which the teaching and learning occurs. Such a restructuring, albeit in a modest way, is a function of the academic study skills unit at FIT.

Comments and observations

The case study of the access and equity initiatives at FIT suggests that "student potential" is a more than useful concept for selection officers to develop, and that educational engagement during tertiary education must be a more flexible process, involving the remaining three commonplaces of education which must contribute to the total educational experience of the student. Clearly, equally important to the overall educational process are the teacher, the curriculum, and finally the milieu in which the learning is to occur. Given that these three irreducible factors share central importance with the learner in the educational process, we believe that it is imperative that we consider initiatives which will contribute to a balanced educational experience for the student. We are being encouraged by the Federal Government to alter the socio-economic profile of the student population in tertiary education in order that participation by hitherto underrepresented groups is increased. What we are asserting is that for us to meet this goal in a socially desirable way, there must be four integrated types of initiative mounted. Unless each of the commonplaces are significantly affected by the Participation and Equity ideals, there will be a continual mismatch between the learner and the process, with the inevitable result of an unsatisfactory "participation profile".

In our view, one of the critical steps which must be taken to balance such initiatives is the production of at least a modest re-education program for the lecturing staff at our institutions, in order that the style and presentation of their teaching be modified to enable "disadvantaged" students more personal access to their skills, ideas and aptitudes which comprise the fundamentals of higher education. If we reflect on the significant change in our policies regarding the admission of students in the light of equity pressures during the last few years, it is somewhat unfair, perhaps, that we are now requiring of lecturers, who were initially employed to lecture to a certain (assumed) audience, to now involve themselves with students with whom they have little in common. For example, we believe that the admission of students who have significantly different styles of learning and a different conceptual apparatus to mainstream students, contributes to the attitudinal mismatch which is currently observed between lecturers and students. We might suggest that the advent of these problems was not only due to the pressure from equity programs, but arises also from a more fundamental change in the nature of our student popula-

. . . it might be suggested that the role of Participation and Equity initiatives is to turn our "disadvantaged geese" into "middle class swans . . .".

tions. Nevertheless, it is plain that we need to grapple with these problems in a concerted and forthright fashion.

Accepting that we need to balance the four commonplaces in an ideal equity scheme, we must also admit that in many courses we are continuing to offer unchanged curriculum, in a traditional milieu, to a vastly changed student profile. Without wishing to draw too many (male-centred) parallels, VFL football is currently undergoing a fairly traumatic navel gazing exercise in the face of falling participation by paying fans, and even the most culturally pure tradition, test cricket, has dressed its heroes in coloured pyjamas in response to a new population. No one, however, would claim that the Sydney Swans and West Coast Eagles are not a major force in the VFL, nor that the test teams of today have not been imbued with increased impetus from one-day matches. Therefore, we believe that those who are committed to Participation and Equity principles might take heart at these examples of successful outcomes in traditional areas which have been achieved by radical solutions.

Our problem, simply stated, has been how to admit a significant number of non-traditional students into our tertiary education institutions, assure them of a meaningful education, and give them the possibility of a successful professional career. After only a few years experience with accelerated Participation and Equity initiatives, it is clear that the answer is not to put them into a traditional syllabus, with its concomitant traditional lecturing methods, carried out in an environment which assumes certain (non-specified) learning behaviours, then live in the earnest hope that they are resilient enough to succeed against all odds.

In an ideal situation, what would be needed is a reworking of the entire educational process, producing a program which:

- meets community and market place expectations for graduates;
- is capable of accepting students from non-traditional backgrounds in accordance with Government policies;
- does not disadvantage the traditional population of tertiary students; and
- integrates the teaching staff with the new educational process.

Clearly, this ideal option will not be open to us, so we are forced to look at a gradual interpolation of these ideals into the existing system. We require a careful orchestration and sensitive overview of the development of changes to the four commonplaces on our tertiary campuses, providing balance to the programs and assuring that as relatively few as possible disjunctions occur in the experiences of the students.

