During the 1990s in Australia, school retention rates rose and curriculum offerings in the senior secondary years widened to provide pathways to higher education, vocational education and training, and employment. The challenge in the post compulsory years is to accommodate larger numbers of students while responding to broad differences in abilities, interests and aspirations. At first, the issue was how to get more young people to remain at school into the post compulsory years; now the issue is 'how to get all groups of young people to make best use of the extra years of schooling' (Lamb & Ball 1999, p. 2).

An initial scan of the literature identified various factors which are interacting to shape students' post school aspirations and choices – the curriculum as well as student social background factors. For example, interaction of personal, social and socio-political factors influence how students make decisions regarding subject selection. This study was based on the need for qualitative research which takes account of social and cultural differences in student backgrounds as well as their school experiences. Most of the previous research has been large statistical studies conducted Australia wide. In order to provide a firm base to guide QSA policy and assist in meeting needs of different groups of students in different Queensland locations, there is a need for qualitative research to explore the issues in more depth in the Queensland context. There is also a need to document and research the impact of various initiatives which are being taken at system and school level to address the issues. This seems to be a clear gap in the research literature. Also, because of the changing social and economic context, there is a need for the issues to be investigated in 2005, rather than relying on data bases compiled over a decade ago.

In the long term, research should aim to not only to understand social and educational problems, but also to plan actions towards their resolution. Understanding students' perceptions about pathways and their relationship to the curriculum should aim at developing principles that might guide schools and educational systems in planning programs that are more sensitive to the needs of specific groups of students as they consider their post secondary school options. We hope that this study forms the first stage of such long term activities by providing an in-depth analysis of young peoples' school experiences and voices, and by identifying issues in the complex relationship between the school curriculum, students' backgrounds and their future plans.

The research study reported here investigated the influences shaping Queensland year 11 and 12 students' post school aspirations and their sources of information about post school options and pathways. In particular, the study focused on the relationship between students' post school plans and curriculum provisions, school organisation, and scaffolded learning. The aim of the research study was to provide detailed, up-to-date information about these issues across a broad range of Queensland schools and student/staff cohorts. In addition, the study also investigated how social, cultural and economic factors might impact on students' subject choices and post school aspiration

1.1 Research Questions

Overall Research Questions were:

- How do current year 11 and 12 students in Queensland perceive their post school options?
- What are the main factors influencing their perceptions of and knowledge about their post school options?

In particular:

- What is the impact of the curriculum they are studying?
- What is the impact of any initiatives to provide post school pathways information, advice and support to students?
- Which school/system initiatives ameliorate effects of social disadvantage? How and why?

1.2 Methodology Used

The study was conceived and conducted in four stages.

1. Systematic literature review was undertaken focusing specifically on the views of senior secondary school students in relation to post school options. The literature reviewed covered three main areas on: (a) the relation between school curricula and the construction of post school options (b) the effect of social background factors, and (c) the information provided by schools about post compulsory options for students.

2. Case study schools were selected to represent a spread of school based on: school size, location (regional, rural, urban), school type (state, catholic, independent), socio-economic demographics (lower, middle, high), and cultural factors (percentage of students who do speak English as a first language). Document were collection at each case study school – including collection of curriculum materials, promotional material, research papers and policy documents in relation to their curriculum design and student perceptions of post school options.

3. Focus groups were conducted with three categories of participants: (a) secondary school students, (b) classroom teachers and guidance officers and (c) administration personnel in the sample of identified high schools.

4. Data collection and analysis were conducted iteratively in a manner consistent with qualitative designs.

1.3 The Participating Schools

A range of schools were selected for the study based on the criteria identified above, and in consultation with staff from the QSA. Information posted by schools on their various websites proved useful in identifying specific programs and/or their educational foci. Schools were initially contacted by email with details of the project, descriptions of the research team, and commitment required from potential participants. This initial contact was followed by a phone call to explain the project in detail and to identify the commitment sought from the schools in terms of time and

human resources. After the verbal approval to participate in the project, the schools were asked to respond by email to indicate their official acceptance/willingness to participate in the study. This was followed by obtaining formal permission from the education systems involved to allow the project to proceed in the nominated schools. Ethical clearance procedures to conduct the study in the respective schools were followed.

Twelve schools were initially identified and included: seven State, three Independent and two Catholic schools. In terms of their location, five schools were metropolitan schools situated in the southeast of the state, four were rural or semi-rural schools, and three were provincial schools. Due to timetabling restrictions one school dropped out of the study.

1.4 Focus Group Questions

Based on the aims of the project, and informed by an extensive review of literature, the research team designed focus group discussions around the following sets of questions.

Student Focus Groups

1. Can we start by asking you to tell us your name, what subjects you are studying, and what you are hoping to do after you leave school.
2. Why did you choose these particular combinations of subjects?
   Who helped you to make these decisions? (Parents, friends, work mates?)
   How are you finding these subjects?
   Where do you think they are taking you?
3. What sorts of things did the school do to help you choose the subjects you are studying?
   Were particular people involved?
   Did you receive any career advice?
4. How many people have got part-time jobs?
   Tell us about them.
   Have these jobs affected your choice of school subjects?
   What about what you do when you leave school?
5. What changes would you like to see in what you are currently studying?
   … In what you studied in previous years?
   How could the school improve its support for students in terms of subject choices and future options?

Teacher Focus Groups

1. What do you think are the main issues facing senior students in relation to their post school options? What are the different factors influencing student choices about their post school options?
2. Can you describe any whole school initiatives to help students make informed decisions about their post school options and pathways?
3. What role do you play in guiding student decision-making in terms of post school options and pathways?
4. In terms of what you teach how have you designed learning experiences (what you teach, how you teach it) to cater for student needs in your class?
5. What needs to change in terms of: study options, subject specifications, learning experiences?

6. Can you comment on how the structure of whole school learning experiences (range of subjects, combination of subjects, workplace experience etc) has been designed to cater for student needs in this school?
7. Can you comment on the whole school philosophy in terms of meeting the educational needs of all students?

School Administrators Interviews

1. What do you think are the main issues facing the senior students in relation to their post school options?
2. Can you talk about school initiatives to help students make realistic post school choices?
3. What are the different factors influencing student choices about their post school options?
4. How have learning experiences been designed to cater for student needs in this school? (meaningful learning, engaged relationships, experiencing success)
5. How do you help students make wise choices in terms of school learning experiences? What constraints do you experience in this process? How do you manage these constraints?
6. How do choices about learning experiences affect students' post school options and pathways?

1.5 Procedures

Each school was visited for 1-2 days by two researchers and/or research assistants working on the project. Interviews with school principals and/or deputy principals were conducted individually for about 1 hour. The groups of available staff for the focus group and/or individual interviews varied from one school to another. Typically at least two focus groups with students were conducted in each school. Each focus group was approximately of an hour's duration. In each case, the school nominated the students and the teachers who contributed to the research discussion. Care was taken to ensure a wide representation of students' interests, abilities and backgrounds. Individual consent forms were obtained from each participant and, in the case of young people under 18, of their parents.

All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Two research assistants coded the data using the computer software program NVivo. The data coding system was developed by the team via a synthesis of the major themes emerging from the literature review and the fieldwork data. Once this coding system was developed, the research assistants trialled it against the whole set of data using the NVivo system. In the process some coding nodes were deemed insignificant, and others emerged as significant. Verification of the coding system was confirmed by the two research assistants working on the same data set, and via regular consultation with the principal members of the research team.

2 Literature Review

An extensive review of relevant literature was conducted and a data base of references compiled. For the purposes of this report, the literature review was then organised into four sections. The first three deal with: policy context, research on school retention and participation, and research on school programs and initiatives. A final section draws out key issues emerging from the review of literature.

2.1 The Policy Context

Since the 1970s there have been significant changes in participation and retention rates in schooling in Australia. Many more students are now completing secondary schooling and participating in some form of post compulsory education. These changes have in part resulted from the restructuring of the youth labour market; young people are staying at school longer, partly due to the lack of opportunities in full time paid work. At the same time, policy initiatives at federal and state levels over this period have focused on improving student retention rates, with the aim of enhancing economic productivity through the development of a more highly trained and skilled workforce.

These trends, seen in Europe, USA, UK, and Canada, as well as in Australia (Dwyer &Wyn 2001), have had major implications for young people's transitions from school to work. Several major reviews of research highlight the fact that transitions from school to work are now more protracted, fragmented and in some ways less predictable than in the past (Cieslik & Pollock 2002, Furlong & Cartmel 1997, te Riele 2004). These trends are often seen as related to the 'risk', 'uncertainty' and 'individualisation' which are said to characterise societies in late modernity (Giddens 1990, Beck 1992). However, other writers (e.g., Furlong & Cartmel 1997) emphasise the continuities in young people's experiences, particularly in relation to the reproduction of inequalities through schooling, where class and gender remain significant influences on educational experiences and outcomes. In addition, the accuracy of generalisations about 'youth at risk' transitions from school to work has been questioned (Marks 2005), as has the way such accounts further marginalise the marginalised (te Riele 2006).

