

The challenge of widening participation in higher education across the lifecourse: Towards new conceptions of higher education

Paper prepared for the NZARE Conference November 2008

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Participation across the lifecourse in higher education has substantially different purposes and forms – these include various alternative policy constructs, such as ‘social equity’, ‘national economic development’ and ‘lifelong learning’ – there are particularly important differences for policy purposes between ‘first-time’ university admission for adults and the ‘re-engagement’ of graduates to retrain and/or to renew or redirect their careers. Of course, participation across the lifecourse might simply ‘enlighten life’ as the delightful story of Joseph Ciampa, PhD graduate at 91 years of age, illustrates.

This paper provides a broadbrush examination of widening participation in Australian higher education in the context of the Australian equity policy framework and the changing character of the higher education sector. The paper examines the factors surrounding educational advantage and disadvantage in Australia and the underlying causes for the persistent under-representation of certain groups of Australians. The paper examines mature-age participation, on which the existing research is quite limited. Mature-age participation, especially of the ‘first-time’ entry kind, remains something of a policy ‘blindspot’ for the Australian higher education sector, despite the significant participation since World War II of adult university entrants. The paper proposes a set of conditions that would be needed for participation across the lifecourse to gain more traction in institutional policy and practice and within the consciousness of Australian communities.

For some time, particularly in the 1990s, participation in higher education across the lifecourse was referred to under the rubric of lifelong learning (the following is paraphrased from James & Beckett 2000) In fact, lifelong learning was once something of an umbrella term in Australia. On the one hand, it was used to signify intellectual autonomy and non-reliance on formal educational participation. On the other hand, it was used to evoke a diametrically opposite concept, that of repeated engagement with education and training programs, whether in educational organisations or in the workplace. This led to a frequent contradiction in the portrayal of the lifelong learner: he or she is someone whose learning is independent of educational organizations; equally, he or she is also someone who is motivated

and able to engage in formal learning throughout his or her lifespan. The breadth of the concept made it a convenient rhetorical slogan and its over-use threatened to undermine its significance and impact.

The report *Developing Lifelong Learners through Undergraduate Education* (Candy, Crebert, O'Leary 1994), prepared for the National Board of Employment, Education and Training, was a landmark in the discussion of lifelong learning in Australian higher education. The authors responded to a brief to identify and describe the characteristics of undergraduate education, which enable and encourage graduates to participate in formal and informal learning throughout their lives (Crean 1994). The report adopted a curriculum focus, being concerned in the main with the teaching and learning conditions that create the skills, dispositions and capacities for learning after graduation.

Following the Candy propositions, the Karpin Report (1995) also influenced thinking in higher education. Similar to Candy, but from a different perspective, Karpin advocated a holistic managerial model of workplace learning, especially in the overt support given to the 'higher order social and cognitive competencies', which Karpin called 'soft skills'. These are the interpersonal and communicative capabilities of strategic thinking, vision, flexibility and adaptability, self-management, team membership, problem-solving, decision-making and risk-taking. Of course these capabilities – or attributes – are not adequately characterisable as merely cognitive in a narrow sense, since they involve the social and affective. Indeed the tag 'soft skills' is a pejorative misnomer. It is quite difficult to educate for these capabilities, and even more so to have them count in corporate structures for productivity and promotion outcomes, yet lifelong learning at its broadest is about acquiring these capabilities and exercising them in a sophisticated fashion.

So in both the education and the corporate world in Australia in the early to mid 1990s there was the emergence of interest in more sophisticated and more holistic adult learning capabilities and strategies. In the years following the Candy and Karpin reports the concept of lifelong learning centred less on curriculum and more on structural issues. Attention shifted – arguably narrowed – to the institutional arrangements that encourage and allow entry and re-entry to formal learning at various stages in life and career.

The report of the 1998 Review of Higher Education Policy, *Learning for life* (West 1998), colloquially the 'West Review', again endorsed the role of higher education in developing a learning society, declaring in its first recommendation the need for 'a commitment to establishment of a learning society in which all Australians, of whatever social, cultural and economic background, have access to a post-compulsory education of excellent value'. The review proposed key changes as cornerstones of this goal, including achieving universal completion of secondary education, improving 'first time access' to post-secondary education, and new student-centred funding arrangements – a voucher-like lifelong learning entitlement. Contentiously, the Review argued that a student-centred funding model would achieve two complementary outcomes: the incentive to encourage students to choose their studies carefully, and, equally, encouragement for providers to compete vigorously in terms of the nature, price and quality of their offerings. The proposal drew widespread student protest and public concern and was dropped.

The purposes of undergraduate education are again under question and universities are striving to create new relationships with students and communities. The current Review of Australian Higher Education, led by Professor Denise Bradley, is entering the final phase of its deliberations.

The review's terms of reference require the panel to look at these areas:

- diverse, high performing institutions with a global focus;
- productivity and participation;
- effective and efficient investment;
- underpinning social inclusion through access and opportunity;
- enhanced quality and high standards; and
- a broad tertiary education and training sector.

The final point is especially significant, for the review is looking at the relationship between higher education and vocational education and training.

