Competition, specialisation and stratification: academic outcomes of the government school system in Melbourne, Australia

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Abstract
Following the increase in the school-aged population as a result of the post-war baby boom, Australia, like many other nations, established a large comprehensive public school system. This system was not only designed to cope with the growth in school enrolments, but also to provide a well rounded education and promote social cohesion. However, unlike many other comparable nations, Australia’s non-government school sector has also played an extensive role in the provision of school education – a role which has grown substantially over the past couple of decades.

Since the mid-1990s, enrolments in government secondary schools have been decreasing. As a result, pressure for maintaining enrolments and favourable outcomes has led to curriculum specialisation among government schools in metropolitan Melbourne – creating two groups of schools, divided according to socioeconomic status. One group has successfully increased academic outcomes; the other group no longer bothers to compete academically and has instead adopted a vocational focus.

For other nations with small, but growing private school systems, these results highlight the dynamics of an increasingly competitive education system and the impact that it can have on the opportunities available to government school students, particularly those in areas of low socioeconomic status.

Introduction
The Australian population experienced a boom following the Second World War, courtesy of a rising birth rate and high migration levels. There was also an increase in prosperity in Australia as a result of industrial growth and developments in primary production (Keeves 1990b). This rise in population and improvement in general wellbeing fuelled new ideas about the value of education, and an increase in school enrolments, particularly in secondary schools (the final six years of schooling in Australia). Governments across the states of Australia responded to these aspirations by developing comprehensive government secondary school systems that offered a wide ranging curriculum and were available to all students regardless of class, race or religion.

However, in the mid to late 1970s, enrolment growth in the government sector slowed as parents began to choose non-government schools over the government comprehensive system. A key reason for this change in enrolments in favour of the non-government sector, which comprises Catholic schools and ‘other non-government’ or independent schools, was the introduction of recurrent funding for these schools in the early 1970s. This paralleled other changes in public policy in the mid to late 1970s as ideas related to economic liberalism began to re-emerge (Quiggin 2005). The growth in non-government school sectors changed the dynamics of Australian education creating fierce competition for enrolments and successful academic outcomes. The comprehensive system of government schooling came under pressure in this more competitive setting.
In response to this, small changes were made to the government school system. Policies of decentralisation, the adoption of school ‘choice’ and curriculum specialisation developed throughout the 1980s, 1990s and the beginning of the twenty-first century. The academic outcomes of government secondary schools in recent years suggest that these improvised changes to the system have not been enough to ensure that government schools provide post-school opportunities for all students, including those with university ambitions.

This paper uses the Australian state of Victoria, and in particular, its capital city of Melbourne as a case study to illustrate the Australian situation. It begins by exploring the enrolment changes in Victorian secondary schools. It then highlights the enrolment shift to the non-government school sector in the late 1970s and explores some of the main reasons for this change with particular focus on school funding policies in the non-government school sector. The analysis then focuses on how the government school sector has tried to adapt to the competition from the other sectors and concludes by examining the change in academic outcomes of students attending government secondary schools in Melbourne.

**Growth in secondary school enrolments from the 1960s**

Australia, like countries across the world, experienced substantial population growth following the Second World War. This was primarily a result of a baby boom, but also the product of a robust migration policy. The consequence of this boom for the provision of education was immense. As the baby boom generation reached the age of school attendance, school enrolments grew significantly. At the same time, education participation in the later year levels of schooling was rising.

Figure 1 shows that enrolments grew at a faster rate than population growth in the secondary school age cohort in the second half of the 20th Century. Between 1966 and 1986 there was a 43 per cent increase in secondary school enrolments in Victoria, a net gain to the education system of 111,093 students. By comparison, during that time, the population of 15 to 19 year olds in Victoria rose by a more modest 25 per cent or 72,095 people.

During the period from the mid 1960s to the mid 1970s in particular there was significant growth in secondary school enrolments as participation rates in secondary education rose (Figure 1). Further growth also occurred later, from the early to mid 1980s, primarily a result of increasing numbers of students remaining at school until the final year of secondary schooling.
With an increase of more than 110,000 secondary school enrolments in the 20 years to 1986 came the need for greater provision of secondary schools. This growth was satisfied primarily by the government school sector, via comprehensive schools. Between 1966 and 1986 there was an increase of 112 secondary schools in Victoria, 95 of which were government schools (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1986; Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics 1966). In this era of mass education and growing population, government comprehensive schools ‘became the basic building block…as metropolitan landscapes came to be dominated by the urban sprawl’ (Angus 2000:25).

