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EQUITY STEPS INTO SPOTLIGHT

Federal Education Minister, Brendan Nelson, invented neither student poverty nor scholarships, but paradoxically the Government's higher education reforms, with the partial de-regulation of fees and the introduction of Commonwealth Learning Scholarships, have caused universities to re-focus on both.

It's not that student poverty has just been discovered - any university welfare or loans officer can attest to the chronic poverty and complicated lives of many students.

Indeed, the AVCC's 2001 study "Paying their Way" laid out clearly how increased indebtedness, long paid working hours, and the cost of living are undermining some students' studies.

So, the affordability of higher education is not a new issue, but the university-by-university decision-making on HECS rises and fee-paying places is causing significant and prolonged attention to be drawn to this matter.

Universities across Australia are struggling with the conflicting obligations of keeping their institutions afloat financially and keeping student debt levels down.

Within ATN universities, existing programs of financial support measures - scholarships, bursaries, computers and the like - are being re-examined and expanded.

It's becoming apparent within the sector that the future market differentiation brought about by the reforms, may well be more around scholarship programs, than around price.

Emerging from the focus on affordability is the inadequacy of public policy on two fronts.

Firstly, the income test of the Social Security Act can mean that a student who is awarded a university scholarship or bursary, often because of their low-income situation, can have their Centrelink benefits reduced. Thanks to a specific Parliamentary amendment in late 2003, the new Commonwealth Learning Scholarships are exempt from this income test.

Again, the income test is not a new issue - universities with existing support programs for low-income students have long struggled with it. But, the exemption for CLS highlights the possibility of other similar exemptions, and underscores the contradictions which now exist.

Secondly, student income support arrangements such as Youth Allowance, Austudy and Abstudy are up for review by a Senate committee which is looking at the adequacy of these payments, the effect of these measures on students and their families, and the importance of adequate income support measures in achieving equitable access to education.

Current public attention goes beyond just affordability issues, thanks to a policy review initiated by the "Nelson reforms".

One of the many reviews arising from the reform process involves the national equity framework with its designated equity groups and national monitoring framework. Both have been in place for a decade, and allow institutions to track the access, participation, retention and success of low-SES, Indigenous, rural and NESB students, as well as students with a disability, and women in non-traditional areas such as Engineering and Information Technology.

Also up for review is the little-known (?) Higher Education Equity Program (HEEP), a \$6m fund (set to rise to \$9m) distributed to universities on the basis of their performance in student equity as measured by national indicators.

This review might well have remained a minor issue, except for the emerging hypersensitivity around poverty issues, and some clumsy moves from DEST.

All agree that it is the low -SES cohort, whose level of under-representation has not changed for a decade, which poses the greatest challenge to policy and practice in the sector. New ideas and creative strategies, more than ever, are needed to overcome the complex mix of lack of money, lack of aspiration, and lack of information which appears to be at play.

And yet DEST allowed initially only a month for responses to its discussion paper (now extended), and the Minister and Prime Minister led out some clumsy and un-compelling arguments about men in school-teaching being an equity group.

Consequently, there is now significant interest in this review and the fundamental questions it raises, such as: which groups should be included; how should performance be measured and rewarded; how can university efforts be supported by government and other sectors of education?

Whatever the trigger, these various debates around the impact of poverty and disadvantage on access to university are welcome and overdue.

Despite some progress, low-income, Indigenous and rural peoples' under-representation has persisted. However despite this the ATN universities do not believe that disadvantage can simply be equated with under-representation.

There are many complex reasons why particular groups of people may or may not participate in higher education, fields of study or even types of university. Some of these are the result of educational disadvantage and some are the result of a wide range of other social factors, including cultural expectations, perceptions of status, family expectation, employment opportunities and so forth.

Despite decades of effort, it's fair to describe equality of access to higher education as an unfinished public project and an incomplete piece of nation-building.

The ATN universities are responding by establishing a joint project on improving outcomes for low-SES students. Financial support and reforms to the income test are already part of our collective push.

Within the five ATN universities, a quick mapping of activities and outcomes related to financial support, and to student equity data, shows pockets of strength and weakness.

Across the ATN, our student outcomes are above state and national averages on many indicators, especially retention and success. Each university has at least one area of excellence.

It's a similar story with financial support measures. At QUT for instance, at least \$1m has been set aside in 2005 for scholarships, bursaries, and the like.

More significantly, the ATN has acknowledged that for the best chance of changing participation rates for low-income students, a holistic (?) approach is needed.

Importantly, although affordability is uppermost in people's minds at the moment, the ATN has adopted a four-part framework to give coherence to its efforts:

- 1 outreach - to create aspiration
- 2 admission - entry mechanisms which take account of disadvantage
- 3 financial support - to assist with the costs of living/studying
- 4 learning and other supports - to maximise engagement and academic success.

Reforms to public policy are needed to support the sector in its efforts. The income test for Social Security benefits should exempt all scholarships, bursaries and HECS/fee discounts for low-income students. The ATN has already made representations (to whom) on this issue. Also, the review of the student income support scheme should focus on how well-targeted such benefits are, whether the means test is too tough, whether the scale of payments is appropriate, and how the Commonwealth Learning Scholarships should nest within the income support scheme.

Finally, there needs to be a more significant effort from DEST in supporting inter-sectoral and inter-institutional strategies, and in spreading good ideas.

For example, the task of creating aspiration in prospective students is difficult if left to university outreach efforts alone. Imaginative collaboration with school and vocational education sectors achieves better results. But neither the HEEP scheme, nor other processes reward or recognise such efforts. That's why the ATN submission to the review of the national equity framework will suggest the creation of a national fund to support and disseminate good practice based around inter-institutional and inter-sectoral strategies.

There is both a social justice case and a business case for ensuring capable students can enrol and complete, regardless of their background.

The lesson we can learn from the sector's slow past progress in this area is that it is hard work, requiring large-scale, coherent and enduring effort from all parties.

The present debate provides an opportunity to re-commit to this important area.