It is widely anticipated the review's recommendations will accelerate the massive and unprecedented phase of curriculum renewal taking place in Australian universities. The University of Melbourne led the way with the 'Melbourne Model', in essence a structure involving 3-year liberal bachelors degrees + 2-year professional masters or research masters degrees, that commenced this year.

The reasons for the renewed attention to the purposes and structure of the curriculum and the desired outcomes for graduates include:

- new patterns of student engagement;
- an increasing market-orientation in the Australian higher education sector and pressure for institutional diversification and distinctiveness;
- the intensification of interest in interdisciplinary education;
- the intensification of interest in workplace learning, community engagement and knowledge transfer;
- the internationalisation of higher education taking place worldwide;
- a new focus on the ways in which universities contribute to community development; and
- renewed commitment to the goals of equity and social inclusion.

Australian university curricula seem likely to remain in a state of flux as societal needs change rapidly and institutional competition heightens – the era of 'steady-state' curricula seems to be over. Should a new university funding model be adopted post the Bradley Review, as is anticipated, the public policy framework might encourage even greater diversity.

Despite the current urgency for change, some aspects of Australian higher education have adapted little in the past decade. In his seminal 1973 paper, Martin Trow proposed that universal higher education systems – that is, those in which at least 50 per cent of citizens participated in higher education at some stage in their lives – would differ significantly from elite/mass systems. The table below (Brennan 2004) captures some of Trow's original conceptions of the essential differences between elite, mass and universal higher education that relate to participation.

Figure 1

Trow's Conceptions of Elite, Mass and Universal Higher Education

	Elite (0-15%)	Mass (16-50%)	Universal (over 50%)
<i>Curriculum and forms of instruction</i>	Highly structured in terms of academic or professional conceptions of knowledge	Modular, flexible and semi-structured sequence of courses	Boundaries and sequences break down; distinctions between learning and life break down
<i>The student 'career'</i>	"sponsored" after secondary school; works uninterruptedly until gains degree	Increasing numbers delay entry; more drop out	Much postponement of entry, softening of boundaries between formal education and other aspects of life; term-time working
<i>Academic standards</i>	Broadly shared and relatively high (in meritocratic phase)	Variable; system/institution 'become holding companies for quite different kinds of academic enterprises'	Criterion shifts from 'standards' to 'value added'
<i>Access and selection</i>	Meritocratic achievement based on school performance	Meritocratic plus 'compensatory programs' to achieve equality of opportunity	'open', emphasis on 'equality of group achievement' (class, ethnic)

From John Brennan, "The Social Role of the Contemporary University: Contradictions, Boundaries and Change," in *Ten Years On: Changing Education in a Changing World*, Center for Higher Education Research and Information. Milton Keynes: The Open University, 2004.

Trow predicted that universal higher education systems would be characterised by features that included:

- more open entry and a focus on 'added-value' rather than absolute standards;
- much delayed entry in contrast to the conventional school-higher education linear sequence of elite/mass systems;
- more modularised curricula;
- more people "dipping in and out" of university throughout their lives; and
- participation in higher education would be a social obligation as well as a right.

Trow's analysis provides an illuminating perspective on equity and participation in Australian higher education. Despite Australia having an arguably universal higher education system, by Trow's definition, many of the characteristics he foreshadowed are barely evident. Australian higher education remains 'frozen' between mass and universal conceptions and this has significant effects on the possibilities for widening participation.

Australian higher education has had a national equity policy framework for two decades. Internationally, Australia was an early leader in establishing an equity policy framework, summarised on the following page. Compared with many nations Australia has a well-developed database on participation and equity in higher education.

The definition of equity in Australian higher education derives from the landmark discussion paper *A Fair Chance for All* (NBEET 1990):

The overall objective for equity in higher education is to ensure that Australians from all groups in society have the opportunity to participate successfully in higher education. This will be achieved by changing the balance of the student population to reflect more closely the composition of the society as a whole.

The policy framework for socioeconomic status uses three groupings using a postcode index calculated on census income data. Postcodes are ranked according to the educational and occupational characteristics of residents using the SEIFA (Socioeconomic Indexes for Areas) index. The group of postcodes at the lowest end of the ranking which contain the first 25 per cent of the population are allocated a low SES classification, those containing the next 50 per cent of the population a medium SES classification and the final 25 per cent a high SES classification.

Persistent inequalities remain in the participation in higher education for certain groups of Australians (from James et al. 2008). In broadbrush terms, people from low SES backgrounds are about one-third as likely as people from high SES backgrounds to participate in higher education. The share of university places for people from low SES backgrounds – approximately 15 per cent of places, compared with a population reference point of 25 per cent – has remained virtually unchanged for 15 years despite the overall expansion of access to higher education during that period. People from low SES backgrounds are particularly underrepresented in the professional fields of study for which there is the most competitive entry and in postgraduate education. Students from low SES backgrounds comprise less than 10 per cent of postgraduate students.

The social imbalances in Australian higher education may not be as large as those in some developed nations, though direct comparison is difficult. Australia's apparent equity performance may be a result of: 1) an SES classification system with only three categories of social class; and 2) the use of a geographical index for SES classification rather than, say, parental occupation or educational attainment. The geographical index may overestimate low SES participation in Australian higher education – and correspondingly underestimate the rate of high SES over-representation.

