

Making a Difference: tracking the impact of equity scholarships in assisting students to access university and to persist in their studies

A “snapshot ” of some institutional equity scholarships involving seven universities and an institutional study “Overcoming Student Hardship “ which presents the impact of equity - based Scholarships on students financial disadvantage, rural disadvantage and the digital divide.

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Abstract

Under the new Higher Education Equity Support Program (HEESP) criteria, established by the Department of Education Science and Training (DEST) in 2004, all universities are now required to offer a range of scholarships to their equity category students. These include institutional scholarships and the DEST allocated Commonwealth Learning Scholarships. Scholarships are recognised as only part of the picture of helping to alleviate the obstacles and burdens on those under-represented cohorts of students who belong to the Commonwealth designated equity groups. Building links with secondary schools and creating aspirations in families for tertiary study, also form part of the powerful determinants of who will access university

But what impact do scholarships have as a strategy? Are equity scholarships making a difference to students' capacity to access university, to study, to remain at university and to succeed?

This workshop will give a *snapshot* of some of the institutional scholarships currently available in several universities around Australia and will form the basis for discussing early impressions of the impact of these, particularly as they affect students. It is recognised that these will be early indications only, as many institutions have had institutional equity scholarships in place for less than two years.

As little research has been conducted in this area, Tanya Carson has recently undertaken a study on the impact of equity scholarships on students at Swinburne University of Technology. The findings of her research, undertaken in 2005, will be discussed as a basis for sharing insights into the ways in which equity scholarships can help students overcome hardship

Introduction

The broad aim of this workshop is to understand how several universities relatively new to the situation of establishing and processing large numbers of equity based scholarships, had been developing, managing and evaluating the strategy. Further, we wanted to assess the early impressions of staff regarding the impact of the strategy on student financial hardship. Finally, in addition to this broad aim, we wanted to analyse more closely the effect of scholarships on our own students at Swinburne through a study asking them about their views and impressions on how the scholarship had helped improve their living and studying situation.

To gain a “snapshot” of what was happening, we asked 6 universities to answer some questions and provide comments. The institutions that took part were: Victoria University, Australian Catholic University, University of Tasmania, Latrobe University, Queensland University of Technology and the University of Southern Queensland and Swinburne University. The responses have been analysed in a table entitled: *Institutional Equity Based Scholarships* (See Appendix 1). In addition, as stated, we were interested in assessing in our own institution, the impact of equity scholarships on students paying their way through undergraduate degree programs, particularly since these scholarships had been introduced and or strengthened since the 2001 Australian Vice- Chancellor’s commissioned study “Paying their Way” (Long & Hayden 2001). The report at that time, had highlighted the extent to which students were in paid work of necessity and the negative impact this was having on their studies and it had called for an urgent re assessment of students’ income support arrangements.

The second strand of our workshop details the study undertaken by Tanya Carson of students at Swinburne University of Technology, entitled “*Overcoming Student Hardship*”. The purpose of this research was to present the impact of scholarships on students’ financial disadvantage, rural disadvantage and their experiences of the impact of the digital divide. The study looks at students’ financial experiences prior to their receiving a scholarship and once in receipt of a scholarship, either institutional or a Commonwealth Learning Scholarship.

Taking a *Snapshot* of some Equity based Scholarships

To gain a *snapshot* in September, 2005, we asked colleagues the following :

- Please provide a brief summary of the equity category institutional scholarships your institution offers.
- Does your institution have a monitoring process for these scholarship holders? If so, what practices do you have in place to support, develop, mentor and keep in touch.
- Does your institution provide feedback forms to scholarship holders? If so, what kinds of responses do you get? Perhaps, include a copy of a form or a report.
- Are your equity based scholarships part of an Equity Unit or are they part of The Scholarships Office?

- Do you have any comments to make from an institutional perspective about the impact of equity scholarships on students?

Responses

The responses have been collated under the following five themes: Institutional Scholarships, Monitoring Process, Feedback, Equity Unit or Scholarship Office and Impact.

