

Fewer VCE graduates enrol for university

June 16, 2008

A GROWING number of public school students in Melbourne's west are enrolling into university, as more from the east take on trades and apprenticeships, according to new Victorian Government research.

But fewer VCE graduates are going to university overall, with many forced to defer tertiary studies and work for a year to cope with rising costs.

A snapshot of the class of 2007, to be released today, shows that more than one in four students who completed year 12 are now not in any form of tertiary education or training.

Of that group, more than 14% entered the job market, 3% are looking for work, and 11% deferred their studies for the year — the highest rate of deferrals since the Government started tracking students five years ago.

The trend has prompted the Victorian Education Minister, Bronwyn Pike, to challenge the Federal Government to boost student income support.

She warned that programs such as AUSTUDY and Independent Youth Allowance — which students often claim barely cover the cost of living — needed a rethink.

The study was based on an April survey of more than 33,000 students who completed their VCE last year.

Conducted by the Australian Council for Educational Research, the Government's annual On Track study also found:

- Private school students were enrolling into university at a greater rate than their public school counterparts (54% compared with 36%).
- The number of students enrolling into university has fallen slightly, from 47.4% last year to 44% this year.
- Almost 20% of public school students entered the workforce after completing their VCE, compared with 9% of students from non-government schools.

The figures come at a critical time for the Government, which is preparing to unveil a new five-year education blueprint designed to tackle underperformance and make schools more accountable for their results.

Ms Pike admitted she would like to see more young people entering university, TAFE or training courses after finishing school.

But she said she was "heartened" to see the data shattered typical "east-versus-west" school stereotypes: public school students from Melbourne's west who are attending university had increased to 36% — the highest since the Government started tracking students in 2003.

In the same period the number of government school students taking up apprenticeships or traineeships from the eastern suburbs has almost doubled from 5.3% to 9.3%.

The study suggests that most students deferring tend to come from non-metropolitan areas.

Opposition education spokesman Martin Dixon — who is involved in a parliamentary inquiry into the participation of regional students in higher education — said costs were a major factor in stopping students from even attempting further studies.

The president of the National Union of Students, Angus McFarland, said the findings were further evidence that the Federal Government, which is reviewing Australia's higher education system, should improve student income support immediately.

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