Low-SES, regional students struggle with university admission

KATHERINE TOWERS
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Career advisers and parents of students from low-income backgrounds and regional areas are directing students away from university, in a sign that the federal government’s $500 million-plus flagship equity program to improve tertiary access for disadvantaged students is failing to hit the mark.

A report from La Trobe University also found disadvantaged Year 11 students across Victoria and NSW had a poor understanding of university admission schemes and little support in navigating the complex and burdensome process of tertiary entrance.

Low socioeconomic status and regional Year 11 students did not know the process for applying to university, were not aware of equity and scholarship schemes or the existence of principal recommendation schemes, and were unlikely to understand the Year 12 subject weighting system.

“Confusion was highest among regional and low SES students, groups who were also the least certain of their post-school destinations. These results highlight the difficulty students have in navigating the complexity of the tertiary admissions landscape,” says the report, titled The Adaptation of Tertiary Admissions Practices to Growth and Diversity.
Little more than one-third of students surveyed chose subjects based on the knowledge they would help boost their Australian Tertiary Admission Rank, compared with almost 50 per cent of high-income students who chose subjects based on weighting.

The report also found low-SES and regional students were relying on support and advice from teachers and career advisers for their choice.

“Of those not intending to pursue further study after school, Year 11 students from low-SES and regional areas were the most likely to say that parents, guardians, teachers and career advisers had helped them make the decision about what to do after school.

“The majority (60 per cent) of those who indicated they intended to go directly into employment cited financial reasons for this, while another 15 per cent provided answers related to getting an early start in life.”

Chief researcher Andrew Harvey said researchers were focusing on how the complexity of the tertiary entrance system affected the decision-making of Year 11 students, particularly focusing on students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Researchers surveyed Year 11 students, secondary school career advisers, first-year university students, leaders in state-based admissions centres and the directors of university admissions departments.

Dr Harvey said researchers were most surprised by low-SES Year 11 respondents who revealed a general lack of understanding of the processes required to enter university and the schemes available to boost their chances of entry.

“There needs to be better transparency, clarity, consistency and efficiency surrounding equity schemes such as the plethora of principal recommendation schemes,” he said. “The system is messy, the bonus points are messy, the weighting system is messy and students from low-SES schools and regional areas are the most affected.”

He said schools targeted by the federal government’s $553m Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program were the least likely to understand how the system worked.