

**The post-school destinations of young low socio-economic status adults:
The place of Vocational Education and Training in the lives of
Queensland's Year 12 completers**

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1. Abstract

This paper provides a comparison of the destination of young adults who complete Year 12 in Queensland by differences in their socioeconomic status. The literature indicates that students' educational outcomes are related to their socioeconomic status, an issue of immediate relevance to Vocational Education and Training in Schools (VETiS). Methodologically, this study is situated in relation to the Australian Governments' *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (MCEETYA, 2008) and the Queensland Government's (2008) *Towards Q2* policy, both of which seek to redress socioeconomic disadvantage in and through education and training. This is followed by the presentation of an analysis of data currently available from Queensland's *Next Steps* reports regarding the destinations of Year 12 completers for the years 2005-2008. It should be noted that the *Next Steps* reports themselves present a year by year account; this paper provides a cumulative data analysis. The analysis of the statistics indicates the differing participation rates for young adults from the lowest and highest SES groupings in VET, university, full-time work and other activities.

2. Introduction

Education and training are important drivers of economic and social success for individuals, employers and nations. Vocational education and training in schools (VETiS) may offer a route whereby young adults might escape from their

disadvantaged backgrounds and climb the socio-economic ladder. This paper adds to the conceptual exploration of inequality and achievement through an examination of data regarding the post-school destinations Year 12 completers. Focusing their socio-economic status, it seeks to extend current policy considerations in terms of their freedom to achieve valued goals, including the place of Vocational Education and Training in their work/life trajectory.

This paper provides an analysis of Queensland Government's (2005; 2006; 2007; 2008) *Next Step* reports which present the results of annual State-wide surveys of the destinations of students who completed Year 12 at the end of previous year. In doing so, this paper contributes three important features that are not currently available in the research literature on the outcomes of Vocational Education and Training in (Queensland) Schools (VETiS). First, it gives a picture of the post-school destinations of Year 12 across four years; whereas the Queensland *Next Step* survey concentrates on a year by year analysis. Second, the study reported here, which contributes to a longitudinal analysis of the Queensland Government's *Next Step* surveys enable comparisons to be made of Year 12 completers' destination by socio-economic status (SES) and VET, higher education, work or other activities. Third, this paper represents but a preliminary attempt at ascertain the potential of Sen's (1992, 1999) conceptualisation of inequality, achievement, freedom and their interrelationship to studying the post-school destinations of young adults according to their socio-economic status.

3. Literature review: Socio-economic status and students' educational achievement

Socio-economic status (SES) is one of the key factors shaping, if not determining students' educational achievement. Individual teachers, schools and education systems have a responsibility for ameliorating the disadvantage which may arise from low socioeconomic status. This has been an important aspect of educational policy making in Australia for more than 30 years.

NSW DET reviewed research on socio-economic disadvantage in the Australian and international contexts. It conducted a meta-review of research on the question of whether socio-economic disadvantage is an educational problem. The review focused on studies exploring student achievement scores on tests of reading comprehension

and mathematics of 14 years old between 1975 and 1998 (NSW DET: 2005: 1). The results were reported by SES, language background, gender and location. Notable differences were found between students by SES, both at an individual level and between schools. The results showed that throughout the 1975-1998 period, “students whose parents in professional and managerial occupations had the highest average scores and students whose parents were production worker or labourers had the lowest” (NSW DET: 2005: 2). It was also found that “the gap in scores widened between schools with higher concentrations of professional parents and all other schools” (NSW DET: 2005: 2).

Further analyses of the research explored the factors that impact on Equivalent Tertiary Entrance Ranks (a means of generating equivalent Year 12 results between Australian states). Socio-economic background, as measured by parental education, wealth and occupational status was an important influence on tertiary entrance performance (NSW DET: 2005: 2). In Victoria, research found clear and consistent trends for students from lower socio-economic status families have low VCE scores (Year 12 results) (NSW DET: 2005: 3).

