

EQUITY AND LOCAL PARTICIPATION IN VET: POLICY CRITIQUE AND RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

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It is argued that national equity policy in vocational education and training is flawed by its neglect of the local or 'community' dimension. Policy misrepresents the compound nature of social disadvantage, ignores the concentration of disadvantaged people in particular localities and gives little incentive for providers, including community agencies, to develop equity strategies addressing local labour market and socio-cultural disadvantage. It is argued that community-based provision is a key element in equity strategy. Research on patterns of local participation using national statistics and census data can contribute to debate on this question by examining how far equity is achieved at the provider level. The article sets out a conceptual model for local equity analysis developed in a recent study which assumes participation patterns reflect a complex interplay of area socio-economic factors, clientele influences and provider constraints, and describes three research approaches of area participation analysis, catchment analysis and provider equity analysis. Conceptual issues arising in these directions for VET participation research are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Over twenty years ago the Kangan Report (1974) and the Poverty Commission (Fitzgerald 1976) made 'disadvantage' a touchstone for the direction of vocational education and training (VET) in Australia. In the years since, the broader meanings of educational and economic inequality with which the term 'disadvantage' was invested have been steadily eroded in VET equity policy. National training reform brought an industry-driven approach that led the state technical and further education (TAFE) systems to abandon the community college model and its charter to meet local and regional needs for vocational education and training. For a decade, the industry training policy emphasis of the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) agreement with the states has relegated 'community responsiveness' to a minor place, even if it remains an important concern for VET providers committed to equity objectives.

This article argues that national equity policy is flawed by its neglect of the 'community' dimension, and that the current discourse of 'representation' of 'target equity groups' has written out the localised and compound nature of social disadvantage. This, together with ANTA's expressed mistrust of 'supply' solutions to equity issues, gives little incentive for VET providers, including community agencies who are well placed to do so, to develop locally-based equity strategies. Yet it is precisely the point that equity policy needs to address local variations in labour market and population characteristics. (Throughout the article, I will refer to VET in the broad, though much of the argument will have in mind TAFE institutes and ACE organisations).

There is a pressing need for researchers in the field of VET to debate local and regional factors affecting equity in VET participation, and to consider the social distribution of

learning opportunities. While there is current interest in equity in outcomes of VET, this presumes we already know much about equity in participation, when this is true in only the most abstract sense of 'under-representation' of particular groups. Thus the article will press the case for research on VET participation in different localities and regions using national statistics and census data, having first advanced a critique of equity policy. It will describe a model for local equity analysis which has been developed from earlier research on equity in adult community education (ACE) in NSW (McIntyre, Brown & Ferrier 1996). This model assumes that participation patterns result from a complex interplay of area socio-economic factors, participant or clientele influences and provider constraints. Three research approaches to equity analysis generated by this model will then be described in turn: area participation analysis; catchment analysis and provider equity analysis. A final section will examine some issues arising in participation research and social profiling in equity research.

VET EQUITY POLICY AND ITS SHORTCOMINGS

National equity policy (eg. ANTA 1996) is framed in terms of making the training system responsive to the needs of groups that have been disadvantaged and under-represented in VET. Current policy looks beyond the identification of barriers and seeks to develop strategies that will improve the outcomes of participation of 'target equity groups'. Equity policy is framed in terms of labour market and training participation rates and the level of participation in VET courses.

Thus 'target equity groups', which include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people of non-English speaking background, disabled, rural and certain groups of women, are more likely to be unemployed or not in the workforce, or over-represented in low skilled work and have less opportunities for training on-the-job that tend to be found at higher levels (ABS 1995, 1998a; McIntyre & Crombie 1997). They are concentrated in basic preparatory rather than vocational courses.

Equity policy as expressed by ANTA (1996, and see also ANTA 1999) emphasises the development of consultation and the setting of training priorities and long term strategies. Improvements in equity outcomes will result, it is said, by encouraging industry to link training and employment and by 'supporting individuals from under-represented groups in training and employment' within the existing framework rather than through the funding and offering specific access and equity programs. The emphasis is upon defining and assessing progress on realistic outcomes, recognising that access and equity issues have multiple components, including the design of relevant training, elements of social and cultural learning, employability and life skills, language, literacy and numeracy skills, and student support measures (ANTA 1996).

