Introduction

This cover paper reviews and extends a presentation made by Dr Hamish Coates (ACER Principal Research Fellow) on Monday 3 March to the Parliament of Victoria Education and Training Committee’s Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education.

The review examines what is known about such participation from published empirical research. It does not examine in detail statistics published by institutions or agencies. It responds most directly to points b, d, e and g in the Terms of Reference.

Participation in higher education is becoming more important in a society and economy that increasingly relies of advanced professional competency and capability. Higher education is important both for individual learners and graduates, and for Victoria as a whole.

Victoria needs means of ensuring that all talented people have an equal opportunity to enter higher education, regardless of their background. As part of this, it is critical that talented people do not miss out on higher education because of where they live. People from regional areas and from lower socioeconomic areas of Melbourne should have the same opportunity to access and succeed in higher education than people from higher socioeconomic areas of urban Melbourne.

Since 1990, these ideas have underpinned a national student equity framework for Australian higher education (DEET, 1990). This framework has underpinned a large number of important national, regional and institutional initiatives. More broadly, it has provided a firm foundation for advancing conversations about access and participation of students in university education.

As relatively recent reviews (James, Baldwin, Coates, Krause, & McInnis 2004; Coates & Krause, 2005) have shown, however, at a national level there has been little if any growth in participation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In certain instances, as outlined below, things have become worse.

This is concerning, as it occurs alongside the existence of a well-accepted national framework, considerable investment by higher education institutions, and increasing value and demand for higher education.

It is suggested here that while we can identify broad reasons for such trends, knowledge limitations restrict our capacity to develop effective solutions. A number of suggestions for advancing understanding and practice are made.
Factors influencing access and participation

Early school departure plays a major role in inhibiting individual’s transition to university study:

- In general, completion rates for urban students tend to be about 10 per cent higher than for rural students. Rural males have the lowest levels of secondary school completion. These differences remain when statistical analyses control for parental education and earlier achievement, indicating that location is a determining factor.
- Various reasons can be identified as contributing to early school departure. People may leave school early due to travel time and costs, school staffing difficulties, needing to take up work, decreased value placed on schooling, individual or parental expectations and attitudes, or limitations in school curriculum and resources.
- Rurality, however, may also count against even those students who make it through Year 12. This is because ENTER scores are related to population density, and are 3 to 4 points lower for rural students compared with students from metropolitan areas.

In addition to early school departure, the research literature identifies a range of other factors as influencing participation in higher education:

- Students from rural areas and lower socioeconomic areas of Melbourne are more likely to be the first person in their family to attend university. This can lead to greater student and family uncertainty about the costs and benefits of higher education. Importantly, it might constrain expectations.
- Regional campuses do much to enhance the general capacity of individual’s to access higher education. However regional campuses may not offer desired courses, and so may not ameliorate any disadvantage associated with distance.
- The capacity to access appropriate funding and support, whether based on perception or experience, can shape decisions about accessing or sustaining participation in higher education. Access to paid work to support study is likely be a particular consideration for students attending regional institutions, where work opportunities may be diminished.
- Requirements and conditions of eligibility for the Youth Allowance have changed very little over the last decade or so. Therefore, for many students, particularly outer suburban and remote students, the additional costs of transport to university or moving out of home in order to study potentially have a greater impact on university choice than they did a decade ago.

Current patterns and trends

According to 2006 national equity statistics published by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), only 17.3 per cent of students enrolled at Victorian universities are from provincial areas, compared with a national average of 18.7 per cent. Both of these figures are well below the reference value of around 25 per cent. Nationally, the participation of males in isolated or remote areas has declined. Further,
while the retention of urban and rural students has remained relatively stable over the last 15 years. The retention of students from isolated or remote areas, however, has declined.

Clearly, despite having a national equity framework in place for over 17 years, current policies and practices are not achieving the objective of increasing university participation rates of students from regional and lower socioeconomic areas of Melbourne.

Analysis of participation rates across nine Victorian universities brings this out. Figure 1 shows that all but three universities are below the state average. More importantly, only two institutions meet the national reference value.

![Figure 1: 2006 participation rates at Victorian universities](image)

**Knowledge limitations**

While concerning, it is probable that such patterns are not a true reflection of the current state of affairs. Large knowledge limitations surround this aspect of higher education due to a relative lack of empirical research and problems with routine practices.

There is a need for greater insight and change in the following areas:

1. There are measurement limitations with the statistics that are used to shape our understanding of student participation in this area. Specifically, efforts should be made to move away from using postcodes as the means of defining rurality and even socioeconomic status. More refined metrics should be used that provide better measurement of rurality and socioeconomic status and, importantly, which do not conflate these two issues.

2. Detailed work should be undertaken to examine the extent to which ENTER scores mask the performance and hence potential of students from rural areas. This work should seek means of correcting any bias which may be found to exist. There may be value in using data on student aptitude to complement measures of school achievement. In 2008, for instance, uniTEST is being trailed nationally by ACER as a means of identifying ‘hidden talent’.
3. Higher education institutions and local communities have led many advances in practice, and there would be value in a study that synthesised and published work that has been done, and identified what appear to be the most effective practices.

4. There is a need for greater evidence on individual decision-making and the factors that surround individual choice. Greater understanding in such areas will provide a means of developing policies and practices that can be used to inform individual analysis of the costs and benefits of higher education.

5. Research has so far failed to conclusively examine the extent to which residential location in metropolitan areas is affecting university participation. There is a need for research which examines the geographical impact of university attendance in metropolitan areas when other factors linked to socioeconomic status are controlled for.

Resources attached


