
QUEENSLAND YEAR 12 STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF ACCESS TO INFORMATION ABOUT POST-SCHOOL OPTIONS: ARE THERE EQUITY ISSUES?

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Abstract

Since the publication of the Federal Government's discussion paper 'A Fair Chance for All' (1990) considerable attention has been paid to maximising the opportunity all Australians have to access and participate in higher education. Recent reviews of the participation of equity groups in tertiary study have identified the continued under-representation of students from rural and remote areas and students from low-SES backgrounds. This paper presents findings and implications for policy and practice from a selected sample of students who attended Queensland schools identified as rural and remote or socioeconomically disadvantaged, and completed Year 12 in 1997. Students surveyed experienced a range of post-school outcomes including TAFE, university, apprenticeships, and unemployment. The Tertiary Entrance Procedures Authority (TEPA) conducted this research as part of its legislated responsibility to identify equity groups who have difficulty accessing information about tertiary entrance and further education. The data collected included both quantitative and qualitative aspects of these students' experiences of the information and services provided to them throughout their schooling with respect to their post-school options. The findings of this research will be used to inform current policy on managing transitions to further educational opportunities; improve existing information resources provided by TEPA to Queensland school students; and assist with the development of necessary additional resources. Feedback on the results of the study will also be provided to relevant groups and stakeholders, including Queensland tertiary institutions and secondary schools.

Background

Participation of rural and remote and low-socioeconomic status students in tertiary education

In 1996, the National Board of Employment, Education and Training (NBEET) published a review of the National Higher Education Equity Framework, evaluating the effectiveness of tertiary equity programs in meeting national targets of access, success and retention for equity groups. Professor Stanley, the then Chair of the Higher Education Council, in his letter of introduction to the review, stated that:

"...in particular there are two groups in Australian society which are still severely under-represented in higher education - rural and remote students and students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds." (NBEET 1996:iv).

This theme was recently reconsidered by Professor Meek, co-author of the report entitled *Managing higher education diversity in a climate of public sector reform*, who was quoted in the Sydney Morning Herald as saying:

"...every major study in the last few years has concluded, as we have, that kids from working class families are still missing out on a university education". (Garcia, 1998:3).

The report by Meek & Wood (1998) once again found that students from poorer backgrounds are under-represented in higher education, as are students from rural and remote areas. Recent articles in *The Australian's Higher Education Supplement* have reported on student enrolment patterns in higher education. Healy's contribution provided figures on an increase in the share of private school leavers entering tertiary study in Victoria, South Australia and Queensland, while the share of government school-leavers decreased. Another article, written by Illing, presents the findings of a Monash University report entitled *Equity and university entrance: A 1997 update*. The study confirms the findings of earlier reviews with low-socioeconomic status (SES) students still the most under-represented equity group in Australian universities, making up only 15 per cent of national enrolments while being 25 per cent of society. These findings are linked to the private/state school phenomenon discussed by Healy, where tertiary institutions with a larger percentage of private school student enrolments have smaller percentages of students from low-SES backgrounds.

Not only are students from rural and remote areas and low-SES backgrounds under-represented in participation in tertiary study, their success at tertiary level and retention to completion is also disappointing (NBEET, 1996). The NBEET review suggests that the inequalities observed in access, success and retention of low-SES students and those from rural and remote areas reflect inequalities that begin at school level. Students in these groups have lower rates of success and retention at school (Dusseldorp Skills Forum 1998). The problems faced by these students are illustrated quite graphically by an article in the September 1998 edition of *PEDALS* magazine, published by the Isolated Children's Parents Association, which reports that Year 12 completion rates of remote boys has plummeted to 44 per cent, a rate 26 per cent below the national average for boys and girls. Not surprisingly, students who both live in remote areas and are from low-SES backgrounds have the bleakest outlook in terms of access, success and retention in higher education.

There is a range of possible reasons for the low participation rates of rural and remote and low-SES students in higher education, with considerable overlap between these two groups. Recent investigations focusing on low-SES students have offered a number of hypotheses for the low participation rate, including:

- an absence of a distinct lobby group for low-SES students (Illing, 1998)
- a lack of exposure to and orientation towards tertiary study within the family environment (Patton & McMahon, 1997)
- subject choices which may limit post-secondary options (Teese et al, 1995)
- financial constraints and decreased support from peers (NBEET, 1996)
- an absence of an observable link for low-SES students between tertiary study and future careers (Patton & McMahon, 1997).

While the difficulties faced by students in rural and remote areas are similar in many cases to those experienced by low-SES students, researchers have attributed lower participation rates of this group to a range of factors, including:

- lack of role models and awareness of career opportunities that exist outside their community (Patton & McMahon, 1997)

- limited opportunities for pre-service and in-service training to improve teacher awareness of issues affecting rural and remote students (PCAP, 1997)
- inability of schools to offer a broad range of senior secondary subjects, potentially affecting the ability of students to fulfil prerequisites (NBEET, 1996)
- lack of targeted information specifically designed for rural and remote students (NBEET, 1996)
- movement of academically able students away from schools in rural and remote areas (Patton & McMahon, 1997).

Equity programs in Queensland secondary schools

Queensland's Department of Education has an established Equity Programs Unit responsible for addressing the issue of secondary school success and retention that plays such a crucial role in the accessing of tertiary education by equity groups. The Equity Programs Unit coordinates a range of initiatives targeted at specific groups (i.e. rural and remote students), as well as dealing with broad issues that span the range of student groups and contribute to the development of equity policy. In the context of Education Queensland's move towards school-based management, the majority of programs coordinated by the Equity Programs Unit are focused on supporting schools to deliver programs in accordance with current equity policy. The general approach of programs involves professional development and curriculum interventions that deal with equity matters in a mainstream context. The activities aim to promote inclusive and non-biased teaching practices, curriculum, and school programs that provide equal opportunities to all students, irrespective of background.

Professional development for teaching staff and curriculum interventions are a primary focus of the Literacy Enhancement for Special Program Schools Scheme (LESPSS), which targets students from low-SES backgrounds and, to a lesser extent, the Priority Country Areas Program (PCAP), which targets students from rural and remote areas. The LESPSS scheme directs funding for school-based implementation programs that enhance the literacy and numeracy outcomes, and the related long-term consequences, of low-SES students. In terms of operations supporting post-school options, PCAP supports school or regional projects aimed at assisting students' access to resources, for example financial support for students to travel distances to participate in work placements, to visit university campuses, and to attend Open Days and Careers Markets. PCAP also funds projects such as enrichment camps and rural and remote students' participation in events such as Tournament of the Minds.

Formal information sources regarding post-school options

As shown in Table 1, information about post-school options is formally communicated to students through a number of different channels. At the school level, Guidance Officers and Careers Counsellors are responsible for providing career and further study information and advice to students. Many schools hold information sessions about subject selection, tertiary entrance and tertiary courses for students and parents. Visitors from local university or TAFE campuses and the Office of TEPA are often invited to speak at these sessions. Additionally, schools (sometimes in clusters, sometimes individually) organise Future Options or Pathways Days and related events for their students. TEPA also convenes community meetings in response to requests from schools and community groups to provide students, parents and teachers with information about tertiary entrance processes and related details. TEPA-organised Links seminars are also held with Guidance Officers, Careers Counsellors and Year Coordinators. These seminars provide an overview of the tertiary entrance process, allow informal discussion of issues raised by the latest tertiary admissions round,

disseminate the latest information on changes to admission requirements and procedures, and facilitate access to the Authority's wide range of resources relating to tertiary entrance.

Table 1. Formal information sources for students' post-school options.

School level	Regional level
Guidance Officers & Careers Counsellors	Careers Markets
Student and parent information sessions	University and TAFE Open Days
TEPA community meetings	Tertiary Studies Expos
Future Options or Pathways Days	Industry Careers Expos

Data relating to the quality and comprehensiveness of post-school options provided by these formal school sources is largely anecdotal. School information sessions and Future Options Days are organised and implemented locally, so information on these events is difficult to document. However, details are known of the TEPA Community Meetings program. During 1998 TEPA conducted meetings at 47 schools through Queensland and northern New South Wales. Six of the schools visited were designated as PCAP schools and four were schools targeted under the LESPSS. Schools holding meetings, particularly in rural and remote centres, are encouraged to invite parents and students from surrounding schools to attend, thus maximising access to presentations by TEPA staff members.

In addition to formal information services at the school level, there are regional events addressing students' information needs. As Table 1 shows, Careers Markets and Industry Careers Expos held throughout the State, university and TAFE Open Days, and Tertiary Studies Expos provide information to students about their post-school options. TEPA is involved in organising and coordinating the staging of many of these events.