The above case study illustrates, in our view, some encouraging steps taken in this process and gives us cause for optimism regarding the implementation possibilities of the Government's policy on access and equity in higher education. However, it also signals some warnings about how the policy could inadvertently marginalise "disadvantaged" groups admitted to higher education. In the case study on innovative recruitment and selection processes discussed here, we have worked with the student in the area of career guidance in both the school context and at the Institute during the "spring schools". We have attempted to raise the sensitivity of the Institute teaching staff to the special needs of these students at the departmental selection officer level and also during the "spring school" sessions, and we have facilitated discussion regarding the flexibility and possible innovations to curricula at both the secondary and tertiary level by arranging discussion between staff of schools and of departments of the Institute. Finally, we have attempted to modify the milieu in which the students begin their tertiary education by developing suitable induction devices and providing special support programs in the academic skills area.

On the positive side, the case study has illustrated for us the type of recruitment and selection processes which have new potential. We believe that if higher education institutions work closely with their local schools, more personalised and protracted procedures which will facilitate students entry into tertiary education can be devised. Whilst it can be argued that such an undertaking could be uneconomic and inordinately labour intensive when adopted on a large scale, we suggest that such arguments are not appropriate in a context where relatively few access students are the subject of recruitment exercises. Also, the introduction of such approaches has significant spin-off. The process of linking higher education institutions with the local schools, particularly with recruitment in mind, produces an environment in which teachers, parents and the wider community become better informed about, and become more interested in, the area of higher education generally. Clearly, the whole level of debate about selection processes is raised considerahly by this approach both in the school setting and in the Institute providing higher education.

It should be noted, however, that in this case study, we found that support for innovative selection procedures is not uniform across our institute. Those responsible for implementing access and equity policy

should guard against situations in which "equity" students find it difficult to gain access to high-demand courses, since if the composition of the higher education system is to reflect the population as a whole, balanced admission to the total range of courses for "equity" students is implied.

Notes

1. STC stands for Schools Year 12 and Tertiary Entrance Certificate, an acronym referring to a group of schools in Victoria who, at the Year 12 level, offer a non-competitively assessed curriculum, the assessments for which are presented in literal form.
2. Many examples of initiatives which focus upon the learner are reported in the CTEC discussion paper "Initiatives in Advanced Education to Increase Participation and Equity", prepared by the Advanced Education Council Working Party on Course Related Matters, February 1986.

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Tertiary Selection – access or process?

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The members of any society who dominate successfully its culture, technology and mores have the power to alter, or maintain, that society through its educational system. This system begins at birth with the informal family (or parental) education and continues into the formal systematic years of schooling. By manipulating those who enter and succeed during these formal years, those who seek to dominate do so. Free, secular and compulsory schooling, as we have it in Victoria, would appear to negate such efforts, but when we come to the vital tertiary entrance phase, it becomes quite apparent that selection has already begun – albeit without the knowledge of those heing selected (perhaps culled would be a better term?). For example, Government school students are doing less well in getting into tertiary institutions in Victoria[1]. Obviously one's selection of school at the secondary level is part of the 'control' exercised by those who are dominant.

However the more vital issue is the tertiary entrance selection process. For years some form of public examination has been regarded as the test of the 'good' school or student[2]. As a direct consequence of this, the examination exerts an influence upon the curriculum which makes reform, to either large or small degrees, difficult indeed. In *Victoria, Ministerial Paper Number 6* (Supporting Document Number 6, Assessment and Reporting)[3] argues for descriptive assessments, tailored through teacher-student negotiation to suit the needs of the student. Similarly in Queensland, the Board of Teacher Education in its report on the "Secondary Schooling and the World of Work" conference, proposed that 'schools should not teach for specific job skills but should look to developing . . . the complete person'[4]. How does this square with tertiary selection?

Another pressure upon current selection schemes is the Government insistence upon increased student retention rates at the Year Twelve level. These rates have come from approximately thirty per cent in 1971, to nearly fifty-five per cent in 1987. It would be quite unreasonable to expect these extra Year Twelve students not to opt for tertiary entry. As this group grows, can we select on the same basis as in previous years? Will the student population allow it?