Australian universities vary considerably in the proportion of students from low SES backgrounds. This is partly due to geographical effects, as well as the effects of competitive selection processes based on school achievement levels. While improvement in the participation of people from low SES backgrounds is an issue for collaborative action by the whole sector, the differences between university performance in this area should be noted. Presently, some universities are notably more successful in enrolling people from low SES backgrounds, reflecting their contexts, patterns of student demand and selection/recruitment policies and processes. The under-representation of people from low SES backgrounds is most marked in the Group of Eight research-led universities. There has been a slight downturn in the proportion of students from low SES backgrounds in the Go8 as a whole over the past 5 years, though not in all group members.

Figure 2: The Australian equity framework

Equity groups The current equity target groups were first designated in 1990 in *A Fair Chance For All*, broadly following the disadvantaged social groups identified during the mid 1970s. Data collected from students at enrolment is used for classification of group membership. The equity groups are:

- *people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds* (student socioeconomic background is measured by the postcode of their permanent home address – the 4-digit code used to identify urban and rural districts for mail delivery. All Australian postcode districts are classified using an index of low, medium and high socioeconomic status derived from national census data);
- *people from rural and isolated areas* (student location is measured by postcode of student permanent home address and classified with an index of urban, rural and isolated postcode districts derived from population density data and proximity to large cities);
- *people with a disability* (self-identified by students on enrolment, through responses to the question ‘Do you have a disability that may affect your studies?’);
- *people from a non-English speaking background* (defined as people who were born overseas, who arrived in Australia within the previous ten years and who speak a language other than English at home);
- *women in non-traditional areas of study and higher degrees*; and
- *Indigenous people* (self-identified on enrolment);

Performance indicators The performance of the equity groups is measured by five indicators:

- *Access* (proportion of the equity group among commencing domestic students)
- *Participation* (proportion of the equity group among domestic students overall)
- *Retention* (the proportion of equity group students who re-enrol at an institution in a given year compared with the students who were enrolled in the previous year, less those students who have completed their course).
- *Success* (the mean *student progress rate* for the previous year for the equity group, this being the proportion of units passed within a year to the total units enrolled).
- *Completions* (the proportion of students completing all the academic requirements of a course).

Monitoring and reporting To monitor performance, the access and participation indicators are generally referenced against the proportion of people in the equity group within Australia overall. Retention, success and completion are referenced against all other students. Indicators are reported as percentages or ratios as appropriate. Universities are required annually to report the performance of the six equity groups and to have an equity plan. The Higher Education Equity Programme (HEEP) provides universities with funds to assist the equity groups, with the exception of Indigenous students who are supported through the separate Indigenous Support Funding programme.

The participation of Indigenous people is a special case. The low access rates and low completion rates for Indigenous people are distinct problems that require targeted policies and programs. There are some similarities in the educational participation patterns between Indigenous people and low SES people, but evidence too of distinctive challenges for Indigenous people.

For a period there was growth in access for Indigenous people, though this has stalled and may be dropping. Indigenous people are vastly underrepresented in higher education on even the most conservative estimates based on population size, population demography and share of university places.

The cumulative effects of long-term educational disadvantage in schooling create particular challenges for the higher education, for here the picture is stark. The DEST statistics on Indigenous people's participation in higher education reveal extensive under-representation in key areas.

- It is estimated that only five per cent of Indigenous people commence higher education by age 18, compared with close to 30 per cent of non-Indigenous people.
- Indigenous people are relatively over-represented in enabling courses and sub-degree programs and vastly under-represented in postgraduate education.
- Indigenous students' enrolments in undergraduate courses are predominantly in the fields of society and culture, education and health. Enrolments are low in key professional areas in science, technology, engineering and architecture.
- Indigenous students' retention and success rates are typically about 80 per cent of those of non-Indigenous students. The university completion rate for Indigenous enrollees remains well below 50%.
- The numbers of Indigenous academic and general staff have increased in the last few years, but are still unacceptably low. In total, Indigenous staff represent less than one per cent of the staff of universities, yet Indigenous people represent about 2.5% of the nation.
- In 2006 there were fewer than 300 Indigenous academics across the whole higher education sector. Only 37 academics were at associate professor or full professor. In 2006 there were 480 Indigenous general staff in higher education. It is estimated there would need to be 960 academics and 1180 professional staff for parity on the basis of population share.
- Only one in eight Indigenous academic staff hold doctorates, compared with over half of all academic staff.

Indigenous students tend to be older (48% over 30 years cf. 30% non-Indigenous), tend to have greater family responsibilities (30% have dependent children cf 17% non-Indigenous and are more likely to have a disability/condition that affects their studies (~15%; non-Indigenous ~6%)

The challenges for the sector lie in improving the number of Indigenous staff in universities, recruiting Indigenous students who are academically prepared for university (given that school completion rates for Indigenous people are about half of those for other Australians) and in retaining students once enrolled. The low retention rate of Indigenous people is a major problem. Financial factors are likely to be highly significant in improving access and retention for Indigenous students.

