

Submission to the Higher Education Review 2008

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This submission is focused on questions 8 and 9 of Section 3.2: Opportunities to Participate in Higher Education.

8. Should there be a national approach to improving Indigenous and low SES participation and success in higher education?

9. If you support a national approach to improving Indigenous and low SES participation and success how do you see it being structured, resourced, monitored and evaluated?

It is the author's view, based on her substantial work in the area of Indigenous higher education, that the particular circumstances and characteristics of Indigenous students warrant separate, focused consideration¹. This consideration is best given by Indigenous people and their representatives, such as the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC). The present submission, therefore, does not address Indigenous participation and success. This submission focuses on the participation and success in higher education of people from low socio-economic status (SES).

The federal Education Minister, the Honourable Julia Gillard, MP, recently said:

We want to make sure there is a vision for our universities for the next fifteen, twenty years. We want that vision to include the ability of the poorest Australians to be able to aspire to go to university and have a fair chance of doing so.

The *2008 Australian Review of Higher Education* provides the opportunity to facilitate improvements in the sector that will have wide-reaching positive and lasting impact and effect on the future of this country and its people, particularly the people from lower SES. This submission argues that this issue should be the major focus of the Review because there is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to effect real change.

Participation and success of low SES students

While the issues associated with poor rates of participation of students from low SES compared to their peers in Australian higher education have been widely understood and acknowledged for more than a decade and a half, there has been no improvement or advancement of this situation in this timeframe. There is evidence that the Group of Eight universities perform particularly poorly in terms of representation of students from low SES in their student profiles. The 2008 equity scoping report commissioned by Universities Australia provides recent further confirmation of these commonly known findings. This is despite an expansion of participation *per se*, the provision of financial

and other support for students, and significant target setting and monitoring of universities' performance.

In terms of success, there are widely held erroneous assumptions about the threat to standards of allowing students with marginally lower academic achievement, as measured by numerical rankings – which are widely understood to be limited in their usefulness – to enter university. However, a large body of longitudinal research by the Australian Council of Educational Research and others indicates clearly that once admitted to university, students from low SES have success rates comparable to those of their higher SES peers.

The *2008 Australian Review of Higher Education* provides the opportunity to move beyond acknowledgement of the issues and onto sustained action to address them. This will simply not be possible without a coordinated, structured, national approach that is appropriately resourced, monitored and evaluated. This submission puts forward a proposal a coordinated national approach is made up of two interlocked components:

1. The establishment of a National Equity Performance Fund
2. The establishment of The Australian Centre for Equity in Education (TACEE).

1. A National Equity Performance Fund (NEPF)

Modelled on the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund (LTPF), the National Equity Performance Fund (NEPF) would be designed to encourage the maintenance and enhancement of performance in the area of student equity and in particular, low SES participation and success in higher education.

Presently, there are few incentives for universities to perform well in the area of equity, and there are imposing barriers to equity performance. Because of the erroneous assumptions about threats to standards, to be known as a university that excels in equity, or 'an equity university', is a kind of death knell to an institution's reputation, particularly internationally.

Prior to the introduction of the LTPF, the situation across the sector was broadly similar in regard to teaching and learning. But with the introduction of a very large fund and the (perhaps unintended) subsequent rankings and reputational impacts of teaching and learning performance, to be known as a university that excels in teaching is no longer the insult or threat to reputation and standing that many universities previously feared it might be. In fact, quite the opposite is now true. Institutions that previously only boasted of research performance now proudly also boast of teaching and learning performance. More importantly, perhaps, the LTPF brought about serious consideration on teaching and learning in a way not previously seen in the Australian sector. The LTPF changed the teaching and learning landscape.

The NEPF would be designed in a similar way to the LTPF and with similar intentions. Fulfilling hurdle requirements in the form of equity plans, targets, strategies, timelines

and institutional resourcing commitments would provide eligibility to the Fund for institutions. Indicators of institutional success in terms of low SES would then include:

1. Proportion of students from low SES of total student population;
2. Low SES student participation rate;
3. Low SES student success rate;
4. Proportion of low SES graduates in full-time employment;
5. Proportion of low SES graduates in further part-time or full-time study;
6. Low SES graduates' perceptions on the development of generic skills; and
7. Low SES graduates' overall satisfaction with their course.

The majority of these indicators have been vigorously defended as robust and fair in relation to teaching and learning performance. This has worked in favour of many of the elite universities who can rely on their reputation and standing, as well as the high SES of the majority of their students, to ensure high performance on several of the indicators. The NEPF would allow the use of these vigorously defended indicators for another purpose central to the federal government's agenda: social inclusivity through education.

