

URBAN DISADVANTAGE AND PROVIDER EQUITY STRATEGIES

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Abstract

This paper explores the underlying problem of the meaning of ‘disadvantage’ in equity research in the VET sector. Current policy discourses of ‘equity’ in VET gloss over the nature of the socio-economic disadvantage that underlies questions of the participation and achievement of the so-called ‘target equity groups’. While indexes of socio-economic disadvantage are widely applied in education, their application to VET participation is as problematic. Postcode participation studies of Sydney and Melbourne have shown there is strong participation and achievement in disadvantaged areas identified by such indexes. A key question then, is how these patterns of participation result from the ethos and programs of regional TAFE providers who may be responding to the needs of VET clients in such areas. The analysis requires a multi-dimensional framework encompassing client characteristics, provider factors and the way these interact in and are modified by the nature of the regional context. Research in these lines shows that an important focus of equity research needs to be the nature of the local clientele that takes advantage of the programs that public providers customise in their knowledge of local disadvantage and the need for ‘equity’.

Disadvantaged areas and local VET clientele

Recent research (McIntyre, Volkoff & Egg, in progress) has attempted to throw the spotlight on the question of the nature of the local clientele of TAFE, viewed in its regional context and in terms of the evolution of equity policy.

The terms ‘local clientele’ and ‘regional context’ signify the rediscovery of the ‘community’ in VET policy research, suppressed at the height of training reform and now rediscovered during an era of political reaction in the countryside. (The significance of the communitarian politics cannot regrettably be explored here, but see McIntyre forthcoming).

A ‘clientele’ is a body of individual students (clients) that share particular social, economic & educational characteristics, who may be ‘targeted’ for participation attempts and to whom educational services, including equity programs, can be marketed. A local clientele is one that lives and participates in VET locally. The question of local clientele —who uses VET providers and why they do — is a key issue in the analysis of VET participation and now one receiving attention. From an equity perspective, it is important to identify the terms on which disadvantaged individuals are participating and whether they are achieving outcomes to the same degree as other clients.

There are some difficulties in defining ‘disadvantage’ in this context and its ambiguous relationship to the VET equity policy vocabulary. For this reason, we need to recount the

policy history of 'equity' and trace its development from the earlier concept of disadvantage (or earlier terms of social deprivation or underprivileged). Policy ideas were not born yesterday.

'Disadvantage' is defined in socio-economic terms. Though it has some problems, a useful contrast can be made between socio-economic disadvantage and socio-cultural characteristics. The latter (eg. being Aboriginal or non-English speaking) may lead to lower education or employment levels defining socio-economic disadvantage. In studying 'local clienteles' from disadvantaged areas, the prime interest is the employment and schooling levels. Such socio-economic criteria provide the primary benchmark of disadvantage. It is also necessary of course to monitor socio-cultural participation and its relationship to socio-economic disadvantage, without confusing them.

The nature of 'disadvantaged clienteles' using TAFE and ACE providers has been established by a series of studies of participation in Sydney and Melbourne postcodes (McIntyre 1998, 1997, 2000b). These studies are possible by the fact that 'student home postcode' is collected by AVETMISS, and its relatively good data quality. Recent work has mapped VET participation on to patterns of 'urban disadvantage' as defined by the ABS indexes of socio-economic disadvantage. These indexes, in brief, distinguish between more specific indexes based on economic (income and housing) or education-occupational factors (qualifications and occupational group). A full discussion of the application of ABS indexes of socio-economic disadvantage can be found in McIntyre (2000a, 2000b).

One obvious trend from these studies is worth highlighting here (Tables 1 and 2). When Sydney or Melbourne postcodes were grouped by degree of disadvantage (sextiles), the greatest number of TAFE clients were found to be in most disadvantaged postcodes. There were also other important differences in the educational and employment characteristics of the clients, and their socio-cultural status (for example whether they are of non-English speaking background). It can be fairly concluded that it TAFE clearly serves large 'disadvantaged clienteles' in these postcodes.

The Melbourne study (McIntyre 1999, 2000c) compared TAFE with adult community education (ACE) participation in over two hundred postcodes. This showed that while TAFE is concentrated in more disadvantaged postcodes, ACE participants are fairly equally distributed across the socio-economic range. This points again to interesting questions about the socio-economic characteristics ACE clienteles, and continuing discussion about the role of different sectors. The study is consistent with the well-documented trend of ACE to attract large numbers of more advantaged clients (see McIntyre Brown & Ferrier 1996 and McIntyre 2000c).

