

Scholarships: the money maze rewarding winners of genetic lottery

April 27 2015

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Independent schools are in the middle of interviews to award much sought-after academic scholarships for 2016 but new statistics have brought focus to who funds the scholarships and why are they awarded to those who have already won a genetic lottery in being born academically gifted.

The Australian Council for Educational Research has tracked the VCE outcomes of more than 2000 recipients of year 7 scholarships to independent schools and found, perhaps not surprisingly, that scholarship recipients are “the brightest of the bright”.

Navigating the scholarship maze: independent schools award scholarships to the academically gifted but how many, how ...

ACER’s analysis of the scholarship holders’ VCE results from 2004 to 2013 showed they received a median score of 98.1 in their final years of school, putting them in the top 1.9 per cent of all students.

But the results highlight the lack of clarity surrounding independent school scholarships, with few schools revealing how many scholarships are offered each year, at what rate – and who pays for them.

Although most independent schools do not publicise it, it is the fees of ordinary parents with ordinary children, in the middle of the bell curve with no hope of ever getting a scholarship, who subsidise fee discounts for the super-bright children, often of professional families, who were likely to achieve anyway.

An examination of the websites of 16 of Melbourne’s largest and long-established independent schools found none that revealed the size, extent and source of money for the academic scholarship pool. None mentioned whether academic scholarships were funded from the fee pool of other families or were from bequests. None mentioned means tests to exclude, for instance, the children of two bright professional parents.

Some, such as MLC, reveal the number of year 7 scholarships – 36 offering full, three-quarter or half discount on the fees. Others such as Wesley don’t reveal the number of scholarships offered and only that “up to a maximum of 50 per cent of annual tuition fees”. Shelford Girls Grammar School mentions neither number available nor the amount on offer or the source.

Some older schools have long-established



Navigating the scholarship maze: independent schools award scholarships to the academically gifted but how many, how much they’ll receive and who funds the scholarships is harder to ascertain. Photo: Karl Hilzinger

scholarship funds, often awarded in the name or memory of the donor – such as Wesley’s R.G. Menzies Scholarships, but many others fund their scholarships from the fees of families whose children will never come within cooee of a scholarship or a fee discount.

A reward for genetic advantage

From what ACER’s analysis has revealed, scholarships are a reward for being born bright. For the independent school, they appear to be also an opportunity to bring in a cohort of students almost guaranteed to do well in VCE.

ACER’s manager of school assessment services, Barbara Smith, says 12,000 Australian students sit an ACER scholarship test each year and the examination papers are structured to finely differentiate between high-performing students. “Scholarship tests have to be challenging because they need to identify the best of the best,” she said.

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Barbara Smith, ACER’s manager of school assessment services

ACER is one of several organisations running such tests around Australia each year and Ms Smith says the tests assess skills “developed over the child’s lifetime both in and out of school”. They are about interpreting, deducing, inferring and thinking critically, rather than “the ability to retrieve learned knowledge”.

Ms Smith says students “do not need an extensive period of test preparation or coaching to perform well”.

Yet each of the 12,000 families will have paid at least \$100 to sit the test and many will have paid “a couple of thousand of dollars for coaching”, according to Frances Paroissien, director of Hendersons Educational Services, Melbourne’s

long-running coaching service. Ms Paroissien says independent schools use different testing regimes including ACER, Edutest and Academic Assessment Services. Some use verbal and numerical reasoning tests, others mixed-ability tests but whatever test is used scholarships only go to the cream of the crop. “We have a lot of families who are dreaming.”

Hendersons has been offering coaching for independent school scholarships and admission to select-entry schools such as Melbourne High School for almost 30 years and Ms Paroissien says in that time much has changed.

She says once schools used to publish the names and primary schools of winners and more schools used to offer full scholarships.

Schools are now more likely to offer fee discounts of one-third to one-half, leaving scholarship “winners” with a yearly bill of about \$10,000 to \$15,000 or up to \$90,000 for the duration of the scholarship.

Parents seek a bargain

Of course, families can and do shop around seeking more. All independent school principals have sat at their desk with the scholarship hopeful opposite; some arrive with their two barrister parents and their glowing school reports; others come with their grade 8 in French horn, hoping the school will welcome the rarity who can fill that empty spot in the school orchestra.

Other super-bright young things come with parents who explain they have been offered “a 50 per cent scholarship at X Grammar and 75 per cent at Y grammar” – and the unspoken end of that sentence is: what are you offering me?

St Michael’s Grammar School principal Simon Gipson had sat through many of these interviews and had grown weary of them.

In his years of interviewing students for scholarships he had found

it increasingly challenging finding students who fitted the school’s values from within the large number of academically high-achieving students and their parents “who were looking for bargains”.

He was conscious that the century-old St Kilda school had been begun by Anglican nuns who valued social equity and community involvement but its scholarships, funded from the fees paid by non-scholarship families, were increasingly focusing on the narrow high-achieving academic student.

Mr Gipson said he was keen to award scholarships to students who could “make a positive difference” and for whom, without a scholarship, attending St Michael’s would be impossible.

In 2000, St Michael’s previous principal had begun a scholarship to allow a refugee to study at the school so it was clear the school community was open to the idea of genuine opportunity, he says.

He took the proposed changes to the school’s board and they embraced the change. The school’s scholarships are now means tested – although not with a set income – and the school community can contribute to a tax-deductible scholarship fund, including via family trusts.

The aim is to offer an opportunity to a well-rounded child who will benefit, Mr Gipson says. Not that these new scholarship winners are from generations of disadvantage or low achieving – they are still academically successful but with broader interests.

He says since the change of focus and strict means testing was introduced, “the numbers applying has gone down and the quality has gone up”.

And back at Hendersons, Ms Paroissien says the real growth area in her business is coaching for high achievers programs, the Selective Entry Accelerated Learning (SEAL) programs operating at state secondary schools across Melbourne.