

## Who should go to university?

Who should go to university, only the select or all who want to? It is the question that ran through the 2015 Universities Australia Conference (10-11 March 2015). It is lurking behind the contentious funding and fees debate that has wracked higher education for the past year. It is the issue that determines how well higher education supports Australia's future.

Gary Banks, former Productivity Commissioner, best illustrated the question. He revealed the ambivalence between the economist in him and the romantic academic. The economist argues human capital theory – the importance of each individual developing their education and skills to the optimum to apply in future work and life. The academic worries about the flood of people on campus, too many of whom do not meet the test of bright minds in pursuit of knowledge.

Professor Banks went further to target one key to the problem – the education achievement of school leavers. If school leavers have the knowledge and skills expected from study through to year 12 then the arguments for open access to university make sense. If they do not, then the instinctive desire of higher education protectionists has a stronger foundation. They can cloak their exclusionary preference in the garb of applicants' insufficient education development. The same challenge applies to the large number of non school leaver applicants.

Senator Carr has rarely hidden his support for the protectionist argument. Labor is now at the point of walking away from one of the few unchallenged policies of the Rudd-Gillard Government and from the essence of the Hawke Government achievement in doubling school retention and expanding universities. It is the Gillard changes that have seen sustained growth in the number of science and technology students, and slowed growth in law students, despite his contrary assertion. Student demand is more attuned to employment potential and apparent future demand than the previous allocation system.

Senator Carr's proposals to create incentives for universities to ensure all those they enrol gain the education they need, neither falling by the wayside nor emerging essentially unskilled, is a useful idea: the initial Gillard package included performance funding measures precisely to do that. Honing in on low ATAR entrants, casting 50 as some sort of pass mark, is not. Professor Shergold rightly focused at the outcomes graduates have, not what they knew at entry.

Rose Steele, President of the National Union of Students, highlighted the issue, perhaps inadvertently but instinctively. She argued that university had to remain open to all 'bright' people, in her opposition to deregulating fees. 'bright' is a judgment but the sense is clear, that school leavers with middle to low ATARs are not 'bright'.

The essence of the Dawkins expansion of universities followed through by the Bradley report's demand driven funding is that higher education is one additional part of the education pathway which all people should have access to. The judgment of suitability is the gain the individual will get, not whether they are more or less capable than someone else.

So let's think about the schools as Professor Banks argued.

Over the 1980s year 12 retention rates doubled from being for the minority, 35% of the age cohort in 1980, to being for the majority at 77% in 1992, with small fluctuations since.<sup>1</sup> This doubled the base group of university eligible students, and extending it across all regions. Every concern expressed about widening university access applies to this change in school completion rates. If twice as many

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<sup>1</sup> ABS, National Schools Statistics Collection Australia 1985, CATALOGUE NO. 4221.0, Table 11 and ABS, Australian Social Trends March 2011, Year 12 Attainment, ABS catalogue no. 4102.0

were completing school then surely standards had to fall, schools would struggle to deal with students with a wide range of academic capability and interest, school leavers would be overeducated for the jobs they took, and worst of all more and more people would think they were eligible for university.

Few people now question the value of high levels of year 12 retention and completion. We expect the schools to cope with the wide range of students. We blame them not the students for weaknesses in education standards.

The high school retention rates affect the ATAR. With over 70% of the school leaver cohort completing year 12 it means that those students are spread by definition across the ATAR range from 99 to less than 30. To determine that 50 is a pass point for university entry is to exclude over a quarter of year 12 graduates automatically from university.

The ATAR has sense in determining who, from those suitable, can access a particular course if places are limited – if you accept that priority should go to those initially more capable. It has no sensible role in determining who is suitable. For that you need to consider the skills of the applicant against those deemed needed for the course. School systems have that information (eg. see [NSW grades](#)); universities to date largely ignore it.

The regional evidence undermines the argument that university must be selective because some of those year 12 completers are simply not ready for university. There are regions where 90% of the school age cohort completes year 12 and over 60% go on to university; conversely in other areas completion is lower around 60% with 20% to 30% going on to university. I have not seen anyone show that there is that level of difference in academic capability between regions.

At heart the protectionists are fighting a rear guard action to defend universities against the expectation that they be a place of education for all, not just for the bright and the socially well off. It is a strange argument that says that very high achievers can advance their knowledge only when surrounded by the few others like themselves with exclusive access to the most learned staff. It has never been true of Australian universities.

It is why I disagree that the funding and fee proposals in the Pyne package were the most radical in decades, or even centuries to echo Bruce Chapman's rare hyperbolic moment. University financing options consume a lot of time, they generate lots of acrimony but ultimately they are about underpinning what the university does. HECS, now HELP, is a major mechanism to remove financial barriers, but it is a tool not the objective.

The significant change kicked off by Menzies, intensified by Whitlam and Dawkins, expanded by Gillard and open now for completion is to say that higher education is for all - bright, lumbering, rich and poor. It is what you will gain that matters, not whether you are better or worse than someone else.

25 March 2015