

Re-thinking equity for students at Monash University

Fran Ferrier and Margaret Heagney

Abstract

This paper reports on a project undertaken at Monash University in 1999 that aimed to provide information to support decision-making about ways to renew, direct and improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the institution's equity efforts.

The project examined a range of qualitative and quantitative data in exploring two main questions:

- 1. Do the existing recognised equity categories encompass all important forms of disadvantage at Monash? Are there other forms of disadvantage that require attention and that could be addressed by the university?*
- 2. How strong an emphasis should be placed on the equity categories? Should equity effort be directed in additional ways?*

Findings include that slow and small progress toward equity in some cases, coupled with backward movement in others, indicates the limited effectiveness of some existing approaches and a possible lack of understanding (or a misunderstanding) of the extent, causes and nature of disadvantage. Disadvantage is broader, deeper and more complex than under-representation, and extends beyond recognised equity groups. It is also dynamic rather than fixed, changing often and sometimes rapidly.

A major conclusion is drawn that sustained and multifaceted approaches to equity are required if significant improvements are to be achieved.

1. About this paper

In the past, the Federal Government has been a 'major driver of equity' in Australian higher education institutions. Now, however, there is a growing realisation of the 'central nature of equity to the operations of a modern university'. Consideration of equity is vital in relation to mainstream institutional concerns such as meeting the needs of a post-industrial society, and the relationship between the university and community (Clarke *et al*, 1997, p 28).

In this context, Monash University commissioned this study to contribute to the process of equity planning in the university. It provides information to support decision-making about ways to renew, direct and improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the institution's equity efforts. Two main questions were addressed:

1. Do the existing *equity categories* encompass all important forms of disadvantage at Monash? Are there other forms of disadvantage that require attention and that could be addressed by the university?
2. How strong an emphasis should be placed on the equity categories? Should equity effort be directed in additional ways?

These issues were investigated through a scan of relevant research, an analysis of data, and consultations and interviews within the university community.

2. The Context

The higher education system

The past decade has been a period of enormous growth in Australian higher education. Enrolment statistics indicate that in the decade from 1987 to 1997, the number of students in the Unified National System (UNS) rose by 67 percent (DETYA 1997). By itself, this growth has increased opportunities for participation in higher education, but many inequities persist.

Marginson (1999) notes that as it grows, higher education is becoming more universal, and more representative of the population as a whole. However, particularly in the most sought after institutions and courses, 'pockets of advantage' continue to exist. This is supported by data indicating that successful participation in higher education remains influenced by educational background, patterns of work, and work and family responsibilities (eg see Dusseldorp 1998, 1999).

Across the system, the Federal Government's Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) recognises six 'equity groups', based on their under-representation in the student population:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People
- People from rural and isolated areas
- People from low socio-economic status backgrounds People with disabilities
- People from non-English speaking backgrounds
- Women in non-traditional areas and higher degrees by research.

Of these six categories, people of low socio-economic background (low SES) and from rural and isolated areas, are noted to have made the least progress in increasing their representation in higher education during the past decade (eg DETYA 1999, Clarke *et al* 1997).

The identification of equity categories has been found useful in setting equity targets and promoting and directing equity effort. It has provided a 'mechanism' for the monitoring of equity performance and outcomes and for guiding the distribution of funding and opportunities. At the institutional level, it has contributed to the identification of some 'pockets of advantage' (Marginson 1999).

However, as a strategy for improving equity it has several drawbacks. It tends to provide a simplified picture of the extent and nature of 'disadvantage' and masks diversity within groups. It can set de facto boundaries around equity programs and activities (see Bacchi 1996, Butler 1997, Butler and Ferrier 2000, for a fuller discussion of some of the drawbacks of equity categories). In addition, recent research by Western *et al* (1998) has indicated that the methods used for two of the categories (low SES and rural and isolated students) are flawed and of limited usefulness at the institutional level.

Recent equity research provides a more comprehensive picture of disadvantage. It indicates that disadvantage extends beyond the boundaries of the designated equity groups, taking many forms in addition to under-representation. There are also some differences in disadvantage according to the characteristics of institutions and their local social and economic environments.

