

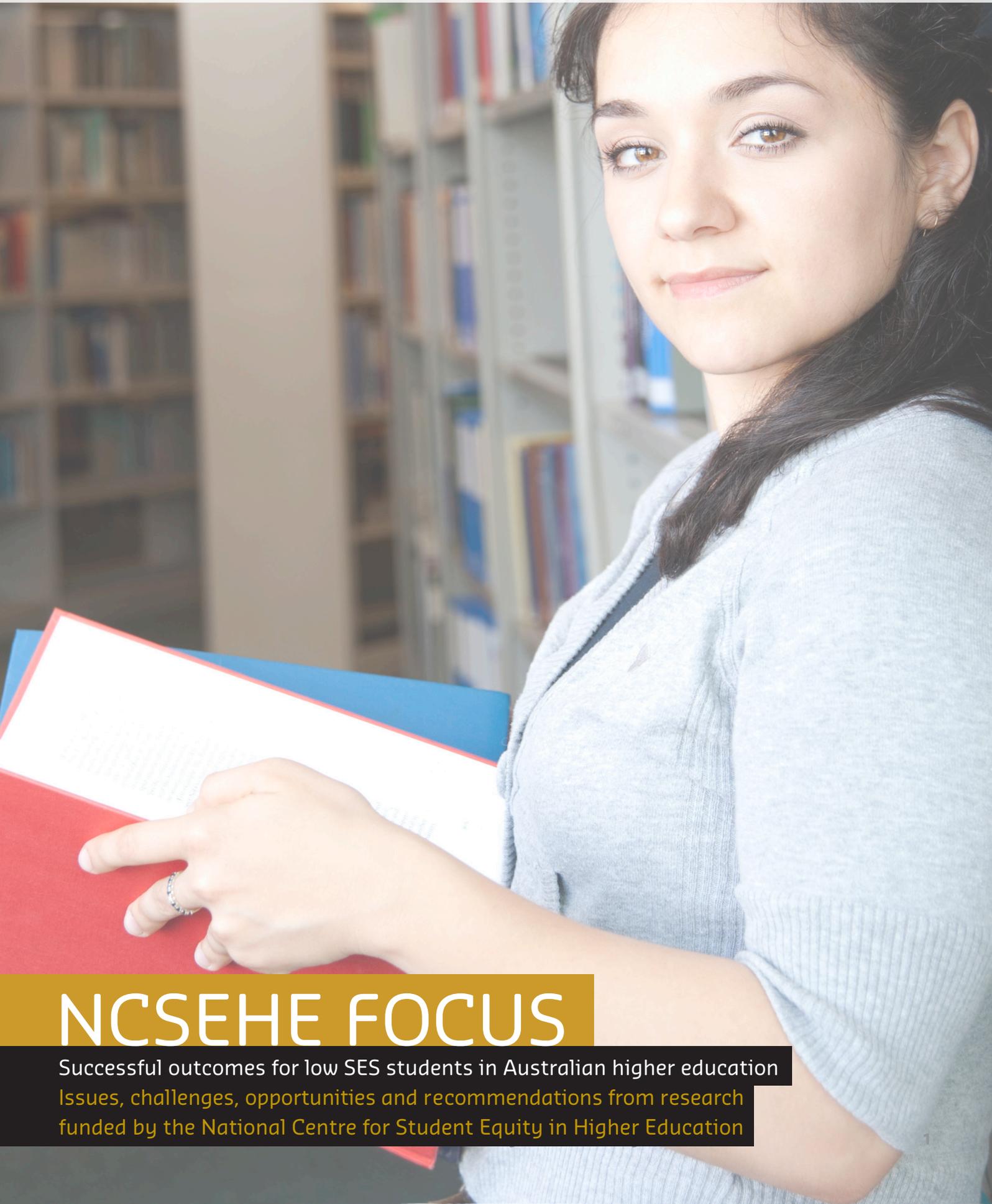


**NCSEHE**

National Centre for Student  
Equity in Higher Education



**Curtin University**



# NCSEHE FOCUS

Successful outcomes for low SES students in Australian higher education  
Issues, challenges, opportunities and recommendations from research  
funded by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education

# New insights from NCSEHE funded research reports on low SES students in higher education

The major expansion in student numbers that followed the introduction of the demand-driven funding system has resulted in more students from equity groups accessing university. Between 2008 and 2015 the number of undergraduate domestic students increased by 34.7 per cent, with most equity groups recording growth rates substantially above that figure. As a result, equity students as a proportion of the total student population has increased.

This change has been especially true of students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds whose numbers have increased by 50.4 per cent in the same period, resulting in an increase in enrolments from 86,581 to 130,246. This has been brought about via the demand-driven system and important policy initiatives such as the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP). While these numbers indicate that great progress is being made towards making the higher education system more accessible for low SES students, progress has been slowing in recent years.

This challenge was acknowledged in the Australian Government's *Higher Education Reform Package* which set out defining hallmarks for higher education, which included that it be sustainable, accessible, affordable and accountable. The Package re-affirmed the Government's support for the HEPPP which, in conjunction with *The Evaluation of the HEPPP* report by ACIL Allen Consulting, indicates that financial support for policies and programs that support students from low SES backgrounds will continue with a growing emphasis on transparency and accountability.

A critical component of the drive towards more equitable outcomes in higher education is the need for quality research into the trends and issues, and the challenges and opportunities, which characterise equity in higher education. The National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) seeks to close the gap between equity policy, research and practice through programs in evaluation, research

and analysis. The NCSEHE has funded 34 research projects that inform policy and practice, 10 of which have a primary focus on students from low SES backgrounds and which form the basis of this report.

