

MEDIA RELEASE

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Is there any good news in higher education?

It would seem that the Australian education sector is in the spotlight almost constantly of late. Unfortunately not all of the attention has been positive. Barely a day seems to go by without the performance of our educational institutions and the quality of the education they offer being critiqued and even attacked.

Completely eclipsing any other education related issue is the battering of the reputation of our education system arising from the recent spate of horror stories experienced by international tertiary students. Assaults on public transport, lack of student support, abuse of the skilled migration process, collapsing private institutions, substandard course delivery and the list goes on. All tarnishing the quality of an Australian education, both here and abroad. All detracting from some of the good news.

And there has been good news that unfortunately can't seem to rise above the bad. One particularly bright light on the horizon is the Government initiative to improve access to higher education for young people who otherwise would not contemplate going to university. In June Education Minister Julia Gillard announced new low socio-economic participation targets that Australian universities will have to meet by 2020. The Government expects that by 2020, 20% of university enrolments will be by students from low socio-economic backgrounds. The announcement of the participation quotas has been received with caution and perhaps skepticism by some universities. That's hardly surprising given the vast differences that exist from university to university and state to state.

So how do Australian universities fare and compare when it comes to providing access and equity to disadvantaged students? We posed this question to the publishers of the recently released 2010 edition of *The Good Universities Guide*.

'At present the burden of reaching the target falls heavily upon the shoulders of metropolitan universities' says Davorin Vrdoljak, General Manager for Publishing with *The Good Universities Guide*. 'For example, five of the most elite Australian universities are currently enrolling under 10% of students from a low socio-economic segment. Where as, regional universities enrol on average 25%. This indicates that metropolitan universities have a long way to go in meeting the Government's expectations.'

According to the 2010 *Guide*, there are currently 14 universities above this 20% threshold, although only two are located in metropolitan areas – Victoria University and the University of Western Sydney. The overall national average for participation by students from the low socio-economic backgrounds is currently 15.7%.

'The regional universities are really taking the lead on this one' says Davorin Vrdoljak, 'In fact the top three institutions for enrolling from low socio-economic background as are actually CQUniversity, University of Tasmania and the University of Southern Queensland. It will be interesting to see how quickly Australian universities are able to respond to the Government's call for an increased focus on access and equity.'

How did the ACT perform?

The Good Universities Guide compares universities on a number of characteristics when it comes to access and equity. These include Cultural Diversity, Indigenous Participation and Gender Balance. Within the ACT, ACU and The University of Canberra received 4 stars for *Access by Equity Group*, a measure of the proportion of commencing students from the 6 key equity groups, (low socio-economic status being one). ACU also received 5 stars for *Indigenous Participation* and is amongst the top 20% of institutes enrolling students on the grounds of credit for TAFE studies, (5 stars, *Proportion Given Credit for TAFE*).

However there are many aspects to choosing a university, undoubtedly different for each student wanting to obtain a bachelor degree. For the seventh successive year, ANU has achieved the top rating (5 stars) for *Graduate Starting Salaries* and was outstanding in the key fields of Accounting, Business and Management and Law with starting salaries at \$47 242, \$50 363 and \$52 549

respectively. Interestingly, the starting salary for those graduating from a Humanities and Social Sciences degree at ANU were among the best in Australia (\$47 686) for this field, second only to the University Wollongong (\$50 018). The University of Canberra also fared well within the Accounting and Communications fields with starting salaries at \$46 525 and \$46 233 respectively, both well above the national average.

In other areas, the University of Canberra has once again achieved 5 stars for the proportion of its graduates finding full-time work – the highest rating of the three ACT based institutions. ANU is among the countries top 20% of institutions for *Student-Staff Ratio*, *Student Demand* and *Overall Student Satisfaction* – 5 stars for each category. “Both ANU and Canberra have retained high ratings within these categories over consecutive years confirming that the standard at these institutes is well above the national average” said Ross White of *The Good Universities Guide*. “Graduates can look forward to great outcomes from each of the three ACT institutions, be it well paid employment or the opportunity to further their academic career” he added.

	ANU	Canberra	ACU
Access and Equity	★★★	★★★★	★★★★
Indigenous Participations	★★★	★★★	★★★★★
Graduate Starting Salaries	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★
Positive outcomes	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★
Research Grants	★★★★★	★★	★
Entry Flexibility	★★	★★★★	★★★
Cultural Diversity	★★★★	★★★	★★★★
TAFE Credits	★★	★★★★	★★★★★
Student-Staff Ratio	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★
Student Demand	★★★★★	★	★★★★
Overall Student Satisfaction	★★★★★	★	★★★

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Book orders *The Good Universities Guide* will be available to the public through newsagents and online at www.isubscribe.com.au/hobsons or by contacting Hobsons on Freecall 1800 682 133 from 10th August, 2009.