Expansion of the system of Careers Markets and Tertiary Information events in 1998 means the coverage of the State is the widest it has been in several years (see Appendix A for a detailed description of the events and their locations). TEPA has attempted to ensure that the representation of towns and centres on the calendar is equitable so that rural and remote areas are not deprived of information that is readily available in the major towns and cities. In some cases, TEPA and PCAP support attendance at regional careers and information events by students from rural and remote schools by making funds available to transport students to events. However, if students cannot attend, the information presented at events such as the Careers Markets is also sent to schools in the region.

By the end of 1998, Cairns, Townsville, Mackay and possibly Rockhampton will have held Industry Careers Expos showcasing jobs, courses and careers in a range of employment areas. These expos bring together local universities, TAFE institutes and other local training providers, as well as a range of local businesses, to provide information and advice to students and their parents on jobs, courses and careers available in a given industry area.

Equity programs offered by tertiary institutions in Queensland

A range of equity programs have been initiated by Queensland tertiary institutions over the last eight years to address the under-representation of students from rural and remote areas

and students from low-SES backgrounds in higher education. The institutions have also developed programs for NESB students, students of indigenous descent and students with disabilities, but these groups are not the focus of the current report. The various equity programs relevant to this research provided by Queensland's higher education sector can be classified in three general categories: (1) outreach, (2) access, and (3) support.

Outreach programs

Outreach programs include those initiatives aiming to bring tertiary education to people and communities who do not typically participate in further study, or in the case of women, who do not participate in particular fields of further study. Methods to allow these groups to become more familiar with tertiary education include university experience programs, typically incorporating a residential component, school visits by university staff and students, and the Careers Markets and Tertiary Information events previously mentioned. Table 2 summarises the types of outreach programs used by Queensland's tertiary institutions and identifies the intended target group for the intervention.

Table 2. Outreach programs provided by Queensland's tertiary institutions.

Program	Target Equity Group
On-campus residential 'schools' to provide students with experience of what tertiary institutions have to offer, see firsthand the benefits of further study, including sessions on developing effective study skills, coping with living away from home, the costs of study, and the career opportunities available after graduation; programs often involve tertiary students from similar backgrounds as 'mentors'	Rural and Remote Low-SES
On-campus visits by students to experience tertiary institution environments and increase awareness of what tertiary study is like	Rural and Remote Low-SES
Mentoring programs where tertiary students meet regularly with secondary students to discuss experiences of tertiary study and to encourage and support secondary students	Low-SES
Interactive TV broadcast linking Yrs 10-12 students with academics and students to answer questions and provide information	Rural and Remote
School visits by tertiary staff and students, especially students from similar backgrounds (i.e. ambassadors)	Rural and Remote Low-SES
Information on tertiary institutions and tertiary entrance sent to all schools for students information	Rural and Remote Low-SES
Careers Markets, Open Days, Industry Careers Expos, and Tertiary Study Expos	Rural and Remote Low-SES

Website to provide information and answer frequently asked questions, and also to allow students to ask their own questions via e-mail	Rural and Remote
Information on access and participation programs in school newsletters	Rural and Remote Low-SES

Access and participation programs

Access and participation programs are designed to enable students from defined equity backgrounds to gain earlier access to the tertiary education sector. Initiatives such as scholarships and alternative entry provisions address the financial and secondary school achievement barriers that often hinder students from rural and remote and low-SES backgrounds from pursuing further study. The establishment of rural campuses allows students to study without the difficulties associated with relocation and leaving the family home, as does the use of flexible delivery of course content and distance education. The access and participation programs used by Queensland's tertiary institutions and their intended target groups are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. Access and participation programs provided by Queensland's tertiary institutions.

Program	Target Equity Group
Alternative entry and special consideration processes for entry to tertiary study, generally involving nominations by school staff	Rural and Remote Low-SES
Scholarships-Merit-based Equity, HECS exemption, residential; information on these made available through schools, newspapers, school newsletters, radio, employment agencies and through direct mail to students identifying themselves as belonging to equity groups	Rural and Remote Low-SES
Special consideration of achievement at school	Rural and Remote
Flexible delivery units and distance education	Rural and Remote
Tertiary Preparation programs to provide potential students with the skills and knowledge necessary to gain entry to tertiary study and succeed	Rural and Remote Low-SES
Establishment of regional campuses	Rural and Remote

Support programs

While outreach and access programs encourage and enable more students from equity groups to attend tertiary institutions, recent literature identifies that the success and retention of these groups once pursuing further study are well below the average (Latham & Green,

1997; NBEET, 1996). Many tertiary institutions recognise the importance of providing support for all students, especially those from rural and remote and low-SES backgrounds, in the transition to tertiary study. The support programs used by Queensland's tertiary institutions to assist students during their first year of tertiary study and beyond are summarised in Table 4, along with the target groups for each program.

Table 4. Support programs provided by Queensland's tertiary institutions.

Program	Target Equity Group
Special and intensive orientation week programs	Rural and Remote Low-SES
Peer assisted learning or mentoring programs where first year students are linked with third and fourth year students in the same course	Rural and Remote Low-SES
Program of workshops and seminars on study skills, computer skills, writing skills, maths skills; in some cases one-to-one tutorial support; library awareness programs	Rural and Remote Low-SES
Social and academic student associations for students admitted under equity programs	Rural and Remote Low-SES
Counselling and welfare services	Rural and Remote Low-SES
Professional development programs for staff of tertiary institutions to make teaching practices and curriculum inclusive and sensitive to student needs	Rural and Remote Low-SES

Aims of the study

From the scan of the practices and programs currently available in Queensland to inform students in equity groups about their post-school options, it was apparent that there was a significant effort from both the secondary and tertiary sectors to provide services and resources to these groups. As limited research had been undertaken to determine whether the information needs of these groups differed in any way from students outside equity groups, TEPA had not yet developed a targeted resource aimed at equity students as part of its suite of information materials. Preliminary discussions at the planning stage of the study suggested that students in equity groups may experience specific information deficits that TEPA can address as part of its Information Program.

This study aimed to assess whether there are equity issues in the dissemination and availability of information relating to post-school options, especially that pertaining to accessing and participating in tertiary education, across Queensland secondary schools. Students who completed Year 12 at rural and remote schools and at schools identified as having high proportions of students from low-SES backgrounds were targeted by this research, with the inclusion of a comparison group of students who did not attend schools falling into either of these two categories. Students from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds

(NESB) and of indigenous descent also self identified from within this sample. The identified equity group of students with disabilities was not included in this research as a number of relevant issues were addressed by a previous TEPA research project (O'Connor, Hartley and Charnley, 1994). It was also decided that the type of questions required to ensure the survey was relevant to this group were overly intrusive. Gender differences with regard to information satisfaction and acquisition were also explored, with additional analyses focusing on study in non-traditional fields planned for future investigation of the sample.

This project was conducted by the Tertiary Entrance Procedures Authority as part of its legislated responsibility to identify equity groups with difficulty accessing information about tertiary entrance procedures and processes. The research examines whether differences exist in provision and satisfaction with information about post-school options for students from rural and remote and low-SES schools compared to students not in these categories. The existence of such differences may help to explain the lower participation rates of these students in higher education. Redressing any inequity in access to information about students' post-school options may broaden the opportunities of students from rural and remote areas and low-SES backgrounds and increase their access to tertiary study.

Method

Sample Selection

During the initial phase of the study, the researchers attempted to obtain a representative cross-sectional sample of students from rural and remote and low-SES backgrounds, as well as students who do not fall under either of these definitions. In the search for a sample meaningful to the equity activities of Queensland secondary and tertiary institutions, consideration was initially given to the DEETYA definitions of these two equity groups. In practical terms, the indices used by secondary and tertiary institution equity programs were deemed to be more relevant to the stakeholder groups involved in the current investigation. This approach appears to have been appropriate given that the DEETYA definitions have recently been the subject of a major review (Western, McMillan & Durrington 1998).

Secondary schools targeted by the Priority Country Areas Program (PCAP) in 1997 were selected as representative of rural and remote Queensland schools. This definition was highly relevant to current program provision in Queensland, with PCAP schools benefiting from targeted funding due to their rural and remote locations. Schools located more than 75 kilometres from centres of 10 000 people or more within identified shire boundaries are targeted by the PCAP program. In 1997, 31 secondary schools throughout Queensland were PCAP schools.

Institutions participating in the Special Program Schools Scheme (now the Literacy Enhancement for Special Program Schools Scheme or LESPSS) in 1997 were selected as representative of low-SES schools. As with the PCAP example, this definition is meaningful in terms of current program provision across the secondary and tertiary sectors in Queensland. The Index of Relative Socioeconomic Disadvantage (IRSED) on which the LESPSS schools are selected, is a complex combination of at least 15 demographic variables, including income, employment status, educational attainment, population density, and motor vehicle ownership. The students address data is mapped back to the Collectors' Districts and the ratio of low to high socioeconomic background students in each school is determined. Many of the major equity programs at Queensland tertiary institutions are targeted at schools that fall under the LESPSS definition.