Table 1. Disadvantage and VET participation, Sydney postcodes, 1996

Sextile	Total partps	TAFE	Part Rate (a)	EmPLY % (b)	Yr 10 % (c)	ATSI	NESB
1	50,944	1306	7.9	46.1	34.4	2.1	51.1
2	40,468	1038	6.9	54.2	34.1	3.0	36.8
3	25,341	618	7.0	57.7	33.8	2.4	27.5
4	29,369	734	6.9	60.6	32.4	2.2	21.1
5	20,944	537	6.4	62.7	29.4	1.8	15.5
6	19,810	495	4.9	62.2	22.0	1.7	19.0
All	186,876	785	6.7	57.3	31.0	2.2	28.4

Table 2. Disadvantage and VET participation, Melbourne postcodes, 1996

Sextile	Total TAFE partps	Average TAFE partps	TAFE Part rate (a)	Employ (b) %	Yr 10 or less % (c)	Total ACE partps	Average ACE partps	TAFE-ACE Ratio
1	51,380	1427.2	9.7	49.4	30.2	17,080	474.4	0.40
2	41,082	1081.1	8.8	58.5	28.1	16,170	425.5	0.44
3	30,389	799.7	8.4	56.0	29.1	12,915	339.9	0.52
4	29,061	764.8	8.9	56.0	26.5	14,374	378.3	0.54
5	33,140	872.1	7.6	53.1	20.5	19,600	515.8	0.75
6	19,960	486.8	6.8	51.2	18.5	16,206	395.3	0.93
All	205,012	895.2	8.3	54.1	25.4	96,345	420.7	0.60

Source: McIntyre (2000c). Sextiles grouped by Index of Socio-Economic Disadvantage. (a) Participation rate is the number of 1996 TAFE students from the postcode as a proportion of persons aged 15 years and over. (b) Students self-employed or employed part-time or full-time. (c) Students with year 10 or less prior schooling as a proportion of all students. The last two rates ignore the 'not stated' numbers in each case.

A strong case then can be made for identifying disadvantaged 'regions' and analysing their local VET clienteles, and more particularly in what respects these are disadvantaged clienteles. This kind of analysis is essential for developing a convincing analysis of the 'community benefits' of participation in VET, whether TAFE or ACE or private provision. Such an analysis is needed if the current interest in 'learning communities' and regional developments is to feed into VET policy and correct its recent neglect of the 'community dimension' of adult participation.

'Equity' and its policy history

How to conceptualise the analysis of local clienteles is a problem that first requires some troubling of the concepts of equity.

Although as Falk states (1999 p.47) there is a commonsense view that that equity means equal which means the same, as individuals are clearly not 'the same', equity is frequently taken out of 'the realm of the commonsense' and placed into the 'too hard basket'. So although most people hold and can express this commonsense view, it is commonsense (ie manifestly true) only to the extent to which it is not examined.

Beyond the commonsense view, equity is in fact a 'slippery, illusory notion, embedded in and so constrained by its ideological framings and popular mythologies' (Butler 1999 p.31) and equity policy and practice reflect this. Government policy has had a major role in developing equity practices in vocational education and training (VET) through both funding regimes (TAFE, National Training Reform Agenda) and various commissions into related areas (Fitzgerald Report, Henderson Report). In the last decade in particular, equity policy and practice critique, analysis and research has contributed to the development of a broader view. The emphasis of the activities of government and researchers is always to explore and develop two related and enmeshed issues. The first issue is that of equity as an expression of 'educational fairness' or a 'fair go for all'. This is the debate around funding levels, targeted versus mainstream programs and individualised versus community development responses. The second issue is one of effectiveness and the search for specific strategies that do deliver equity outcomes and also involves the search for satisfactory measures of the outcomes of these strategies. Practitioners' responsibility then is to take the policy rhetoric of 'target equity groups', 'key performance measures' and so on and develop their own commonsense (and actionable) view of equity.

Various approaches or lenses have been used to look at equity in VET. Butler and Ferrier (2000) suggest that equity policy should be interrogated for its role in enabling a 'screening' of the privileges of the 'norm' as well as acting as an organizing principle through which equity or justice can be 'distributed'. Powles and Anderson (1997) suggest an approach to equity provision that examines the underlying goals of provision and whether policy and practice serve a social service role (ie whether they are based on the nature of disadvantage) or whether they serve an economic utility role and are based on the levels of disadvantage. In many Economic Union countries, in particular in Britain, use of the term 'equity' has largely been replaced by 'social exclusion'. This concept is a response to globalisation and highlights the re-ignition of the social and economic divisions between those who benefit from the new economy and those who are 'left behind' or excluded. It is a concern for the costs of social alienation.