These reports add to our growing knowledge of the underlying reasons why students from low SES backgrounds struggle on access, participation and outcomes. Collective insights from the NCSEHE reports illustrate how compounding disadvantages limit students' ability to navigate the Australian higher education system as easily as their non-equity group peers.

There are some clear messages from the research. Being from a low SES background is still a predictor of adversity for many students: school experiences and school guidance are critical to shaping intentions, expectations and outcomes; the personal and family characteristics of students from low SES backgrounds matter for shaping individual journeys; low SES students find it difficult to navigate the application system for accessing university; and transitioning through university is a multi-faceted challenge for low SES students.

We need to recognise that compounding multiple issues require diverse multiple solutions. There is a need for more quality research to better elucidate challenges and solutions. Recommendations for positive change must then find their way through research, information and communication channels to contribute to progressing equity in higher education. Researchers can be assisted in this process by a greater commitment to transparency and accountability across the higher education system, involving all stages and all institutions.

The insights from NCSEHE funded reports on low SES students add to our knowledge of equity in higher education and make a contribution to signalling future directions for policy and practice.

## Issues and challenges

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### Being a student from an equity group is still a predictor of challenges in completing university.

While the expansion of the higher education system has increased the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds participating in university study, the modest increases in their proportionate representation in higher education indicates that for many equity students accessing and succeeding at university is a struggle.

The share of low SES students increased from 16.2 per cent to 17.1 per cent between 2009 and 2012. In completions, approximately 69 per cent of low SES students completed a degree, compared to 78 per cent of students from high SES backgrounds.

Recent NCSEHE research indicated that low SES students were more likely than other students to drop out within the first two years of study, or to be still enrolled without completion, nine years after commencement.

Similarly poor outcomes in representations and completions were also evident for other equity groups.

The reasons for dropping out of university were generally different for equity than non-equity students. Equity group students cited finance, family obligations and core issues related to 'getting by'. Non-equity group students' reasons for dropping out of courses centred on issues of choice and lifestyle.

The research concluded there was no meaningful difference between students in equity groups and non-equity group students when it came to student engagement at university, access to resources and the experience of quality teaching, which narrows the focus of attention for support measures.

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### School experiences are critical in shaping intentions and expectations.

The impact of schools and schooling has a significant influence on students' intentions to pursue university education.

University aspirants were more likely to seek information about career and study options from a broad range of sources than non-university aspirants. They were more likely to speak to family and friends, use the internet, attend careers expos and receive information from educational institutions.

University aspirants reported higher levels of participation in university open days

and careers expos, and more commonly searched online about careers and received printed information about careers and study options.

Research showed that that variation between individual schools can matter for students' educational intentions.

While strong structural supports are in place in schools, the student-teacher relationship appeared to be crucial in students' experience of, and engagement in, their schooling.

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## Individual background characteristics of low SES students matter in shaping completions.

Modest rates of improvement in the proportion of low SES students accessing and completing university indicates multi-dimensional challenges associated with a range of social and cultural factors.

Understanding these impediments at the individual and socioeconomic level is vital in developing solutions to challenges.

Research confirmed that socioeconomic status continues to play an important part in university completions with low SES students having lower completion rates than their high SES peers. Disadvantage sets in before university – those with

lower academic achievement at age 15 were further disadvantaged if they were also low SES, whereas higher academic achievement reduced the impact of being low SES.

While socioeconomic status had a major influence on student outcomes in education, it was also the combination of background characteristics that influenced an individual's chance of completing.

This suggests greater attention must be given to the social and cultural influences on low SES students and the focus of support needs to be relevant at the individual level.

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## Transitioning through university for students from disadvantaged backgrounds is a multi-faceted challenge.

While research has illustrated the challenges and successes of equity students in accessing and completing higher education, there is a need to understand the actual experiences of individuals to fully appreciate the nuances and complexities of the educational journey.

Research showed that enabling courses have provided good foundations for later higher education; the common themes emerging from qualitative research included observations on greater self-belief, feelings of transformation of self, 'learning how to learn' and increased competency.

However, personal transformations were sometimes countered by tensions in personal relationships as the demands of a new student life came into conflict with the social expectations from partners

as students changed their lifestyles and working hours. Managing social relations was an issue for some students. In addition, there was something of an understandable discord or disjunct between earlier self-perceptions and newer more confident characteristics, leading to a self-questioning of new capabilities.

The findings from this research suggest there are important issues based on subtle considerations.

Supporting broad generalisations from diverse individual experiences is difficult and this is a reminder that qualitative research is not always predictable and may not fall within standard frames of reference. Attention to the mental and physical health of students may be a barometer of progress in transitioning through university.

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## School experiences and careers guidance strongly shape participation outcomes in higher education.

While there has been an increase in the number of pathways to higher education and alternatives to university, students from low SES backgrounds are overrepresented in the VET sector, which is not an effective pathway to university, and progress in improving the representation of students from low SES backgrounds in university continues to be a challenge.

A major influence in this context is schools, particularly career advice and school experiences which have substantial influence on young people's post-school outcomes.

Recent research confirmed some trends: young people from low SES and regional and remote backgrounds were less likely to enrol in university than young people from high SES backgrounds and metropolitan areas and were more likely to enrol at

university at a later stage; and students from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds (NESB) were more likely to enrol at university and do so at earlier stages than students from English speaking backgrounds. But the shaping influence of career guidance and school experiences was identified as an important driver of outcomes. Students with positive attitudes towards school, positive relations with teachers and those who received different forms of career guidance were more likely to enrol at university and did so at earlier ages. The strongest positive associations for students were from university, TAFE or schools careers advisors – employer representative talks about careers were negatively received.

