



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE



Student Equity 2030

Response to NCSEHE Discussion Paper

22 October 2018

Introduction

The University of Melbourne welcomes the opportunity to respond to the 'Student Equity 2030: A long-term strategic vision for student equity in higher education' Discussion Paper.

The Discussion Paper is both well-considered and comprehensive, identifying many of the key challenges confronting the equity agenda in our higher education system. Equity considerations should have a central place in the broader conversation around the design of policy and funding arrangements, and in our long-term thinking on post-secondary study. The authors of the Discussion Paper are to be commended for the comprehensive approach taken, as is the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education for supporting the project.

We strongly support the push for a post-secondary education system that is inclusive and accessible to groups that have historically been under-represented. The University of Melbourne has initiated a range of programs that seek to provide pathways for low SES, Indigenous, regional and remote students, and students with a disability. More broadly, we recognise there is a need to ensure that the tertiary education system, as a whole, enables continued learning opportunities for all segments of society. This means a system that is responsive to diverse student needs, and a system whose different parts interact with each other in a functional way. It also means updating the way we think about student equity, moving beyond traditional equity categories and recognising the importance of lifelong learning in supporting equity and inclusion.

The following comments address some of the issues raised in the Discussion Paper. Since the Paper is very broad in scope, and since there is significant overlap in the points raised in its eight consultation questions, this submission does not aim to respond to those questions individually. Instead, we identify four key problem areas around which our long-term thinking on student equity is organised, noting the points at which the comments offered are directly relevant to the consultation questions.

The four key focus areas are:

1. A holistic approach to student equity
2. Sector differentiation and institutional diversity
3. Industry transition and lifelong learning
4. Accountability and transparency

The comments offered on these areas are not intended to account for all of the issues associated with student equity. The aim is to tie the discussion to broader issues confronting the tertiary education sector, and to suggest how our long-term thinking might be framed by considering the general features of an education system that will help to promote equity and inclusion.

We also note that the University of Melbourne enjoys considerable research expertise in this space, through the Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education (MCSHE) and through the Melbourne Graduate School of Education (MGSE). We would welcome the opportunity to provide further input, where possible.

For further information, or to discuss this submission, Dr Julie Wells, Vice-Principal Policy & Projects can be contacted at julie.wells@unimelb.edu.au or (03) 8344 2639.

1. A holistic approach to student equity

Australia's higher education system does not function in isolation. The results achieved at a tertiary level are shaped by the learning outcomes in early education, in primary schools and in secondary schools.

Our vision for equity in higher education should, therefore, be holistic in the sense of recognising the ways in which various parts of our education system influence each other. A conversation around what student equity in 2030 might look like is timely: students entering primary school now will, in 2030, be considering their options for post-secondary study. The education they receive between now and then will determine the options that are available to them.

There is a growing recognition of the importance of early childhood education in shaping outcomes later in life, given the critical stages of a child's brain development occur before school age. We know that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are at risk of being unready for school by the time they enrol in primary school. Of particular concern is access to early childhood education in rural and remote areas, which lags well behind that in our cities. Federal Labor's commitment to extend subsidised pre-school to include three-year olds is a welcome development. Beyond questions of access, there needs to be a sustained focus on the quality of the early childhood education provided.

We should also look for opportunities to better understand the various ways in which school level performance is influencing post-school educational and employment pathways. The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) has now been in operation for a decade. NAPLAN data offers significant insight into the patterns of learning development across primary and secondary schooling, including areas where the system is underperforming. Consideration should be given to how this data may be matched with data reflecting post-secondary outcomes (e.g. higher education statistics) to inform longitudinal analysis of the performance of the education system in its entirety.

None of this is to suggest that higher education providers are not responsible for ensuring that they are accessible to traditionally under-represented cohorts of students. There is a legitimate expectation that Australia's higher education system will widen access, and support success, for members of groups that have been traditionally marginalised.

However, the responsibilities of our universities extend beyond increasing equity participation levels. While post-secondary outcomes are significantly influenced by those at lower levels, the causal influence runs in both directions. As the Discussion Paper notes (under Question 2), entry standards for tertiary courses inevitably inform the decisions students make at a secondary level. Pre-requisites for bachelor degrees impact the subjects that students undertake in latter secondary years. Consequently, the watering down of pre-requisites can undermine the preparedness of students when commencing a degree. For example, STEM-related study in secondary school has declined in recent years, with major implications for the preparedness of commencing university students in relevant programs.