The international assessment programs conducted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) both provide insights into the relationship between SES and educational outcomes in Australia and overseas. International studies of SES and achievement have been used in the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) which was first conducted in 1995 in over 40 countries. TIMSS measures SES in two ways: parents’ education level and family wealth. The TIMSS program demonstrates a significant positive relationship between learning mathematics, science and socio-economic factors. It also provides insights into “relatively simple and unobtrusive measures of socio-economic status by defining a scale from survey questions about possession in the home (e.g. number of books, computer, video camera, etc)” (NSW DET: 2005: 4). Students from wealthier families had more of these items in their home. The TIMSS study (2002-2003) confirmed that students who used a computer at home and school achieved a significantly higher science score than those who only used a computer at school. The data about family possessions provide a reliable way to indicate those students who may not know about their parents’ income and to measure direct family financial support for learning (NSW DET: 2005: 5).

Research has confirmed that “too often the education system reproduces socio-economic inequality, rather than challenging it, [and that] socio-economic inequality makes learning difficult; but it requires school to help children climb up the down escalator” (NSW DET: 2005: 8, 9). In Britain, the concept of social exclusion is being used to examine the factors which transmit poverty and disadvantage from one generation to the next (NSW DET: 2005: 9). The concept of social exclusion is defined as more than income poverty. It is linked with problems such as “unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown” (NSW DET: 2005: 9). Social exclusion is thus a broader notion of disadvantage than simply low income levels.

The review of NSW DET (2005: 8) studies from the USA found that the most important factors associated with educational achievement are “not race, ethnicity, or immigrant status. Instead, the most critical factors appear to be socio-economic ones” (NSW DET: 2005: 9). These factors include “parental education levels, neighbourhood poverty, parental occupational status, and family income” (NSW DET: 2005: 9). Of course, claiming one factor as the most important does not override the significance of others.

The research points to a strong relationship between SES and a range of schooling outcomes at the individual student level. Researchers have also posited several explanations for the effects of concentrations of disadvantage on individual’s life chances (NSW DET: 2005:2). The effects of concentrated disadvantage are a consequence of one or more of the following (NSW DET: 2005: 14):

1. Lack of positive role models — with respect of education outcomes, the absence of role models may lower attendance rates, increase dropout rates and decrease student achievement.
2. High concentration of non-traditional families — single-parent households may have less school involvement and parental supervision.
3. Lack of economic opportunities — the need to travel far from one’s community for employment results in increased commuting time and hence less school involvement and parental supervision.
4. Lack of empowerment — the high rate of joblessness and the weak connection to the labour force that characterise high poverty communities result in reduced feeling of empowerment or self-efficacy.

This meta-review of the research literature with regard to the interrelationship of education and SES indicates that “the current conceptualisation of socio-economic disadvantage used by the NSW Priority Schools Funding Program (PSFP) and the variables used to calculate the index of socio-economic disadvantage for schools remains basically valid” (NSW DET, 2005: 15). This meta-review also supports “the view that the concentration of disadvantage rather than disadvantage *per se* is the significant driver of educational under-performance” (NSW DET, 2005: 15). This paper adds to this conceptual exploration of inequality and achievement through an examination of the post-school destinations of Queensland’s Year 12 completers according to their socio-economic status. Further, it seeks to extend current policy considerations by adding the question of freedom to achieve (Sen, 1992) to the discussions about the place of Vocational Education and Training in the lives of young adults completing Year 12.

4. Research Method

The research strategy for this study involves an investigation of the statistical representation of the post-school destinations for Year 12 completers in order to explore the place of VET in the lives of those of differing socio-economic status. This study is working forwards to elucidating key features of the relations between inequality, achievement and the freedom to achieve (Sen, 1992) by developing theoretically informed and empirically grounded explanations. Three points relating to this study are highlighted here, namely the delimitations of the case, its policy context, the data set that has been analysed and the conceptual framework informing the discussion of findings.