As would be expected, there was a small overlap between schools that met the criteria for both rurality and low-SES. The number of students who had attended PCAP schools in 1997

was smaller than those in the low-SES group and, as such, the PCAP sample was selected first and the students who met both definitions were excluded from the low-SES sample.

Materials

A survey was developed based largely on previous collaborative research undertaken by TEPA. General information regarding the students' current activities, intentions with regard to further study and demographic data were included. Other questions attempted to identify reasons for deciding not to participate in further study, access to information sources, satisfaction with information obtained about post-school options, and additional information requirements. Respondents were also given the option to request additional information about TEPA's research program and feedback on completion of the project. The four-page questionnaire was accompanied by a cover letter explaining the purpose and parameters of the research. It was anticipated that the majority of respondents would have completed the questionnaire in less than 20 minutes, depending on the number of free response questions they chose to answer.

Procedure

Surveys were mailed over a three-day period during early March. Reminder letters requesting return of the questionnaire were sent to all non-responders at the beginning of April.

Results

Students' demographic characteristics

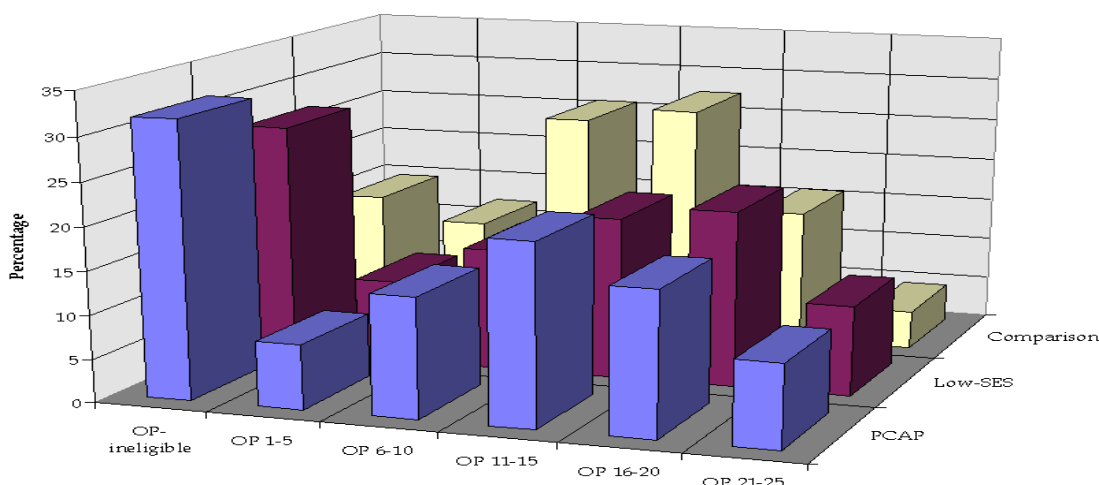
In total, 2 472 surveys were mailed to students who completed their schooling in 1997. Thirty-nine were unable to be delivered as students had already changed their addresses, reducing the sample to 2 433. Of the 867 (36%) who returned the questionnaire, 283 (32.6%) were from PCAP schools, 255 (29.4%) attended schools designated as low-SES, and 329 (38%) of students who returned the survey fell outside these two categories.

School background

As would be expected when selecting students from schools participating in PCAP and low-SES programs, the majority of respondents had attended government schools during their senior years (695: 80.2%). Fewer respondents had undertaken post-compulsory studies at independent schools (107: 12.3%) or Catholic schools (65: 7.5%). While most of the students who responded to the survey were completing Year 12 in Queensland for the first time (838: 96.7%), 15 (1.7%) were repeating their final year at school, with the balance consisting of overseas or Visa students.

Overall, more PCAP and low-SES students who responded to the questionnaire were ineligible for an OP than the comparison group students, as can be seen from Figure 1. It was also observed that students from both the PCAP and low-SES groups were more likely to have achieved a lower OP than the comparison group.

Figure 1. OP and OP eligibility by target groups.



Language background

Of the total number of respondents, 801 (92.5%) indicated that the primary language spoken at home was English, with 20 (2.3%) speaking an Asian language, 12 (1.4%) a European language, 6 (0.7%) an Indigenous Australian dialect, 3 (0.3%) an Indian language, 1 (0.1%) Middle Eastern, 1 (0.1%) an Islander language and 1 (0.1%) Afrikaans. The remaining students specified a mixed language environment at home with 9 (1%) speaking English and an Asian language, 9 (1%) English and a European language, 2 (0.2%) English and Islander and 1 (0.1%) English and a Middle Eastern language.

A greater number of students appeared to identify with certain cultural groups even if they did not speak a language other than English at home. From the total number of respondents, 36 (4.2%) indicated that they identified with a European-based cultural group, 7 (3.1%) an Asian cultural group, 23 (2.7%) Indigenous Australian, 9 (1%) Islander, 4 (0.5%) New Zealand, 3 (0.3%) Indian, 3 (0.3%) Middle Eastern, 3 (0.3%) Australian/Asian and the balance (13: 1.3%) identifying with North American, Central American and a mix of the previously mentioned cultural and ethnic groups. Interestingly, 87 (10%) of the respondents specified 'Australian' as the cultural or ethnic group with which they were most closely aligned.

Parents' educational background

As part of the survey, recent students were also asked to provide details regarding their parents' highest level of education. As shown in Table 5, across the PCAP, low-SES and comparison groups, the highest qualification attained by the majority of respondents' fathers was a trade certificate or an apprenticeship. Fathers of those in the comparison group were more likely than those in either of the other groups to have achieved a further tertiary qualification such as a diploma, degree or postgraduate qualification.

Table 5. Father's highest level of education for all respondents.

	PCAP	Low-SES	Comparison
Primary school	20%	17%	13%
High school	24%	18%	23%
Trade/Apprenticeship	32%	31%	29%
Diploma/Associate	5%	7%	8%
Degree	4%	4%	10%
Postgraduate	1%	3%	10%
Other	3%	5%	1%
Unsure	11%	15%	6%

It can also be seen from Table 6 that mothers of the respondents were either less likely to have undertaken post-compulsory education or their children were less aware of their formal studies. While for most the highest level of education was Year 12, more mothers than fathers appear to have completed diplomas, degrees and postgraduate studies. As would be expected, very few students indicated that their mothers had completed trade certificates or trade apprenticeships. As was observed in relation to fathers' level of education, PCAP and low-SES families were less likely to have been exposed to further study experiences after school.

Table 6. Mother's highest level of education for all respondents.

	PCAP	Low-SES	Comparison
Primary school	22%	16%	15%
High school	41%	33%	39%
Trade/Apprenticeship	7%	7%	9%
Diploma/Associate	7%	11%	13%
Degree	6%	7%	12%
Postgraduate	2%	4%	6%

Other	3%	7%	1%
Unsure	12%	15%	5%

Gender

Those who responded to the questionnaire were disproportionately female, as shown in Table 7. It is apparent that there were more females present across the PCAP, low-SES and comparison groups.

Table 7. Percentage of males and females in each group.

PCAP		Low-SES		Comparison	
Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
32%	68%	41%	59%	37%	62%

Students' post-school activities

Based on survey responses, 42 per cent of PCAP students, 50 per cent of low-SES students and 62 per cent of those in the comparison group accepted a place in a tertiary course in 1997. Table 8 details the activities of those students who did not accept a place at a tertiary institution as part of the intake managed by the Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre Ltd (QTAC). Students from low-SES schools were more likely than those in other groups to be unemployed, with many specifically stating that they were in the process of looking for work. PCAP students were more likely than others to be apprentices or trainees. Those in the comparison group appeared to be more likely to be employed than the equity groups in the study. Interestingly, a similar percentage of 'other students' across all groups were currently engaged in study either at private colleges or undertaking TAFE courses not offered through QTAC.

Table 8. Current activities of students who did not accept a QTAC offer.

	PCAP	Low-SES	Comparison
'Other student'	15%	13%	17%
Wage / salary earner	39%	38%	47%
Apprenticeship / traineeship	23%	9%	7%
Unemployed	12%	23%	13%

Travel / holidays	1%	4%	7%
Home duties	1%	2%	1%
Other	9%	11%	8%

Characteristics of students who did not accept a QTAC offer

As can be seen from Table 9, PCAP students appeared to be less likely than the other groups to accept an offer and more likely not to make an application or to reject the offer of a place. A similar response pattern was also evident for low-SES students, differing in that they were slightly more likely to have accepted an offer, or submitted an application and that they were less likely to have rejected the offer of a place. Those respondents in the comparison group accepted offers and made applications more frequently than the Queensland averages for 1996. This strongly suggests that students who could be identified in terms of rural and remote and low-SES equity groups are less likely to apply for tertiary places and less likely to accept an offer.

