Enrolments of disadvantaged students rise slowly

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The proportion of low socioeconomic status students has risen from 14.8 per cent to 16.3 per cent.

Universities must boost efforts to increase enrolments of disadvantaged students, with signs showing that numbers have reached a new equilibrium.

The latest student statistics, which cover the first half of 2015, show that progress among equity groups has been modest.

The proportion of low socioeconomic status students, both undergraduate and postgraduate, has risen to 16.3 per cent from 14.8 per cent in the equivalent period of 2008.

While indigenous enrolments have increased from 1.2 per cent to 1.5 per cent, they remain well below parity.
Enrolments from regional Australians have declined from about 17.4 per cent to 17.1 per cent. The statistics suggest an expensive exercise in recruitment has had little effect on student composition, with outstanding HECS debt rising from about $17 billion to $40bn over the same period.

The equity drive also suffered from cost-cutting by successive governments.

Labor converted start-up scholarships for poor students into loans and made a $26m cut to the flagship program in 2012, while the Coalition also cut it by another $51 million in 2014.

Mary Kelly, equity director with Queensland University of Technology, said universities should not be disheartened by the recent figures showing only incremental growth. “It’s the first time in decades that there has been any growth whatsoever,” Ms Kelly said. “We’ve got to keep our nerve and persist with partnerships to stimulate demand.”

The last comprehensive examination of higher education in Australia, the 2008 Bradley Review, spawned a major focus on social inclusion.

It gave rise to a target for 20 per cent of undergraduate enrolments to come from the most disadvantaged quarter of Australian society by the year 2020.

That target was abandoned by then education minister Christopher Pyne in 2014.

Ms Kelly said that on current trends, the low-SES component would reach 18 per cent by 2020. But she said this was good progress, given that raw numbers of disadvantaged students had risen substantially. She said the figures suggested the low-SES proportion had been growing by one-third of a percentage point a year, rather than the 0.5 per cent required to reach the Bradley target.

“If we can keep going, in 10 years’ time higher education will look quite different.
“It’s a glass half-full issue. If you take the past as a frame of reference, (the low-SES component) didn’t move at all as a percentage for over a decade.”

Ms Kelly said experience from Britain suggested five to 10 years was needed to shift university student composition. She said the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program — subsequently reduced to the Higher Education Participation Program — had been crucial to progress, and the 10 per cent cut had been “relatively small” in a challenging budget scenario. “HEPPP has been a survivor,” she said. “All universities up-scaled their efforts when it came along, and they have stayed in the game.”

Andrew Harvey, who heads La Trobe University’s Access and Achievement Research Unit, said HEPPP had triggered vital attitudinal change among young people who had assumed university was “not for them”.

He said that universities triggered “a change in expectations, not only among students but also teachers and parents”, when they established connections with schools.

Dr Harvey attributed the drop-off in regional participation to under-achievement at school.

He said many non-urban schools lacked the resources to offer subjects such as economics and languages, which are weighted to give good university entry scores.

“For a range of reasons, regional school achievement is a lot lower, and that hits university participation.

“There’s no easy way around that — putting more campuses around the place doesn’t get you more prospective students.”

He also questioned assumptions that demand for the uncapped university system was now saturated, saying that a spike in births about a decade ago was likely to translate into more school leavers down the track.
“There’s quite a lot of growth coming through the system that we probably didn’t think was there five or 10 years ago.”