Several recent studies demonstrate the degree of overlap in the membership of the equity categories. Together they indicate that where individuals (and groups) are represented in more than one category the problems and barriers they experience 'compound' — producing intensified disadvantage. Among these studies, Dobson *et al* (1998) find that more than 80% of low SES students and 60% of rural and isolated students are also members of other equity groups. Clarke *et al* (1997) note that low SES is held to be a 'common central element' in the disadvantage experienced by students in other equity categories and

affects the impact of other forms of disadvantage. A large and comprehensive study of the attitudes and aspirations of school students towards tertiary education, (James *et al* 1999) points to the influence of a complex mix of interacting elements, noting particularly that rurality and low socio-economic status combine to produce the greatest educational disadvantage.

Clarke *et al* note that many students who present as low SES are disadvantaged in a range of other ways: emotional trauma sufferers, sole parents, long-term unemployed, current or former offenders in custody. A survey into student economic circumstances (University of Ballarat, 1997) illustrates that the problems of poverty extend beyond students in the low SES equity category. Ongoing surveys by the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) show that some students continue to be disadvantaged by the structure and delivery of postgraduate courses and fee-paying arrangements (eg CAPA 1991, 1992, 1999).

Changing arrangements in higher education continue to pose new challenges to equity. Increases in the HECS¹ charge and in the prevalence of course fees are noted particularly as having created new difficulties for students in recent years, especially those from low SES backgrounds (Kelly 1998).

Monash University

Monash is one of a group of large, high demand universities that Marginson (1998) indicates receive the majority of funding for research and have high school-leaver cutoff scores in most courses. This points to the likelihood of 'pockets of advantage' within Monash.

Across the institution as a whole, future equity planning is occurring within the context of two documents guiding the development of the university, *Leading the Way*, The Monash Plan 2020 and the *Learning and Teaching Operational Plan*.

Leading the Way, The Monash Plan 2020, indicates a vision of student equity based on openness in response to a recognition of the diversity in the characteristics of students:

Monash students will experience a learning environment which is open to the perspectives and experiences of individuals and groups from different backgrounds which is supportive of all students (p12).

Though its focus is the institution as a whole, the plan articulates a commitment to equity that recognises the differences between the university's six campuses:

Monash will maintain its practical commitment to equity, both for its students and staff expressed in a way which is sensitive to the cultural setting of each campus. (p 15)

Operational plans such as the *Learning and Teaching Operational Plan* pick up the directions set out in *Leading The Way* and provide details of relevant goals, strategies and targets to be pursued over the next three to five years. The *Learning and Teaching Operational Plan* commits the university to:

increase the participation of people from disadvantaged groups who are currently under represented in higher education (p30)

and to the development of an

appropriate student-centred flexible learning environment, which embodies the themes of understanding, life-long learning, innovation, engagement and internationalisation and takes into account access and equity issues (p2).

¹HECS is an income contingent loans scheme by which students contribute to the cost of their education through the taxation system. Recent changes include a shift from a standard charge to different charges by course and a lowering of the income level at which HECS must be repaid.

More specific student equity goals and strategies are spelt out in the Disability Action Plan and in the operational plans of each of the university's campuses and faculties. These focus on equity concerns at the local level and work with campus and faculty programs and services.

Beyond the DETYA categories, Monash has already recognised mature age students as an equity category for internal purposes. This recognition followed an extensive and informative internal study carried out in 1995 (O'Dowd, 1996).

Monash has a range of equity programs and services to assist students from the DETYA equity groups. Some are university wide and others faculty specific. Some, such as those conducted by Disability Liaison Service, are well established and widely used by students on all campuses. Others, such as the Special Admissions Scheme are not yet established in all faculties or have not yet achieved sustained equity outcomes.

The university also provides support services which are available to all students, but especially useful for students suffering particular problems and difficulties. These include *Language and Learning Services, Faculty Mentoring Programs and Student Employment and Careers Services.*

Monash's six Australian campuses display different characteristics resulting from a combination of their institutional history, culture, curriculum, environment and student body (Evans and Farley, 1999, p 37). These differences are important because students in equity categories are unevenly distributed across the campuses — so that more intense equity effort may be required in some places.

