

## LA TROBE SUBMISSION TO THE AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES ACCORD (SUB-ATTACHMENTS)

### Sub-Attachment 1: Participation rates of equity groups in higher education (Low Socio-Economic Status (SES))

At present the way equity group participation is calculated does not take into account the proportion of people from the equity group available for study (the denominator), and so a nuanced understanding of true participation rates is not available. This is different to the way employment rates are calculated, for example: the number of people available for employment who are in employment. We set out the case with regard to people from low SES backgrounds as an example below.

#### Participation rate of people from low SES backgrounds

Since the release of the 'Martin Report' on equity of participation in higher education in 1990, policy objectives around participation have centred on identified equity groups, particularly people from low SES backgrounds. While the way low SES is derived has been refined somewhat since that time, the broad metric remains: locales (previously postcodes, now census districts) are ranked according to the Socioeconomic Index for Areas (SEIFA) and grouped into population quartiles, with students from each area accorded a socioeconomic status on the basis of their residence.

While the method is cost-effective and plausible for very broad-brush analyses, its deficiencies are well rehearsed: in particular that it is invalid for assessing the demographic characteristics of individuals, that it cannot differentiate between socioeconomic and geographical effects, and that it misses the characteristics of those who have moved from the area in which they grew up (it is all but useless in assessing socioeconomic variations in participation at the postgraduate level for this reason).

None of these observations is new, and it has long been recognised that a system which assesses the socioeconomic characteristics of individuals is needed; for example a composite scale based on both parents' occupations and education levels (James, Bexley and Maxwell 2008).

#### Stubborn participation rates

As the Accord Discussion Paper notes, participation in higher education by people from low SES backgrounds has remained stubbornly below the benchmark level set by the Martin Report (25 per cent, or population parity), hovering between 14 to 17 per cent depending on address metric.

However, it is difficult to know the true levels of participation using the present, blunt method. It may be that the true rate is lower still, with higher SES individuals from locales designated as low SES taking up disproportionate numbers of places, or it may be that the number of people from low SES background qualified for university is lower than the population proportion and, accordingly, rates are in fact higher than is apparent.

A challenge for the Accord panel is:

*The need to measure rates of participation in higher education as a proportion of those prima facie qualified to enter, for each equity group*

In the example below, we consider how:

- Proportionally fewer young people from low SES backgrounds complete high school, compared with those from more privileged backgrounds;

- While rates of completion of high school with and without an ATAR (unscored) are hard to track, anecdotally, those ‘going unscored’ are disproportionately from low SES and rural backgrounds;
- Of those that do complete with an ATAR, ATARs are heavily skewed by social class;
- Disproportionate rates of senior school achievement are also apparent in Naplan results, which skew along SES lines.

In short, the proportion of low SES school leavers *prima facie* qualified to enter university is far lower than the population proportion. This is due to systemic inequity at the school level, and requires improvements to school funding and social welfare.

It is extremely important that universities are funded to undertake outreach activities into schools, both to inform post-school aspiration among those who may not have an informed understanding of university pathways, as well as to increase engagement with study. However, there is only a limited amount of effect universities can have on what are very deep-rooted social issues, that go far beyond simplistic ideas about ‘raising aspiration.’

### School completion

For example, [Productivity Commission](#) data show marked differences in completion of high school along equity lines: 78 per cent of high SES students vs 68 per cent of low SES. However, geographic location skews attainment even more than does SES. Low SES young people from South Australia have a Year 12 attainment rate of 87 per cent; while high SES young people from Queensland complete at a rate of 62 per cent:

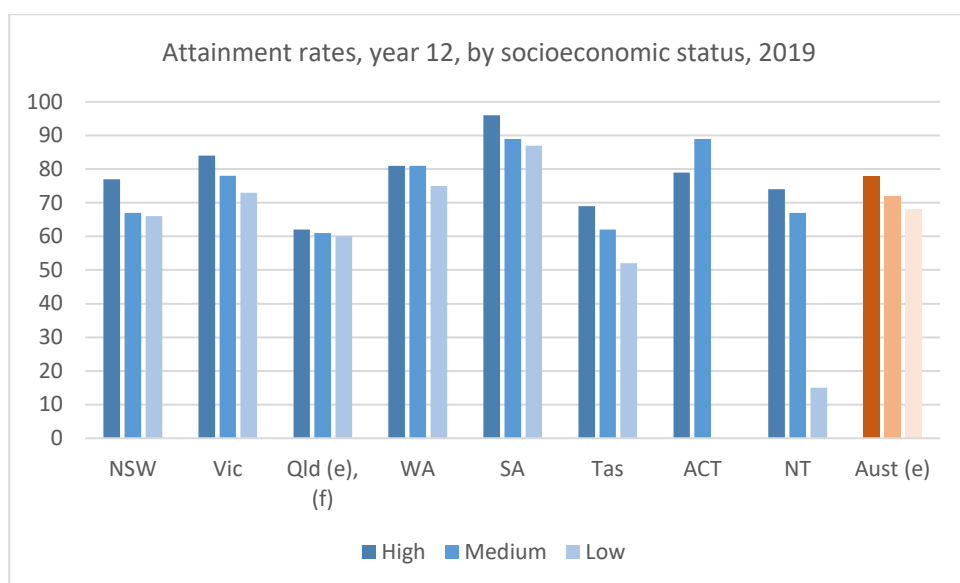


Chart data drawn from Productivity Commission Report on Government Services 2022, Part 4, School education

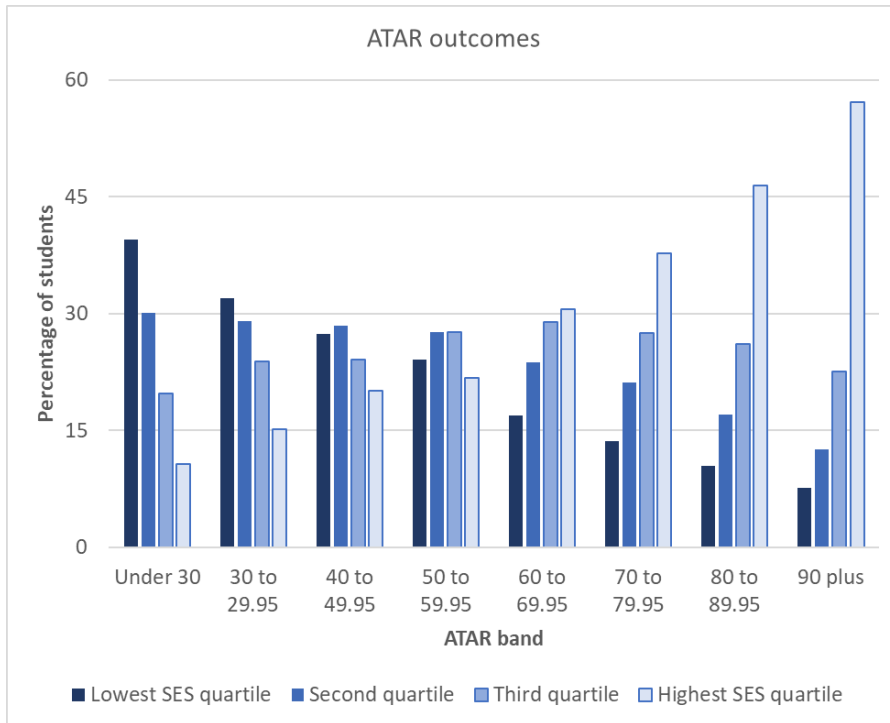
Further differences are apparent when regionality is considered, with high school completion ranging from 93 per cent in Adelaide down to 10 per cent in remote Northern Territory.

	NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT	Aust
Major cities	72	80	63	81	93	..	80	..	75
Inner and outer regional	63	74	58	77	82	58	..	70	66
Remote	70	88	58	91	88	57	..	54	73
Very remote	67	..	51	62	68	50	..	10	41

Attainment rates, year 12, by remoteness, all schools

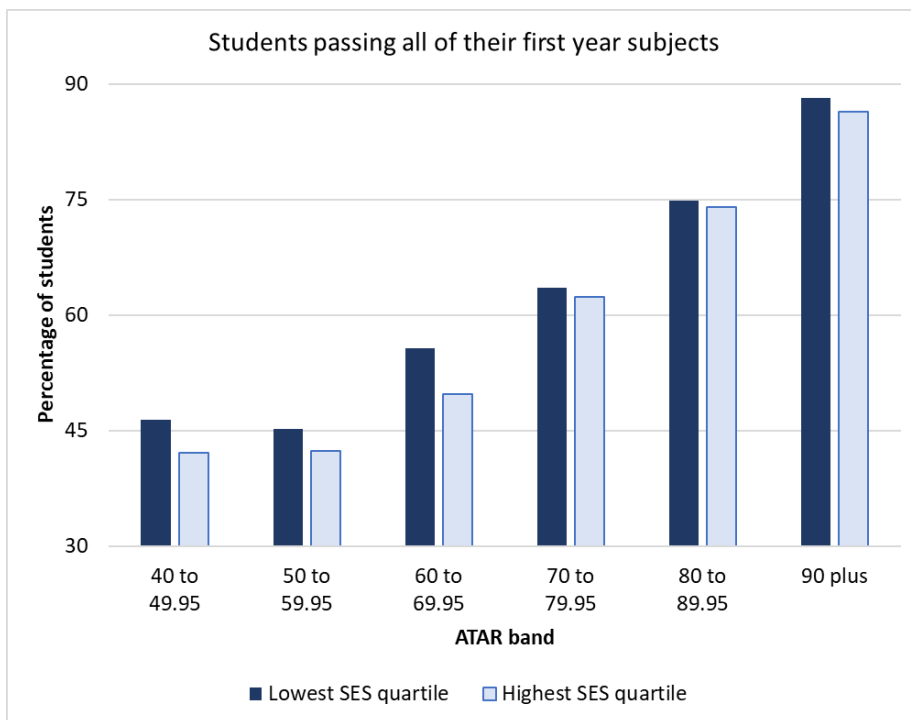
**ATAR**

Among those young people who complete high school and receive an ATAR, students from higher SES bands dominate higher ATARs, while those from disadvantaged backgrounds have ATARs clustered at the lower bands:



Data source: Universities Admissions Centre (2020)

Once students enter university, however, lower SES students tend to outperform higher SES students by ATAR band:



Data source: Universities Admissions Centre (2020)

The disproportionate achievement rates of senior school achievement by SES are apparent much earlier than year 12. Studies show that while students from the same ENTER bands are equally likely to go to university regardless of SES background, high SES students who were achieving similar grades to low SES students in Year 9 went on to achieve ENTERs around 10 points higher three years later.<sup>1</sup>

The figure below draws on Productivity Commission data to show how Year 9 Caplan results in reading skew according to parental education level, and parental occupation grouping. These indicators are well used proxies for socioeconomic status (and we would recommend that these be used in SES calculation methodology rather than residential location). We can see that achievement levels even in Year 9 are already leading to unequal positioning for future further education opportunities:

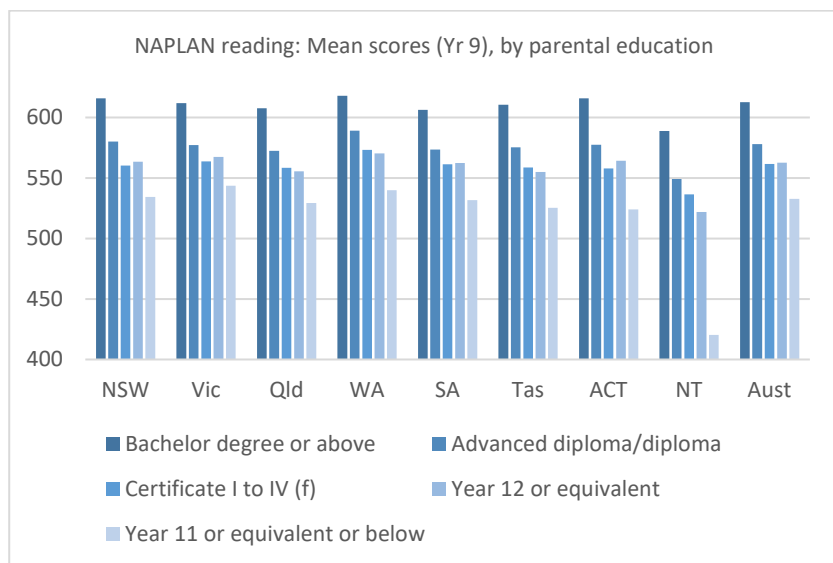


Chart data drawn from Productivity Commission Report on Government Services 2022, Part 4, School education

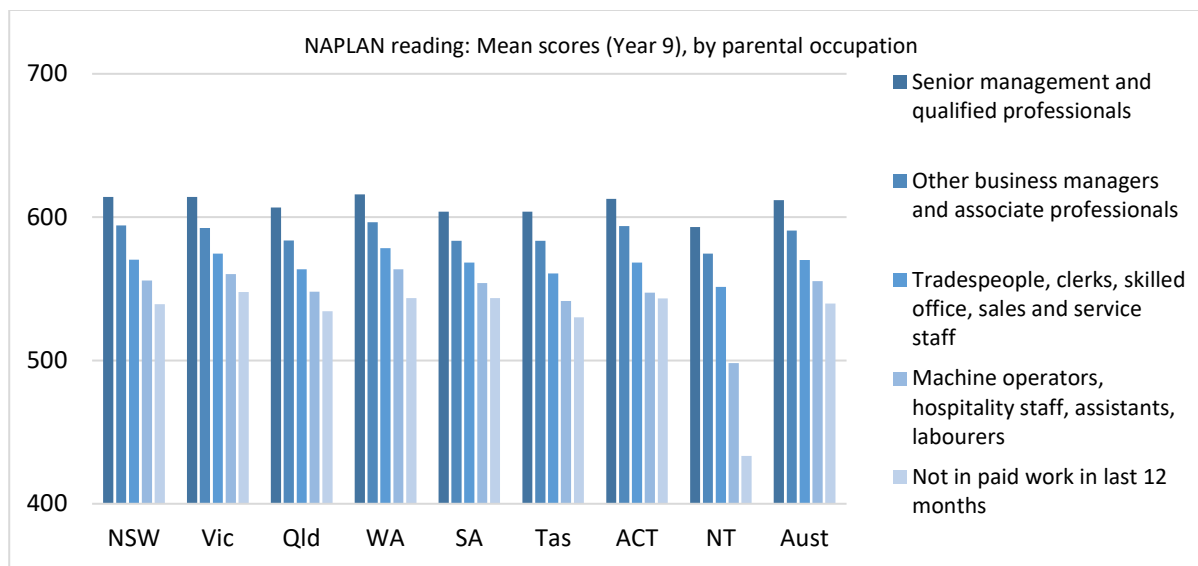


Chart data drawn from Productivity Commission Report on Government Services 2022, Part 4, School education

<sup>1</sup> Cardak, B. A., & Ryan, C. (2006). Why are High-Ability Individuals from Poor Backgrounds Under-Represented at University?. Available at SSRN 914025

**To improve participation, Australia needs a better understanding for the reasons for differing completion rates. This requires:**

- **Measures that reflected the circumstances of individuals and that can distinguish between socioeconomic and geographical effects; for example; parental education and occupation;**
- **A participation metric that takes into account the number of people available to participate, in the same manner as employment statistics take into account those available for work.**