The case of “post-school destinations for Year 12 completers”

The focus of this study is the “post-school destinations for Year 12 completers”, a focus by the research evidence and which is refined in the light of theoretically informed data analysis. An initial conceptualisation of “post-school destinations for Year 12 completers” arose from Singh and Sawyer’s (2008) report that in 2000, of the 58,100 school leavers in Queensland, 28 per cent (16,400) were “early school leavers,” of whom 76 per cent were not in education or training, and 29 per cent were

unemployed. At the time Gardner (2002: 12–14) recommended that the 5000 (11.5 %) of Queensland students who left school before Year 11 be targeted by policy-makers for new initiatives in education, training and work. Moreover, Government was concerned about those disengaged from full-time education, training or work:

As many as 10,000 young people [had] not completed Year 12 and [were] not working or undertaking further education and training. Many others [had] completed Year 12 but [were] not working or undertaking further education and training. It is these young people we need to focus our strategies on. (Queensland Government, 2002: 9)

As Vennesson (2008: 230) explains the process of establishing one’s research focus takes place “at various stages during the research,” being refined as new categories are developed and new relations between theory and data are established. Thus, what constitutes “post-school destinations for Year 12 completers” is also informed by mounting State and national concern about young adults who are disengaged or alienated from schooling as well as those who are ‘at risk’ of dropping out. For instance, Australia’s Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA 2004) reported that young adults from low socio-economic status (SES) groups continue to be less likely to participate in Year 12 (59%) than those from high (79%) SES groups. The gap between the completion rates for those from high SES groups relative to those from low SES groups had worsened slightly by 3% from 1998 to 2004 (see Table 1).

Table 1: Year 12 completion rates by Socio-Economic Status (SES), Australia 2003–04

Year	Low SES	Medium SES	<i>Difference</i> <i>(medium–low)</i>	High SES	<i>Difference</i> <i>(high–low)</i>
2004	59	66	7	79	20
2003	63	67	4	79	16
1998	62	66	4	79	17

Source: MCEETYA 2004 (Appendix 1: Statistical annex, Table 34)

Delimited in this way, “post-school destinations for Year 12 completers” names the Queensland Government’s education and training reforms that have encouraged schools to engage more actively young adults at risk of disengaging from education and training, and to improve the employability of young adults.

The policy situatedness of this study

Education and training outcomes remain strongly associated with social-economic status. There are large numbers of students with low educational outcomes whose family origins are poor and characterised by disadvantage. While the hope is that VET may break such inequality or disadvantage, it can also act to strengthen them. This is especially so if VET policies are not designed and implemented according to egalitarian practices. This is one of the reasons to explore whether VET policy and associated reforms operate as mechanisms to counterbalance socio-economic disadvantage. Specifically, this study of “post-school destinations for Year 12 completers” benefits from being situated in relation to Australian Governments’ policy setting, *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (MCEETYA, 2008). Goal 1 of the *Melbourne Declaration* aims to improve “educational outcomes for Indigenous youth and disadvantaged young Australians, especially those from low socioeconomic backgrounds” (MCEETYA, 2008: 10). The *Melbourne Declaration* advocates that

“Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence, governments and all school sectors must improve educational outcomes for Indigenous youth and disadvantaged young Australians and encourage them, their families and their communities to hold high expectations for their education” (MCEETYA, 2008: 10).

The policy aims to ensure “that socioeconomic disadvantage ceases to be a significant determinant of educational outcomes” (MCEETYA, 2008: 7). Since educational experiences and achievement are increasingly important in shaping the life chances of young adults, especially their ability to get a good job offering a decent career. This has significant implications for VET policies. The focus of government

policies on equal education for Indigenous and disadvantaged groups is evident in the *Melbourne Declaration* which calls for

“targeted support can help disadvantaged young to achieve better educational outcomes. Australian governments must support all young Australians to achieve not only equality of opportunity but also more equitable outcomes.” (MCEETYA, 2008: 15)

The Queensland Government has also considered the benefits of, and connections between education and the economy, environment, health, crime and community engagement. *Towards Q2* (Queensland Government, 2008: 7) identifies entrenched disadvantage as necessitating empowering of disadvantaged people with purpose and knowledge to make changes that create a better and brighter future. *Towards Q2* speaks to the inequality of education from the root and commits the Queensland Government to ensuring that disadvantaged groups will not be left behind. The Queensland Government promises to ensure that “more young Queenslanders [will] complete Year 12 or equivalent level of achievement as an essential building block for post-school qualifications” (Queensland Government, 2008: 31). This policy promises to deliver high quality of learning and training to provide help for disadvantaged students to offset social and economic difficulties.