There is evidence that some forms of career advice have strong effects on enrolment from some equity groups.

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## There are ongoing dissatisfactions and pressures to drop out of university among equity students.

Research has shown that members of equity groups have lagged behind their counterparts in completing their university degrees. To find effective solutions to raising completion rates, there needs to be a better understanding of the determinants of student satisfaction in Australian higher education, with a focus on students in various equity groups.

Recent research examined the determinants of three academic outcomes: being at risk of dropout; dropout from university studies; and academic performance as measured by Weighted Average Marks (WAM). The research found that equity students in Australia were generally well-supported at university and satisfied with most aspects of their educational experience and that there were only modest

differences in the various dimensions of student satisfaction between equity groups and their non-disadvantaged counterparts, as well as between equity groups themselves.

Personal background characteristics were shown to be the drivers of the risk of students dropping out. The underlying reasons why students considered leaving university were led by financial reasons, health reasons and disposition towards study.

While there were modest differences in terms of student satisfaction levels between equity and non-equity groups, there were also substantial differences in terms of being at risk of drop-out and academic performance between equity and non-equity groups.

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## Low SES students face challenges in the application system for accessing university.

Students from different socioeconomic backgrounds have different access to knowledge about higher education and what it has to offer, which in turn leads to differences in aspirations.

The university application process is one factor that may discourage students from seeking entrance to higher education. Recent research showed that there is growing evidence that disadvantaged students are struggling with the application process for higher education, as they either

lack information about universities, their programs, or both, and they typically have less informed networks to draw on.

Students from high SES backgrounds constructed application portfolios that were more attentive to the application process and ultimate admission, which suggests that low SES students are hindered in participating in higher education.

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds were less engaged with the application process.

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## Mentoring as a support program has not been well understood or optimally employed.

While there is considerable research on support measures for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and the importance of those students being able to confidently find and approach peers and staff in universities for support, there has been very little authoritative research into mentoring programs.

Recent research into 203 mentoring programs at 39 Australian universities showed that the majority of programs (74 per cent) were focused on the enabling phase (most of which were targeted at Indigenous students); 15 per cent of programs were focused on the engagement phase; and 20 per cent were focused on the employment

phase. Information across programs at different institutions was limited and there was little knowledge or research into the effectiveness of different types of programs.

Mentoring is used extensively to attract and support students from equity groups and to assist them towards successful completion and future employment. The programs are mainly inclusive in that students from equity groups are included in programs available for all students.

Mentoring programs are established and effective but limited general knowledge of program experiences may have led to outcomes that are not as effective as they might be.

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## Being a First-in-Family student is often accompanied by cultural and social challenges in succeeding at university.

First-in-Family (FiF) students are a diverse cohort frequently characterised by many challenges, largely due to social and cultural limitations in understanding higher education processes and benefits and issues of self-efficacy. However, FiF students are also receptive to opportunities because many are highly motivated and enthusiastic about university life once they reach university.

The goal is to turn the challenges into opportunities. While the diversity of issues for FiF students are frequently picked up due to their categorisation in different equity groups (for example low SES; regional and remote; Indigenous) there are other characteristics commonly shared by FiF students that may be overlooked.

A key consideration for transitioning FiF students into and through university is recognising that FiF students don't always have the 'hot knowledge' that non FiF students acquire from parents or older siblings who have already attended university. Another consideration is that the cultural capital that FiF students bring to

university is not always recognised or valued leading to a 'mismatch' between their own and other background learning environments.

These considerations can play into a sense of 'not belonging' and self-doubt at students' ability to succeed.

Research findings have been consistent with similar research into FiF students which found that before enrolling, FiF students knew significantly fewer university students than non-FiF students; they were less likely to ask a lecturer or tutor for help; less confident in using Blackboard; more worried about living and educational expenses; and were less likely to cope with academic workload and continue with the course.

However, once FiF students learn to overcome disadvantages associated with background experiences and characteristics, they frequently become transformed by the university experience, develop increased skills, improved confidence, and a greater ability to critically analyse and articulate opinions.

## Opportunities and recommendations

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### Encouraging aspirations for higher education and providing support will improve access to university for equity students.

The impact of schools and schooling is critical to determining aspirations to attend university.

Schools could improve their information and support processes to make the transition from school to university easier and more seamless. The current focus is on improving equity student connections with participation in university open days, career expos, and better access to improved online information on higher education options.

As the student-teacher relationship is often critical, attention may be warranted in clarifying roles and responsibilities for providing information and support within schools.

As schools differ in their support systems, knowledge of best practice among schools would encourage students' aspirations to access universities across the whole secondary school sector.

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### Improving career advice and information on educational opportunities will increase equity student expectations.

Program and policy initiatives aimed at improving career guidance and advice and school experiences in shaping university participation are likely to result in expanded university enrolments. Interventions to widen participation in higher education can be implemented at all phases of a student's life, including pre- and post-admission.

Early interventions at secondary school are particularly important in determining whether students plan to attend university. Many such initiatives are in place (for example campus visits; mentoring programs; joint school and university activities). These activities should complement, rather than substitute, other means of support for equity students.

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### Equity students need support with university application processes.

Equity students have less first-hand knowledge of university life and what it has to offer; they have fewer friends or family members to provide information and advice, and as a consequence they are less engaged

in the application process for university. A central recommendation from research in this area calls for stronger advice and support services targeted to students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

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## Seeing students on enabling programs as individuals with distinct stories will contribute to informing programs.

Equity students experience personal transformations as they successfully navigate their way through university and into the world of work. These involve unique individual experiences that are often omitted or given inadequate attention in some research into equity issues.