Equity appears in VET policy in varying guises. The storyline of contemporary equity policy is of a person lifting themselves from the social and economic ignominy of the dole queue or single parent's benefit to the buying power and opportunities of a well-paid job. Through their participation in VET and hence the labour market, individuals become respected and valuable members of society. In contrast, some earlier policies (especially in the 1970s and early 80s) emphasised the need for an appropriate response to address poverty. Reform measures reflected a concern to overhaul the state and its institutions as the key to overcoming the poverty that was at the heart of uneven life experiences. The Kangan and Fitzgerald reports reflect that view of equity policy development.

Each of these contrasting snapshots of VET equity policy is underpinned by a different concept of equity – on the one hand there is a view of the individual who (simply) needs help to overcome barriers and gain access to a multitude of opportunities. But on the other hand, in the 70s example equity is seen to be impossible to achieve without addressing the inequity of the systems supporting the state. Yet another view, perhaps a Marxist view of equity would suggest that without changing the capitalist state itself equity is not possible. Thus the concept of equity is highly variable in meaning, which reflects origins based on different paradigms or modes of thinking about society. Each paradigm attributes the causes of disadvantage to a different foundational cause, and is grounded in a different political and philosophical ideology. Each provides an explanation of multiple forms of social disadvantage - economic, social, political and cultural.

Table 3 is an attempt to present an interpretation of the relationship of these concepts to underlying social theory.

Table 3. Concepts of equity

Strategies to promote equity in VET	Equity strategies not needed: provide welfare to those who are unable to support themselves	Provide access courses and 'second chance' education opportunities to enable people to move in from the margins	Manage diversity, address social exclusion through close connections between welfare and the labour market	Remove barriers to increase the level of representation of target groups	Go out to the people, work with them to identify and develop tools to empower collective social action
Role of work	Work and equity do not have an association	Work is how people express their value to society	Welfare through work	Work is an important aspect of people's lives - all people have the right to work	All people have the right to participate in work under healthy and suitably valued conditions
Focus or goal of equity	Opportunities are available to all, there is a natural order to society and only some can benefit.	Develop each individual to maximise their economic potential. Enable individuals to improve themselves, thus they will have access to the benefits of society and improving their return to society through increased productivity. Avoid waste of talent	Individual choice Social exclusion is a failure of the relationship between the individual and society and arises through problems of resource allocation and also involves power relations, culture and social identity	Distributive justice (Rawls) Make the education system accessible to the individual, by redistributing resources, inequalities can be addressed	Social justice Non-dominant groups should be supported and resourced to develop tools to challenge an oppressive system
Dominant policy tools, issues	Maintenance of the status quo, social and class reproduction	Utilize human capital, managerialism	Allow/enable the marketplace to dictate. Economic rationalism, mutual obligation	Address social disadvantage, arbitrate between competing interests in society	The economic system must be changed in order to effect change in social relations and institutional processes
Political ideology	Conservative	Neo-conservative	Neo-liberalism	Liberal/iberal humanism	Socialism, radical socialism

The divisions should not be viewed as rigid. In particular, although a strategy (eg target equity groups) may emerge through one view of society (ie distributive justice) it may well be considered to be a suitable (or pragmatic) strategy through another lens (such as economic rationalism). However, such a representation of concepts can offer an indication of the sources of some of the stresses involved at the levels of both policy development and policy implementation.

The table was constructed through examination of various strategies for addressing equity issues and also various perceptions of work. The role of work is included in recognition that it has become a key component in current views of equity concepts. More broad connections are then made with the overall focus or goal of equity strategies in the education system and then some of the broader policy issues associated with each of the parent ideologies that are set out on the final line. The table could have been presented in reverse order ie with 'political ideology' the starting point. However, this 'view' is intended to give a model for the process of interrogating practice in the search for underlying influences (Egg, in progress). One important limitation of such a table is that it fails to take account of the contextualized nature of equity practice. Such practice may be equally influenced by prevailing macro or micro level policies, resource availability, organizational flexibility and so on as it is by underlying concepts. Examining this interplay is the project of the NREC research.