The issues facing the higher education sector in achieving better outcomes for Indigenous people are partly to do with socioeconomic status and levels of educational disadvantage in schooling, but there are also deep cultural issues to be confronted in order for stronger relationships to be built between universities and Indigenous people and communities.

A set of interrelated factors lie behind the persistent under-representation of people from low SES backgrounds (see images to follow). The relative influence of these factors cannot be determined with precision from the available data. Under-representation in higher education is partially the result of lower levels of educational achievement in schools, lower educational aspirations and lower school completion rates. These three factors are significantly interrelated.

It seems likely that lower levels of educational achievement are the precursor for other effects. Some simple statistics illustrate the pervasive problem of school achievement. For low SES students the Year 12 completion rate is 52% for males and 66% for females, compared with 75% for males and 83% for females for high SES people. In remote areas Australian Year 12 completion is 44% for males and 61% for females. The Indigenous school completion rate is about half the rate of the total population. PISA data reveals substantial differences in achievement on standardised tests for low SES students versus other students.

Thus the imbalances in higher education participation reflect endemic educational disadvantage that begins in the earliest years of schooling. People from low SES backgrounds are more likely to have lower perceptions of the attainability of a university place, less confidence in the personal and career relevance of higher education and may be more likely to experience alienation from the cultures of universities. Financial factors are cited by students as barriers or deterrents to entry to higher education. However, it is not clear from the available data the extent to which financial considerations – including the capacity or willingness to pay university fees, the availability of income support while studying and the opportunity cost in loss of potential income while studying – are inhibitors or barriers to university for people from low SES backgrounds in comparison with broader aspirational and school achievement factors.

All things considered, the available data do show that disadvantage with respect to higher education should not be conceptualised narrowly in terms of extrinsic barriers that confront students at or near the point of higher education, such as distance and financial cost. There are clearly broader social, educational and cultural factors involved. Thus scholarships, bursaries and fee remissions are not the entire solution to increasing access, though this is not an argument for reducing such schemes.

Vocational educational training (VET) appears to have more appeal than higher education for some people from low SES backgrounds. The participation rates of low SES people relative to medium/high SES people are stronger in VET than in higher education. However, despite the higher rate of VET participation there is still a shortfall in overall participation in tertiary education for people from low SES backgrounds.

It appears that low SES participation in Australian higher education is principally an issue of *access* rather than *success* once enrolled. At aggregate level, socioeconomic status appears to explain little of the variation in higher education success and retention rates. Once enrolled, low SES people do almost as well as medium SES and high SES in terms of retention, success and completion. Low SES remote students and Indigenous students are an exception and particular attention needs to be given to both these groups.

Figure 3: The problem of aspirations and lack of awareness of higher education ...

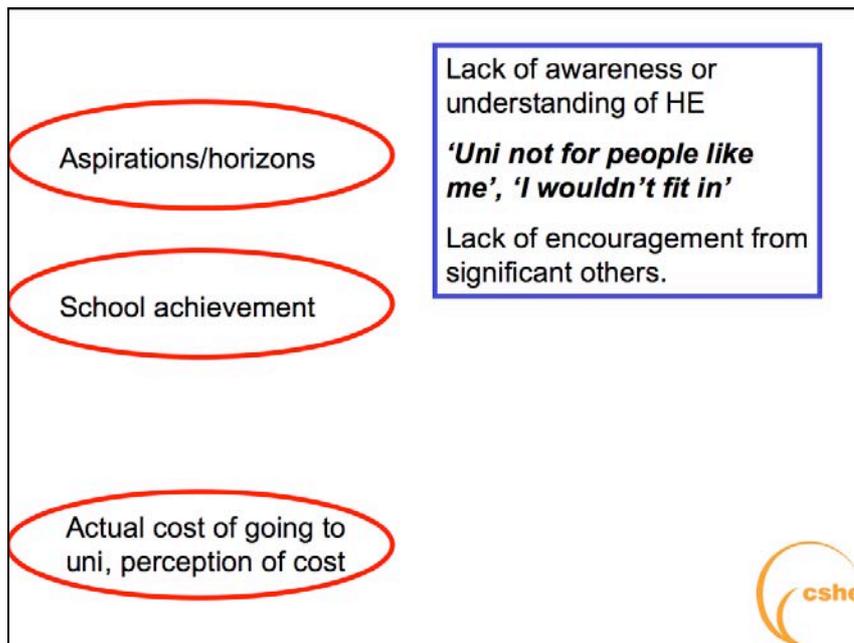


Figure 4: The problem of school achievement ...