As all institutions were allocating scholarships to the DEST Equity Groups with an emphasis on disadvantage experienced through low SES and or rurality, this has not been tabled as a column for comment in our analysis. The DEST Equity category groups in the Higher Education Equity Support Program include for 2005, low SES, and rural and isolated as the main target groups but also, people with a disability or medical condition and Non English Speaking Background people. It also aims to assist in overcoming educational disadvantage associated with gender.

The Number and Value of Scholarships

From the brief outline provided by respondents, it was clear that there are enormous variations in the value and length of equity based scholarships currently being offered. It is interesting to note that there appears to be a growing interest too, in philanthropy and the need to seek partners in funding from business and industry, private donors, state government bodies and others.

How they are being administered

Our respondents indicated that scholarships are administered either through an Equity Unit (most feeling the strain of lack of resources for this purpose) or through a designated Scholarships Office (these areas were also stressed by lack of sufficient staff). Close liaison with equity practitioners was thought to be very valuable, whichever system had been established.

Monitoring and Feedback

The overall impressions we gained are that some universities are already beginning to study the effects of scholarships on recipients and more want to follow this pattern. One exception to this, amongst those we contacted, is our own institution, Swinburne, which has as part of the equity scholarship process, monitored recipients' academic progress, initiated conversations about this topic and created a caring, service-oriented relationship. As well, we have encouraged students to become ambassadors and role models and surveyed students regularly about their perceptions of the value to them of the scholarships and of the Equity Unit that administers the scholarships. However, the context for being able to provide such a service up until now, has been the relatively small number of institutional scholarships available. (20 approx.)

Most institutions were not at this stage, monitoring student feedback or progress for purposes other than those required by the Commonwealth to maintain student eligibility, but time and resources permitting, intended to investigate this aspect more closely in future.

Impact

Whilst respondents were very positive about the value of scholarships to students, they expressed concerns that were centered around the following issues:

- An inability to keep up with rapid growth in the administration necessary for handling scholarships, especially as the numbers of recipients were increasing on an annual basis, for the four year period.
- Need for greater liaison in their own institutions with Marketing, Recruitment and Access, Student Services, Teaching and Learning Departments, academic departments and feeder secondary schools, as well as links with rural communities.
- Need to develop support strategies within academic departments and teaching and learning units for those students who were not maintaining their academic eligibility requirements and were starting to *fall through the cracks*.

- Need for better strategies and support systems to encourage more Indigenous students to apply for and remain holders of scholarships.

The impact was consistently believed, however, to be very positive, though most comments available at this stage as foreshadowed, were anecdotal. As awareness of the availability of scholarships has been growing in the general community and amongst students themselves, the demand for them has been increasing too. Already, there appear to be increasing numbers of applicants who are suitably qualified and who are eligible but are still not able to obtain such support and this will be of greater concern in future. Overall, it was believed that the scholarships have enabled students to better concentrate on their studies and to remain to complete their courses. Several universities have indicated that they are in the process of surveying students and other stakeholders, to provide evidence of this.

So what has the real impact been on equity scholarship recipients at Swinburne?

During 2005, Tanya Carson undertook a Sociology stream of the Honours program at Swinburne. Her research, which at the time of this paper is in the process of being completed, is entitled *Overcoming Student Hardship: A study of the situation faced by Swinburne undergraduates in the Equity Scholarships Program and Commonwealth Learning Scholarships Program*.

Tanya has sought an insight into the situations of financially disadvantaged students prior to attending university, once at university, and once in receipt of a scholarship. She has studied the students' situation from three levels of disadvantage: financial disadvantage, rural disadvantage and experience of the impact of the digital divide.

The specific research question posed was: Have the equity scholarship programs helped the recipients allay their financial hardship? Supplementing this question, if the scholarships have had an impact, in what ways have they done so?

The Commonwealth Governments commitment to equity in higher education, which has been in place in various policies and programs since the post World War II period, has provided a range of initiatives over time to assist with the provision of equitable access to university. In more recent times, such initiatives and sources for government funding have included, as indicated, the Higher Education Equity Support Program (HEESP) and the Commonwealth Learning Scholarships (CLS) Program. Within these programs, the Government has identified a number of under-represented cohorts of students within the university sector and the representation of these equity category students has become a benchmark for addressing issues of equitable access, participation, retention and success at university.

