

Originally published in The Australian: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/opinion/minorities-have-right-to-share-of-postgrad-pie/story-e6frgcko-1226401538935>

Minorities have right to share of postgrad pie

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- From: [The Australian](#)
- June 20, 2012 12:00AM

AUSTRALIA'S great unseen equity problem is in postgraduate and higher degrees. Only 11 per cent of postgraduates and 8 per cent of doctoral students are from disadvantaged backgrounds. Despite constituting more than a quarter of the nation's population, rural and regional students represent only 11 per cent of continuing PhDs. The message is clear: improving access to undergraduate courses is not enough.

The dearth of disadvantaged students at postgraduate level has several consequences. More than a quarter of Australian university students are enrolled at postgraduate level. These students are more likely to enter professional and managerial occupations and to get a wage premium for their additional education. The Beyond Graduation Survey 2011 reveals that full-time employed bachelor graduates who completed their degree in 2008 earned a median salary of \$66,000, while their postgraduate counterparts were earning \$85,000.

How might postgraduate access be broadened? To find solutions we need to understand the major causes of under-representation.

The majority of research is conducted at the Group of Eight universities, which also enrol the bulk of higher degree students and large numbers of postgraduates. They are all based in major cities and enrol relatively low numbers of disadvantaged undergraduates. Due to low levels of institutional mobility many students continue their education at the same university in which they completed their first degree. Thus, the postgraduate profile largely resembles the undergraduate profile, but with even fewer under-represented students.

Strategies that could be adopted to remedy the imbalance include redirecting some equity scholarships to postgraduates. Need as well as merit could be considered in the allocation of higher degree scholarships. More radically, funded postgraduate places could be offered to selected students from low-socioeconomic and regional schools. The University of Melbourne has used a similar policy to guarantee professional postgraduate places to Year 12 students with the highest ATARs. In the US, the federally funded McNair Program targets academically capable first-generation college students in financial need, and enables them to participate in structured research and additional educational activities.

At a policy level, the federal government could set specific targets for postgraduate and higher degree participation. Targets could be developed in line with more transparent data about postgraduate courses and cohorts. The remission of HECS debts for completing higher degree students is another potential policy that would advantage low-socioeconomic and regional students. Debt aversion affects employment as well as educational outcomes. As the recent report on Australia's research capacity noted, greater access to youth allowance, public transport concessions and relocation assistance would help.

In its response to the report, the federal government argued that its equity interventions at undergraduate level will flow through to increased participation at the postgraduate and higher degree levels. However, evidence from both Australia and Britain suggests postgraduate study may become even more stratified as undergraduate access is broadened.

Universities can still reinforce privilege while trying to mitigate it. As postgraduate study becomes more widespread and its benefits more pronounced, under-represented students will need to be supported to share these benefits.

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