These experiences can inform support information systems and support processes to assist equity student programs.

The range of student experiences is a reminder that there is a need to be able to communicate with equity students in ways that listen to their stories and to feed relevant insights into support programs.

While there is a strong case for continuing to support enabling programs, it's also important to acknowledge that the social value they provide goes beyond quantitative or economic measures.

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## Being aware of the challenges for First-in-Family students will result in easier transitions through university and higher completion rates.

While FiF students often face compounding social disadvantages in accessing and completing university, they are also frequently highly motivated, grateful for the opportunity to study, and seek to make positive changes to themselves and others on completion of university.

Supporting this successful transition can be assisted on three levels: the institution; teaching and professional staff; and the students themselves.

At the institutional level, universities could pursue improved data collection and reporting; expand community outreach; offer more explicit information for FiF students; provide websites to support FiF students; recognise the value and diversity of the FiF cohort; and provide financial support for FiF students.

Recommendations for teaching and professional staff include: encouraging academics to better appreciate the transformative potential of higher education; getting to know the FiF cohort; building a sense of community on campus; making expectations clear; being approachable about teaching; promoting health and wellbeing; and encouraging students to seek help.

FiF students could also be encouraged to take responsibility for ensuring an easier transition through university by making efforts to become better informed; planning ahead; giving themselves time; being realistic; making new friends and developing a peer support network; maintaining health and wellbeing; setting achievable goals; and focusing on the positive.

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There is potential to use mentoring programs more effectively to support equity students through university to completion of courses.

Research into mentoring programs at a national level, including research into evaluating their effectiveness, produced recommendations to inform mentoring program design and uptake.

Universities should examine the specific support required for students from disadvantaged groups during, and nearing completion of, their courses in specific institutions to evaluate the appropriate forms of mentoring support.

University programs need to ensure that mentee selection processes are clearly outlined in the program information. Programs should also ensure that mentees are provided with relevant preparation and support.

Examples of program details where benchmarks, particularly those relating to evaluation, are comprehensively addressed should be made available on websites of funding bodies or other central repositories to provide best-practice models.

## Research report summaries

### NCSEHE funded research reports on students from low SES backgrounds

The NCSEHE invites proposals from high quality researchers and equity practitioners to conduct policy-relevant research aimed at supporting and informing policy and practice on student equity in higher education.

Proposals are assessed and awarded through a competitive selection process.

Three annual rounds of funding have been completed and 34 research projects have been supported. Ten of those research projects have had a primary or substantial focus on low SES students.

The low SES research projects are summarised in the table below, followed by summaries for each of the reports. The report summaries seek to distil three considerations: background and methodology; issues and challenges; and opportunities and recommendations.

For a more detailed appraisal of these considerations, titles are hyperlinked to the full reports.

Report	Date	Lead author	Institution
<a href="#"><u>School Experiences, Career Guidance and the University Participation of Young People From Three Equity Groups in Australia</u></a>	2016	Dr Wojtek Tomaszewski	University of Queensland
<a href="#"><u>Factors Influencing University Student Satisfaction, Dropout and Academic Performance</u></a>	2016	Dr Ian Li	University of Western Australia
<a href="#"><u>Mentoring Programs and Equity Groups: The Australian Story</u></a>	2016	A/Prof. Susan Beltman	Curtin University
<a href="#"><u>Exploring the Experience of Low SES Students via Enabling Pathways</u></a>	2015	Dr Chad Habel	University of Adelaide
<a href="#"><u>Equity Groups and Predictors of Academic Success in Higher Education</u></a>	2014	Dr Jill Scevak	University of Newcastle
<a href="#"><u>Exploring the Experience of Being First In Family at University</u></a>	2014	A/Prof. Sharron King	University of South Australia
<a href="#"><u>Do Individual Background Characteristics Influence Tertiary Completion Rates?</u></a>	2014	Mr Patrick Lim	NCVER
<a href="#"><u>Choosing university: The Impact of Schools and Schooling</u></a>	2014	Prof. Jenny Gore	University of Newcastle
<a href="#"><u>Completing University in a Growing Sector: Is Equity an Issue?</u></a>	2014	Dr Daniel Edwards	ACER
<a href="#"><u>Are Low SES Students Disadvantaged in the University Application Process?</u></a>	2014	Dr Buly Cardak	La Trobe University

Note: The date refers to the year of the NCSEHE funding round; the publication date is the following year.

## *School Experiences, Career Guidance and the University Participation of Young People From Three Equity Groups in Australia (2016)*

- Wojtek Tomaszewski, Francisco Perales and Ning Xiang (University of Queensland)

### Background

- While there has been an increase in the number of pathways to higher education and alternatives to university, changes in transitions from school to work have not been distributed evenly across social strata as students from low SES backgrounds are overrepresented in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector, which is not an effective pathway to university.
- Closing the gap between students in equity groups and non-equity groups has proved challenging. A key focus of attention in this context is schools, particularly career advice and school experiences, which have substantial influence on young people's post school outcomes.

### Objectives and methodology

- The report had three research questions: How is equity group membership associated with students' likelihood of enrolling into university? How are secondary school factors (career guidance and school experiences) associated with students' likelihood to enrol in university? Are the impacts of school factors on university enrolment different for young people from equity and non-equity groups?
- The research used longitudinal data from the 2003 cohort of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth (LSAY), employing regression models and focussed on three equity groups: low SES; students from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds (NESB); and students from regional and remote areas.

