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Free enabling programs key to education equity: Andrew Harvey



One study found that about 30 per cent of students in some enabling programs were from the lowest socioeconomic decile

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University fees are a strong deterrent among the poorest 10 per cent of students despite the availability of income-contingent loans, new research has found.

And a proposal to charge fees for enabling programs would actively discourage participation among the most underprivileged groups.

Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds have more than twice the rate of representation at enabling level courses than they do at undergraduate level, the research found.

“Indigenous people represent 1.5 per cent of undergraduate students but 6 per cent of enabling students. Students from refugee backgrounds, mature-age students and those from foster-care backgrounds are also more likely to enrol in a free enabling

program than any other pathway,” said Andrew Harvey, director of the Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research at La Trobe University.

“By contrast, the student demographics in vocational education pathways, where fees are charged alongside loans, look very similar to undergraduate demographics. It is only enabling programs that are truly widening access.”

Dr Harvey said about 30 per cent of students in some enabling programs were from the lowest socioeconomic decile.

“This is important because most university data examines socioeconomic status only by quartiles. When we look more closely at deciles, we can see very clearly the people for whom income-contingent loans are a barrier to university,” Dr Harvey said. In the lowest socioeconomic decile, fewer than 10 per cent of people hold a degree, compared with 58 per cent of those in the highest decile. Similarly, only 9 per cent of 18 to 19-year-olds in the lowest socioeconomic decile were participating in higher education in 2011, compared with an average of 28 per cent across all deciles, and 55 per cent within the highest decile.

“A person from the highest socioeconomic decile is more than five times as likely to hold a bachelor degree as someone from the lowest decile.”

Dr Harvey said evidence that the most disadvantaged students were more likely to access free enabling courses undermined continued government messaging that income-contingent loans ensured that no one was blocked from participating in higher education because of cost.

“It is time to challenge that belief. The government has relied on this widely held view in its proposed changes to university enabling programs,” he said.

Under proposed changes, government loading for enabling courses will be cut and students will be charged the equivalent fee, amounting to \$3223, but can access the Higher Education Loan Program.

Dr Harvey said a national survey of more than 2500 enabling students found that almost two-thirds said that free or low-cost pathways strongly influenced their decision to enrol.

“Many of these people are carers, single parents and others whom the government considers target groups for new employment measures,” he said.

“After completing their enabling programs, students record better retention rates than other equity group students at university, despite typically being more disadvantaged.”

Dr Harvey said the new data highlighted the limitations of the HELP scheme.

“University participation of disadvantaged students has not worsened after previous increases to fees, but neither has it improved much,” he said.

“For 25 years, the proportion of university students from the lowest socioeconomic quartile has hovered between 15 and 16 per cent.

“HECS is broadly equitable, but it still deters some groups from accessing university.”

Dr Harvey said the measure would have a very modest impact on government expenditure on higher education and in the longer term would be “negative for budget repair and negative for human capital”.

“A more coherent approach would rationalise and expand the provision of enabling programs nationwide, alongside related reforms to promote social mobility,” Dr Harvey said.