Turning the problem around, what effects does the style of tertiary entrance mechanism have on the institutions for whom it has been ostensibly designed to serve? Apparently the effects of tertiary selection are promising to he quite threatening. Let me explain. In the past, students have been selected and passed through the tertiary system largely unaffected by Government decisions (with the exception of matters dealing with fees of course!). However a new mood of government intervention is with us. The 'White paper' leaves us with no doubt about that:

> *"Institutions will be asked to specify . . . measures of performance . . . future general funding allocation will have a direct regard to . . . achieving agreed equity goals".*

or published (newspaper) supporting statements[5] regarding "completion rates" as "indicators of institutional performance"

If your funding is dependent upon student completions[6], what effect does this have upon selection procedures? Or does the institution make such changes within its courses to ensure "good" (in Ministerial terms) completion rates, and thereby funding? If one assumes that academics can resist such pressures, then the bureaucratic arm (i.e. registrars and their colleagues) of the tertiary institutions must be the ones to take the brunt of all such pressures. A further pressure upon selecting authorities, in Victoria at least, is the introduction of the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) wherein the notorious TE, or Anderson, score will have little place.

Those who are in opposition to the VCE-type proposals usually cite the (mythical) validity of external examinations. (Correlations between HSC score and first year university success is not good.[1] This, then, is the situation facing us in Victoria as we enter the 1990s. How do we select? Do we select? Can we satisfy all our masters, social and political? To answer these questions, I should like to look at the situation in one Victorian institution (where, after talking to the registrar, one senses near-panic as time is running out). The registrar for this particular school currently oversees a fairly typical situation, where a mixture of N-type (Normal-type entry through HSC scores and the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Committee (VTAC)) and E-type (Exceptional entry through VTAC and individual offers to STC, TOP, and Mature-age etc applicants). In this current year, about half the entry cohort will be of each type. Thus, about a hundred and twenty entrants will have been selected hy their academic score (Anderson score) and the same number via other processes.

The N-type entry we shall ignore, since it is assumed that under the VCE, no standardized, externally validated examination

Obviously one's selection of school at secondary level is part of the 'control' exercised by those who are dominant.

system will exist. Thus, this category of entrant will cease to exist as a separate category, since everyone will, in effect, be an E-type! However, the procedures used to select the non-HSC students are illuminating. At present only six hundred applicants are vetted and about half (three hundred) are required to sit for an essay-test and a basic mathematics test. Although scoring of mathematics tests is quite straight forward (using machine marking) the essay-test is quite a deal more complex. The task is to assess some three hundred handwritten scripts, in a short time. Subject co-ordinators are used to read these scripts, and the Course Director acts as a second-reader to ensure some validity and reliability across markers. As can be imagined, since these essays are to be in English, those whose first language is not English suffer undeniable bias. After this first hurdle, those remaining in the selection pool are then required to present for an interview. All the academic staff are required to assist in conducting such interviews. It takes some ten days to interview all applicants, and as can be imagined, as time passes interviewers become more weary, and as staff are untrained (as interviewers) there is a great deal of good (or ill) fortune depending when and by whom, one is interviewed. To further complicate matters, the Freedom of Information Act means that written comments for the guidance of selectors, are most circumspect, and it's with great difficulty that staff rate interviewees from 'Very Good Prospect' through to 'Poor Prospect', where the phrasing (using prospect) is meant to indicate the applicant's probability of success both academically and practically throughout their course. The last phase of this E-type processing is a consideration of the academic results for those who have just completed TOP, STC or other non-HSC year twelve courses. The result of all this is that offers are sent to some one hundred and fifty hopefuls.

Now this somewhat tortuous process involves nearly a hundred staff and some three weeks of time. The registrar is not keen, needless to say, to have to extend this process to all VCE applicants. This would mean that instead of three hundred essays, there would be nearer one thousand! (On this year's figures, the number would be nearer fifteen hundred!) Then would follow the interviews. Not all the staff are interested in conducting a thousand interviews. Clearly, some other course of action is required.