This framing of equity policy is open to critique on several fronts (Powles 1990, 1992, Powles & Anderson 1996, Golding & Volkoff 1998, Volkoff & Golding 1998, McIntyre 1998). It misrepresents the compound nature of social disadvantage in the concept of 'under-represented groups', ignoring the concentration of disadvantage in particular localities and the unequal social distribution of 'opportunities' to participate. As a result, national policy discourages the development of local equity strategies by providers best placed to address localised disadvantage. The following critique lays emphasis on this failure to understand the localised nature of disadvantage though there are doubtless other grounds for criticism of the state of both equity policy and equity research that are not canvassed here (for a recent review of research, see NCVET 1998a).

It can be said, first of all that the emphasis of national equity policy on ‘under-representation’ of ‘target equity groups’ groups is an insidious reification of socio-economic inequality and educational disadvantage. It is certainly possible to demonstrate that particular client characteristics reduce the probabilities of module success and the degree to which they do so (Ball 1998) and equity research has laboured to point out the compound nature of social and economic disadvantage (the statistical association of low educational levels, poor employment, poverty, isolation and cultural group membership), where individuals may have ‘multiple memberships’ of ‘equity groups’ (Powles 1990, 1992; Golding & Volkoff 1998; Volkoff & Golding 1998, McIntyre 1998). Butler (1997) has emphasised the need to attend to the multiple contexts of gender equity (global, national, state, local; educational, industrial and so on) and the situation of particular groups of women that make it necessary to go beyond the idea of women as a unitary target group. Butler and Lawrence (1996) have argued that rural and remote disadvantaged people are not an additional category but one which compounds the problems of some individuals and groups, especially indigenous Australians, complexities that are blandished by the ‘metrocentrism’ of national VET policy.

A second criticism is that the current equity discourse of ‘under-representation’ effectively dis-locates disadvantaged people. It is precisely the point that national equity policy gives little weight to the social and economic location of disadvantaged individuals and groups. Yet particular localities have much greater concentrations of disadvantaged people than others, just as ‘advantage’ is concentrated in particular localities. Economic and educational inequality is unevenly socially distributed, and equity policy as currently framed ignores this fact, making it difficult to raise questions about the distribution of VET resources to address disparities in localities and regions. National policy then puts little pressure on state training authorities to ensure that VET providers should have effective strategies to address local disadvantage. It is extraordinary that the concept of social and economic inequality taken for granted in social policy at least since the Poverty Commission (eg Fitzgerald 1976) should have been so effectively swept aside by the economic rationales of training reform.

The current policy context does not favour concepts such as the ‘social distribution of opportunities to participate’. Here it is necessary to recognise that a range of conceptual issues arise from the deployment of terms such as ‘access’ ‘equity’ and ‘disadvantage’. any discussion of equity policy, though it is only possible for this paper to allude to assumptions about distributional justice that underlie much of the following discussion. Greater debate about equity concepts is needed (see Powles & Anderson 1996).

Failing to understand disadvantage as unequally distributed will undermine the hopes now placed in the power of employment-based strategies, for how can such strategies be effective if they do not acknowledge the wide variations in labour markets and skill populations in different localities and regions? Labour markets are key to how ‘efficiently’ as well as how ‘equitably’ VET meets demands for skills at the local level, affecting the capacity of regions to implement industry and employment-based strategies. Again, this capacity is unequally distributed, and because disadvantage is compound and localised, the burden of achieving equity outcomes through such strategies is by no means evenly shared across labour markets, local employer networks, TAFE institutes or government agencies. A more effective national policy would make local and regional strategies a key focus of implementation.

