

Tracking student equity in higher education: Improving the status quo (while not throwing out the baby with the bathwater)

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In its [interim report](#), the Universities Accord Panel posits that a high-quality and equitable higher education (HE) system is essential for Australia's continued prosperity. The Panel's proposals have given rise to wide-ranging discussions about the feasibility of dramatic increases in the participation of students from equity groups in HE and how such increases might be brought about.

One issue of contention, discussed by a group of national experts during the [Accord Insights through an Equity Lens](#) event, is the continued relevance of the six national equity groups (low socio-economic status (SES), regional/remote, Indigenous, disability, non-English speaking background (NESB), and women in non-traditional areas (WINTA)). The Australian equity framework, that first identified these groups, was conceived in 1990 in the government white paper [A Fair Chance for All](#), aimed at addressing inequitable HE participation. Since then, the names and definitions of the six groups have been adjusted and many valid criticisms have been made, including that First Nations people [do not consider themselves an equity group](#).

The most recent and comprehensive [review of the equity groups](#) was undertaken by the Institute of Social Science Research (ISSR) at the University of Queensland in 2018. The ISSR review suggested multiple quick improvements to the regional/remote (split), NESB (redefine), and WINTA (tighten) groups. Despite their limitations, the review concluded that "socio-demographic characteristics continue to be relevant for monitoring equity in HE and should remain the key defining feature of an equity framework over the short- to mid-term".

It is important to consider that Australia is the only country with a (now) 30-year time series of HE equity data that enables meaningful analyses of educational disadvantage. The most powerful example of this has been the recent analysis of the effects of cumulative disadvantage on student outcomes, also undertaken by [ISSR](#). Only because Australia has consistent longitudinal data can we explore empirically the hypotheses emerging from theories of intersectionality.

That is not to say that further improvements to the equity framework and specific equity groups shouldn't be made. More comprehensive adjustments and additions were recommended by ISSR for the medium-term, including that the low SES measure be complemented by a set of area-level indicators corresponding to the 10 [SEIFA](#) (Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas) [IEO](#) (Index of Education and Occupation) deciles, and individual-level indicators of educational disadvantage, especially maternal education levels.

The team also suggested the introduction of systematic monitoring of student *outcomes* for different age groups and the introduction of a much-needed indicator of multiple disadvantage. Moreover, they advised that an indicator be introduced to capture

“potentially disadvantaging family structures such as children of single-parent families and out-of-home care leavers as part of an expanded equity monitoring framework.”

Critically, the ISSR review included analyses of common barriers to HE participation to explore alternative approaches to identifying disadvantage. Unsurprisingly, the identified barriers closely corresponded to the current equity groups, most strongly for low SES and Indigenous. This means that the existing equity indicators show the significant structural disadvantage of the identified population groups in relation to HE participation, even when individual-level barriers are controlled for in the statistical models.

The ISSR’s recommended changes would add nuance to the existing equity groups and improve their accuracy. These recommendations have not yet been actioned by the Department of Education but seem more urgent than ever in light of the desired diversification of the student body. Even so, these various improvements do not amount to an argument for significantly changing the Australian equity framework at a point when structural changes are being proposed for the HE sector. Without the equity groups, it would be impossible to track the impact of these changes on known groups of educationally disadvantaged students.

To capture the complexity of the proposed reforms, however, the Universities Accord Panel would be well-advised to consider the final recommendation by ISSR: that a longitudinal framework for improved equity monitoring and interventions be developed to make visible how and when educational (dis)advantage accrues across the life course, and at what points lifelong learning interventions should be targeted for maximum effect. Such a framework would truly enable empirical insights we have never had before.

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