



## Editorial Introduction

Since the 1990s, the Commonwealth government has funded universities to improve the proportional representation of designated equity groups in higher education. This briefing paper evaluates how well Australian universities have performed against the parity targets of the widening participation agenda for students with disability. It finds the higher education sector has some work ahead to reach targets for enrolments and completions in undergraduate, postgraduate coursework and postgraduate research programs.

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## Disability Access to Australian Higher Education

Deanna Grant-Smith and Bernd Irmer

For three decades, Australian government policy has sought to improve the proportional representation of designated equity groups in higher education. Referred to as the ‘widening participation agenda’, the goal is to increase the participation of these groups to levels that mirror their representation in the broader Australian population. The Commonwealth used census data to establish its equity targets for achieving proportional representation and provides universities with funding to support this aim. One of the six groups identified was people with disability, including those with hearing, learning, mobility, vision and medical disabilities, behavioural and mental illnesses, and autism spectrum disorders. With the target for students with disability set at 8% of the student population (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1990), this briefing paper considers how much progress has been made towards its realisation. The paper focuses on the key trends in participation access and completion by students with disability, how these trends differ by university group and type of higher degree, and what impact they might have on achieving the widening participation agenda.

### Widening the Participation of Students with Disability

The focus on higher education as a strategy to enhance employability means that participation is increasingly important to employment outcomes (Kinash, McGillivray & Crane, 2018). However, credential inflation caused by growing numbers of individuals completing undergraduate degrees has resulted in more individuals upgrading their qualifications through postgraduate education (Wakeling & Laurison, 2017) to maintain a competitive advantage in the labour market (McCulloch & Thomas, 2013).

A greater understanding of how well the Australian university sector is increasing the participation of students with disability across different levels of degree is required to ensure that disadvantage is not further entrenched. For example, students with disability who possess a postgraduate research degree earn higher mean full-time salaries (\$80,000) compared to those with postgraduate coursework (\$73,100) or undergraduate degrees (\$57,100) (QILT, 2018).

### Access trends

Across the university sector, the participation of students with disability has historically been and remains significantly below the 8% target, especially in postgraduate research and coursework programs. In the decade from 2006 to 2016, a slight improvement in the overall proportional representation in commencements for students with disability occurred (see Figure 1).

This improvement was gradual and started at a low baseline. Nevertheless, between 2009 and 2016, there was a more significant upturn in commencing enrolments of students with disability across all degree levels, with the strongest improvement experienced in undergraduate enrolments.

### Completion Trends

Higher rates of participation reflect progress but do not mean that equity has been achieved nor that it will be soon. It is important to measure outcomes in relation to student (non)completion or graduation (Archer, 2007). Therefore, although undergraduate and postgraduate coursework enrolments of students with disability noticeably increased over the decade 2006–2016, the comparative improvement in completions is markedly less pronounced (see Figure 2).

Students with disability are significantly less likely to complete their degree than the average for all students (Grant-Smith, Irmer & Mayes, 2020). This may suggest that the higher education infrastructure and support available for students is insufficient to support successful completion. Consequently, initiatives that not only support initial access, but that facilitate retention and, ultimately, successful degree completion, must be developed.

### Performance by University Type

Expanding access to higher education can have the perverse consequence that individuals then need to have a degree from an elite institution to maintain their competitiveness in the labour market (Kariya, 2011). To fully understand the penetration and effect of the widening participation agenda, it is therefore important not only to consider representation at the sector level but also to consider the extent to which this has occurred in different types of universities (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002).

Australian universities are most commonly divided into four groups or types: Group of Eight (Go8), Australian Technology Network (ATN), Regional Universities Network (RUN), and Innovative Research Universities (IRU). The remainder, covering both public and private universities, are considered non-aligned.

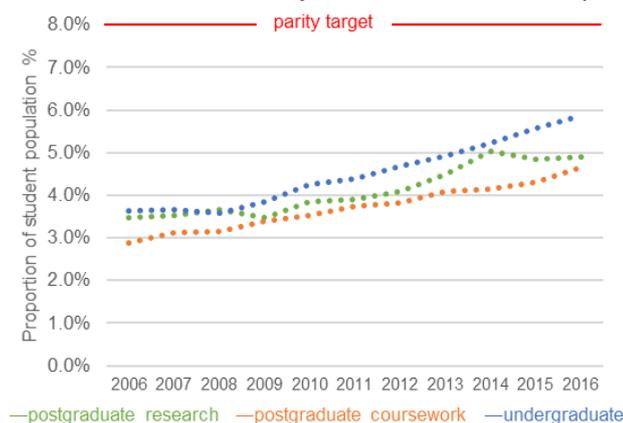
Each university type shares a specific history, priorities and emphases that shape how the widening participation agenda manifests within them and across the sector. For example, the Go8 universities, Australia's elite higher-education institutions, have the largest share of postgraduate students. This means that if these universities underperform on equity parity targets, a considerable impact on sector-wide performance occurs.