This is to say that national equity policy is flawed because it is not grounded in a response to social and economic diversity. Policy, conceptually speaking, has gone backwards in ignoring what might be called the ‘community dimension’ of equity policy. This is now easier to argue, since the ‘neglect of community’ has found a potent expression in the reactionary

politics of the day and its threat to conservative governments. Yet the very process of training reform, in producing the national VET system under ANTA effectively buried the ethic of 'community-responsiveness' as a locally-responsive TAFE system became the first casualty of restructuring. It was only late in the day, with record unemployment, that the then Labor government rediscovered the importance of regional development and the need to make education and training respond to regional needs (Kelty 1993, NBEET 1991). Thus the argument is that the great advantage of a national policy framework is that it might constrain to state training authorities to provide incentives for VET providers to develop and resource equity strategies at the local and regional level.

A third criticism has more to do with the hopes placed in diversity of VET provision as a means of increasing equity in participation, and this touches on the role of community agencies. The threats to equity of a demand-driven, 'open training market' have been much debated and documented (Anderson 1998) and national policy so far may be accounted a failure in not addressing the conceptual difficulties of understanding equity in the context of the 'training market' and competition policy. There is at least a tacit assumption of the diversity of clienteles and their different needs – but who is to provide for these needs is little discussed.

One exception is the attention given to the community agencies, whose potential contribution to equity was one reason for their inclusion in the broad VET system. Schofield (1996a) in her review of ACE in the national VET system, pointed out that ACE organisations have numerous competitive advantages which give them an equity role (Schofield 1996a, 30ff). ACE organisations are responsive to demand in local and regional labour markets, often in localities serviced by neither public nor private providers. They contribute to community development and are able to integrate with other agencies and identify and meet the demand for relevant VET, and they have a learner-centred culture able to address the specific needs of particular 'equity groups'.

There is, however, considerable evidence now that ACE, generally speaking, does not meet the needs of disadvantaged people and has, in this respect, more of a symbolic value to national policy (McIntyre 1998). It is only in the largest states that there are independent networks of ACE organisations to speak of, and it is stretching the definition of ACE to count TAFE colleges providing short courses as 'ACE providers' when the activity of community providers is not recognised by state training authorities even though their work clearly has equity outcomes (see Ducie 1994). Moreover, the capacity of ACE to meet the needs of disadvantaged learners is limited by the constraints of cost-recovery and competition for adult learners with a capacity to pay for courses (see McIntyre, Brown & Ferrier 1996, Golding & Volkoff 1998). When ACE does play an equity role it is not through its general adult education courses but mainly as a result of its diversification into other sorts of programs and clienteles particularly accredited VET courses (see Schofield 1996a) including literacy and labour market programs. This diversification has been driven by providers searching for other funding sources, given the poor returns from 'user pays' for all but the largest inner city providers (McIntyre Brown & Ferrier 1996). Other research shows that the rhetoric about 'pathways' from ACE to VET for disadvantaged women, a goal of the national women's VET strategy is also far from being a reality. It is mainly in Victoria that this bridging role is found, among neighbourhood houses and other small providers who tend to be funded by a mixture of provider grants, special VET funding, user-pays and community services funding. Relatively few examples of pathways can be found in other states (McIntyre & Kimberley 1997; Clemans & Rushbrook 1998).

Thus, the efficacy of adult community providers to achieve equity objectives is questionable, yet possible if resources are targeted to support programs tailored to the needs of disadvantaged groups and incorporating a range of appropriate services, including employment-based components. The reality is that the community sector is otherwise far less adequately resourced than TAFE to perform an equity function - but since national policy is rejecting 'supply-side' solutions of special courses, it seems unlikely that resources will be forthcoming. A disturbing finding of the pathways research was that in most states there was little incentive for large TAFE institutes to build partnerships with small community providers even though such partnerships are demonstrably cost-effective in reaching particular equity groups (McIntyre & Kimberley 1997). This kind of failure of policy imagination was one reason for the second Senate Inquiry's scathing attack on ANTA, and its recommendation for a new funding structure (Crowley 1997).

To sum up, it is apparent that Australian equity policy gives currently little weight to the 'community dimension' of VET and, in advancing employment-based solutions is discounting the potential for community providers who are best placed to respond to localised disadvantage but who need to be resourced to do so. It is to the investigation of this dimension of inequity that the article now turns.