Differences in location, curriculum and enrolments are indicated below:

Campus	Location	Curriculum	All students 1999
Clayton	Suburban	All disciplines except Pharmacy	18,245
Caulfield	Suburban	All disciplines except Law, Pharmacy	6,735
Peninsula	Outer suburban	All except Law, Pharmacy, Science	2,463
Gippsland	Rural	All except Law, Pharmacy	5,407
Parkville	Metropolitan	Pharmacy only	452
Berwick	Outer suburban	Business, Info Tech, Arts, Science only	1,263
TOTAL			34,565

Table 1 shows the socio-economic status of all students by campus for 1999. Overall, there appears to be a strong similarity in the SES status of students enrolled at Clayton and Caulfield, contrasting with that of students enrolled at Berwick, Gippsland and Peninsula. The proportion of students of low SES appears particularly small at Clayton and Caulfield.

Table 1: All students 1999, SES status by campus

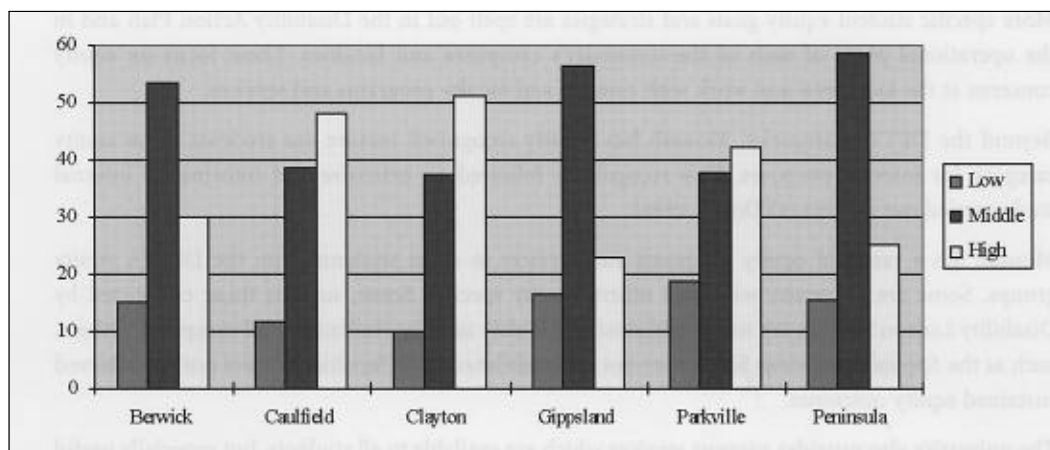
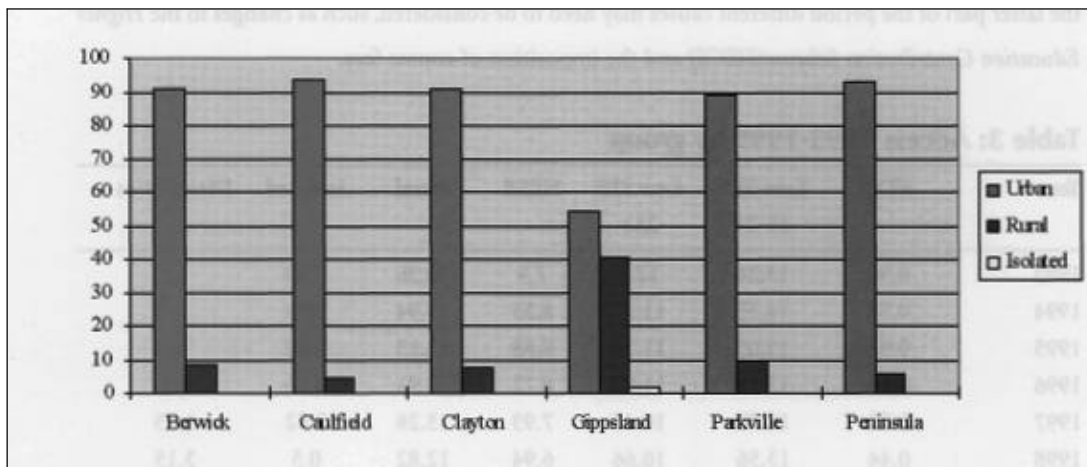


Table 2 shows the proportions of all students whose home addresses are in urban, rural or isolated areas, in 1999. In this case, Gippsland clearly stands out as different from the other campuses. At five of the six campuses the overwhelming majority of students come from urban areas. At Gippsland however, the proportion of rural and isolated students is much higher.