Table 9. Outcomes of applications for tertiary places.

	PCAP	Low-SES	Comparison	QLD 1996*
Accepted	42%	50%	62%	51%
Rejected	12%	8%	8%	17%
Deferred	5%	6%	5%	3%
No offer	4%	4%	5%	7%
No application	31%	26%	17%	22%
Other	6%	6%	3%	-
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

* Figures expressed as percentage of all Year 12 students in 1996.

As part of the questionnaire, students who were not currently studying were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with a number of possible explanations as to why they had decided not to pursue tertiary study. Responses were made on a five-point scale (an option to indicate that the statement was not applicable was also included) with a rating of 'five' indicating strong agreement and 'one' suggesting strong disagreement.

Students who did not submit an application

Looking for a job (mean = 4.4) was the statement with which most students who did not submit an application for a tertiary place agreed when asked why they were not currently studying. Those respondents who did not submit an application to QTAC for a place in a tertiary course (208: 24.1%) also agreed that they needed a break (mean = 3.9), that they were not interested in further study (mean = 3.7), that the expense of tertiary education was too great (mean = 3.6), and that the cost of HECS was too high (mean = 3.5).

"I would have liked to receive more information on studying at TAFE as well as work/employment because these were what I was more interested in than university information. All the information we ever received at school was mainly about university options but no-one considered those students who didn't want to go to uni" (Student who did not apply)

Students who rejected an offer

Students who rejected an offer at a tertiary institution (78: 9%) tended to agree that tertiary study was too expensive (mean = 3.8), the cost of HECS was too high (mean = 3.8) and that they wanted to look for a job (mean = 3.8). This group of respondents who rejected an offer also disagreed that they did not like the course offered (mean = 2.1), they wanted to study at a different institution (mean = 2.0), or that they didn't want to study (mean = 2.2).

Students not offered a place

For those students who were not offered a place (39: 4.5%), the primary reason that they weren't studying at a tertiary institution was, overwhelmingly, the absence of an offer (mean = 4.4). These students also suggested that tertiary study was too expensive (mean = 3.8), they needed a break from study (mean = 3.7), the cost of HECS was too high (mean = 3.6), and that they wanted to look for a job (mean = 3.5). Respondents not offered a place tended to disagree with the statement that they weren't studying due to a lack of interest (mean = 2.3) or that they didn't want to study (mean = 2.4).

Students who deferred

Students who chose to defer a tertiary place (46: 5.3%) agreed that they did so because they needed a break (mean = 4.2), wanted to look for a job (mean = 4.0) or that they thought tertiary education was too expensive (mean = 3.7). Those who deferred strongly disagreed that they didn't like the course in which they were offered a place (mean = 1.3) and disagreed that they would have preferred to study at a different institution (mean = 1.9).

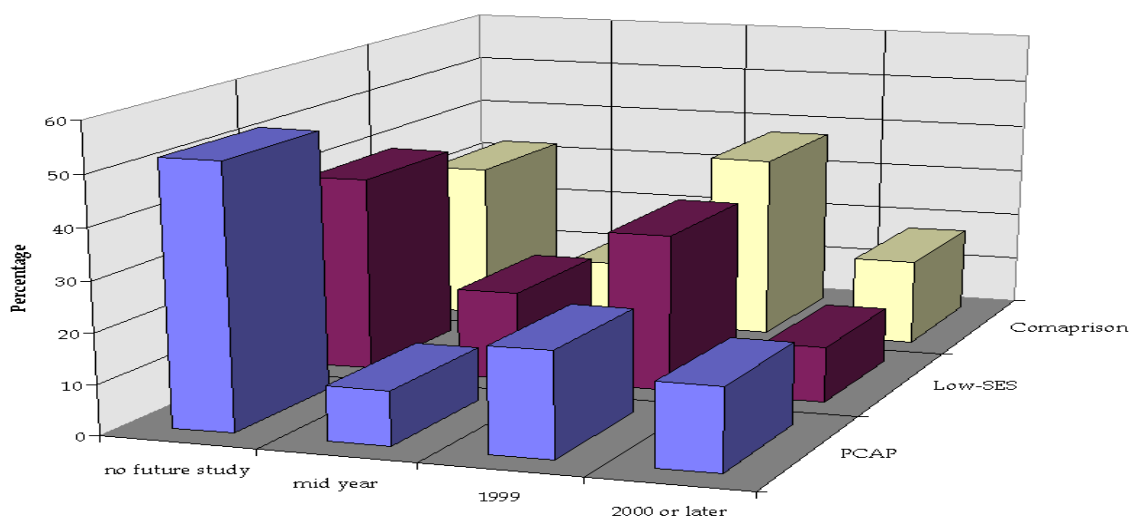
"I would have liked to receive heaps more information on deferment and job prospects. Because I was thinking of deferment at the time I wanted information and it seemed no pamphlets could tell me. This would have been of good use to my decisions. I am still unsure about what procedures, if any, I have to take" (Student who deferred)

Applying for tertiary study in the future

Of those respondents who were not studying in 1998, 166 (19.1%) indicated that they did not intend to apply to QTAC for a place in a tertiary institution in the future, as can be seen from Figure 2. Fifty-three (6.1%) indicated that they would apply to QTAC when considering

further study as part of the mid-year intake, 113 (13%) in 1999 and 59 (6.8%) felt that they would submit an application in 2000 or later.

Figure 2. Intention to apply for a tertiary place in the future.



As is also shown in Figure 2, PCAP students, and to a somewhat lesser extent those from low-SES backgrounds, believed that they would not apply for tertiary study in the future. A greater number of students from the comparison group indicated that they would apply in 1999 than either of the two equity groups.

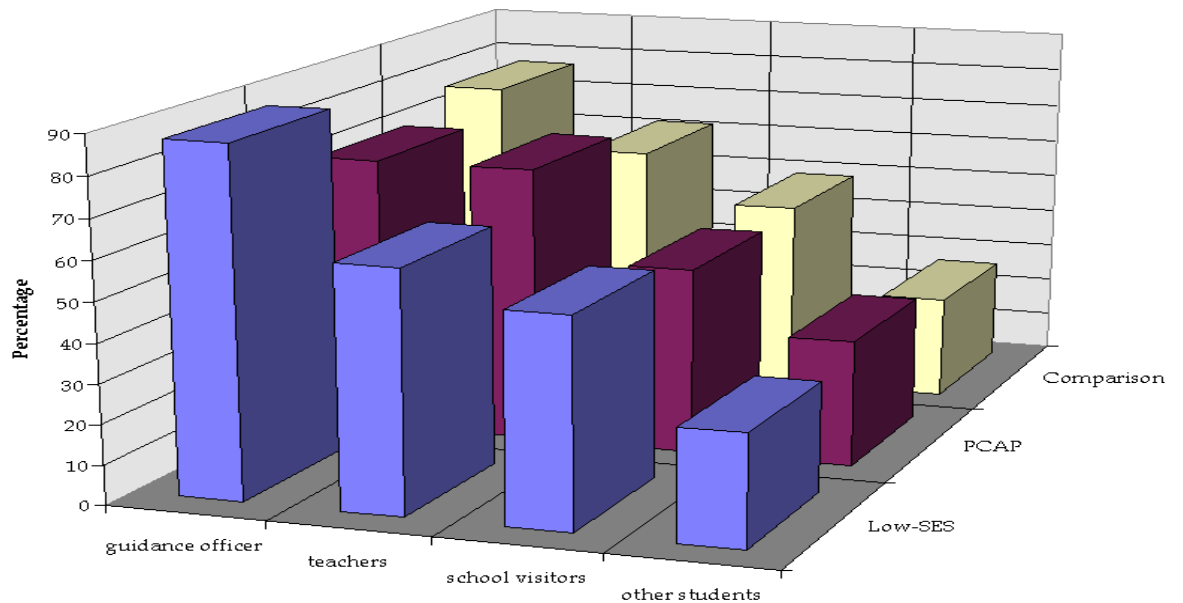
How do students acquire information about tertiary entrance and tertiary courses?

Respondents were provided with a list of potential information sources relating to post-school options and asked to indicate those they had accessed while at school. Overall, students appeared to receive most of their information within the school environment from either Guidance Officers, teachers, visitors to the school or other students.

"The most useful information I received was from the guidance officer who told me which subjects I should take, which university would offer the best course for my particular areas of interest, and who found out an estimate of what OP I was going to get".