The data set

Harreveld and Singh (2008) found that, until recently specific outcomes from Queensland’s reforms to Senior Learning (Year 10, 11 and 12) were difficult to capture and verify from official evaluations. With the statistical data now available from the *Next Step* surveys (Queensland Government, 2005; 2006; 2007; 2008) this study contributes to efforts to redress this concern. The *Next Step* surveys are conducted by the Queensland Department of Education, Training and the Arts through the Office of the Government Statistician. The surveys targeted all students from Government schools, non-Government schools and TAFE secondary colleges who completed Year 12 in Queensland in 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2007. They included all students who completed the Senior Certificate or Certificate of Post-Compulsory School Education, the latter being awarded to students with disabilities. The surveys

were conducted during April and May in the year immediately following completion of Year 12; that is approximately five to six months after the young adults left school.

The *Next Step* responses were collected mainly via computer assisted telephone interviews as well as paper-based surveys from a small number of students who could not be contacted by telephone. Importantly, prior to each survey, all Year 12 completers were sent letters from the Queensland Minister for Education and Training informing them about, and encouraging them to respond to the survey. Moreover, as an incentive to increase the response rate, all responding Year 12 completers were offered a chance to win valuable prizes. The response rates for the surveys between 2005 and 2008 were 59.9%, 77.5%, 81.2% and 80.1% respectively. Table 2 shows the key characteristics of the respondents across the four years of the *Next Step* survey.

Table 2: Key characteristics of respondents

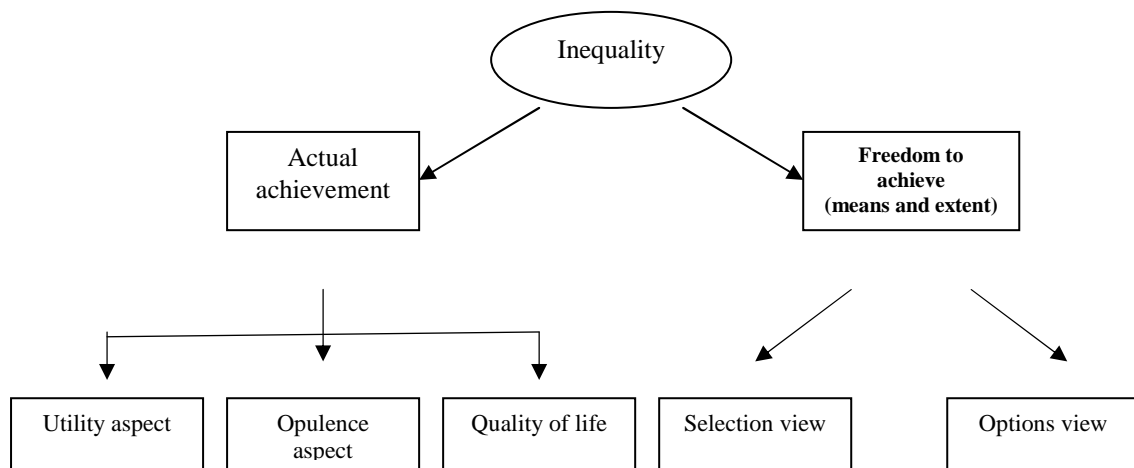
Year	Government schools	Catholic schools	Independent schools	TAFE secondary colleges	OP-eligible	Metropolitan regions	Non-metropolitan regions	VET qualification	SAT
'05	61.2%	19%	19.1%	0.1%	73.6%	71.7%	28.3%	31.3%	3%
'06	57.5%	21.1%	20.8%	0.6%	71.1%	67.7%	32.3%	35.2%	5.9%
'07	58.7%	20.7%	20.3%	0.3%	68%	68.4%	31.6%	33.1%	8.2%
'08	59.9%	20.1%	19.8%	0.3%	65.8%	68.7%	31.3%	39.8%	8.7%

(sources: Queensland Government, (2005; 2006; 2007; 2008))

Inequality, achievement and the freedom to achieve

To extend current considerations of the relations between inequality and educational achievement we have turned to the work of Amartya Sen. Sen (1992: 31) argues that a person's position in their social environment can be judged from two different perspectives, namely their "actual achievement" which is related to what a person manages to accomplish relative to their desired goals and the "freedom to achieve" relative to the opportunities that people have to fulfil what they value (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Conceptualising inequality, achievement and freedom



Sen proposes three ways to judge an individual’s achievement. These are the utility aspect or the pleasure or happiness that is achieved; the opulence aspect judged in terms of the socio-economic resources secured; and quality of life such as measured by living standards (Sen, 1992: 31). Sen (1992: 33) argues that the issue of equality also depends on “the conversion of resources and primary goods into freedom” which means taking gender, the environment, and livelihood into consideration.

