Measuring the Socio-economic Status of Higher Education Students
February 2010
The Australian Council for Private Education and Training (ACPET) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) discussion paper *Measuring the Socio-economic Status of Higher Education Students*.

ACPET is the peak, national industry association for independent providers of post-compulsory education and training. ACPET represents more than 1,100 organisations, from schools to higher education institutes, delivering a full range of education, training and English language courses to both domestic and international students.

ACPET has long advocated for one education system with a continuum of qualifications and removal of artificial sectoral barriers, which is aligned with national policy objectives. Accordingly, ACPET advocates that the measurement of socio-economic students of Higher Education students should be examined within this context.

ACPET research has shown that the role of private providers in the Australian higher education sector has grown substantially in the past seven or eight years, with a particularly notable period of expansion following the introduction of FEE-HELP to this part of the sector in 2005. The DEEWR statistics show that private HEPs admitted nearly eight per cent of all undergraduate commencers in Australia in 2008. The indication from private HEPs involved in ACPET research is that this share is likely to have grown further in 2009.

ACPET welcomes the Government’s intention to improve participation of students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds in higher education to 20 per cent of all undergraduate students by 2020.

The discussion paper *Measuring the Socio-economic Status of Higher Education Students* highlights the challenges and opportunities in analysing and measuring the SES of higher education students. The dimensions that could be used to enhance measures of the SES status include: education level of parents; occupation and income levels of parents; disability; area of residence; and performance of secondary school attended.

The discussion paper does not mention Mesh Blocks as a possible data source used to measure the SES of higher education students. Mesh blocks are a smaller geographic collection area than the proposed Census Collection District. The ABS has developed Mesh

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1 In some parts of the sector the term Higher Education Institution (HEI) is used in addition to HEP in order to differentiate between types of private provider; HEIs are considered distinct from HEPs by virtue of their status in relation to non-provision of FEE-HELP places. For ease and parsimony, in this report we use the term HEPs to apply to all providers of higher education in Australia. This decision is based on the definition and terminology set out by the Australian Government in the following website: [http://www.goingtouni.gov.au/Main/CoursesAndProviders/ProvidersAndCourses/HigherEducationInAustralia/Default.htm](http://www.goingtouni.gov.au/Main/CoursesAndProviders/ProvidersAndCourses/HigherEducationInAustralia/Default.htm)
Blocks as a new micro-level geographical unit for statistics. There are 314,369 spatial Mesh Blocks covering Australia with most residential Mesh Blocks containing approximately 30 to 60 dwellings. Mesh Blocks have been designed to be small enough to aggregate accurately to a wide range of spatial units and thus enable a ready comparison of statistics between geographical areas, and large enough to protect against accidental disclosure. Mesh Blocks are intended to become a new building block of statistical and administrative geography. ACPET recommends that DEEWR use Mesh Blocks as part of its analysis of SES status.

A further opportunity for consideration by DEEWR is use of the the unique student identifier (USI) also referred to as the unique student number. The USI is a Council of Australian Government (COAG) announcement that follows on from other similar initiatives that are being developed in some Australian states, which are designed to track students through their continuum of education. Accordingly higher education enrolment becomes a mechanism in which data is updated rather than new data collected. The USI should be integrated into DEEWR policy development as it has the potential to overcome some of the issues raised in the discussion paper, namely statistical collection can prove to be inaccurate when students leave the family home located in low SES postcodes at the commencement of tertiary education (or other levels of education).

The use of a USI also has the ability to overcome issues such as timing of some data collection, this is because it allows previously collected data to follow the student rather than be collected at enrolment. Whilst USI will provide a longitudinal mechanism for collecting data and formulating associated policy it should not operate in isolation. A combination of a number of dimensions is needed to ensure thorough analysis. These dimensions may include education access and retention enablers that have been previously collected for low SES students such as Austudy and Abstudy that will provide a rich source of data in understanding student and family demographics.

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Some private HEPs consider themselves as offering niche courses in specialised fields that are not necessarily available within the public university system. Others model themselves

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2 MESH BLOCKS DIGITAL BOUNDARIES, AUSTRALIA - PRODUCT BRIEF

3 Council of Australian Governments' Meeting 7 December 2009
directly on university structures, teach similar types of subjects and have ambition to become self-accrediting institutions.

In many cases, these institutions offer an opportunity to engage in higher education to many domestic students who would otherwise have not been given the chance to study at this level of education. This is a salient point when looking at increasing attainment levels of students from low SES backgrounds.

Given the role that provide Higher Education Institutions can play in increasing attainment levels of students from low SES backgrounds it is imperative that DEEWR have an understanding of costs associated with data collection. Regardless of what mechanisms are used to collect data there are likely to be a costs to institutions. As such any investment that the Commonwealth makes into data collection must be done so in an equitable manner across the full spectrum of Australian higher education providers.

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