Conceptualising provider equity strategies

Past work on equity policy since the period of training reform has focused on the client perspective— identifying and describing target groups such as indigenous Australians, women, people with a disability, people from a non-English speaking background and more recently, among 'emerging' classifications, people with a mental illness, people from rural areas, prisoners and mature age workers facing a restructured workplace. Specific equity strategies, including the development of appropriate pathways and options, are then based on the group profile.

However, from a perspective of urban disadvantage, it is necessary to locate 'the disadvantaged' in a local and regional context. The abstract social space that is implied in the language of 'target equity group representation' needs to be replaced by a focus on local clienteles that come from disadvantaged urban areas (leaving aside questions of non-metropolitan regions). To take this perspective is to ask how disadvantage people in urban areas access the system and what benefits they derive from their participation in TAFE in large numbers, according to the studies reported earlier (McIntyre 2000b, McIntyre 2000c).

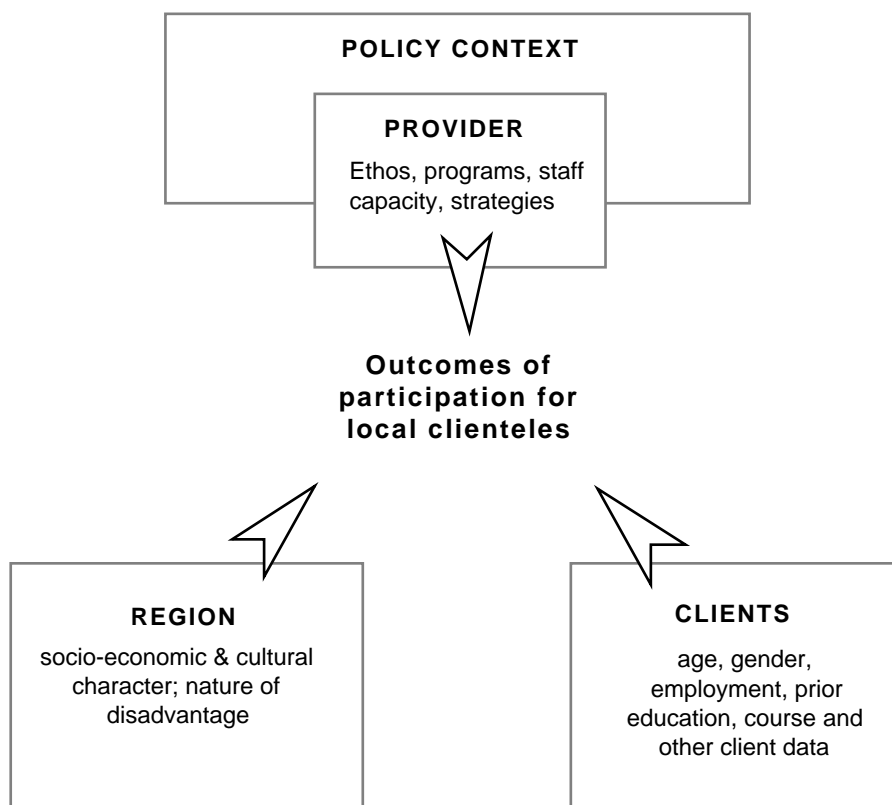
Such research needs a robust framework to understand how participation and outcomes are achieved through a complex set of interactions among specific client characteristics, provider equity strategies and locality factors. This framework brings together client, provider and regional perspectives on equity research.

Most importantly, such a framework reinstates the provider in the analysis, since institutions, or rather the professionals that work within (and beyond) them, are agents who propound and pursue strategies designed to achieve equity in the system. How professionals 'strategise around equity' in Sydney and Melbourne disadvantaged TAFE catchments, is highly researchable.

A framework for research is needed if we are to grasp how equity is produced through an interaction between providers and clients, mediated by socio-economic and cultural influences in particular localities, including the labour market, transport and other community infrastructure, population movements and so on. How then do we conceptualise a framework that would allow us to rediscover (for it was lost in period of training reform) the ‘community dimension’ of equity policy (McIntyre 2000a)?

The broad parameters are suggested by Figure 1 (based on McIntyre 2000a, and see also McIntyre, Brown & Ferrier 1996) suggests one possible schematisation.