### Key findings and recommendations

- The report found that young people from Low SES and regional and remote backgrounds were less likely to enrol in university than young people from high SES backgrounds and metropolitan areas and were more likely to enrol at university at a later stage; and that students from NESB were more likely to enrol at university, and do so at earlier stages than students from English speaking backgrounds.
- In regards to career guidance and school experiences, students with positive attitudes towards school, positive relations with teachers and who received different forms of career guidance were more likely to enrol at university and did so at earlier ages. The strongest positive associations for students were from university, TAFE or schools careers advisors – employer representative talks of group discussion about careers were negatively received.
- There was evidence that some forms of career advice had strong effects on enrolment from some equity groups.
- There are important implications for theory, policy and practice: policy initiatives aimed at improving career guidance and advice and school experiences in shaping university participation were likely to result in expanded university enrolments; interventions to widen participation in higher education can be implemented at all phases of a student's life, including pre- and post-admission; and early interventions at secondary school are particularly important in determining whether students plan to attend university. Many such initiatives are in place (for example campus visits, mentoring programs, joint activities between schools and universities). These activities should complement rather than substitute for other means of support for equity students.

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[Tomaszewski, W., Perales, F., & Xiang, N. \(2017\). \*School Experiences, Career Guidance, and the University Participation of Young People from Three Equity Groups in Australia\*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education \(NCSEHE\), Curtin University, Perth.](#)

## *Factors Influencing University Student Satisfaction, Dropout and Academic Performance (2016)*

- Ian W. Li and David R. Carroll (University of Western Australia)

### Background

- Access to, and participation in, higher education by individuals from equity groups has increased in the past decade, but studies have found that members of equity groups have lagged behind their counterparts in completing their university degrees.

### Objectives and methodology

- This study examined the determinants of student satisfaction in Australian higher education with a focus on students in various equity groups. It examined the determinants of three academic outcomes: being at risk of dropout; dropout from university studies; and academic performance as measured by Weighted Average Marks (WAM).
- The study was based on data from the national University Experience Survey (UES), supplemented with demographic and enrolment data from the Higher Education Information Management System (HEIMS), and WAM data from 13 participating universities.
- Students were asked to indicate whether they had seriously considered leaving university in their first year and the reasons for doing so. The reasons were grouped into six broad categories for statistical analysis: financial; health or stress; academic/institutional; social and personal; workload; and disposition or attitude to study.

### Key findings and recommendations

- Equity students in Australia were found to be generally well-supported at university and were satisfied with most aspects of their educational experience.
- There were only modest differences in the various dimensions of student satisfaction between equity groups and their non-disadvantaged counterparts, as well as between equity groups themselves.
- Students with disability and from NESB recorded lower levels of satisfaction across most dimensions – suggesting more attention could be devoted to addressing inequities among these groups.
- Students from most equity groups were found to have larger probabilities of being at risk of drop-out, led by Indigenous students, students with disability and students from regional or remote areas.
- The underlying reasons why students considered leaving university were led by financial reasons; health reasons; and disposition towards study.
- In summary, the various models point to modest differences in terms of student satisfaction levels between equity and non-equity groups; and to substantial differences in terms of being at risk of drop-out and academic performance between equity and non-equity groups.

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[Li, I. W., & Carroll, D. \(2017\). \*Factors Influencing University Student Satisfaction, Dropout and Academic Performance: An Australian Higher Education Equity Perspective\*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education \(NCSEHE\), Curtin University, Perth.](#)

## Mentoring Programs and Equity Groups: The Australian Story (2016)

- Susan Beltman, Shamim Samani and Kate Ala'i (Curtin University)

### Background

- There is a gap in knowledge as to what kinds of mentoring programs work best for equity students. The relationships involved in mentoring can include mentor-mentee; peer mentoring; and online mentoring.
- Mentoring programs in higher education have been shown to be a success across the student population generally, as well as for specific equity groups. However, research has typically examined programs in one university or a particular equity group and little is known of the extent and success of mentoring programs across Australia.

### Objectives and methodology

- The research project had three aims: to create a map showing the extent to which mentoring programs are used in Australian universities for students at three progressive stages: enabling, engagement and employment; to examine the extent to which features of a cross-section of programs align with existing best practice in mentoring guidelines and benchmarks; and point to areas that need further research or that could inform current practice.
- A total of 203 mentoring programs were identified from 39 Australian university websites. The majority of programs (74 per cent) were focused on the enabling phase (most of which were targeted at Indigenous students); 15 per cent of programs were focused on the engagement phase; and 20 per cent were focused on the employment phase.
- The second stage of the research examined the effectiveness of mentoring programs specifically targeted at equity groups by combining standards from two sources: *Good Practice in Peer Mentor Programs in Higher Education* (Australia and New Zealand Student Services Association (ANZSSA)); and the Australian Youth Mentoring Benchmarks (AYMB).

### Key findings and recommendations

- Overall, the report concluded that mentoring was used extensively to attract and support students from equity groups and to assist them towards successful completion and future employment. The programs were mainly inclusive in that students from equity groups were included in programs available for all students. Programs that targeted students from specific equity groups aligned well with established guidelines for effective mentoring.
- The report's recommendations included: universities should examine the specific support required for students from disadvantaged groups during and nearing completion of their courses in specific institutions; research should be conducted to compare the effectiveness of general versus targeted programs for students from underrepresented groups; university programs should ensure that mentee selection processes are clearly outlined in the program information; university focused programs should ensure that mentees are provided with relevant preparation and support; research should be conducted to examine how universities evaluate and report on their program outcomes through a range of in-depth case studies that could include document analysis; and examples of program details where benchmarks, particularly those relating to evaluation, should be comprehensively addressed and made available on websites of funding bodies or other central repositories.

