

The Challenges of Improving Low SES Student Participation

The evidence that students from low-SES backgrounds have been and continue to be under-represented in participation in higher education is incontrovertible. Not very much has changed since Sheldon Rothman wrote in 2003 that the Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth showed that:

low-SES students have lower scores on tests of school achievement, they are less likely to remain at school until Year 12 (and they are more likely to leave school early—before Year 11), they are more likely to undertake vocational education and training subjects while at school, they are less likely to study science and mathematics subjects in Year 12, and they are less likely to attend university, even after having completed Year 12.¹

Yet when students from this cohort do achieve access, analyses such as that presented by Gary Marks of the Australian Centre for Educational Research in 2007 indicate that, while some groups of predictably low-SES status do have lower completion rates – notably Indigenous students and mature-age female students – the general likelihood of a student's completing a university course is influenced less by their regional and socioeconomic background than by factors such as parental level of education and their ENTER score.²

The implication of these 2 situations is that there is a wasted pool of talent and the Australian Federation of University Women agrees entirely with the Bradley Review and the Minister that it's right to be concerned about this – both for the sake of Australia's economic well-being, which requires an increasingly skilled workforce, and for the sake of its social justice and harmony, which require that all citizens have opportunities to develop their capacities as fully as possible, not just for economic advantage but also for the satisfaction of their individual psychological and emotional needs.

Tapping into that talent pool will be a complex problem. It requires systemic change not only in the structure, the curricula and the processes of the entire educational sector, but also in social attitudes all the way from students to parents to journalists to politicians.

Let's assume for the moment that we can take as given that there are students in this group with the capacity to benefit from university education and that university places can be made available for them by changes to the funding of universities and by their selection processes. Will this guarantee the *scale* of participation that the Bradley Review and the Commonwealth Minister for Education see as desirable?

After all, ever since the abolition of the Commonwealth Scholarships and the closing of the brief Whitlam window of no tuition fees, the university sector has made sporadic attempts to widen the social mix of the student body and/or to provide appropriate services to engage a range of students. If I mention three past ones from Monash University, it's not because Monash has been exceptionally active, but because I've been involved in them and seen at first hand the difference they can make to students. One was a special entry scheme in the 1980s for mature age students – in some cases on the grounds of Adult Matriculation, in others of post-school life experience. They underwent a literacy test (a good predictor of success) and an interview (a good predictor of commitment), and if admitted had a high success rate. But they were few and mostly admitted to the generalist studies of Humanities and Science rather than the prestigious areas of Law (which was reluctant) and Medicine (which refused to participate on the grounds that these students must necessarily be under-prepared).

Another, which was both an entry and support scheme, was the Monash Orientation Scheme for Aborigines, which in its early days provided foundation studies to prepare Indigenous students from across Australia to enter degree courses. A considerable degree of social

disruption was involved for an Indigenous student coming from, e.g. Broome, and gradually the scheme changed its nature as other universities developed their own support systems for Indigenous students. The Centre for Indigenous Australian Studies at Monash no longer provides a specific pre-enrolment year, but does support Indigenous students both academically and socially. A difference in Indigenous participation *is* being made across the university sector but the rise in enrolment numbers is slow and insufficient.

My remaining example is less do with access than with an attempt to deal equitably with the needs of students admitted to one of the new universities of the 1960s, students who – if compared with the first year cohort entering Melbourne University – had less family experience of higher education and lower entry scores, both of which were and still are factors indicative of lower SES status and predictive of lower completion rates. A strategy of intensive teaching for first-year students was adopted. In the Department of English, this meant that tutorials, regarded as essential for student learning, were in groups of 8-10 and conducted in the staff member's office; the tutorial group was maintained for a full year so that staff knew students very much better than under the current fragmented semester system, and Departmental policy used the more experienced academic staff to lecture and give tutorials to first-year students. I had already taught at Melbourne University, but I was confident in those first years at Monash that our students were getting far more attention and that it was having an effect. Now I fear that the experience of a 'tutorial' is too often one of 30 students crowded into a room allocated somewhere in any available building on site, and delivered by a harassed 'casual' staff member, wondering whether to give priority to marking assessments or finishing another chapter of the thesis which will alone determine the possibility of an academic career.³

So then, attempts have been made, using strategies that may have to be re-visited (especially the intensive teaching) if a new surge of low SES entry is created – but still an increase in the percentage of participating students from this sector has been slow and slight. Nor are merit scholarships, a recent strategy, going to be enough on their own to produce significant statistical change, although they may certainly ensure that the more academically accomplished of the low SES group are not excluded by financial incapacity.

