A new report has found entrenched inequity in universities’ employability programs.

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Universities strive to provide equitable opportunities for people starting their tertiary education journeys but drop the ball on students emerging out the other side.

A new report has found entrenched inequity in universities’ employability programs, with financially and socially disadvantaged students routinely missing out on career advice, CV coaching and the internships, overseas experience and extra-curricular activities valued by bosses.

The findings, to be released today by La Trobe University, suggest a naive view of employability as a “neutral concept” — with all students participating equally — could widen the disparities in career success between graduates from privileged and disadvantaged backgrounds.
It also could hurt universities, as graduate outcomes increasingly underpin their reputation and funding — particularly as creeping credentialism erodes the “wage premium” conferred by degrees.

“Universities are increasingly being judged and held accountable for what their students do after graduation day,” the report warns.

“Institutional employability strategies that are established uncritically may well contribute to social closure and exacerbate existing inequities among student groups.”

The researchers compared university employability programs in Australia, the US and Britain. They also conducted a desktop analysis of Australian university websites and surveyed career managers and student union leaders.

A central finding was that hard data was difficult to find.

“Student equity is not a systematic part of most strategies,” the report argues.

“Few universities collect data on the participation of equity groups within their employability experiences, and any allocation of specific funds to assist under-represented groups is sporadic and rarely monitored or evaluated.”

The problem extends to student-provided services. “Student unions can produce and access very little data on the participation of equity group students in university clubs, societies or employment,” the report says.

“Extra-curricular activities are rapidly being expanded and rewarded, often with minimal consideration of accessibility and equity implications.”

The report also found that students were “marginalised” from the development of institutional strategies. Their results were “masked by attrition data” — because university dropouts were overlooked in graduate outcome figures — and could be encouraging perverse consequences.

“Rather than redoubling their efforts to improve student equity, some universities may see new policy drivers as an incentive to restrict access to only the most ‘employable’ and ‘retainable’ of students,” the report says.

“The employability agenda raises questions of where university accountability ends, but also of where it begins.”

Lead author Andrew Harvey said the study’s most striking findings were an “institutional disconnect” between careers and equity offices, and the fact optional activities were becoming mandatory. He said degrees were no longer enough, with graduates also expected to furnish evidence of globetrotting, cultural competence, voluntary experience and participation in massive open online courses.

“A lot of records of extra-curricular activity are being formally rewarded and recognised on transcripts, testamurs and e-portfolios,” said Dr Harvey, director of La Trobe’s Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research. “These are helpful in a way, but they raise real equity issues. “

He cited research findings that disadvantaged students avoided extra-curricular activities because they thought academic achievement was more important.