**To address disproportionate participation rates, Australia needs:**

- **More investment at the school level;**
- **Improved social welfare for parents and young people;**
- **Targeted education support in geographic areas with very poor school outcomes;**
- **Methods for allocating places at university that are not skewed by social class (remove and replace ATAR).**

## **Sub-Attachment 2: Improving the quality of student equity data while increasing data availability and ensuring its ethical use (Disability data)**

The quality, availability, and conceptualisation of student equity data has been a consistent frustration of equity researchers, practitioners, and students for many decades. The present Australian Universities Accord process offers a critical opportunity to address these persistent issues and provide the sector with more insightful, actionable, and ethical equity data assets. While there are many issues with equity data that we could delineate, we will focus here on disability data.

### **Disability Data**

There are numerous critical gaps, inconsistencies, and conceptual/categorical, issues which frustrate the consistent capture and transfer of disability data throughout a student's lifelong learning journey. While the reporting of disability data by universities to government via TCSI has recently improved, the national disability data ecosystem remains far from optimal.

There is little consistency in data capture practices between a student's secondary schooling and tertiary education. Additionally, the data record of a student's disability status is frequently lost during the transfer from one institution to another. In the Victorian context, there are also gaps between pre-university data collection via VTAC's Special Entry and Access Scheme (SEAS) – which adjudicates claims for disability and medical adjustments to the ATAR – and a student's commencement at university. These highly vetted SEAS disability data are effectively single-use and are not made available to universities in a way that would aid ongoing student support efforts.

These gaps in the consistency and portability of a student's disability status can work to compound disadvantage. There are already considerable financial and accessibility barriers to obtaining a medical diagnosis of disability in Australia. For example, the diagnosis of a learning disability such as dyslexia, which is not covered by the NDIS, can cost well over \$1,000. Specialised tutoring and learning support can then cost individuals and their families additional thousands of dollars per year. Wait times to see a specialist psychologist for ADHD diagnosis and treatment are yet another barrier and can extend to well more than a year. Considering these significant barriers, gaps in the disability data ecosystem often demand additional and undue levels of self-advocacy, cultural capital, and cost for students with disability.

To address these and other concerns, we understand that several submissions to the UA panel have recommended that the existing Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD) on School Students with Disability be extended to the tertiary sector. We encourage the panel to consider this option, but urge caution on 3 important points:

- 1) The NCCD recognises only 4 broad categories of disability and therefore provides a far less refined data picture than TCSI's current 11 categories (Element E615).
- 2) The NCCD does not capture or report on multiple disability categories for an individual student. Instead, schools are asked to report only on the single disability category that is believed to 'have the greatest impact on the student's education'. We note that current TCSI data collection allows for the reporting of students with two or more disabilities.
- 3) The NCCD reports only on students who have received one of four levels of *learning adjustments*. This likely to cause many students with a physical disability to go unreported. For example, a student may have a mobility impairment that does not require reasonable adjustments to be made to learning activities. The university sector, however, needs these students represented in data collection to provide important insights into campus and built environment accessibility. We note that physical disabilities of this kind are currently captured in TCSI data collection (E615, value 12).

There are also significant gaps in disability data capture and reporting that are introduced upon university enrolment and again throughout a student's tertiary career. A recent analysis conducted by La Trobe has shown that every year several hundred students will decline to *declare* a disability status upon enrolment but will later *register* for disability support with the university's AccessAbility support team.

The reasons for this gap in disability *declarations* that are reported to government and *registrations* for localised support are likely to be multiple and will at times reflect a student's reluctance to disclose personal information (Clark et al., 2018).

In practice, however, this means that disability statistics are likely being poorly captured and reported to government. For example, in a 5-year period (2015-2020), La Trobe supported 2,985 students who registered for disability support with the university, but who declined to declare this status within officially reported data systems. This data suggests that disability status is critically under-reported throughout the university sector.

