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Why first-in-family uni students should receive more support

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Why first-in-family uni students should receive more support

Abstract

Many university students fall into one of the six “equity groups” that receive targeted funding. However, there is one group that has for too long been ignored as a group that needs extra assistance in making it through university.

The six targeted equity groups include those:

- from lower socioeconomic backgrounds: currently measured by permanent home postcode
- from rural and isolated areas: measured by permanent postcode, population density data and proximity to cities
- with a disability (self-identified on enrolment)
- from a non-English-speaking background (those born overseas and who speak a language other than English)
- women in non-traditional areas of study; and
- Indigenous people (self-identified on enrolment).

Accurately identifying those that fall under these categories is necessary for universities as substantial equity funding is based on it. In January 2015, the new Higher Education Participation Programme (HEPP) was announced with a budget of A\$487 million (2015-2017).

HEPP provides funding to universities for programs that attract, support and retain students from “disadvantaged” or equity backgrounds. However, the usefulness of defining students into such discrete categories has been questioned. Individual students frequently fall into multiple equity categories, which requires lots of time spent ticking boxes on everyone’s part.

Keywords

family, uni, receive, students, support, should, more, why, first

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THE CONVERSATION

Why first-in-family uni students should receive more support

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Completing university is difficult for students who are the first in their family to enrol. They should be listed as one of the equity groups to receive more support. Flickr/Sarah R, CC BY-SA

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First in family

One cohort not included in current Australian equity definitions is those students who are the first in their family to go to university. This is despite reports these students have higher rates of attrition and struggle academically.

This is a global phenomenon: within the US, 43% of this cohort left university without a degree and the UK reports a strong correlation between low university participation rates and parental educational levels.

In Australia, over 50% of the student population is estimated to be the first in their family to go to university. A significant proportion of them consider departure throughout their university careers. In 2011, 26% reported that they considered leaving university in the first year of studies, a figure that increased to 34% for later years.

This cohort is particularly vulnerable to attrition and disengagement from university for many reasons. One UK study argues that the lack of a culture of higher education within the family impacts how prepared the student will be for university.

First-in-family students are also reported as having to do additional and often invisible “work” in relation to university attendance, such as reassuring others, like parents, partners and children, that they have made the right decision or are “investing wisely” by studying. Their study also acts as an enabler for others considering further education.

When you have little or no parental or family history of university attendance, or come from a community where attending university is not the norm, both students and their families experience a steep “learning curve” upon arrival at university.

As universities continue to expand their student populations, adequately supporting first-in-family students is imperative. This includes engaging with the family. If family members understand how best to support students through their education, then the prospects of retaining students improve.

First-in-family students also affect inter-generational change as going to university represents the start of a new educational cycle for the wider family, encouraging other family members to view it as a possibility.

Given “first in family” status currently falls outside Australian equity definitions, there is every possibility that these students may slip through the cracks in the system. Our research says the term “first in family” should be regarded as a “supra equity category” cutting across other equity groups.

Including “first in family” as an umbrella category also moves beyond deficit perspectives of students, which assume something is lacking on the part of the individual. Rather than asking students to tick boxes that define them as lacking (wealth, language, ability), how much better to welcome them and their families by celebrating “being the first”?



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