If equity groups are comparatively over-represented in certain universities—or groupings of universities—and under-represented in those considered more prestigious or elite, then a level of stratification and structural disadvantage within the sector may be indicated.

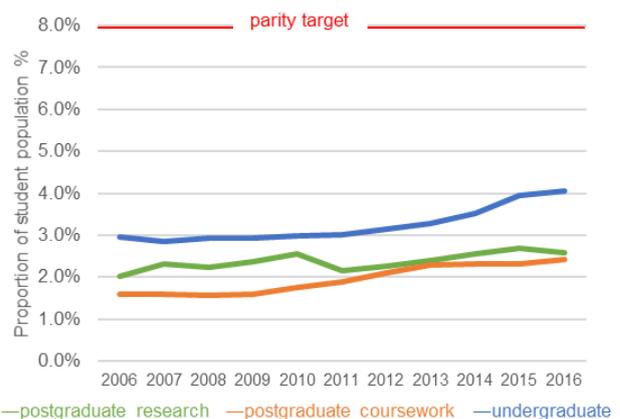
While clear differences between the groupings of universities exist the parity target for students with disability has not been met by any university group for any course program, for either enrolments or completions (see Figure 3). For example, in the postgraduate research space, no university group meets the parity targets for completions or enrolments for students with disability. The Go8 and RUN have both made significant proportional gains on enrolments, which is important given the relative size of their student populations. However, this has not been matched by a similar upturn in completions.

Postgraduate coursework shows a similar pattern, with moderate improvements in access that are not matched with improvements in completions. Again, RUN and Go8 made the most significant proportional gains on commencing enrolments, with RUN approaching parity for this measure. In contrast, the undergraduate cohort shows a different pattern with IRU and non-aligned public universities both approaching parity for access and outperforming others for completions.

**Figure 1**  
Sector-Wide Access Trends for Students with Disability



**Figure 2**  
Sector-Wide Completion Trends for Students with Disability



Source: Published and unpublished data (DET, 2018).

## Impact of Stratification

Stratification is strongly evident in the participation of students with disability in the postgraduate space as seen by the comparatively poor performance of the Go8 against the parity targets, and to a lesser extent, by ATN. Stratification can also be observed in the comparatively strong performance of the IRU and RUN university groupings. This unequal representation indicates that regional and smaller universities may be carrying a disproportionate burden in supporting students with disability, and may be making a greater, yet arguably under-recognised, contribution to remediating inequalities.

Differences in wealth and resources between universities can impact their ability to accommodate the learning needs of non-traditional students. It appears that those institutions with the most resources and, therefore, arguably, the greatest ability to support these students, tend to have proportionately fewer represented in their student base. Conversely, larger proportions of equity group students attend less wealthy or less well-resourced universities, and smaller universities have a larger proportion of both commencing and continuing students with disability compared to larger universities (Kilpatrick et al., 2017).

This may result in some smaller universities facing disproportionate costs if they enrol higher numbers of students who have more costly support requirements (Brett, 2016). Exploring the ways government-funding models could be used to support universities with high numbers and proportions of disadvantaged students, including students with disability, is required to ensure the success of these students.