2.1.1 Relevant Policies

In Australia, the Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) developed a Ministerial Declaration, *Stepping forward: improving pathways for young people*, with the goal of improving social, educational and employment outcomes for all young people (MCEETYA 2002). The Transition from Schools Taskforce then developed an Action Plan to implement the Ministerial Declaration. The key areas of action around which the plan has been developed are:

- *Education and training as the foundation for effective transition for all young people*
- *Access to career and transition support*
- *Responding to the diverse needs of young people*
- *Promulgating effective ways to support young people*
- *Focused local partnerships and strategic alliances.*

At the state level, in Queensland, one of the goals of *Queensland State Education (QSE) 2010* was:

- *Maximising the number of students who complete year 12 with a foundation for later learning and the skills to be part of a competitive workforce in the knowledge economy.* (Education Queensland 2000, p. 30)

Following QSE 2010, selected initiatives were taken up in *Queensland the Smart State. Education and Training Reforms for the Future* (Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2002). The consultation document for this policy direction again stressed the need for skills for the knowledge economy and highlighted the need for all students to complete 12 years of education.

> *Our young people matter. We must do what we can to keep all of them in some form of learning or earning. We must take responsibility for what happens to young people now, so that they can lead satisfying lives and fully contribute to our society and economy.* (p. 7)

As a result, the Queensland Parliament has passed new laws so that all young people aged 15 - 17 years will be 'learning or earning'. From 2006, all young people will be required to remain at school until they complete Year 10, or turn 16, whichever comes first (Department of Education and the Arts, 2004).

> *They will then participate in education and training two years beyond Year 10 or turning 16; or until they have gained a Senior Certificate; or a certificate III vocational qualification; or until they turn. 17* (p. 1)

They will be able to enter the workforce, as long as they are working for at least 25 hours a week. As part of the *Education and Training Reforms for the Future* (ETRF) reforms, year 10 students will develop a Senior Education and Training Plan (SET Plan), which will map out their planned study and training pathways.

A further relevant reform concerns the new Queensland Certificate of Education which will allow students to gain credit for a broad range of learning in vocational and training settings as well as in schools. In other words, the Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) includes a broad range of learning: VET, workplace, community, university, and other awards. Consequently, the QCE extends the curriculum beyond the secondary school.

It is also relevant to this project that special attention is to be paid to students at risk of disengaging from school, and Youth Support Coordinators are being employed to work with such young people in schools and communities.

2.2 Research on School Retention and Completion

A number of large scale studies in Australia have explored young people's post school destinations (Lamb 2001), and their attitudes and aspirations (James 2000). Other areas of investigation have included: post school options and pathways in relation to particular social factors – e.g., socioeconomic background (ACER/Smith Family 2004, Teese 2000); gender (Collins et al 2000, Gilbert & Gilbert 2001); Indigenous backgrounds (Marks & Fleming 1999, Parente et al 2003); rural and remote locations (Alston & Kent 2003, Whiteley & Neil 1998); and the influence of parental and family networks, peers, and teachers.

The ACER/DEET series of Longitudinal Studies of Australian Youth (LSAY), a detailed series of studies of subject choices, and transitions to post school education and

employment are particularly relevant to this study. These studies show that subject choices in senior secondary school are related to differences in access to higher education, vocational educational and training, and to employment outcomes (Fullerton & Ainley 2000). These choices reflect social backgrounds of students, with students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, from private schools and from non-English speaking backgrounds more likely to participate in courses leading to higher education and the professions. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to participate in courses leading to VET or to enter the labour market with no further formal education or training.

These studies are particularly relevant to the project because they indicate recent trends in transitions from school, and the likely post school outcomes for students of particular course and subject choices during senior schooling. For example, Lamb and Ball (1999) examined the patterns of course enrolments in year 12 and the consequences for education, training and work experiences post school. They concluded that 'after controlling for background, achievement and school differences, there remain large variations in the likelihood of participating in further education and training based on subject choice in year 12. These findings show that student course taking is a strong predictor of outcomes' (p. v).

Other research reveals that the main reasons students give for leaving school early are to search for work and lack of interest in school work (Teese 2000). Te Riele and Crump (2002) also report, based on a NSW study, that disadvantaged students often find the curriculum irrelevant or too hard. In addition, a National Board of Employment, Education and Training report (1995) concludes that:

> *Students who enter the labour market before year 12 are driven by their experience of school, rather than the extent of their knowledge about, or attitudes towards, careers and options for post school education and training. Young people who are performing badly at school are most likely to leave school early.* (p. x)

Richard Teese's research (2000) provides further insights highlighting the importance of how well a student is achieving, as well as the subjects which are studied:

> *The flight from school involves a rejection of the performance demands of the curriculum – and the sense of failure which the curriculum often brings ... Social integration in school is not curriculum neutral. The upper secondary curriculum is hierarchical with high stakes and low stakes subjects. The level of the curriculum that a student occupies – academic, general, or vocational, university approved or terminal – and how well a student is achieving at that level influence whether a student feels at home or out of place. … In general as achievement declines, integration weakens and dropping out becomes more and more likely.* (p. 50)

More recently, Teese (2004) reported that the two major reasons for leaving school early are demand for work or an income, or lack of interest in school work. He also reported large variations by gender, region, socioeconomic background and Aboriginality.

Clearly, various factors are interacting to shape students' post school aspirations and choices – curriculum and school factors, as well as the social background of the student. Lamb et al (2004) provide a useful summary of research on the key factors affecting retention and participation, and note that there is little difference in the

patterns between the states and territories. They (2004) emphasise that the research literature highlights the fact that early leavers are drawn disproportionately from the ranks of low achievers, and highlight the importance of the curriculum and schooling experience:

> *Failure to establish meaning in the curriculum or to build satisfactory teaching relationships removes the possibility of successful learning which is the most important intrinsic motive for staying on at school. Economic pressures to find work and earn a living may hasten early leaving, but where a positive experience of learning has not been established, resistance to these pressures is often ineffectual. (*pp. ix- x)

2.3 Research on School Programs

2.3.1 Vocational education and training

Most of the research on school programs and curriculum initiatives relevant to this study relates to the impact of the introduction of vocational education and training (VET) programs in schools. VET-in-schools programs are increasing in importance relative to the traditional school to VET pathway (Knight 2004). Some studies have investigated the issue of how well the development of vocational learning in schools has helped to keep young people engaged in education. For example, Knight (2004) reports that vocational learning in schools can function as an equity strategy performing a 'preventative function' by allowing students 'to develop work-related skills while still advancing their general education' (p. 194). He continues: 'If broader, more flexible education and training encourages young people to stay at school longer, then there are potential benefits in both the general education and vocational learning areas' (p. 195).

Another study of VET in schools programs concluded that 'For most, VET plays an essential role in managing diversity, in improving learning and in securing a range of good outcomes for school leavers' (Polesel et al 2004, p. 8). But these researchers report that problems remain – concerning resourcing and institutional relationships between schools and TAFE. They argue that the students and their needs must be the focus of policy: 'Unless adequate acknowledgement of the need to provide high quality VET in a range of settings (and not just in those where it is easy) is made, access to VET will continue to be constrained for many young people in Australian schools' (p. 9).

2.3.2 Careers guidance

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment Education and Training (1997) reported that careers guidance in schools was very poor. In a Queensland study, Patton & McCrindle (2001) investigated the role of career information and vocational guidance in students' post school planning, and reported that students requested more information on their options. Similarly, the former TEPA organisation conducted a number of research studies in Queensland between 1996 and 1999 to ascertain what information was needed for key stake holders in relation to transition of students from year 12 to tertiary education. Findings suggested that many students would have preferred more assistance when in year 10 and felt that year 12 was too late to be making course and career decisions (Whiteley & Neil 1998).

Recently Taylor (2006) has posed the question of how well the current market context in education fits with 'the rhetoric of facilitating school-to- work transitions for all students' (p. 35). Taylor's research suggests that 'the vertical differentiation [i.e.,

streaming] of academic and vocational programming and the association of the latter with the less able students encourages the further erosion of vocational planning, despite policy rhetoric around improving the transitions of non-college bound youth. … In fact there are few incentives for schools to provide pre-vocational programs when they are associated with less desirable clients' (p. 53). In contrast to the proliferation of vertically differentiated programs, Taylor argues for 'comprehensive systems that provide all students with a good broad based education until age 18' (p. 54). Drawing on Young's (1998), *A Curriculum for the Future*, she advocates the development of a unified curriculum which would involve 'making explicit the vocational aspects of academic subjects and the academic aspects of vocational subjects' (Taylor 2006, p. 54).

2.3.3 Special initiatives

Few relevant initiatives were documented in the literature with the exception of a series of case studies published by MCEETYA as an outcome of the *Stepping Forward* report (MCEETYA 2002). The *Stepping Forward – Sharing What Works* is an overview of initiatives designed to improve transition pathways for young people disconnected or at risk of becoming disconnected from schooling. However, the case studies documented mainly focused on young people who were already disengaged, and featured alternative school settings and/or community settings. One initiative, coordinated by TAFE Queensland, was the 'Northern Corridor Educational Precinct' which aimed to strengthen linkages between industry and agencies delivering education and training services to youth. Given that these initiatives were mainly addressing the needs of the 'most vulnerable' who were already disengaged, they are less relevant to mainstream school situations and to this project.

Since 2004, state wide trials of the ETRF reforms (discussed earlier) have been taking place. In each local area, state and non-state schools have worked with TAFE colleges, business and industry, local government, youth organisations and community agencies to develop District Youth Achievement Plans. These plans identify resources available to young people, their learning needs and the strategies and actions to meet local needs.