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[Beltman, S., Samani, S. & Kate Ala'i. \(2017\). \*Mentoring Programs and Equity Groups: The Australian Story\*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education \(NCSEHE\), Curtin University, Perth.](#)

## Exploring the Experience of Low SES Students via Enabling Pathways (2015)

- Chad Habel, Kirsty Whitman (University of Adelaide) and Jennifer Stokes (University of South Australia)

### Background

- While there is substantial research evidence of the performance of students from low SES backgrounds in higher education, there is a need to understand the actual experiences of students.

### Objectives and methodology

- The study had two objectives: The prime goal was to interview students from the University of Adelaide to see how their experience had developed or changed during the course of their degrees. The secondary aim was to compare these experiences with those of similar students at a different institution (the University of South Australia).

### Key findings and recommendations

- Preliminary evidence produced some outcomes that were contrary to what was expected: it was anticipated that students would have changed fundamentally since their earlier interview, but it was found that the pathway they found themselves on after the enabling program had remained relatively solid.
- The inference was that the enabling courses provided a very good foundation for later higher education, with many noting how much they had changed since then.
- Common themes included much greater self-belief; feelings of transformation of self; 'learning how to learn'; and increased competency.
- However, personal transformations were sometimes countered by tensions in personal relationships as the demands of a new student life came into conflict with the social expectations from partners as students changed their lifestyles and working hours. Managing social relations was an issue for some students.
- In addition, there was something of an understandable discord or disjunct between earlier self-perceptions and newer more confident characteristics, leading to a self-questioning of new capabilities.
- The research unearthed the depth and complexity behind the student experience of studying a bachelor degree from entering via an enabling program. Overall, students had an enormously positive experience of adapting to academic culture and felt grateful to staff, the program and the university.
- Although students didn't feel stigmatised as being working class and usually felt at home in the university, this varied among individuals.
- The great variety of student experiences makes it difficult to support broad generalised results, a reminder that qualitative research is not always predictable or may not fall within standard frames of reference.
- One of the case studies in the project highlighted the significance of physical and mental health issues and the profound effect this can have on opportunities for success.
- A clear finding was that enabling programs can have profound and life-changing effects for individuals who feel they have no other options for accessing higher education. There is a strong case for continuing to support enabling programs. The social value they provide goes beyond quantitative or economic measures.

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[Habel, C., Whitman, K. & Stokes, J. \(2016\). \*Exploring the Experience of Low-SES Students via Enabling Pathways\*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education \(NCSEHE\), Curtin University, Perth.](#)

## Equity Groups and Predictors of Academic Success in Higher Education (2014)

- Jill Scevak, Erica Southgate, Mark Rubin, Suzanne Macqueen, Heather Douglas and Paul Williams (University of Newcastle)

### Background

- Research into FiF students in Australia is limited in number of studies and in the scope of variables.

### Objectives and methodology

- The aim of the study was to investigate the influence of FiF, socioeconomic and demographic contributors to academic outcomes of students enrolled in a large regional Australian university. It posed three questions: Do FiF students differ from non-FiF students in demographics, entry pathway to university, enrolment status, degree type enrolled in, social connections, help seeking, worry about expenses and engagement with university studies? Do FiF students come from lower SES backgrounds than non FiF students? Are there differential levels of academic success amongst FiF and non-FiF groups enrolled in the same programs, and what student and program characteristics relate to this?
- The research was based on a survey of 983 graduates at a large regional Australian university. Participants were sampled from five broad degree types: allied health; sciences; engineering; business and commerce; and medicine. Forty-one questions were posed relating to socioeconomic issues and engagement with university studies.

### Key findings and recommendations

- FiF students were more likely to be female and older than non-FiF students. Before enrolling, FiF students knew significantly fewer university students than non-FiF students; they were also less likely to ask a lecturer or tutor for help; less confident in using *Blackboard*; more worried about living and educational expenses; and were less likely to cope with academic workload and continue with the course.
- There were few significant differences between FiF and non-FiF students in two areas. There were no significant differences between FiF and non-FiF in entry pathways to university study; full and part time enrolment; degree type; year level of study; and hours attended. FiF students scored significantly lower than non-FiF students on coping with the academic workload; complexity of course material; intention to continue with the course; seeking resource help; academic skills; and confidence.
- The main conclusions were that FiF is strongly linked to social class and economic variables. It also confirmed that FiF students are at a disadvantage compared to their non-FiF counterparts.
- The research project produced a *Guide For Educators* to provide practical information on teaching support programs, applicable to all equity student groups.

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[Scevak, J., Southgate, E., Rubin, M., Macqueen, S., Douglas, H. & Williams, P. \(2015\) \*Equity Groups and Predictors of Academic Success in Higher Education\*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. Curtin University. Perth.](#)

## Exploring the Experience of Being First In Family at University (2014)

- Sharron King (University of South Australia), Ann Luzeckyj (Flinders University), Ben McCann (University of Adelaide) and Charmaine Graham (University of SA)

### Background

- FiF students are an under-recognised and diverse cohort, not included as part of any official equity group. Low SES is well represented within the FiF grouping.
- Research shows FiF students are highly capable when given an opportunity to participate in higher education. However, they experience educational disadvantage because their cultural and social capital does not readily align with that of universities.

### Objectives and methodology

- The project was a collaboration between the University of South Australia, Flinders University and the University of Adelaide. The key areas of focus were: the factors that influence students' decisions to enrol, attend and continue at university; how FiF students experienced university; the impact of studying at university; how students managed points of transition; how self-image was transformed; and how universities supported or hindered experiences and progress.
- The research involved analysing bibliographies of international publications on FiF student experiences; examining survey data; and in-depth interviews.