APPROACHES TO LOCAL EQUITY ANALYSIS

How might equity at the local level be researched? Participation has largely been studied in terms of the general characteristics of populations of participants, which include the national surveys of education and training conducted by the ABS (ABS 1995, 1998a), graduate destination surveys (eg. NCVER 1998b), national surveys of adult learning participation (Evans 1986, 1993, McIntyre & Crombie 1996) and surveys of ACE participants (ACFEB 1995, McIntyre, Foley, Morris & Tennant 1995). These surveys have generally found that adult education participation and training is dominated by educationally qualified and employed participants, with other groups under-represented.

The perspective of local equity analysis opens up questions about comparative participation rates in areas known to be disadvantaged. Working with assumptions that equity can be defined in terms of the equitable distribution of resources, research asks to what extent the VET participants from such areas represent their 'disadvantaged' populations. It would be a serious failing of equity in VET provision if the VET resources available in 'disadvantaged areas' were mainly consumed by individuals who are relatively advantaged in educational and employment terms. Thus, in areas with a large indigenous population, to what extent are TAFE courses and facilities monopolised by non-Aboriginal people living in the area? In areas of high unemployment, to what extent does TAFE enrol mostly employed people? Such questions illustrate what is meant by the distributional justice assumptions of local equity analysis.

Local analysis studies the characteristics of participants who live or work in a certain area. The characteristics of VET participants living in a postal area (postcode) can be compared with the characteristics of that locality in general and with the regional or state VET profile. Thus, in terms of the 'representation' of equity groups in VET, it is their 'representation' in those localities where they live in large numbers that matters. Using client home postcode as the key information, this may be explored using information about VET participants from national VET statistical collection and Australian Census mapping software (ABS 1998b).

To research local patterns of participation, it is necessary to have some conceptual model of factors in play. Participation can be theorised as the result of a complex of factors - the kinds

of programs offered; the decisions of management which shape the organisation and its directions including whether providers have taken steps to bring greater numbers of people in 'equity groups' into courses; the nature of the locality and the catchment of a provider, where a range of demographic, social and economic factors has an impact on what is demanded and what can be provided. This could be described as an 'an ecology of provision' model, one which acknowledges that who participates is not simply the result of funding regimes and government policies but of their interaction with social and economic factors affecting demand and supply of VET (see McIntyre Brown & Ferrier 1996).

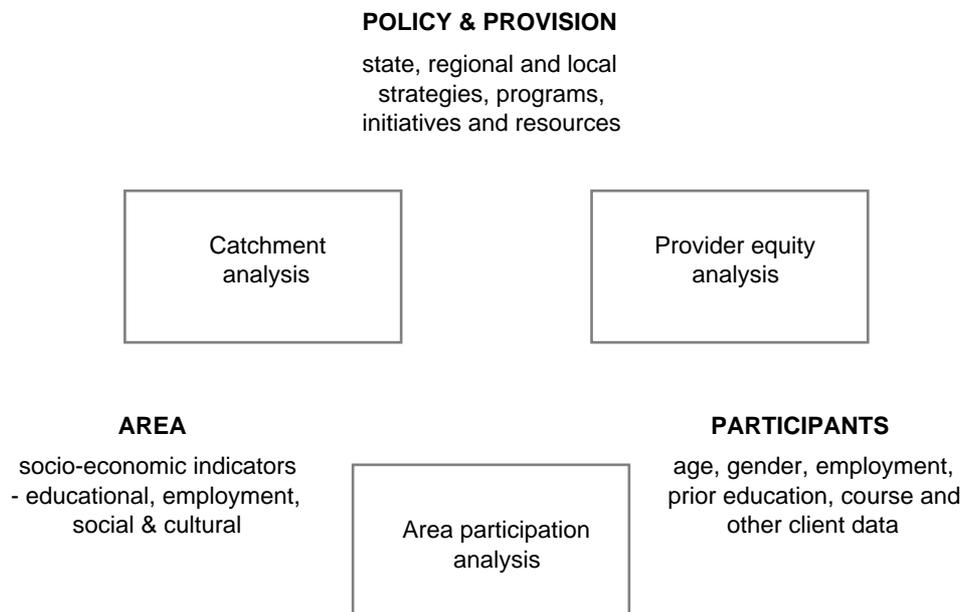
Participation is, through and through, a matter of social and cultural choices and the ability to make such choices. Participation patterns reflect the demands of clienteles for types of courses, where some clienteles make more demands than others on providers, and have greater inclination and capacity to take certain courses, in terms of the personal and financial resources required to do so. Demand is affected not only by the financial costs to participants but cultural costs - whether what is provided is culturally accessible and amenable to groups residing in an area. Demand is known to be depressed by lower levels of educational qualification, levels of employment and labour force participation and lower occupational differences. Employment itself is arguably one of the most important factors in access to adult education and training (McIntyre & Crombie 1996, ABS 1998a).