2.4 Key Issues Emerging from the Review of Literature

1 There is a mismatch of established models of transition and actual attitudes, choices and experiences of young people themselves, with assumptions often being made about 'normal' biographies and linear transitions and choice, in contrast to the current context of risk and uncertainty and 'choice biographies' (Dwyer & Wyn 2001). Rather than being seen as a developmental stage to be passed through, transition is more appropriately conceptualised as an active process negotiated by young people which will differ for different groups of young people. In this context, Slade and Trent (2000) emphasise the need for those working with young people to recognise their achievements (for example, their experiences in the work place) and 'the unrecognised CV' of many of them (p. 227). On this point, Dwyer and Wyn (2001, p. 24) suggest that:

> *One of the implications of the contemporary pattern for young people to mix school and work is that, rather than school being a preparation for work, the workplace is providing young people with a pragmatic perspective on education. … The evidence suggests that young people are developing a perspective on schooling in which education is only one of a*

number of options which they are managing. Furthermore, in making decisions about how they will manage these options, they are making very pragmatic choices about which school subjects are relevant to them.

2 There is much policy hype about the 'knowledge economy' and the need for youth to gain more education/training to compete for high skilled, specialist jobs in this economy. While students with higher qualifications are more likely to get jobs, more education does not guarantee jobs, nor does it guarantee highly skilled jobs. According to Dwyer and Wyn (2001), people generally tend to be overqualified for the work that they are doing. This in turn, creates a paradox between ambitions fuelled by the rhetoric of government policy and advice of educators and the realities of the market place. It is imperative to question policy rhetoric which makes assumptions about 'one-to-one links between the two markets' of education and the workplace, and in particular generates expectations that education is a vehicle for upward social mobility 'at precisely the time that global economic developments have forced a far-reaching reshaping of the nature and conditions of the workplace at a national level' (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001, p. 63).

There is a need, therefore, to take account of VET and employment opportunities which are realistically available. There are problems with raising the aspirations of students without realistically available opportunities. As Slack (2003) points out, decision making is a pragmatic rational process: 'one of reconciling aspirations with opportunity'. Similarly, Ball et al (1999) refer to the role of 'imagined futures' in decision making and boundaries which constrain opportunity.

3 There is a need to provide quality educational experiences which take account of student needs and backgrounds – it is not enough just to keep them at school. Lamb et al (2004) conclude that not all retention is 'good', and not all early leaving is 'bad'. They point out that some students who complete school have had an unsatisfactory experience of learning and of school, and it is questionable whether their completing school was a useful exercise. They argue that the MCEETYA position which gives priority to quality education over completion as such is very relevant here. Lamb et al (2004, p. 147) also argue that:

the biggest single motive for early leaving is the demand for work. When this leads to work associated with a contract of training (particularly apprenticeship), parents and schools claim this as a successful outcome. Many young people who leave school early and enter an apprenticeship have had a positive experience of school and report favourable attitudes. From this point of view, too, the outcome could be considered positive and consistent with MCEETYA priorities.

Further, Lamb et al (2004) conclude that not all schooling provides 'clear and recognised pathways' beyond school, and not all 'clear and recognised pathways' are viable. They report that low achievers have weak transition outcomes: this means that retention should not be viewed as a goal in itself. They ask two significant questions: 'How robust in transition terms are all strands within the mainstream curriculum? Do all strands represent high quality schooling?' (p. 147).

4 There is a need for high quality VET opportunities to be offered in a range of settings for all students, not just for the lower achievers. A recent longitudinal study (Marks 2005) of a large cohort of young people who did not go to university, cautions against too much reliance on vocational education for successful transition. The study found that while only a small minority of non-university bound young people had problematic transitions from school to work; full time study in vocational courses did not have the expected beneficial effects on later employment. However, the study did find that apprenticeships strongly promoted subsequent full time employment – but only for males.

5 Youth 'at risk' is the currently favoured label used in Australian policy for youth whose educational outcomes are considered too low, with an emphasis on the risk of disengaging from school and not completing senior secondary education. Te Riele (2006) argues that the dominant conceptualisation of youth 'at risk' draws attention to what is wrong with these young people, rather than to what may be wrong with schooling. She proposes use of the concept of 'marginalized students' instead, which identifies individuals not through their personal characteristics but through their relationship with schooling. She argues that, 'this approach allows recognition that marginalization is at least in part a product of schools and society, and requires action in those arenas' (te Riele 2006, p.129).

3 Data Analysis

3.1 Students: Scaffolding, Pathways and Choices

According to the interview data, senior secondary students generally were media-savvy, adept multi-taskers, and skilled users of ICT. Many were working part-time, some up to 30 or more hours a week. They were acutely aware of their liminal status in the school context, held decided views of their subjects, teachers and schooling, and were typically articulate, often indeed convincing, in expressing their views of these matters.

Recent policies such as *learning or earning* up to age 17 contributed to the trend of diversification of students from a wider range of academic abilities and interests, and from a range of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. However, despite overall increases in enrolment in the senior school, principals and staff in some schools were still concerned about the loss ('dropping out') of students with either inadequate or no formal educational qualifications. This was particularly the case for some rural schools or schools with a substantial number of students from situations of low socioeconomic status, poverty, from Indigenous or certain cultural/ethnic backgrounds.

Students indicated varying degrees of interest or commitment to formal schooling. A number, particularly those from higher SES backgrounds, were strongly committed to academic success. Others, who were undertaking mixed academic and vocational education courses, appreciated the '*practical'* aspects of their education and expected to be shown how the more academic units had practical relevance. Similarly, their attitudes to post school options varied from disinterest or wishful thinking to realistic awareness of possible pathways, the means to those ends, and the costs involved. A number planned to take a year or more off to travel, to gain experience, to '*take a break*' from study or to earn money before taking up or changing their tertiary options.

Most schools surveyed had taken positive action to address these matters. In seeking to engage students, there was a growing willingness to acknowledge student views and voices, to improve provision of information and communication with students, and to provide a wide range of services and support for them. There were three common concerns expressed by students. First, with the increase of options that students face in their senior school comes the difficulty of making informed decisions. Secondly, students who are in hybrid work and study programs expressed some confusion as to what others expect of them. While they were treated as adults at work or in training, they were still treated as children at school. Thirdly, many saw that the more traditional academic subjects were boring, abstract or had no relevance to their lives or work futures.

We now address issues raised by the students themselves in this study.

3.1.1 Acknowledging student views and voices

Increasingly schools are offering a variety of pathways and choices for students in the senior levels of schooling. Students interviewed in the Year 11 hospitality course at one northern rural school were undertaking a wide mix of school, vocational, and Authority subjects whether they led to an OP rating or not. Their selection of subjects was typically on the basis of a combination of consideration: personal interest, for the sake of variety, as prerequisites for certain jobs, a

traineeship, or merely to keep their future options open. Some regarded their vocational experience as trying out a particular situation in work experience to '*see what it was really like'*. This either confirmed their interest, or led to alternative choices. However, in some cases, subject selection was based on perceptions that some subjects may contribute to a higher OP. There were cases where students chose certain subjects merely on the basis of the teachers' reputation or whether they liked the teacher or not.

Overall there was a level of satisfaction with these options. However, students expressed some concerns that arose from these choices t. In other words, there was some concern expressed in terms of the proliferation of subject choices, and the difficulty of making informed decisions given this range of offerings.

First, in general, while there was evidence that many schools are offering students more pathways that are intended to prepare them for different post school options including work, less evidence existed that teaching in specific subjects has changed to address the post school interests of students. At least one school was implementing a process of career education through all subjects in the curriculum. However, in general there were significant concerns about subjects such as mathematics or science because they were seen as having no relevance to students' lives or work. Rather than '*theory, theory, theory*' or '*1,000 word essays in English*', they wanted things that were more '*practical'*.

Second, for many students, the variety of choices that they are facing and the early introduction of these choices, can contribute to a sense of anxiety. It is worth mentioning that almost all schools offered some career advice, typically in a range of forms: career evenings with parents and students; as part of Health and Physical Education subjects; in career and industry expos, visits from a variety of occupations and visits to industrial, commercial, agricultural and professional settings; guidance offers, counsellors, work experience personnel and other support staff; on the school web-site; and through brochures and booklets. However, there were some suggestions that such activities have their limitations. Lack of maturity and peer influence was a common staff interpretation for comments such as these from Grade 10 students: *'basically none of us listened and we listened to MP3s and the CD Walkmans'. 'It wasn't even relevant… or interesting.'* The Job Guides book stated the prerequisites for each occupation, but most didn't know what they wanted to do at that time. They would have preferred an *'on-going type thing'*, that is, for it to be integrated into their subjects. Another student commented, *'There was one software thing where you put in all your interests and things you were good at and it told you… but that didn't help much..*' S/he found the guidance officer more thorough and personally helpful, adding, '*It's silly that at 15 we have to decide the subjects we're doing [that] will ultimately decide what we're going to do for the rest of our lives. At 15 I had no idea what to do*'. Several students expressed similar disquiet about having to make what they perceived to be serious decisions so early. While many students indicated that a '*change in mind*' was possible and that there have real possibilities for changing curriculum tracks, others were concerned about locking themselves into pathways based on these early decisions.