**We encourage the Panel to consider policy that will address these critical gaps and inconsistencies in student disability data collection and work to reduce barriers to data portability. With Clark et al. (2018)<sup>2</sup> we recommend the adoption of policy that offers 'options of disclosure channels and times where students retain control over their information' (p. 5). We also recommend exercising a level of caution in considering the adoption of the NCCD for the tertiary sector.**

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<sup>2</sup> Clark, C., Wilkinson, M., & Kusevskis-Hayes, R. (2018). *Enhancing self-disclosure of equity group membership: an investigation of self-disclosure by Indigenous students, students with disabilities and students from non-English-speaking backgrounds at university*. UNSW Student Life.

<https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/project/enhancing-self-disclosure-of-equity-group-membership>

### **Sub-Attachment 3: La Trobe Indigenous Staff' perspectives on the Australian Universities Accord (AUA)**

#### **Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion**

The positioning of Indigenous peoples within the framework of participation and Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) is a very limited understanding of the fundamental standing of Indigenous identity within higher education. Indigenous understandings are key elements across all aspects of our current higher education sector; this can be highlighted by every Australian university acknowledging and committing to UA Indigenous Strategy 2022-2025.

#### **Governance**

Comments on Indigenous governance were noted in relation to Indigenous members being positioned at the highest levels of university governance. There has been some positive changes with some large uptakes of Pro-Vice Chancellor Indigenous and Deputy Vice Chancellor Indigenous occurring on multiple Australian university sites but still very few instances of Indigenous leadership as Chancellors or University Council representation and no Indigenous Vice Chancellor ever guiding a university. While there is value in increased participation, the greatest value would be direct leadership by Indigenous members.

#### **Indigenous Knowledges (IK)**

The decolonisation or Indigenisation of curriculum is becoming a steady practice across many universities. Much of this is led by Indigenous staff guidance of non-Indigenous discipline curriculum writers but in relation to Indigenous staffing, it is not generally completed by Indigenous experts in these discipline areas. This experience can highlight some positive content changes and inclusion of IK but much of the subtle Indigenous dexterity is not evident in this work. Highlighting the need for some greater improvement in Indigenous employment across all disciplines of higher education and the greater support of Indigenous students into higher education who may evolve into working in these fields. A further comment to the concept of embedding IK is the ownership of knowledge and the control of its expression to others. There is a greater desire to engage but also a need for Indigenous peoples to control these outlets of cultural materials.

#### **Wellbeing of Indigenous staff and students**

There are concerns expressed by Indigenous participants relating to the care of Indigenous people's wellbeing within the very non-Indigenous structures of higher education institutions. These concerns relate to the cultural safety that some Indigenous staff and students feel is not clearly present. One way of addressing this would be to have more Indigenous people employed in mainstream positions not just identified roles with support systems and having structures in place to attract and sustain Indigenous staff.

#### **Self-Determination**

Indigenous self-determination should be present within all aspects of higher education and should not be seen as an add-on or inclusion to the established direction of the institutions. The concept of self-determination is a recurring theme with a focus on Indigenous peoples being allowed to position themselves in a decision-making place and not as an inclusion such as Indigenous participation within the Accord discussion paper and its inclusion as a parity group. The belief of allowing Indigenous peoples to be self-determining within all aspects of higher education such as student engagement and recruitment, governance, learning and teaching and research will allow for greater change within the higher sector in the next 20-30 years.

#### **Research**



Recommendations in this area include further support for Higher Education Research (HDR) students such as through increased financial support and supporting researchers' pathways from undergraduate through HDRs and early career researchers. Protection of IK in research from non-Indigenous researchers through appropriate ethical protocols is also crucial. There is also scope for improved Indigenous community engagement that responds to community needs rather than research that happens to include Indigenous peoples.

### **Learning and Teaching**

Again, through a lens of self-determination, there should be a focus on the decolonisation or embedding Indigenous understandings within higher education curriculum. Again, highlighting the significance of IK within higher education and the need to correctly engage with these knowledge systems through the educational process of informing all students about Indigenous Australia.