

Equity in higher education

November 2010

Key proposals

- The Group of Eight (Go8) supports improved participation and success of low socio-economic status (SES) undergraduate students. Universities should be able to respond in ways which align with their stated missions and capacity to achieve successful outcomes for students. Local social composition should also be taken into account where institutional equity targets are set.
- The Government's higher education equity agenda needs to be more broadly based. It should include students with a disability and Indigenous students, as well as students from low SES backgrounds. It should also include graduate studies, so that students from under-represented groups have access to the full range of educational opportunities, especially Higher Degrees by Research (HDR) which are not always available at small or regional campuses.
- Each university should focus on the access and success of under-represented groups to particular disciplines and courses (e.g. Indigenous medical practitioners).
- Funding incentives for equity outcomes should reward success, and act as an incentive to ensure adequate investment is made in support for students.
- A more flexible pricing system would be more equitable than a common fixed-price system, in that those with a greater capacity, pay what they can afford. This would enable universities to offer greater support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Partnership funding for outreach activities needs to be ongoing and sufficient to meet the costs of early, long-term interventions necessary for raising aspirations and readiness.

Key equity principles of Go8 universities

1. Equitable access and academic excellence are essential aspects of a high quality university education.
2. The opportunity to participate in higher education should be available to all who can benefit.
3. Effective schooling is a necessary precondition for success in tertiary education.
4. Universities can contribute to the social inclusion agenda in a number of significant ways, however the best outcomes will be achieved where efforts are aligned with the mission and areas of strength of each institution.

Issues and challenges

Participation and access

The Government has placed a strong emphasis on social inclusion across all social policy settings. In higher education the focus has been on the participation of low SES students at the undergraduate level. This has been done within the context of a push for growth in the attainment of Bachelor level qualifications to improve overall productivity and social outcomes.

The narrow focus of the equity policy has been successful in concentrating the efforts of universities on the low SES undergraduate cohort; however it poses some challenges for research intensive universities, particularly those that

are seeking to shift their load profile to a greater proportion of postgraduate enrolments. The national equity agenda will be stronger when different universities can contribute according to their varying strengths rather than all having to contribute in the same way.

The focus needs to be broadened to include other groups such as students with a disability, students who are first in their family to attend university, those with family responsibilities, and Indigenous students.

A recent study by the University of Melbourne suggests ‘focusing policy effort on raising the university enrolment rates of youth from the lowest quartile of SES distribution may be too narrow. The second quartile has participation rates equally as low as the lowest quartile’ (Coelli, 2010:22).

The Go8 will work actively towards the low SES undergraduate student equity participation target outlined by the Government in *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System*, however universities should be able to respond in ways which align with their stated missions. The broad national low SES target outlines a positive goal for the country but this is best achieved by universities determining how they can contribute to successful outcomes.

Postgraduate participation

In order to increase the postgraduate population to meet Australia's research, industry, academic and professional workforce requirements, the equity agenda needs to be expanded to include postgraduate students from diverse backgrounds such as low SES students, those from regional and remote areas and Australian Indigenous students.

The following points outline why greater postgraduate participation will be necessary in the future:

- Since 2001 the number of domestic students commencing HDR programs has slowed, suggesting a decline in completions in the near future. This could be offset by implementing strategies (income support, part time pathways, mentoring) to encourage students from under-represented groups into this field—see *Go8 Backgrounder 19: Research workforce*).
- Australia needs to increase the number of university teachers and researchers in coming years to counter the ageing academic workforce and to deal with the projected increase in student numbers in coming years (as outlined in *Go8 Backgrounder 10: Future demand for higher education in Australia*).
- Supporting students from under-represented groups to undertake professional education via postgraduate coursework programs will help to upskill the country's workforce thus enhancing Australia's participation in the knowledge economy.