Third, there was a tension between the students' commitments to their school work and to their employment related activities. Most students were working part-time, some for long hours, 30 or more, weekly. Homework was clearly affected, as was interest in their subjects. Some complained of little sleep as a result, or doing homework early in the morning. Schools which allowed '*a catch-up day*' free from formal class-work – a practice which allowed students on traineeships or

apprenticeships time for TAFE or their industry trainer where the remaining students could catch up with homework, sleep, or attend additional/supplementary tutorials – were appreciated–. (Some subjects also allowed '*a lot of time in class*' for assignments.) While some students saw their work as just for the money – '*they ... have very high rates of pay… so that's why it's alright*', for others it enabled them to try out areas of possible future employment, and/or it instilled useful skills for work. '*simple things like discipline and punctuality', or paying attention to instructions – 'They don't like it if [you] ask them the second time round, so you've really got to listen the first time*'. *'Time management', 'patience', 'customer service', 'improving your people skills*' and '*interaction with people*' were also mentioned as attributes or skills gained.

Lastly, adult students constitute a particular group in senior schooling that may not be sufficiently catered for in some schools. At least in one site that has a significant number of adult students, they appear to hold positive views of their experience. Teachers '*don't talk down to you. They're not condescending. They treat you like an adult*.' They were assisted to catch up with subjects in the early stages with extra tuition or classes. However, there were some concerns. As adults they had to pay for their enrolment. Some found 'government benefits', the youth allowance or a disability allowance provided some financial support. Some were studying part-time to support themselves financially. For most, *'one of the key problems that you've got, it's financial.*' They would like school book-hire schemes extended to the over-18s to save the high cost of buying them. Others had tried apprenticeships or other work and found it unsuitable, so returned to secondary school so as to prepare for university study or better careers.

3.1.2 Engaging students with diverse interests

As discussed in the literature review above, the student population in Queensland schools is more diversified in their career and academic interests than a few generations ago. Most schools surveyed have faced the demands of such diversifications in different ways. A rural high school in North Queensland provides an exemplar of what can be done to engage students and how it may be achieved. In this process, the leadership and vision of the principal with a committed and enthusiastic staff was crucial. Prior to the ETRF reform, subjects were restructured so that every department in the school put a vocational education unit with a certificate in place. School-based traineeships and apprenticeships across Years 10 to 12 were supported by the local business community, and students are able to go off campus for one or two days a week for these programs. A small number of OP-bound students also participate in some of these programs so as to widen their future options. However, the participating staff in these programs felt that students commencing Year 10, particularly the boys, were too immature to cope with these programs, and so their entry was delayed until Year 11. While traditionally such programs were regarded as extra-curricular activities, the new certificate in education [Qld Certificate of Education] will be helpful in that it will allow credit for what students do at work. In other schools practical courses (e.g., horticulture, hydroponics) drew on and applied school subjects (science, biology, maths, chemistry). Further, in at least one school, students were able to conduct a business as part of their studies in some subjects. The teacher concerned commented, '*Kids love it. It's hands-on*'.

Teachers often expressed concerns that such work related pathways might 'lock' students into 'non-academic' pathways thus disadvantaging some students who, with some encouragement and maturity, might select them later. However, in at least one

school, such first-hand experience of possible work options also meant that students could change courses or work options 'in midstream' to ensure maximum flexibility after appropriate guidance.

A further challenge for secondary schools is adult re-entry to the senior school to extend their educational qualifications (OPs) and/or continue to further education and training consistent with concepts of life long learning. Of the schools visited, only one metropolitan school was catering to this need. Students were integrated into general classes, but bridging courses for entry and extra tuition were also provided.

Students' engagement with schooling is facilitated by other means as well. For example, in one state college students had designed their own school uniforms, which gave them a sense of control over certain aspects of their school environment.

While these programs have undoubtedly allowed more students to stay on in school, they raise issues related to the scaffolding of choices in terms of subject selection and relation to post school pathways

3.1.3 Scaffolding students in their transition to senior schooling and post school pathways

In general, students expressed overall satisfaction with and appreciation of the personal support that some teachers provided in terms of senior subject selection and connection/relation to post school options. In addition, some schools provided a wide range of support to engage students from diverse backgrounds, and support the personal development and social needs of this cohort of students.

In addition to the P&C groups and teacher aides, most schools had a wide range of committed and excellent support staff – guidance, career, counselling, workplace liaison, work experience, welfare, community liaison, work placement personnel. Some schools also involved external groups (such as the YMCA, and various employment services) to provide support for their students. We obtained a strong impression of special support staff – as well as many classroom teachers – who were really committed to supporting and assisting students on a wide range of matters including personal issues, economic constraints, and learning options.

A number of schools were placing these support services into a separate department or faculty in the school. In one Brisbane high school this was nicely articulated by the Head of Student Support Services – '*we do care for kids… And we have plenty of kids from other schools that come and say 'Oh this place is so fabulous' because they get one-on-one attention*' and '*teachers treat you with respect*'. This person also stressed the need to build resilience, '*the strength inside, and the mateship thing'* in students to enable them to face an uncertain and challenging future. In one rural high school, learning support and special education were integrated as a separate department in the school with its own head of department, in this case the learning disability teacher. Given the challenge of finding employment for young people with disabilities in a country town, this faculty works with the local Employment Agency to place employable students in a range of appropriate jobs. There was concern, however, that at-risk students, i.e., students with learning difficulties were not always willing to take on some types of work such as plumbing, cleaning, and so forth – because they felt these jobs were beneath them. Questions were raised as to a putative '*welfare mentality'* and the lack of a work ethic. On the other hand, '*some of the street kids and the at-risk and the learning difficulty kids'* were ready in grade 8 to be *'adult workers'*. Hence their career paths needed mapping earlier. This was not possible in a traditional school. On-line learning allowed for 'self-pacing' and engaged many learning difficulty students, most of

whom – boys – were 'computer literate'. A major handicap, however, was the high cost of site licences.

At least one high school was providing a breakfast club for Indigenous and non-Indigenous disadvantaged students, in line with '*the concept of the school being a caring place where we look after the kids and the kids feel as though they're being supported*'. This high school was also implementing a welfare program with year level welfare teams replacing form teachers. Allowances were made for flexible attendance by retaining at-risk students in the school system on the condition that they were engaged in some gainful work.

There was recognition in schools that students are likely to be sexually active and to experiment with legal and illegal soft and hard drugs – while alcohol is still '*probably the chief drug of choice*'. Human Relations Education includes these issues, although estimates of its success by teachers and students appear to vary. One possible negative appeared to relate to HRE or Life Skills programs, which were not always effective, with some teachers not interested and a number of students paying no attention or resenting this use of time when they could have had a spare or caught up with homework or other study. '*So*', as a senior school specialist said, '*the kids hate it generally*.' This was in spite of inclusion of work in these programs on study skills, resume writing, budgeting, driver education, sex education, drug education, skin cancer, and leadership.

Most schools took considerable pains to ensure students had timely and adequate information on their subject options for the senior years, the range of possibilities for further education, and their various work and career options. Attendance at university careers weeks and open days, visits from industry and business representatives, visits to TAFE colleges and other settings were the norm. Some schools also held their own annual career expo. At least one school has one full day during the third term of each year where students participate in activities of personal planning for the following year. Other schools have developed detailed booklets describing each subject offered at each level with their prerequisites and follow-up subjects. However, such information might not have been sufficient for some students who wanted more detailed and specific information '*about exactly what the subjects are about*.' They also suggested using students '*who've actually done it'* to explain what subjects were like and what they involved. Concerns were expressed in regard to information about workloads required in the various subjects being considered by the students. One urban school provided first hand experience of the senior school by allowing students from grade 10 to participate in year 11 subjects for a week in order to give them a taste of what to expect in these subjects.

Career education and development is receiving increasing emphasis. The SET plan, a major state-wide initiative now being implemented from years 8 to 12, links each student's interests and future intentions with their subject choices, and develops incrementally from year to year, and records of students' learning options are filed with QSA. Software packages for career planning such as 'Career Voyage' are used in a number of schools. (Students, however, had varying views on its value.)

Several non-metropolitan schools assisted Year 10 or 11 and 12 students to better understand post school and tertiary options and possibilities by taking them to Tertiary Expo, visiting various colleges, universities and TAFE institutions and/or ensuring visits from staff at such institutions, as well as looking at relevant industries.

A metropolitan senior college employs someone three days a week '*to work with our students to help get them apprenticeships and traineeships'*. At least one school wrote letters to parents explaining the various options and their consequences. In this

particular school parents were invited to participate in three-way planning meetings between a teacher, the parents and the student. However, parental attendance at these meetings was, in many cases, limited. Worklinks, an external employment agency, was also used for the same process, as well as placing students on work experience. A non-metropolitan urban school uses another external provider, Job Pathways, to assist students who are not OP-eligible for putting in a QTAC application.

In spite of provisions to scaffold students' choices, some students expressed concerns about wrong, or at least incomplete, information supplied to them. One student was told that if she is not eligible for an OP rating, she would not be able to go to university. Doing her own investigations on the matter, she '*found out that you could still get into university which no-one ever really told me, so I figured that out by myself*'. Other students received wrong information about the levels of mathematics needed to do certain options, such as engineering, at university. While the data here is not sufficient to establish how widespread this phenomenon is, it points to the need for professional development of teachers to be able to better provide advice to students on their subject selection and future aspirations.

