

THE VOCATIONAL FATE OF GOVERNMENT SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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In the mid-1980s the Victorian Government abolished the technical school system in order to erase class divisions between government high schools and techs. High schools then became de facto comprehensives, in principle dedicated to equality of opportunity for all. In fact subsequent policies and growing competition from independent schools have forced government secondary schools to specialise. For most, the only feasible path has been to offer more technical and vocational subjects, for example the new Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL). Consequently, academically-inclined students at many government schools are now less favourably placed to compete for declining numbers of university places than before. A two-tier secondary school system has evolved in Victoria, though this time with less student choice than in the one that it replaced.

INTRODUCTION

This article traces recent changes in the provision of secondary school education in the state of Victoria with particular emphasis on its capital city, Melbourne. It examines the decline of the government comprehensive secondary school and the consequences of the system that has replaced it. The comprehensive school ideal was conceived as providing equality of opportunity for all students and the eradication of social divisions that existed between schools. However, the worthy aims of the comprehensive ideal were not achieved. It was fully implemented in Victoria in the late 1980s with the closure of technical schools. Since then disadvantage related to equity of access to academic post-school pathways has increased, primarily as a consequence of strong competition from the independent (private, fee-paying) school sector and the declining provision of university places in Victoria.

Since the mid-1990s, subsequent Victorian governments have devolved responsibility for competing for student enrolments and for post-school outcomes to individual government schools, thus shifting accountability from the state education department. Those schools which are unable to compete for enrolments are ultimately closed or merged. This pressure

on schools has forced the demise of the comprehensive school system, because schools have begun to specialise in order to appear distinctive, attract as much government funding as possible, and survive in an increasingly competitive education market.

The research reported in this paper shows that, in their efforts to specialise, government schools have tended to turn to vocational pathways in an attempt to differentiate themselves from the independent sector. This is in preference to developing academic specialisations which would entail directly competing with the robustly resourced independent schools for a diminishing number of university places.

THE COMPREHENSIVE IDEAL

Comprehensive government schools began to emerge in Victoria and across much of the developed world in the 1960s and 1970s in order to facilitate growing enrolments in the secondary school years. This growth was a result of the population boom that followed World War II and of an increase in participation in education in the secondary school years. The charter of the comprehensive school in Victoria, as elsewhere, was to offer a broad curriculum to students from a wide range of social backgrounds within neighbourhood schools.

nese schools were established to provide all things to all students, therefore making any other form of school provision (for example academic grammar schools in Britain, or technical schools in Victoria) unnecessary.

The full implementation of the comprehensive ideal occurred later in Victoria than in most education systems across the developed world. This is because the Victorian system still maintained a number of technical schools alongside its comprehensive high schools. These were known as ‘techs’. In 1982 they enrolled more than 8,000 Victorian students, or 27 per cent of all year 11 government school students in the state.¹

However, in the mid-1980s a Ministerial Review of Post Compulsory Education, chaired by Jean Blackburn, was commissioned by the Cain Labor Government. The report resulting from this review, commonly known as the Blackburn Report, argued that the existence of distinct technical schools and high schools in Victoria was creating a class divide in school provision. According to Blackburn, the school system at the time promoted ‘twin forms of exclusion—social and intellectual’.²

In order to solve these problems, the Blackburn Report recommended implementing a ‘concept of general education’³ whereby ‘all students in years 11 and 12 have access to a comprehensive curricula range’.⁴ Following this and other recommendations, the Cain Labor Government dissolved the tech school system, paving the way for every government secondary school in Victoria to become comprehensive.⁵

Those who implemented the comprehensive school policy expected that it would ‘broaden the opportunities of students’ in Victoria,⁶ however, this was not the outcome. The education market has become increasingly competitive since this

time, primarily due to growth in the non-government school system, which comprises two sectors; the Catholic sector and the independent (or ‘other non-government’) sector. In Victoria, growth in the independent school sector is of particular note. Its expansion was fuelled by generous Federal Government funding and strengthened by its record of academic success. Between 1986 and 2004, secondary school enrolments in Victorian independent schools increased by 35 per cent, or 17,000 students. By comparison, enrolments in the government school sector declined by 23,600 students (or 10 per cent).

The academic success of the independent school sector was particularly appealing to middle class families as it gave their children a strong chance of competing successfully for university places. Middle class parents recognised the importance of a university education for their children and their flight towards the independent schools reflects a lack of faith in the ability of the government comprehensive secondary schools to compete on even terms for academic outcomes (see details below).