Our universities are also tasked with training the next generation of school teachers, with the expectation that they are equipped to improve the literacy and numeracy levels of Australia's children. If the entry standards or the design of teacher education programs are inadequate for the task, then this will undermine the extent to which the equity aims of the entire education system are realised.

Summary point

Our vision for student equity in 2030 should be holistic, recognising the ways in which the various parts of the education system – early education, primary, secondary and tertiary – influence each other.

2. Sector differentiation and institutional diversity

A differentiated tertiary education system – with a diverse range of institutions – helps to promote equity-related objectives. A diverse system provides incoming students with genuine choice, giving them the opportunity to select the course and institution most suited to their interests, career aspirations and aptitude. More diverse systems are thought to “stimulate social mobility through different access points and progression pathways”,¹ thus advancing key equity aims.

There are some signs that Australia’s higher education system may be shifting towards greater differentiation and specialisation. The block learning model implemented by Victoria University for its first-year bachelor students – in which students undertake subjects concurrently over a shorter period rather than sequentially over a semester – is (within Australia) highly unique and innovative. The early indicators are that this is delivering the intended outcomes: retention levels have improved, suggesting that the block learning model is better engaging students who enter a university program with lower levels of preparedness.

Nonetheless, Australia’s higher education sector is overwhelmingly dominated by doctoral-awarding institutions with similar course profiles. While demand driven funding has increased participation rates for a number of equity cohorts, it has largely failed to deliver a system with greater institutional differentiation. It is appropriate that the next phase of sector reform addresses how the demand driven system might be updated to encourage greater differentiation among our universities. This should include consideration of how distinct institutional missions might play a bigger role in funding allocations, and how equity and opportunity can be supported through seamless pathways between qualifications and diverse learning environments.

What is also crucial is that both parts of the tertiary education system – higher education and vocational education and training (VET) – are functioning optimally and complementarily. The demand driven system has created a funding bias towards bachelor level study, skewing enrolments away from VET qualifications. The problems in the VET sector have been exacerbated by the reputational damage sustained through the VET FEE-HELP scandal. The health of Australia’s tertiary education system depends upon vocational education representing a different but equally valuable, high-quality option as that offered at our universities.

While this last point is generally accepted, the major challenge is finding the appropriate policy and funding mechanisms to achieve this. The VET FEE-HELP experience illustrates how changes intended to support the VET sector can end up damaging it. Proposed policy interventions need to be approached with caution.

Funding arrangements that are ‘neutral’ in the sense of placing VET and university students on a level playing field should be part of the long-term vision for tertiary education. The Victorian Government’s commitment to making 30 TAFE courses in priority areas free is a positive move. Moving away from a system where enrolment patterns are distorted by unequal funding settings in different parts of the post-secondary system will help to re-energise the VET sector.

We should look to international exemplars of well-functioning VET systems for reform options. Vocational education plays a key role in the innovation ecosystems of a number of European countries, in which VET institutions partner with research intensive universities and with industry to encourage the dissemination of new knowledge and practice throughout the economy. Importantly, in each of these countries, vocational qualifications are defined by their unique attributes rather than by a lower status relative to a university degree.

¹ Goedegebuure, L; Massaro, V; Meek, L; and Pettigrew, A, (2017) “A Framework for Differentiation”, *Visions for Australian Tertiary Education* (Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education), pp.7-16 (p.8).

It is important that VET providers update their course offerings such that the qualifications they offer continue to be industry relevant. There is some merit in reviewing the governance arrangements for major TAFE providers. Granting TAFEs the level of autonomy that our universities enjoy would encourage innovation in curriculum design, and allow for greater responsiveness to changing skills needs. Relatedly, the training package curriculum model is in clear need of review.

Summary point

Equity and inclusion are best accommodated through a diverse system, in which universities are differentiated by distinct course offerings, and in which vocational education represents a different but equally valuable, high-quality option as that offered at our universities.

3. Industry transition and lifelong learning

Industry transition and the changing needs of the labour market represent a key set of challenges for Australia's tertiary education sector, and the extent to which it continues to act as an enabler of opportunity and social mobility. We know that workers in the future will enjoy lower levels of job security than those in the past. While the future labour market is difficult to predict in any detail, what we can be confident of is that workers will need the skills to cope with this uncertainty, and that they will typically continue learning throughout their lives. The traditional pathway of undertaking a tertiary qualification directly after completing secondary school, and then never returning to tertiary study, is becoming a thing of the past.

