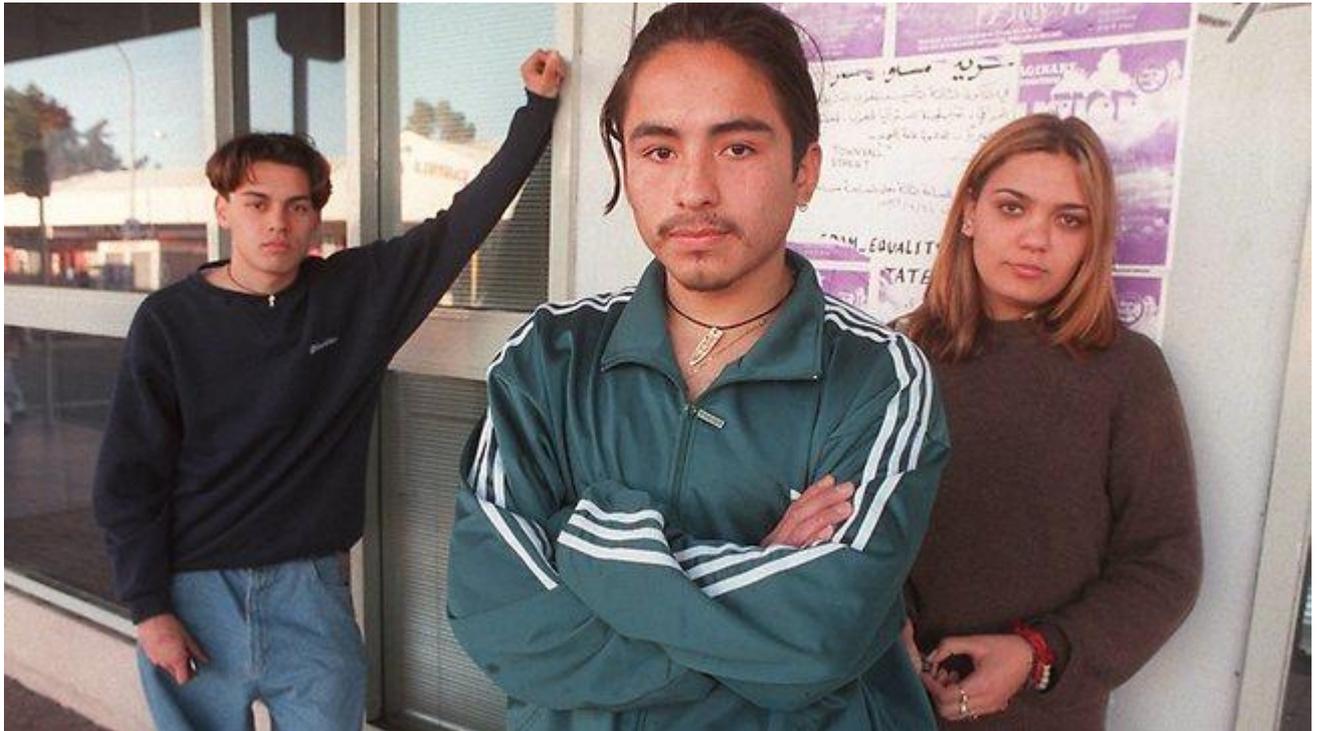


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Language too big a barrier for non-English speakers

- By: *Andrew Harvey and Kemran Mestan*
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Students from non-English-speaking backgrounds are underachievers at university and under-employed after it. Picture: Troy Bendeich *Source: Supplied*

THE equity debate requires broadening from the present focus on access to include academic achievement and graduate outcomes.

While the main challenge for regional and poorer students remains just getting into university, other equity groups confront different forms of disadvantage during or even after their studies.

Students from non-English-speaking backgrounds, for example, are underachievers at university and underemployed after it. Their plight highlights the need for a policy approach that targets disadvantage at all points of the higher education spectrum.

The 2011 census shows NESB students are under-represented in higher education, comprising 5.3 per cent of the general population but only 3.5 per cent of higher education students. The declining NESB participation rate largely reflects changes to migration policy, with Australia accepting a higher proportion of skilled migrants since 2001.

Nevertheless, university access remains extremely limited for groups such as refugees. Targeted strategies are required to increase participation of these and other under-represented communities. Academic achievement is also problematic. NESB students have relatively high rates of subject failure, despite showing relatively high levels of persistence. In 2009, their success rate was 0.98 while their retention rate was 1.02, where the sectoral average is represented as 1. So while they have higher than average retention, they also disproportionately fail subjects.

Why? Expectations around academic culture and language provide some clues. What unites this cohort is a background in which the English language was not the first spoken. Unlike international students, NESB students are not required to undertake an entrance test in language proficiency, but language command remains pivotal to their likelihood of achievement.

A recent study by the University of Technology, Sydney found that some international students demonstrated little improvement in English language proficiency throughout the course of a university degree. In that study, only two of 40 students beginning their courses with the sector-minimum IELTS score of 6.5 ultimately reached the level of 7.0 demanded by employers.

Language difficulties affect domestic students as well as international ones. There are NESB students who struggle to access academic support and to understand lecturer accents and teaching styles. A 2002 study found that many students understand the rules of language but have trouble applying them within a disciplinary context. How universities confront the challenge of language proficiency within their teaching models is crucial.

Graduate outcomes provide even greater cause for concern. The Australian Graduate Survey reveals that NESB students are more than twice as likely as English-speaking students to be seeking full-time employment. Last year, that equated to 44 per cent of recent NESB graduates compared with just 16 per cent of graduates from an English-speaking background. The gap is particularly pronounced in fields such as engineering and is not explained by rates of further study, which are similar for both cohorts.

Command of the language is pivotal to employment outcomes, as are employer perceptions. It has been argued, in Canada at least, there may be an "ethnic penalty" that involves employer discrimination towards newly arrived migrants and those with strong foreign accents.

Equally, NESB students often have relatively weak networks, and employability is about connections as well as qualifications.

Universities may need to promote the broader student experience, including opportunities to join campus clubs and societies, volunteering and leadership groups. Work-based learning and community engagement could also be embedded across the curriculum. Finally, institutions could continue to work with employer groups to prevent potential discrimination on grounds of ethnicity, accent or appearance. The equity category of NESB highlights the need for policy to focus beyond access. As Central Queensland University vice-chancellor Scott Bowman recently noted: "What we as a sector produce at the end of a student's studies should be far more important than what we begin with."

Universities pride themselves on adding value by raising the academic achievement and employability of all students. Despite this frequently stated view, some student cohorts still appear to be disadvantaged within and beyond university. We struggle to attract regional students, to retain indigenous students and to provide jobs for NESB graduates. At each point of the higher education continuum there remain serious inequities.

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