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Equity package is no gift for regionals

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THERE are very real risks that the federal government's new equity package will move funds from country to city, from mature-age students to school leavers and from postgraduates to undergraduates.

Under the proposed deal, universities will create access agreements with the government that will include both participation funding and new commonwealth scholarships money.

Participation funds will be \$700 million over four years while scholarships money could be up to \$3 billion. In other words, there will likely be more money designated as equity funding, but it will not be distributed evenly.

Two policies, in particular, will advantage city campuses over regional ones. First up, some participation funding will reward student success beyond merely turning up and will look to success rates — the number of subjects attempted and passed.

This will favour the elite Group of Eight universities, all of which are in capital cities. These institutions typically record strong success and retention rates, largely because their students enter with high ATARs. The result will be a slight shift of funds towards metropolitan campuses.

More significantly, the proposed scholarship scheme will see urban universities raise large amounts of money for equity purposes. Elite universities will charge higher fees and 20 per cent of the profits will be directed towards disadvantaged students.

Certainly, some regional students will benefit by relocating to study but, as has been widely reported, regional campuses will raise less revenue than their urban counterparts.

Mature-age students may also receive relatively less funding. Elite universities enrol much higher proportions of school leavers than outer metropolitan and regional institutions.

In 2012, two thirds of undergraduates in Go8 institutions were school leavers, compared with 30 per cent at regional unis.

The largest scholarship funds will likely be used to attract more school leavers rather than older students and undergraduates rather than postgraduates. Undergraduates are also likely to attract more government-sourced participation funding. Indeed, it is at postgraduate level where the three axes of disadvantage align. Those considering postgraduate courses will likely already be carrying a level of undergraduate debt.

Most postgraduates will head towards the cities, as deregulation shifts research resources further towards the elite universities. And many who receive government-supported

postgraduate places are also likely to be school leavers whose place was promised upon undergraduate entry, such as at Melbourne University.

Are there ways of addressing these issues? Regional students are already considered an equity category (albeit one whose participation has not budged in 25 years).

It's not surprising the Regional Universities Network is lobbying for the Go8 universities to be excluded from participation funds, a pooling of commonwealth scholarships money and an increase in regional loading.

Another option is to directly reward all universities for their regional enrolments. Neither the participation funding nor the regional loading actually does this. Low socioeconomic and regional students represent similar proportions of the population and similar participation levels. Funding them in similar ways makes some sense. Equally, the access agreement guidelines could focus on regional students.

Evidence from Britain on widening participation suggests university outreach is far too metro-centric, partly because of economies of scale.

Australia likely suffers the same problem, on a much vaster scale. It is simply much easier to deal with multiple schools in neighbouring suburbs than to travel to remote areas. Yet, with school achievement being the major barrier to university, outreach is critical to raising regional participation rates.

Mature-age students could be managed at least two ways. Pooling some scholarships would help this cohort, as well as regional students. More radically, the group could be formally added as a recognised equity category, with data and targets to drive action.

Postgraduate students could also be considered within the new scholarships framework.

One concern of deregulation is it could exacerbate postgraduate inequity.

If elite institutions invested some of their scholarship funds at postgraduate level, this could promote institutional mobility. It might also let regional and other students pursue otherwise unattainable higher qualifications.

The fate of the three cohorts will depend partly on how the access agreements are framed.

In Britain the agreements are managed by the Office for Fair Access, which has been praised for its independent leadership and guidance.

Critics says the OFFA does not have enough teeth, sets targets of variable quality across institutions and has not conducted enough research to inform practice.

Australia can learn from this. Our access agreements may devolve responsibility to institutions and encourage greater sectoral diversity. However, clear guidelines and targets will still be needed if the government aspires to meet national equity objectives.

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