Sen (1992:51) defines freedom in terms of the opportunities that are open to a person. Freedom of choice is of direct importance for the quality of life and well-being of young adults given their post-school destination. He points out that “freedom has to be distinguished not merely from achievement, but also from resources and means to freedom” (Sen, 1992: 37). Therefore, this raises the issue of “what factors affects the means by which young adults from the lowest SES quartile achieve their post-school destinations”. There are two ways young people might face either with a “selection view” or an “options view” (Sen, 1992: 34). The selection view is focused on the comparison of the nature of the bundles of choices when a young person is faced with “a particular bundle of life choices (Sen, 1992: 34). “It goes straight at the goodness of commodity bundles (nothing else is involved)” (Sen, 1992: 36).

The option view provides an interactive comparison between the “commodities” themselves and the “revealed preference” of the young adults who chooses a particular set of “commodities” (Sen, 1992: 34). This dynamic choice model sees the decision young adults make not only depends on the “structure of preferences” of the

“commodity” itself, but also on young people’s comparison of these with other substantial life options (Sen, 1992: 35). Sen (1992: 35) emphasises their option of comparing “the goodness of the *selected* bundles directly”. By weighing up the potentiality among different options, the young adult accomplishes the freedom to choose. However, Sen (1992: 35) argues that “the opportunities of choice have been seen only as means to acquiring preferred bundles of commodities”.

Simply put, when a young person chooses between VET, Universities or work or something else, s/he may firstly compare the nature of all those possible destinations (selection view). Then it is the options view that facilitates her/him to make final choice by comparing them; thereby disclosing the revealed preference for and the potentiality of one over the other. However, we should note that there are many factors influencing the means and extent of freedom. Sen (1992: 36) indicates that “resources tell us about the set of commodity bundles from which we can choose”. A young person’s advantage may be judged by a command over resources in his/her social environment. It is an important indicator to compare individual advantage concerning the issue of freedom. Differences in social and economic characteristics can make the conversion of resources or primary goods into the freedom to achieve similarly variable.

5. Findings and discussion

With respect to the post-school destinations for Year 12 completers, the percentage of the lowest SES Year 12 completers who go to university dropped from 30% in 2005 to 23.3% in 2008. However, the highest SES Year 12 completers destined to go to university only dropped 0.7% across these four years (see Table 3). Year 12 completers from the highest SES were twice as likely to enter university as those from the lowest SES during this period.

Table 3: University destination comparison of Year 12 completers, by socioeconomic status, Queensland 2005-2008

Year	Lowest SES quartile		Second lowest SES quartile		Second highest SES quartile		Highest SES quartile	
	No.	percentage	No.	percentage	No.	percentage	No.	percentage
2005	1300	30%	1423	32.7%	1672	38.5%	2116	49%
2006	1971	25.6%	2441	31.6%	2935	38.2%	3948	51.3%
2007	2069	25.6%	2541	31.4%	2995	37%	4158	51.8%
2008	1928	23.3%	2421	29.2%	3036	36.7%	4005	48.3%

Table 4 shows that for all the SES groups, VET as a post-Year 12 destination dropped approximately 4% from 2005 to 2008. 6% fewer of the highest SES quartile undertook VET courses following Year 12 relative to those in the lowest SES quartile.