Table 2: All students 1999, urban/rural/isolated by campus



Our consultations in the university, (see section four) revealed that students at different campuses also experience different problems (and problem intensity) related to the particular characteristics of each campus. For instance, students enrolled in regions with higher unemployment have less success in finding part time work and receive lower levels of family support.

3. Equity Trends and Problems at Monash

From 1993 to 1999 equity performance at Monash University has been patchy. Improvements in some equity measures have been matched by declines or little to no change in others. The data support the presence of enduring 'pockets of advantage', particularly at the two largest campuses - Clayton and Caulfield.

DETYA Equity Groups

Tables 3-6 provide information about most of the DETYA groups from 1993-1999. Data for low SES students are disaggregated into young (15-24 years) and mature age (25+), to reflect the university's specific interest in low SES mature age students. Data for women in non-traditional fields and higher degrees is measured on a different basis and thus indicated separately in Table 7.

Table 3 indicates **Access** (*the number of commencing students in each equity group as a percentage of all commencing students*). With the exception of people with disabilities, access is lower in 1999 than in 1993 for all groups. From 1993 access rose to a peak in 1995 but has since declined to new low levels.

Access for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people shows particularly volatility - with substantial variations occurring from year to year. This suggests the influence of short-term factors, but could also have other causes.

Among low SES students there has been a stronger decline in access among mature age than among young students. In the early nineties this may reflect pressure from the Federal Government to admit larger proportions of school leavers. However, as this influence would have been substantially less in the latter part of the period different causes may need to be considered, such as changes to the *Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS)* and the imposition of course fees.

Table 3: Access 1993-1999 by group

Year	ATSI	Low SES 15-24	Low SES 25+	NESB	Rural	Isolated	Disabilities
1993	0.54	13.24	12.40	7.90	16.36	0.89	
1994	0.52	14.35	11.36	8.55	15.94	0.83	
1995	0.95	15.05	11.39	8.88	15.13	0.82	
1996	0.87	13.49	11.28	8.72	13.91	0.75	1.10
1997	0.71	14.71	10.48	7.93	13.28	0.52	1.35
1998	0.44	13.56	10.66	6.94	12.82	0.50	3.15
1999	0.31	13.03	10.11	6.60	13.06	0.54	3.14

Table 4 indicates **Participation**, (the share the members of each equity group have of total student enrolments, compared with the incidence of the particular group in the relevant State population). It shows improvements in the participation of people with disabilities, younger people from low socio-economic backgrounds and people from non-English-speaking-backgrounds. However participation has declined for all other groups. Participation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students shows the same volatility as Access.

Apart from a jump in 1995, participation for mature age low SES students has remained fairly steady — suggesting little impact of equity programs or initiatives. Rural students and low SES students (young and mature age) continue to be the most under-represented of all groups. Thus equity initiatives have had little impact on these groups also.

Given the substantial under-representation of rural students a surprise is the over-representation of isolated students. There could be a number of explanations for this and further investigation is necessary to explain it. In part, the data might reflect the very small number of people in the Victorian population who can be classified as isolated. The difference between the two groups has lessened as representation of isolated students has declined substantially since 1995.

Table 4: Participation by group 1993-1999

Year	ATSI	Low SES 15-24	Low SES 25+	NESB	Rural	Isolated	Disabilities
1993	0.86	0.23	0.24	0.94	0.66	2.16	
1994	0.95	0.27	0.25	1.00	0.61	2.17	
1995	1.60	0.29	0.32	0.99	0.59	2.18	
1996	1.44	0.28	0.23	0.98	0.56	1.90	0.31
1997	1.44	0.30	0.23	0.93	0.54	1.69	0.34
1998	1.00	0.29	0.24	0.84	0.51	1.39	0.99
1999	0.69	0.29	0.24	1.07	0.52	1.37	0.93

Table 5 indicates **Success**, (the study load passed by a student as a proportion of the load for which the student enrolled). Across most groups success rates are generally high and have fluctuated very little. This is indicative both of the success of the support provided for these students and high levels of ability and commitment among them. However, success rates are still lower than for non-equity students and there are some specific problems:

- the success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students has declined since 1995.
- the success rate of Isolated students has also declined.

This may not be mere coincidence, for it is likely that there are a number of students (possibly many) who are members of both groups.

