Dr Who? Equity and diversity among university postgraduate and higher degree cohorts

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Lack of equitable access at the higher levels of university is detrimental to individuals and more broadly to economic productivity and social cohesion. This paper considers the nature and extent of under-representation in postgraduate and higher degree study and proposes responses at both the institutional and policy levels. Particular focus is given to low socio-economic and regional students within the Australian context. Major causes of postgraduate inequity include the pipeline effect, which is fuelled by institutional stratification and low levels of institutional mobility. Moreover, the influence of financial barriers and limited cultural capital does not ‘wash out’ during undergraduate study. Proposed institutional strategies include redirecting a proportion of equity scholarships to postgraduates, giving consideration to need in the allocation of postgraduate scholarships, and offering funded postgraduate places to selected disadvantaged students. At a policy level, suggestions include government targets for postgraduate participation, undergraduate debt remission, and increased postgraduate Commonwealth-supported places.

Keywords: higher degree; low socio-economic status; postgraduate; regional students; student equity; widening participation

Introduction

The under-representation of some groups in postgraduate and higher degrees is problematic and likely to become exacerbated. In outlining the nature and extent of this problem, the authors focus on the increasing prevalence, cost, and importance of postgraduate and higher degree study, the extent of unequal access, and the broad implications of educational stratification for social justice and economic prosperity. Particular emphasis is given to students from the lowest socio-economic quartile and from rural and regional backgrounds, as these two groups are widely and persistently under-represented in higher education. The authors examine the specific causes of under-representation at the higher levels of university, particularly within the Australian context.

Consideration is subsequently given to current responses to the policy challenge of under-representation. The authors argue that the Australian Government’s approach to postgraduate inequity is limited, and the belief that greater undergraduate diversity will naturally flow through to the higher levels of study is challenged. Potential strategies are consequently canvassed to address the lack of student diversity at postgraduate and higher degree levels. These strategies are divided into institutional measures and public policy initiatives.
What is the problem and why does it matter?

Students from low socio-economic and regional backgrounds are significantly under-represented in Australian higher education. On average, a student from a high socio-economic background is approximately three times more likely to attend university than a student from a low socio-economic background (Lomax-Smith, Watson, & Webster, 2011). Many low socio-economic students are also from regional and remote areas and experience compound disadvantage as a result (James, Baldwin, Coates, Krause, & McInnis, 2004). The problem of limited access to higher education has been well-documented and is now the subject of numerous strategies at government and institutional level. In the 2009–2010 budget, the Australian Government set a target of 20 per cent of undergraduate enrolments to be students from the lowest socio-economic quartile by 2020, and has since allocated substantial funding to support this goal through the Higher Education Partnerships and Participation Program (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011a). At postgraduate and higher degree level, the problem of representation appears even worse.

A very small number of low socio-economic students currently continue to postgraduate level study, with an even smaller proportion going on to higher degree study. Heagney (2010) notes that low socio-economic students constitute only 10.5 per cent of the total Australian postgraduate cohort. The under-representation of some students is most evident at doctorate level where the cohort is predominantly metropolitan and from medium to high socio-economic backgrounds. In Australia in 2008, just 8 per cent of continuing PhD students came from low socio-economic backgrounds, despite this group constituting 15 per cent of the overall university cohort and 25 per cent of the population. There is little evidence that the effect of class simply ‘washes out’ through undergraduate level.

Students from rural and regional backgrounds are also under-represented at postgraduate and higher degree levels. In Australia in 2008, only 11 per cent of continuing PhD students were from rural and regional backgrounds, despite this group constituting 17 per cent of the overall university cohort and 27 per cent of the population (Heagney, 2010).

