

## 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 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.'

### **Victorian universities: *Equity, diversity, income and outcomes!***

Victorian universities, whilst being amongst the nations biggest and most diverse by student population remain a conspicuous absence from the 5 star rating for *Access by Equity Group*. Ballarat, Deakin, LaTrobe, Monash and RMIT all achieved an impressive 4 stars for *Access by Equity Group* but are consistently outshone by an interstate cohort who, on the whole represent a more regional focus than Victoria's Melbourne-centric universities.

Victorian universities may not be counted amongst the countries *most* accessible for equity groups however Victoria is *the place to be* for international students. Deakin, Melbourne, Monash, RMIT, Swinburne and VU are amongst the nations largest enrollers of international students with LaTrobe not far behind. Ross White, Data Coordinator for Hobsons explains,

*"Our data indicates roughly 35% of all international, undergraduate students in Australia are enrolled in a Victorian university. This shines through in the Cultural Diversity rating which indicates Victorian campuses are some of the most multi-cultural in the country."*

Equity and diversity aside, Victorian universities have been among the most successful at generating income independently of the more usual government streams of revenue - an encouraging statistic given some uncertain economic times, both now and ahead. This counts double for Victoria's G8 representatives, Melbourne and Monash who are among the nations highest earners for research.

Victorian graduates generally report solid rates of employment – impressive given their sheer number and the diversity of the fields of study from which they graduate. Whilst Deakin and Swinburne fare less well overall for employment, at field of study level Swinburne’s Computing and IT graduates and Deakin’s Accounting graduates on average enjoy higher rates of employment than like graduates from other universities.

Teaching quality yields mixed reviews from Victorian graduates. Despite a comparatively poor student-staff ratio, Ballarat students reported excellent teaching quality. Conversely, Melbourne’s excellent staff to student ratio brought equal measures of criticism from its graduates – two stars for teaching quality. More student generated reviews and ratings of Victorian universities can be found at [www.rateyouruni.com.au](http://www.rateyouruni.com.au)

	<b>VERY BIG</b>	<b>BIG</b>	<b>AVERAGE</b>
Number of Higher Education Students	Deakin, Melbourne, Monash, RMIT	LaTrobe, Swinburne, VU	Ballarat
Number of students from abroad	Deakin, Melbourne, Monash, RMIT, Swinburne, VU	LaTrobe	Ballarat
<i>Equity / Diversity</i>	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★
Access by Equity Group		Ballarat, Deakin, LaTrobe, Monash, RMIT	Swinburne, VU
Cultural Diversity	Monash, RMIT, VU	Ballarat, Deakin, Melbourne, Swinburne	LaTrobe
<i>Income</i>	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★
Research Grants	Melbourne, Monash		Deakin, LaTrobe, RMIT, Swinburne
Research Intensity	Melbourne	Monash	RMIT, Swinburne
Non-Government earnings	Ballarat, Melbourne, Swinburne	Deakin Monash, RMIT,	ACU, LaTrobe
<i>Experience/ Outcomes</i>	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★
Getting a full time job		Ballarat, Melbourne, Monash	LaTrobe, RMIT
Student–Staff Ratio	Melbourne	ACU, Monash	LaTrobe, RMIT
Teaching quality	Ballarat	Swinburne	Monash

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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](http://www.isubscribe.com.au/hobsons) or by contacting Hobsons on Freecall 1800 682 133 from 10<sup>th</sup> August, 2009.