Table 5: Success by group

Year	ATSI	Low SES 15-24	Low SES 25+	NESB	Rural	Isolated	Disabilities
1993	0.87	0.98	0.98	0.98	0.98	0.96	
1994	0.91	0.98	0.96	0.98	0.98	0.98	
1995	0.93	0.96	0.95	0.97	0.98	0.97	
1996	0.90	0.97	0.94	0.97	0.99	0.95	0.95
1997	0.84	0.96	0.93	0.96	0.98	0.95	0.97
1998	0.79	0.98	0.96	0.95	1.00	0.92	0.95

Table 6 shows **apparent retention** (the proportion of students enrolled in the institution in a given year who re-enrol in the institution in the following year, less the students who complete their course. The indicator is expressed as the ratio of the apparent retention for the equity group over the apparent retention of other students).

The data show that people with disabilities and people from non-English-speaking backgrounds are retained at Monash University at a higher rate than non-equity group students. Other disadvantaged groups have retention rates close to the non-equity group. As with success, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students from isolated areas are of particular concern.

Table 6: Apparent retention 1993-1999 by group

Year	ATSI	Low SES 15-24	Low SES 25+	NESB	Rural	Isolated	Disabilities
1993	0.57	0.96	0.88	0.99	0.92	0.81	
1994	0.92	0.94	0.92	1.08	0.88	0.77	
1995	0.85	0.98	0.94	1.08	0.96	0.82	
1996	0.80	0.98	0.93	1.03	0.98	0.83	
1997	0.82	1.00	0.98	1.06	0.98	0.82	1.01
1998	0.71	0.96	0.91	1.08	0.84	0.73	1.06
1999	0.79	0.97	0.95	1.02	0.96	0.79	1.01

Table 7 provides some information about female enrolments in higher degrees and in nontraditional fields of study.

For higher degrees, the figures indicated are for participation and show that female participation increased from 1994-1999, but remains stronger in coursework than research. Annual changes are not indicated, but growth was strongest from 1994-1995 and has since slowed. A more useful measure, for equity purposes, would indicate differences between fee-based and non-fee courses, and by fields of study.

For non-traditional fields the data indicate enrolments by faculty. This is not an ideal measure, as there are many differences by field within a faculty. The proportion of women among all enrolled students has increased in all cases.

Table 7: Female enrolments in higher degrees and non-traditional fields

Course type	Participation 1994	Participation 1999
Higher degree research	0.82	0.95
Higher degree coursework	0.95	1.07
Faculty	1997 (%)	1999 (%)
Business	45.08	49.00
Engineering	13.06	15.13
Science	38.41	42.55
Information Technology	30.21	34.49 (1998)

Overall the data indicate that people in most of the DETYA equity categories:

- continue to experience access and participation difficulties at Monash

- remain under-represented in the student population
- are successful in their studies and continue from one year to the next to a degree slightly more (NESB, disabilities) or slightly less (Low SES, Rural) than students who are not in the equity groups.

Particularly in the case of success and retention Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students from Isolated backgrounds remain a cause for concern.

Comparing Monash indicator data with that for the higher education system as a whole shows that Monash has done well on some measures, but lags on others. In 1999, access and participation were lower at Monash than for the system as a whole for low SES students, rural students, isolated students and ATSI students, but higher for NESB students, students with a disability, women in higher degrees by research and women in Engineering.

For instance, for young students (aged 15-24) of low SES, Monash results (13.76% access; 0.29 participation) were below the national figures (16.34% access; 0.40 participation). Similarly for rural students, access at Monash (13.06%) was below the national figure of 18.36%, as was participation (Monash 0.52, national 0.72). For students with a disability access at Monash was 3.14% compared with a national figure of 2.56% and participation 0.93 (national 0.71).²

On measures of success and retention results for Monash were very similar to those for the whole system with some exceptions. For ATSI students, success at Monash in 1999 (0.92) exceeded the national figure of 0.72, but the volatility of Monash results has already been noted. For isolated students, retention at Monash (0.80) was below the national figure (0.90).

National comparisons must be treated with caution. The institutions that make up the national system are diverse in geographical location, catchment, client focus and missions and goals. For good reason, some have a strong focus on particular equity groups than others. This focus may skew national figures. Nevertheless there is some room for improvement at Monash, particularly in relation to low SES and rural students.

Compound Disadvantage

Enrolment data for 1999 for all students (except for students from overseas) was examined to identify the extent and patterns of multiple group membership. The examination focused on the two groups identified as having made the least improvement in their representation in the higher education student population over the past decade: low SES and Rural and Isolated students.