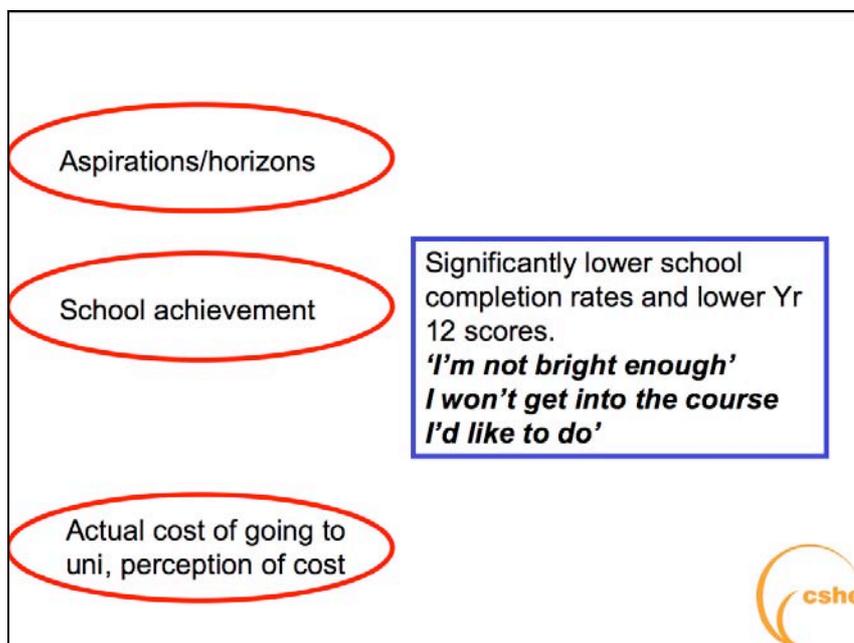


Figure 5: The problem of the costs of higher education, real and perceived ...

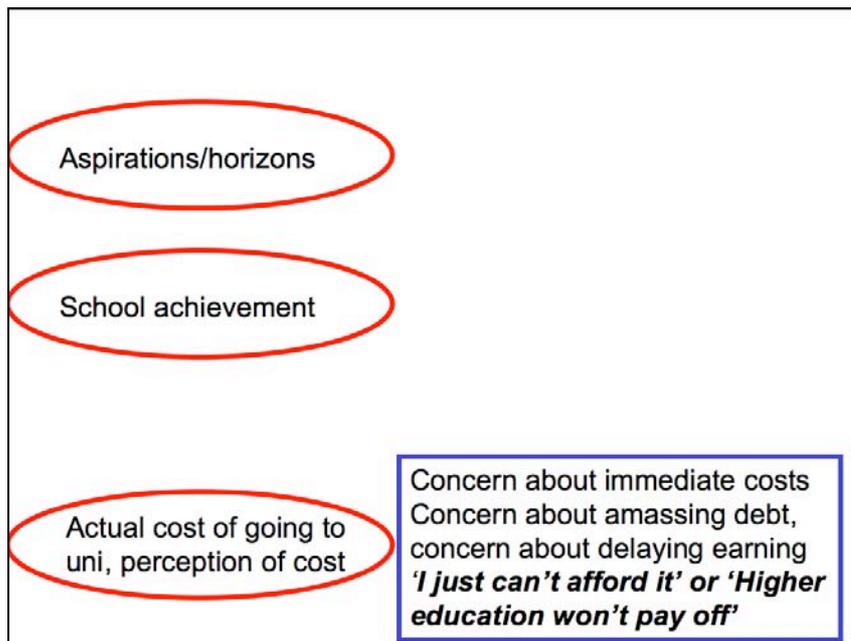


Figure 6: Little is known with certainty about how these factors interact ...

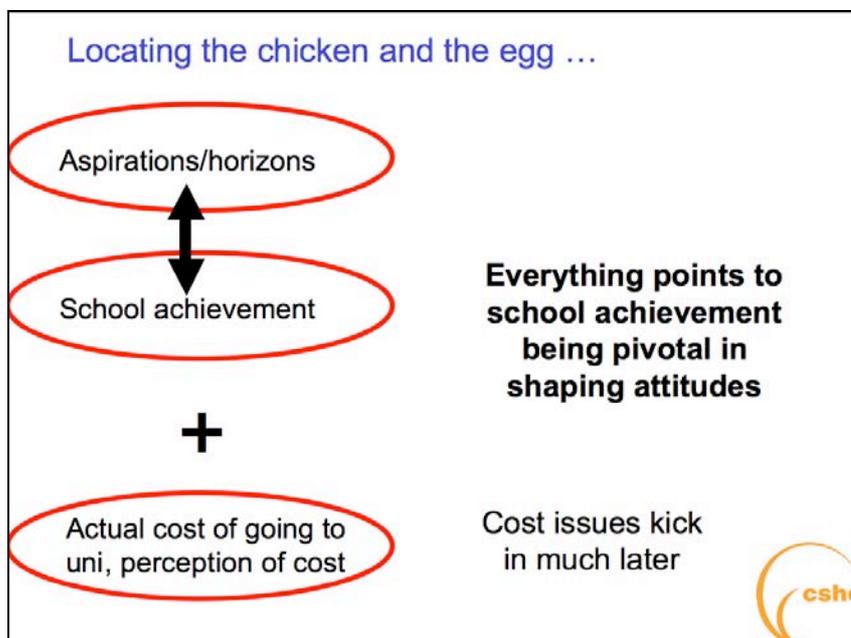


Figure 7: 'Barriers' vs 'Absence of encouraging factors' ...