Considerable energy, time and financial resources from within institutions as well as the Department of Education, Science and Training, have been directed at making universities more accessible for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In late 2004 the Student Equity Unit at Swinburne conducted a client satisfaction survey with its 2003 and 2004 Equity Merit Scholarship and Study Grant holders. There were some very insightful responses regarding student hardship from both the 1st year holders (from rural and financially disadvantaged backgrounds) and the 3rd year holders (from financially disadvantaged backgrounds). Forthright responses were also provided in many of the inaugural 2004 Commonwealth Learning Scholarship (CLS) applications.

Such responses conveyed levels of disadvantage students experienced. Such experiences included not being able to afford to buy food, not being able to afford to travel to university for class, not being able to afford to have any heating at home, and not even having the loose coins to make photocopies of materials and chapters of books the students couldn't afford to buy. It was after receiving responses to this survey and further similar comments on the CLS application forms that an interest in the depth and prevalence of these types of disadvantage was developed by the researcher

There has been little research conducted about equity scholarships administered to undergraduate students. Therefore there is little knowledge about the tangible benefits, if any, that students experience from receiving such scholarships. There is, however an abundance of research showing that students from rural backgrounds and students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds are under-represented in higher education.

This abundance of research regarding these cohorts of students, also offers reasons for their under-representation. The reasons include: students from rural backgrounds lack access to resources and knowledge about what to do post secondary school (see Alloway et al. 2004; James et al. 1999; Kilpatrick and Abbott-Chapman 2002); students in financial need are reluctant to take on such a debt when already faced with financial difficulty to undertake study (The Senate 2004: 170). There are costs associated with relocating for rural students, so the perceived high costs of living while studying at university as well as the HECS debt, act as a significant deterrent to these under-represented students. This is further compounded for financially disadvantaged students from rural backgrounds. The digital divide (referring to those with access to information technology and those without) that is being created in society, is also negatively impacting upon students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds.

As increasing numbers of students from under represented groups are encouraged to accept and take up equity based scholarships, it is likely that they will in turn require additional support from universities to enable them to complete their course of study successfully. Therefore, it is important to gain an insight into the impact that equity scholarships have on disadvantaged students.

Method of Research

In order to determine what benefits, if any, students gain from receiving equity scholarships, Equity Scholarship and Commonwealth Learning Scholarship holders at Swinburne were targeted and invited to participate in this research. The chosen method of survey instrument was a questionnaire, allowing students to contemplate, answer and complete the series of questions in their own time.

The written questionnaire was designed to seek an insight into three aspects of the students' life: the students' financial situations prior to studying at university; the students' financial situations once at university but prior to becoming part of the Equity Scholarships Program; and the students' financial situations once a part of the Equity Scholarships Program at Swinburne. Similar questions were asked for each of these times. Those awarded an equity scholarship in their first year of university were able to leave out the second section about once they were at university but prior to receiving a scholarship. The questions were derived from previous students' claims to financial

disadvantage at Swinburne in their applications for the Equity Scholarships Program and Commonwealth Learning Scholarships Program.

The number of awards given out in the Equity Scholarship Program and the Commonwealth Learning Scholarships from 2002 – 2005 exceed 200. The number of students invited to participate in this research (taking into account that some students have received multiple awards) number 140. Of this 140 invitations, 38% (n = 53) completed and returned the questionnaire.

Research findings

The majority of respondents, whether from a rural background or metropolitan background, had needed to work and to save to be able to afford to attend university. This suggests students knew that they would require their own means of finance to help support themselves through university. Reasons for this may include realising they would require upfront payments to assist with relocation expenses, or knowing they would need a supplement to their government benefit entitlement.

Thirty two (32%) of students or their families had needed to borrow money to enable the respondent to attend university, a higher percentage of these being students from a rural background. The additional costs of relocating to Melbourne were likely to have played a large role in the need for students from rural backgrounds to borrow money to afford to go to university. It also indicates that upfront cash appears to be of essence for many students attending university.

