



The GAPS Think Piece – Issue 12

Promoting Equity in Higher Education: The Measurement and Reporting of Disadvantage in Australia

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Australia has witnessed a marked expansion in domestic higher education participation and improvement in attainment in recent decades. In 1989, there were approximately 356,000 domestic undergraduates studying in Australian universities and only 12.3% of the population aged 25 to 34 had a university bachelor degree qualification. By 2014, domestic undergraduate enrolments had swelled to over 751,000 and bachelor degree attainment among 25 to 34-year-olds had reached 37%.

Accompanying this historic expansion in higher education participation has been an increasing focus on ensuring equitable access to the Australian system through a series of key policy initiatives, including:

- the introduction of 'income contingent' loans for student tuition, whereby students pay back debt only after they enter the workforce and are earning at a rate above the median adult wage;
- the expansion of student income support; and
- the funding of access and participation programs at the university level.

An important aspect of the Australian response has been the transparent and reliable reporting of participation rates by disadvantaged groups. The reporting of equity participation data can provide a point of focus for policymakers and practitioners without necessarily becoming an end in and of itself. This has been the case in Australia where for the 25 years the Federal government has mandated the national collection of statistics on student participation in higher education with particular reference to measuring disadvantage or – as we prefer to emphasise the desired outcome in Australia – equity in participation.

This formal collection of statistics began in Australia with the release of a major report from the Federal government in 1990, *A Fair Chance for All*. This report led to the collection and reporting of higher education student enrolment data and the classification of 'equity' students across six major groups:



- people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (Low SES students);
- people with disability;
- Indigenous people;
- people from rural and isolated (remote) areas;
- women (which became Women in Non-Traditional Areas – WINTA); and
- people from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds (NESB).

These groups have historically been characterised by their under-representation in Australian higher education. *A Fair Chance for All* outlined the case for expanding participation among these groups. The subsequent review into measuring equity status, the 1994 Martin Review (*The Review of Equity and General Performance Indicators in Higher Education*) established the definitions for these core equity groups. It also outlined a process for collecting data on students' status as part of universities' operational reporting to the Federal government through the higher education online collection system in Australia, known as the Higher Education Information Management System (HEIMS). As a result, Australian higher education institutions provide equity data on students as part of their standard reports to government.

Current equity group definitions and the method of data collection for each are reported in the accompanying table (see Table 1).

Perhaps the outstanding feature of reporting equity group status in Australia is the simplicity of the system. Students issue a simple self-report ("yes/no") for Indigenous or disability status. Postcodes of permanent residences at the time of enrolment are used for the identification of disadvantage associated with low socio-economic (low SES) and regional and remote status. WINTA students are identified on the basis of their enrolling area. This simplicity has ensured the development of a comprehensive collection and reporting system in Australia.

A critical factor in the development of this system is that it allows for comparisons to be made between equity group shares of population and higher education participation rates. By way of example, Table 2 outlines the relevant population "Reference Share" for each equity group, except WINTA, which is 50% of enrolment in a relevant discipline. In essence, the reference share describes that percentage of total student population which equity groups should comprise such that their representation equals or approaches that of their community population share.



Table 1 Method of Identification and Definition of Australian Higher Education Student Equity Groups.

Student Equity Group	Method of Identification	Definition
Low socio-economic status (Low SES) students	Postcode/SA1 area of student's enrolling address	Socio-economic status (SES) is assigned to students on the basis of the SES of the geographical location in which they reside, as identified by postcode, or as now, by ABS statistical area (SA1) classification. All SA1 areas are ranked on the basis of ABS estimates of the Socio-Economic Index for Areas (SEIFA) of Education and Occupation calculated using census data. LSES students come from the bottom 25% of Australian SA1s (with a postcode backup) in a national ranking.
Students with disability	Self-reported	Students who self-report disability to their higher education provider, either at the time of their enrolment or during the course of their studies. Major disability classifications are: Hearing; Learning; Mobility; Visual, Medical; and Other.
Indigenous students	Self-reported	Students who self-report as Indigenous to their higher education provider, either at the time of their enrolment or during the course of their studies.
Students from regional areas	Postcode/SA1 area of student's enrolling address	Regional students are defined as having a permanent home address in an SA1/postcode area that is classified as regional using historic Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) classifications and the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS).
Students from remote areas	Postcode/SA1 area of student's enrolling address	Remote students are defined as having a permanent home address in an SA1/postcode area that is classified as regional or remote using historic Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) classifications and the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS).
Women in non-traditional areas of study (WINTA)	Enrolment in identified major	Female students who are enrolled in the Natural and Physical Sciences; Information Technology; Engineering and Related Technologies; Architecture and Building; Agriculture, Environmental and Related Studies; and Economics and Econometrics.
Students from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB)	Self-reported	Students from a non-English speaking background who have been resident in Australia for less than ten years.



