

## Level playing field? Educational disadvantage and its impact on participation in higher education

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## Background

- Government and private schools and universities in Australia and UK past 12 years
- Equity and disability practitioner in 1990s
- Australia at forefront of equity policies
- Participation rates unchanged since 1991

## Equity research

- Educational disadvantage and university experiences (low SES, disability, rural)
- Responses are remarkably similar
- Says less about the features of those groups than about university and school systems and structures

## Context of higher education

- From 'elite' to 'mass' system but reverse trend in schools - increased funding to private schools - increasing social stratification
- Reduced funding to university sector
- Increases in international students (24.4%)
- Change in rhetoric - 'equity fell off the agenda'



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## Advancing Equity and Participation in Australian Higher Education

Action to address participation and equity levels in  
higher education of people from low socio-  
economic backgrounds and Indigenous people

April 2008

## Renewed focus on participation rates

- SES still the major factor influencing students' aspirations to HE (James, 2002)
- Participation limited by lower ENTER scores, educational aspirations and school completion rates; financial factors; appeal of VET
- "Even with expanded overall participation rates, social polarisation remains entrenched" (p. 4)



### Bradley Review

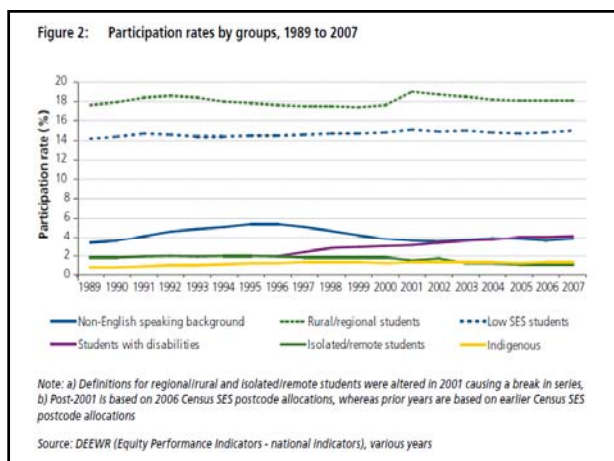
- To remain competitive, we need to expand HE by targeting most under-represented groups - low SES, rural, remote and indigenous
- Australia was at forefront of equity policies but participation rates fallen behind other countries
- Low SES students 3 times less likely to attend HE; but equal success, retention and completion
- Lifetime financial gain for a graduate (cf. Year 12) more than 70% or \$1.5 million

"The current policy and funding settings have not led to more equitable higher education outcomes in Australia for under-represented groups in terms of enrolments in universities... the quantum of funds provided has been insufficient to make significant headway in improving participation from under-represented groups." (p. 36)

Table 4: Degree of under-representation of groups, 2007

Group	2007 Participation rate % in higher education	Proportion in general population <sup>a</sup>	2007 participation ratio <sup>b</sup>
Non-English speaking background	3.8	3.7	1.02
Students with disabilities	4.1	8.0 <sup>c</sup>	0.51
Rural/regional	18.1	25.4	0.71
Remote	1.1	2.5	0.44
Low SES	15.0	25.0	0.60
Indigenous	1.3	2.2	0.59

Note : a) Based on ABS 2007 data, b) A participation ratio of 1 indicates appropriate representation of the equity group in the student population. c) Excludes profound and severe core activity limitation  
Source: DEEWR



**Recommendation 3**  
That the Australian Government commission work on the measurement of the socio-economic status of students in higher education with a view to moving from the current postcode methodology to one based on the individual circumstances of each student. (Chapter 3.2)

**Recommendation 4**  
That the Australian Government set a national target that, by 2020, 20 per cent of higher education enrolments at undergraduate level are people from low socio-economic status backgrounds. (Chapter 3.2)

**Recommendation 6**  
That the Australian Government undertake a regular process of triennial review of the income support system to assess the overall effectiveness of the support payments in reducing financial barriers to participation of students in need. (Chapter 3.3)

### A more sophisticated approach to increasing access

Increasingly it is recognised that to improve access for disadvantaged groups three precursors to entry need to be addressed early in the educational cycle for potential participants:

- awareness of higher education;
- aspiration to participate; and
- educational attainment to allow participation.

#### What has worked

Successful projects which have improved the participation of low socio-economic status, Indigenous and rural students in Australia have been highly targeted and operated in partnership or collaboratively with other sectors.

Overseas, successful projects have often involved cross-sectoral initiatives, outreach and early education programs involving partnerships between universities, colleges and schools, the establishment of national targets and major investments in improving retention.

Office of Australian Higher Education Final Report | 27

## Issues and possibilities

- Educational attainment
- Increasing aspiration
- Outreach partnerships

## Educational attainment

- Low SES will rarely be able to enter university, despite their aspirations - **compounding effects** of disadvantage
- Higher ENTER scores among private schools (reverse trend in the UK - public grammar schools consistently outperform private schools)
- **Patterns of social and educational disadvantage** happen well before people consider university
- Universities expected to compensate for years of educational disadvantage and structural inequalities

## Challenges for low SES students

- Rural/urban fringe students - relocation costs, loss of support systems
- Students often work 30 - 40 hours a week
- Practicum-based courses (jobs, housing)
- Impact of poverty on physical and mental well-being
- High SES students - incentives, rewards, private tutors

## Factors influencing aspiration

- **Financial** (fees, transport, accommodation, books)
- **Parental attitudes** (prior experiences, education)
- Lack of **role models**, influence of **peers**
- **Schools** - teachers' attitudes, quality of teaching to enable success
- Beliefs/practices of the local **community** eg 'Can get a good job without university'
- **Subtle factors** - family coherence, opportunities to discuss and debate issues, self-perception

## A tale of two boys

- This is the tale of two boys. They are the same age. They are equally smart. But their outcomes couldn't be more different...