In the early 1990s the political scene in Victoria was transformed. Labor was replaced by a Coalition Government of Liberals and Nationals, led by Jeff Kennett. This new government was ideologically opposed to the idea of a ‘one-size-fits-all’, centralised, comprehensive school system. As a result, the direction of education policy in Victoria changed. One of the most significant changes adopted by Kennett was the ‘Schools of the Future’ policy, introduced in 1993. This policy was aimed at addressing perceived inefficiencies in the comprehensive system. It combined ‘decentralised school management with standards-based reform’.⁷ The move to increase school-based decision making was designed to promote greater accountability among individual schools, theoretically leading to greater flexibility for them to

implement specialist programs and create better outcomes for students. The 'Schools of the Future' policy ensured that the responsibility for addressing issues of enrolments and academic competition from independent schools was devolved to individual government schools. The onus was now on each government school to compete within the education market.

In 1999 the Kennett Government was replaced by Steve Bracks' Labor Government. The new Bracks Government re-badged the Kennett school-based management policy as 'enhanced self-management'⁸ and attempted to put more emphasis on community-based decision making in schools. This was intended to soften the power given to individual principals in the Kennett policy and to appease the Australian Education Union, which had been critical of the accountability framework implicit in 'Schools of the Future'.

By the end of the 20th century, government secondary schools in Victoria were still essentially fulfilling many of the roles of the comprehensive. Although operating in a more competitive market, they continued to act as local schools, enrolling local students. They provided a range of curriculum options and were ultimately guided by the state education department's policy.

THE DIVIDE IN GOVERNMENT SCHOOL YEAR 12 OUTCOMES

As Stephen Lamb has recently shown, some government schools in Melbourne have been particularly successful in adapting to the education market, but many others have struggled.⁹ Overall, neither the Kennett reforms nor the Bracks softening of them did anything to slow the decline of enrolments across most of the government school system.

In May 2002, the Centre for Population and Urban Research (CPUR) released a

report that detailed the growing division within Victorian education.¹⁰ The report highlighted an increasing gap in the achievement of students completing year 12 between the independent and government school sectors that was leading to substantial differences in articulation to university. The report also found that there was considerable differentiation of outcomes in the government school sector. Only a handful of government schools in Melbourne were competing competently with independent schools for university places and government schools located in areas of low socioeconomic status were struggling academically, as were most of those located in outer suburbia.

The findings of this report generated a short, but vigorous debate about post-school pathways for year 12 students and the merits of establishing specialist academic schools within the government system. The Victorian Minister for Education, Lynne Kosky, dismissed the findings. The main argument against the report used by Minister Kosky at the time was that it was 'elitist' due to its focus on the university pathway. She argued that the government school system was providing a range of options to students and that the Bracks Government was 'committed to ensuring all students have access to excellent schooling that will lead to their desired career'.¹¹

In 2003, the Bracks Government released its Blueprint for Government Schools. This document did acknowledge that there were problems within the system. The Minister's foreword stated: 'some groups of students continue to have poor levels of literacy and other basic skills. These students can be concentrated in particular schools and particular areas of the state'.¹² The Blueprint encouraged schools to develop 'a distinctive focus or theme which will facilitate innovation and excellence and lead to improved student

outcomes'.¹⁵ While this was well short of the policy of specialisation embedded in England under Tony Blair's Labor Government, the Victorian Blueprint did move a step towards formalising the move away from the comprehensive ideal. In particular, the Bracks Government was

eager to emphasise its belief that in order to provide an 'excellent education' we must recognise that 'one size does not fit all'.¹⁴

Despite these policy statements, there were no programs targeted to improve academic post-school opportunities for students enrolled at schools in low

Table 1: Proportion of year 12 government-school applicants to the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) offered a university place, by school location, Melbourne, 1997 to 2005

