

**EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND EXCELLENCE:  
MORE OF THE SAME**

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*In mid-1996 the higher education council released its review of and recommendations for the equity programs in place during the 1990s. These recommendation are critically evaluated in the light of data previously published in People and Place on this issue.*

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**INTRODUCTION**

The Higher Education Council (HEC) recently published advice on the national framework for the future planning and management of equity in the higher education sector, through to the year 2000.[1] The report assesses the progress of the higher education system towards meeting the original equity objectives set in the White Paper (1988), and enunciated further in A Fair Chance for All (1990).[2] Although the Council's research found that only three of the six designated equity groups (Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders [ATSI], women in non-traditional areas, people from non-English-speaking backgrounds, people with disabilities, rural and isolated students, and people from low socio-economical status (SES) backgrounds) remain under represented in higher education (that is Aboriginal, rural and isolated, and low socio-economic origin persons), its recommendations nonetheless continue to include all six of the original groups as disadvantaged'.

The references used in the preparation of the Report are thorough and wide ranging. It is interesting, however, to note that no reference was made to work which might be in any way critical of previous equity policy determination and administration.

**NON-ENGLISH SPEAKING BACK- GROUND (NESB) STUDENTS**

Earlier work published in People and Place[3] showed that the existing policy, which ceases to count a person as a member of a NESB' equity group after they have been in Australia for ten years, was incorrect. It was shown clearly that many of the language groups failing to achieve appropriate representation in higher education had either lived in Australia for more than ten years, and that many were in fact Australian-born. On the basis of this evidence, one might reasonably have expected a policy realignment, to target the access problems being suffered by these language groups, but this has not occurred. Nor has analysis on the access of NESB students by particular language group been undertaken by those driving the policy agenda, despite the fact that data to undertake this work have been available for a number of years. Instead, analysis has been limited to aggregates of all NESB' persons.

The HEC Report has also continued to use the inappropriate 15-64 age group as the

denominator in calculations of rates of access. In looking at the population at large, the denominator is overstated by many thousands by using the broad band of 15-64 years. A range of age groups closer to the actual distribution of higher education students would have provided a much more precise set of access rates. In 1995, only 28 per cent of students were aged 30 and over, and only 11 per cent were aged 40 and over. Many of these older students are involved in postgraduate study, and therefore fall outside the equity' net in terms of undergraduate access. Because there are significant differences in the age structures of migrants and non-migrants, in that a higher proportion of migrants are aged in their mid 30s to mid 60s than Australian-born persons, this tends to understate the participation rates for NESB persons relative to the Australian-born.

Another interesting NESB issue is that both A Fair Chance for All and the Discussion Paper prepared prior to the final HEC Equity Report declared NESB students (even using the inappropriate 10 year cut-off) to be under represented. The final report has now decided that NESB students are over represented, but there has been no explanation for this change.

## **FEMALE STUDENTS**

The continuing designation of female students as disadvantaged' is hard to understand. The Report notes ...the view in some quarters that women should not be considered an equity group' (p. 27), but it offers no comment as to what the rationale behind this view' might be. It also suggests that ...equity issues remain in some significant areas' (p. 28). The report does not comment on the imbalances in those fields of study where women are greatly over represented, choosing instead to concentrate on the relatively small fields of Agriculture and Architecture and the more substantial field of Engineering. The fact remains that Engineering is the only field of study in which women remain greatly under represented. No one has yet explained why this is a problem, either for women or anyone else. A full analysis of engineering enrolments might reveal other ways in which its numbers fail to reflect the overall composition of Australian society.[4] Such detailed analysis is missing from this report.

