ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the issues of social inclusion in tertiary education using data from the 2006 ABS General Social Survey. It undertakes an analysis of the data from two perspectives. The first is based on an interrogation of the concept of social inclusion. The understanding and use of this term differs from, but adds to, the use of the term disadvantage. Both terms describe a ‘state’ or condition but social inclusion/exclusion also describes the processes that lead to this condition. International literature discusses the concept of social exclusion as a process that is cross-sectoral, spanning not only economic but social, cultural and political dimensions. In order to be socially included people must have access to education. Taking this as a starting point for the second perspective, this paper analyses those who are disadvantaged in relation to education and looks at factors of economic, social, cultural and political significance in relation to their education level.

Social Inclusion and Disadvantage

The emergence of social inclusion and exclusion as concepts for exploring and more clearly understanding social issues offers an opportunity to do things differently, based on new insights arising from a more complete picture of the issues that affect education participation and attainment and the nature of the individual student’s education experience.

For some years, inequities in higher education and VET have been viewed through the lens of ‘disadvantage’, with a particular focus on groups in the community identified as under-represented in student populations, groups of students with poor retention and completion rates and those who cluster in lower level courses or some fields of study. Policies and initiatives to address disadvantage have sought to increase participation and attainment through a mixture of encouragement (e.g. outreach programs), special arrangements for entry, participation and assessment (e.g. mature age entry, pathways from VET to higher education, flexible learning) and by providing various financial, academic, personal and social supports.

While continuation of the current approaches is likely to lead to further improvements, experience suggests that they will only be incremental. This will be the case also if ‘social exclusion’ is treated merely as a euphemism for disadvantage, for this would counter its potential to contribute the new insights required to rebuild efforts to address inequities.
Instead, disadvantage and social exclusion should be understood and treated as complements rather than substitutes. This approach would enable each to provide a different perspective (a different lens) on inequities and their causes. Together, the use of both lenses would create a more comprehensive picture for guiding effective interventions.

The way this could be done is to treat disadvantage in higher education and VET as a dynamic state that is created and sustained by active and passive exclusionary processes i.e by social exclusion – (active being the result of discrimination and passive the unintended consequence of some other action). Borrowing an analogy from health: social exclusion would be the disease and disadvantage the symptoms.

Explorations of inequities based on this approach would seek to answer two questions:

- What is the evidence of disadvantage? (e.g. under-representation; no post-school qualification; poor completion rates etc)
- What active and passive exclusionary processes create and sustain this disadvantage?

**Measuring Social Exclusion**

In order to understand the full impact of social exclusion – the barriers and risk factors to participation in tertiary education – the Social Exclusion Knowledge Network (SEKN) of the WHO advocates the inclusion of indicators covering four aspects of exclusion:

- **The cultural dimension** - acceptance and respect for diverse norms, values and ways of living.
- **The economic dimension** - income, employment, housing and working conditions.
- **The political dimension** - power dynamics which generate unequal patterns of rights and ‘the conditions in which rights are exercised’ (SEKN, 2008) such as access to utilities, community infrastructure services, education, health and social protection.
- **The social dimension** - relationships of support that enable a sense of well-being and connection with others, the community and broader social systems: family, friendships, neighbourhoods, and social movements.

This categorization is useful for several reasons:

- It provides a cross-sectoral view, instead of one that is sector specific
- It indicates how a social exclusion framework can be applied to existing insights.
- It highlights that the causes of disadvantage are multi-dimensional.

This paper explores inequities in education using this framework and data from the **General Social Survey**.

The **General Social Survey** is a multi-faceted survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) that ranges across various aspects of life in order to gauge social interrelationships, outcomes and areas of advantage and disadvantage. The 2006 survey (analysed here) is the second in the series conducted by the ABS, the first having been conducted in 2002.
The analysis aims to cast light on two questions:

Disadvantage: Who are those who miss out on higher education and VET and thus the benefits that successful participation can bring?

Social Exclusion: Why do they miss out?

The paper focuses on 20-39 year olds only. The analysis uses the highest level of education attainment as an indicator of disadvantage. It assumes that disadvantage is greatest where a person has no school or post-school qualification (i.e. their highest level of attainment is Year 11 or less) and is reduced by a VET or higher education qualification. However, it also assumes that there may be some disadvantage among those who have completed Year 12, have no further qualification and are not studying toward one; and those with the lowest levels of post-school qualification (Certificate I/II). Data on those who do hold a post-school qualification: a higher education qualification; advanced diploma or diploma; or Certificate III/IV is included to enable comparisons.

