Measuring socio-economic status

The IRU supports the proposals set down in *Moving to an Enhanced Indicator of Higher Education Students' Socio-economic Status* for a more precise locational SES measure using geographical data at the SA1 level (based on the SEIFA IEO).

The final proposal makes sense but the discussion paper shows up the mixed objectives that bedevil the area.

Why do we want to measure socio economic status?

Starting from an objective that any person is as likely to enter higher education as any other person - based on the person's educational capability, attainment and need - the evidence suggests that people with various characteristics are either more or less likely in fact to enrol.

One point of divergence from equal probability is by socio economic status, with the higher the status the greater the likelihood of participation. We know this because the answer is consistent regardless of which of many measures is used.

Hence the overall objective is to reduce and ultimately remove the variation by SES. This applies across the spectrum from lowest to highest quartile. Low-SES serves as the lead indicator, it is not the whole of the problem since there is notable under-representation in the second quartile as well.

What is the extent of the problem?

There are various measures of SES, targeting different combinations of income, education and employment factors. In most research the results are considered by quintiles but the higher education measure has long been quartiles.

In all cases the data show that there is considerable under-representation in higher education at the lower end of the scale and over-representation at the upper. The figure for the lower quartile tends be similar around the 14 to 18% mark. It is also clear that the second quartile (or second quintile) also have significant under-representation, just not quite as great as for the first.

How address the problem?

Being low-SES however defined does not in itself mean a person has a difficultly accessing university or studying once enrolled; it suggest that the chance of a problem is higher. Universities have developed a wide range of services and improvements to teaching practice to achieve the best learning outcomes for students. Some of these may directly and explicitly be targeted to low-SES students, others focus at the potential challenges assisting all students with relevant needs.

Universities have a general requirement to do their best by students and specific incentives from the Government to improve access from under-represented groups. For SES the loading and the Partnerships funding add to use of CGS funds. There are two distinct views about the purpose of these funds:

- that the funds are for Low-SES and must thus be spent. No funds should drift out to assist say a second quartile student from a district at the 26 percentile. On this approach the funds must be quarantined, strictly acquitted and action reported precisely against low-SES; or
- that the funds weight towards universities with greater proportions of low-SES, providing assistance to ensure the range of student supports are in place, with use of them by any student who wishes. This is more consistent with the Bradley Report's recommendations and more likely over time to achieve the whole goal.

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Is there a best indicator?

The nature of the Department's paper and the discussion often had amongst interested university parties is that there is a best indicator that we must keep working to define. The discussion conflates two things:

- that there are various factors of relevance hence the weighting chosen on each will affect the measure at the margin (for example whether to focus on family income versus education). There is no right answer here – the different measures point to different reasons for under-representation, each of which in time needs to be addressed if equal probability of enrolment is to be achieved; and

- precision of the measurement which can be taken
  - indirectly (assess the standing of a location by the average of the residents against some mix of income, education and employment factors, and assign each student to the standing of the location they come from) or
  - directly (assess each individual for their particular circumstance).

    The indirect is easier for the whole university population, but is necessarily less precise at the individual level. The results aggregated are more reliable. The direct approach is easier to do for a sample where reliable data on the chosen factors can be collected and assessed.

The Department's preferred outcome maintains consistency about which factors are being measured (the education and occupation index) and improves the precision of the locational identifier (SA1 in place of the previous census districts) and removes the complication of using Centrelink data about individual students. Given the high correlation between the different factors, if the outcome for the education and occupation index picks up it is highly likely that the outcome for the other measures will improve as well.

Use of the indicator

The prime funding role of the indicator is to determine the distribution of the Participation low-SES loading. The indicator needs to be sufficiently robust that the relative allocation among universities seems fair. Each modification of the geographic base reduces the problem of heterogeneous postcodes which sit in the middle SES bands but whose individual residents spread equally across the bands.

The paper states twice that Universities want a better measure so they can know precisely to the individual who to target. This ties the individual very closely to a perceived set of problems, when the correlation is not that precise. There is partial contrast to students with a disability, where the disability (if a disability not an impairment) connects to barriers to learning in many cases. Hence identifying the person with a disability is a strong pointer to the action needed.

Identifying a person as low-SES does not prove their need. Identifying a person's needs through assessment of their educational barriers and weaknesses will target assistance better and assist overall with ensuring an equal likelihood of access.

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