Students from rural backgrounds often experience additional disadvantage, both emotional and financial. The research found that almost all rural students had experienced at least some stress in moving away from their social networks, and were at least somewhat surprised at the high cost of living. All students reported experiencing financial strain on themselves or their family upon moving to Melbourne

Impact of scholarship

Prior to receiving scholarship 88.5% of all respondents said they had to work to help pay for study and living costs. Once in receipt of a scholarship 49.1% said they did not have to be engaged in paid work as much. It appears the scholarships are giving students the ability to not have to work as much, allowing the students to concentrate more fully on their studies.

Prior to receiving a scholarship 30% of students could not afford their textbooks and course related materials most of the time. Once in receipt of a scholarship, only 5.7% could still not afford textbooks most of the time.

The greatest benefit of the scholarship was reducing financial strain and providing a better quality of life. All students from a rural background had access to a computer at home once in receipt of a scholarship. Importantly, the numbers of students who had considered deferring and/or discontinuing their course for financial reasons decreased from 57.7% prior to receiving scholarship to 3.8% once in receipt of scholarship. This suggests the scholarships have had an impact on the students' financial situations, and have enabled them to continue their studies.

Students were specifically asked if they felt the scholarship had had an impact on their studying and or living situation. Eighty seven (87%) of students said the scholarship had helped improve their living / studying situation most of the time.

The analysis suggests that scholarships appear to be assisting students to remain in their courses, to perform better at their studies, particularly through greater access to technology and study related materials, and at the same time, these scholarships are providing a benefit to institutions through increased retention rates. This latter indication of a link with better retention figures is important and will warrant further investigation. The study demonstrates that the considerable work load that many institutions have been involved in while developing scholarships programs, is having positive results for students and that students themselves do appreciate the awards.

References

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INSTITUTIONAL EQUITY-BASED SCHOLARSHIPS

“A Snapshot”

To gain a snapshot we requested the following:

1. What equity category institutional scholarships/grants does your institution offer?
2. Does your institution have a monitoring process of these scholarship holders? If so, what practices do you have in place to support, develop, mentor and keep in touch?
3. Does your institution provide feedback forms to scholarship holders? If so, what sort of responses do you get? Perhaps include for us a copy of a report.
4. Are your equity-based scholarships part of an equity unit or are they part of the scholarship office for the institution? How well do you think this works?
5. Do you have any comments to make from an institutional perspective about the impact of scholarships on equity students?

With thanks to our colleagues for the responses:

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INSTITUTIONAL EQUITY-BASED SCHOLARSHIPS

“A Snapshot”

September 2005

Institution	Institutional Equity-based Scholarships (No. annually)	Monitoring Process	Feedback	Equity Unit or Scholarships Office	Impact on	
					Student	Institution
Swinburne	7 x \$3,000 1 x \$10,000 5 x \$2,000 (3 rd year) Study Abroad (5-7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Provide a 'drop in' service ○ Monitor results ○ Use awardees as leaders, ambassadors ○ Provide bookshop vouchers ○ Help buy computers, printers. 	Survey students – Annually. Received unsolicited numerous letter of thanks, appreciation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ No scholarships office. (CLS and institution-based) in Equity Office within Student Services. ○ A University Scholarships Committee is being organised with a strong academic focus. 	Very valuable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Major impact on workload – inadequate staffing resources. ○ Greater awareness of scholarships within Institution – eg. Marketing, recruitment and access, Faculties.
Victoria University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 5 fee waivers (Temporary Humanitarian Visas) ○ 475 Access Scholarships of \$1,000 each ○ TAFE – 2 years duration ○ Year 12 West Ring (50) ○ Students with Dependent Children (10) ○ > 21 years Returning To Study (30) 	No. Advise students of student support services available.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ No. Under development. ○ Have just completed a survey with Equity and Social Justice Office. Will present findings at this conference. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Scholarships Office now in Student Services. Broad brief to liaise with Equity, Marketing, Prospective Students, Admissions, etc. ○ Major benefit: coordinate the whole range of scholarships. One source of enquiry for students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Anecdotal. Improved grades ○ Less hours needed in paid work ○ Lots of positive comments from students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Concerned about rapid growth in administrative work load ○ Current issue - need strategies to improve scholarship benefits for indigenous students.