Wakeling and Kyriacou (2010) have identified at least three reasons to be concerned about the manifest under-representation of some groups within postgraduate education. Australian and international evidence highlights that levels of qualification are closely linked to outcomes in occupation, wealth, and other life benefits (e.g., Graduate Careers Australia, 2011; Lindley & Machin, 2011). On one level, ensuring broad access to the private advantages of postgraduate education is therefore a question of social justice. More broadly, societies depend on research and innovation to drive their economies. If barriers to entry are preventing particular cohorts from accessing postgraduate and research course offerings, the talent pool of potential researchers will be narrow and the quality of national research output is likely to be diminished. Finally, Wakeling and Kyriacou hypothesise that there may be an escalator effect, whereby the highest status universities attract a relatively narrow cohort of undergraduates (predominantly high socio-economic) who subsequently form a highly concentrated pool of potential researchers for the sector. A vicious circle is thus created in which the socio-economic diversity of the research pool is narrowed. While their hypothesis is based on the British higher education sector, there are clearly parallels in Australia, particularly between the Russell Group universities, which dominate research funding and activity in the United Kingdom (UK), and the Group of Eight coalition of research-intensive Australian universities, which account for more than two-thirds of university research in Australia (Group of Eight, 2012).
There are also institutional risks in any potential narrowing of the postgraduate cohort. Drawing on the Bradley Review, Nigel Palmer notes that postgraduates not only support close to 60 per cent of Australia’s research and development effort and perhaps 70 per cent of universities’ overall research output, but also as much as 50 per cent of the teaching capacity in universities (Palmer, 2010). Postgraduate supply is therefore necessary to support the ambitious undergraduate growth targets of the Australian Government, but it is also central to the undergraduate equity agenda. Attempts to widen participation may be constrained if the university teaching cohort is not itself reflective of a cross-section of society, and at worst pedagogy may become informed by class prejudice. As Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) argue, social reproduction is derived in part from transmission of the cultural capital and beliefs of educators to students in the classroom.

An increase in the proportion of the population acquiring undergraduate degrees has resulted in credential inflation and a rise in the number of students continuing to postgraduate education (Wakeling, 2009). Tomlinson (2008) found a growing sense among students that ‘the degree is not enough’ pressuring some students to seek postgraduate credentials to gain an advantage in the competitive job market. In Australia, the proportion of university students enrolled in a postgraduate degree was 7.5 per cent in 1990, 14 per cent in 2000, and 26.8 per cent in 2010 (Hare, 2012). In the United States (US) and Great Britain, postgraduate qualifications are now held by just over 10 per cent of the workforce and more than a third of all college graduates (Lindley & Machin, 2011). It is therefore becoming progressively important to limit barriers to postgraduate study that may affect some groups disproportionately.

Postgraduates are more likely to be employed after graduation compared with undergraduates (Smith et al., 2010). Unemployment rates in Australia stand at about 2.6 per cent for postgraduates, 3 per cent for undergraduates and 7.1 per cent for individuals with no post-school qualifications (Ross, 2012). It has been predicted that there will be increased demand for highly qualified labour in future years. Access Economics (2008) projected employment growth for people with postgraduate qualifications at an average of 3.6 per cent per annum, compared with 2.9 per cent for undergraduates and 1.6 per cent overall employment growth. Internationally, the postgraduate share of employment has increased sharply over the past few decades. In the US, the postgraduate share of employment increased from 7.5 per cent in 1980 to 13 per cent in 2009. In Great Britain, the postgraduate share of employment increased from 4 per cent in 1996 to 11 per cent in 2009 (Lindley & Machin, 2011).

Students with postgraduate or higher degrees are more likely to enter professional and higher managerial occupations, although there is considerable variation by course and mode of study. For example, nearly 80 per cent of employed Australians with a PhD are working in a professional occupation and 13 per cent are working in managerial jobs (Edwards et al., 2009 as cited in Edwards, 2010). These are also the fastest growing occupation types (Access Economics, 2008).

Evidence suggests that employers consider qualification levels as an indication of productivity and general abilities (Machin & Vignoles, 2005). Lindley and Machin (2011) found that postgraduates were more likely than college-only graduates to be employed in positions requiring specialist knowledge, advanced numeracy, and complex computer tasks. Further, postgraduates are more likely than less qualified workers to strongly agree that their job is interesting, helpful to other people, and useful to society (Wilson et al., 2005 as cited in Norton, 2012). Given the link between education levels and employment opportunities, it is not surprising that there is also a strong relationship between education levels and earnings.
Indeed, postgraduates earn more on average than individuals whose highest qualification is an undergraduate degree (Smith et al., 2010). According to the Australian Beyond Graduation Survey 2011, full-time employed bachelor degree graduates who completed their degree in 2008 were earning a median salary of $66,000, while their postgraduate counterparts were earning $85,000 (Graduate Careers Australia, 2011). This puts the average weekly earnings for full-time employed graduates at $1270 for those with bachelor degree and $1635 for those with a postgraduate degree. To put this in context, the average weekly earnings for Australian adults at the time of the survey was at $1305 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011).

A similar trend can be observed internationally. Mean weekly earnings for US doctoral graduates are around 50 per cent higher than those of bachelor degree graduates (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). On average, those with higher qualifications are also likely to earn considerably more than graduates over their lifetime. Researchers from the London School of Economics estimated that, over a lifetime, individuals with a masters degree earn 15 per cent more, and individuals with a PhD earn 23 per cent more, than those with a first degree (Smith et al., 2010).