Table 1 shows that the proportion of 20-39 years old in the General Social Survey (2006) who did not hold a post-school qualification was about 45 per cent – this is slightly less than population figures for the proportion of 15-64 year olds with no non-school qualifications (which was about 50%). Another seven per cent held the lowest level post-school qualification (Certificate I/II) and 45 per cent held a qualification from a Certificate III/IV to a postgraduate degree. The most common qualification was a Certificate III/IV (17%), followed by a bachelor degree (14%). The differences between the two population groups indicate that 20-39 year olds are more likely to have participated in higher education and VET than the broader population group of 15-64 year olds. Of course within this broader age group are young people (15-18 years) who may still be at school or be part way through a VET or higher education course.

Nevertheless, results also indicate considerable room to improve the overall levels of education attainment among 20-39 year olds to reduce the percentage without a post-school qualification and to increase the proportion holding higher level qualifications.

Table 1: Level of highest post-school qualification – 20-39 year olds in the survey population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate Degree, Graduate Diploma/Graduate Certificate</td>
<td>838</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor Degree</td>
<td>1931</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Diploma/Diploma</td>
<td>1094</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificate III/IV</td>
<td>2221</td>
<td>16.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level not determined</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificate not further defined</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disadvantaged:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificate I/II</td>
<td>906</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Post-school qualification</td>
<td>6068</td>
<td>45.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>13375</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3
What is the evidence of disadvantage?

Graph 1 shows differences in education attainment for those who are in the lowest decile of gross household weekly income. The vertical bars indicate the proportion that each group makes up among people holding a particular qualification, for instance this lowest decile are 1 per cent of persons with a higher education qualification and 14% of Cert I/IIIs. The horizontal line indicates the proportion that the group comprises in the survey population – people in the lowest decile of gross household weekly income are about 4.5 per cent of the total surveyed.

A stark picture emerges. People in this group are very strongly over-represented in two categories of disadvantage: those who hold a Certificate I/II or who have completed Year 11 or less. They are under-represented among holders of all other types of qualifications.

The graph points to a reasonably strong association between having a low income and education attainment at Certificate I/II level or Year 11 or less. Thus it reinforces the existence of disadvantage in this category. However, there is a need for caution – people in all categories of education attainment may have been studying toward a higher qualification at the time the survey was conducted. Engagement in full-time study in particular might have a strong effect on income.

Graph 1: Education attainment – those in lowest decile of gross household weekly income, compared with population share

Graph 2 provides information about people with disabilities among 20-39 year olds in the General Social Survey. This group comprised about 7% of all respondents in this age group. The General Social Survey asked those with a disability or long-term health condition to indicate the type of disability, which was then coded as profound, severe, moderate or mild core activity restriction, a
school/employment restriction only or no specific restriction. The data covers the first four of these categories.

The graph clearly shows that people with a disability are strongly over-represented among those with education attainment at Certificate I/II level or completion of Year 11 or less – two categories identified as disadvantaged for this analysis. They are also slightly over-represented among those with a Certificate III/IV. They are under-represented among those with a higher education qualification, an Advanced Diploma/Diploma and those who have completed Year 12.

Previous studies have indicated that people with disabilities cluster in VET programs at Certificate I/II level, thus the substantial over-representation among this group is not unexpected.

Given the association between education attainment at Certificate I/II and Year 11 or less it might be assumed that many people within this group will be found within lower income deciles – particularly for personal income.

**Graph 2: Education attainment – those with a disability, compared with population share**

Graph 3 provides information about people in the survey who live in rural or remote Australia. They are about 12 per cent of the 20-39 year olds in the population surveyed. [Please note here that the GSS omitted people from very remote areas from the survey. They represent less than 2% of the total population (except for the NT, where the excluded population accounts for 20%). The ABS estimated that this 2% were unlikely to impact on national estimates.]

The graph shows that people in this group are under-represented among those with a higher education qualification, Advanced Diploma/Diploma and completion of year 12. They are particularly over-represented among those with a Certificate I/II and over-represented to a lesser extent among those with a Certificate III/IV and Year 11 or less.
What processes create and sustain this disadvantage?

The following tables explore the exclusionary processes that lead to these disadvantages, using variables from the GSS that cover the four dimensions identified by SEKN: cultural, social, political and economic. The focus is on those in the selected categories of disadvantage – those with education attainment at Year 11 or less or Certificate I/II. Data for those with other qualifications is included for comparison. While there are some data gaps, particularly to the cultural dimension, the GSS does provide comprehensive data in the other three dimensions. This paper takes two of these dimensions and looks at them in greater detail.

**The Economic Dimension of Social Exclusion**

Table 2 looks at measures within SEKN’s economic dimension of social exclusion other than income: labour force status, income sources, financial difficulties and financial resources.

