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Student equity in higher education is imperilled

Andrew Harvey



We'll take the best and the brightest, as long as they have the resources to pay.

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Student equity in higher education is imperilled. While the financial and broader needs of students have increased, the capacity to meet them has reduced. Universities will need to improve their efficiency and embed equity across institutions to meet the new challenges of the pandemic.

Covid-19 has exacerbated the digital divide, mental and physical health issues, employment precarity, and student poverty. At a time of already rising need, the Australian government's recent changes to higher education have also increased tuition fees and reduced public funding to the sector.

By 2024, the government will have cut expenditure on higher education by over a billion dollars since 2020. At that point, the government will spend over 50 per cent more on private schools than it will on higher education.

For students, one outcome of government policy changes will be higher fees. Average fees will rise by 8 per cent overall, but by 10 per cent for women and 15 per cent for Indigenous students. For universities, declining public funding combined with falling international student revenue will mean difficult choices. It is critical that equity is prioritised when these choices are made.

Despite their increasingly corporate language, public universities are not-for-profit organisations that were founded to serve their communities. Government funds support specific equity groups, but institutions have a broader obligation to ensure that all capable students can succeed.

First, we need to understand and reward academic merit in context. Understandably, there has been much recent debate about the limitations of ATAR. The rank remains a narrow measure of capabilities and skills and is correlated with socio-economic status. For these reasons, a university student from a regional public school usually outperforms a student from a private, metropolitan school who has the same ATAR. Understanding context is thus important for both equity and academic reasons.

Despite this evidence, many institutions still rely on ATARs not only for admissions but in awarding scholarships to secondary school students. Allocating scarce university funds on the basis of ATAR alone is not justifiable on equity or merit grounds. By contrast, Harvard and similar selective American universities do not award any tuition discounts without means testing. Accounting for financial need does not undermine merit but simply recognises that all merit is contextual and resources are limited.

Universities often provide on-campus accommodation for students, and these beds could be allocated on the basis of need. A recent scholarship proposal by the Australian National University to support accommodation for eligible students provides a welcome innovation. Other institutions have fewer financial resources but beds can still be prioritised where demand exceeds supply. Allocating the first residential accommodation places to those in need should be standard practice, with or without subsidies.

Many courses require students to undertake placements within schools, hospitals, and other worksites as a condition of completion and, in many cases, accreditation. These placements can involve months of full-time labour, usually unpaid. Other courses include optional work-integrated learning (WIL) offerings where students can gain workplace experience, again often unpaid. Such activities are valuable for future employment but often not valued.

To undertake these placements, some students need to reduce or even resign their own paid jobs, while extra-curricular activities may be out of reach altogether. Universities need to enable under-represented students to participate by offering

need-based financial bursaries and support. More broadly, the sector needs to work with industry to ensure that accreditation and placement requirements do not prevent capable students from enrolling or succeeding in certain courses.

Similar activities such as study abroad will soon return, where students can undertake both short-term and long-term placements overseas to gain valuable experience. Again, universities can offer need-based financial support to diversify the range of students able to travel overseas for these important opportunities. Cohort initiatives would also encourage under-represented students to participate, where small groups of students can travel together as a team.

Embedding equity requires attention to all levels of higher education. Enabling programs, which provide a pathway into higher education for many under-represented students, have suffered reduced government funding under changes announced last year. Such programs may become loss leaders but remain critical to increase representation of Indigenous, low socio-economic, and other under-represented students.

At the other end, postgraduate and higher degree by research levels require a commitment to equity. In particular, the allocation of limited postgraduate Commonwealth Supported Places is critical. Supported places are required to assist students who could otherwise not enrol, and should be allocated with financial need in mind. At higher degree level, the academic merit of all scholarship applicants needs contextual assessment, and need could be a priority for scholarships and broader support.

Embedding equity requires a whole of institution commitment, supported by dedicated evaluation, research, and leadership. Such a commitment would ensure that universities fulfil their mission to support local communities. The embrace of equity also supports academic excellence, ensuring that the best and brightest can succeed irrespective of their financial background and means.

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