

Selective schooling and equity: Policy proposals for addressing socioeconomic and academic stratification in Australian schools

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Summary

This policy brief outlines the key findings from a study of selective secondary schools in Sydney and Melbourne. It compares the social and academic profiles of selective and non-selective schools. The findings show that academic selection contributes to social and academic stratification. High socioeconomic status (SES) students enrol disproportionately into selective schools and have the highest academic achievement in Year Seven and Nine compared to nearby non-selective government schools. The policy brief concludes with recommendations to address the inequalities associated with selective schooling.

Selective schooling in Sydney and Melbourne

Unlike ordinary government schools, where most students enrol based on residential location, entry into selective schools or selective programs in partially selective schools is determined by students' academic performance on competitive entrance exams. Fully selective schools are well known for producing high senior secondary outcomes and for being attended by pupils of predominantly high SES backgrounds (Ho 2018; Kenway 2013). Sydney and Melbourne have the most selective secondary schools in Australia, but the two systems vary in the selection policies. These differences can be summarised as shown in Table 1.

A new cluster approach to school markets

Tham explored academic and social stratification in Sydney and Melbourne based on the following typology:

- (1) Fully selective schools that enrol students based on entrance exam results
- (2) Partially selective schools that have academically selective as well as mixed-ability classes
- (3) Independent (including high-fee) private schools
- (4) Non-selective government schools.

This typology was used to investigate how selective practices influence the types of students who enrol in schools within local ecosystems, or school 'clusters'. Each cluster represents one of each school type from the above typology, all located in geographical proximity to each other across metropolitan Sydney and Melbourne. The schools were matched where possible to school sex and year in which they were established to enable fair comparisons. Eighty schools were investigated in total, including 64 in Sydney and 16 in Melbourne.

Drawing on data from the Australian Curriculum Assessment Reporting and Authority (ACARA), the social profiles were compared between school types, between cities and over time to explore how pupil enrolment varies with school

Table 1 Overview of selective schooling in Sydney and Melbourne

	New South Wales	Victoria
Number of selective schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 22 fully selective high schools • 26 partially selective high schools offering academically streamed classes within mainstream schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 fully selective • 52 partially selective 'Selective Entry Accelerated Learning' (SEAL) secondary schools have a mix of academically streamed and general ability classes
Selection methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both fully and partially selective schools utilise entrance exams, as well as previous school assessments and reports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both fully and partially selective schools utilise entrance exams
Application process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students apply for up to 3 schools and are enrolled based on exam performance and individual school demand 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students apply for up to 3 schools and are enrolled based on exam performance and individual school demand
Equity measures and policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No cap on enrolments from any 'feeder' primary school • Commitment to more equitable selection system in current review undertaken by the New South Wales Department of Education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No more than 5 per cent of students from any one feeder secondary school • 10% of places reserved for students from low-income families or equity cohorts (primarily students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait cultural heritage)

selectivity. The proportion of students in the top two quartiles of the Socio-Educational Advantage (SEA) index were used as the measure for socioeconomic advantage for each school type (ACARA, 2020). Additionally, Years Seven to Nine performance in school National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results were examined for the domains of numeracy, reading and writing.

Key findings

- In the majority of all clusters, fully selective schools enrol the highest proportions of socioeconomically advantaged students, with an average of 89 per cent overall. This is more than private schools, which enrol 81 per cent of high SES pupils. Non-selective government schools in the clusters have the lowest share of advantaged students in the majority of all school clusters, with 50.4 per cent of high SES students. These social compositions have been relatively stable across schools from 2014 to 2019.
- The relative proportion of high SES students in partially selective schools is more location specific compared to fully selective schools:
 - In Sydney, partially selective school students are socioeconomically similar to non-selective government schools, enrolling 54.2 and 56.2 per cent of high SES students, respectively.
 - In Melbourne, the social profiles for partially selective schools in the inner suburbs is similar to public schools with around 80 per cent of high SES students. Trend analysis conducted on newly established partially selective schools in outer metropolitan Melbourne shows partially selective schools can stratify local school markets. Partially selective schools have 43 per cent high SES students compared to nearby non-selective government schools, with an average of only 14.3 per cent of high SES students in the latter.
- The NAPLAN performance of Year Seven and Nine students across school types varies in relation to school selectivity. School selectivity and academic selection appear to produce three strata of academic achievement. Fully selective schools are the highest achieving in both year levels and in all domains. In Year Seven, for example, over 90 per cent of all fully selective schools in Sydney schools are performing in the top two bands for numeracy and reading. Partially selective schools and private schools make up the middle strata of

academic achievement. Public schools have the lowest average achievement across all three domains compared to the other school types. This three-tier pattern of academic stratification is fairly consistent when considering the four school types in Sydney and Melbourne.

- Despite differences in how students are selected in each system, the patterns of socioeconomic stratification across both metropolitan contexts suggest that the equity measures in place in Victoria, such as the ‘5 per cent rule’, do little to reduce socioeconomic stratification associated with selective schooling.

Recommendations

The processes, outcomes and issues related to selective schooling are complex and are not unique to Australia. Socioeconomic stratification is observed in many countries with selective school systems, such as the United Kingdom (Gorard & Siddiqui 2018) and the United States (Bonafant & Bellei 2018). Scaling back student selection via competitive entrance exams would help decrease the socioeconomic stratification associated with selective schools. However, selectivity operates in various forms across school sectors and hence, a multi-faceted approach would be required to promote greater diversity in schools.

With this in mind, the three recommendations listed below are intended as initial steps in the process of working towards the broader goal of re-designing a more equitable and fairer school system:

- (1) For the State of Victoria to commission a comprehensive review of fully selective schools that examines the socio-academic patterns of applications and enrolments. The focus would be on whether the selective mechanisms give opportunities to students from all backgrounds to participate in selective schools, including low-SES students.
- (2) For state governments to investigate whether the financial resources supporting the testing, administration and overall operations of partially and fully selective school systems promote equal opportunities for all students.
- (3) For both states to commission a review of partially selective schools, focussing on the types of students who apply, how they are selected, what impact selective programs have on other students in the schools and on other local schools, and the effectiveness of any equity measures that are in place.

References

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About the author

Dr Melissa Tham is a Research Officer in the Centre for International Research on Education Systems at Victoria University. She conducted mixed methods research on students' experiences of Australian selective schools as part of her doctorate degree and has continued exploring the realities of selective schooling in Australia. She is currently conducting additional work to further examine the specificities of selective schooling in different urban contexts.

Access the full Working Paper [here](#).

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