Given the differential performance of universities in terms of equity and the particularly poor performance of Go8 universities in this area to date, it would be appropriate and fair to divide the NEPF so that both *performance* and *improvement* were recognised, as with the recent changes to the LTPF. That way, the poorly performing institutions would be afforded the opportunity and incentive to improve in the area of equity.

Given that equity performance will not have the same market appeal and value as teaching and learning performance, the success of this initiative would depend entirely on the size of the Fund as this will determine, to a large extent, the real value of the exercise and, therefore, the effort that institutions would make toward equity outcomes. It would be inappropriate and ineffective to provide a token or small amount of funding and thereby facilitate opt-out by institutions that might arguably most need to improve performance in this area. The NEPF should, therefore, receive a similar level of funding as the LTPF, at around \$74 million per year.

Similar to arrangements for the LTPF, an expert advisory board, made up of staff and associates drawn from The Australian Centre for Equity in Education (TACEE), outlined below) and others would provide strategic and operational advice to the government, who would administer the Fund.

Just as the work of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) assists universities that wish to improve teaching and learning performance, so too will part of the work of the TACEE (outlined below) provide such assistance to universities in the area of equity.

Submission 1: That the Review recommend the establishment of a National Equity Performance Fund to be divided according to universities' performance and improvement in relation to equity outcomes.

2. The Australian Centre for Equity in Education (TACEE)

The Australian Centre for Equity in Education (TACEE) would have three central, nationally focused objectives:

- i) To provide high level coordination of a national central research centre for equity in all levels of education, including early childhood, primary, secondary, vocational and higher education;
- ii) To provide high level coordination of support for the enhancement of higher education institutional and sector performance in equity areas; and
- iii) To provide research-based advice to the Minister for Education on the participation and success of low SES students in all levels of education.

The TACEE would significantly expand and build on the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education located at the University of South Australia. Staff and associates of TACEE would comprise national and international experts on equity in early childhood, primary, secondary and tertiary education on a range of appointment types including permanent, contract, casual and secondment arrangements. The base funding for TACEE would be provided by the federal and state and territory governments and this funding would be supplemented by research and consultancy income. The base funding would include a secretariat, a core staff and an operational budget commensurate with the scope of the objectives of the Centre. The Centre would be overseen and managed by a Board, appointed by, and answerable to, the Minister for Education.

The Centre would comprise a consortium of non-aligned universities with demonstrated expertise and experience in equity in education. The National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education would be a key player in the consortium, as would universities with demonstrated high performance in the participation and success of low SES students and with recognised expertise around equity in the other education sectors.

i) National research centre

TACEE would be the leading research centre on equity in education in Australia. Despite some investment in research in the area and some knowledge of factors that contribute to the poor progression of low SES students from secondary to higher education in Australia, **we require comprehensive, robust data on ‘what works’ in terms of improving the equity performance of universities.** One of the major functions of the Centre will be to coordinate and oversee a suite of large, federally funded, longitudinal studies by experienced researchers of the performance of the Australian higher education sector, and individual institutions within that sector, in relation to low SES student participation and success.

Similar to the work of the IHEAC, the work of TACEE would be expected to make important contributions to reforming the culture of universities. However, unlike the IHEAC, whose influence is limited to the higher education sector when it is often too late to effect some of the change of the kinds necessary for students, the TACEE would also focus on the other educational sectors – early childhood, primary, secondary and tertiary education. An evidence-based research approach would be taken.

This research would involve, among other foci, tracking student from low SES from early childhood education and primary school through secondary school and into post school choices. It would include **rigorously investigating the impacts of various factors that contribute to the poor higher education participation and success of low SES students** such as:

- the effects of personal, familial and community aspiration on low SES student choices;
- perceptions of the relevance and benefits of higher education and other post-compulsory education options among low SES students, families and communities;
- individual resilience and self-efficacy of low SES students;
- financial circumstances of low SES students; and
- labour market conditions affecting low SES students.

Given the dearth of research evidence about *what works* in terms of improving equity in higher education, a major focus of the research program would be **rigorously investigating the efficacy of existing programs, initiatives and activities around improving higher education equity** such as, for example,

- setting targets for enrolment of low SES students at university;
- targeting year 10 11 and 12 low SES students and offering study skills, peer mentoring and institutional familiarisation programs;
- targeting year 7, 8 and 9 low SES students and offering aspirational and motivational programs to raise awareness and open possibilities;
- targeting low SES primary school children to provide information about post school options and the necessary pre-requisites for each;
- community education programs focusing on the benefits of higher education aimed at parents of all low SES children;
- flexible university entry arrangements for low SES students;
- university/school partnership arrangements;
- linkages with and pathways from vocational education, including clear articulation and credit transfer arrangements;
- partnering arrangements between universities and relevant state Departments of Education;
- waiving fees and offering special HECS rates;
- provision of scholarships and other financial support;
- provision of double weighted institutional funding to develop support programs and

- relevant training to staff to support low SES students;
- modification of course structure to provide reduced study load where appropriate and necessary;
- the provision of academic and social support for enrolled students from low SES;
- identifying at risk students and providing case management and relevant support;
- providing specialised development and training for university staff.

ii) Enhancing equity performance

Modelled in part on the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC), part of the remit of TACEE would be to assist universities to improve their equity performance.

