

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.'

Students' needs met by WA Universities

When it comes to the topical issue of access and equity, Western Australian universities perform better than other universities in any other State or Territory, across all six equity indicators. However, there are many aspects to choosing a university, undoubtedly different for each student wanting to obtain a bachelor degree. Perhaps it is the quality of teaching, research reputation or graduate outcomes that determine their decision. Whichever, there are universities in WA that deliver according to each of these criteria, and in spades!

In terms of students' experiences of their tertiary education, all WA universities except Curtin rate well above the national average. And while Curtin graduates might not be enamoured by their educational experience, employment prospects are good and they command good starting salaries. According to Richard Evered, Ratings Manager at the *Guides*, "Graduates in Computing and IT, Engineering and technology, Health services, Rehabilitation and Science all earn salaries above the national average. It is a similar story for UWA, whose graduates in all the above fields as well as Economics, Humanities and Law also earn above the national average."

For ECU all of their Nursing and Environmental graduates found full-time employment while at Notre Dame all their Accounting, Education, Humanities and Rehabilitation graduates also found employment. At Curtin, all Pharmacy and Built environment students gained full-time work and at UWA all Dentistry students. For Murdoch their best results for employment were in Law (96%) and Business (93%).

Both Curtin and UWA fared very well in gaining research grants. “When research income is divided by research staff numbers to produce an income per staff member figure, Murdoch joins these two in achieving good results at or above the national average” said Richard Evered.

“Overall, prospective students, both domestic and international are well served by the choice of institutions in Western Australia,” he added

	Curtin	ECU	Murdoch	Notre Dame	UWA
Access by Equity Groups	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★★★★
Teaching Quality	★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Generic Skills	★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Overall Satisfaction	★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Starting Salaries	★★★★★	★	★★	★★★	★★★★★
Employment Prospects	★★★	★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Positive Graduate Outcomes	★★	★★★	★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Entry Flexibility	★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★
International Enrolments	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★★★★
Research Grants	★★★★★	★	★★	★	★★★★★
Research Intensity	★★★	★	★★★★★	★	★★★★★
Student-Staff Ratios	★★★	★	★★★	n/a	★★★★★
Cultural Diversity	★★★★★	★★★	★★	n/a	★★★
Indigenous Participation	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★★

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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.