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### Following the facts or the money?

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**PUBLICATION of data moves slower than the sector, so recent changes in student trends can be hard to identify. However, there was clearly no decline in quality during the initial expansionary phase of higher education from 2009-11. Attrition rates, student-staff ratios and student feedback in this period all indicate rising standards and satisfaction. And while quality was preserved, a more diverse sector was also created.**

Following adoption of the Bradley Review, the sector expanded rapidly. In 2009, there were 15,000 additional undergraduate commencements, and by 2011 the sector had grown by 18.6 per cent.

During the first years of rapid growth, there was no evident decline in academic quality. Adjusted retention rates actually rose by around 2 per cent. Student success rates varied little. Even student to staff ratios remained stable, despite an estimated 33,000 additional undergraduate commencements over the three years.

There is little current evidence to support claims of over-crowded lecture theatres filled with ill-prepared and unhappy students. Based on the Australian Graduate Survey, satisfaction has continued to rise. In 2011, over 82 per cent of graduates reported they were happy with their course. The proportion of graduates agreeing that they received good teaching has also increased since Bradley. Any quality crisis has been largely asserted rather than argued.

What about all the students now being accepted with low ATARs? The demand-driven system has certainly led to more offers for lower school achievers. Between 2011-13, offer rates for applicants with an ATAR of 50 or less increased from 18.2 per cent to 32.5 per cent. However, these students still comprise a tiny proportion of the sector.

About half of university applications are made by non-Year 12 applicants. Among the other half, students with an ATAR below 50 represented just 4 per cent of offers in 2013. Universities are not being overwhelmed by low school achievers.

Moreover, most students with relatively low ATARs are actually successful at university. There is some correlation between school performance and university achievement, and legitimate concerns about attrition in some disciplines. There is also a need for universities to work closely with schools to improve achievement, particularly in regional areas. Nevertheless, even the most recent data shows that student retention rates rose again in 2012. Most enrolment growth has met the demand of academically capable students.

Quality and money are not the only considerations in the demand-driven debate. The market for places was established partly to improve opportunity for under-represented groups. This has been a relative success story.

The numbers of low-SES students enrolled at university rose dramatically between 2009-11, though their proportion rose only marginally. Many of the fastest growing universities have been regional, including the University of the Sunshine Coast which increased domestic student enrolments by 37 per cent. The absolute growth of regional enrolments is not reflected in a rising proportion of sectoral share, but expansion has improved access for thousands of low-SES and non-metro students.

More is needed. Some groups remain under-represented, and selective professional courses are still dominated by students from wealthy backgrounds. Postgraduate education has become a new field of stratification in which a quarter of all students are enrolled. If the market for places remains, targeted programs such as HEPPP will still be required to improve equity within the sector. If caps are restored, interventions will become even more important to ensure that higher education reduces rather than reflects inequality.

Australia's educational performance is frequently defined as high quality, low equity. Under the demand-driven system to date, improvements to equity have been made without any apparent decline in quality. In reviewing the system, it is important that we follow the evidence rather than just the money.

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