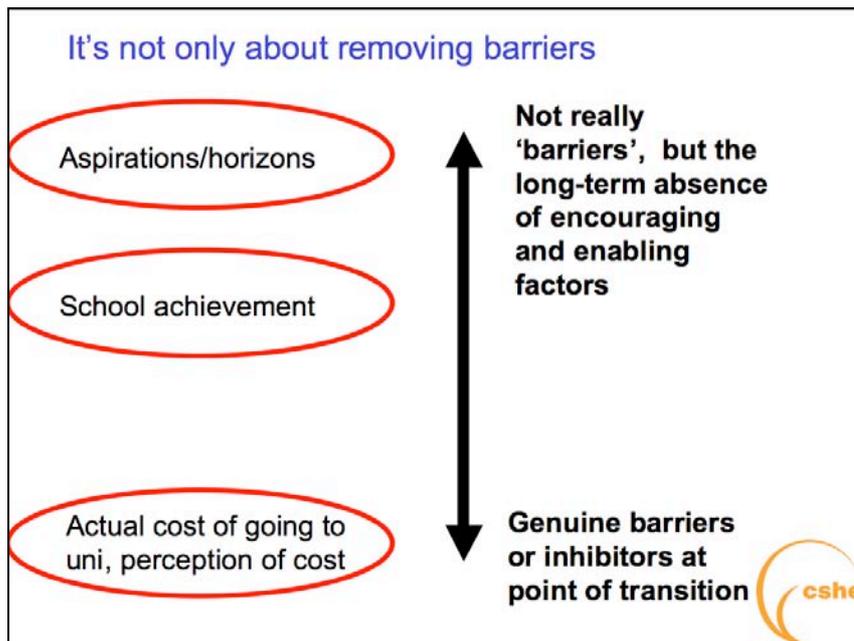
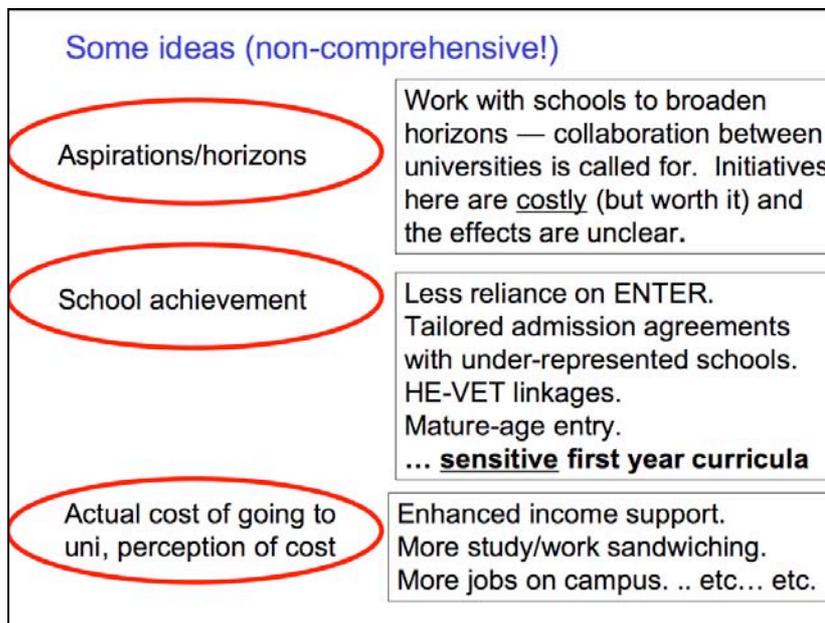


Figure 8: Some of the strategies being undertaken ...



The costs of higher education are a significant factor. In 2006 the CSHE undertook a major study for Universities Australia (James et al. 2007). The study found that, compared with the most recent national study in 2000, a smaller proportion of students with annual budgets in deficit. However, the study also revealed:

- greater reliance on paid work — paid work providing a higher proportion of income;
- more students taking out loans;

- increase in levels of non-cash assistance;
- decline in Commonwealth assistance for income support;
- more students reporting missing classes to work; and
- more students reporting that paid work was having an adverse effect on their studies.

The survey found that many students were in stressful financial positions. A large proportion of students lacked adequate financial support and many were highly anxious about 'making ends meet' on a week-to-week basis. There was much anxiety about accumulating debt. A surprising one in eight students indicated they regularly went without food or other necessities because they could not afford them. For Indigenous students, the comparable figure was much higher, an alarming *one in four*.

Most concern was expressed by full-time undergraduates (especially females), full-time postgraduate coursework students and Indigenous students. The following comments are typical of the students in stressful financial circumstances:

I struggle every week with my finances. I get paid the bare minimum wage and I can only work once a week due to my timetable.

I am constantly worrying about the huge debt I am getting into: how am I going to be able to pay this money back?

Constantly having to think ahead to make sure I have just enough money to afford the next field trip, textbook or put petrol in my car so I can actually make it to my classes. I even tried to condense my timetable so that I can save on petrol.

Overall, female students were under more financial pressure than were male students. Female students were more likely to have a budget deficit and less likely to have savings for an emergency. Female students were more likely to have taken out a repayable loan in order to study than were male students, however male students with loans had borrowed much larger amounts.