As shown in Figure 3, low-SES, PCAP and comparison group students exhibited similar patterns of responses with regard to information obtained while at school. Students from schools in low-SES areas overwhelmingly view Guidance Officers as the primary information source in relation to post-school options, consulting teachers and school visitors to a lesser extent. Students attending PCAP schools were equally as likely to nominate teachers as Guidance Officers when identifying information sources, perhaps reflecting the absence in many rural and isolated schools of a full-time Guidance Officer.

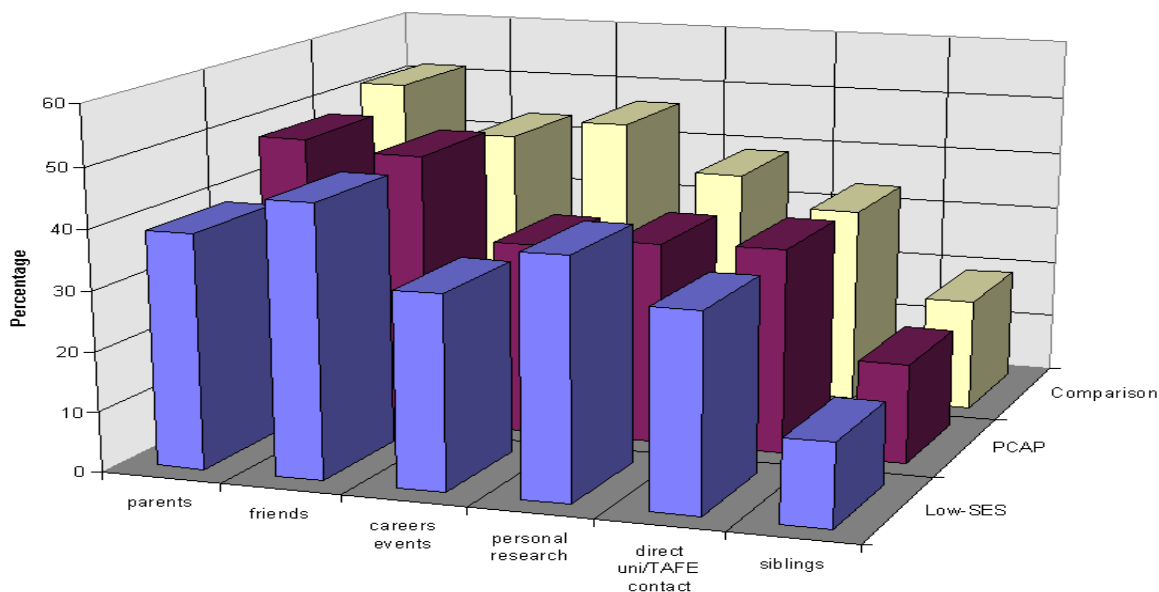
Figure 3. Within school information sources accessed by PCAP, low-SES and comparison groups.



When accessing information outside the school environment, students from low-SES schools appeared to favour friends and personal research, as can be seen from Figure 4. PCAP students indicated they obtained information relating to study and work after school from parents and friends. In contrast, comparison group students accessed information from parents, careers events and, to a lesser extent, friends. This attendance at tertiary information events would be expected given that students in the comparison group were more likely to have had the opportunity to attend careers markets and tertiary expositions. Student comments highlighted the usefulness of these events and the value of exposure to a range of areas of study and career directions that may not have been previously considered.

"Careers markets and tertiary study expos are extremely helpful in opening up the broad range of studies/careers available after school. Not only are your eyes opened to many fields you may never have heard of before, there are people with firsthand experience in the various fields to probe for extra information. Schools should make a conscious effort to escort students and encourage them to attend these expos".

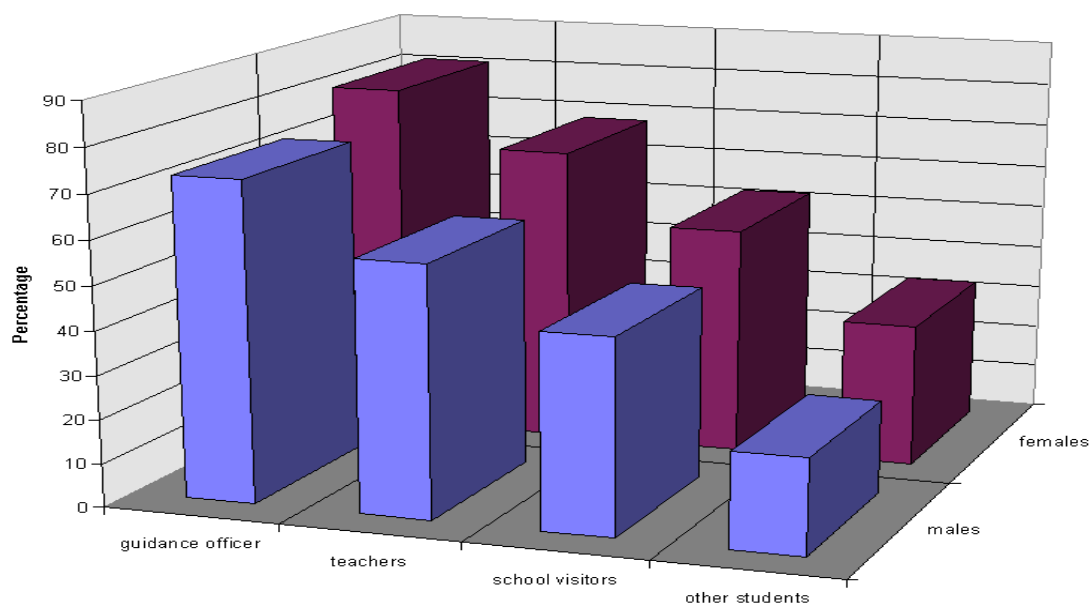
Figure 4. Additional information sources accessed by PCAP, low-SES and comparison groups.



As shown in Figure 5, males and females indicated that while they obtained information from similar sources within the school, overall a greater percentage of females accessed information relating to post-school options. In particular, female students appeared to have been more likely to view other students and teachers as sources of information than male students.

"Mostly from teachers, I got on well with them and they understood me and tried to help me in any way they could". (female student)

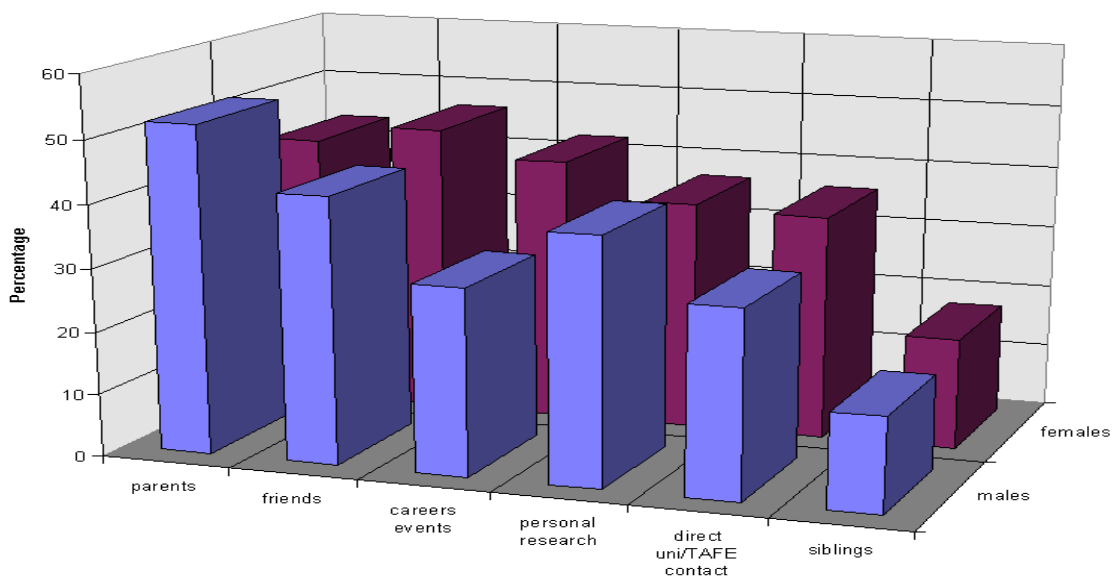
Figure 5. Within school information sources accessed by gender.



From Figure 6 it is evident that males are more likely than females to indicate they obtained information from parents and, to a lesser extent, as a result of personal research. Female students also appeared to be more likely than males to use friends and careers events as information sources when investigating post-school options.

"I just got told my options but the most useful information I got was from my father. He said go and do a TAFE course. I don't care what it is as long as you enjoy it..." (male student)

Figure 6. Additional information sources accessed by gender.