### Key findings and recommendations

- The key motivating factor for FiF students was creating a better life for themselves. However, there were significant financial and personal costs associated with university study for FiF students. All FiF students interviewed had to work in order to support themselves while at university. Living costs were most acute for students who had to relocate to the city or who had family support commitments. Personal costs included loss of social interactions with friends and family and reduced health and well-being, especially in peak assessment periods.
- FiF students lacked the 'hot knowledge' that non-FiF students generally acquire from parents or siblings who have attended university. This includes how to navigate university systems and procedures and knowledge of support services.
- The cultural capital that FiF students brought with them to university was often not recognised or valued and consequently FiF students struggled with the 'mismatch' between their own and other background learning environments.
- For some students their identity was shaped by their FiF background and a sense of 'not belonging' and self-doubt at their ability to succeed.
- All students spoke of being transformed by their university experience, noting increased skills, improved confidence, and ability to critically analyse and articulate opinions. They also spoke of how it increased their 'ambition for life' and what was possible in future careers.
- Recommendations for institutions included: improved data collection and reporting; expanded outreach into the community; more explicit information for FiF students; a website for FiF students; recognising the value and diversity of the FiF cohort and providing financial support for FiF students.
- Recommendations for teaching and professional staff included: appreciating higher education is a transformative experience; getting to know the FiF cohort; building a sense of community on campus; making expectations clear; being approachable about teaching; promoting health and wellbeing; and encouraging help-seeking.
- Recommendations for FiF students included: better informing yourself; planning ahead; giving yourself time; being realistic; making new friends and developing a peer support network; maintaining health and wellbeing; having achievable goals; and focusing on the positive.

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[King, S., Luzeckyj, A., McCann, B. & Graham, C. \(2015\). \*Exploring the Experience of Being First in Family at University\*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. Curtin University. Perth.](#)

## Do Individual Background Characteristics Influence Tertiary Completion Rates? (2014)

- Mr Patrick Lim (National Centre for Vocational Education Research)

### Background

- There is insufficient evidence as to whether the enrolment of students from low SES backgrounds translates into completions, and whether they complete higher education at the same rate as their higher SES counterparts.

### Objectives and methodology

- The report had two research questions: Do background characteristics, particularly SES, influence the completion of courses? If there are substantial differences, what are the size and direction of these differences?
- The study used the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) data in conjunction with random effects models to analyse the impact of SES on university completion. The data was from the 2003 cohort that tracks young people from age 15 to 25 as they move from school into further study or work or other destinations.

### Key findings and recommendations

- The report found that socioeconomic status continues to play an important part in university completions with low SES students having lower completion rates than their high SES peers.
- Those with lower academic achievement at age 15 were further disadvantaged if they were also low SES, whereas higher academic achievement reduced the impact of being low SES.
- Low SES males were more likely to complete than low SES females; however, females overtook males as SES increased.
- There was a strong relationship between commencing field of study and SES. Low SES students who commenced in a technical field had the lowest probability of completion. Commencing field of study had a much smaller impact on high SES students.
- Students attending Catholic or independent school had a higher probability of completion than those from government schools. High SES removed the impact the school sector had on completion.
- SES had a minimal impact on regional status, with students from regional locations having lower completion probabilities across the full range of SES.
- Working moderate hours (between one and 20 hours per week) over the length of their course increased the chance of course completion, regardless of SES background. This may be because income earned may help students to meet living expenses. Results also showed that working more than 20 hours per week, and not working at all, substantially decreased the probability of completion for all SES students.
- Socioeconomic status remains important even after considering the influence of an individual's academic ability. However, it is not SES alone that impacts on completion, but rather the combination of background characteristics that influences an individual's chance of completing higher education.

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[Lim, P. \(2015\). \*Do individual background characteristics influence tertiary completion rates?\*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Perth: Curtin University.](#)

## Choosing university: The Impact of Schools and Schooling (2014)

- Jenny Gore, Kathryn Holmes, Max Smith, Andrew Lyell, Hywel Ellis and Leanne Fray, (University of Newcastle)

### Background

- Despite government policy and concerted efforts by schools, students from low SES backgrounds remain underrepresented in universities.

### Objectives and methodology

- This study analysed the impact of schools and schooling on students' intentions to pursue university education.
- Schools used in the study were New South Wales government secondary schools with low SES rankings. Students targeted were primarily from low SES backgrounds. Data was drawn from 15 NSW schools in surveys of 832 students, plus interviews with parents, teachers, principals and careers advisors.
- The report also included four case studies on four different schools to assess relationships between the impact of schools and students intentions to participate in higher education.

### Key findings and recommendations

- The findings from the project were presented in two categories: choosing a university; and the impact of schools and schooling.
- When choosing a university, just over 40 per cent of students intended to attend a university out of the sample of 832 students. Proportionately, this featured more females than males, more high SES than low SES, and more students with prior high achievement than low achievement. The intention to go to university was related to students' perceptions of travel as a potential barrier. University aspirants were more likely to seek information about career and study options from a broad range of sources than non-university aspirants. They were more likely to speak to family and friends, use the internet, attend careers expos and receive information from educational institutions.
- On the impact of schools and schooling, university aspirants reported higher levels of participation in university open days and careers expos, and more commonly searched online about careers and received printed information about careers and study options. The research showed that that variation between individual schools can matter for students' educational intentions.
- All schools provided a wide range of subject options and pathways for their senior students and the general ethos in each school was supportive of student aspirations. However, interviews with students revealed some differences in student perceptions of school supports. While strong structural supports were in place in all schools, the student-teacher relationship appeared to be crucial in students' experience of, and engagement in, their schooling.
- Given the strong relationship of academic achievement with students' intention to attend university, regardless of student SES, school efforts to improve student achievement are imperative for schools wishing to increase the participation of their students in higher education. These efforts could include improving the quality of teaching, offering flexible subject options, and enhancing student-teacher relationships. While schools are already working on these kinds of supports for students, their impact appears to be uneven among university aspirants, non-university aspirants and students who are still deciding on their educational plans.