The introduction of the comprehensive school system not only accommodated the growing enrolments in secondary education, it also helped to encourage participation in education among groups that had previously had little access to schooling. As Campbell and Sherington note, ‘the few public high schools which had emerged in Australia prior to the Second World War catered principally to parts of the middle class…Even in the 1940s the great majority of students in public primary schools did not proceed to a state high school’ (2004:5-6). The advent of the government comprehensive secondary school in the late 1950s and early 1960s changed this – making secondary schooling more accessible to the majority of students.

The comprehensive ideal and the implementation of a comprehensive school system
Ultimately, the function of a comprehensive school system was to teach a diverse curriculum to a wide range of students in ‘neighbourhood’ schools. They developed at a time when there was a strong focus on community. In addition, comprehensive schools were easily built and quickly staffed in order to meet with the demands on education provision at the time (Angus 2000). Comprehensive systems developed not only in Australia, but across the world, in countries including Britain, the United States, France, the former Soviet Union and parts of Scandinavia (Bellaby 1977; Connell 1993). According to the document that introduced the comprehensive school to Britain:

A comprehensive school aims at establishing a school community in which pupils over the whole normal ability range and with different interests and backgrounds can be encouraged to mix with each other, gaining stimulus from the contacts and learning tolerance and understanding in the process (quoted in Haydn 2004:416).

Campbell and Sherington, show that the ideal was adopted in a similar vein in Australia, noting that the schools:

Have a very broad set of social and citizenship-making responsibilities…Are deliberately committed to offering broad curriculum opportunities…Exclude virtually no one…[and] in Australia these are the schools upon which the great majority of young people remain dependent for their secondary education (2004:2).

The comprehensive government school system in Australia replaced a firmly rooted system of diverse schools designed to suit different needs. In Australia until the 1960s the government education systems were generally structured in a similar way to the British tripartite model of junior technical schools, middle domestic common schools and academic grammar schools (Campbell 2003). The comprehensive school system attempted to combine all of these elements into the one school.

However, the implementation of the comprehensive ideal was not without its problems. Shaw argues that ‘ideals present us with desirable goals which, from the nature of the ideal, will never be completely realised – or else they would cease to serve as such’ (Shaw 1983:152). As Campbell notes in the Australian context, but with reference to the implementation of comprehensive schools across the world, ‘neither the form of comprehensive schooling advanced nor the nature of its implementation was pure or unproblematic’ (2003:581). Within the government school system there were two major problems impeding the implementation of the comprehensive ideal.

The first problem was creating a curriculum for all students and thus avoiding streaming and selection by academic merit. In many parts of the world, including Victoria, academically selective government schools continued to exist alongside the comprehensive government school system. In addition, within the comprehensive schools, the practice of streaming students by ability often continued (Campbell and Sherington 2004; Haydn 2004; Shaw 1983).

The second problem was with the idea that each school would have a broad mix of students from different social backgrounds while also remaining local and community-oriented. In Australia, as in many other parts of the world, this was almost impossible to achieve because of the ‘fact that the population is not randomly divided’ (Shaw 1983:68). In parts of Britain and the USA a representative social mix in schools was achieved by bussing students across urban centres (Haydn 2004; Wraga...
Despite some of the practical problems with implementing the comprehensive ideal, such a system was well suited to the needs of Australia. Given that the task of providing secondary education to such a large generation of children had not previously been encountered, the practicality of a system which could be uniformly delivered added to its appeal from a government perspective. The comprehensive school system also developed around the ideas of community, inclusiveness and providing opportunity for all, ideas which were influential in social policy at the time.

The increasing presence of the non-government school sector from the mid-1970s

The ideals around which the comprehensive school was based did not last. By the mid-1970s public policy became driven by new economic ideas and the role of schools as facilitators of community cohesion was superseded by the notion that schools were institutions for the individual ‘attainment of measurable, favourable academic outcomes’ (Vinson 2002:2). Consequently, the role of non-government schools began to increase and the aforementioned growth in the government school system slowed.

Figure 2 shows that the government school sector was the main beneficiary of the initial boom in secondary school attendance that occurred between the 1960s and the mid-1970s. However, apart from a small rise in the early 1980s, government school enrolment levels have since been stagnant.

From the late 1970s, the major growth in Victorian secondary school enrolments has been in the non-government sectors. The late 1970s saw the Catholic school sector become the fastest growing category. In the early 1980s, the independent schools experienced an enrolment boom that has continued strongly since. Between 1963 and 2004, the independent school sector in Victoria experience a 186 per cent enrolment growth in secondary students. By comparison, there was a 105 per cent increase in Catholic school secondary enrolments and a 39 per cent growth in government school enrolments over this period of time (Figure 2).
When examining the percentage increases in enrolments shown in Figure 2 it must be noted that the non-government sectors did start at a much lower base than the government sector in the early 1960s. The actual numbers of Victorian secondary school students for every five years from 1964 to 2004 are displayed in Table 1. The independent school sector had only 23,825 enrolments in 1964, rising to 65,831 in 2004.