Achievement and readiness

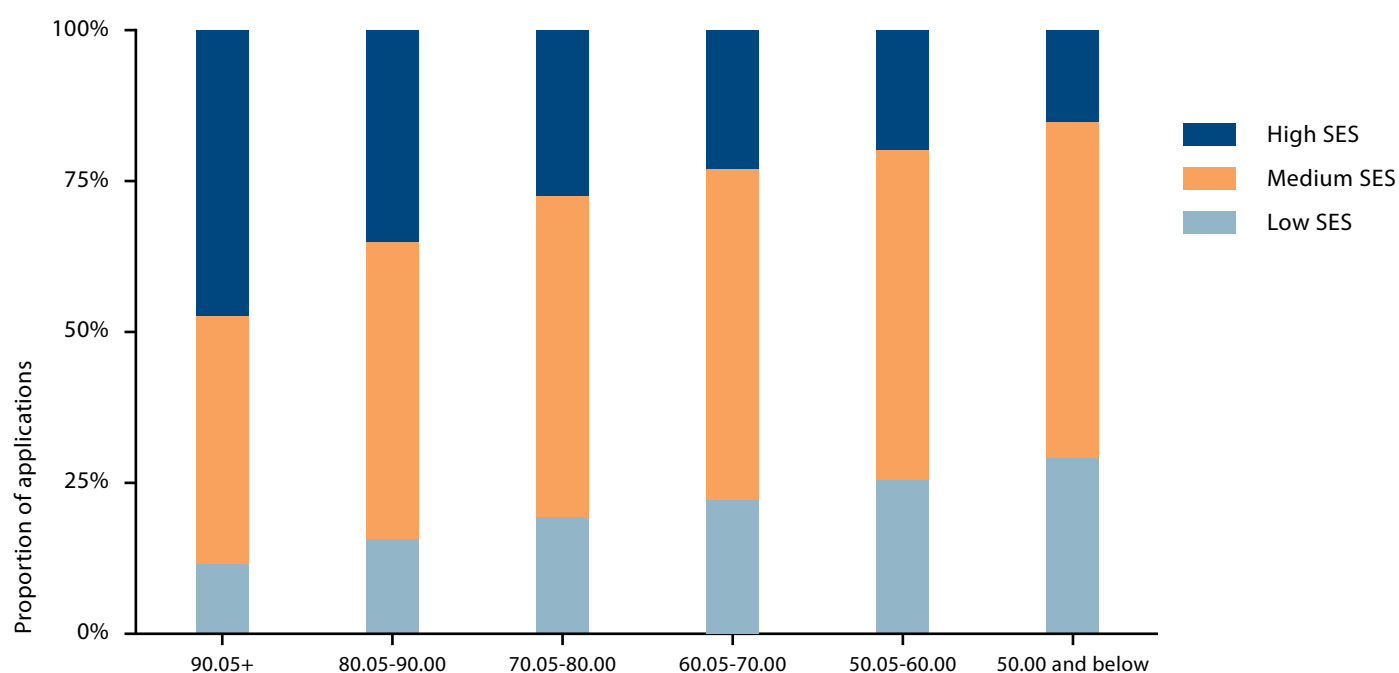
Results in the final year of secondary schooling determine access to university for the majority of applicants. DEEWR data on undergraduate applications, offers and acceptances shows that under-representation of low SES people among undergraduate students is mainly caused by a lower propensity to apply, rather than to any differences in offer or acceptance rates.

Once students from low SES backgrounds apply to university, their enrolment rates are comparable with those of other students (refer to *Go8 Backgrounder 8: The international tendency to concentrate capability*). Low SES students' lower propensity to apply is related, inter alia to their Year 12 results, which are lower on average than for medium or high SES students (Figure 1).

While low SES students who make it to university do as well as others, for a given tertiary entry score (TER), there is evidence that low SES school students are less successful at translating academic ability (measured by Year 9 results) into a corresponding TER (Cardak and Ryan, 2006).