The clear financial advantage underlines the importance of breadth of postgraduate access. More broadly, nations worldwide are increasingly reliant on a workforce with postgraduate qualifications. In Australia, growth in masters and doctoral degrees in the decade from 2000 to 2010 was largely the result of international student numbers. Indeed, domestic masters student enrolments actually decreased over that period (Larkins, 2011). If access to the highest level of university is being impeded by factors of demography or background, the economic and research capacity of the nation will necessarily be limited.

What are the causes of under-representation at postgraduate and higher degree levels?

Paradoxically, one of the major causes of under-representation at postgraduate level may be widening participation at undergraduate level. As the previous section demonstrated, the expansion of higher education means higher levels of qualification are needed to distinguish employment candidates. Aware that postgraduate degrees are frequently required for professional success, students are voting with their feet and, increasingly, with their wallets. Demand for postgraduate study has risen rapidly, and universities have adjusted their fee structures accordingly. The University of Melbourne modified its curriculum to transfer professional courses from undergraduate to postgraduate level in 2008 and most postgraduate coursework places attract substantial fees (Potts, 2012).

The extent to which improvements in access to undergraduate education may be undermined by an increasing selectivity of postgraduate education is canvassed by Paul Wakeling in his 2009 doctoral thesis (Wakeling, 2009). Wakeling considers two opposing viewpoints: first, that the impact of class diminishes at each additional level of education; and second, that postgraduate education is replacing undergraduate education as the mark of distinction. In the first instance, Wakeling cites evidence of the diminishing effect of class at each additional level of education (Hansen, 1997; Mare, 1980; Shavit & Blossfeld, 1993). By this theory, the effect of socio-economic status on postgraduate access should be extremely small, and Wakeling notes that some international evidence does support this view. Nevertheless, conflicting international evidence, including from Australia, conforms more to the theory of ‘social closure’ which emphasises the role of education in reproducing inequality and preserving societal systems of power (Wakeling, 2009). Though the data remain varied and contested, in some contexts it does appear
as though postgraduate education is replacing undergraduate education as a positional advantage.

Most notably, Wakeling highlights ‘the symbolic capital which attaches to a first-degree from particular universities or types of university’, and notes that in the British data he analysed, ‘the first-degree institution attended was a clear indicator of the likelihood of progressing to postgraduate study’ (Wakeling, 2009, p. 292). In summary, institutional stratification accounted for much of the difference in postgraduate participation among socio-economic groups. Wakeling’s observations could be applied to Australia with a further note around low institutional mobility.

The Group of Eight universities are the leading generators of PhD scholars in Australia, accounting for 52 per cent of all PhD student load (Harman, 2002). At the undergraduate level, the Group of Eight participation share of people from low socio-economic backgrounds is at about 11 per cent, which is well below the national mean (Centre for the Study of Higher Education, 2008). With small numbers of low socio-economic and regional students at the undergraduate level, a pipeline of privilege is created. This pipeline is exacerbated by relatively low mobility among Australian postgraduate students (Kiley & Austin, 2008).

While doctoral students in many countries undertake their PhD at a different institution from their original degree institution, and are expected to study overseas as part of their doctorate, the Australian PhD cohort has been described as a stay-at-home cohort, with few students changing institutions and even fewer moving between States (Kiley & Austin, 2008). The Beyond Graduation Survey of 2009 reveals that, of those surveyed, more than half of bachelor degree graduates in full-time further study were enrolled at the same institution at which they completed their undergraduate study in 2006 (Graduate Careers Australia, 2009). The survey notes that natural and physical sciences graduates, who are the most likely to continue to postgraduate education, are also the most likely to continue studying at their previous institution (75 per cent). Institutional stratification can be seen as a major reason for unequal postgraduate access in Australia. Because the most elite universities are all metropolitan-based, there is also a regional element to the stratification.

Breaking the cycle of exclusivity relies in part on expanding access within the undergraduate cohorts of the Group of Eight universities. Interestingly though, many research-intensive institutions are seeking to transfer student load from undergraduate to postgraduate level, and the main sources of undergraduate growth nationally are the newer universities such as Australian Catholic University (Hare, 2012). By moving most or all professional degrees to postgraduate level, some have argued that greater postgraduate equity may result because undergraduate performance will determine entry rather than school exam results, which are correlated with socio-economic status (James, 2007). Nevertheless, existing evidence around low institutional mobility, together with the increasing cost and length of professional degrees under the new scenarios, leave questionable the extent to which such measures might increase equity.