It seems to me that we need to look again at *the students* and learn much more about what might influence them towards greater participation

If I were asked to nominate three key factors I'd say Information, Motivation, Support.

Information and Motivation are of course to a large extent intertwined. Without some information on the nature of university studies and of their possible outcomes, it is hard to see how students can imagine this as their future and be motivated to work towards it. Educated parents can instill expectations of such a future very early. Of course there are such parents in the low SES category, but in general much of the responsibility for providing information about and stimulating motivation towards higher education falls on schools and above all on teachers. This was certainly my case. I was the daughter of a failed dairy farmer, removed from the farm to a not-very prosperous rural town, and with a family background in which higher education simply didn't figure. It was my teachers who identified me as a potential candidate for higher education and set about ensuring that I could achieve at a level that would gain the scholarships that would be my only possibility of university entry. Teachers are at the heart of education. No amount of classy infrastructure, no amount of information technology can substitute for a good teacher (who will of course be sufficiently competent in IT to make students understand that Google is a great servant but can be a bad master for an otherwise ill-informed mind)

It's tempting perhaps to see the problem as being all about schooling. And undoubtedly to achieve better participation of low SES groups (and of other possibly disadvantaged groups

such as those from what we clumsily call Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds) it will be essential to have better-resourced schools, especially *public schools* and especially better-resourced with regard to well-qualified, well-paid, enthusiastic and *respected* teachers. That would be a really big step forward. So would adequate numbers of special-needs teachers in schools with a high concentration of students of low SES status; also properly-qualified career-counsellors with a wide knowledge of career possibilities and an open mind about the capacities and prospects of the students that come to them. Apart from the employment sector, the education sector itself has changed so much over the past 30 to 40 years that it's been difficult to keep up. Like many university academics I have a deplorably sketchy knowledge of what goes on in TAFE, and suspect that many of those in TAFE have only an outdated idea of what goes on in universities. In a climate of under-funding this breeds inter-sectoral territorial and status hostilities. Perhaps more exchanges and temporary secondments of staff between schools and tertiary education institutions and between universities and TAFES would lead to more mutual respect and a better understanding of how to advise students on which pathways into post-secondary education would best suit their capacities and ambitions.

Universities could also, I think, do more 'outreach' to the student population, and I don't mean classy supplements advertising the virtue of a particular university in the broadsheet newspapers: that's largely preaching to the converted. Even Open Days may fall into that category. It would be interesting to have a survey showing the percentage of low SES school students among those attending.

Outreach to and interaction with schools in their region should be a more valuable way of informing and motivating students. It used to be common for staff from my Department to visit schools and take part in inter-school forums to discuss Year 12 texts set for study, but the practice has declined as Community Service has become an increasingly ignored career factor: it doesn't figure in DEST reporting; it's not adding value to the Department/School/Faculty.

At any rate, schools, as Minister Gillard has said, cannot be expected to do it all alone. Their function is by no means only to ensure that students are 'prepared' to enter university – not even Year 12 students. Year 12 is no longer, as it was once, just about 'Matriculation' – nor should it be. But the result of this is that institutions of tertiary and higher education now have responsibilities to provide for students with a much larger range of educational experience and development than used to be the case.

And if universities are to take in larger numbers of low-SES students, those responsibilities will be increased. There are two things that we must not allow to happen. One is for these students to be brought into universities by numbers and set up to fail, the other is for academic standards to be reduced in order to meet completion rates that have been set as a criterion for funding. It is possible that those students with lower SES who have accessed the universities up to now have had one or more of the factors likely to lead to completion: natural aptitude (possibly leading to high ENTER scores and equity scholarships); strong motivation; good study habits, educated parental background (which makes the university environment less intimidating). In a greatly increased low-SES cohort, it seems probable that students entering will lack these advantages. They may well be among that group with a predictor of non-completion: those with low ENTER scores. It is easy to associate a low ENTER score with being 'academically-weak' (the 1970 ACER paper cited earlier does just that): but it could mean a student inadequately taught or simply unprepared in the disciplinary discourse of academic studies. These students deserve a chance. In fact some of the best experiences of my teaching life have come from watching the delight of such students as they 'catch on' and feel their intelligence become fully engaged with what they are studying.