Table 1 shows a peak enrolment of 250,277 students in the government sector in 1984, coinciding with the peak in overall secondary school enrolments in Victoria. From the mid 1980s onwards, a steady decrease in enrolment numbers can be seen in the government sector until a slight rise in 2004. However, the trend for the non-government sectors was one of increasing growth. From the 1960s to 2004 the number of Catholic and independent school enrolments steadily rose.

The right half of Table 1 shows the distribution of secondary school enrolments across the three sectors in Victoria from the 1960s to 2004. Over the forty year period shown, the government school share of enrolments has declined from 72.2 per cent in 1964 to 60 per cent in 2004. Both non-government school sectors have experienced increases in their share of secondary enrolments during this time, with the Catholic sector growing from a 17.6 per cent share to 22.1 per cent of the market and the

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The independent school sector increasing from 10.2 per cent to 17.9 per cent. Within the independent sector, the most significant increases in market share occurred between the late 1970s and 2004, these sharp gains are apparent in Table 1 as well as Figure 2.

The government school sector share of enrolments in 2004 (60 per cent) still makes it the largest supplier of secondary education to Victorian school students. However, as this share slowly decreases, the likelihood of the non-government sectors overtaking as the key secondary school education providers in Victoria becomes a realistic possibility.

Table 1: Secondary school enrolments and enrolment share by category, Victoria 1964 to 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of students enrolled</th>
<th>Share of enrolments across sectors (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Government</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>169,454</td>
<td>41,306</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>211,243</td>
<td>48,606</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>232,990</td>
<td>55,446</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>232,695</td>
<td>61,715</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>250,277</td>
<td>73,014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>228,021</td>
<td>76,396</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>217,431</td>
<td>73,550</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>214,631</td>
<td>76,902</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>220,073</td>
<td>80,974</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Reasons for the enrolment changes

As mentioned briefly above, the change in enrolment patterns in Victoria closely matches a change in the general direction of public policy that began across the world in the mid 1970s. These include the decline in economic ideas related to the Keynesian model of social democracy and the rise of economic liberalism. It is argued that the market-dominated ideas of economic liberalism helped dampen enthusiasm about the comprehensive school system and also encouraged increases in government funding of schools in the non-government sector.

While the influence of this macro change is discussed further below, the balance actually tipped in favour of the non-government sector in the early 1970s with a policy decision enacted by a Federal Labor Government. Gough Whitlam became Prime Minister of Australia in 1972 after campaigning on a strong platform of reform, increased funding and a system-wide expansion of the education system (Barcan 1993). After forming Government, Whitlam commissioned a report into schooling in Australia, commonly referred to as the Karmel Report, which helped to shape the education policies of the Whitlam Labor Government.
The reforms brought about as a result of the Karmel Report led to a ‘massive expansion in the size of Commonwealth funding for all education’ (Burke 2001:2). These increases provided a much needed boost in funding to the government sector, helping to keep up with the steady pace of growth experienced in the 1960s. However, arguably just as significant was the benefit the non-government sector received as a result of these reforms. Funding for the non-government sector was greatly increased and the recurrent funding of non-government schools was formalised. From this time onwards, the Federal Government assumed the task of funding the non-government school sector, leaving the individual state governments to primarily fund the government schools. According to Marginson, the policies stemming from the Karmel Report actually legitimised ‘private schooling as an alternative’ and paved the way for the large increases in non-government school funding in the following years (2002:8).

Table 2 highlights the significant growth in government recurrent grants to non-government secondary schools in Victoria from when such grants were first allocated by the state, up until the changes to funding arrangements introduced by the present Australian Government in 2001. Both state and federal contributions grew significantly during this time.

As Table 2 shows, it was the state governments which first introduced recurrent funding for the non-government sector. In 1967, the Victorian Government contributed $10 to the schooling of each secondary school student in a non-government school. By 1973, following the Whitlam reforms, federal government recurrent funding had overtaken that of the contribution from the state. The significance of the increase to funding during the Whitlam years is immense. From 1967 to 1976, the maximum total recurrent funding per secondary school student in the non-government sector in Victoria had risen from $10 to $569.