In a more open and competitive system, providers are influenced by the demands of clienteles for certain types of courses, and take resource allocation decisions in the light of policies and the social and economic character of their locality. They make assumptions about the kind of participants they want in programs, and it may be that providers avoid targeting disadvantaged clienteles who pose 'difficulties' for normal practice and require more costly program design (counselling, work placement, literacy tutoring). Equity has costs, and for this reason, targeted equity funding has usually assumed that providers need to be persuaded to develop programs for under-represented groups by directing resourcing to this end, acknowledging that both providers and would-be participants are resistant (Lundberg & Cleary 1995). As we have already noted, targeted funding has now been discounted by current policy. Therefore, it is an important objective of equity research to assess whether disadvantaged people who are concentrated in a given locality are represented in local VET participation.

A working model for analysing equity in local participation is summarised in Figure 1. This model assumes three main reference points, each of which is complex in itself - policy and provision, referring to state, regional and local equity policies affecting what strategic programs and initiatives are directed to equity objectives; the area or locality and its characteristics, including both economic and employment and socio-cultural indicators; and the nature of participants in VET, defined in terms of client data such as age, gender, course data, cultural background, employment and prior education, data available through national statistics.

The model highlights the interaction of these factors and suggests three types of analysis of equity in participation at the local level, taking two or more of these referents into account: area participation analysis; provider equity analysis and catchment analysis. In practice, each of these foregrounds one set of concerns over others, and in this sense, can contribute multiple views of equity in participation.

Figure 1. Model for local equity analysis



These approaches to local equity analysis will now be described:

1. *Area participation analysis.* This approach assesses the extent to which people living in a postcode or other locality participate in VET. It employs indicators such as participation rate (the number of students enrolled in VET in a given year expressed as a proportion of the population aged 15 years and over). Area analysis might also make sectoral comparisons and calculate, for example, participation rates in ACE, private VET and higher education. Area participation analysis is the basis for identifying whether disadvantaged areas are experiencing depressed participation. Analysis can examine differences between high and low rates and seek relationships between participation and various social and economic indicators known to be associated with adult participation, such as higher levels of education, occupation and income.

2. *Catchment analysis.* This examines participation from the standpoint of particular providers in the VET system (TAFE, ACE, private) and asks what postcodes make up their nominal catchment. This dimension of equity analysis can open up questions regarding the kinds of clienteles which providers are reaching in particular localities. From an equity perspective, the interest is whether providers in ‘disadvantaged areas’ are delivering programs in those postcodes and to what extent they are targeting more ‘advantaged’ areas. An important function of catchment analysis is establishing the extent to which participation is local rather than diffused. However, it will not discern the characteristics of the clienteles which are being served by the provider.

3. *Provider equity analysis.* A third kind of analysis builds on the results of catchment and local participation studies. It asks what kind of participants are represented in the enrolments of a provider, and particularly whether the ‘target equity groups’ are represented in proportion to their numbers in the local area and the nominal catchment, taking into account some analysis of the VET needs of the area in relation to local industry and employment. Such an analysis would take into account whether there were high

concentrations of particular equity groups and their educational and economic disadvantage. The analysis might also ask to what extent relatively advantaged clienteles are participating.