Equal outcomes in school rests on equal access to quality educational opportunities. At present there is unevenness of provision of infrastructure, quality teaching, subject choices and access to study supports such as revision classes, all of which have an impact on final exam results. Government funding is needed to bring these items up to a high standard so that students from all backgrounds have the same opportunities to develop their readiness for higher education.

Figure 1: Proportion of applications to Australian universities by SES grouping, 2009



Improving schooling for Australian students of all SES backgrounds is a very large challenge requiring a long-term solution. The current review of school funding offers an opportunity to begin to tackle the problem. In the meantime, diversified pathways and entry programs, together with more diverse ways of identifying academic potential, will be vital.

Universities can contribute to this by focusing on teacher education and by using their research capabilities to provide an evidence base for social inclusion policies and strategies needed to improve achievement and readiness of students from under-represented groups.

Even less is known about the preparedness of potential mature age students from equity groups, and the factors that influence their access to university. In addition to outreach programs aimed at low SES school students, a successful equity strategy will develop specific programs and admissions schemes for older disadvantaged students. In addition to broadening the pool of school leavers interested in university study, a truly inclusive equity strategy must reach out to potential students who did not have an opportunity earlier in life to undertake tertiary education.

The Go8 has commissioned a research project on *Access to university for people from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds*, which will assist in understanding how best to identify academic potential and provide access for students from more diverse backgrounds and non-school leavers. In addition, institutions such as the University of Sydney and the University of Western Australia are investigating selection and admission practices which recognise the diversity of students' prior educational opportunities.

Retention and success

Effective reporting and monitoring of "success" indicators must be put in place. The current formula for allocating funding under the Participation component of Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program (HEPPP) does not include completion or retention data despite the program objectives explicitly stating:

'The Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) provides funding to eligible universities to improve access to undergraduate courses for people from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds, in addition to improving retention and completion rates of those students.'

Source: DEEWR website, 17 August 2010.

Given the quantum of funding available under the HEPPP, incentives are high for universities to quickly increase the number of low SES undergraduate students enrolled, without regard for likelihood of success.

There are significant risks to the student, the higher education sector and Government if the participation imperative is not augmented with consideration of a student's ability to succeed.

If a student is given a place at a university and fails to progress, he/she will incur a Higher Education Loan Program (HELP) debt which will need to be repaid on an income contingent basis. The private returns on this investment will be limited if the study does not lead to a qualification. There is also the opportunity cost to the student of the time spent studying. And a negative experience could be a disincentive to participate in study in the future and become a basis for discouraging family members and friends.

For the Government, an increase in the attrition rates of higher education will call into question the efficiency of the expenditure on the sector. It may also have to carry a greater unpaid HELP burden. In addition, there is a considerable reputational risk for the higher education sector as a whole if quality is seen to be compromised.

There is evidence to suggest that students from equity groups need intensive high-cost supports such as one on one Language and Learning supports. Funding of these services is important for the success and retention of these students, and recognises the investment that universities and the students themselves have made. Effective reporting and monitoring of success indicators should be put in place to ensure adequate investment is being made in effective support.

Understanding the progress of students

There is a need for systems which pick up the complexity of disadvantage, particularly that experienced by students who are members of more than one equity group. Double or multiple disadvantage is common. Although low socio-economic background is shared by many who have multiple group membership, the present policy focus on low socio-economic background alone is inadequate. The diversity within equity groups is overlooked—students may be identified and counted as being low SES, but it is not known if they are a mature aged student or a school leaver, Indigenous or non-Indigenous, someone who has work or family responsibilities or neither.

A more fine grained approach to the equity measures is necessary to pick up the complexities of multiple group membership disadvantage and assist universities to develop integrated strategies to deal with that complexity (Ferrier and Heagney, 2001:94).

In order to monitor access, retention and success of under-represented groups in particular disciplines and level of course (eg. Indigenous medical practitioners and lawyers from under-represented groups with postgraduate qualifications or low SES males in top band Commonwealth Supported Places) institutions need to be able to track students from primary school to postgraduate studies.

