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Questions of equity are not applied equally

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DURING the admissions process, most universities compensate applicants for educational disadvantage by providing bonus points. Students in multiple categories of disadvantage can receive more than 25 additional points to their aggregate score, opening doors to courses they otherwise may be denied.

The logic is admirable, but there are issues of concern with the present approach.

There is an unstated philosophical divide about what constitutes disadvantage, and this plays out across the state-based tertiary admissions centres. Definitions of disadvantage are inconsistent across institutions, as are the levels of compensation. This is exacerbated by low transparency, with few institutions publishing the number of bonus points available for each eligible category.

Also, students are generally required to opt in to demonstrate their disadvantage, which relies on them completing forms that are often not widely advertised. Finally, the consideration of disadvantage differs by type of application, with the growing number of direct-entry applicants receiving limited or no capacity for compensation in some universities.

So, just how is educational disadvantage defined for admissions purposes? The NSW admissions centre considers compensation for students who have suffered "long-term educational disadvantage as a result of circumstances beyond their control or choosing". In Victoria this definition is broadened to include short-term disadvantage, while in Queensland the equity access scheme is designed for students who have experienced "difficult circumstances that have negatively impacted on their studies".

These differences are subtle but they reflect different philosophical approaches to disadvantage. For example, Queensland includes educational disruption, home environment and responsibilities, and financial hardship. These are specific circumstances rather than broader structural factors such as class and geography. In Queensland you may be considered disadvantaged if you have frequently changed schools or had a disrupted school environment. In Victoria you may be considered disadvantaged automatically by attending a school in a rural or poor area where university transition rates are low. Whether structural disadvantage should be compensated, or whether only the circumstances of each individual should be considered, is a philosophical and an empirical question. At present the answer hinges on which side of the border your university of choice lies. Perhaps a national tertiary admissions centre would provide a better answer.

To complicate matters further, individual institutions have very different approaches to the allocation of bonus points. While the tertiary admissions centres consolidate categories of disadvantage and verify individual claims, institutions ultimately determine what constitutes disadvantage. In this they are often guided by data on participation rates. Indigenous

students, for example, have relatively low participation rates and universities provide compensation for applicants largely on this evidentiary basis.

Other categories are less clear. As a cohort, students from a non-English-speaking background are actually over-represented at university but they record relatively low academic achievement and graduate outcomes. So, should this cohort be provided with bonus points to access university? Well, that depends on the institution. A student from a non-English-speaking background who arrived in Australia seven years ago would be eligible for up to 15 bonus points at RMIT, but zero at Melbourne.

Sex is another controversial category. Targets for participation of women in non-traditional fields have been met and the category since abandoned, but many universities still provide bonus points to female applicants in engineering and information technology. Some universities also provide bonus points to male applicants in areas such as nursing and education. Swinburne University of Technology provides compensation only for women, while the Australian Catholic University provides compensation only for men. Does sex reflect underlying disadvantage or merely under-representation?

What counts is easier to work out than for how much it counts. Prospective applicants usually need to contact individual institutions and even then universities may be reluctant to reveal their calibration scales.

This secrecy reflects the fact equity has become a battleground. Bonus points are ostensibly offered to compensate for disadvantage, but they also affect market share, Australian Tertiary Admission Rank cut-off levels and perceptions of quality. Reaching equity targets means receiving funding through various programs or mission-based compacts. Unfortunately, the lack of transparency may be hindering those already hindered.

A further issue is that most students are required to opt in by completing a specific application form. If compensation for educational disadvantage is difficult to apply for, then many eligible applicants will not act.

This problem could be partly resolved by greater automation. Some institutions automatically attribute bonus points to students from a list of identified schools, alleviating the need for separate forms.

Finally, compensation for disadvantage is not always available for applicants outside the tertiary admissions centre process. Many mid-year, transferring and mature-age applicants apply directly, missing out on equity schemes. The expansion of equity schemes to postgraduate level could be considered.

A more student-centred system requires definitional clarity, consistency across states, transparency among institutions and consideration of the structural and individual causes of disadvantage.

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