The table highlights that compared with other groups, those in the two disadvantaged categories (Certificate I/II or Year 11 or less as their highest level of education attainment) are:

- Less likely to be employed and more likely to be unemployed or not in the labour force.
- Those in employment are less likely to indicate that they expect no change in their employment situation in the next 12 months – especially women (perhaps indicative of less stable employment).
- More likely to rely on government support as their principal income source – especially women.
o More likely to indicate that government support has been their main source of income for 12 months – especially women.

o More likely to indicate that they are living in a household where there are no people in employment – especially women.

o More likely to indicate difficulties in paying bills – especially women.

o More likely to indicate that they would have difficulty in raising emergency funds – especially men (consistent with males having less access than women to the social networks that provide support for all aspects of family and community living, including economic).

Results point to many linked exclusionary processes cutting off some people from educational opportunities. In particular, they suggest that people in these categories are living in straitened circumstances, with little flexibility in incomes to accommodate study costs. Women in particular appear to be long-term recipients of financial support, such as a pension or grant.
Table 2: Economic dimensions of social exclusion – 20-39 year olds by highest level of education attainment GSS 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HE</td>
<td>Cert III/IV</td>
<td>Cert I/II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour force status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>90.9</td>
<td>87.9</td>
<td>57.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not in labour force</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>38.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal source of income</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee</td>
<td>79.1</td>
<td>74.6</td>
<td>48.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Govt support</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>38.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Govt support has been main source of income in last 12 months</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>54.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No employed people in household</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>29.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expect to have same employment in 12 months time</td>
<td>79.8</td>
<td>76.8</td>
<td>42.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience difficulty in paying bills in last 12 months</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>46.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able to raise $2000 emergency money in a week</td>
<td>94.0</td>
<td>82.5</td>
<td>57.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The political dimension of social exclusion

Table 3 provides data on several aspects of SEKN’s political dimensions of social exclusion: the number of dependants; access to a car and the internet; use of computers; and participation in education.

Dependants

People with children are more likely to be dependent on community infrastructure and services than those without and are thus likely to have less flexibility in moving to access education and training opportunities. Those with children may also require access to childcare services to enable them to attend classes and complete course requirements. Having children can also have a large impact on family budgets, reducing the funds able to be devoted to study costs. Caring for children also reduces the time available for study.

The data show:

- more than half the respondents with a higher education qualification, a Certificate III/IV, or Year 12 had no children, while a majority of those in the disadvantaged categories (holders of a Certificate I/II and Year 11 or less) had at least one child and in many cases two or more.
- interesting gender differences. In all education attainment categories more than 50 per cent of men have no children, while in two categories of disadvantage more than 70 per cent of women - with a Certificate I/II or Year 11 or less - have at least one child and reasonably large groups have two or more (35% of those with a Certificate I/II and 46% of those with Year 11 or less). For these groups in particular family commitments may have a bearing on participation in education and training.

Access to a motor vehicle

Lack of access to a motor vehicle may prevent participation in education where travel is required but public transport is not available or inadequate. It can also be particularly important where there are children requiring transportation to health and education facilities.

The data show:

- the groups with the least access to a motor vehicle are in the disadvantaged categories
- among men it is those education attainment at Certificate I/II level (64% have no access to a car)
- among women it is those with attainment at Year 11 or less (77% have no access).

More than a third of men with Certificate I/II as their highest level of attainment have children (36%) as do the vast majority of the women with Year 11 or less (72%).

Lack of access to a car is not a concern where those without can reach the places they need to. More than any other group of survey respondents, males with a Certificate I/II indicated that they had difficulty in getting to places that they needed to reach.
Use of internet and computers

Access to technology and to the internet can be important in supporting study and can also provide opportunities for social networking and exposure to different ideas and role models, which may be important where aspirations to further education are low.

The data show:

- those most likely to be using a computer at home are those with a higher degree or with Year 12
- those least likely to use the internet on a daily basis are men and women in the disadvantaged category of education attainment at Year 11 or less (17% of men and 19% of women)
- those most likely to indicate they did not use a computer at home were those with education attainment at Year 11 or less, with the figure for men (62%) being lower than for women (68%)

Overall the data appear to suggest that those with a Certificate I/II are able to access and use the internet and a computer regularly, but not at home. Those with Year 11 or less have even poorer access and use patterns.

Participation in education

Access to education and training opportunities is an important element of social inclusion.