Universities are embracing curriculum reform in response to this changing environment. The move towards shorter cycle courses – “micro-credentialing” – is an important part of this response. The University of Melbourne has recently launched the [‘Melbourne School of Professional and Continuing Education’](#) (MSPACE), offering professional education programs in a range of flexible formats. The University's suite of Graduate online course offerings also reflect the shift towards non-traditional programs. Students are typically free to tailor programs to their particular needs, for example by consolidating subordinate qualifications (Graduate Certificates) into a Masters degree.

The important point is that our tertiary education system will be called upon not only to provide young Australians with an initial opportunity, but to allow individuals to continuously re-skill in the face of industry transition and disruption. Displaced workers will likely become a significant equity cohort in their own right in the coming years. This brings into question how the shorter cycle courses that support lifelong learning are to be integrated into policy, funding and regulatory arrangements alongside traditional programs. Specifically, there is a need to consider the changes to the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) that are necessary to accommodate micro-credentials, and whether changes to arrangements for public subsidies and income contingent loans are needed.

Also significant are the sectors of the economy that are likely to grow in the coming decades. It is generally accepted that that we will see growing demand in service sectors such as healthcare, aged care and education. Overwhelmingly, the jobs that will be created in these areas share two key features: they will involve higher level skills that will require post-secondary qualifications, and they are critical in supporting equity and inclusion in Australian society. Our tertiary education system is at the forefront of sustaining Australia's skills capability across these areas.

Summary point

The equity performance of our tertiary education system will depend on how well it adjusts to industry transition and to lower levels of job security. A key part of this adjustment will involve accommodating micro-credentialing within policy, funding and regulatory arrangements.

4. Transparency and accountability

The Discussion Paper appropriately raises the issue of how the equity performance of our higher education institutions should be measured (Questions 5, 7 and 8). Australian Governments make a substantial financial investment in our higher education system. It is reasonable for them to expect higher education providers to be accountable for delivering the outcomes that are intended by that investment.

A key component of building transparency and accountability is the collection and reporting of data that reflects equity-related outcomes, e.g. participation rates, retention rates. Importantly, we should be aware of the risk of poorly designed performance measurement which can drive the wrong kind of behaviour. It is generally acknowledged, for example, that the use of performance contingent funding needs to be sensitive to the risk of introducing perverse incentives, e.g. encouraging institutions to avoid enrolling students from disadvantaged cohorts whose graduate completion and employment levels are lower than the sector average.

The reporting framework is likely to deliver undesired outcomes if its design is based on a traditional (and outdated) view of post-secondary study. The performance indicators reported in the higher education statistics and on the QILT website have a significant focus on bachelor-level performance, with much less attention given to sub-bachelor and post-graduate outcomes. The siloed approach to collecting higher education and VET data is a further issue, potentially discouraging universities from pursuing new collaborative models with VET providers.²

The introduction of unique student identifier for all tertiary education students (in both higher education and VET) would significantly aid the assessment of institutional performance as well as enhancing our understanding of the study pathways taken. As noted above, linking NAPLAN and PISA data with post-school data would also contribute to these aims.

The accountability and transparency framework should be informed by the broad aims for our tertiary education system, including the need for institutional diversity and for greater agility in the form of shorter cycle courses. Key challenges include the following:

- The role of qualitative assessment, which is sensitive to divergent, institution-specific, approaches to students.
- The need to ensure that performance measurement is sensitive to new types of courses (e.g. micro-credentials). Standard retention measures that capture the percentage of students who re-enrol in their second year are inappropriate to short cycle courses.
- The need to integrate higher education student data with VET data, in view of the importance of collaboration between the two sectors.

In addition to accountability for teaching and learning outcomes, there is a need for renewed focus on student wellbeing and mental health, and on support for persons with a disability, to ensure that our post-secondary education sector is meeting its responsibilities in these areas.

Summary point

Institutions should be accountable for their equity performance. Accountability and transparency would be supported by improved data collection and reporting, including the introduction of a unique student identifier for all tertiary education students, and better use of existing data (e.g. NAPLAN) to assess student progression and institutional performance.

² See Halsey, J. *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education* (Department of Education and Training), see p.52.