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Helping disadvantaged students deal COVID-19

The burden of COVID-19 will not fall evenly ... it is time to increase the targeted funding of equity groups

By ANDREW HARVEY

The burden of COVID-19 will not fall evenly. Students with a disability, financial disadvantage, and poor internet and computer access are already more likely to withdraw from university, and to cite *financial and health* reasons for doing so. Achievement gaps will grow as poverty, anxiety, and mass online learning expose a *disparity of resources, dispositions, technology, and parental support*. Universities have done an *admirable job* of providing bursaries to those most affected, but the scale of need is unprecedented. Beyond *CSP guarantees* it is time to increase the targeted funding of equity groups.

Students with a disability already form the fastest growing equity group in Australian higher education. Numbers will rise further given the *well-documented mental health impacts* of the pandemic, yet funding per student has declined for many years. The Disability Support Program needs strengthening.

The *Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program* (HEPPP) has greatly helped universities to support financially disadvantaged students. Again though, the scale of the pandemic has underlined the precarity of employment, food insecurity, and widespread poverty that already confronted many students. Increasing HEPPP is now critical to widening participation and preventing attrition.

Numerous recent reviews have highlighted the regional digital divide and need to increase regional university participation rates. A regional version of HEPPP and an Enabling Program boost would provide financial assistance, pathways, and technological support for regional students.

Finally, Indigenous students *remain under-represented* and face unique risks in the pandemic. Closing the gap requires a stronger Indigenous Student Success Program.

Through specific programme funding, equity support can be targeted, delimited, and sustainable. Without such funding, the student equity gains of the past decade are highly endangered.

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