



**EQUAL OPPORTUNITY
PRACTITIONERS IN
HIGHER EDUCATION
AUSTRALASIA**

Secretariat
Review of Australian Higher Education
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Dear Professor Bradley

Review of Australian Higher Education

The EOPHEA (Equal Opportunity Practitioners in Higher Education, Australasia) network is pleased to provide you with comments related to key equity and diversity issues for students and staff relevant to the review of higher education.

EOPHEA is hopeful that your review will provide a significant opportunity to address key issues related to equity, diversity and social inclusion that are fundamental to the economic and social prosperity of this country and the sustainability of its universities in an increasingly competitive global market.

We wish you and the other members of the Review panel every success in your deliberations and thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this process. EOPHEA would be pleased to elaborate further on any or all of the matters raised in these submissions. Illness has prevented the completion of the EOPHEA submission regarding staffing issues, and it is hoped this can be sent to you shortly.

Yours faithfully

Dr Ann Stewart, National Co-convenor (student issues), EOPHEA
Ms Beverley Hill, National Co-convenor (staffing issues), EOPHEA

4th August, 2008

Encl: Submission, Student Issues
Attachment, *Outreach and Social Inclusion*, DEEWR Forum, July 2008



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Submission to the Bradley Review of Higher Education – Student Issues

Underpinning social inclusion through access and participation

1. *Vision for the sector*

EOPHEA agrees that the Australian community can rightly expect the higher education sector to not only serve it in terms of research, development and education of its future professional workforce, but to make a significant contribution to the social cohesion and overall advancement of the nation, in both economic and social terms.

To this end universities should be expected to play a more proactive role in encouraging and providing opportunities for people from disadvantaged groups to access higher education and in ensuring their curriculum equips graduates with skills and understandings beyond the specific discipline that will enable them to take up a leadership role in a democracy that embraces the diversity of its people and has an increasingly important role within the international community.

2. *Barriers to achieving the identified vision*

2.1 *Student Finances*

There has been recognition that financial considerations pose a significant barrier to many students in accessing higher education. To this end, successive federal governments have developed a raft of equity scholarships with a view to increasing access. There are a number of fundamental problems with these which are detailed below. In addition the cost and increasing complexity of administering these scholarships is placing a significant impost on universities.

Recent research indicates that students are working an increasing number of hours. This is severely impacting upon the quality of their engagement with their university and their capacity to maximise their academic development and broader education during their course of study. Financial incentives therefore must be most coherently addressed.

The following points outline some of the key issues:

- 2.1.1 Current Commonwealth equity scholarships which range from approximately \$2,000–\$4,000, while helpful, are inadequate in terms of making a significant difference to the poverty of those they target.

2.1.2 The complexity and costs of administering these is significant for each institution. In fact the cost to the higher education system of administering these Commonwealth scholarships has not been adequately costed. EOPHEA understands that the previous DEST administration did undertake some preliminary costing of central administration of the scheme and found it to be exorbitant and accordingly individual universities were obliged to take up this responsibility. It is untenable that universities be expected to continue administering an increasing number of scholarships with no additional funds for implementation. This obligation impacts directly on monies that could be used for teaching and learning.

2.1.3 Currently, University scholarships are treated as income under the Social Security Income test whereas Commonwealth Scholarships are not. Effectively this means that significantly disadvantaged students are placed in a position of receiving a degree of assistance from their university, but this may see their Centrelink allowance reduced. In some cases, in real terms, this makes the student worse off than if they did not receive an institutional equity scholarship. This effectively creates a situation where the equity scholarships are subsidising social security payments.

In addition, philanthropic organisations report that there is less inclination by members to donate to funds used for providing equity scholarships if they are aware of the potential negative impact the scholarships may have. This anomaly was mentioned in the Parliament by Senator Stott-Despoja in speaking to the Taxation Laws Amendment (Scholarships) Bill 2005 which amended the legislation in regard to Commonwealth Scholarships, but not university equity scholarships.

2.1.4 The Commonwealth Government Equity Scholarships' guidelines require universities to award these scholarships on the basis of postcode groupings, which take no account of living costs in the postcodes where the student is actually attending university. This means that a student experiencing high levels of financial disadvantage, but whose home postcode is non-regional, can only be awarded a Commonwealth learning Scholarship of approximately \$2,000. Conversely, a student who may demonstrate significantly less financial disadvantage, but whose home postcode is regional, is automatically eligible for a Commonwealth Accommodation Scholarship worth approximately \$4,000.