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[Gore, J., Holmes, K., Smith, M., Lyell, A., Ellis, H. & Fray, L. \(2015\). \*Choosing University: The Impact of Schools and Schooling\*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education \(NCSEHE\), Curtin University, Perth. Teachers & Teaching Research Program, The University of Newcastle, Newcastle.](#)

## Completing University in a Growing Sector: Is Equity an Issue? (2014)

- Dr Daniel Edwards and Julie McMillan  
(Australian Council for Educational Research)

### Background

- The Australian higher education system has expanded considerably in recent years, providing an opportunity for many students from disadvantaged backgrounds, but there are questions as to how much equity students have benefitted.
- Equity groups also saw big increases in enrolments between 2009 and 2012 but only modest increases in their representation in higher education. The share of low SES students increased from 16.2 per cent to 17.1 per cent; the share of non-metro enrolments increased from 19.4 per cent to 19.5 per cent; and the share of Indigenous enrolments increased from 1.3 per cent to 1.4 per cent.
- There is insufficient evidence on the linkages between variable factors into attrition rates and the impediments faced by equity students to explain outcomes.

### Objectives and methodology

- The report sought to answer four questions: Do higher education completion rates differ for different groups of students? Are disadvantaged students less likely to complete university than others? What are the most reliable variables for determining the likelihood of university completion? If there are differences in completion between groups of students, do factors relating to student engagement, experience or satisfaction help to explain these differences?
- The study analysed student outcomes using the Higher Education Student Collection which allows individual students to be tracked through their unique Commonwealth Higher Education Student Support Number (CHESSN). From 2005 onwards, the CHESSN enables researchers to track the pathways of students within and between courses and institutions.
- The study focused on three equity groups: low SES; non-metro; and Indigenous.

### Key findings and recommendations

- Nationally, lower completion rates were evident for students with lower ATAR scores, especially below 60. The national average completion rate was 73.6 per cent, over a nine-year period following commencement.
- Approximately 69 per cent of low SES students completed a degree, compared to 78 per cent of students from high SES backgrounds. Low SES students were more likely than other students to drop out within the first two years of study or to be still enrolled without completion nine years after commencement.
- Students in metropolitan areas were more likely to complete a degree than those from regional and remote areas (the figures respectively were 75 per cent, 70 per cent and 60 per cent).
- Indigenous students had a completion rate of around 47 per cent compared to 74 per cent for non-Indigenous students. More than one in five Indigenous students in this cohort had dropped out of university before their second year and another quarter had dropped out at some other stage in the nine-year period.
- The reason for attrition differed between groups based on data from the 2013 University Experience Survey. Equity group students cited finance; family obligations; and core issues related to 'getting by'. Non-equity group students' reasons for dropping out of courses centred around issues of choice and lifestyle.
- There was no meaningful difference between students in equity groups and non-equity group students when it came to student engagement at university, access to resources and the experience of quality teaching.

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[Edwards, D. & McMillan, J. \(2015\). \*Completing university in a growing sector: Is equity an issue?\* National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. Curtin University: Perth. Australian Council for Educational Research \(ACER\): Melbourne.](#)

## Are Low SES Students Disadvantaged in the University Application Process? (2014)

- Buly Cardak (La Trobe University), Mark Bowden and John Bahtsevanoglou  
(Swinburne University of Technology)

### Background

- In Australia, high SES background students are three times more likely than low SES background students to attend university.
- While disadvantage in higher education is multi-faceted, the university application process is one factor that may discourage students from seeking entrance to higher education.
- The report is based on administrative university application data from the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre. It comprises information on all 40,650 Victorian Year 12 students who completed the VCE in 2011 and applied for a university place in that year.

### Objectives and methodology

- An economic model was developed to understand student behaviour and decisions around university applications. The key variable of interest was the number of changes students make after they discovered their ATAR score.
- Students from different SES backgrounds had different access to knowledge about higher education and what it had to offer which, in turn, led to differences in aspirations.
- The essential feature of the project was to investigate empirically how students responded to new information in the form of discovering their ATAR in the university application process. This can be interpreted as an indication of how the capacity to process information differs across the SES distribution.

### Key findings and recommendations

- The report concurred with other background research that cited a number of key considerations: the 'predisposition stage' was important in shaping a student's preferences to attend university, with family and cultural influences being significant; parents educational attainment and encouragement from family shaped intentions; aspirations were strongly related to socioeconomic status; people from low SES backgrounds did not perceive university education as a good investment; and many students believed they had insufficient information to make appropriate course choices.
- The project concluded that there is growing evidence that disadvantaged students are struggling with the application process for higher education, as they either lack information about universities, their programs, or both, and they also typically have less informed networks to draw on.
- High SES students seem to construct application portfolios that are more attentive to the application process and ultimate admission, which suggests that low SES students are hindered in participating in higher education.

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[Cardak, B., Bowden, M. & Bahtsevanoglou, J. \(2015.\) \*Are Low SES Students Disadvantaged in the University Application Process?\* National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. Curtin University: Perth.](#)

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Curtin University, GPO Box U1987, Perth WA 6845, Australia  
Phone: +61 8 9266 1573  
Email: [ncsehe@curtin.edu.au](mailto:ncsehe@curtin.edu.au)

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