Patterns of Participation in Year 12 and Higher Education in Australia: Trends and Issues

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The report examines participation in education in Australia. In part it updates information on participation in Year 12 and higher education presented in LSAY Research Report Number 13 Participation in Education and Training: 1980-1994. The earlier findings, based upon the experiences of four youth cohorts, are updated by including the 1995 Year 9 LSAY cohort, using the 1998 and 1999 data for participation in Year 12 and higher education, respectively. Using the data for the five youth cohorts we are able to discuss changes in the patterns of and influences on participation over the last 20 years. Furthermore, this report addresses several policy and conceptual issues relevant to educational participation. These include rurality, ethnicity, Indigenous status, socioeconomic background, part-time work, individual schools and psychological factors.

In the examination of participation in Year 12 the main findings are:

- 76 per cent of the 1995 Year 9 cohort participated in Year 12 in 1998;
- females are more likely to participate in Year 12 than males, and the gap between males and females in Year 12 participation has increased since the early 1980s;
- Year 9 students whose parents work in high status occupations are more likely to continue on to Year 12, but the importance of parental occupation has declined since the early 1980s;
- Year 9 students from more educated family backgrounds are more likely to remain at school until Year 12, but these differences have also declined since the early 1980s;
- young people with language backgrounds other than English are more likely to participate in Year 12;
- students living in non-metropolitan areas in Year 9 are less likely to participate in Year 12; and
- Year 12 participation is strongly associated with achievement in literacy and numeracy in Year 9.

In the examination of participation in higher education the main findings are:

- participation in higher education was at 31 per cent in 1999 (for the Year 9 1995 cohort);
- gender differences have grown, with young women increasingly participating in higher education, 9 percentage points more than young men in 1999;
- students with language backgrounds other than English are consistently more likely to participate in higher education;
- young people living in non-metropolitan areas are less likely to participate in higher education but these differences are comparatively small;
- occupational background, school type and achievement have become more weakly associated with participation in higher education over time.

A number of policy and conceptual issues are examined.

Rurality:
One important issue is the question of whether young people from non-urban areas are disadvantaged in terms of educational participation. A variety of measures of rurality were examined. It was found that the different measures provide much the same conclusion. On most measures, a gap of approximately 10 percentage points (in favour of urban students) was found in the Year 12 and higher education participation...
rates between the most urban and the most rural groups of students. In addition, the major difference in participation is between the 45 to 55 per cent of students in metropolitan areas and the remainder in regional and rural areas.

**Ethnicity:**
Measures of ethnicity such as Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) and Language Background other than English (LBOTE) have been criticised for being too broad and heterogeneous. It is argued that such broad definitions obscure certain ethnic groups who have very poor educational outcomes leading to incorrect conclusions about their experiences of disadvantage. In order to examine the relationship between ethnicity and participation, a more detailed measure of ethnic background was constructed. It was found that the Year 12 and higher education participation rates of almost all groups of students whose fathers were born in non-English speaking countries were higher than for students whose fathers were born in Australia. In some instances the participation rates were substantially higher. The higher participation rates could not be accounted for by students' performance in the Year 9 achievement tests or their socioeconomic background, suggesting other factors are at work.

**Indigenous Status:**
This study confirms that Indigenous students have considerably lower participation rates than non-Indigenous students. Of the Indigenous students sampled in 1995 when they were in Year 9, 47 per cent participated in Year 12, and 17 per cent undertook some form of higher education in 1999. These rates were much lower than for non-Indigenous students. Further analyses showed that only part of the explanation for the lower participation rates of Indigenous students relates to socioeconomic background and achievement in literacy and numeracy in Year 9.

**Socioeconomic Background:**
One of the major debates surrounding socioeconomic background and educational outcomes is what aspects of socioeconomic background are most important. The analyses presented here indicate that cultural factors (measured by parents' education) have a stronger relationship with participation than wealth (measured by home possessions). Another issue is whether the influence of socioeconomic background on educational participation has declined over time. It was found that there has been a decline in the influence of occupational background on participation in both Year 12 and higher education.

**Part-time Work:**
Part-time work while at school could either provide extra resources to help a student remain at school or could distract a student from their school work, leading to a decreased likelihood of participation. Our results suggest that part-time work in Year 11 has little or no effect on Year 12 participation, other things being equal. However, it does appear that working part-time for extensive periods of time in Year 12 is detrimental to participation in higher education.

**Individual Schools:**
Approximately 7 per cent of schools have Year 12 participation rates significantly below that expected given the State, school type and academic mix of students. For these schools then, it would appear that there may be socio-cultural factors that affect the likelihood of their students reaching Year 12.

**Psychological Factors:**
Factors such as level of engagement in school life (as shown through participation in extracurricular activities), academic self-concept, educational aspirations and parental expectations are often neglected in models of participation in education. The analyses presented here show that these factors are significant influences on Year 12 participation, with academic self-concept and aspirations substantially increasing the understanding of Year 12 participation.