3.1.4. Factors shaping student choice

Factors shaping student choice of subjects and pathways were quite varied across the whole sample. Socioeconomic status, ethnicity, gender, geographical location and access to resources shape the particular experiences and expectations of all students – irrespective of the level of awareness of their effect by the students. These factors will be discussed in the following section. Here we will discuss the factors that the students have identified as affecting their choice of subjects and pathways.

Significant persons typically mentioned by the students as influential in terms of subject selection included parents, other family members, siblings, relatives, teachers, guidance officers, counsellors and other support staff, and friends. While some parents were substantially involved or even prescriptive in their children's choices, other students said that their parents trusted them to make their own choices or showed little interest in the process. However, there is some evidence that this might be related to the socioeconomic background of students. For example, one student from a family with a long tradition of engineering careers talked about encouragement from several family members to study Math C.

Experience was a second major influence. Work experience and part-time work provided 'reality checks', enabling students to sample future employment opportunities and to determine areas they would like to pursue and those they definitely did not want to do. However, the work experience that students have is necessarily limited to retail, manufacturing and generally unskilled employment in contrast to professional jobs.

The provision of relevant information was a third aspect. Career evenings, visits to or from tertiary institutions and staff, the SET plan and similar processes had mixed reactions. Uni expos often don't provide enough detailed information. However, visits to a university were generally seen as useful. There was a diverse opinion as to the best time to conduct them – towards the end of year 10 when they are choosing their senior subjects, in year 11 or 12, before making their QTAC choices.

Finally, economic factors impinging on post school options for further education discriminated against students from lower SES backgrounds. HECS charges and TAFE upfront fees were commonly mentioned, with the costs of boarding for non-

urban, rural and remote students a further deterrent. For students from country towns, rural or remote settings, the shift from home was often daunting.

However, many students identified limitations to their choices based on what is offered at the particular school. Schools' offering of subject choices is determined by several factors. First, there were restrictions based on the school's ethos and focus. Students from a large metropolitan private school that prides itself on its academic focus and achievement, noted that the school '*doesn't offer a huge selection [because … it] only offers OP eligible subjects*'. While a student from a rural state school commented that '*because living in, like the rural area, that you do – it's also expected that the majority of people will go into agriculture, trade and these things … that's what the school concentrates on teaching you*'.

A second practice in many schools that may restrict choices is the presentation of subjects on different lines on the timetable. Often this is done for better management of the school's resources and the efficient distribution of teaching staff responsibilities. While care is often taken to minimise difficulties to students, quite a number of students in the focus groups raised this as a limiting factor in their subject choices. Some schools allow students to study a subject from another line of their choice; however they have to study it independently during their spare time, with the teacher occasionally checking on their progress. One student said: '*In previous years I found that, like, I wanted to do Music and Drama but they were in the same line'*. Similar concerns were expressed by some students who wanted to study OP subjects and at the same time participate in traineeships or apprenticeships that were offered on the same days.

3.2 A Fair Go for All

For some time equity, inclusion and social justice have been included in Queensland education policy statements as well as in policies of the Queensland Studies Authorities. A major focus of this project has been to study the issue of *pathways as they relate to social factors related to the student and the school*. As research surveyed in the literature review section of this report indicates, access and participation to education remain a function of several variables including socioeconomic status, geographical location, ethnic and racial background among others.

The data from this project show that many schools surveyed are aware of such factors and some measures have been taken to deal with them within the capacity of those schools. The diversity of social and cultural backgrounds and the effects of distance and rurality are generally recognised by schools and most staff as issues requiring continuing attention to ensure their access to the widest possible range of potential choices and pathways for a fulfilling life. However, less focus may have been directed towards dealing with traditional factors such as gender, concerns about diversity based on cultural and ethnic factors, and, in particular, the needs of Indigenous students.

This study did not focus specifically on the private/public debate in education, although a combination of private and state schools were included in the sample. One might query, however, the apparent exclusivism of certain private or elite schools, in which, despite scholarships, school fees remain a principal determinant – and deterrent for many – of access. Also of note is the effect of marketing by private and elite schools, and some senior state colleges, is their potential of marginalising of other schools and their impact on conceptions of inclusion and social justice. In

particular, of relevance to the topic of pathways, this study did not consider student destinations upon completion of high school and any variations between the different types of schools. Some previous studies reported above have focused on these issues.

3.2.1 Practising equity, inclusion and social justice

A commitment to principles of equity and inclusion, and by extension, social justice, was evident in the comments from principals and most staff in the state schools that were investigated, though the manner of their implementation varied. Private and elite schools pointed to scholarships and the efforts made by less affluent parents to ensure their children received the best education. The distinction between religious and secular private schools is a further compounding factor. While fee structures differed between various schools, the common element was their need to compete in an educational market, where parental demands and expectations dominated.

The head of support services in one state senior college defined social justice thus, '*That everyone has the right to be treated with respect and it doesn't matter how much money you've got or what disability or what gifts you have, you deserve to be treated with respect and you deserve to have the whole plethora of options there, and as much support to wherever you want to go. That's how we feel.*' Notions of inclusion were fostered by encouraging *'the mateship thing'*. Overall, understandably, schools were more concerned with the practical implications of issues than with clear definitions. However, with the exception of programs to assist Indigenous students, we note the absence of any special programs targeting specific groups of students in the schools visited.

3.2.2 Managing issues of access and resources

Adequate access to a range of relevant senior subject options, resources, experiences and post school pathways is arguably a *sine qua non* for equity and social justice. Judged in these terms, while the private, elite schools in this study are better resourced for academic education, they offer much less for the less-academically inclined students in the way of work experience and preparation; state schools, on the other hand, while poorer in plant and material resources, offer a much wider provision of subjects and experiences.

Students from lower SES backgrounds experienced greater difficulty in accessing tertiary education due to family and personal financial limitations. HECS charges and living expenses were a major deterrent. Teachers reported that such students, if planning for tertiary studies, are unlikely to attempt high status careers (e.g., medicine) but rather the humanities, social sciences and education. Some guidance and support personnel were also concerned about the deterrent impact of high TAFE fees and charges on such students. We were told of a TAFE course on management which cost $20,000, while even the basic courses cost $960. Private colleges were even more expensive. Such options may be only available for students from middle class or higher socioeconomic backgrounds.

Distance was a further factor which impinged on access in two ways: lack of experience and extra financial cost. Some private schools provided boarding facilities and made special provision for students from rural or remote settings whose experience of urban contexts and employment opportunities was circumscribed by their home situation. Similar situations were found in state high schools in Western and Northern Queensland for students with limited or no experience of metropolitan settings and experiences. Action taken included school camps by the coast, visits to

urban settings, industries, facilities (e.g., theatres, museums, galleries) and institutions. Students were taught how to travel by bus, train, ferry and what boarding involved. We were told of students becoming 'homesick' and withdrawing even in smaller campuses such as regional campuses and universities, while the extra cost of travel, accommodation and incidentals was a substantial deterrent, particularly to lower SES students.

3.2.3 Provision for indigenous students

Overall, the numbers Indigenous students staying at high school have increased during the past few decades. A northern rural high school was noteworthy for the range of provisions it made for Indigenous students, with particular attention to those from remote communities. Of approximately ten per cent Indigenous students in the school, half were drawn from the local community and half had come from remote communities, the latter group staying at a boarding institution. Vocational education, school-based apprenticeships or TAFE courses with skills that these students could take back to their communities were promoted. Where previously there was no culture of completion of academic studies, a number of Indigenous students were now graduating from Year 12.

After consultation with teachers, Indigenous students and community members, this high school developed an alternative literacy and numeracy program which allowed Indigenous students, particularly the sub-groups who speak Creole or '*Murri English'*, to '*come out and have time working in an alternative program and then slide back into the mainstream as they become competent to do so*'.

The position of Indigenous Coordinator was created by the school to ensure a coordinated approach, accountability and effective measuring of outcomes with these students. This person manages programs for individual students and assists them to access desired educational choices including mainstream and OP or vocational education. The Indigenous Coordinator also provides inservicing for staff and acts as the contact person for community organisations and work provision for students.

This school was also seeking to set up a video conferencing link so that Indigenous students from remote communities could talk to their parents and community elders, and also planned to send teachers to visit those communities. DVDs produced by Indigenous students showing parents the classrooms and subject areas would be part of 'the enrolment package'. These visits would enable the school 'to act as a one-stop enrolment shop' for DEST and other departments, thus cutting the bureaucratic processes which often led to these children arriving late one or two months into the school year. The school is also seeking to 'upskill' interested teachers through professional development and ongoing training to work specifically with Indigenous students. Under the Initiative for Vocational Learning Opportunities for Indigenous Students (IVLOIS), DEST is funding a joint project with the Vocational Partnerships group to address student self-esteem, confidence building and goal setting, and to help in work placement. Students visit the Indigenous unit at the local university and relevant personnel from this university also visit the school to outline potential interest areas and the support mechanisms provided for Indigenous students.

