

Submission to Review of Australian Higher Education

Equity of participation for people from lower socio-economic backgrounds and rural and isolated areas

Associate Professor Richard James
Centre for the Study of Higher Education
The University of Melbourne

Policy resulting from the current review of higher education is likely to provide a critical turning point in the way equity is conceptualised and managed within the sector. This submission is concerned with the relatively low participation rates of people from lower socio-economic backgrounds and people living in rural and isolated areas, though the points made in it are largely relevant to other groups for which participation equity remains an issue, including indigenous people and people with disabilities.

Higher Education at the Crossroads correctly points out that the expansion of access to higher education has improved the participation rates of people from lower socio-economic backgrounds and people living in rural and isolated areas. The relative participation shares of these two groups have altered little however. Australian higher education remains significantly socially polarised.

In crude aggregate terms, for every ten urban people on a per capita basis who attend university, roughly six rural or isolated Australians will do so. The situation for people from lower socio-economic backgrounds is roughly similar, though slightly worse: on a per capita basis, only five people from lower socio-economic backgrounds attend university for every ten people of medium or higher socio-economic backgrounds (James et al. 1999).

These imbalances have remained much the same for the past decade. They reflect differences in school completion rates as much as they do differential rates of transition to higher education for people who have completed senior secondary schooling. They also reflect aggregate differences in academic achievement levels that arise directly from cumulative disadvantages in educational opportunities rather than intrinsic shortfalls in intellectual ability or potential within these community groups.

The social polarisation in Australian higher education participation is particularly evident when demographic variations between universities and courses are taken into account. People from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less successful in applying for and gaining access to the high demand universities and courses. The Go8 universities fall well below the national mean for participation share of people from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Even the institutions most effective in enrolling students from lower socio-

economic backgrounds (Victoria University — 24.4 per cent of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds as a percentage of non-overseas students in 1999, Griffith University — 23.1 per cent, and the University of South Australia —22.7 per cent) fail to reach the population reference value of 25 per cent.

Social justice alone suggests policies and programs to encourage participation equity should continue undiminished. The review of higher education should consider the potential impact of new higher education policies on existing participation imbalances. Fee deregulation, for instance, would be likely to have two effects on participation equity unless appropriate policy measures are in place.

1. Higher fees would be a significant deterrent for people from lower socio-economic backgrounds and rural/isolated areas (regardless of whether or not deferred payment is an option, since there is some evidence of debt-aversion among these groups). An overall downturn in participation could be anticipated.
2. The present social polarisation across universities would be intensified as prospective students from lower socio-economic and rural/isolated backgrounds are deterred or excluded by the dual effects of highly competitive entry requirements and the (presumably) higher fees sought by the universities/courses for which there is high demand. The prospect of the universities which confer the greatest positional status serving a social elite would loom large.

The costs of higher education are particularly serious inhibitors or barriers, especially the expenses associated with leaving home for rural school students. CSHE research (James et al 1999) shows that at least twice the proportion of the least advantaged school students (lower socio-economic background students who live some distance from university campuses) believe that the cost of university may stop them attending university compared with the most advantaged students (urban, higher socio-economic background students). Forty-one per cent of lower socio-economic background school students believed their families probably could not afford the costs of supporting them at university. Well over one-third of lower socio-economic background students indicated they would have to support themselves financially if they went to university.

But the underlying causes of higher education participation imbalances for school-leavers are far more complex than simply the deterrent effect of the cost of higher education for lower income families, even though the problem is often depicted in this way. The imbalances are a result of significant differences in perceptions of the relevance and attainability of higher education that steadily build-up prior to the crucial decision-points in the final years of secondary schooling.

For this reason, equity initiatives focused on the school-university transition will have limited impact if they:

- address the problem of educational disadvantage only in terms of removing cost barriers/inhibitors; and
- if they operate exclusively or primarily at the point of transition from school to university.

The present participation inequities *might* be reduced, however, if there is a commitment to focusing more energy on the early stages of the creation of educational ambition.

Recommendations

The higher education sector needs to reconsider how participation can be broadened. New and creative policies are needed to encourage and support the participation of under-represented groups.

To make a significant difference, equity programs for people from lower socio-economic backgrounds and people living in rural and isolated areas must have two thrusts:

1. programs must reach back into early secondary education to raise expectations and possibilities in schools and communities (this has been realised in the UK, where universities are striving to reach Prime Minister Blair's goal of widening participation among low-income families); and
2. programs must facilitate access at the point of transition through alternative entry mechanisms and financial support.

Seen in this light, broadening participation is without doubt costly and there are no quick fixes. Non-traditional students are more costly to attract to university and require more academic support and other forms of support once enrolled. Special financial arrangements and incentives are needed.

At least three strategies would be required to make serious inroads into the present participation imbalances. The higher education system would need to:

1. Initiate programs in under-represented schools/communities to build aspirations, raise confidence in the relevance of higher education (and post-secondary education more broadly), and contribute to higher academic achievement. This would require universities working cooperatively with schools and TAFE colleges.
2. Preserve a proportion of higher education places and create alternative entry schemes for prospective students who are of considerable academic potential but who are likely due to their circumstances to be unsuccessful in securing the high grades needed for competitive entry to the courses in greatest demand. This suggestion will elicit concern about 'falling standards', but it is a vital component of a serious equity agenda.
3. Ensure scholarships are available to remove financial deterrents and hardship.

The higher education review might critically examine how higher education participation could be widened in these ways. Consideration might be given to funding a small number of collaborative equity ventures between universities, TAFE colleges and schools in

selected urban and rural regions. The ventures should be targeted at the junior and middle secondary years.

Continuing improvement in the pathways into higher education that bypass competitive selection procedures is essential. Competitive entry based on school achievement is a major stumbling block for young people from lower socio-economic and rural or isolated backgrounds: in their personal assessment of their possibilities; in their actual chances; and in their assessment of the labour market value of courses to which they might realistically gain access. The high demand universities/courses have a community obligation to attach a priority to academic merit in selection policies, but they also have an obligation to consider other factors as well. Equity initiatives in these settings will need to be innovative and ambitious if student recruitment bases are to be widened and if a broader cohort of students are to be retained and to thrive academically once at university.

References

- James, R. (in press) *Socio-Economic Background and Higher Education Participation: An analysis of school students' aspirations and expectations*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.
- James, R., Wyn, J., Baldwin, G., Hepworth, G., McInnis, C., & Stephanou, A. (1999). *Rural and Isolated Students and their Higher Education Choices: A re-examination of student location, socioeconomic background, and educational advantage and disadvantage*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.