2.1.5 At present, students are unable to transport their Commonwealth Scholarship when they transfer to another institution. They are obliged to re-apply for a CS at their new university. Because of the difference in eligibility criteria between universities or because of the differential distribution of equity scholarships they may in fact not be eligible for a CS at their new location. Even in those circumstances where they are eligible, there may be a period of up to one year before they are able to reapply and take up a new equity scholarship.

2.1.6 The current threshold of earning prior to impact upon Welfare payments has remained at the same level of \$6,000 for nearly 10 years, yet the costs of

living and study have significantly increased over this time period. Students therefore begin to lose Centrelink support once their income reaches the \$6,000 level. This affects students who are working or who are in receipt of an institutional equity scholarship, philanthropic financial support or other bursaries or financial assistance.

2.2 Access and outreach

Refer Appendix for detailed discussion of this issue. In summary however the following points are highlighted.

- 2.2.1 There have been considerable efforts made by governments and many individual universities over the years to improve the representation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. While some improvement has been made in areas such as women in non-traditional disciplines, there has been a notable lack of success in efforts to improve in particular, proportional representation from people from low socio-economic backgrounds and Indigenous Australians. There is a complex array of reasons for this, however, one key aspect has been the failure to address the issue of aspiration.
- 2.2.2 The increasingly competitive environment in higher education is not conducive to encouraging collaboration between universities. In addition, State vs Federal politics result in lack of meaningful cooperation and stifle attempts to address the issue.
- 2.2.3 Although there are some individual pockets of success, overall there has been a lack of collaboration between the sectors. This has seen a lack of potential synergies being explored and developed in a range of areas, such as universities value-adding to schools and TAFE institutions or expanding possible alternative pathways into higher education.
- 2.2.4 Funding received from the Federal government to encourage universities in their equity work has been inadequate in terms of supporting the type of outreach required to make substantive change in this area. Short term goals have been developed to match the short term funding cycles. Little reward has been given for improved performance and there has been minimal consideration of the context of each university and what realistically it might be expected to achieve.

2.3 Additional areas of concern

- 2.3.1 The use of postcodes to identify students from low socio-economic backgrounds remains problematic. While the longitudinal data has some integrity, there is little capacity to use this information to accurately identify individuals from Low SES backgrounds. Indeed, there is now a conflation between Low SES and financial disadvantage. While the two are related, they are not identical. It is essential that this issue is addressed to ensure more robust data.

2.3.2 EOPHEA is extremely concerned to ensure that, despite some issues with the definitions of Low SES, the national longitudinal student equity data should continue to be maintained by the Federal Government. DEST/DEEWR no longer provides universities with data for the following, despite these areas being identified as priorities in the *Higher Education Equity Support Program Guidelines*:

- a. women in specific non-traditional areas of study
 - i. Women in Engineering
 - ii. Women in Architecture
 - iii. Women in higher degrees (by coursework)
 - iv. Women in higher degrees (by research); and
- b. students from low socio-economic backgrounds (25 and over).

3. Strategies that should be adopted

3.1 Student finance

- 3.1.1 There is an urgent need for the existing legislation (Section 8 of the *Social Security Act*) to be amended to remove the anomaly in the treatment of institutional equity scholarships by Centrelink.
- 3.1.2 We would recommend serious consideration be given to scrapping the current scholarship system completely and to develop an alternative income support mechanism for tertiary students. This should be administered through Centrelink, which already undertakes a comprehensive means test to establish financial hardship and has all the individual data related to residence, age, parenting responsibilities, disability and so forth. Consideration should be given to providing students from regional areas an additional accommodation and travel allowance.
- 3.1.3 If a scholarship system remains in place, a thorough examination of the current system should be undertaken with a view to making additional scholarships available at an increased rate of remuneration to meet the considerable unmet demand. Additional flexibility should be built in to enable universities to provide higher levels of assistance to those most in need.
- 3.1.4 The current system by which a student's access to a Commonwealth Accommodation Scholarship is linked to their postcode of home address does not adequately account for the reality of individual student's financial disadvantage. Development of a more refined instrument to calculate need in regard to individual financial circumstances and the requirement for relocation to take up tertiary study would be highly desirable.
- 3.1.5 The threshold of earning for those on welfare should be increased from its current level of \$6,000 to a more realistic figure, which should be adjusted for CPI. EOPHEA suggests that \$10,000 might be a more realistic level.
- 3.1.6 With specific regard to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, EOPHEA believes that:

