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School type points to uni performance

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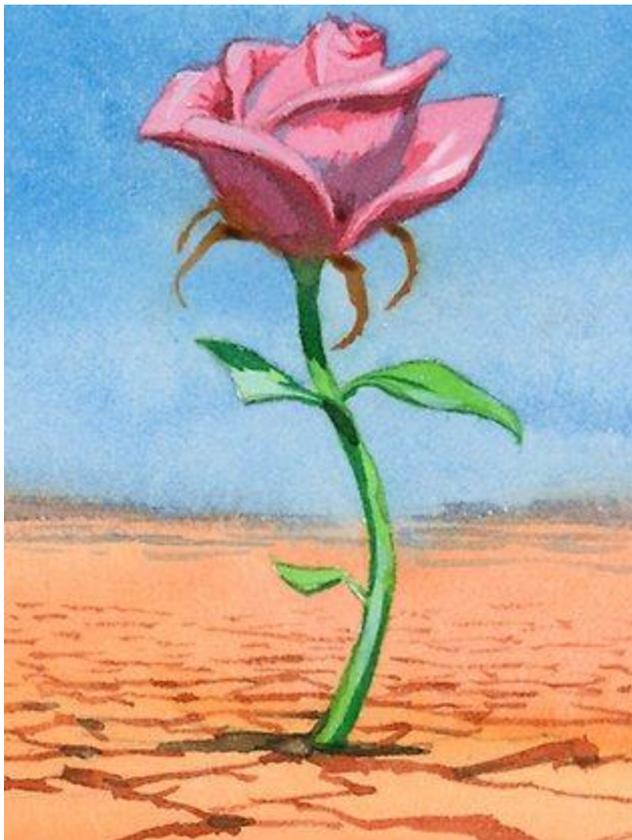


Illustration: Sturt Krygsman *Source: The Australian*

WHETHER students attend a government, Catholic or independent school is a stronger predictor of university aspiration and achievement than their individual backgrounds or parental wealth.

School type influences whether students aspire to university, where they aspire to study and to what extent they will succeed.

School type appears to be a better indicator of university achievement than socioeconomic status. Studies confirm that low socioeconomic students perform at roughly equivalent levels to the overall university cohort, if not slightly higher.

Research jointly conducted by Monash and La Trobe universities reveals little difference in achievement when the socioeconomic status of individual students is examined. There are substantial differences, however, when we examine achievement by the type of school previously attended by students. In both institutions, a typical government school student will

out-perform a private school student with the same ATAR once they are enrolled at the university.

The difference in achievement roughly equates to five ranking points, meaning that a government school student with an ATAR of 70 will perform as well as an independent school student with an ATAR of 75. At the lower end of tertiary rankings, achievement differences are even more pronounced.

The researchers investigated the aspirations of nearly 10,000 prospective students across their regional catchments between 2009 and last year. Analysts Lucie Joschko and Michael Luckman found that socioeconomic status had little relation to the desire to relocate to Melbourne to study. In Bendigo, 52 per cent of low SES students selected a local course option as their first preference, compared with 46 per cent of other students. In Mildura, all socioeconomic categories preferred a non-local course option. There was a slightly greater gap in Gippsland, where there was 12 percentage points difference between low SES and other students.

By contrast, school type revealed significant disparities: more than 90 per cent of students from many independent schools sought to relocate to study. In Bendigo, more than 80 per cent of Year 12 applicants from independent schools selected a first-preference course at a non-local campus, compared with just 55 per cent of applicants from government schools.

Interestingly, the influence of school sector appears to persist. Non-school leaver applicants who attended an independent school were also more likely to choose relocation than their peers who attended government schools. Many of these students aspired to the most prestigious universities and that is where they enrolled. Within La Trobe's regional catchments, nearly half the Year 12 students from some independent schools began study at University of Melbourne or Monash.

These findings have implications for approaches to social inclusion. Most targets and funding consider socioeconomic status by postcode, but universities need to address the stratification of the schools sector.

Uni access schemes targeting under-represented schools have been criticised for providing advantages to some privileged students who happen to be enrolled at identified schools. But targeting schools rather than individuals is not only a question of administrative ease.

The socioeconomic profile of schools bears a significant relationship to individual student performance. Moreover, our findings suggest that school type is a strong additional indicator of achievement.

More students from in-need government schools could achieve well at university if they were provided preferential access to compensate for educational disadvantage.

Other research findings underline the importance of school-university partnerships. A recent study by Jacqueline Homel and colleagues found that cultural factors were more significant than material resources in explaining school completion rates. A poor experience of school is the biggest risk factor for non-completion of Year 12. Working with disadvantaged schools, universities can engage students with the possibilities of higher education.

Examining student perceptions within regional independent schools would be another fruitful area of analysis. The equity agenda has naturally focused on the schools and students deemed most in need, but the aspirations of independent school students have received less attention.

What drives these regional students to prefer prestigious metropolitan universities so overwhelmingly? The schools sector does not merely reflect the socioeconomic status of its students. Expectations of parents and other forces of acculturation influence student behaviour and aspirations.

Finally, meeting the higher education equity targets may depend upon the effectiveness of Julia Gillard's plans to lift Australian education into one of the world's top five school systems. The Australian schools sector has been defined as one of high quality but low equity within the OECD.

Given the influence of school type on university aspiration and achievement, more resources may be required to improve transition rates from in-need and predominantly government schools.

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