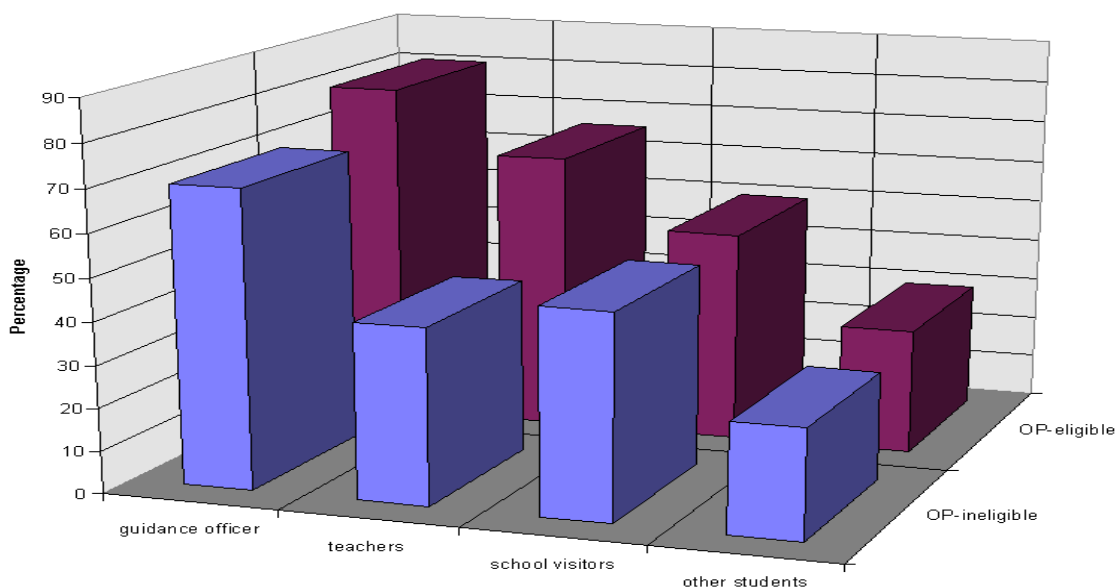


OP-ineligible students were less likely overall than those who were eligible for an OP to

respond that they had obtained information relating to work and tertiary study information within the school environment. As was the case with other groups, the Guidance Officer was consulted by the majority of students, with somewhat fewer OP-ineligible students specifying they had accessed information via this source. Most notably, as can be seen from Figure 7, OP-ineligible students were less likely to have found teachers a useful information source regarding post-school options.

"Whilst our guidance counsellor offered us a lot of help and was there to answer questions I didn't really understand how uni or the OP system worked in great detail. I would have liked to have known more as when you don't understand OPs and university in detail it is hard to strive for a goal, i.e. courses".

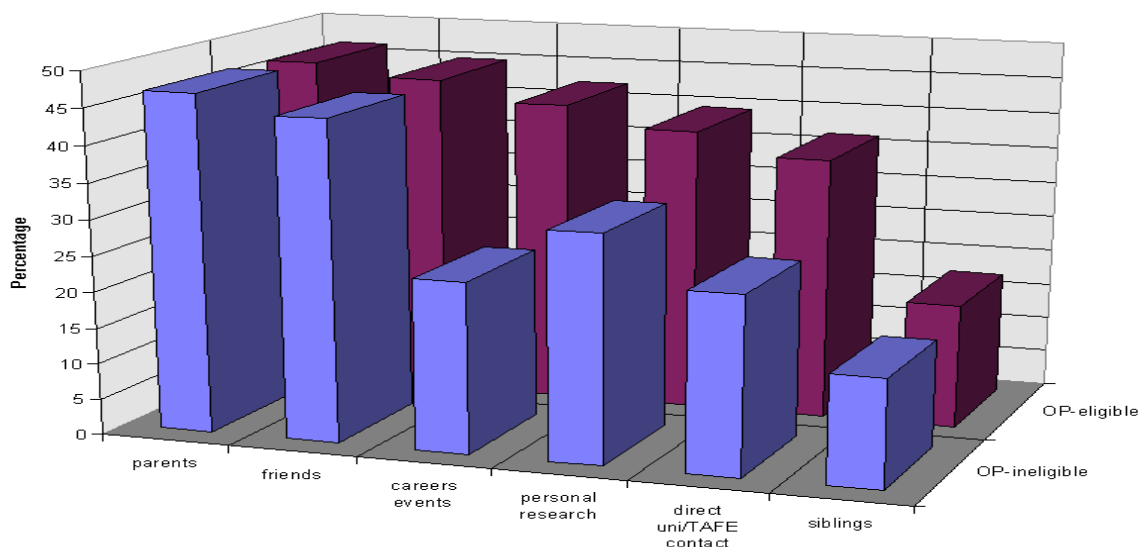
Figure 7. Within school information sources accessed by OP-eligibility.



Parents and friends were regarded as important information sources irrespective of OP-eligibility as can be seen from Figure 8. OP-ineligible students did not appear to have attended careers events, conducted personal research or directly contacted universities or TAFEs to the same extent as OP-eligible students. This pattern of responses suggests that OP-ineligible students may not be as motivated or encouraged to consider career issues or future study options prior to leaving school.

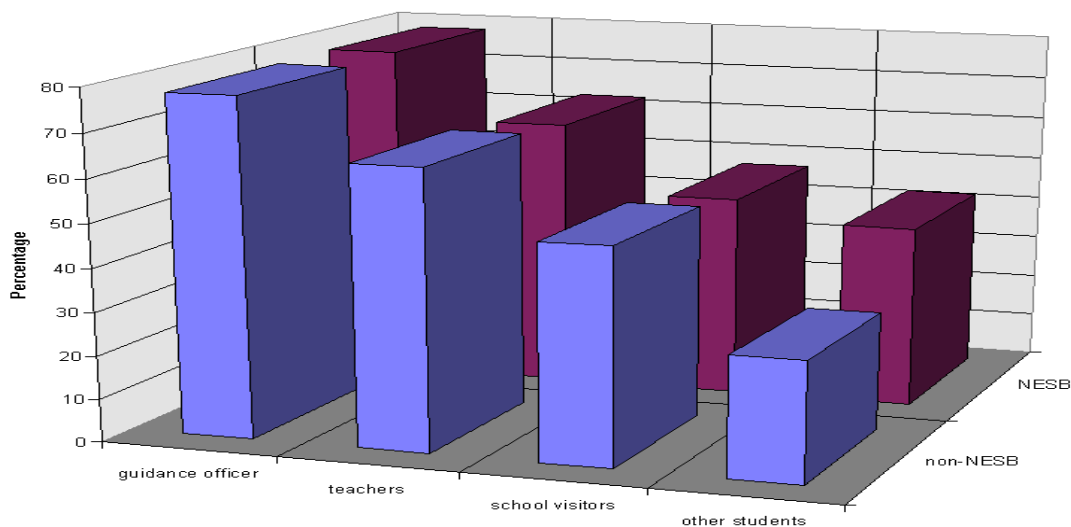
"The most useful information I received was when I enquired to TAFE about a course... I also felt that someone talking from TAFE was a great help. She told us the importance of having even just basic office skills and why short TAFE courses like that could be a help in gaining employment. I had not considered this before". (Student with OP 14)

Figure 8. Additional information sources accessed by OP-eligibility.



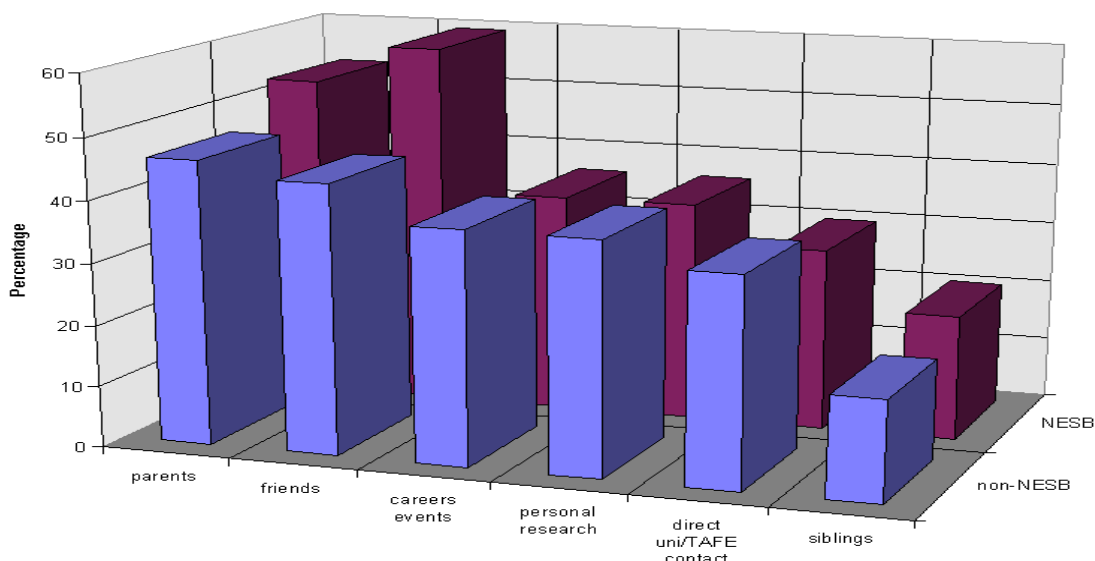
Despite the fact that the group of NESB students was relatively small and definitely not homogeneous, overall they appeared to access certain information sources at a different rate to students from an English speaking background. From Figure 9 it is evident that NESB students were more likely to have consulted other students as information sources.