It could be argued in the name of specialisation and diversity that elite universities should focus on ‘quality’ and leave the widening participation agenda to the newer universities to fulfil. The likely impact on the postgraduate cohort of such a move would, however, be concerning. Similarly, any deregulation of undergraduate fees which would narrow the student intakes in elite universities would likely result in further divisions of access beyond undergraduate level. The Group of Eight itself has argued that the Commonwealth focus on low socio-economic undergraduate targets is overly narrow, and that there is a clear need to ‘improve access to graduate level courses for those from under-represented groups to
facilitate better outcomes in research, the academic workforce, and professional pathways’ (Group of Eight, 2010, p. 7).

Apart from the specific effects of institutional stratification, financial disincentives to study remain a major reason for uneven postgraduate access. In Australia, the proportion of fee paying postgraduate coursework students has risen sharply since the mid-1990s, compared with those studying on Commonwealth-supported places. Between 1996 and 2005, the proportion of domestic postgraduate coursework students who were paying fees rose from 30 per cent to 80 per cent and, despite a gradual decrease, still sits at almost 60 per cent (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011b). The rewards of further study are high, but the financial costs are also rising. Postgraduate study can cost from approximately $6,500 for a graduate diploma to $57,000 for a Masters of Business Administration (Boyd, 2008). Rising fees impact upon access, completions, and outcomes as low socio-economic students are typically both poorer and more debt-averse (Burdman, 2005; Callender & Jackson, 2005). Belasco and Trivette examined US data and found that for the periods 1999–2000 and 2007–2008 the proportion of graduate students taking out student loans increased from 49 per cent to 57 per cent (2012 as cited in Patton, 2012).

Rising course fees will continue to affect low socio-economic and regional students disproportionately. Costs, both perceived and actual, have been found to be a particular deterrent to participating in higher education for students from low socio-economic and regional backgrounds (James, 2002). Furthermore, low socio-economic students are far less likely to have paid their undergraduate debts up front, or had these debts paid for them, compared with higher socio-economic students (Birch & Miller, 2006). Accumulated student debt could lead these students to choose direct entry into paid employment over further study.

Since 2002, income-contingent loans have been available for domestic full-fee paying postgraduates (Norton, 2012). The Commonwealth postgraduate loans system (FEE-HELP), however, is less generous than that provided to undergraduates, with real interest rates applying. Income support is also lacking at the postgraduate level, especially for coursework students. Only a small proportion of postgraduates receive Youth Allowance and Austudy which are the two main income support benefits (James, Bexley, Devlin, & Marginson, 2007). Data from 2006 shows the mean annual income from Youth Allowance and Austudy for full-time postgraduate coursework students was considerably lower than for undergraduate students, $980 compared with $2160 (James et al., 2007). Postgraduate students also have a very high rate of rejection of income support applications. The rejection rate from Centrelink, the Australian Government agency responsible for delivering income support payments and related services, is over 16 per cent for postgraduate students (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). There is also limited availability of scholarships for postgraduate coursework students.

Most domestic higher degree by research students are supported by scholarships or Australian Postgraduate Awards (APA). Scholarships, however, are often quality-based and not needs-based at the postgraduate level. The APA annual income of only $23,728 in 2012 (Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education, 2012) is barely above the official poverty line. This level of support may not provide a significant incentive for disadvantaged students to continue to postgraduate study.

Finally, the growing financial barriers to higher study are likely to be compounded by attitudinal and social forces. Students from low socio-economic and regional backgrounds typically have less cultural capital and family support for higher education, and this is likely to persist through to the postgraduate level. Krause, Hartley, James, and McInnis
(2005) found, for example, that these students are more likely than high socio-economic students to be the first in their family to attend university and to report that their parents have little understanding of the university lifestyle. Bok (2010) describes the capacity of low socio-economic students to navigate their aspirations for higher education as analogous to being made to perform ‘a play without a script’.

Students from low socio-economic backgrounds who do enter higher education may also have fewer opportunities to accumulate cultural capital during undergraduate studies. Walpole (2003), for example, examined longitudinal US data and found that low socio-economic students have different experiences in higher education compared with high socio-economic students, and were less likely to continue beyond undergraduate degrees. Students from low socio-economic backgrounds had a lower level of involvement in student clubs and groups, spent less time studying, reported poorer academic achievement, and spent more time working. It seems that while these students are working more hours, they are missing opportunities to engage with peers and acquire cultural capital. This lack of cultural capital is therefore likely to endure through undergraduate studies (Walpole, 2003) and could influence the choices these students make about further education.