- More money needs to be allocated for scholarships that are specifically earmarked for Indigenous Australian students.
- Specific scholarships should be provided for post-graduate Indigenous Australian students, including the notion of “internships” leading to an academic career.
- Funding for **ITAS** needs to be increased and the formula changed to enable a greater percentage of students to receive assistance.
- Government teaching/learning-related grants and awards , such as Carrick grants, should encourage embedding of Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum. Understanding of Indigenous perspectives should become a graduate attribute for all universities.

3.2 Access and outreach

- 3.2.1 Building aspiration to higher education needs to be based upon a model of community engagement. The attached document to this submission provides detail of a possible model for such work. It is important that this strategy links funding to the long term sustainable relationship development between key stakeholders, which underpins cultural change.
- 3.2.2 Collaboration between universities and other sectors must be encouraged to maximise resources and to work towards a shared goal of convincing *all capable potential students to consider university education as a realistic option at some time in their lives*. This is distinctly different from traditional competitive marketing in which each university seeks to convince the ‘already-aspiring’ to attend their particular institution. National mechanisms need to be developed to encourage and support such collaboration and which can also address the issue of Commonwealth v State entrenched competition. The current Federal government is ideally placed to take action on this issue.
- 3.2.3 Universities must be encouraged to develop multiple pathways to higher education. This will be significantly enhanced if encouragement is given for intersectoral collaboration as noted above.
- 3.2.4 There are existing examples of good practice in outreach and access in Australia and overseas, in particular the UK and these should be published and promoted as possible models for consideration.

3.3 Higher Education Funding

If the government is serious in addressing issues of access and participation, funding must be commensurate and linked to incentives for the relevant institutions, in particular supporting cross- and inter-sectoral collaboration. As noted previously, such funding must be structured in such a way that it can support community-based programs designed to bring about long term shift in aspiration.

3.4 Research

- 3.4.1 EOPHEA applauds the establishment of the National Centre for Student Equity. There is a considerable amount of research to be done in this field in a range of related areas, and the capacity of this Centre to inform the work of the Federal and State governments as well as institutions of higher education and vocational education is considerable. It is to be hoped that the Centre will be appropriately resourced and relevant incentive provided to encourage the necessary collaboration. Some of these areas are briefly outlined below, although this is not in any way intended to provide a comprehensive analysis of research needs.
- 3.4.2 While there is some research that indicates the introduction of HECS has not significantly affected the university participation of people from Low SES backgrounds, anecdotal evidence suggests that there is significant misunderstanding about the actual costs of participation, and insufficient understanding of the post education choices students may make because of HECS debts. Further research into these issues and ways to effectively address such misunderstandings in different community contexts would be of value.
- 3.4.3 A recent UK study by Claire Callender (2008), looked at ‘impact of students’ paid work on their actual marks and degree results...’ (Callender 2008, 359) identifying that ‘the more hours students worked, the greater negative effect.’ (ibid, 359). Significantly, Callender found that students who were from lower income backgrounds worked longer in paid employment whilst studying, and that this contributed to poorer academic outcomes. Further studies to better define the actual costs to students of undertaking tertiary education and to the actual outcomes for students from different income backgrounds would be of value to the sector.
- 3.4.4 As yet there has been no large scale research conducted into the effectiveness of scholarships as a tool in facilitating access or in making any substantive change to the minds of people from Low SES backgrounds in considering higher education.

3.5 Monitoring and Reporting

- 3.5.1 It is imperative that the Federal government maintain its responsibilities in the area of data collection in addition to improving the rigour with which it monitors the efforts of universities in improving access, participation and success of disadvantaged groups in higher education. Specifically, those areas previously identified as having ‘dropped off’ should be reinstated in the collection and reporting.
- 3.5.2 National student equity data should be publicly released by the middle of the calendar year following its collection.
- 3.5.3 In addition to the above, EOPHEA believes that the nature of the reports from universities related to their student equity programs should be more comprehensive and in the interests of sharing good practice, made publicly available.

Attachment: Transmitted separately is a copy of a recent address by the EOPHEA National co-Convenor (student issues) to the Go8/DEEWR *Forum on Social Inclusion* held at the University of Melbourne, July 2008