What are the other possibilities? Two spring to mind immediately. The first is to adopt an 'open-access' approach. This means that anyone who has completed year twelve, and asks for admission, be admitted. The first reaction to this suggestion is 'what nonsense!' but this idea has indeed been tried.

To see this process in action, detailed below is an American case-study. The University of the District of Columbia has an open admissions policy. This has the predictable outcome of a high student attrition rate. Thus the choice is open admissions and high attrition or, do something about the attrition rate (the Victorian institution mentioned above has an attrition rate of less than five per cent in its school of education). At UDC a comprehensive testing programme exists; it considers student achievement levels and other relevant factors. Students being assessed under this scheme lack, in general, necessary skills to be successful in UDC courses. (Many of these are heads of households who hold jobs as well as try to study).[7]. To offset high attrition rates the University College of the UDC was formed to be the entry point for all new students. (As Fields points out, UDC is the last point of call for intending tertiary students – if you can't get into anywhere else, UDC must take you[8]). The open admission policy then, has led to the following placement testing and counselling plan:–

- diagnosis of academic weaknesses
- identification of instructional needs
- prescription of appropriate developmental courses
- student placement in these courses
- identification in these courses
- identification of personal and, or, academic counselling
- evaluation and recycling

Obviously a well-thought out — and thorough programme. Could such a scheme work here in Australia? The answer is logically 'yes' – but at what cost? In my experience, counselling in Australian tertiary institutions is not as detailed nor as vocationally oriented as that described by Fields. So an initial cost would be the upgrading of counselling services. What about the extra tertiary places required? There certainly would be an increase in the number of places required, but how many seems to be either unknown or unavailable. According to the Federal Opposition education spokesman, Mr. Beale, 80,000 student places would be needed (for 1989) to place all applicants. Mr. Dawkins (the Minister) maintains that a mere 20,000 places would be needed. (The difference is rather substantial; presumably the true figure lies somewhere in between!)[9].

The open admissions solution is not educationally unsound, but in Australia's current economic plight, an improbable solution! The registrar referred to above, indicated that "if they (the Government) would fund it (more places for open admissions) then why not?" Given that extra funds are not likely to be forthcoming, what then is the other option? Some form of selection, that can handle large numbers of applicants easily, and in the light of FOI legislation, in a defensible, objective manner. On past performances (by employers and academic institutions) Mathematics tends to be the favourite screening subject. No matter whether Mathematics is required within the course or not, it is easy to administer a Mathematics test, it can be corrected via machine, and most importantly, is believed by all to be objective and impartial. Perhaps one could argue, that this sort of screening-selection is fair. The tests may well be equitable and reliable etc. But consider the fate of an applicant for, say, an engineering course. He/she has applied for a place at RMIT, Melbourne University, Monash and Swinburne (not necessarily in that order or preference). Does he/she sit four entry tests? To do so would be absurd. Quite sensibly all these institutions have consulted one another and agreed upon a test and the applicant sits but once. So there we have it. Just like the secondary scholarship examinations! Sit once for all schools (faculties). How sensible!

But wait, to increase our applicant's chances of success, his/her (private?) school is teaching him/her a course designed to ensure selection success. Teaching to the test!

Soon everyone is doing it. The VCE has been bypassed because all schools teach the entry test. Shades of last century – the Matriculation examination has returned. This scenario is not as farfetched as one might think. The aforementioned registrar, although horrified at the suggestion, did agree that there would be no way of stopping such an occurrence once it had started. In fact he argued that with the Government's 'push' to reduce the number of tertiary institutions, it would be easier for the 'few' remaining to get together and bring the Matriculation back into existence.