Location of government school (statistical subdivision—SSD)	Year for which university offer was made*					Percentage point change 1997 to 2005
	1997	1999	2001	2003	2005	
<i>Inner region</i>						
Inner Melbourne [^]	79.7	83.2	81.8	81.0	81.3	1.6
<i>Northern and Western inner/middle</i>						
Western Melbourne	46.8	54.3	50.0	32.4	34.0	-12.7
Moreland City	37.1	55.1	43.5	32.9	34.2	-2.9
Northern Mid Melbourne	53.1	51.2	47.5	38.6	43.5	-9.6
<i>Northern and Western outer</i>						
Melton-Wyndham	52.1	62.9	51.4	36.1	32.8	-19.3
Hume City	46.0	50.4	55.9	29.3	37.0	-8.9
Northern Outer Melbourne	46.1	46.3	49.0	34.2	39.3	-6.7
<i>Eastern and Southern inner/middle</i>						
Boroondara City	67.0	74.3	70.0	63.3	68.4	1.5
Eastern Middle Melbourne	59.2	60.3	60.1	55.0	58.0	-1.2
Southern Melbourne	52.2	53.5	51.7	44.7	48.6	-3.6
Greater Dandenong City	48.8	52.0	45.6	32.8	35.1	-13.7
Eastern Outer Melbourne	53.1	53.1	47.9	41.5	43.7	-9.5
<i>Eastern and Southern outer</i>						
Yarra Ranges A	54.2	49.4	48.0	35.5	35.9	-18.4
South East Outer Melbourne	43.0	46.5	45.9	31.3	31.8	-11.2
Frankston City	52.5	48.4	49.9	41.6	39.0	-13.4
Mornington Peninsula Shire	49.0	48.8	52.2	33.6	36.0	-13.0
Total Metropolitan Melbourne	53.9	57.0	54.9	44.2	46.8	-7.1
<i>Total Victorian university offers made (number)</i>						
	7,487	7,348	7,610	6,777	7,105	-382

Source: VTAC, 1996–97 and 2004–05 unpublished

Notes: *The years here refer to the year of expected university commencement. Therefore, 1997 refers to students who completed year 12 in 1996 and were offered a place to begin in 1997.

[^]The figures for the Inner Melbourne SSD are not necessarily an accurate reflection of the circumstances of its government schools because the two academically selective schools in Melbourne are located in this area. More than half of all the VTAC applicants from Inner Melbourne were from these two schools, therefore skewing the academic outcomes of the area.

academically performing areas. KATNER, during this time, the government prevented the expansion of one of the few specifically academic programs running in government schools, the Selective Entry Accelerated Learning (SEAL) program. This program was operating in 24 schools by 2003 and another 20 schools reportedly wanted to implement it. But the state government denied funding for the expansion of the program. This was despite the conclusions of an independent review commissioned by the Government which recommended that it 'dramatically expand special programs for bright students in state schools ... or risk losing them in increased numbers to private schools'.¹⁵

In 2005, the CPUR updated its earlier (2002) analysis of the educational situation for Victorian year 12 students.¹⁶ This second report found that there had been increasing stratification in academic performance between school sectors and within the government school sector since the early 2000s. It showed that a decrease in the provision of university places during this time had substantially increased the vulnerability of students in the government school sector as far as following academic post-school pathways was concerned.

Once again, the state Minister for Education dismissed the findings, arguing that the report was too focussed on university pathways and that this focus 'belittles any other educational experience'.¹⁷ This comment revealed a selective reading of the report, which dedicated a chapter to the post-school alternatives to university, and an unwillingness to recognise that the dramatic declines occurring in government school enrolments were closely related to the problems that the sector was having in competing academically.

In the year following the second CPUR report, there was little improvement for those students in the government sector who

had ambitions to enter university at the end of year 12. Table 1, which has an additional year of data to that used in the 2005 report, displays the proportion of Melbourne's government school tertiary applicants who gained an offer to begin a university course in the years 1997 to 2005, by school location. Table 1 shows that, during this time, access to university places for government school students in the outer suburbs of Melbourne decreased dramatically. Much of this decrease can be attributed to deficiencies in the funding of university places by the Federal Government: as the table shows, the number of university places offered to Victorian year 12 students from 1997 to 2005 diminished. (The issue of lack of university places is examined in more detail in an accompanying article in this issue of *People and Place*.) At the same time, increasing numbers of students were completing school and applying for tertiary education places. The intensification of competition for university places was particularly detrimental to the university articulation rates of students in Melbourne's fastest growing population corridors such as South Eastern Outer Melbourne (which had the lowest rate of university offers in 2005), and Melton-Wyndham (which experienced the largest percentage point decrease in university offers during this time). (See Table 1.)

