

AEU Response to the DEECD 'Selective Entry Academic Schools' Discussion Paper

The AEU has long held serious concerns over educational provision in a selective entry setting and maintains its opposition to select entry schools and to the establishment of two new selective entry schools in North Melbourne and Eastern Melbourne. All Victorian government schools should be adequately resourced to cater for the learning needs of all students including those students who are academically talented. The AEU believes that efforts to meet the needs of these students are best achieved in a comprehensive educational environment.

In light of the Government's commitment to the establishment of two new selective entry schools, the AEU calls for these schools to be developed as year 7-12 settings, rather than the proposed year 9-12 model.

The advantages of the 7-12 model is that it does not take students from 7-12 government secondary colleges and so disrupt the programs of the school and of the individual students concerned. It is a better fit with the normal break between primary and secondary school and is in keeping with the Year 7 recruitment into the many existing accelerated learning programs around the state. As 7-12 co-educational schools with a different entry point, the new selective entry colleges will be able to better market themselves as something new and distinctive and not just a second class version of Melbourne and Mac Rob. As the major leakage of students from government to non-government schools occurs at the transition from Year 6 to Year 7, the Year 7 entry point makes sense in terms of supporting the government system of schooling.

On this basis, the selection process at the two new schools would be significantly different to the existing selection process at MacRobertson Girls' High School and Melbourne High School.

Consideration 1: Meeting the needs of students and schools

Key Question 1

How can a balance be achieved between the needs and interests of individual students and the needs and interests of schools?

Key question 2

How should the selection process into the selective-entry schools be conducted?

The selection processes should be based on combination of an examination of academic aptitude, written application and interview. The entrance exam should explore a student's abilities in verbal reasoning, numerical reasoning, reading comprehension, mathematics, creative expression and analytical expression. The written application should be an opportunity for candidates to outline their suitability for the school, with the interview underlining the candidate's social skills, motivation and communication abilities as well as contributing to an expanded discretionary selection process. Students should be able to indicate their school of preference. Applications for enrolment should be at no cost to the student.

The AEU rejects the notion of geographic zoning for any of the selective entry schools on the basis that these schools are state wide providers and receive applications from across Victoria. The union acknowledges that proposed locations of the new schools (and the location of the existing schools) already act as a default zoning. This largely disadvantages those applicants from the west and the north of Melbourne in particular.

If the new schools are to be for years 7-12 this requires a separate and different entry procedure to the one for the existing schools. The department should be responsible for the management of the selection process, with adequate additional resources provided at the local school level to facilitate the process.

If the new schools are to be for years 9-12 then the selection process needs to be consistent across the 4 locations, with the same examination, written application and interview processes and management structures as outlined above.

Key question 3

Should there be caps on enrolments from source schools? If so, should a single cap applied to all schools or a differential cap?

As 7-12 schools the AEU holds the view that no formal primary school enrolment caps are required. However, there should be an overall requirement about the student composition of these schools which would include the goal of diversity, including diversity in school background.

As 9-12 schools there would be a requirement for an enrolment cap to be maintained at the current 3% level for both government and non-government schools. This cap should be underlined by a quota requirement which ensures that at least 60% of successful applicants derive from the government school sector.

Key question 4

What should the purpose of any 'discretionary' selection category be? How should this category be applied?

The AEU supports the notion of a discretionary category and recommends that this selection category should be increased to 15 percent of all enrolments. Increasing the number of students enrolled using the discretionary capacity enhances the schools capacity to account for a range of extenuating and exceptional circumstances, including, but not exclusive to:

- illness at the time of the examination,
- interrupted schooling as a result of illness,
- social disadvantage (as indicated by SFO, EMA, ESL or indigenous status).

The criteria for discretionary intake should reflect the desire to maximize the range of student circumstances and socio-economic backgrounds in the student cohort.

The use of the discretionary category should be considered within the proposed 3% enrollment cap per school, with a capacity to apply criteria to deal with any anomalies arising from an application of the rule.

Such a discretionary category should apply to all selective entry schools, and regardless of whether the new schools are established as catering for years 7-12 or 9-12.

Consideration 2: The depth and breadth of applications

Key question 5

How might the number and breadth of applicants across the state be increased?

Key question 6

What strategies should be used to ensure equity of opportunity for all highly-able academic students?

It is an imperative that all selective entry settings provide a wide range of support for students who have been identified as being from a disadvantaged background. This could include, as the discussion paper suggests, support for travel or mentoring and tutoring support for the student if there is minimal support or difficulties in the home environment. Normal support that is available to all students regardless of the school they are in should also be available,

including State Schools Relief and special provision re payment of fees for materials/subject costs.

Consideration 3: Partnership potential

Key question 7

What opportunities might exist concerning cooperative relationships with educational, corporate, philanthropic and community organisations?

The cooperative arrangements that the new (or existing) selective entry schools develop should be on the same basis and utilise the same protocols as for any government school. The selective entry status of the schools should not be used as a basis on which arrangements with educational, corporate, philanthropic and community organizations are established to the disadvantage of other government schools. There are currently many secondary schools who have developed relationships with local businesses, training and education institutions to enhance the educational provision at their schools. This should not be any different for the select entry schools.

Key question 8

How can selective-entry schools provide a benefit to the broader education system?

The AEU considers that the best educational outcomes for students derive from the effective cooperation between schools. In this light, the AEU advocates the selective entry school must work with system as a whole and not merely with the other selective entry settings. The AEU believes this would only result in the selective entry settings being seen as elitist and separate from the rest of the government school system. The development and sharing of curriculum and programs that are suitable for comprehensive school settings must be a priority of the new selective entry schools.

Consideration 4: Governance arrangements

Key question 9

What are the major governance considerations and opportunities associated with the new selective-entry schools?

The governance arrangements of the new selective entry schools should be the same as any existing government school. Currently under the new Education and Training Reform Act 2006 all schools are required to have a correctly constituted school council. If any of the select entry schools chose to work in a cooperative manner with other schools in a geographic area, but to do this in a more formal sense, then alternative arrangements could be investigated. There are a number of school 'precincts' currently being developed to formalise these cooperative arrangements.