Rising inequity in postgraduate access is happening despite, and perhaps because of, expanded access to undergraduate education. The following section outlines some potential strategies which could be undertaken by institutions and governments to broaden access at postgraduate and higher degree levels.

**What is being done and what could be done?**

In the UK, the Higher Education Commission is undertaking a review of postgraduate education to consider, amongst other things, the role that postgraduate education can play in stimulating economic growth, and the question of access to postgraduate education, including the role postgraduate education plays in enabling entry into professional and competitive occupations (Grove, 2012). No equivalent review has been undertaken in Australia in recent years, though the *Base Funding Review* is examining financial support levels for postgraduate student load compared with undergraduate load (Lomax-Smith et al., 2011). Moreover, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Innovation inquired into research training and workforce issues in 2008, resulting in publication of the report, *Building Australia’s Research Capacity*. Recommendation 9 of that report advocated ‘That the Australian Government attach additional funds to research training scheme places that are secured by minority and under-represented students. This funding is for universities to provide the additional necessary assistance for minority and under-represented students throughout their candidature’ (Australian Government, 2008, p. 7).

In its response to this recommendation, the Federal Government referred to initiatives undertaken to broaden undergraduate access to meet the objective of 20 per cent of university students being from low socio-economic backgrounds by 2020. The Government argued that, ‘In the longer term, these initiatives to boost participation and attainment at the undergraduate level will flow through to increased participation and attainment at the post-graduate level, including in research higher degrees’ (Australian Government, 2008, p. 7). Two universities have subsequently included postgraduate equity targets within their Compact agreements with the Australian Government, although the vast majority of equity targets, initiatives, and strategies continue to concern the broadening of undergraduate access. The assumption that participation increases will naturally flow through
to postgraduate level is challenged by the relationship between massification and stratification. Existing data already reveal a substantial difference between low socio-economic representation at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and this gap may in fact increase as the higher levels of education increasingly reflect positional advantage.

Specific responses to postgraduate inequity are therefore required at both institutional and governmental levels. From an institutional viewpoint, the problem of the narrow undergraduate pipeline remains a central issue to be addressed. Following its transfer of all professional degrees to postgraduate level, the University of Melbourne has already responded to a backlash among parents of high-achieving school students, who believe that their children should be guaranteed entry into postgraduate programs rather than having to prove themselves again in a highly competitive undergraduate context. The University has begun to develop just such a guarantee, and students who receive a high tertiary admissions rank in their final year of schooling are guaranteed entry not only into the undergraduate stream, but into a subsidised postgraduate place subsequently (Trounson, 2011a). This system could be extended on a needs basis to low socio-economic schools, subject to satisfactory achievement. Guaranteeing postgraduate entry for a specified group of low socio-economic students could be a useful strategy to raise awareness of, and enthusiasm for, postgraduate options among disadvantaged Year 12 cohorts.

The recent joint initiative between the University of Sydney and the University of New England (UNE) provides another model for increasing the number of students from low socio-economic and regional backgrounds. The UNE Alternative Entry Pathway scheme allows students to enter UNE on the basis of school recommendations, rather than the standard tertiary admissions rank (Trounson, 2011b). According to this new arrangement, students from low socio-economic schools in selected courses who complete first year at UNE will be offered a limited number of second year places at the University of Sydney. Similar initiatives involving constructive links between universities could be introduced for the postgraduate cohort. Moreover, diversification of the undergraduate cohort at research-intensive universities is likely to become increasingly important to boosting postgraduate equity.

As Wakeling has highlighted in the UK, first-degree institution is a major predictor of postgraduate study (Wakeling, 2009). Wakeling argues that ‘a strategy which attempts to place more high-achieving working-class students in pre-1992 universities would, on the basis of my research, spill over into postgraduate participation’ (2009, p. 296), where the pre-1992 British universities can be broadly equated to the Group of Eight Australian universities. By contrast, if institutional stratification increases, for example through fee deregulation, research intensification, and an expansion of fee-paying professional degrees, an unintended consequence may be the further narrowing of the postgraduate cohort.