Table 8 provides data in relation to SES status. The data enable identification of some characteristics in addition to membership of other equity groups.

Compared with other students, the data indicate that students of low SES are more likely to be:

- of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent
- of non-English speaking background
- from rural or isolated areas
- enrolled externally aged 16-23

are less likely to be:

- enrolled part-time
- enrolled in a postgraduate course

² National figures supplied by Statistical Services, Monash University.

Table 8: All students 1999, SES status by selected characteristics

	High SES	Middle SES	Low SES	All
ATSI	0.2	0.3	0.5	0.2
NESB	6.1	4.4	7.7	5.9
Disability	3.6	3.7	3.7	3.7
Rural	0.4	19.5	30.6	12.2
Isolated	0.0	0.6	1.1	0.4
Urban	99.5	79.8	68.2	85.9
Age 16-23	57.7	53.9	60.8	55.5
Part-time	31.3	28.3	23.6	28.8
External	10.8	18.0	18.1	15.2
Female	53.4	56.2	56.6	55.0
Higher degree research	8.4	6.7	4.1	7.2
Other postgraduate	17.1	15.6	12.6	16.0
Total No	15,040	4,166	14,765	34,565

Table 9 provides data in relation to the home address of the student (urban/rural/isolated).

Table 9: All students 1999, rural/isolated/urban by selected characteristics

	Rural	Isolated	Urban	All
ATSI	0.7	0.0	0.2	0.0
NESB	0.5	1.4	6.3	5.9
Disability	4.0	2.1	0.0	3.7
High SES	1.5	2.1	50.4	43.5
Middle SES	68.2	65.4	39.7	42.7
Low SES	30.2	32.3	9.5	12.0
Age 16-23	54.2	22.5	60.5	56.1
Part-time	16.4	4.2	30.9	28.8
External	33.0	76.7	12.0	15.2
Female	58.8	57.0	54.5	55.0
Higher degree research	3.6	2.1	7.7	7.2
Other postgraduate	13.8	34.8	16.1	16.0
Total No	4,222	142	29,700	34,565

The data indicate that compared with urban students, those from rural or isolated areas are more likely:

- to be of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent to have a disability
- to be of low or middle SES
- of mature age (Isolated, not rural)
- to be enrolled externally
- to be female
- to be enrolled in a postgraduate course other than a higher degree research (Isolated students, but not rural)

are less likely to be:

- of high SES
- of non-English speaking background
- enrolled part-time
- enrolled in a postgraduate course (rural, but not isolated)

The data support the existence of multiple group membership, and in particular of an overlap of students in the groups *ATSI*, *low SES* and *rural and isolated*. Lack of success in achieving improvement in the access, participation, success and retention of these groups could reflect the compound nature of their disadvantage. An integrated strategy, such as that recommended by James *et al* (1999), might be more successful in addressing the problems experienced by these students than strategies based on single group membership.

The data also indicate the diversity in the characteristics of students within a single equity category. Among low SES students, for instance, are mature age and young students, students enrolled part-time, full-time and externally, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, female and male students, urban and rural students, etc. This diversity further underscores the complexity of disadvantage.

The data also raise some interesting questions that could be taken up in future research. Why for instance, are low SES students more likely than other students to choose full-time enrolment, particularly when the ability to complete a course part-time has traditionally been viewed as an equity measure. How does this relate to the higher levels of external enrolment among low SES students? Why are low SES students so poorly represented in postgraduate courses, particularly research higher degrees, particularly when success and apparent retention for these groups are only slightly lower than for other students?

Financial survey of enrolled students

In 1999 the Monash Students' Association surveyed current students on the Clayton Campus about aspects of their financial situation such as income levels, source of income, and their purchase patterns re food, accommodation, clothes, textbooks, transport, health and childcare services. Given that only 110 responses were received and the questionnaire was mainly distributed via union services such as welfare, employment and financial aid, the survey is not representative of the student population. However it gives an insight into the range and depth of financial problems encountered by students using the union's support services.