Figure 1. Framework for analysis of equity in local participation



A variation of this kind of multi-dimensional framework is that proposed by our current NREC-funded research (McIntyre, Volkoff & Egg in progress). The three dimensions are referred to as client, provider and regional perspectives on equity research. *Client perspectives* refer to the dominant concept of 'equity target groups' and the factors that compound disadvantage, creating barriers to access, retention and success that are often exacerbated by systemic and institutional barriers. *Provider perspectives* highlight the role of the provider in generating equity outcomes through delivering or brokering 'workable solutions' at the local level. and have generated desired outcomes. It focuses on what is required to customise equity strategies for local disadvantaged clientele, including the development of pathways and options. *Regional perspectives* emphasise that equity in the VET system is constrained by great social and economic variations with the capital cities

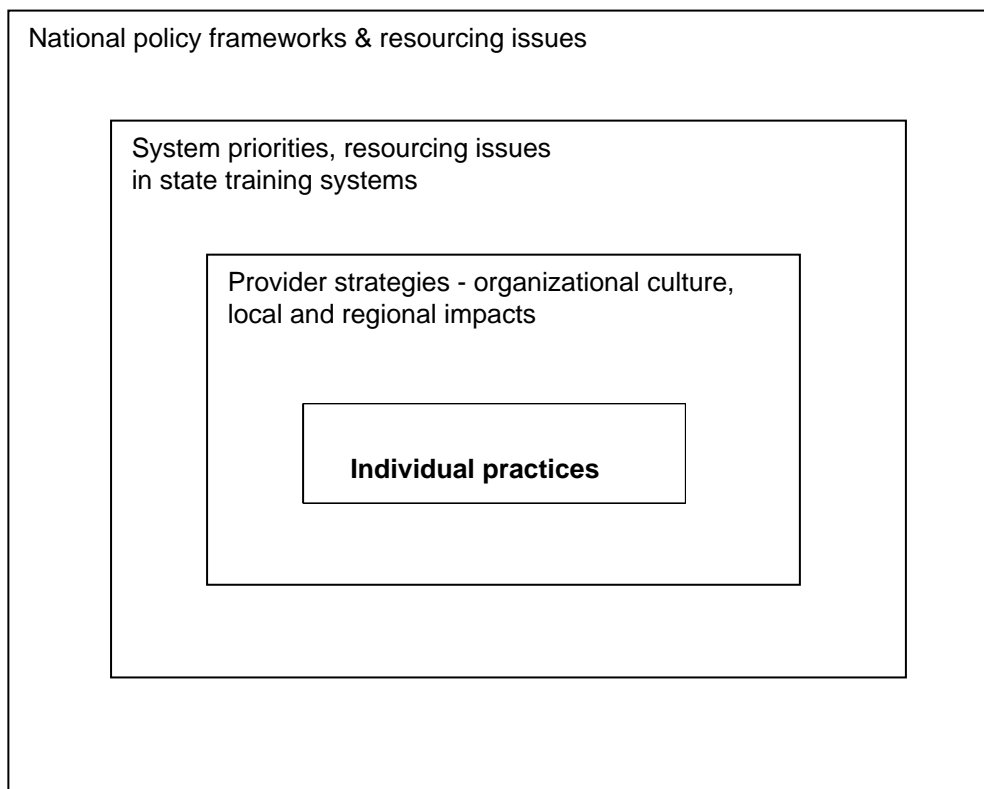
and between urban and regional and rural communities, recognising that differing labour market, employment and socio-cultural factors impinge on the 'provider-client interactions' already referred to.

VET providers take these local and specific conditions into account and include the issues that arise as part of their practice in constructing responses to equity policies. Thus there is a need for a further level of analysis examines the active roles that professionals play in making their organisation responsive to the local context.

Figure 2 attempts to suggest how particular localised and responsive equity strategies are 'nested' within larger policy, resourcing and professional rationales that 'construct' the provider that policy depicts as 'delivering' outcomes.

It is at this level that our NREC research is attempting to uncover the 'agency' of the TAFE Institute in producing equity outcomes for the local disadvantaged clientele through programs that respond to the characteristics of these clients. Though it is not usually regarded as customisation, it is precisely that (see ANTA 1998).

Figure 2. The 'nesting' of equity practices within TAFE policy



Conclusion

This paper has attempted to build on past work that attempts to locate equity in VET participation in its regional or 'community' context. Much more could be written, in view of the current policy interest in learning communities and the re-discovery of regional

development as a policy frame for VET resulting both from the work of ANTA-funded research centres as much as the politics of reaction.

The paper has emphasised the central importance of a concept of 'local equity clientele' in order to stress the way residents in a given disadvantage area may benefit from the strategies of providers that recognise both their needs and characteristics and the characteristics of the region that modify what is possible in the way of equity outcomes: increased skill levels, employment opportunities, entry to further education and so on.

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