Figure 9. Within school information sources accessed by language background.



In Figure 10 it is also evident that when obtaining information about post-school options NESB students appear to frequently consult people, as opposed to attending careers events or undertaking personal research. In particular, parents, friends and siblings are more likely to be accessed by NESB students than those from an English speaking background.

Figure 10. Additional information sources accessed by language background.



What type of information do students value and need?

As part of a free response section, students were asked to detail the information they had found to be most helpful when making decisions about post-school options. Table 10 categorises the comments made by students from PCAP, low SES and comparison groups. While most students in the comparison group found the *Queensland Tertiary Courses (QTC)* book, the school Guidance Officer and careers markets to be useful sources of information, responses were slightly different for the other groups. PCAP students were less likely than the comparison groups to nominate a broad range of helpful information sources, as suggested by the lower overall incidence of responses. When PCAP students commented on information they had found to be useful, they were more likely to suggest that interaction with teachers had been useful as had, to a slightly lesser extent, the QTC book and Guidance Officers.

"The teachers gave the best information. Some of them do a lot of things before becoming a teacher so they pass on their experience most of the time. By the end of Year 12 most of the students get to know and trust their teachers. So students are going to listen to them and believe them".

Table 10. Number of student comments regarding useful information sources.

	PCAP	LOW-SES	COMPARISON
Resources			
<i>Queensland Tertiary Courses book</i>	23	43	61
Careers markets / TSXPO	18	11	33

Direct contact with universities	14	11	23
Publications	7	4	17
People			
Guidance Officer	20	37	42
School visitors	15	20	23
Teachers	24	12	18
Current tertiary students	11	6	8
Advice			
Options open to students	9	9	16
Pathways	8	10	19
TAFE information	13	5	9
University information	7	7	13
Apprenticeships	6	8	4

Students from low-SES schools also appeared to be less motivated, or able, than students in the comparison group to comment on helpful sources of information about post-school options. While the QTC book and the Guidance Officer were seen to be helpful, they were not commented on with the same frequency as comparison group students. For students from low-SES schools, school visitors appeared to have made an impression, with fewer finding careers markets and teachers to be helpful information sources. Differences observed between these groups also serve to highlight varying preferences for post-school options and opportunities to access both information and people.

"QTAC guide - able to take it home and take my time reading about courses and having the prerequisites and the contact numbers available. It was straight forward to read and understand... most importantly it was mine to keep so I could highlight areas and refer to parts at any time".

Tables 11 and 12 contain content analyses of free responses to a question requesting student comments on information they would like to have received about their options after Year 12. Across the PCAP, low-SES and comparison groups many students indicated that no further information was required and, in many cases, the information they had received about post-school options was both good and useful. Many suggested that students should undertake personal research and assume individual responsibility for such matters.

"I think everything was quite sufficient and anything that you felt you missed out on, you researched yourself which is a good learning curve for university anyway".

Students from PCAP schools appeared to be interested in further information about financial assistance and Austudy, despite the finding that this group was not dissatisfied with information provided about programs for those from rural and remote areas. PCAP students were also more likely than other groups to indicate they wanted to receive information relating to work and employment opportunities.

Table 11. Number of student comments regarding information required about post-school option issues.

	PCAP	LOW-SES	COMPARISON
None required / Good information provided	20	15	30
Financial assistance / Scholarships / Austudy	23	10	21
Apprenticeships	19	26	19
Work	24	11	17
Alternative entry	15	16	19
Guidance Officer assistance	10	4	1
Information about forms and processes	8	4	7
Living away from home	8	6	5
OPs and QCS Test	5	6	9
Career-course link	3	13	3

Interestingly, students from low-SES schools did not indicate that they required additional information about financial assistance, instead requesting more detail regarding apprenticeships. Low-SES students also did not appear to be interested in information relating to employment opportunities, preferring instead to gain a better understanding about the links between specific courses and careers. It may be possible to attribute this to a shift in focus from work to post-secondary study, also reflecting the need for this student group to anticipate that jobs would be available in a specific profession on completion of their tertiary studies.

Requests for further information and assistance from Guidance Officers, details about OPs and the QCS Test and living away from home were evident across all groups surveyed.

All three groups expressed similar needs for information relating to tertiary studies as can be seen from Table 12. Additional details about TAFE alternatives, courses and university life were suggested by students as areas where further information could have been provided to students investigating post-school options. Of lesser concern to these groups were issues relating to other courses, HECS, and other training institutions.

Table 12. Number of student comments relating to information required about tertiary study.

	PCAP	LOW-SES	COMPARISON
TAFE Alternatives	14	14	15
Course detail	12	10	15
University life	11	13	14
HECS	8	5	9
Other courses	5	3	9
Other training institutions	3	5	9

Satisfaction with information

When asked to indicate the degree to which they were satisfied with information received relating to aspects of post-school study and career options, only a small number of differences emerged across the equity groups in this study. Students were questioned about their satisfaction with information they may have received while at school regarding OP-eligibility, tertiary applications, employment, financial assistance, special programs, alternative entry, and subject selection for senior studies. Due to the small number of NESB students in the sample, statistical tests were not performed for this group. With regard to the other equity groups, surprisingly only a limited number of significant differences emerged.

"Some things our school never discussed. Most information pressure was put on making university decisions. HECS, Austudy etc. was more or less 'well when you apply you will be sent more information'. This is why a lot of people have to defer as they don't have Year 12 to prepare to move away from home".

As would possibly be expected based on participation levels in vocational training, female students were significantly less likely to indicate that they were satisfied with the information they received about apprenticeships ($F=4.7$, $p<.05$). PCAP students were significantly more satisfied than the comparison group with the information they received about apprenticeships ($F=26.8$, $p<.01$) and employment opportunities ($F=6.7$, $p<.01$). It is also interesting that those from a low-SES background were significantly more satisfied than the comparison group with the information received while at school regarding Austudy ($F=14.2$,

$p < .01$) and employment ($F=8.2$, $p < .01$). No other significant differences were observed when comparing these equity groups.

Satisfaction for QTAC applicants vs. non-applicants

A number of differences in student satisfaction with post-school option information emerged when comparing those who had submitted an application with those who had not. Students who applied to QTAC for a tertiary place were significantly more likely to be satisfied with the information they had received about HECS ($F=16.2$, $p < .01$). Satisfaction with information provided with regard to qualifying for an OP was significantly higher for those students who had applied to QTAC ($F=10.3$, $p < .01$). It is also not surprising that students who did not apply for tertiary study were significantly more dissatisfied than those who did with the information they had received about applying through QTAC ($F=30.5$, $p < .01$).

Satisfaction for OP-eligible students vs. OP-ineligible

The majority of differences observed in relation to satisfaction with information provided about post-school options were observed between OP-eligible and OP-ineligible students. As would probably be expected, students who were eligible for an OP were significantly more likely to be satisfied with the information they had received about qualifying for an OP ($F=6.8$, $p < .01$) and applying for tertiary study ($F=18.7$, $p < .01$). Students who had not qualified for an OP expressed significantly higher levels of satisfaction with the information they had received about apprenticeships ($F=18.8$, $p < .01$), TAFE ($F=19.5$, $p < .01$), Austudy ($F=12.5$, $p < .01$), and employment opportunities ($F=11.8$, $p < .01$).

"I was not told about TAFE or university if I did not get an OP. I was disappointed because now I would like to attend TAFE"

Discussion

It is clear from the results that the primary site of information acquisition is within the school environment for all students, irrespective of their equity status. It is also apparent that there are a number of fundamental issues that need to be addressed, such as ensuring all students have adequate access to information about applications for tertiary study and the costs of further education before the specific needs of equity groups prior to entering tertiary study can be identified.

There are several matters which fall within TEPA's sphere of influence that may assist with making equity group students fully aware of their tertiary entrance and post-school options. The key issues which emerged from the findings related to:

- provision of basic information about post-school options
- professional development of Guidance Officers
- dissemination of information to target students
- teacher awareness of equity issues and tertiary options.

