

Abstract Template

TITLE: At the margins: which students are excluded from the Australian higher education equity framework?

AUTHOR: Andrew Harvey

AFFILIATION: La Trobe

In 1990, the Australian Government established a framework for student equity in higher education, *A Fair Chance for All*. The Framework declared that all Australians should have the opportunity to participate successfully in higher education, and that this objective could be met by ‘changing the balance of the student population to reflect more closely the composition of society as a whole.’ (AFCFA 1990: 2). *A Fair Chance for All* identified six under-represented groups for policy priority: people from low socioeconomic backgrounds; Indigenous Australians; people from regional and remote areas; people with disabilities; people from non-English speaking backgrounds; and women in non-traditional fields of education. Ambitious participation targets were established for each group, and national and institutional strategies were outlined to help reach these targets.

The authors of the Framework understood the difficulties of defining and differentiating groups of disadvantage, and acknowledged concern about the affixing of labels to individuals. The six targeted groups were nevertheless adopted on the grounds of practicality, strategic importance, and administrative ease, in the quest to ensure a more representative higher education sector.

This paper examines cohorts that are excluded by, or marginalised within, the Framework. In particular, the plight of people from out-of-home care backgrounds and refugee backgrounds is considered. The paper also investigates the effects of multiple and compound disadvantage, and the capacity of the Framework to manage and calibrate such disadvantage. Finally, a comparison is made between categorical and contextual definitions of disadvantage. The paper considers the ongoing importance of class and regionality in higher education, but also the risks of reification of identities.