Student support

Although universities have implemented, or are in the process of implementing, the participation and equity goals outlined in the *Review of Higher Education* (Bradley), the Government has yet to give universities the 10 per cent more funding per student on 2007 levels recommended in the Review. More funding is needed to meet significant costs associated with maintaining an adequate level of student to staff ratio and providing a higher level of support required for those students who are less prepared for academic study. This is evident in the distinct differences in school achievement by SES, shown in Figure 1.

Even when school students have aspirations for higher education, those aspirations can be curtailed by the perception and the reality that attending university costs a lot of money. (OECD studies in 2006 and 2009 indicate that Australian students pay a very high proportion of the costs of the university education when compared with students in other OECD countries). With the present pricing system universities do not have the option of offering discounted places to students (both undergraduate and postgraduate) who would benefit from the opportunity to participate in higher education. Fixed pricing levels remove a potential funding source for institutional equity bursaries and scholarships which can play a vital role in both the access and retention of under-represented groups.

Financial resources

While some students receive financial support from their parents, many depend on their part-time jobs for their accommodation, food, transport and study costs (James et al, 2010). The dependency on employment is particularly acute for students with dependent children.

The Go8 believes better targeted and increased levels of student allowances are necessary to ensure those students with high cost burdens can undertake study. Funding their living expenses and income foregone are bigger deterrents to non-participation than debt-aversion for many students from underrepresented groups. Therefore it is important to increase income support delivered to students via Youth Allowance and Austudy to adequate levels.

Accommodation and transport

A key barrier to access at Go8 universities is mobility and the high cost of living in inner-metropolitan areas. The solutions of affordable housing and more efficient and reliable transport are essentially government planning and infrastructure investment issues. Universities and governments will need to work together to develop innovative approaches to public-private projects for housing and to look at alternative delivery modes, such as licensing of courses to other education providers in outer-metropolitan and regional areas.

Improving student readiness and widening aspirations

Successful outreach requires a long-term commitment and includes working with teachers, parents and the students themselves. Recent research shows (Gale et al, 2010) that the primary school is the optimum time to involve students in outreach programs. Early interventions are a long-term investment and require dedicated, stable funding over a long period to produce results.

However levels of aspiration to higher education vary from region to region and community to community. Recent research conducted in the western suburbs of Melbourne with secondary school students demonstrated their aspirations were already high but they were sanguine about the possibility of realising their ambitions. The survey demonstrated that:

- overall most student respondents (68%) believe they will go to university sometime after they finish school;
- higher proportions of students from low SES backgrounds report they intend to go to university but may not be able to because of results, money, transport, proximity. This mirrors UK experience reported by Sir Martin Harris, Director of the Office of Fair Access “other factors...especially their schooling...depress their measured attainment below that which reflects their higher education potential” (Harris, 2010:7); and
- although confidence is high overall, students from LSEBs are less confident about the possibility of going to university, particularly students who speak English at home.

Source: Bett and O’Callaghan, 2010.

Diverse approaches to outreach involves tailoring programs to the needs and characteristics of local communities. It is important to shape outreach programs’ elements to the particular demographic and location of communities. The University of Western Australia provides outreach programs in the Pilbara many hundreds of kilometres from its home campus. The community in the Pilbara is very different from the one targeted by Monash University in Dandenong in the outer suburbs of Melbourne. Here there is a large multi-cultural population as well as small communities of Australian Indigenous and African refugee peoples. Providing outreach programs for non school leavers and mature age students is particularly challenging. Different approaches need to be employed and relationships built in community education settings, via adult education centres, local libraries and TAFEs.

Objectives

- To have a student body participating in higher education that reflects the overall diversity of the Australian community. This will be supported by a more representative academic staff profile.
- To ensure anyone with the capability to benefit from higher education can gain access and has the means to successfully complete their desired level and course of study.
- Raise the aspirations and engagement of disadvantaged Australians to maximise the country’s productive output though harnessing untapped talent.
- To improve the overall health and wellbeing of all Australians.