Table 4: Total VET comparison of Year 12 completers, by socioeconomic status, Queensland 2005-2008

Year	Lowest SES quartile		Second lowest SES quartile		Second highest SES quartile		Highest SES quartile	
	No.	percentage	No.	percentage	No.	percentage	No.	percentage
2005	1403	32.3%	1391	32.1%	1297	29.7%	1149	26.6%
2006	2484	32.3%	2354	30.5%	2176	28.3%	1785	23.2%
2007	2455	30.4%	2398	29.7%	2199	27.2%	1748	21.6%
2008	2367	28.6%	2271	27.4%	2177	26.3%	1856	22.4%

Those Year 12 completers in the lowest SES entered full work at an increasing rate over the four years, rising by 4% during these four years. It went up by 3% for those in the highest SES quartile (see Tables 5). It may be presumed that the increasing employment rate was positively related to the global economic boom during these four years. However, with the economic crisis beginning in 2008, it is expected that the employment rate of young adults will decline. This will pose new question for government officials, educators, employment brokers and young adults themselves.

Table 5: Working full-time comparison of Year 12 completers, by socioeconomic status, Queensland 2005-2008

Year	Lowest SES quartile		Second lowest SES quartile		Second highest SES quartile		Highest SES quartile	
	No.	percentage	No.	percentage	No.	percentage	No.	percentage
2005	680	15.7%	692	16.0%	664	15.3%	453	10.5%
2006	1227	15.9%	1171	15.2%	963	12.5%	789	10.3%
2007	1418	17.5%	1364	16.9%	1243	15.4%	905	11.2%
2008	1629	19.7%	1600	19.3%	1404	17.0%	1121	13.5%

The “other” destinations include working part-time, seeking work or not studying/not in labour force. The lowest SES quartile increased by 6.5% across year 2005 to 2008. The highest SES Year 12 completers also followed this tendency, with the percentage rising in “working full time” and “other” destinations, but the increase was moderate (1.7%).

Table 6: Others destination comparison of Year 12 completers by socioeconomic status, Queensland 2005-2008

Year	Lowest SES quartile		Second lowest SES quartile		Second highest SES quartile		Highest SES quartile	
	No.	percentage	No.	percentage	No.	percentage	No.	percentage
2005	956	22%	825	19%	715	16.3%	602	14%
2006	2012	26.2%	1749	22.7%	1610	21%	1172	15.2%
2007	2138	26.5%	1779	22%	1651	20.4%	1244	15.4%
2008	2356	28.5%	198	24%	1661	20.1%	1302	15.7%

Figures 2 and 3 shows the proportion of different VET courses Year 12 completers chose from 2005 to 2008 based on the socioeconomic status groupings, the highest and lowest. Apprenticeships were the first choice for the lowest SES. VET Certificate IV+ and Traineeships courses were the second choice for them, while VET Certificate III was the least choice for both SES groups. The choice of VET Certificate IV+ declined but the choice of Apprenticeships increased during these four years among the highest SES group. As for the choice of Apprenticeship, Figure

2 shows that it is a steady choice among Year 12 completers rising a little across the four years among both SES groups.

Figure 2: A comparison of the lowest and highest SES Apprentice & Trainee destinations