One northern rural school established a Truancy and Graffiti (TAG) group in conjunction with the police, the council and the community, with liaison personnel from parents, police liaison officers, and a Community Education Counsellor (CEC) who works with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. She and the Deputy Principal undertook house visits and other community work. The school also set up a community learning program for '*mainly Aboriginal students*' who were '*walking the*

streets here' and creating a considerable amount of nuisance and vandalism. This program is run by an outside provider that developed a drop-in centre in town at their offices. Funding from the Department of Communities, behaviour management projects from the Department of Education and the Arts and local funding helped support this project. TAG draws on the school deputies and support personnel, the district police inspector and senior sergeant, some businesses, two Council members and the deputy mayor, bringing in members from local football teams as role models. They provide camps, monthly barbecues (with local business representatives), weekends away and fishing trips. Relationship-building between the community and the young people was crucial to the whole process. There is a breakfast program at the school '*not just for [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander] kids*' with donated meals and church and community support, including '*a local justice group'*. There was concern, however, that ETRF was now directing funding and programs from a distance with much less financial provision. Hence some local programs had shut down because of lack of funds.

The situation was substantially different in a metropolitan senior college with a small number of Indigenous students and also some Samoan and Pacific Islander students. The Indigenous students were not all '*particularly low income*' and they fitted '*the normal curve [of student performance] pretty much*'. The school captain, who was '*one of the top grade 12 students*' was Indigenous.

A western regional school had 15-20% Indigenous students. Many wanted better vocational training (e.g., mechanics, hairdressing) not available locally. Most dropped out of school early, and this was linked with their low SES background. Many girls fell pregnant, many children experienced domestic violence, and some were homeless. This school wanted Indigenous studies for all, including non-Indigenous students. It now had an Indigenous advisory group. Parent education was seen to be critical, and the school also had an Indigenous student support officer, who made home visits as well as working with these students. In another western regional school a third of its school population was Indigenous, and only three staff members were Indigenous. There was a Community Education Counsellor to support these students. This person sets up their work experience, helps with assignments and study skills, homework and self-esteem. Parents were also visited to improve their perception of mainstream education. Teenage pregnancies were reported to be '*huge'*, and often older children were looking after younger children at home. However, last year, eight students completed year 12 and despite the difficulty of breaking away from families three enrolled in a nearby university, two to do nursing and one to do social work.

A number of other schools we visited with Indigenous students, however, did not seem to have such a range of provisions and these students were not mentioned as targets for pathways programs. We conclude therefore that more needs to be in this critical area to cater for the needs of students in all Queensland schools.

3.2.4 Accommodating difference

Socioeconomic factors and family history were found to strongly affect student choices of curriculum and pathways. As noted elsewhere in this study, students from advantaged situations were much more likely to complete senior school, obtain good OPs and progress to tertiary studies. In contrast, fewer low SES students and students in poverty attempted, or were successful in the more advanced academic subjects, while TAFE was a more likely pathway than university. While a number of school programs and support systems attempted to remedy the situation of lower-achieving, less able or disinterested students, and to 'compensate' for 'disadvantaged' students,

there was still room for greater sensitivity to the differential effect of socioeconomic status. Current policies, structures and requirements also militated against disadvantaged groups, and often there was little home support. Strong concern was also expressed over the deterrent effects on low SES students of HECS charges and TAFE fees. Some teachers suggested that a scheme equivalent to HECS rather than fees would increase the participation of these students at TAFE. Post school options and pathways were also found to be substantially affected by culture, gender and background.

Nevertheless, good things were being done. Traineeships and school-based apprenticeships enable many low SES students to move into stable employment and establish successful careers. A wide range of support services provide counselling, guidance and personal help. Then there is the mentoring and extra tutoring provided by dedicated and understanding teachers. In one school, for example, maths teachers stayed longer at school one day a week to provide free maths tutoring for low SES students. Another school in a rural town has developed a range of options for assisting such students. Using external voluntary and commercial agencies such as Get Set for Work or the Jobs Pathways Program students are prepared for work and assisted to get it. A volunteer supported district youth program works with the school to assist unmarried mothers, at risk kids, those from deprived backgrounds, those who are homeless or with no family infrastructure, to continue learning. Projects such as restoring cars or child-minding ensure that learning becomes practical for disengaged youth.

Resourcing is an issue which substantially differentiates between school types and neighbourhoods. Its effect on rural, remote and regional schools has been noted. Private schools were generally much better resourced than state schools. All schools, however, appeared to make considerable efforts to engage with, inform and involve parents. Many state schools were also actively involving their local community, industry, employers and non-government support services. While the impact of fee-paying overseas students on resourcing in state schools is unclear, the extra demands on teachers' time and skill for support to ESL students, and the need for better resources and appropriately skilled teachers, were noted by a number of teachers.

Administrators and staff at rural or remote schools were very aware of their disadvantaged situation in terms of distance, access to extra-mural resources (museums, galleries, theatres, libraries, performances etc.) and other educational facilities (TAFE, colleges, universities) vis-à-vis schools in metropolitan contexts or larger cities. As noted previously, they were making considerable effort to compensate through camps, excursions and other methods. Employment opportunities in such situations were also largely contingent on the distance factor and limited local business opportunities in rural areas.

There appeared to be a greater recognition of between school and inter-systemic differences (e.g., state/private/church) – where elite schools were generally clearly advantaged in terms of their own resources and that of the students' parents – than within schools or intra-systemic differences. Nevertheless, most schools provided a range of programs and support services for their own students. Concern was expressed by staff of rural and remote schools for better resourcing from Education Queensland; they would also like greater support and understanding of their situation from QSA. For example, many school personnel wanted additional professional development in terms of implementation of curriculum and reporting/assessing measures. In particular, schools in regional and remote areas lamented both the lack

and costs of professional development, including costs of time, travel, and resources in relation to ongoing professional development. In some schools, one teacher was released for professional development and then had to go back to the school and pass this knowledge onto other teachers. Many teachers in remote and regional state schools wanted more 'hands-on' professional development such as examples of curriculum programs, what worked, what didn't, and why. By contrast, extensive professional development opportunities were provided for teachers in the independent, urban, affluent schools.

Gender is another factor that is often related to student post school choices. The intersection of gender and SES is a compounding factor for equity concerns and it was noted that parents with the means to do so were more likely to send their sons to better resourced independent or private schools and their daughters to local state schools. While the career options for girls have widened and some boys are considering careers that were traditionally for females, gender remains an issue affecting decisions on post school options. By and large, and with some exceptions from single sex girls' schools, gendered differences in subject choice and career options seemed so naturalised at times as to be virtually unrecognised by many staff or students. One matter given substantial attention was girls' earlier maturity, hence greater tractability. If gender effects were noted, they were seen as beyond or outside schooling. However, subject choices continue to show some gender differentiation. Apparently, no school visited provided special programs or offered systematic advice to students to counteract gender stereotypes. Similarly, many young people themselves are often not aware of gender as a factor in the choices available to them or other students in their cohort.

There are exceptions. For example, staff at a large school in a non-metropolitan area with a substantial proportion of low SES students noted that '*our students are fairly gender-specific about… a lot of jobs'*. One difference was *'the boys taking hospitality and that sort of thing… but perhaps that's become a bit of a gender-blurred occupation anyway'*. Girls were more likely to see themselves as *'academically bound'*. These students were perceived as *'coming from a fairly traditional and role-modelling at home in terms of gender'*. Students who did want to move beyond traditional sex-stereotyped roles or occupations faced considerable hostility. One male student said he was called '*poof and shit like that when I paint my nails and have both my ears pierced*.' His uncle also *'cops flak'* as a male nurse. Another make student in ballet '*copped heaps'*, while males in the fashion industry were seen as '*all homosexual'* because it was '*all feminine based'*.

In that school, only one girl was talking woodwork and three males among 30 girls enrolled in dancing. Students knew of no program that encouraged girls into jobs they don't normally get, and vice versa. Some staff, however, noting maths and IT programs and competitions for girls, claimed that they were now more empowered and confident than boys and called for QSA to establish a men's unit *'to encourage, to empower our boys'*. It is of interest, and indeed concern, that in a number of schools where once staff would have been concerned with girls' disadvantage their stress is now on the need to remedy the alleged boys' disadvantage.

The counsellor in a private school noted that girls weren't going into non-traditional areas of work, with the exception of the Defence forces. Parents were not interested in trades-type occupations for their daughters and often pressured them into professions (e.g., vet science and physiotherapy) that they might not be suited to. A

few girls had gone into engineering but it was reported that they found it difficult to cope with the dominant macho male ethos.

Ethnicity: Some schools appeared to be working well in support of students with ethnic minority or refugee backgrounds. A metropolitan senior college, for example, received a number of refugees from the Balkans wars: '*Probably our top student was one of those. He went to UQ and he's doing a PhD now.*' African refugees, particularly from Sudan and Ethiopia, were increasing in number. However, most had little or no education and the college '*faced huge problems with them coming here*'. Many were older, and were put into adult education programs. They found it '*really hard to get going with the English'*. Also noted was the lesser impact of migrants from the Philippines or South Africa who had come through New Zealand first.

One northern rural school, however, with a large Italian and Indigenous population as well as Spanish, Slavs and Chinese did mention multiculturalism specifically. Racial tensions were eased when parents saw high school students from different backgrounds playing together harmoniously. Parents wanted Italian taught but the school was unable to get an Italian teacher so that language was taught at year 8 level only. However, many of the teachers spoke Italian and some also spoke Spanish. A lot of parents in the area still struggle with English.