Full-time postgraduate coursework students were under the most financial pressure. Of all cohorts, full-time postgraduate coursework students had :

- the highest rate of rejection for Youth Allowance/ Austudy;
- the highest rate of dependence on a partner;
- the highest incidence of having used savings to support their studies in 2006 (62 per cent); and
- the highest estimated debt upon completion of studies.

These students were more likely to agree the following questionnaire statements: "My financial situation is often a source of worry to me," and "Supporting my studies puts a great deal of pressure on my parents/partner."

Many Indigenous students were under financial duress. Indigenous respondents to the national survey:

- reported higher study-related expenses;

- were far more likely to have taken out loans:
Undergraduate 33.8%; non-Indigenous 24.4%
Postgraduate 34.4%; non-Indigenous 20.2%;
- reported working longer hours
Undergraduate mean 3 hours greater - 17.8; non-Indigenous 14.8
Postgraduate mean 3.6 hours greater - 18.9; non-Indigenous 15.3;
- were more likely to have missed classes because of paid work; and
- were more likely to agree that their financial situation worried them (72.5%; non-Indigenous 52.5%)

Mature-age participants have never been treated as an equity target group but since the expansion of the higher education system following World War II, Australia has had a tradition of adult participation in higher education.

Commencing mature-age students are defined in various ways, including 21 years or over and 25 years or over. The overall share of students aged 30 years or more hovers at a little over one quarter of the student population, defying the common belief in the predominance of school-leaver entry. In some universities, 50% of students are mature-age. Many of these mature-age students are postgraduates of course, as the tables to follow show.

The three tables that follow present some age-group data for 2003-2007 for both undergraduate and postgraduate students. As rough denominators, the total number of undergraduates is 660-690,000 during this period and the total number of postgraduates 260-270,000, giving a total student population of 950-990,000, including international students who now comprise around one quarter of all students).

While noting the age-group categories are not of equal size, the figures show that:

- participation peaks in the 25-29 and 30-39 age groups for undergraduate students and participation is higher in older age groups for postgraduate students.
- participation by older people has been rising steadily;
- international students form a particularly significant proportion of 25-29 and 30-39 year old postgraduates but not in older categories.

Table 1: Domestic student population by age category (all students, undergraduate and postgraduate, 2003-2007)

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
<i>Undergraduate</i>					
25-29	51,759	50,493	49,178	49,478	50,848
30-39	55,909	53,983	52,818	52,085	52,089
40-49	27,927	27,208	26,719	26,167	26,350
50-59	7,815	7,907	7,953	8,154	8,545
60+	1,347	1,338	1,442	1,522	1,748
<i>Postgraduate</i>					
25-29	37,414	38,360	38,048	38,665	40,187
30-39	55,794	55,774	55,245	55,921	56,542
40-49	36,853	36,876	36,641	36,848	36,542
50-59	13,498	14,069	14,594	15,517	16,184
60+	2,019	2,182	2,471	2,693	3,030

Table 2: Whole student population (domestic and international students) by age category (all students, undergraduate and postgraduate 2003-2007)

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
<i>Undergraduate</i>					
25-29	69,855	67,711	65,263	66,112	68,876
30-39	66,267	63,719	61,258	60,214	60,144
40-49	30,425	29,572	28,857	28,317	28,337
50-59	8,126	8,186	8,249	8,470	8,849
60+	1,368	1,372	1,467	1,553	1,780
<i>Postgraduate</i>					
25-29	61,284	63,781	65,608	67,301	70,266
30-39	78,190	78,019	76,353	76,518	76,768
40-49	44,304	44,823	44,379	44,391	43,351
50-59	14,856	15,523	16,081	16,970	17,615
60+	2,140	2,310	2,593	2,818	3,142

Table 3: Award course completions for all students by age category (undergraduate and postgraduate, 2003-2007)

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
<i>Undergraduate</i>					
25-29	18,854	18,901	18,179	data not available	19,096
30-39	14,560	14,811	13,957		12,859
40-49	6,902	7,028	6,603		6,121
50-59	1,889	1,933	1,906		1,926
60+	306	327	312		368
<i>Postgraduate</i>					
25-29	20,270	21,697	23,992		25,616
30-39	24,411	24,867	24,725		24,851
40-49	13,006	13,652	13,797		13,601
50-59	4,098	4,338	4,584		5,005
60+	503	553	677		787

CASE STUDY ONE: Open Universities Australia (OUA), which began in 1993 as Open Learning Australia, is an important mechanism for non-traditional delivery of higher education (the data to follow are from the OUA website). OUA is owned by seven universities and is growing rapidly OUA students are typically working adults seeking to develop their knowledge and their qualifications via online study. OUA presently has around 23,000 students and thus is equivalent to a medium size university. The tables below summarises the growth in unit enrolments in recent years and the age distribution of students. Notably, undergraduate enrolment dominates postgraduate enrolment and the enrolments are strongest in the 20-24 years and 30-34 years age brackets.