Table 2: Commonwealth and Victorian Government recurrent grants to non-government secondary schools per student, 1967 to 2001 (actual $)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Commonwealth Government ($)</th>
<th>Victorian Government ($)</th>
<th>Total recurrent funding ($)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Minimum</td>
<td>Maximum</td>
<td>Minimum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>355</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>1068</td>
<td>611</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>740</td>
<td>2942</td>
<td>415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>832</td>
<td>3560</td>
<td>447</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>908</td>
<td>4636</td>
<td>460</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


It is important to note that the policies outlined in the Karmel Report were not intended to set in motion the funding of elite private schools that has become policy today. Ultimately, the Karmel Report argued for funding based on equity, and recognising that some non-government schools catered to disadvantaged families, included them in the funding model. However, this introduction of recurrent funding
was the catalyst for the subsequent funding increases seen in Table 2. What drove these increases was not a desire for equity within the education system, but the ideology of market liberalism.

From the mid 1970s in Australia, economic liberalism (also known as neo liberalism, market liberalism, Thatcherism or economic rationalism) became ‘the dominant position in both microeconomic and macroeconomic policy debates’ (Quiggin 2005:26). Public policies based on the previously dominant macroeconomic, Keynesian model, were slowly abandoned in favour of a free-market approach. The philosophy of this approach ensured that previous ideas relating to the community-building role of schools were replaced, and schools became seen as institutions for the ‘market driven and entrepreneurial citizen whose objective was personal fulfilment’ (Marginson 1997:64). Education policy slowly became synonymous with words such as ‘choice’, ‘competition’ and ‘merit’, and funding policies have since promoted competition and choice as essential to a system which provides the best outcomes. In this context, the non-government sector, and particularly the independent schools were able to thrive.

The reasons for the enrolment success of the independent school sector cannot be put down to funding increases alone. One of the attractions to parents about the independent school system in Australia is that it produces students who are high academic performers. In the context of a society that is increasingly focussed on individual outcomes, there is significant capital in having a reputation based on facilitating a good academic performance. Middle class families in particular have been attracted to the independent school system in an attempt to ensure that their children are able to achieve the grades to gain entry to university.

As long as funding for the independent sector grows and academic reputations are confirmed by government produced benchmark indicators, it seems that the middle class will continue to ‘flock’ to the independent school sector (Vickers 2004).

**Dealing with the competition: consequences for the government school system**

As a result of the enrolment challenge to public schools, governments of all political persuasions began to introduce reforms to the government school system based initially around ideas of decentralisation and later on policies involving specialisation. As the results using the example of government schools in the metropolis of Melbourne show, the consequences of these changes for students vary significantly.

**Decentralisation**

Decentralisation involved removing some of the bureaucratic restraints placed on government schools by education departments and giving more decision making power to individual schools and the communities they served. The theory behind this is that if schools operate according to the needs of their local community, they may be more successful in helping students to achieve favourable outcomes.

In Australia, the idea of decentralisation was actually promoted a lot earlier than it began in practice. In 1973 the Karmel Report encouraged state education departments to undertake a less centralised approach to school management through the devolution of schools (Keeves 1990a; Musgrave 1990). However, the main problem with this
recommendation was that it came from a federal government which did not control the government school systems in individual states. Therefore, the process of devolution was left to each state bureaucracy to implement at its whim and initially resistance to decentralisation was strong among many groups, particularly the state education bureaucracies.

Despite this resistance, decentralisation of government school systems gathered pace across the western world in the 1990s because of a need for these schools to remain viable and attractive to students. In the United States, one of the major approaches linked to decentralisation was ‘school-based management’ which aimed to remove as many of the ties of central bureaucracy as possible and put decision making power in the hands of the school leadership team, teachers and parents. Similar practices were also adopted in Australia. By the late 1990s, Victoria was recognised worldwide for its innovation in the area of school self management (Caldwell and Hayward 1998; Odden and Bush 1998; Woholstetter et al. 1997).

Specialisation
One consequence of decentralisation was the promotion of school specialisation. The promoting of specialisation in the government school system was yet another move that pushed government schools further away from their original comprehensive charter. Specialisation within the government system was introduced as a way of raising public perception of government schools by portraying them as interesting and progressive. In the context of increased competition for enrolments, the need to differentiate and focus their curriculum was seen as a way of cornering potential new markets and of maintaining enrolments.

Specialisation of government schools occurred across the world in the 1990s and early 21st Century. In Australia, examples of individual school curriculum-based specialisations included emphases on information technology, vocational based subjects, science, or sport. Other ways that government schools were adapted to become ‘specialists’ included becoming single-sex, scaling back to create ‘senior colleges’ which enrolled only students in the final years of secondary school, and developing separate junior and senior school campuses.