Table 1. Research questions for local equity analysis

Analysis	Equity questions	Concepts
Area participation	Do disadvantaged areas have adequate participation rates? Are disadvantaged groups represented in VET in those areas where they reside in significant numbers? In what course types? What is the profile of VET participants compared to the VET population, and to the socio-economic profile of the area?	VET participation rate, specific participation indicators, disadvantage indicators such as the socio-economic indicators for areas (SEIFA). National VET statistics on student education, employment and socio-cultural group membership.
Catchment analysis	To what extent is participation in a provider concentrated in the local area or distributed beyond it? What postcodes make up the catchment of particular types of VET providers (TAFE, ACE, private)? To what extent do catchments overlap? To what extent are disadvantaged areas not served by VET providers of any kind?	Catchment of a provider, defined in terms of main home postcodes of students. Disadvantaged areas, as defined by economic and education criteria or other indices.
Provider equity profiling	To what extent are 'target equity groups' represented in proportion to their numbers in the local area and the provider's nominal catchment? What particular equity groups are being targeted and what is the nature of their educational and economic disadvantage? To what extent are relatively advantaged clienteles participating, eg those with prior education in full-time employment?	Provider equity profile; local equity group representation in the locality and the provider profiles. Advantaged and disadvantaged clienteles.

CONCEPTUAL ISSUES IN LOCAL EQUITY ANALYSIS

Local equity analysis employs social indicators to represent the characteristics of people living in an area and the kind of factors, arising from social and economic conditions, which translate into educational needs and influence demand and participation. This methodology has a long history in social planning and community work, and in the post-Kangan era, state TAFE systems made much use of it in planning new capital works, and for at least a decade ago, the socio-economic factors in participation have been analysed (see King 1987).

The model makes numerous assumptions about equity in participation, some of which can be discussed here. First, it assumes that participation is variable by location, and that socio-economic factors act on demand (together with factors such as the availability of certain courses, labour market demand for skills and so on) to influence this rate. Second, it assumes that certain kinds of indicators are more useful for identifying educational and economic disadvantage and hence more useful for explaining why participation is high or low compared to the state. In pursuing such directions, there are issues arising from concepts such as

participation rate, social indicators, local catchments and clienteles which need some comment.

The concept of a participation rate invites questions about what high or low rates signify, and this depends in part on the values and assumptions of the analysis. Gross participation rates are particularly open to interpretation, and therefore it may be useful to develop more specific indices. Criticisms of the ‘representation’ discourse suggest a need to develop such indicators in order to better estimate disadvantaged participation, for example, the unemployed female youth participation rate (the proportion of the female population aged 15-24 participating in VET) or the proportion of women participants having schooling of Year 10 or less.

National VET statistics make it possible to generate more specific participation rates such as Stream 2 participation, initial vocational preparation, the youth male or female participation and indices for specific cultural groups, such as the indigenous participation rate. However, there are serious difficulties in taking this very far in locality analysis at, say, the level of postcode, where many areas may have few VET participants, for several reasons: the confidentiality restrictions of national VET statistics, and the problems of data incompleteness (large ‘not stated’ numbers for the categories of interest). The representation of sub-groups or type of course enrolment - for example, NESB women with low prior education enrolled in vocational courses might be more practicable at the regional or state level. This said, the principle of local analysis is to compare the various participation rates for postcodes, say in greater Sydney, with social indicators for the population living in those postcodes.

Table 2 lists a number of possible candidates for participation indices which make use of the VET client data.

Table 2. Specific participation indices

Participation index	Definition
Youth	Students aged 15-24 participating in VET as a proportion of the area population, or
Male youth	Male students aged 15-24 participating in VET as a proportion of the area population
Indigenous participation	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students participating in VET as a proportion of the area indigenous population
Women with low prior education	Women with schooling of Year 10 or less participating in VET per thousand students
Vocational participation	Proportion of VET students enrolled in Streams other than 1000 or 2000.
Employed	Proportion of VET students who are in employment full-time or part time

Obviously this thinking on participation makes assumptions about what student information is most important for equity analysis and how this can be compared to social indicators for the locality developed from census data, using for example, Cdata96 (ABS 1998b). Given the general findings of educational participation studies mentioned earlier, education level and

employment status are key factors. Such client data may be poorer for disadvantaged respondents who are less likely to state their (lack of) educational qualifications or employment