An independent school attracted a considerable intake of international students from China, Taiwan and Japan. These students could access tertiary education as international students on bridging courses or with an OP. However, similar ESL students with Australian citizenship do not have the same alternative of a bridging course, having to rely on OP alone. This was seen as an equity issue. Across the whole investigation, however, we found little discussion of ethnicity and consequent disadvantage per se.

Matters which did not fall under the usual headings but which were clearly significant, included '*transient families, family break-up and non-traditional families, and homeless children'*. A further problem which is an equity issue is the '*at-risk students who have limited numeracy and literacy skills'*. At least one school connects with a Community Youth Support Group to assist homeless children and other at-risk students in 'earning or learning' etc. or transition courses, or pre-vocational courses at TAFE. Other external supports include Bridgeworks, employed by Boys Town for the Get Set for Work program.

3.3 Issues in Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment

In general, schools in Queensland are meeting the challenge of a diversified student population and the need to integrate the school experience with post school options. Here we note the trends that many schools are following to various levels depending on the school ethos and available resources.

First, there is a widening range of curriculum developments that provide increasing options to students. Most schools offer a range of subjects, from school based to Authority subjects leading to OP, to utilisation of TAFE, private provider and university subjects. Special courses, integrating preparation for some specialist or contemporary occupation with more traditional subjects, for example in the aerospace/aviation industry, hydroponics, and ecotourism, are under development in several schools. This is in addition to a mixture of academic and work related subjects and pathways. A significant degree of hybridisation of the content, process and locus

of education was evident across the state, in, for example, an almost universal acceptance of work experience for junior school students, the provision of school-based or other traineeships and apprenticeships by many schools, with cooperation between school and TAFE, school and employers, school and private colleges, or by contracting work out to private providers. A few schools also permitted some students to take certain university subjects, for example in accounting or business. A TAFE college was located on the campus of one school under the oversight of its principal. In one private school the International Baccalaureate provided an internationally accepted complement or alternative to the OP process.

Central to many of these changes was the increasing embeddedness of schools, their content and processes, in their community, business and regional contexts. Here we acknowledge a developing network of links with and input from families, local communities, minority/ethnic/ Indigenous groups, employers and other training and educational facilities. In this process, good lines of communication with home, students, community, employers and the media were necessary prerequisites. In these changes, the increasing permeability of boundaries between school and the world of industry, commerce and professions was evident.

To enable a wide range of curricular options in the senior school a number of schools are now operating on a four day week with a fifth day – a student day – allowing for the participation of students in traineeships, TAFE, apprenticeships, and tutorials and private study for those students not involved in those activities.

3.3.1 Noting local initiatives

In addition to initiatives already noted in this report, the pathways issue was encouraging schools to look at new opportunities – for example, the resources and energy industries, the wine industry – for bringing education and training into line with employment opportunities.

Mention has been made of senior schools which are seeking to meet a range of student needs (traineeships, part-time workers, library work) by timetabling a day a week as a classroom free day. One urban school has moved to a four-day school timetable for year 11 students, with a similar development to follow for year 12. The remaining day is for study, work or ETRF initiatives including alternative programs.

An increasing mix of academic and vocational subjects was possible in many schools. Similarly, the need to ground theory in practice or incorporate more '*practical stuff*' [a student comment] in academic subjects, particularly '*lower-strand*' courses is more widely accepted. Some students, however, still wanted more attention to these issues. Thus on the transition from year 10 to 11 one student said, '*Like you could change the syllabus. Like, you'd start with really basic stuff which is really familiar territory and then branch out, kind of ease you into it a bit more*.' However some teachers felt that school traineeships and like programs impact on the academic studies of the better students.

The issue of subject choice, lines and difficulties in changing subjects is mentioned in detail elsewhere. A number of schools are addressing this issue. At least one school takes student choices first, and then using a computer program, sets up lines which maximise choices. Another school allows a '*window of opportunity of about a month*' after commencement in which changes can be made. After that the sequence for students to follow is set out in pro forma fashion: '*See the current teacher and discuss the problem. See the proposed teacher to see whether change is still possible. Talk to the guidance officer. See the heads of departments. Go to the deputy. Make the changes on the computer'.*

One city school sought to enable a wide range of subject experiences by providing semesterised subjects, with students making selections each semester in Years 8 to 10. Their experience and results were then drawn on for their subject choices and career options in the senior school.

3.3.2 Distance education

A few of the schools visited allowed students to study subjects at a distance. The forms of these studies vary. Students enrolled in some subjects offered under supervision of a teacher outside the school either online or offline. *Offline* subjects consisted of electronic communication through email, with perhaps some material put on CD or Webpage. Students can undergo the study in their own time – either in school or out of school time. However, students studying subjects *online* participated in 'virtual' classrooms through video conferencing or chat rooms in real time with a teacher, and possibly other students, at a different location.

Students selected this mode of study for a variety of reasons. In smaller schools, such provision increased the range of subjects available to students. Students selected subjects at a distance that are not usually offered by the specific school due to lack of availability of teachers, or due to the small number of students interested in the subject. Further, in order to manage and rationalise a variety of subject offerings, most schools that were visited offer their subjects timetabled on distinct and incompatible '*line'*. Some students who could not enrol in a subject because of conflict between lines may decide to do one subject through distance education. A few of the students interviewed mentioned art, history, economics and IPT as subjects that they have studied at a distance. However, languages were the most common subjects offered electronically. At least one student was enrolled in university subject at a distance.

Distance education is a new phenomenon that schools are employing to increase the availability of pathways and subjects to meet the needs of the increasingly diversified students in Queensland schools. Students who had tried the distance method, however, indicated that it was not really adequate and the rate of withdrawal seemed considerable. Because of the limited number of students selecting such options, many of the students have to undergo their studies outside the school timetable. While for some this has the advantage of increased flexibilities, for many it meant studying these subjects at lunch time or after school. Often there are no special quiet rooms to do the study electronically. '*Like you don't have set lessons or whatever, and you do what you need to do in that lesson down the library*'. In addition, the culture of schooling that the students were accustomed to depends on the teacher as the key source of knowledge and time management for students' study. Many students expressed feelings of discomfort in studying at a distance because of their lack of familiarity with the new modes. One student summed up the feeling of many students '*it is really hard because you've really got to be dedicated and motivated and disciplined as well* [in doing subjects at a distance]' Another student said '*it's a bit inconvenient because you don't have the teacher. I prefer having a teacher telling you what to do*'.

One student suggested an alternative to distance education, where one teacher may move between different schools to assist students in their distance studies. We have not observed this phenomenon in any of the schools visited. However, we understand that it is possible for some school clusters to share a teacher to deal with special needs of students across a range of schools.

3.3.3 QSA, the QCE and the International Baccalaureate

The International Baccalaureate was offered as an alternative to, or complementary with, OP subjects at one private co-educational school. Year 11 did OP and IB, while Year 12 students chose between them with some students undertaking both. The IB, it was said, '*provided an edge*' through its focus on inquiry-based and independent student learning. The IB includes 6 subjects which all students must do: a language, science, arts, theory of knowledge, a community service project and an extended essay. Where the OP subjects are seen to be focused on skills and process, the IB subjects are focused on skills, process and knowledge. The IB was grounded in a humanist, Western European frame. In consequence, there was a stress on critical analysis and transferability of skills and abilities. Students could study overseas (including developing language skills) for a semester in another IB qualified school – we were told there were over 700 worldwide. The IB is viewed as enabling access to a greater range of universities in Australia and some of the most prestigious universities in the world. It was also seen to produce a '*well rounded person*', '*more global type student*' and at the same time prepared for university study.

However, as well as requiring considerable academic ability, the IB was very expensive for schools to run, costing $25,000 per student on top of all other school fees. Understandably, then, the student intake for this school was typically from the more affluent and middle class sectors of society. Students presented a relatively sophisticated insight regarding their futures; they knew what they wanted to do and become and chose subjects (whether OP or IB) accordingly.

4. Conclusions and Implications

Schools function in a significantly different context from that of the recent past. For the past twenty years, government policies, undoubtedly shaped by the economic imperatives and patterns of youth unemployment, have encouraged students to stay at schools for longer. As a result, today's schools have to cater for programs and curriculum to a varied student population in academic interests and abilities. Further, the increased cultural and ethnic diversity of students reflect both directed program attempting to attract higher numbers of Indigenous students and demographic changes in the Australian population.

It is obvious from the schools' visits in the conduct of this study that both curriculum policy makers and schools have considered the effects of such increased in student diversity. There is ample evidence that schools today are providing for a wider variety of post school options to their students. The curriculum, both as intended and implemented, offers students a wide selection of options and pathways. New subjects are introduced that did not exist a few decades ago. The variety of career orientated subjects, combinations of TAFE with academic subjects, and the combination of work and study programs are examples of such flexibilities offered by many schools. Moreover, there is some evidence that these options or pathways are, at least in some contexts, flexible, allowing programs that offer a mixture of type of subjects and movement between them. The main focus of this research was to look at the effect of today's curriculum on students' post school options and aspirations. In the data collection procedures and analysis we have given priority to the students' voices.

Along with the changes in student population, years of sociological analysis have identified significant issues about the relationship between school education and society. From one point of view, schools have the potential to provide powerful options for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds chances to improve their prospects in society. However, evidence also points to the fact that overall schools participation and achievement remain a function of socioeconomic background of the student – raising questions as to whether schooling has been successful in reducing the gap of advantage within society to any significant degree. This research was informed by social justice concerns as to the effect of social background of students on the available options.