The data indicate:

- those least likely to be studying either full or part time are those with Year 11 or less as their highest level of education attainment
- 20% of respondents with a Certificate I/II were undertaking part-time study - a larger proportion than for any other group
Table 3: Political dimensions of social exclusion – 20-39 year olds by highest level of education attainment GSS 2006

| No. of dependent children | All | | | | | | | | Males | | | | | | | | | | | | Females | | | | | |
|                           | HE  | Cert III/IV | Cert I/II | Yr 12 | < Yr 11 | HE  | Cert III/IV | Cert I/II | Yr 12 | < Yr 11 | HE  | Cert III/IV | Cert I/II | Yr 12 | < Yr 11 |
| None                      | 56.6 | 54.2 | 36.9 | 52.7 | 42.5 | 60.5 | 54.5 | 64.4 | 54.7 | 55.8 | 53.8 | 53.7 | 22.5 | 50.9 | 27.9 |
| One                       | 16.2 | 18.6 | 32.3 | 19.0 | 20.8 | 12.6 | 20.2 | 11.2 | 21.3 | 16.4 | 18.8 | 15.9 | 43.3 | 16.9 | 25.7 |
| Two                       | 19.7 | 16.9 | 27.5 | 19.1 | 21.1 | 17.1 | 16.8 | 23.6 | 17.9 | 18.2 | 21.6 | 17.0 | 29.5 | 20.2 | 24.3 |
| Three or more             | 7.5  | 10.3 | 3.3  | 9.2  | 15.5 | 9.8  | 8.5  | 0.8  | 6.1  | 9.6  | 5.8  | 13.4 | 4.7  | 12.0 | 22.1 |
| Has access to motor vehicle | 95.4 | 90.8 | 81.2 | 89.0 | 79.4 | 95.5 | 92.2 | 63.7 | 85.3 | 81.2 | 95.3 | 88.4 | 90.4 | 92.5 | 77.4 |
| Often has difficulty getting to the places needed | 1.3  | 4.4  | 3.3  | 2.0  | 4.1  | 0.2  | 4.6  | 9.5  | 0.7  | 3.6  | 2.0  | 4.2  | 0    | 3.2  | 4.7  |
| Daily use of Internet     | 34.6 | 22.1 | 34.4 | 32.7 | 18.4 | 41.8 | 18.7 | 41.6 | 35.4 | 17.4 | 29.4 | 27.8 | 30.7 | 30.2 | 19.4 |
| Use of computer at home in last 12 months | 91.6 | 78.9 | 67.9 | 84.8 | 64.7 | 93.4 | 74.9 | 65.7 | 86.6 | 61.5 | 90.4 | 85.6 | 69.1 | 83.1 | 68.2 |
| Studying                  | Full-time | 6.5  | 5.4  | 0   | 14.6 | 1.7  | 4.6  | 3.7  | 0   | 12.8 | 1.5  | 7.9  | 8.3  | 0    | 16.3 | 2.0  |
|                           | Part-time | 12.4 | 10.9 | 19.7 | 13.1 | 8.3  | 10.7 | 7.9  | 23.7 | 14.3 | 9.1  | 13.7 | 16.1 | 17.6 | 12.0 | 7.5  |
Summary
Overall, the analysis found that people in the two categories of disadvantage scored highly on measures of social exclusion in three of the four dimensions: economic, political and social. i.e. more than any other groups they were the most likely to indicate social exclusion. This finding confirms a strong link between exclusionary processes and educational disadvantage.

Unfortunately insufficient data was available from the General Social Survey to reach a conclusion on the fourth dimension of social exclusion – the cultural dimension.

Results in each dimension separately give clues to the nature of some of the exclusionary processes creating this disadvantage but together highlight that educational disadvantage is the outcome of processes operating across at least three and possibly four dimensions – that is, there are no simple causes but complex patterns of intersecting influences.

Looking in turn at results in the two dimensions discussed in this paper:

The economic dimension
Results in this dimension indicated that many people in the disadvantaged groups, especially women, live in straitened financial circumstances, with low incomes and a strong dependency on governments for income support. Budgets are tight, with little flexibility – it can be hard to pay bills. Participation in employment is patchy and in some cases no person in a household is employed. Men are less able than women to access emergency financial assistance when needed.

The political dimension
Measures in this dimension cover access to services and resources, including education. Larger proportions of those with a Certificate I/II than other groups live outside the major cities, where access to services and resources may be limited. Access to services may be particularly important for those with children – people in the disadvantaged categories were more likely to have dependants, especially women. They were also more likely to indicate a disability or poor health. Access to a motor vehicle was difficult for some and especially for men with a Certificate I/II prevented them from reaching the places they needed to reach. Access to a computer and the use of the internet was also patchy – where it did occur it might take place outside the home. Women tend to use the net more than men – perhaps to maintain social networks. Participation in education is strongest among those with Year 12 as their highest level of completion. No holders of a Certificate I/II study full-time and only 24 per cent of men and 18 per cent of women study part-time. Articulation pathways from this to a higher level of qualification appear to be underused. Even smaller proportions (less than 10%) of those with Year 11 were studying.

Conclusion
Effective responses built on the findings of these explorations would simultaneously seek to treat both the disease (social exclusion) and the symptoms (disadvantage). They would ameliorate the effects of disadvantage while also countering the exclusionary processes that create and sustain disadvantage. Preventative measures to ensure good health (social inclusion) would also be advisable.
References

