

Expanding institutional visibility of contemporary equity cohorts

Fiona Navin, Access and Equity, Edith Cowan University

Abstract

Australia's Higher Education Student Data collection and related definitions of equity groups are based on concepts developed in the 1990s and before. Societal changes in Australia over the last 30 years have been transformative, with no commensurate modification of data being collected. Whilst universities aim to foster inclusive learning environments, there are limitations where data does not give visibility to particular cohorts and their unique experiences. These gaps create "missing and marginalised groups" (Harvey et al, 2016, p.4) and limit the voices that truly reflect the diversity of the student cohort. Edith Cowan University (ECU) has broadened institutional definitions and data collection to include contemporary equity cohorts, allowing more nuanced insights into the diverse cohorts at the university. Creating visibility of particular cohorts has enabled provision of effective engagement and targeted support, as well as monitoring of educational outcomes.

The Initiative

Context and Rationale

Diversity and equity are at the core of the responsibilities of Higher Education Providers in Australia. In 1990 *A Fair Chance for All* was released which, at its core, "focused explicitly on access and representation, advocating the need for composition of the student population to reflect the broader population" (Harvey et al, 2016, p. 6). This government objective remains current to this day and reinforced through the Australian Universities Accord Final Report (2024). Six equity groups were identified as measures to 'reflect the broader population' and have remained largely unchanged for over 30 years. While these groupings have been useful reference points for strategy and policy, the ensuing sectoral changes require broadened categories and more nuanced understandings of students (Naylor, Coates & Kelly, 2016). More recently, the Australian Universities Accord Final Report (2024) identifies the need for expanded and more granular equity indicators.

Through successive strategic and institutional plans, ECU has sought a progressive agenda in meeting the needs of diverse communities. In 2020, ECU commenced a process to review its position on how 'diverse communities' was defined and to consider broadening areas of focus on student inclusion beyond traditionally recognised student equity groupings. The intention was to provide students opportunity to share additional personal information, enabling the institution to more effectively direct and provide relevant information and support to students.

Approach

ECU sought to expand current practice and collect new diversity and equity variables for students. To guide what data to collect consideration was given to consistency with the Higher Education Support Act; alignment with the ECU Strategic Plan; established international precedent; and a societal need for the information as evidenced through Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) collections. A comparative analysis of selected countries showed that the UK has the most comprehensive higher education collection of equity data amongst English

speaking countries. Under the Australian population Census, the ABS collects a similar range of information to the UK, with sexual orientation under consideration.

To inform the decision on any revision to student data collection, consultation with students was undertaken. A student survey was developed and administered to students in recognised equity groups, with 641 responses received. Results from the survey showed the majority of students agreed ECU has a strong commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Students were also asked level of support for collecting several identifiers, such as students from refugee background, care leavers, or religious affiliation. Responses indicated strong support for some identifiers, with support for other identifiers less explicit.

Following benchmarking and student consultation, the expanded student indicators were refined and then implemented in 2022. Through the enrolment process, all students have the opportunity to optionally share information such as if they are a care leaver, part of the LGBTIQ+ community, or a parent/carer, amongst others.

Impact

The changing of institutional structures has enabled students to be ‘seen’ and enhanced institutional understanding of the student cohort. Presented as optional questions, to-date 75% of all students have provided a response. For students, the provision of information has enabled tailored and personalised support and communications, resulting in an increase in engagement. For example, for several years ECU has provided tailored orientation sessions for students who are part of the LGBTIQ+ community. Since implementation of the expanded questions, attendance at these sessions increased from 9 students in 2022 to 78 in 2023, with the flow on effect of early peer and university connections. For the university, this institutional data provides opportunity to understand the experiences of historically ‘hidden’ populations to inform policy and services, and monitor outcomes – in alignment with changes put forward in the Australian Universities Accord Final Report (2024). Whilst external comparison to other Universities is not currently possible, alignment to the ABS in some areas enables benchmarking to the general population, and thereby a measure to consider the objectives of higher education and educational attainment in ‘the broader population’.

Questions

- How do universities define and identify students who likely face educational disadvantage?
- How does your university move beyond sociological groupings to consider intersectionality in monitoring of student outcomes?

References

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