Equity beyond the university boundary

Australia
26/05/19

Author

Matt Brett

Matt Brett is Director of Academic Governance and Standards at Deakin University.

Tags

- Social Mobility
- Students

I have been exploring the idea of the university as part of a cross-institutional reading group.

We have read much of Ronald Barnett, who suggests ‘contemporary thinking about the university is hopelessly impoverished’. If there is truth to this critique, our thinking of what we in Australia call non-university higher education institutions (NUHEIs) is near bankrupt. There is little scholarship into NUHEIs and even less that examines equity. Together with colleagues from La Trobe and Victoria universities and supported by a research grant from the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education we set out to examine equity at and beyond the boundary of Australian universities.

NUHEIs are by definition beyond the university system and have been so since the late 1980s when the binary system was collapsed by then Education John Minister Dawkins into the unified national system. Many colleges merged or were absorbed by universities at this time, but some were locked out of the new university-centric system.

The Dawkins reforms led to a marked expansion of the university system, financed through introduction of income-contingent loans. Universities have since enjoyed the bulk of policy focus, public subsidies and preferential access to the student loans program.

NUHEIs were excluded from the loan program until the mid-2000s. They are free to charge whatever tuition fee they deem reasonable, but student loans attract a 25 per cent loan fee. The absence of direct subsidies and the loan fee are perceived as making it harder for NUHEIs to embrace equity because students are at least 40 per cent worse off in terms of costs of education.

Equity is everyone’s business
One might speculate as to whether equity participation and performance is higher or lower in NUHEIs as a result of these policy settings. However, until this research, there has been little information upon which informed judgement could be made.

It’s worth stating why student equity is relevant to NUHEIs. The public underwrites tuition fees and in 2018 NUHEIs received over $500 million through FEE-HELP. The public financing of NUHEIs warrants improved transparency, but equally important is the point that all higher education providers must comply with the Australian Higher Education Standards Framework, which includes diversity and equity standards.

The study was possible because equity is a part of the higher education data collection. What has been missing is the reporting and analysis of the data, representing a collective oversight by policy makers, researchers and NUHEIs alike. This is all the more striking when one considers that growth in NUEHI enrolments was more than double that for public universities from 2012-17. One in 13 domestic students are now enrolled in NUHEIs, despite all the incentives being directed toward universities.

The research found that in terms of equity groups, retention and success is lower for NUHEIs than public universities. NUHEI students are, however, more satisfied than their university counterparts.

The main game in Australian higher education equity policy is participation of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds. So it’s interesting to see that participation rates are now higher in NUHEIs than at public universities at undergraduate level. Comparison of NUHEI and universities participation rates masks considerable variation across both. For almost all equity groups, NUHEIs include both the highest and the lowest performers in the sector on measures of participation, success, retention and satisfaction.

The study invited representatives from six NUHEIs with stronger equity performance to participate in interviews. Better performance was found across various categories: for-profit and not-for-profit; faith-based and secular; and, self-accrediting and non-self-accrediting NUHEIs. The interviews suggest that better NUHEI equity performance arises organically rather than the result of intentional strategy. A commitment to student-centred learning and cultivating a sense of belonging within smaller student populations was described as important across these NUEHIs.

**Challenging assumptions**

The research throws light on a neglected aspect of the system but poses important questions. Our assumptions about the role of public subsidy in student equity are challenged by those NUHEIs that enrol more diverse students, with better outcomes and greater satisfaction than public universities.

At the other end of the spectrum, too many NUHEIs are underperforming in equity, and could learn much from those that perform better. These NUHEIs might also face closer regulatory scrutiny on how they are meeting diversity and equity standards.

Finally, the voice of NUHEI students remains hidden. It is important to know about their experiences, good and bad, and understand why a growing number are choosing NUHEIs
when their cost of participation are so much higher. Improved transparency for NUEHI equity performance data will be important to answering these questions and improving system quality over the long term.