## Focusing on the Future

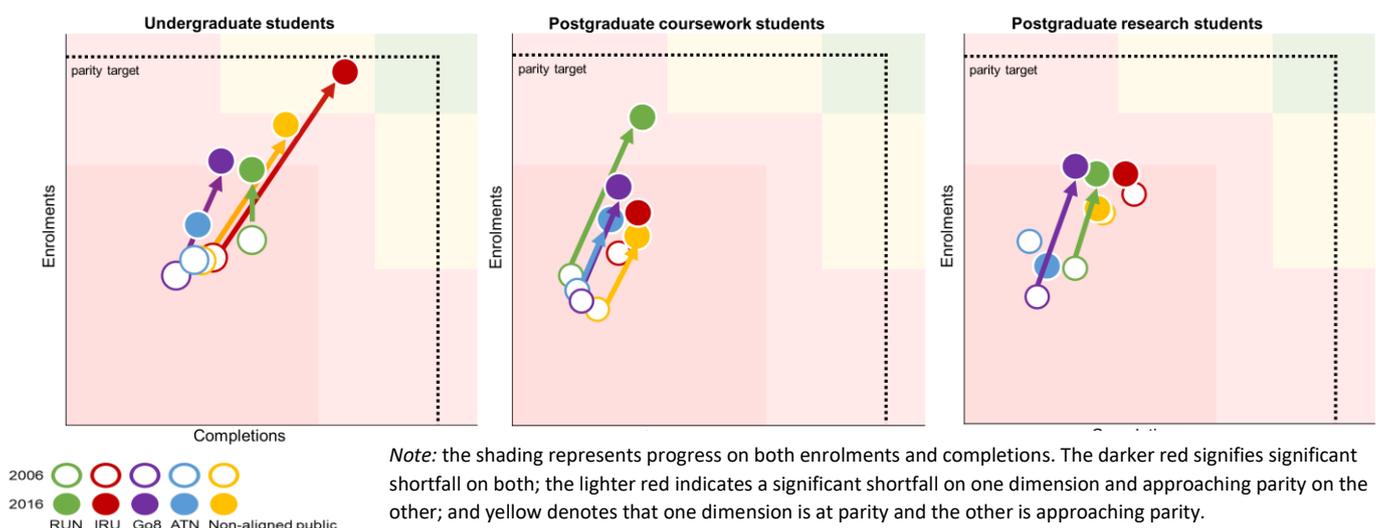
Statistical analysis provides a broad-brush understanding of trends and overall performance. However, in the context of the increasing neo-liberalisation of universities (Sims, 2019), achieving the widening participation agenda requires rigorous qualitative analysis of the issues facing specific institutions and created by systems of governance.

The widening participation agenda is not necessarily universally advantageous, and there is inequality within and between cohorts that is masked by the current reporting regime. A more nuanced understanding of why some universities perform comparatively better on the widening participation agenda would provide lessons for the sector on how to improve. It could also potentially provide the basis for a revision of the performance criteria for public funding.

The recently passed amendments to the *Higher Education Support Act 2003* through the *Job-Ready Graduates Bill 2020* propose that universities receive additional funding to assist with supporting certain equity groups. However, successful funding applications would be based on prevalence reporting. This method is likely to under-represent the overall need for services as the stigma and fear of discrimination, particularly for those with non-physical disability, may discourage students from disclosing personal details that would identify them as belonging to these equity groups (Kusevskis-Hayes, Clark & Wilkinson, n.d.).

Disclosure decisions may be related to several factors, including the extent to which an institution is perceived to be disability friendly (Jacklin, 2011). Additional or refined data-collection methods may be needed to measure participation accurately (Cunninghame, Costello & Trinidad, 2016). Non-disclosure may impact the accuracy of the data collected and the capacity of universities to plan for and resource support services. More importantly, it may result in students not receiving eligible support services and accommodation and could decrease their likelihood of academic success and degree completion.

**Figure 3**  
*Parity Progress by University Grouping for Students with Disability*



In the current funding climate, the desire to promote social mobility and social justice through higher education policy conflicts with the increasing political expectation that the burden of funding universities will move from the state towards the individual, resulting in increased income derived from student fees (Bowl & Hughes, 2013). The egalitarian potential of the widening participation agenda for students with disability may be significantly compromised by such change, particularly given that full-time employment and earnings outcomes for these students remain lower than the average for all students.

## Conclusion

Australian universities vary widely in approaches to and achievement of the widening participation agenda for students with disability (Kilpatrick & Johns, 2014).

Consequently, the widening participation agenda remains open to critique on its capacity to deliver social justice in the higher education arena and beyond for these students (Gale & Parker, 2013). The 2019 update from the Australian Bureau of Statistics indicates that participation of people with disability has slightly declined since 2016 (ABS, 2019). Indeed, the lack of progress towards meeting the 8% parity target is all the more alarming when considering that people with disability comprise more than 18% of the Australian population (ABS, 2016) and that an estimated 45% will experience mental illness within their lifetime (Australian Network on Disability, 2016). There is a pressing need to shift from the welfare mindset of parity targets to a more nuanced and accommodating educational approach that addresses the needs of students with disability, but that also recognises that these students contribute to

creating a vibrant and diverse higher education sector.

As postgraduate study becomes an expectation to advance in employment, a greater understanding of the impact of postgraduate funding models, particularly costs to students, is required to ensure disadvantage is not further entrenched. In the current economic climate of reduced university funding, concerns exist that if a purely economic metric is applied, the needs of students who require a higher investment for a lower return may not be prioritised. A potential risk in the future is that this pattern will be exacerbated if universities choose to target potential students based on their perceived economic value alone—some may calculate that the investment required to support all equity groups to succeed is too great to bear.

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