Institution	Equity-based Scholarships (No.)	Monitoring Process	Feedback	Equity Unit or Scholarships Office	Impact on	
					Student	Institution
Australian Catholic University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o 9 equity bursaries X 1,000 for 1 year only. 8 of these are funded by ACU, 1 x outside donor o 1 Faculty Equity Scholarship. o A number of small loans – may become bursaries. 	<p>No – because of one-year nature. No for CLS – no time to manage.</p>	<p>No – lack of time so far. Work load too heavy.</p>	<p>Equity Office for Institutional and Equity-based and CLS.</p> <p>ACU has no scholarship office yet.</p>	<p>Anecdotal – both beneficial for students. Some withdraw soon after getting them.</p>	<p>Considerable impact on Equity Office – only a little bit of casual staffing.</p>
University of Tasmania	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o <i>Tasmania Access Bursaries:</i> 120 x \$1,000 – 1year University total: \$120,000 per annum (incl. \$10,000 from an endowment) o <i>West North-West Bursary Program:</i> \$2,500 - \$3,000 mostly for 4 years (15) o <i>Premier of Tasmania Bursaries:</i> \$4,000 per year o Endowments increasing. o Total of \$2.1m in "Access" scholarships. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Scholarships Office monitors results each semester o Failing to keep pace. Need better equity support resources o On-going systematic support needed. A lot of students falling through the cracks. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o No – not yet o Would like more discussion on possibilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Tasmania Scholarships Office manages the Tasmania Scholarships Program. o In addition to Equity and CLS UTAS has 250 odd academic Scholarships. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Growth in awards very positively received. o Hold a presentation of certificates. Very positive influence on students and staff. 	<p>Monitoring scholarships and remediation etc. is an area where the University is not keeping apace.</p> <p>Immediate action required by Commonwealth and University to better resource area.</p> <p>Students who fail subjects a worry.</p>
Latrobe University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o <i>Study Support Scholarships</i> – commencing students only - \$3,000 per year for duration of course. 90 awarded. o Indigenous - \$5,000 per year for duration of course (10) 	<p>Scholarship Unit responsible for this. Equity and Access Unit consulted about special cases: going part-time etc.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Not at present. Looking at this. o Survey to be undertaken this year. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Scholarships Office now established. . Close liaison continues with Equity and Access. o Equity Selection Committee established. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o High demand for scholarships, eg. in 2004, 400 applications for 212 CLS o >700 applications received in 2005 	<p>Will look at providing computers – recycled at no charge for 2006.</p>

Institution	Equity-based Scholarships (No.)	Monitoring Process	Feedback	Equity Unit or Scholarships Office	Impact on	
					Student	Institution
Queensland University of Technology	Low income students. A few for Indigenous. Some merit-based only. Details at http://www.equity.qut.edu.au/programs/forstudents/financial/	Only as required by CLS for CLS. Starting to track impact in systematic way. Survey compiled for 2005.	No.	All equity-based scholarships including CLS administered by Equity section.	Not yet – anecdotal – very helpful – relieve stress, allow more time to study. Hope to prove this with data.	
University of Southern Queensland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o <i>Equity Scholarships</i>: 50 in 2005, \$3,000 total 1 x \$2,000, 1 x \$1,000 over two years. <i>LBOTE, Indigenous, Rural</i> o <i>USQ Wide: Distance Education</i>: 16 scholarships – total of \$1,000. o <i>Indigenous Student Scholarships</i>: 3 - \$2,000 per year for duration of academic program (\$6,000 or \$8,000 for 3 or 4 year program) o <i>Year 12 Student</i>: 20x\$2,000 per year. 	Reviewed at payment time.	Not in a formal way.	In 2005 a Student Equity Office has been established (under Careers Employment & Equity section of Student Services)	Informal advice – highly beneficial to students' success and retention.	No formalised research yet into impact.