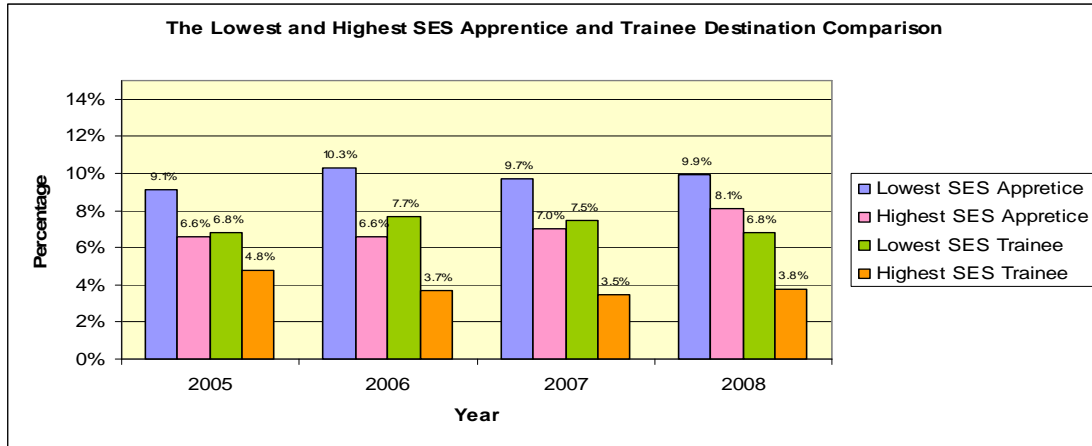
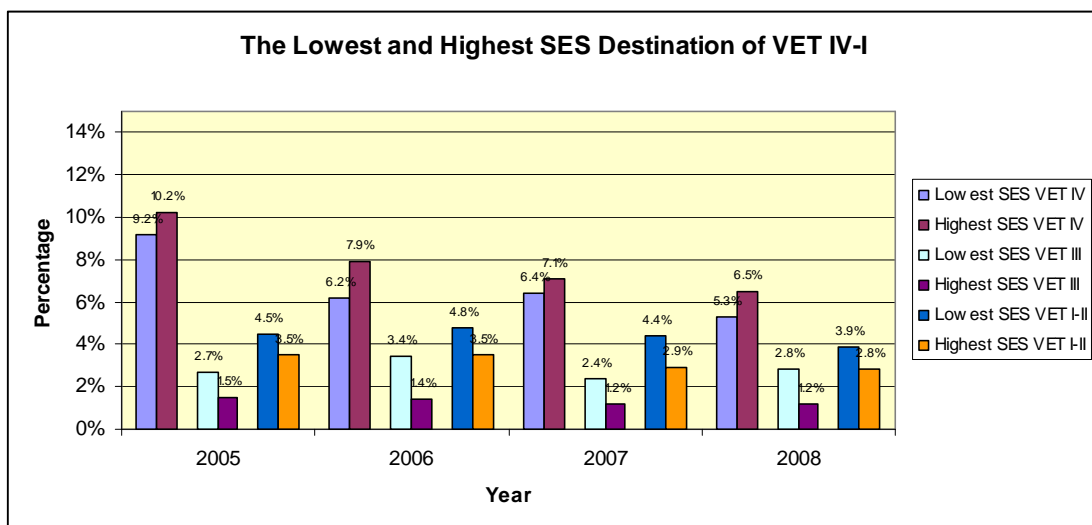


Figure 3 shows that the lowest SES Year 12 completers choose VET III approximately 1.5% higher than the highest SES Year 12 completers. Their destinations after Year 12 varied across different socioeconomic status. Those in the highest SES ranks highest quartile were more likely to go to university, whereas, those in the lowest SES quartile were most likely to take VETiS courses, to work full time and other destinations.

Figure 3: The lowest and highest SES destination of VET IV-I



The Senior Learning innovation in Queensland requires the completion of Year 12 study in school or an equivalent qualification. However, the gap in destinations after Year 12 reflects the socio-economic differences between those of the lowest and highest SES groupings. The data shows that from 2005 to 2008, Year 12 completers from the highest SES are twice as likely as those from the lowest SES to enter university. Likewise the data result shows that in terms of those entering VET courses, the highest SES grouping is a little more inclined to undertake Certificate VI, this is approximately 1% higher than those from the lowest SES group in the respective year. It indicates that higher SES students have access to resources that lead them to high-status careers where they can make a good deal of money. As Sen (1999: 249) argued that we also “need institutions that work to promote our goals and valuational commitment, and furthermore we need behavioural norms and reasoning that allow us to achieve what we try to achieve”.

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined the post-school destinations achievement of Queensland’s Year 12 completers according to their socio-economic status inequality. Students’ post-school achievements are related to, but not absolutely determined by inequalities in their socioeconomic status. The study, of which this paper is a part, is situated in relation to the Australian Governments’ *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (MCEETYA, 2008) and the Queensland Government’s (2008) *Towards Q2* policy, both of which seek to redress socioeconomic disadvantage in and through education and training. The analysis of data available from Queensland’s *Next Steps* reports regarding the destinations of Year 12 completers for the years 2005-2008 points to a divergence in immediate outcomes for young adults that reflect inequalities in their socioeconomic status. The analysis indicates the differing initial destination rates for highest and lowest SES young adults in terms of VET, university, full-time work and other activities. The trends in this data suggest continuing challenges for realising Government policies aimed at redressing disadvantages for young adults of low socio-economic status through VETiS and VET. There is a need for further research to extend current policy considerations by adding the question of freedom

to achieve to the current discussions about the place of Vocational Education and Training in the lives of young adults completing Year 12.

7. Acknowledgement

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