Would the Government allow this second possibility? In my opinion yes. An open admissions policy would cost millions and traditionally Governments hate spending money, even in good times, so what chance now? It may be that there is an increase in the number of places in business or 'high-tech' courses, but this is useless to those hundreds of applicants who are interested in zoology or Biblical archaeology! On the other hand, an objective, fair, etc. etc. etc. test, sat for just once, has great appeal. Special provisions can be made for 'needy' cases (single mothers, Aborigines, Western suburbs and so on) to ensure that electorates are not too disaffected.

Or is this too cynical? Perhaps, but history does have a way of vindicating cynics more than romantics. Are there any other futures? Yes of course there must be. An expansion of the TAFE area, where certification can occur. If the pundits are correct and service industries are to employ half the population (serving the American and Japanese tourists) then the need for tertiary training will lessen. No-one needs an MA to wait on table or make motel beds. Certainly our service personnel will need to be educated – but the type of education could be totally different to our present notions. For example, languages may be of fundamental importance and these may well be learnt in primary and secondary school, not at a tertiary level at all. On the job training may cater for specific needs of particular service areas (the history of an area for a tour guide for example). It would be possible then, to defensibly forecast an Australia where tertiary selection was not required, because applicants were fewer than available places.

Perhaps the long term key to tertiary selection is, in a sense, like the UDC open admissions policy, where there are sufficient, well-qualified counsellors in the schools, who are provided with up-to-date information, who can advise students about possible career choices and paths and who can assist the public in general to come to understand that a tertiary course is not necessarily the best, or only, way to success. Status must be given to a broader range of occupations than it now is. Parents and their children need to come to grips with ideas of quality of life and not just the 'good job' syndrome.

This is a long-term view; immediate concerns for 1990 and beyond are more pressing, but if we don't think in such a longer term, then we will always be reacting to the 'market', whereas it would be far better for us in the tertiary sector to be pro-active and 'setting the pace'. The problem won't go away; something must be done, but which alternative will it be? Free, open access? Fees which limit the number of applicants? An entry exam? A change in the notion of what is a 'good job'? Or . . .?

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The importance of a comprehensive advising system in improving student retention and graduation rates

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Introduction

Recent studies in South Australia[1] and Western Australia[2] have shown that approximately one third of all students fail to graduate, with the largest drop-out occurring by the end of the first year of higher education. In the same studies a majority of students indicated that they did not know much about their university and college courses, while a significant number of students stated that their university course was not what they had expected. This paper discusses recent research on student retention and suggests a number of steps which might be taken by tertiary institutions to help alleviate the tragic loss of so many candidates.

The gap between secondary student expectations and higher education reality: lessons from South Australia and Western Australia

Recently, Power, Robertson and Baker of the National Institute of Labour Studies Inc, Flinders University conducted a (CTEC sponsored) survey of first year students in several tertiary education institutions. The results are reported in the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission publication *Success in Higher Education*. The study examines the adequacy of student preparation for tertiary study, problems of access and selection, and factors influencing the success of students during their first year of higher education. The survey of 7281 students from five SA educational institutions entering higher education in South Australia in 1985 found that over 60% of students stated they did not know much about their university and college courses with a significant number stating that the course was not what they expected.[3] This lack of counselling often resulted in low commitment and eventual withdrawal from the course. Also a lack of assumed background knowledge was reported as a major problem for up to half of the students. Finally, the added maturity and cultural capital of older students provided by work and life experiences provided older matriculants with an advantage which was reflected in higher performance by these students.[4] This suggests that the greatest advising problem lies with the younger students just out of secondary school.

As to student selection, the SA study reported that school performance was a reliable predictor of success for science-based courses, and to a lesser degree in others.[5] School performance, however, became less valid as a predictor as years went by.[6] Overall females and older students performed better than males and school leavers in most courses and institutions. While current assessment and selection schemes were found to be generally effective for screening out most students who could not cope with higher education, their value in selecting among qualified applicants, where there are quotas, was found to be exaggerated.[7]

One of the most disturbing findings of the study was that approximately one in three students entering first year in a higher education institution either withdraws or fails.[8] Moreover the failure and withdrawal