The report indicates that all designated groups (except NESB students) have an over representation of women. In the case of ATSI students it is as much as 62 per cent. Female over representation for students over all is 55 per cent. It must be remembered that the proportion of females in the principal age cohort for commencing undergraduate courses is 48.7 per cent. (aged 15-19 years in 1991). It is hard to understand how the recommendations for the future of equity policy can continue to concentrate on women in non-traditional areas (including research)' without also recommending research to discover the nature of the plight of young males and their access to higher education, non-traditional courses or not. Why is there no concern for understanding how it is that only 38 per cent of ATSI students are male, 44 per cent of students from low SES areas are male, 43 per cent of rural students and 40 per cent of isolated students?

One of the targets for women specified in A Fair Chance for All was that the numbers of women in postgraduate study, particularly research, should increase so as to match their

proportion in undergraduate courses. Meeting this target would, of course, increase female over representation in higher education even more. As has been shown before, about 5,600 male students would have to be displaced for this equity' target to be met. The Report states that the low continuation rates to higher degree studies are out of step with their superior performance at all levels of study, so other factors in the culture of higher education must be inhibiting the academic aspirations and participation of women at these higher levels'.[5] This is an extraordinary assertion to make, and there is no evidence or even commentary in the Report to support it.

## **CROSS-GROUP ANALYSIS**

The bulk of the commentary and analysis in the Report looks at the designated groups in isolation from each other. Although there is some cross analysis late in the report (Designated Group by Sex; Designated Group by SES), the authors seem unable to decide which of the designations is the likely cause of the disadvantage. The report considers the concept of multiple disadvantage', but there has been no attempt to establish which (if any) groups suffer from this problem.

Essentially, the report has taken the easy way out, by recommending more of the same'. Most of the recommendations themselves provide no cause for alarm, but it is strange that many have been made without supporting evidence. In particular, the proposition of multiple disadvantage' needed serious examination. By using analytical techniques which would permit multiple analysis of the various disadvantaged' categories, it would have been possible to establish the actual causes of disadvantage. The cursory examination of equity groups by sex and by SES (as undertaken in the Report) is insufficient for this purpose. The data presented in [Table 1](#) illustrate the point. They show the share of Australian-born English speakers (AE), Australian- and overseas-born non-English speakers (AON) and overseas-born English speakers (OE) enrolled at the undergraduate level in Australian universities in 1995 by gender and SES of address of home residence. This analysis confirms the importance of SES as a factor in educational disadvantage. But it also shows that, within this low-SES category, male AEs and OEs are particularly disadvantaged. The absolute numbers of females from low SES locations enrolled in the universities is far greater than males in the AE and OE categories. In addition the share of females coming from low-SES areas to all females is higher than the comparable figure for low-SES origin male students. This pattern is not repeated with AONs. The data show that much higher proportions of both the male and female low-SES origin AONs (relative to all AON students) are enrolled than is the case for AEs and OEs. Moreover, the number of male low-SES origin AONs slightly exceeds the number of females. The implication is that there is something about the circumstances of low-SES males coming from AE and OE backgrounds that prejudices their educational prospects. Yet after years of official equity analysis the point is still to be officially acknowledged. The designated equity groups other than women and NESB students provide less scope for disagreement with the HEC report or its predecessors. It remains, however, that a thorough analysis is required before setting equity policy in concrete.

[\[Table 1\]](#)

## References

1. Higher Education Council (HEC), *Equality, Diversity and Excellence: Advancing the National Higher Education Equity Framework*, Australian Government Publishing Service (AGPS), Canberra, 1996
  2. Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET), *A Fair Chance for All*, AGPS, Canberra, 1990, p. ix
  3. I. Dobson, B. Birrell and V. Rapson 'The participation of non-English-speaking background persons in higher education', *People and Place*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1996, pp. 46-54
  4. I.R. Dobson, B. Birrell and V. Rapson 'The participation of non-English speaking background persons in higher education', *People and Place*, vol 4, no 1, 1996, pp 46 -54
  5. I.R Dobson, 'Women, disadvantage and access to higher education' *People and Place*, vol 4, no 2, 1996, pp. 46 -54
  6. HEC, op.cit., p. 29
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