Nevertheless it is crucial that local equity analysis should focus on those areas identifiable as disadvantaged using indices such as the ABS socio-economic indicators for areas (SEIFA). A key indicator of equity is arguably the proportion of VET participants who are not-employed and have no more than Year 10 schooling (combined as it is in some areas with Aboriginality or poor English competence, disability or rural location and gender, where members of these groups have a high probability of lacking both education and employment). In practice, the data limitations mentioned above might limit postcode participation analysis to examining alone 'non-employment' or 'low prior education' alone rather than in combination. (It needs to be noted that 'VET participants' will also usually be limited to 'TAFE participants' who comprise the great majority of clients).

Home postcode is a key client characteristic, since it is the means of 'locating' the client in two ways - in terms of the socio-economic profile of the area and the pattern of VET participation in the area of residence. In urban areas, postcode is a small enough unit to capture variability in such characteristics, whereas these variations tend to be smoothed out in larger units such as local government area. (However, it is worth pointing out that fine grained mapping of neighbourhood differences, represented by census collection districts, is possible with the current Census software, and there can clearly be variability within postcodes). In one sense, postcode itself can come to stand for the locality and its characteristics, though here there is some debate about value of indices of socio-economic disadvantage developed from Census data (see ABS 1998c).

Some typical indicators useful in examining equity in VET are outlined in Table 3. These represent social and economic factors known to be variously related to lack of educational participation (lower educational levels, low levels of employment and labour force participation, and occupation and income differences), and these often are highly correlated - for example, the proportion of 'qualified' people (Table 3) in an area is associated with other indicators of educational level and with high proportions of professionals and managers living in that area. Other indicators refer to the representation of target groups in an area: language other than English spoken at home, Aboriginality and low income. In particular kinds of equity analysis, household income (or household income taken together with amount of mortgage payment) may be a useful measure for estimating 'capacity to pay' for educational services in a user-pays system. In making rural-urban comparisons, population density has to be taken into account as a baseline factor in demand and cost of delivery of 'opportunities to participate' (see McIntyre, Foley, Morris & Tennant 1995, pp.107-149; McIntyre, Brown & Ferrier 1996).

Table 3. Examples of area socio-economic indicators for equity analysis

Population density	Persons per square kilometre
Labour force participation	Proportion of the workforce aged over 15 in the workforce (includes those unemployed looking for work)
Unemployment rate	Proportion of those in the labour force unemployed looking for work (ABS defined)
Unqualified	Proportion of the population aged over 15 who do not hold a post-school qualification
Early school leaving	Proportion of the population who left school at 16 years of age or younger
Language other than English spoken at home (LOTE)	Proportion of the population aged over 5 speaking a language other than English at home
Indigenous population	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as proportion of the population.
Occupation groups 123	Proportion of those in the workforce who are managers, professionals or para professionals
Household income	Proportion of households having a weekly household income of over \$1000 in 1996

Clearly, what indicators ‘indicate’ is open to interpretation and there are dangers in making generalisations about populations of people using limited data. Local equity analysis nevertheless makes working assumptions for testing equity in VET on this basis. If a given postcode has large proportions of people with low educational levels, no qualifications, low labour force participation, high unemployment or low incomes, then it is reasonable to expect that the profile of VET participants from these areas ought to ‘represent’ such populations if VET providers are responding to disadvantage of this kind. Similarly, if a postcode has large numbers of indigenous people or another cultural group known to have low education and employment levels, it is a reasonable to expect that local VET providers ‘represent’ these populations in their programs and profiles, if they are to claim that there is an equitable distribution of opportunities to participate. Such expectations are reasonable, not withstanding the exclusionary effects of some course selection criteria such as employment status.

A final comment is needed on the notion of a ‘catchment’ served by a provider and defined in group of adjacent postcodes. Local providers may enrol students who live beyond their nominal (local) catchment and residents may participate in courses nearer their workplace or wherever a course is available. This is more a source of distortion for ‘provider equity analysis’ described in Table 1, than for area participation analysis emphasised in this article.