As the table shows, equity groups have been historically under-represented in Australian higher education. For instance, we can define low SES students as residing in areas which contain the bottom 25% of the Australian population using Australian census data to characterise educational disadvantage. In 2003, only 16.5% of university students could be classified as low SES on this measure. Students with disability accounted for 3.9% of total undergraduate numbers in that year, compared with their 2006 reference share of 8%. Similarly, in 2003, all equity groups saw student representation below their population share.

Table 2 Student Equity Enrolment Proportions, Undergraduates, Table A Providers, 2003-2014, selected years

Student Equity Groups	2003	2007	2010	2012	2014	Reference Share (2006)
Low SES	16.5%	16.2%	16.7%	17.3%	17.9%	25.0%
Students with Disability	3.9%	4.4%	4.8%	5.2%	5.8%	8.0%
Indigenous	1.3%	1.3%	1.4%	1.4%	1.6%	2.3%
Regional	20.7%	19.1%	19.1%	19.1%	18.9%	25.4%
Remote	1.2%	1.0%	1.0%	0.9%	0.9%	2.4%
NESB	3.1%	3.2%	3.1%	3.4%	3.6%	3.7%

Note: National reference shares are calculated from reported state and territory population reference shares using 2006 population weights. Equity ratios for "All Students" including postgraduates are commonly reported in Australia, this table just presents estimates for undergraduates only.

For much of the decade and a half to 2007 over which data were collected on equity group participation, the target measures barely moved as equity student enrolments increased in line with the expansion in the general student population. This period of stasis was characterised by an ongoing commitment to widening participation in Australian higher education within the structures and support mechanisms initiated in the early 1990s. However, this changed in 2007 with the election of the Rudd Labor Government which ascribed a central role to educational attainment, establishing a 40% target for bachelor degree attainment among 25 to 34 year olds and importantly, a specific target for low SES participation of 20% of undergraduate places by 2020, compared with 16.2% in the year in which they entered office.

The 20% target for low SES participation was the major focus of policy, with the introduction of the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Programme (HEPPP) seeing significant funding – around A\$790 million over 2010 to 2016, plus more for some earlier partnership projects – flowing through to universities to support outreach programs aimed at increasing low SES enrolment.



Underpinning the Rudd government's commitment to widening participation in higher education was a shift in higher education funding to a 'demand driven' system whereby universities had increased discretion to set place limits on most courses with some exceptions in the medical and health sciences. Uncapping university places resulted in an unprecedented expansion in undergraduate enrolments in Australia, growing approximately 31.6% between 2007 and 2014 (528,844 students to 695,869 students).

As a consequence of these two policies, low SES participation in Australian higher education undergraduate courses increased from 16.2% in 2007 to 17.9% in 2014. Other equity groups saw flatter performance with the exceptions of Students with Disability, who saw an increase in representation, primarily thought to be due to increased self-reporting. NESB students emerged as the first equity group to see their higher education enrolment share converge on their population reference share (3.6% share of higher education enrolment in 2014 versus a 2006 population share of 3.7%).

Given the context of a significant expansion in places, the fact that equity groups have been able to at least maintain their shares of enrolment is encouraging, suggesting that the uncapping has contributed to widening participation in higher education in Australia, but also the realisation that there is much work to be done. To this end, the measurement of equity group performance is now being extended into critical areas:

- tracking student participation in outreach programs on a formal basis and as part of an important push into program evaluation;
- monitoring equity group academic performance in higher education and not just access and participation rates; and
- monitoring outcomes data so that equity group performance can be monitored, ensuring that participation translates into completions and employment and post-study outcomes commensurate with policy goals.

Further References:

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