Table 4: Unit enrolments at Open Universities Australia 2004-2007

	2004	2005	2006	2007	% change
Undergraduate	23958	37108	47672	62076	30%
Vocational	781	447	284	528	403%
Transitional	438	1474	1486	1818	22%
Postgraduate	325	631	1312	2877	119%
Total	25502	39660	50991	67299	32%

Table 5: Unit enrolments at Open Universities Australia by age group

Age Group	2006	2007	% change
< 15	50	66	32%
15-19	2703	3446	27%
20-24	15659	18562	19%
25-29	11771	16465	40%
30-34	8062	10998	36%
35-39	5187	7165	38%
40-44	3582	4682	31%
45-49	1975	2846	44%
50-54	1051	1571	49%
55-59	547	866	58%
60+	404	632	56%
Total	50991	67299	32%

CASE STUDY TWO: The oldest (and possibly most effective) Australian program for 'second chance' mature age entry to higher education is the Open Foundation program of the University of Newcastle. Open Foundation is a tertiary preparation program that has been preparing adult students to enter University for more than 30 years. Open Foundation is recognised as a University entry qualification by many universities around Australia.

Students undertake 40 units of study and must pass their courses in one calendar year to be eligible to apply for university entry. Applicants must be 20 years of age or over. The program is aligned with the Australian equity framework and is designed to provide a pathway to University for adults who, because of a variety of factors including English language difficulty, having a disability, being from a low socio-

economic background or having lived in an isolated region have not previously pursued university studies. Open Foundation is also designed to provide an opportunity for Indigenous Australians and for women entering non-traditional fields of study.

Open Foundation not only provides a qualification that students can use to gain entry to university but also helps students to develop the skills needed for successful study at tertiary level. In Open Foundation students learn about what it is to study at university. A comment from one successful participant:

Often when I told friends and acquaintances about Open Foundation and its function as a University preparation course they would reply 'What do you want to do that for?' and they might have well have added 'At your Age?' or 'Don't you have enough to do?' A previous Open Foundation student had said that 'It would change your life' and I didn't believe her! How wrong I was. Open Foundation is a wonderful program; for me it was a time of personal growth and new-found confidence. I for one learnt not just how to write an essay but also much about myself and my capabilities. Having left school at 16 I never imagined I would be able to 'think like an academic'.

Finally, some suggestions for the conditions for widening participation across the lifecourse. The context for higher education is changing rapidly and the opportunities for engagement across the lifecourse may expand, but new educational thinking is needed if this to occur.

There is great pressure on universities to be more relevant and to demonstrate their relevance to Australia's social, cultural and economic development. But they face significant value tensions as they endeavour to be:

'excellent' and 'equitable'
'charitable' and 'commercial'
'local' and 'international'

There is a likelihood that the Bradley Review will endorse the concept of mission-based funding compacts in which individual institutions would negotiate their missions and funding arrangements directly with the federal government department, DEEWR. Such arrangements would support institutional diversification and the diversification of curricula.

Social inclusion is also a hot topic in Australian higher education and the Bradley Review's conclusions and recommendations on equity and participation are eagerly awaited. But regardless of the review's findings, a new paradigm will need to widen participation in higher education on a major scale. This would involve a vastly more flexible relationship with communities and more flexible delivery modes, coupled with less emphasis on admissions as the point of intervention.

First, six central observations regarding the issue of equity in Australia ...

1. Presently the higher education sector operates for university admission on a 'merit' + 'compensatory programs' paradigm that constrains progress.
2. Socioeconomic status is awkward to define and measure but define and measure it we must. The postcode method has particular shortcomings,

especially for socially heterogenous regions, e.g. some rural areas. A new metric is needed.

3. Educational disadvantage still tends to be viewed narrowly as solely economic disadvantage, when of course it is not.
4. The problems are decidedly cross-sectoral in character. PISA data show that Australian schools perform unevenly compared with many nations – but there remain high expectations that universities can provide the solution but in many ways they are dealing with the legacy of a socially polarised school system that fails some Australians.
5. Advancing equity requires partnerships, cooperation and collaboration between universities and between universities and schools, TAFE colleges, and so on, but the policy settings do little to encourage or support this.
6. Without doubt equity costs money. The present Higher Education Equity Program (HEEP) provides only modest financial incentives or supports for institutions.

To widen participation at the point of transition from school ...

1. Frame policy around a multi-causal understanding of the factors underlying under-representation.
2. Improve the definition/measurement of socioeconomic status using parental education/employment indicators to enhance the targeting of initiatives and to allow evidence-based policy and practice.
3. Set targets and provide more incentives for universities to work collaboratively.
4. Reach back into schools, well before the school-university transition.
5. Select students more flexibly. Be less reliant on ENTER, encourage and support mature-age entry.
6. Renew first year curricula, diversify first year curricula.
7. Develop better ways of measuring graduate outcomes to counteract the present reputational and positional status effects.

To widen participation across the lifecourse ...

1. New funding arrangements that guarantee lifetime 'tertiary education entitlements' for each citizen.
2. Greater collaboration between VET and HE sectors, a more integrated or seamless tertiary education.
3. Development of more modular yet coherent curricula.
4. Teaching and learning methodologies suited to adult learners.

5. Extensive revision and renewal of the Australian Qualifications Framework to remove sectoral divides and hierarchies and to replace these with a learner/learning centred taxonomy.
6. Development of the Australian Higher Education Graduation Statement to integrate with 'lifetime educational e-portfolios'.

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