Solutions

There are a number of areas in which governments, at the various levels, have responsibilities that greatly impact on the success of initiatives undertaken by universities in the equity area.

In addition to the specific equity measures being implemented, governments also have an obligation to ensure:

- Appropriate funding for places, scholarships and income support. Further initiatives which would be considered are:
 - a. an increase to base funding levels for funded places in line with the Bradley recommendation of 10% more funding per student on 2007 levels;
 - b. offering equity-based income support via Government and industry funded scholarships to HDRs in designated equity groups;
 - c. offering stipends and scholarships, in partnership with industry, for part time postgraduates from designated equity groups with work and family responsibilities;
 - d. ensure funding for in-depth outreach activities for students in primary schools as a means of raising readiness and aspiration for tertiary education is adequate and ongoing;
 - e. adopt a more flexible pricing system that enables universities to offer discounts for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who can benefit from higher education; and
 - f. supporting institutions to offer discounted places in full fee courses for coursework students from designated equity groups, through compact negotiations.
- Up-to-date and accurate data on student retention and success are available to universities to assist them in evaluating the outcomes of their programs.
- Criteria and guidelines for access to student finance do not discriminate or limit access to all levels of study by students from under-represented groups.
- Community infrastructure is adequate to support successful learning outcomes. This includes provision of quality early childhood, primary and secondary education and health care facilities.
- Affordable access to student accommodation and transport in and around university campuses, particularly in inner-metropolitan locations.
- Provide a sound and consistent measure/s of SES and other equity groups. The following specific issues need to be addressed:
 - a. the current measure of SES only applies to current circumstances. It is important to have one measure for commencing and current students and another one which identifies family background. The circumstances both cultural and financial which impact on commencing undergraduate students may not be operating when those students are of mature age and/or postgraduates;
 - b. much of the DEEWR data releases are lagged which has a negative impact on monitoring and tracking equity performance. The sector is committed to transparency and cost effective provision of equitable education. It needs recent and relevant data to ensure the investment in equity is well allocated as well as data by which to judge the utility of its equity programs and strategies;
 - c. collect and publish data which identify students in more than one equity group; and
 - d. implement the proposed tracking system for students from their primary schooling right through to their postgraduate education.

Attachments

Attachment: Go8 approach to social inclusion

Go8 approach to social inclusion

Go8 universities have a distinctive role to play in ensuring Australia's higher education system meets the broad goals and needs of our community and provides opportunities for all those with academic potential. It should also aim to reflect in the student and staff bodies the different educational and cultural backgrounds of Australian society.

Based on the key capabilities of Go8 universities, it was agreed by Vice-Chancellors the best way they can contribute to a more socially inclusive higher education system is to:

- increase aspirations and readiness for those with the capacity to succeed in higher education;
- provide multiple pathways for access, including through structured arrangements with other post-secondary education and training institutions;
- improve access to graduate level courses for those from under-represented groups to facilitate better outcomes in research, the academic workforce, and professional pathways;
- contribute to the body of knowledge on improving the educational attainment, retention and success, and social inclusion of people from disadvantaged backgrounds; and
- undertake research activity which reflects the broader needs of the society and looks to find solutions to current and future issues facing all Australians, and in particular Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

The Go8 secretariat appointed Margaret Heagney as National Student Equity Convenor in May 2010. Margaret will be responsible for co-ordinating and facilitating the group's equity activities and will be the public advocate for the Go8 on equity issues.

In line with dot point 4, the Go8 has commissioned two pieces of work, being undertaken by the Centre for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE) at the University of Melbourne, to progress our social inclusion efforts:

- Go8 Equity Evaluation Framework that will facilitate benchmarking between Go8 universities and provide a template for the assessment of equity and social inclusion activities.
- A Literature Review on *Access to university for people from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds*, which will focus on a broad range of alternative mechanisms for identifying academic potential and facilitating access into graduate programs by underrepresented groups. (Supported by funding from DEEWR.)