More specifically, using up to date research evidence, the Centre would:

- Foster and acknowledge excellent equity initiatives and performance in higher education;
- Develop effective mechanisms for the identification, development, dissemination and embedding of excellent individual and institutional practice in equity for low SES students in Australian higher education;
- Promote and support strategic change in higher education institutions for the advancement of equity and in particular the improved participation and success of students from low SES;
- Develop and support reciprocal national and international arrangements for the purpose of sharing and benchmarking equity performance enhancement processes;
- Raise the profile and encourage recognition of the fundamental importance of equity in higher education in Australia;
- Identify equity issues that impact on the Australian early childhood, primary, secondary, vocational and higher education systems and contribute to national approaches to address these and other emerging issues; and
- Advance Australia's performance in equity in higher education to provide international leadership in this arena.

Just as the ALTC has had a significant impact on the voluntary uptake of projects and other efforts to enhance teaching and learning, with a similar level of funding and, therefore, influence, so would the TACEE be expected to have a similar impact on efforts to enhance equity performance. Funding at a similar level similar to the funding provided to the Australian Learning and Teaching Council for this part of the remit of TACEE would ensure the Centre had the necessary influence in the sector and would be likely to encourage widespread uptake of equity initiatives and genuine valuing of improvements in this arena. The funding for this component of the TACEE would need to be around

\$227 million. Additional funding would be required for the other two components of the TACEE.

iii) High level advice

Students from low SES in Australia do not have a representative body championing their cause. Improving low SES participation and success in higher education, therefore, relies on the goodwill of individuals and institutions. There is much goodwill in the sector but given the lack of progress in the participation and success of this group over the past 15 years, it is clear that goodwill alone will not bring about the necessary changes.

TACEE provides the ideal source of appropriate expert advice to government on evidence-based practice to improve in this area. The Centre would critically monitor the relative participation and success of low SES students across the sector and on an institution-by-institution basis and produce publicly available report cards.

Through its research efforts and Board expertise, the Centre would provide advice to the Minister for Education on improving student outcomes, including through:

- Improving access, progression and completion;
- Enhancing and promoting articulation from vocational education to higher education; and
- Enhancing higher education institutional support of low SES students.

TACEE would also convene an annual national summit that will incorporate:

- Discussion of policy issues;
- Longitudinal and other research outcomes and development; and
- Sector and institutional achievements, innovations and policy developments.

Submission 2: That the Review recommends the establishment of The Australian Centre for Equity in Education to drive the equity agenda of universities.
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Outcomes

The two submissions above will together redress the facts that Australia does not have a national equity system and that this is one of the reasons that low SES participation and success in higher education has remained static for such a long time. Without a radical change at a national level, low SES students will continue to be under-represented at university, with all the individual, community and national consequences of that exclusion to follow.

In order for Australian higher education to improve its equity performance around low SES students, it is critical that a multi-pronged approach such as the one outlined here be

appropriately monitored and evaluated. Ideally, this would be best undertaken by national and international experts, using pre-determined criteria of sector improvement. The proposed Board of TACEE would be well-placed to provide such monitoring and evaluation. The proposed indicators of equity performance in the National Equity Performance Fund would provide the basis of such criteria, which could be adapted for national use based on expert advice. While it would be critical to include longitudinal research evidence of improvement eventually, it would be appropriate to use existing data and measures until the former begins to become available.

The issues of poor participation and success in higher education for low SES people are not confined to Australia – this is a global issue. The *2008 Review of Australian Higher Education* provides the opportunity to effect real change in a relatively small population and develop an higher education equity improvement blueprint that could be adopted across both developed and developing countries worldwide.

Conclusion

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has said that Australia needs an education revolution, including a revolution in the quantum of our investment in education and a revolution in the quality of our education outcomes (Rudd, 2007). This submission proposes a national approach to achieving a core part of this education revolution.

Let us be brave and effect some real change in equity in education and not waste the opportunity this Review brings with recommending some fiddling around the edges.

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ⁱ Work here includes:

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