We really need to know more about what motivates low-SES students to access university and to survive academically. A large research grant would help – one that allowed the researchers to listen to and record the *stories* of such students in order to balance the statistical with the experiential.

If the intake of low SES and otherwise disadvantaged students is greatly increased without any intermediate improvements in schools, there will be a need for substantial support mechanisms– academic, social and economic. Their academic support will place further demands on teaching staff already stressed by the changed nature of the student cohort, the scandalous decline in staff-student ratios, and performance criteria that, because of the nature of university funding, value research way above teaching. I remain surprised and distressed that so little attention has been given to the effects on academic staff of much of what is being mooted in the Bradley Report and in subsequent discussions.

Academic staff who care about their students are already aware that it's not only a question of low-SES students *accessing* university: justice demands that these students be able to perform at their best. Just to have a comparable pass rate isn't good enough - when it comes to employment interviews or applications for postgraduate study it's going to be the kind of pass that counts. There is competition for the best results and how can there be an equal playing field for the student who comes to a 9 am lecture or tutorial exhausted because the job they need in order to have shelter and food, buy books, catch the bus, is one that demands that they stack groceries in the supermarket overnight. Low-SES students are more likely to be in paid employment, sometimes up to 30 hours a week and often in jobs with little award protection for pay and conditions. They are also more likely to be part-timers and part-time students as a group, at least in my experience over 40 years of teaching and postgraduate supervision, perform less well than full-time ones – quite apart from the fact that they have a longer period to wait before reaping the full financial benefits of higher education.

These students will be in particular need of proper financial support via student allowances. I'm sorry to have to use the term allowances, rather than award or even 'pay', because I believe that one of the major problems with social attitudes to university studies is that they are not regarded as they should be – as *work*. This attitude has to some extent seeped into student consciousness, so that study begins to take second place to paid employment. I'm not objecting to the idea that students might be expected to undertake some paid employment to contribute to their upkeep, but it should not be to the detriment of their primary work, which is to complete their degree.

Increasing low SES participation will, then, have costs. The need for better government financial support for individual graduate and postgraduate students is acute in relation to low SES and other disadvantaged students, although one should note that it extends well beyond these groups: it's particularly scandalous that Commonwealth Postgraduate awards have fallen below the poverty line: these are among our brightest and best of future researchers, we need to value them. However, I'm not going to rant about better student financial support at the moment because I hope that the insistence of the Bradley report and the AVCC has persuaded the government that this is essential.

I do want to insist that university funding will need to recognize that a better staff-student ratio (i.e. *more* staff)⁴ and special programs will be needed to ensure that these students make the transition to university successfully. This could take various forms: intensive teaching of first year students, centers to support defined 'at-need' groups; a Foundation Year to provide grounding for the actual degree course; language support programs.

A supportive social environment will also be important for these students. Even without financial stress, universities can be very alienating places for students away from their familiar suburb or town, from their familiar peer groups. Student union activities of the clubs

and societies variety used to provide a valuable point of entry into the social life of the university, over and above the security that poorer students found in having access to free services (e.g. medical, computing). Voluntary student unionism, that triumph of the ideology of individualism, has cut a swathe through student union activities and left universities struggling to find financial and equitable ways of offering this form of support. Let's hope something can be done about it.

As I said earlier: equity demands that low SES and other disadvantaged students not only enter university, but also that they are enabled to access the full benefits of higher education throughout their degree courses. But the issue goes beyond redeeming individual disadvantage. It's a matter of national interest – by investing in the future of this neglected pool of talent, we invest wisely in the future of Australia's social and economic future. Let's do it.

¹ Rothman, Sheldon. 'Young People From Low-SES Families And Participation In Higher Education: Evidence From Five Australian Cohorts.' *Australian Council for Educational Research* (2003).

² Marks, Gary N. 'Completing University: Characteristics and Outcomes of Completing and Non-completing Students.' LSAY Research Report 51 (2007).

³ A survey by the National Union of Students cited students claiming tutorials of 26, although the *average* ration reported by DEST is more than 20 to one staff member, up from 12:1 in 1990. 'Unis Packed to the Rafters', report in the *Age*, 4 April 2009.

⁴ Cf. 'The characteristics of institutions which are significantly related to non-completion rates in specific subjects include the staff student ratio . . .' Johnes, Jill. Inter-university variations in undergraduate non-completion rates: A statistical analysis by subject of study.' *Journal of Applied Statistics* 24 (1997).