Another question is the extent to which catchments are distinguishable. Historically, TAFE campus catchments have been markedly local, while overlapping catchments appear to be a phenomenon of a competitive cost-recovery funding regime. Research on the economics of ACE in NSW (McIntyre Brown & Ferrier 1996) shows that inner-city and northern Sydney ACE providers have prospered by targeting clienteles in relatively affluent postcodes with high population densities, ensuring high fee incomes and reducing unit costs, and tending to ignore those postcodes which yield fewer fee paying students and have more disadvantaged

clienteles. High ACE participation postcodes in 1995 compared to NSW as a whole had higher proportions of post-school qualified residents, considerably more households with 1991 household income over \$50,000. Providers in outer urban and rural postcodes have poorer, more scattered or less educated populations less likely to demand ACE and less able to pay for it, resulting in higher delivery costs and lower fee incomes (McIntyre, Brown & Ferrier 1996, pp.107ff). Nevertheless, ACE participation is still markedly local.

There are interesting questions surrounding the extent to which TAFE can continue to claim to be a significant force in equity in VET, when it has lost some of its capacity to address local disadvantage, and not only because local responsiveness is not a policy priority. Various forces might have undermined TAFE's local equity role - the rationalisation of publicly-funded provision and the limitation of locally-available courses, pressures for cost-reduction, increased competitiveness in delivery and competition for industry clients, increased market segmentation, the focus on employment based programs and workplace learning. To the extent that TAFE providers are targeting more advantaged clienteles, this is a flow of resources away from less advantaged clients. To what extent this has occurred is a matter for empirical investigation.

Work is in progress using 1996 VET statistics and 1996 Cdata 96 census mapping software (ABS 1998b) to analyse equity in VET participation in some 230 greater Sydney postcodes. The first stage of this research identifies crude participation rate and identifies high and low participation postcodes and examines the socio-economic profile of selected areas. (Early analysis suggests that the highest TAFE participation postcodes are those in areas of relatively low socio-economic status). The study profiles VET participants in selected high and low participation postcodes, in terms of their education, employment and socio-cultural characteristics, comparing them to the national and state profiles of VET participants and to the population of the postcode. Key questions for analysis include: in postcodes identified as disadvantaged in various ways (such as high unemployment or low income or qualification levels) how far are VET participants representative of these groups?

A second stage examines the VET participation of some 'target equity groups' in postcodes selected as having high concentrations of these groups in 1996. Further analysis can assess the VET participation (representation) of selected 'target equity groups' in postcodes selected for their high representation of these groups. A third stage envisages a study of the nominal catchment of a western Sydney TAFE institute (to be negotiated) and an assessment of equity issues in the profile data. An extension of the project will then examine other urban areas (eg Melbourne) and selected non-metropolitan regions.

CONCLUSION

The theme of this article has been the need for national policy to recognise the community dimension of equity policy and to this end it has advanced a developing approach to researching equity in local participation.

The article has broached questions about the conceptual basis for equity policy that are not dependent on findings that will no doubt show the widening gaps between the educationally advantaged and disadvantaged. Debate needs to go beyond the assertion of the compound nature of disadvantage to discover empirically whether local populations of disadvantaged people are 'represented' in the clienteles of local VET providers. If equity is a serious priority in state TAFE systems, such providers might be expected to have knowledge of these groups and their needs and to have developed strategies to ensure the increased 'representation' of disadvantaged people in courses and modules. If national policy is not

encouraging such measures at the local level, then what precisely is the role of providers in achieving equity in participation?

TAFE has long claimed that it provides for equity 'naturally' - by virtue of its historical service to the skilled working class, and more recently, and more inclusively, through ethic of locally responsive programs for a broad range of clienteles including 'target equity groups'. Such claims now have to be assessed in view of the disincentive effects of an open training market on VET providers, who may relegate equity as a priority, especially given the 'employment-based' emphasis of national policy. In this case, the 'natural' equity role of TAFE assumes the proportions of a dangerous myth. Hence, there is a need to monitor equity in participation and subject to test the equity claims of providers and systems. With the benefit of such knowledge, policy might begin to conceptualise equity in terms of a demand driven system, and consider how the open training market can be managed to achieve equity objectives.

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