A further approach is to accept that mobility is low and use this to institutional advantage. This could involve, for example, universities offering conditional postgraduate places to school leavers (and mature age undergraduates through some pathways), subject to adequate performance at the undergraduate level in the same institution. This principle could be extended by offering postgraduate scholarships or bursaries to high achieving school leavers subject to undergraduate performance. Alternatively, through a process of flag and follow, low socio-economic students who have performed well at undergraduate level could be identified and targeted for postgraduate places or scholarships in third year. In the US, the federally funded McNair Program prepares undergraduate students for doctoral studies via additional research and educational activities (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2007). The program targets academically capable first-generation college students in financial need, and students from under-represented groups. Results show McNair participants
are more likely to enrol in graduate school than their equivalent peers (Abdul-Alim, 2012). Indeed, McNair participations who received their bachelor’s degree in 2006–2007 had a high three-year graduate school enrolment rate of 69.8 per cent (Federal TRIO Programs, 2012). Recent reduction in funding of this program is of some concern.

Many universities award primarily need-based scholarships at the undergraduate level, and primarily merit-based scholarships at the postgraduate level. A scheme similar to the undergraduate Entry Access Schemes could be adopted for postgraduate scholarship applications to ensure the recruitment of academically capable students irrespective of background. Entry access schemes allow under-represented students applying through tertiary admissions centres to outline their disadvantage and receive bonus points if found eligible. Indeed, measures to compensate for socio-economic disadvantage are widespread at undergraduate level, including principals’ recommendation schemes and other early offers for academically capable students enrolled in designated low socio-economic schools (Harvey & Simpson, 2012). Expanding access pathways and need-based financial support to students from under-represented cohorts could help to advance the postgraduate equity agenda.

Revised supervisory arrangements for higher degree by research students, an increase of peer mentoring networks, and the expansion of academic adviser schemes are also measures which institutions may adopt to raise awareness and support for students beyond undergraduate level. In addition, students need to be provided with information regarding the advantages of postgraduate education in terms of employment prospects and salary levels. As Smith et al. note, ‘Accurate, transparent and easily accessible information, advice and guidance play a significant role in informing people about the benefits of postgraduate study, the different types of qualifications, and the funding that is available’ (2010, p. 7). Universities which are not research intensive will need to strengthen their offers to targeted undergraduate cohorts and increase the attraction of further study.

While institutions can adopt measures to raise postgraduate diversity, public policy settings remain crucial. In particular, targets have become important drivers of equity change, particularly when aligned to funding incentives. The Australian Government could extend participation targets and funding beyond undergraduate level to include postgraduate students. The Commonwealth has allocated $437 million over four years to meet undergraduate objectives around low socio-economic participation, and some progress already appears to have been made following these actions (Evans, 2012). Further targets at postgraduate level would provide institutional incentives to mitigate socio-economic inequality and fully extend the ladder of opportunity.

Financial support is also central to broadening postgraduate access. In its 2008 submission to the Inquiry into Research Training and Research Workforce Issues in Australian Universities, Innovative Research Universities Australia recommended the introduction of a debt remission scheme for Australian students completing higher degrees by research. This could involve complete or partial remission of undergraduate student debts. It was proposed, for example, that a completed PhD might result in 100 per cent remission of the debt, and a Masters by Research degree might result in a 50 per cent remission of the debt (Innovative Research Universities Australia, 2008). The remission would apply at the time a graduate became eligible to make student debt payments through the income tax system. Such a scheme may provide an incentive to continue to postgraduate study and would be especially attractive for low socio-economic and debt-averse students.

Postgraduate Commonwealth-supported places are also central to promoting diversity of postgraduate participation. Expanding the provision of funded postgraduate places may mean redirecting funding from undergraduate to postgraduate studies. In its submission to
the Base Funding Review, the University of Melbourne also recommended that postgraduate coursework places attract a higher base funding rate than undergraduate places given the higher per student costs (University of Melbourne, 2011). Only degree level places are uncapped in Australia, and the Commonwealth Government still tightly controls the allocation and funding of postgraduate places.

Conclusion
Public policy has not followed demography. While several specific measures have been undertaken by governments and institutions to increase postgraduate equity, the full extent of the issue has rarely been conceptualised. With a rapidly growing postgraduate cohort, spurred by rising demand for higher qualifications and consequent benefits for postgraduate students, the need for broad access is both an economic and a social imperative. Despite the growing importance of postgraduate equity, this paper has highlighted that barriers to access remain prominent. While some students ride a clear escalator from undergraduate study towards higher degrees, others see only a staircase designed by Escher. The higher levels of university remain the most stratified. Expanding postgraduate access requires financial and structural incentives on a greater scale than that proposed to date.

References