Preliminary analysis of the completed questionnaires revealed that a substantial number of students experience a lack of adequate financial resources and that this impacts on them both educationally and personally. For example, although 53% of students indicated their financial state was adequate, 29% reported episodes of poverty and 18% described themselves as poor. More specifically:

- nearly 62% of respondents reported being unable to buy essential books and materials in the past year
- 85% had deferred buying clothes because they lacked funds
- 42% missed university classes to go to work
- 28% went without food against their will
- 46% deferred medical/dental treatment for financial reasons
- 21% missed university because they could not afford the transport
- 16% had been at least two weeks behind in rent payments in the past year
- small numbers of students missed classes because they could not afford childcare or slept in their cars because they could not afford transport costs to university.

The survey indicated that students are able to survive on low incomes where they have family (usually parental) support. Of those who indicated incomes of below \$200 per fortnight, 85% reported parental support, with most living in the parental home. The instance of family support diminishes as income levels rise.

Applications for merit-based equity scholarships

The equity profile of some of the university's potential students can be ascertained from information contained in applications for Merit-based Equity Scholarships.³ This material underscores the diversity in the circumstances and experiences of many potential students and the complexity in the disadvantage

³ These HECS-exemption scholarships have now been abolished by the Federal Government. However the University offers a small number of equity scholarships, which include a stipend, to commencing students who demonstrate academic ability and disadvantage.

they experience. Of the 700 applicants in 1999 36% indicated they needed a scholarship because of scarce financial resources. Particularly common among these applicants were people living in one parent families, either as parents or dependents. Among other applicants were students who were homeless (6.3%), suffered abuse, and/or had refugee status.

Family responsibilities hindered some applicants from accessing higher education. These included sole parents determined to improve education and employment opportunities for themselves and their children and/or school leavers who care for siblings, parents or grandparents. Several applicants indicated that their homelessness was a result of a crucial need to leave the family home to escape drug-taking, abuse or violence.

Consultations

Consultations were held individually with 28 students and staff from all Monash sites and a representative of the state government department responsible for education. Academic staff were chosen on the basis of a demonstrated interest and expertise in equity. Administrative staff were officers of the many groups in the University providing student services and support. The students interviewed, who were at both postgraduate and undergraduate levels, included officers of student representative organisations and a small number of individuals who had come to the attention of the Student Equity Office for different reasons.

Discussions were unstructured and covered issues relating to disadvantage in general and to students' experiences of it at Monash in particular. The impacts of disadvantage on access, participation, success and retention were explored, together with current university policies, equity programs and support services. In discussions with a wide range of students and staff, four main groups of issues emerged:

- inadequate financial resources
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- combining study and work
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- family responsibilities
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- students who are the first in their family to attend university.
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In addition, mention was made of students experiencing isolation in the university environment.

Inadequate financial resources

Staff noted homelessness and hunger among students without adequate financial resources, including international students who have little left after the payment of fees and accommodation.

As students are increasingly being expected to cover more costs such as Internet service provision fees, those on low incomes are being pressured.

Rapid changes in a student's fortunes (eg loss of a job, accommodation) create difficulties, especially for those whose finances were already precarious.

Unexpected costs such as transport to other campuses to attend lectures or to access study materials from the library create financial difficulties for students on low incomes.

Combining study and work

Students with scarce financial resources are working more hours to support themselves.

On one campus the majority of students seeking financial advice work between twenty and thirty hours per week, including working night shift to support a full time study load.

Staff report difficulties in scheduling tutorials because many students have part-time jobs

Many students are in casual jobs that have irregular hours and irregular pay, making planning combined work and study difficult or impossible.

Students miss lectures as well as important academic support programs such as Orientation and study skills because of work commitments.

Family responsibilities

Students fulfil many different forms of family responsibility — all of which can affect their participation.

Students juggle the demands of caring for children and extended family members with those of study and employment.

There are students with a full time load in disciplines such as nursing, who care for 3-5 children and work up to four shifts a week in hospitals or nursing homes.

Students with family responsibilities express concerns about lack of understanding of their difficulties.

Students report refusal of extensions of time to complete assignments because staff consider illness in the family insufficient reason

Students need consideration because they care for sick parents and grandparents, as well as children.

Lack of flexible low cost child care is an issue at campuses with large numbers of mature age students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Students report they need short-term low-cost childcare and lectures at family friendly times, ie. to finish by the end of school hours.

Students from non-English-speaking backgrounds can experience tension between the demands of their studies and their responsibilities toward their extended family. They may have to

- act as interpreters for parents and extended family members at visits to medical and legal practitioners
- work long hours in family businesses.