## What works: University outreach and collaborative programs

- Access Monash program
- Smith Family Big Buddy program

**Schools Access Monash**

The Schools Access Monash (SAM) program provides a range of activities for a select number of schools to increase students' awareness of universities and courses available and to help students reach their academic potential.

**Schools involved in the program are:**

- Cranbourne Secondary College
- Dromana Secondary College
- Heathcote Secondary College
- Kumar College
- Lonsdale College
- Monterey Secondary College
- Pakenham Secondary College
- Sandringham College
- Traralgon College
- Western Port Secondary College

**This program aims to:**

- encourage tertiary participation
- provide information about Monash programs and university life
- engage with school students, parents and staff about educational possibilities
- provide individual assistance by Monash students
- provide financial support (scholarships) for selected students

SAM consists of three main components designed to achieve these aims:

- **Individual student assistance** - Monash University students are enlisted to individually assist Year 12 students to maximise their VCE results and therefore enhance their prospects of studying at university.
- **Increased awareness of options available** - Monash University will arrange activities and events that will increase students' knowledge of university as a study option.
- **Schools Access Monash Scholarship** - Monash University will provide a scholarship for one student from each school participating in the program, who is eligible to attend Monash University.

MONASH University  
Education



Will I or Won't I?

Secondary School Students'  
Aspirations for University Study  
Final Report

Schools Access Monash (SAM) Project  
2005 - 2006

Judy Williams, Trevor Gale & Janette Ryan  
Faculty of Education, Monash University

November, 2006

## Evaluation of SAM Program

- 2 low SES schools in outer Melbourne
- Online survey of Year 12 students
- 5 years School level reports and 'On track' data
- Interviews and focus groups - school leaders, teachers and students (52)
- Students' micro level decisions and aspirations

## Demographic context

- Low university application rates and enrolments 10% (State 35%)
- 12% of youth (15-24) not engaged in education or employment (50% higher than national average)
- High rates of casual and part-time employment, mainly in retail sector

## SAM activities...

- Years 10, 11 & 12 visits to Monash campuses
- Monash Library cards
- SAM brochure for students and parents
- Revision classes, stress management classes and 're-focus' days with Monash staff
- Year 9 Maths competition day
- Year 11 Retreat Day
- Equity scholarships
- End-of-year SAM awards
- Mentoring program with Monash students

## Results

- Reasonably confident in their academic ability, many 'just haven't thought about going to uni' but this is changing
- Suggests that encouragement and support through school/university partnerships can increase students' aspirations
- Schools are important 'enablers' for students who may not otherwise be encouraged to go to university

## Teacher comment

"We try to encourage those who are achieving to think that it's not 'not cool' to study and work, because that tends to be a bit of the ethos sometimes...Some of them don't have any aspirations apart from getting their year 12 certificate, because for them they're the first one in their family and that's a huge task."

## Student comment

"It gave me just such a good idea of what I should be doing and how I should go about it. Like, seeing what other people had done and they had achieved so much."

## Most valued initiative

- Monash students mentor/tutor program
- One-on-one mentoring to Year 12 students
- Someone of similar age to talk to about personal or study issues
- A role model or source of inspiration

## Smith Family Big Buddy program

- 'It's their own fault that they're poor'
- Lectures by Smith Family Ballarat Learning for Life program
- Development of Big Buddy initiative
- UB Education students work with primary and secondary children each week
- Big Buddies speak about program to following year's students

## Outcomes

- Excellence in Learning Award 2004
- ACU National award 2008
- Benefits for children as well as university students
- Students and children develop deep and often enduring relationships
- Changes in student teacher attitudes

## Local and national approaches

- Local school/community group/university **partnerships do work**
- Usually small scale, poorly funded
- Rely on goodwill of individuals
- **Investment** in formal, long-term, sustained initiatives and partnerships

## Mixed messages

- **Social:** it's not cool to be smart, 'cult of celebrity'
- **Community:** anti-intellectualism, often higher incomes for people with trades skills
- **Government:** increased fees, decreased funding
- **University:** 'equity' versus 'managerialism'

## A way forward

- Not only a question of 'raising aspirations' or settings targets ('compliance regimes' siphon off time and energy)
- Need to address structural issues
- Need for interventions much earlier
- **Positive messages** about the value of higher education for social and economic mobility

## International approaches

- **UK:** Major investment in Widening Participation programs (*Improving Retention, Aim Higher*) - significant improvements in short time
- **China:** Radical overhaul and expansion of education system, massive investment in schools and universities

New school Inner Mongolia



Grade Four maths class



Teacher's console...



Staffroom