By contrast, a number of government schools in the more affluent areas of the city flourished in the increasingly competitive education market. The proportion of government-school students in Boroondara (encompassing established middle class areas of Camberwell, Kew and Hawthorn) gaining a university offer increased, while in Eastern Middle Melbourne and Southern Melbourne decreases in university offers were small compared to what was occurring in most other parts of the metropolitan area.

By 2005 it was clear that, apart from a small cluster of government schools in the more affluent suburbs of Melbourne, students from the independent sector were dominating the top academic outcomes and filling the most prestigious universities and courses. On the back of these results, and with additional funding flowing from the Federal Government which, in many cases, was used to provide scholarships to lure the brightest students from elsewhere, the independent sector continued to increase its share of school enrolments. The result for most government schools in the competitive education market of Melbourne was that it was unrealistic for them to expect to compete with the academic outcomes of the independent schools. At the same time, the Victorian Government's express desire for schools to specialise and yet its reluctance to offer programs that encouraged academic pursuits, left government schools with limited options if they wanted to embrace the policies articulated in the 2003 Blueprint. For most, there was really only one option open. This was to turn to vocational specialisation.

The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) has been a particularly useful vehicle for vocational specialisation within government schools. The VCAL was introduced in 2002 as an alternative certificate to the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) that students are able to undertake in years 11 and 12. The VCAL is directed at 'students who are most likely to go on to Technical and Further Education (TAFE), an apprenticeship or the workplace after school'.¹⁸ The certificate combines a range of subjects and options including VCE subjects, Vocational Education and Training (VET) certificates, work placements and specific VCAL literacy and numeracy subjects.

The VCAL is fulfilling an important role in the provision of education in

Victoria. Enrolment numbers in the program have grown substantially, from 5,137 in its second year (2003) to 12,326 in 2006.¹⁹ In terms of providing post-school employment, apprenticeship and trainee outcomes for students, the program appears to be a success.²⁰ In 2006 three quarters of Melbourne government schools had at least one student enrolled in the VCAL.²¹ The program has also been adopted in more than half of the Catholic schools in Melbourne, but in only a handful of independent schools.

There are variations in the extent to which schools that offer the VCAL have embraced it. In some, only a small proportion of year 11 and 12 students are enrolled, while in others, large numbers are involved. In general, schools still offer a broad curriculum so that each student has the opportunity to follow a number of post-school pathways. But as the specialisation of curriculum areas becomes more sophisticated and resource intensive, offering the VCAL tends to impact on any possibility of also improving academic outcomes. Commitment of resources towards programs of specialisation can be a substantial strain on school budgets. For example, the VCAL requires a coordinator, teachers and the development of new program-specific curriculums. VCAL programs also often require capital works upgrades to facilitate the practical elements involved in teaching technical subjects. As a result, it is possible that the spread of resources becomes weighted towards the area of specialisation.

VOCATIONAL SPECIALISATION AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

As the focus of a school changes it may lose students set on an academic pathway. Data on the year 12 enrolment numbers in Melbourne's government schools indicates that those which had not implemented a VCAL program by 2006 were experienc-

ing much stronger enrolment growth than those with a VCAL program. Between 2000 and 2006, year 12 enrolments in all metropolitan government schools increased by eight per cent. The growth in year 12 enrolments in government schools that had a VCAL program (six per cent), was lower than the average growth in the sector. On the other hand, year 12 numbers in government schools without VCAL enrolments grew at twice the average rate (16 per cent). In what might be indicative of the future, enrolment patterns of year 10 students in VCAL schools grew by only one per cent in the 2000 to 2006 period, compared with growth of 17 per cent in non-VCAL schools. By comparison, enrolment growth in the independent school sector for year 12 enrolments grew by 23 per cent between 2000 and 2006 and for enrolments in year 10, by 22 per cent.²²

These enrolment trends could indicate a desire on the part of parents to seek academic options for their children. The growth of enrolments in non-VCAL government schools cannot be attributed to demographic trends, since most of these schools are located in established suburbia. If anything, the VCAL schools tend to be more prevalent in areas of high population growth, yet this is not reflected in patterns of enrolment.