The experience of Exclusions Committees indicates that problems associated with students' family responsibilities are a major factor affecting academic performance.

First in the family to attend university

Students who are the first in their family to attend university experience particular disadvantage due to a lack of understanding of what is involved on the part of their family and friends, as well as themselves.

This disadvantage overlaps with the experiences of students with family responsibilities, of particular ethnic and low socio-economic backgrounds.

Non English-speaking-background students who are first in their family to attend university may also be under pressure to work long hours in family businesses.

Difficulties often result in appearances before Exclusions Committees.

Students isolated in the university environment

Isolation is an issue for both domestic rural students and for international students.

Rural students leave important social and financial networks when they come to metropolitan areas to study.

Isolation is compounded for rural students on low incomes. They have to establish new networks very quickly to get the jobs essential to finance their studies.

Although international students were not included in the research, the consultations indicated that these students also experience isolation particularly at smaller campuses. They seek transfers to locations where there is more social support, where they have ready access to study materials and where they can get part time work.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Under-representation of people in most of the DETYA equity categories continues to be evident at Monash University. Across its campuses, the institution provides a range of programs and services to support and promote equity, but improvements in some measures of access, participation, success and retention have been small and in many cases, have been balanced by declines in others.

This is of concern for several reasons. Firstly, Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that 'everyone has the right to education' and 'higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit'. Moreover, there is no evidence that academic ability differs by race, class, gender, or address. Yet the distribution of ability across all social groups is not reflected in data on access and participation at Monash. This points to the continuing existence of 'pockets of advantage' within the institution.

Secondly, slow and small progress in some cases, coupled with backward movement in others, points to the limited effectiveness of some existing approaches to equity and a possible lack of understanding (or a misunderstanding) of the extent, causes and nature of disadvantage. It supports the need for ongoing and new effort, including in some new directions.

Thirdly, the extent of under-representation of the DETYA groups varies from one campus to another. Low SES students, for instance, are much better represented at Gippsland, than at Clayton. This reflects the differences between campuses in location, culture, course offerings and student catchment. However, it might also indicate that some local equity programs and services have been particularly effective. In addition, it supports the need for special equity effort in some places.

Based on this evidence, ongoing attention to the DETYA equity categories is warranted and must continue to be a strong element of the university's equity effort. However, in addition, the material examined for this paper indicates that some additional effort is required.

Firstly, there are some particular forms of disadvantage that may not be confined to those in the designated categories. These are students with inadequate financial resources, students combining study and work, students with family responsibilities and students who are the first in the family to attend university. Some particular effort could also be made to assist students who experience isolation in the university environment.

Secondly, the research supports the existence of multiple group membership and thus the probability of compound disadvantage.

The disadvantage illustrated by the material examined is complex and multi-faceted. It is also dynamic rather than fixed, changing often and sometimes rapidly. Particularly in the stories that we were told in the consultations we learned that much of this disadvantage seems to be created as two groups of elements interact and collide. These are:

- *Barriers and problems created by inflexibility in the policies, activities, rules and regulations of the institution and the understandings of its staff*

These include, for instance: entry criteria, timetabling, assessment methods and requirements, eligibility for special consideration, provision of (and access to) resources such as computers and libraries, the domination of particular cultural understandings.

and

- *Difficulties and problems that relate to the particular circumstances in which individuals find themselves*

These include, for instance: the demands of employers or families, low and changing incomes, changing hours of work, accommodation needs, family support and responsibilities, violence or abuse.

As these elements interact the nature and extent of the disadvantage experienced changes — sometimes dramatically. For instance, a student may begin to encounter difficulties related to the timetabling of a course, or access to the library, only when an employer demands a non-negotiable change in working hours. An illness in the family may require a student to fulfil temporary family responsibilities that affect her/his ability to fulfil designated assessment requirements. A loss of employment may cause a sudden decline in income that puts the purchase of required books beyond the student's reach and makes travel to, or between, campuses unaffordable.

Given this picture of disadvantage, it is very unlikely to be successfully addressed by simple, short-term strategies. A successful response will be sustained, dynamic and multi-faceted, incorporating both initiatives at the local and institutional levels (faculty/campus/university) and flexibility on a scale sufficiently broad to respond to diversity and change (see Ferrier and Heagney, 1999).

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