Provision of basic information about tertiary study to all students

It was surprising to find few significant differences between the comparison and the equity groups in satisfaction with information provision about post-school options. However, it was apparent that all students required additional information about general issues such as financial assistance and HECS and detail about tertiary courses. It is possible that

dissatisfaction with information relating to these basic issues could discourage equity students from considering tertiary study as a viable option.

Professional development of Guidance Officers

The evidence overwhelmingly suggests that Guidance Officers are students' primary sources of information about post-school options throughout their senior years and, as such, they are the main conduit through which equity-related information can be disseminated within schools. When providing Guidance Officers with access and equity information, the varying roles of these professionals within the school need to be taken into account as they impinge on the time available to advise students regarding tertiary options. In addition, many PCAP and low-SES schools do not have a full-time Guidance Officer available at their school, complicating information distribution and communication strategies. Given these restrictions, up-to date resources need to be provided in a format that is easy to access, decreasing the amount of time required to research, integrate and collate data relating to available equity and access programs offered by tertiary institutions.

As suggested by respondent requests, students appear to be asking questions of Guidance Officers which require them to provide a greater depth of information on topics somewhat tangential to specific tertiary entrance and access issues. Matters relating to financial assistance for PCAP students and the availability of apprenticeship/traineeship programs for low-SES students may impact significantly on decisions to apply for study and accept offers. In addition to these information requirements, many students also expect Guidance Officers to be in a position to identify links between prospective courses and careers, as well as being aware of the availability of employment on completion of certain programs of study. These concerns may be especially relevant to equity groups who feel pressured to enter the workforce as soon as possible and could also impact on their orientation to tertiary study and willingness to make an application.

Teacher awareness of equity issues and tertiary options

As teachers appear to be consulted widely by all students, especially at PCAP schools where a full-time Guidance Officer is rare, these educators should be made aware of general tertiary entrance matters and specific equity issues. TEPA has developed a training module to improve teacher understanding of senior schooling and tertiary entrance at a pre-service level and is currently trialing a professional development package for current school personnel. These resources are aimed at improving teacher confidence when discussing such matters with students and colleagues as well as making them aware of the associated procedures, processes and relevant information sources that are available.

In addition to this information, teachers also need to be made aware of the range and scope of equity and access programs available to all students. If such information is introduced as part of undergraduate education programs, teachers may be encouraged to discuss such issues within the school environment and consider these options with students who may or may not be intending to undertake further study. Making teachers aware of these matters encourages their inclusion in the culture of the classroom.

Dissemination of information to target students

Based on the results, students across all groups appear to access information about post-school options primarily within the school environment, with a greatly reduced number indicating they sought information or assistance beyond the school or home. Specifically in relation to target groups, it appears that these students access information and services differentially when compared to other groups. As would be expected, PCAP students are

less likely to have consulted a Guidance Officer, low-SES students are less likely to access information from family members, female students appear to attend careers markets more frequently than males, and NESB students appear to consult their friends when considering post-school options. While providing the school directly with information is an appropriate distribution strategy for all groups, there are differences within the groups which may contribute to the effective dissemination of information to all equity students.

Timing of information distribution to target groups must also be taken into account when attempting to ensure that all students have access to complete, useful and meaningful information about post-school options. Student comments suggest that additional information required to make informed decisions about both post-compulsory and tertiary education needs to be available earlier than Year 12. As the current research suggests, information needs about post-school options appear to be greatest for those students who are ineligible for an OP or who did not apply to QTAC for admission to further study. It would seem to be the case that, to ensure equity of opportunity, the focus of tertiary equity programs may need to be shifted from the end of secondary school to the completion of junior studies.

Recommendations

While there are a number of recommendations that could be made as a result of this research, they will be limited to those that relate directly to TEPA's legislated responsibilities. Based on the findings of the current investigation it is recommended that:

1. Students be made fully aware at Year 10 regarding the ramifications of choosing certain programs of study.

It appears to be the case that students who are part of the PCAP and low-SES target groups are significantly less likely to make themselves eligible for an OP, possibly inadvertently restricting their range of options after Year 12. Prior to making a decision about OP-eligibility in Year 10, students should be made aware of the pathway options that are available to them on completion of Year 12. These students may also benefit from communication of information relating to tertiary study opportunities for which they do not require an OP. Case studies may be useful, decreasing the emphasis on technical information and focusing attention on the variety of study pathways available.

2. Students be provided with additional information at Year 10 about future options and the existence of support programs and services for those who are disadvantaged.

The current TEPA publication *What Now?* could easily be enhanced to accommodate a limited amount of additional information relevant to the target groups. This publication could outline options beyond Year 10, including the existence of equity programs and how to access them, case studies of students through mainstream and equity programs involved in various post-school activities (include apprenticeships and traineeships), and information on the costs of tertiary study (i.e. HECS). This is justified in the context of life-long learning and a broader concept of tertiary education to include vocationally-oriented training.

3. Guidance Officers and careers counsellors be provided with a resource detailing all relevant equity programs and services available for students

A comprehensive, integrated resource for Guidance Officers and careers counsellors should be developed that provides information on post-school options, including equity programs,

and contact details for further information. A comprehensive Website might also be maintained to allow ready access to this information by other stakeholder groups.

4. Teachers be provided with pre-service and in-service opportunities to improve their awareness of the services and programs available for students in equity groups.

This resource would be similar in nature to the pre-service teacher training module developed by TEPA to inform teachers with regard to tertiary entrance processes and procedures. This short training package, in conjunction with written materials, could be included either within the professional experience component of practicum work or as a practical aspect when discussing theories of social justice pertaining to education. As Education Queensland already offers professional development opportunities to improve the awareness of school personnel in relation to equity issues, it may be beneficial to liaise with officers to determine whether it is possible to include additional information addressing tertiary entrance matters.

5. The provision of information relating to general matters impacting on entrance to tertiary courses for all Year 12 students be reviewed.

Students across all groups appeared to have difficulty accessing information about general issues pertaining to further study. Pragmatic matters such as HECS, Austudy, course detail and life at university were concerns for all students surveyed. As it may be the case that lack of information about general issues impacting tertiary entrance and progression to further study may affect both student application and acceptance rates, it appears to be timely to review the nature and scope of the information received by schools. Such a review would ensure that all students have access to similar information when making decisions about entry to tertiary courses.

6. Additional research be undertaken to determine whether the timing of information released to students is appropriate.

The current study did not specifically address issues relating to timing of distribution and whether information requested retrospectively by students is appropriate and meaningful for students currently at school. Additional research would seek to determine whether organisations with an information provision brief are attempting to supply students with answers before they have conceived the questions.

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Appendix A

Careers Markets	Sunshine Coast, Gympie, Maryborough, Biggenden, Bundaberg, Gladstone, Emerald, Gold Coast, Kingaroy, Chinchilla, Mitchell, Roma, Charleville, Dalby, Toowoomba, Stanthorpe, Warwick, Innisfail, Atherton, Charters Towers, PROSAERPINE, Mackay
Open Days	QUT (Gardens Point), CQU (Discovery Day, Rockhampton & Multicultural Fair/Open Day, Rockhampton), Bond (Gold Coast), Griffith (Nathan & Mt Gravatt, Gold Coast, QCA, QCM, Logan), Moreton Institute of TAFE (Alexandra Hills), Southern Queensland Institute of TAFE (Toowoomba), UQ (St Lucia, Gatton), Russo Institute of Technology and The Office Business Academy (Brisbane), JCU (Cairns, Townsville), USQ (Toowoomba, Hervey Bay), Christian Heritage College (Mansfield), ACU (Mitchelton), Logan Institute of TAFE (Meadowbrook), Dalby Agricultural College, Queensland School of Film and Television (Brisbane), UNE (Armidale), Sunshine Coast Business Academy, SCUC, SCU (Coffs Harbour, Lismore)
Other	JCU mid-year information session (Townsville and Cairns), TSXPO (Brisbane), CQU Career Expo (Rockhampton), SCU Tertiary Information Day (Lismore), Coffs Harbour Tertiary Information Day, Port Macquarie Tertiary Information Day, Gold Coast College of Business Student Tourism Symposium, Beaudesert 1998 Opportunities Expo, Cairns Tertiary Information Event, Mount Isa Institute of TAFE Food, Wine, Beer and Arts Fair, QUT Hands on Health Day (Kelvin Grove), Townsville Tertiary Information Event, Wide Bay Institute of TAFE Activities Week (Bundaberg, Hervey Bay and Maryborough), North Point Institute of TAFE Information Week (Caboolture, Redcliffe, Bracken Ridge and Brisbane-held twice), Moreton Institute of TAFE Careers Expo (Garden City), QUT Course Advice Evening (Gardens Point), UQ Information Session (St Lucia)