The differentiation in academic

achievement in relation to perceived vocational specialisation is explored in Table 2, which details the change in the median tertiary entrance results as measured by the Equivalent National Tertiary Entrance Rank or ENTER²³ of VCE students in two groups of government schools: those that had adopted the VCAL within the first two years of the program's implementation and those that had not. Because of varying commitment to the VCAL, the influence on the academic performance of these schools is also likely to vary. On the other hand, it can be assumed that schools which have not adopted the VCAL have indicated more of a priority to academic pathways.

Table 2 shows that in the years before the VCAL was introduced (1998 and 2000) there was already a notable difference in the academic outcomes of the schools that would eventually adopt the VCAL and those that would choose not to. However, from 2002, a decline is apparent in the academic outcomes of VCE students in the VCAL schools while an increase in academic achievement is recorded in those schools that did not have a VCAL stream. The figures here relate only to students who completed the VCE, not the VCAL students. Therefore, the Table 2 data on schools offering the VCAL is confined to those students who chose the more

Table 2: Indexed median* ENTER of year 12 VTAC applicants from Melbourne government schools by VCAL and non-VCAL schools, 1998 to 2004

	1998	2000	2002	2004	Change 1998 to 2004
Schools which had VCAL by 2004 (n=109)	0.81	0.80	0.78	0.76	-0.05
Schools with no VCAL program (n=55)	1.03	1.03	1.05	1.06	0.03
All metropolitan government schools (n=164)	0.90	0.89	0.89	0.89	-0.01

Source: VTAC unpublished 1996–97 to 2004–05

Note: * an indexed ENTER of 1.00 is equal to the median ENTER achieved by all year 12 VTAC applicants (regardless of school sector or location) in any given year.²⁴

academic VCE option in years 11 and 12.

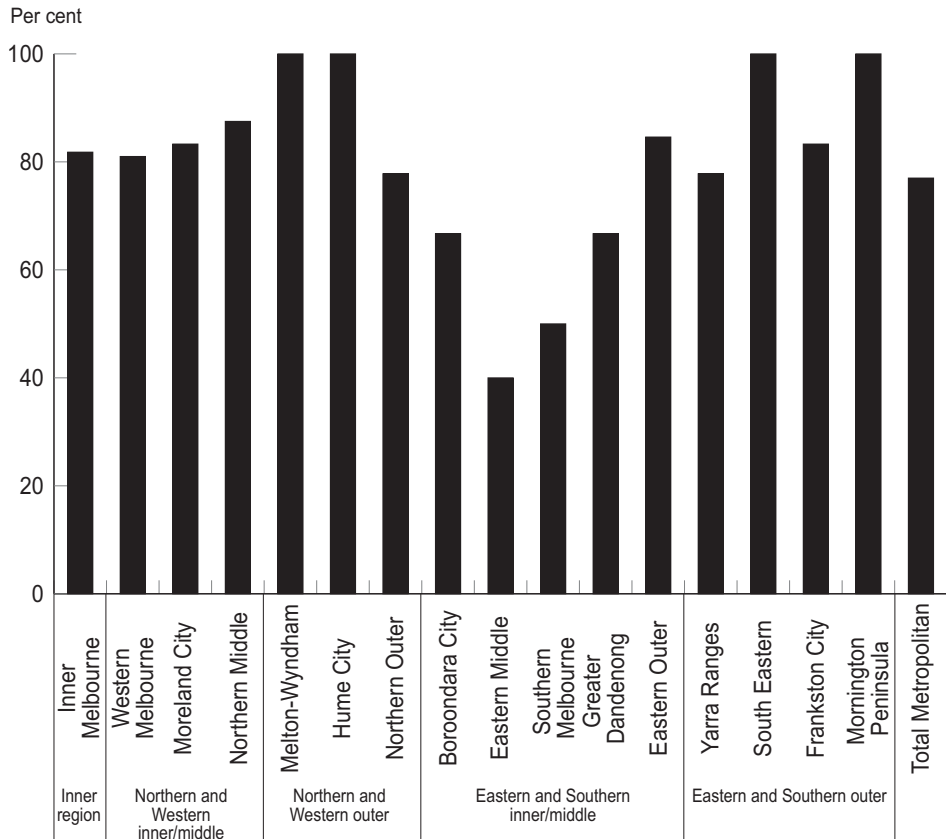
Many factors have contributed to the outcomes of the two groups of schools shown in Table 2, therefore, we cannot attribute these outcomes solely to the introduction of the VCAL. Poor VCE scores have been linked to lower socioeconomic status of students in numerous studies of Victorian student outcomes.²⁵ Therefore, given that the academic scores of these two groups of schools were very different even before the implementation of the VCAL, it is likely that VCAL schools serve a larger cohort

of students from disadvantaged backgrounds than non-VCAL schools.

