Higher Education in TAFE

Equity and Opportunity for all

Higher education programs developed and delivered by TAFE NSW have recorded a higher uptake by low socio economic status students than those reported in the university sector. The delivery of profession-ready degrees and their delivery at rural and regional campuses has extended higher education opportunities for students from a range of backgrounds across NSW.

It is well recorded that there is a ‘persistent underrepresentation of low SES’ students undertaking higher education at universities in Australia. The development and delivery of higher education programs at TAFE NSW deliberately aims to support low SES students in having access to and completing quality higher education programs.

According to the SEIFA Educational and Occupation Index, a quarter of the population aged 15 – 64 is classified as low SES. There are many impediments and factors that inhibit these low SES (LSES) students from undertaking higher education programs. The lower than state average completion rates of year 12 within LSES areas, and the fact that rural and regional students are less likely to be engaged in higher education are some of the identified barriers limiting LSES engagement in higher education. In addition it has been identified that students from LSES have increased participation in VET programs, in an inverse ratio to their engagement in higher education. Other factors such as lack of university aspirations, peer and family expectations may inhibit an individual from studying a higher education program.

TAFE NSW Higher Education commenced delivery of TAFE NSW degrees in 2011. The degrees were developed specifically to provide opportunities to students who were attracted to the applied learning approach delivered in TAFE and to those living within rural and regional centres in NSW. The degrees have attracted a distinctly different cohort of students compared to those studying higher education at a university. TAFE NSW undergraduate students on average are 85% mature aged, at university in 2014 mature aged undergraduate enrolment was 25%. However most significantly TAFE NSW has successfully attracted LSES students to commence and complete TAFE NSW degree programs. Some TAFE NSW courses attract up to 56% LSES students and the more city centric programs such as the degrees in Interior Design and Fashion average 19%. The average LSES for all the higher education programs offered at TAFE NSW is 31%. The 2014 national average of LSES undergraduate enrolment was 15.7%, nearly half that of TAFE NSW.

TAFE NSW has recognised that there is a social responsibility to provide greater access to high quality; industry focused higher education to equity groups by developing appropriate admission
processes that break the nexus between year 12 results and course entry. TAFE NSW also has selected appropriate industry relevant and accredited programs for delivery in rural, regional and relevant urban locations to ensure the programs are available to often isolated low socioeconomic groups. In addition TAFE NSW has ensured that students can transition smoothly from VET programs into TAFE NSW degree programs, with appropriate support and small class sizes to ensure they are geared for success. Through the direct VET to HE pathways offered at TAFE NSW students can develop aspirations that previously did not seem possible. They feel supported and academically comfortable in a familiar TAFE environment and are provided the opportunity to be transformed through their higher education experience at TAFE NSW.\(^4\)

**Notes**