The Victorian Government’s 2003 Blueprint for Government schools clearly spelt the end of the general notion of the comprehensive government school and highlighting the need for specialisation, stating that in order to provide an ‘excellent education’ it must be acknowledged that ‘one size does not fit all’ (Department of Education and Training 2003:26).

Consequences for government school students in Melbourne
As seen from the discussion above, changes in government funding policy, school structures and parental expectations of schools have all had significant impacts on the way education is provided in Victoria over the past three decades. In particular, the government school system has struggled to compete with a well funded, academically successful and rapidly growing independent school system. The following analysis examines the impact on the outcomes of government school students and in particular, the changing academic outcomes among government schools in Melbourne.
Analysis of the final year outcomes of students from government schools across the metropolitan Melbourne area shows that in the decade between 1993 and 2003 there was a sharp polarisation of academic outcomes among schools, linked closely to the specialisation of government schools.

As a consequence of the push for specialisation, government schools in many parts of Melbourne have made a decision to opt out of the academic competition and focus on increasing their strength in non-academic, vocational subjects. Schools are creating links with institutions of Technical and Further Education (TAFEs) and providing tuition to senior students using the rapidly expanding Vocational Education and Training in Schools program (VET or VETiS). The expansion of government schools into these curriculum areas has rapidly increased since the mid 1990s. A smaller, but not insignificant number of government schools have taken an opposite approach, focusing on building an academic reputation and introducing specialised academic programs such as the Selective Entry Accelerated Learning (SEAL) program.

However, specialisation of government schools in Melbourne has occurred in an ad hoc fashion. Many of the academically specialised schools have ended up clustered together in the eastern and southern areas of the city, while those with vocational specialisations have concentrated primarily in the north and western suburbs. Additionally, these changes have occurred in line with the socioeconomic status of Melbourne’s suburbs.

Data from the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC), tracking offers to year 12 tertiary education applicants, has been used to create Map 1. The map highlights the location of government schools in Melbourne which have experienced the greatest improvement in university and TAFE offers gained by year 12 students between 1993 and 2003. This has been calculated using an index comparing the variation of outcomes in each school from the mean outcome for all government schools in the Melbourne metropolitan area. The results for each school in 1993 and 2003 have been compared and those schools showing the greatest change over the period have been displayed. In addition to this, a layer shaded to represent the socioeconomic status of the residents across the city has been included.

As the map shows, the schools with increased numbers of university entrants are located primarily in areas of the city with the highest socioeconomic status. On the other hand, schools with improved TAFE outcomes are generally found in areas with lower SES.
In Melbourne enrolment places in government schools are offered on a nearest to the school basis, whereby a place in the closest government school to your residence (generally measured ‘as the crow flies’) is guaranteed. Therefore, the key to gaining enrolment in a particular government schools is to live close to it. This has severe consequences for government school students and the government school system in general, which has traditionally provided the best avenue of social mobility for people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Students with ambitions to gain a place at university who either cannot afford to enter the private school sector or do not live in close proximity to a high academically performing government school have a more limited chance of gaining access to university.

The comprehensive ideal seems outdated in today’s ultra-competitive education system, and specialisation may well be the best option for government school systems which are failing to compete with the burgeoning private school sector. However, the example of Melbourne has shown that the ad-hoc specialisation of schools can exacerbate existing social stratification. Instead, a more measured approach to the provision of government schooling is required. In large metropolitan areas such as Melbourne, there is a need to carefully plan the specialisation of government schools in order to ensure that a diversity of specialisations are accessible to all students, regardless of socioeconomic status. Creating clusters of schools, which share some resources and work collaboratively, but have distinct specialisations, could be one option for the creation of a more equitable school system in the future.
Conclusion
The comprehensive ideal and the push towards and individualised approach to schooling are in direct conflict with each other. This has been and will continue to be a problem when it comes to providing a balanced approach to education in the government school system: ‘As the ideal of the comprehensive school fades, state systems will struggle to hold onto the foundational values of the last century while at the same time embracing choice and competition’ (Angus 2000:29). As this analysis has shown, the impact of the increased funding for non-government schools, and changing perceptions of the role of government schools has had a severe impact on the enrolments in the government school system in Victoria. In addition, the measures taken by governments and individual schools to compete in the new education market have produced mixed results. For students who have ambitions for university, but are limited in their school choice due to financial constraints, opportunities of finding an academically nurturing government school have reduced over the past decade in Melbourne. Unless careful planning of specialisation policies occurs, students from low SES backgrounds with the ambitions for higher education will continue to be disadvantaged.

References