Nonetheless, the large and increasing gap in achievement between these two groups of schools is of significance if we want to understand the extent to which specialisation is affecting the academic options available to students in Melbourne’s government school system.

In Melbourne, government school students are generally expected to attend the school closest to their home. There are exceptions to this rule—students may bypass their local school if a sibling is

Figure 1: Proportion of government-school year 12 providers with students enrolled in the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), Melbourne, 2006



Source: Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA), 2006 <<http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/vce/statistics/schoolstats/index.html>>

already enrolled at another school or if they prefer the programs offered by an alternative school and there is an available place for them. But according to Department of Education documents, most students beginning secondary school in a government school 'will be attending their neighbourhood school'.²⁶ This policy alone is problematic in a system which is specialising, particularly when specialisation is overwhelmingly focussed at one end of the curriculum spectrum.

As Figure 1 shows, the balance of schools offering vocational specialisation (in the form of the VCAL program) is far from evenly spread across Melbourne. In outer suburbia, most (if not all) schools had adopted the VCAL by 2006. By contrast, government schools in the inner east and southern suburbs were much less likely to have implemented the program. In these latter areas, government school students have a greater range of options offered within their local schools. For example, in the Eastern Middle Melbourne area, which encapsulates many of Melbourne's well-established middle class suburbs, only 40 per cent of government secondary schools offered the VCAL. By comparison, the program existed in all schools located in the outer south-east.

The VCAL program plays an important role in the Victorian education system; the rate at which it has been embraced is an indication of this. In particular, it offers a range of valuable post-school opportunities to students who wish to follow pathways other than university. VCAL programs have helped to engage many students in education for more time than they would previously have spent when the only option in year 11 and 12 was to undertake the VCE. However, the current unbalanced spread of vocational specialisation in Melbourne's government schools does have detrimental consequences for those students who want to continue their VCE

and compete for a university place at the end of year 12.

CONCLUSION

Despite evidence published in 2002 and 2005 showing the continuing decline of educational opportunity in the government school sector since the mid-1990s, the Victorian Government refused to accept that there was a problem. It did not accept that there was a need to provide the resources and encouragement for government schools to offer students academically focussed programs so that they could compete with the growing independent school sector. Instead, the comprehensive system has been slowly replaced by an unbalanced implementation of specialisation. As a result, academic opportunities are limited for those students in Melbourne's government schools who do not live in the affluent middle and inner, eastern and southern suburbs of the city.

Since the mid-1990s, the rates of university offers to government school students from most areas of Melbourne have diminished substantially. There are many factors that have influenced the changing fortunes of the government schools. In particular, enrolment competition from the independent sector and declining numbers of university places have created unprecedented challenges for these schools. However, the subtle implementation of specialisation over the past few years and the way that it appears to be cutting off academic pathways for students in some areas is likely to become an increasingly influential factor in the stratification of post-school outcomes and the continuing enrolment drift to the independent school sector. It is somewhat ironic that the two-tier school system that was abolished following recommendations of the Blackburn Report has re-emerged so quickly, this time with even less choice for students than before.

in 2006 the Bracks Government did finally change its policies and rhetoric regarding academic pursuits in government schools. Funding for new SEAL schools was allocated and plans for two new academically selective government schools in Melbourne were announced. But these policies (especially the new selective schools) will only offer better options for a

minority of students. Instead, the government would serve students better by ensuring that some balance of specialisation across the whole government sector is achieved. Every student should have the option of finding a place in a government school that offers them a realistic opportunity to follow their desired post-school pathway.

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- ²³ The ENTER (Equivalent National Tertiary Entrance Rank) is a ranking attributed to the majority of tertiary applicants in Victoria. It is used by universities to determine allocation of places in most courses. The ENTER is derived from the year 12 results of applicants.
- ²⁴ An indexed median has been used in Table 2 in order to account for changes in the methodology for calculating the ENTER across the time series. The index has been calculated by dividing the median ENTER for students in each group of schools by the median ENTER for all year 12 applicants in each year of the time series. The

median has been used instead of the mean because it avoids problems caused by outlying scores and is therefore more indicative of the actual situation.

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