In this final section, we identify some major learnings from this study and its major implications. However, few comments about the scope of findings are perhaps in order.

First, as a qualitative study, the aim here was to raise some issues and concerns in relation to the topic of study rather than to generalise about the range of available options, their effectiveness or the magnitude of the remaining problems. This, however, does not lessen the relevance of such findings for informing school practice, curriculum policy and even further research. Only in-depth qualitative research can unpack such issues and concerns.

Second, in summarising our learnings and making recommendations, we are conscious of the demarcation of interests and responsibilities in schools and education systems. Different bodies and authorities are responsible for curriculum development, strategic planning and funding, and the implementation of the curriculum at practice level. This demarcation is particularly problematic for shaping the implications from research such as this. Rather than identifying implications for each authority separately, we call for more collaboration between the different authorities

responsible for various aspects of schooling towards further investigation of the arising problems and to work towards their solutions. In the following discussion, we will indicate the major implications of the study for research, policy and practice in bold type within the text.

Lastly, our learnings reported here are not a summary of findings from the data obtained in this study alone. Our learnings and implications stem from the research reviewed and discussion within the team and with other researchers. Similarly, learnings also resulted from certain silences from the data – things that are not highlighted in school policy documents or practices but, we believe, should be.

We will summarise our learnings from this project around the three aims of the project discussed above in Section I. This study aimed to investigate

- What is the impact of the curriculum students are studying?
- What is the impact of any initiatives to provide post school pathway information, advice and support to students?
- Which school/system initiatives ameliorate effects of social disadvantage? How and why?

4.1 The Curriculum and Post School Options

Here we understand the term *curriculum* at two levels. At one level, the curriculum refers to a selection of subjects and programs of activities that are made available either from legislating bodies or that are offered at a particular school. More specifically, it refers to the organisation of learning in the individual subjects and learning experiences, which includes content, pedagogy and assessment practices.

All schools visited have demonstrated significant attempts to widen their curriculum to cater for the diverse students and their interests. In addition to the prescribed Authority subjects, schools are increasingly offering school based subjects and career or work oriented options in which students can participate. The traditional distinction between academic school and practical TAFE subjects is becoming blurred. Similarly, we note several attempts and projects that cross the boundaries between schools and their community and local employers. Undoubtedly these are steps in the right direction towards a) providing students with meaningful and realistic learning experiences, b) increasing students post school options, and c) facilitating their transition to post school study or work.

However, this research has identified several arising issues about this diversification of options which necessitate attention.

First, the availability of different choices and pathways for students in their secondary years has the potential of leading into situations where students are locked early into careers and pathways that they may not want to pursue. Several students reported a '*change in mind*' about their subject selection several times in their senior years. In general, we found that the higher the school level, the harder it is for students to change from one pathway to another or from one subject to another. Some students pointed out the lack of flexibility of the OP scores that might lock students into their choices. At a time when the adult work-life is becoming more mobile and flexible, some school practices seem to be the result of old thinking and values. **Schools and authorities should continue to examine their policies and practices to avoid locking students into study options and pathways.**

Second, while schools are providing a variety of flexible options for their students to increase their post school options, there is ample room for the particular

academic subjects to attempt to link school work with post school options. Some subjects are seen by the students as not relevant for their future life. In particular, subjects such as mathematics are seen by students as necessary to get ahead in life, but information about their relevance to career and real life remains limited. Further, there were no attempts observed of integration between the experiences that students have in work options they undertake as part of their schooling and the other subjects they do at school. Here we call for **further research in the disciplines on how the content can be developed using real world contexts and develop skills needed in real life**. At a school level, **better articulation between the content, pedagogy and assessment practices in school subjects and post school options is needed in all school subjects.**

Finally, in educational discourse, post school options continue to be constructed in terms of students' participation in either further study or work upon leaving school. Irrespective of the students' post school option, all students will live as citizens in an increasing complex and changing world. Current and dominant educational discourse can be critiqued for its limited focus on preparing students for the economy and work at the expense of developing their capabilities for critical citizenship. It is not clear from the case studies reported above what aspects of the school's curriculum are available for students to develop, for example, their values, ethics, skills in collaboration, negotiation, knowledge about the media and its functioning, and capacities to deal with an increasingly diverse and multicultural society. Current debate about teaching of values is a step towards meeting this need. **There is room for researchers and policy makers to widen the post school agenda to include citizenship development, both in the individual subjects and in the broader curriculum.**

4.2 Support for Students

There is sufficient evidence from the case studies reported above that schools are well aware that students need support to make informed decisions about the subjects they have to do from year to year. The type of support that schools provide varies from one school to another and from one level of schooling to another. This support may include parent-teacher interviews or letters to parents, the publication of information booklets, or special days of activities for future planning. Often different personnel are called upon to provide such support including classroom teachers, school administrators, guidance officers, community liaison workers and often members or organisations from the community. Some schools organise career days or visits to industry or universities. However, our research has identified some issues that require attention for providing better support to students to make decisions about their post school options.

First, with the increased options, and having to make decisions early, some students have expressed a level of discomfort and anxiety about having to make decisions that early in their development. We note that all schools visited have provided support and scaffolding for their students, and at times to their parents, to assist in their decision making. **Schools should continue to be sensitive to the emotional needs of their students as they make informed choices during secondary schooling and provide required scaffolding to assist them in their decision making.**

Second, the support that a school can provide for its students often is a function of the resources or the geographical location of the school. Clearly, it is easier for

metropolitan schools to participate in career days or visits to a local university. While we have reported on such activities in some visionary rural schools, the financial demands on both schools and students is enormous in comparison with other type of schools. **Educational authorities should provide additional support/resources for schools from non metropolitan and lower socioeconomic areas in terms of scaffolding student experiences/opportunities in relation to post school options**. Similarly, **larger employer groups and universities should be aware of the need to extend their information networks and recruitments to schools that have less access to such information.**

Third, we have noted that it is more the rule than the exception to have senior school students working part time, in some cases long and late hours, in addition to their school work. For many this is seen as a necessity rather than a luxury. For many students, their work commitments conflict with the time available to do their school work. In some schools visited, the timetable in the school was structured along four days thus allowing senior students to pursue part-time work for one whole day. Further, increasingly some schools are catering for the mature aged students returning to study. Some are offering classes at night, thus allowing part time study in addition to full time work. **Schools should be encouraged to be more flexible in their timetable to allow more diverse groups of students to balance their work commitments and their studies.**

4.3 Social Factors and Post School Options

As discussed above, the diversification of the curriculum has the potential to serve the needs of a wider variety of students in today's schools. However, there remain some issues that need to be addressed.

First, the choices that different schools offer to their students remain a function of a) the ethos of the school, b) the type of students it services and c) the available resources it has access to. While one can argue that parents have a choice in terms of the available schools to send their children to, this situation can raise problems when geographical location and economic conditions hinder some students from attending certain schools that might better meet their aspirations and needs. Here we call for **further research to be conducted on the relationship between the school context and the available access of students to different post school options.** Likewise, **educational authorities should ensure that public schools, in particular smaller schools and those in regional Australia are capable of providing quality and genuine choices for their students.**

Second, the role of schools in providing opportunities to students to counteract the effects of disadvantage in society remains a contested point in the literature. In general there is ample ground for schools to increase their awareness of this role and to have programs towards achieving this function. For example, there was little attention in the schools visited about the need to encourage students to consider non traditional options based on their gender. Similarly, there was little evidence that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds were encouraged to consider university study. On the contrary, evidence points to the fact that many students still consider traditional post school options based on their gender and socioeconomic backgrounds. **We call for further research to investigate post school options that students select and for schools to provide support programs that challenge students towards increased awareness of the effect of social factors/attributes such as gender, ethnicity, and geographic location on their choices.**

Third, patterns of school participation show that there has been a welcome increase in participation by Indigenous students at all school levels. Most schools visited that enrolled a significant number of Indigenous students do provide various types of support to these students. This support is mainly through providing the services of a Community Education Counsellor. However, the number of full time Indigenous classroom teachers remains low. Support for Indigenous students needs to take into account all areas, including social, cultural as well as academic. In many schools, existing support is stretched, especially in smaller schools and in schools with few Indigenous students. There are two areas where facilitating the post school options for Indigenous students could be strengthened. Firstly, **specialised support that Indigenous students receive should be extended to target issues related to post school options in addition to academic support and social support to finish school**. Secondly, **programs that target mainstream students with respect to their post school options should also consider the needs of Indigenous students and not delegate all their support to specialised programs and personnel.**

4.4 Final Words

It is safe to say that schools are in the midst of culture change with respect to the articulation between the school experiences and post school options for all students. While significant progress has occurred in schools to increase students' awareness of post school options, and while an increased variety of curricular activities exist in schools, this report has identified several issues that require further study and action on the part of educational authorities and school administrators.

A change in culture requires persistent and concerted effort and resources as well as a change in ways of thinking by all stakeholders. While all teachers and school administrators interviewed showed the highest professional and personal care for the future of their students, **there is always a need for continuing support and professional development of teachers** who are in the main the product of schooling systems that are significantly different from today's schools. **There is need for continual examination of school policies and practices to ensure the best possible transition for students to their post school careers, work and social life.**

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