Reading between Lines and Going Beyond the Data – Towards a Qualitative Outlook for Quantitative Findings: A Second Reading of the Report 'Completing University in a Growing Sector: Is Equity an Issue?'

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The report 'Completing university in a growing sector: Is equity an issue? (Edwards & McMillan, 2015) is the most comprehensive analysis till date that elicits key trends and reasons for the completion or attrition of equity groups in Australian higher education. In the current context of overall increase in enrolment rates of students of all backgrounds, either due to the widening participation agenda or the demand driven environment it is important to understand which of the student cohorts have better chances of completion and which groups may face impediments (p.1). This focus is further pertinent because there is evidence that on successful completion of university, the employment and income prospects are similar for equity groups as well as their better off counterparts (Edwards & Coates, 2011). Although the report has specific focus on the key equity groups, vis-à-vis students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, non-metropolitan students and Indigenous students, this paper aims to provide a deeper analysis of the case of Indigenous students.

Indigenous students hold a special place in the context of and discourse about Australian higher education. They constitute students from both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. This cohort is special in that this is the only equity group identified as such based on their racial heritage. Furthermore, they are included on the sole basis of self-identification and this leaves the potential many Indigenous students remaining camouflaged in the non-identified or non-identifiable groups.

This report, like almost every other similar report in the past, does not consider the linguistic backgrounds as an identity marker to demarcate student cohorts. Therefore, in this report the outcomes have not been examined against the home language/s spoken by the students. This may be consistent with the traditional practices yet it continues to make the incorrect assumption that all domestic higher education students are of the 'mainstream' monolingual Anglophone background and therefore they all must be speaking Standard Australian English as their first language at home.

This linguistic non-identification is an issue especially given that there is a considerable and increasing number of Australians from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds entering school, vocational or higher education sectors. This is more so for the Indigenous students since there is a large number of them who speak their heritage language, a

creole or Aboriginal English as their first language. These students are from the English as and Additional Language or Dialect (EALD) backgrounds and therefore this paper will consider the report from this missing perspective.

The understanding of the characteristics and factors linked to lower completion of students from equity groups is critical to inform future retention policies for these groups at institutional as well as at national levels. This is even more pertinent for Indigenous students as many of them would have a multi-equity group membership and Indigenous students from an EALD background emerge as the most marginalised and disadvantaged among all other groups.

At the national level, other student category markers like students with low (below 60) Australian Tertiary Admission Ranks (ATAR), part-time students, students who study externally, students in STEM and Agriculture and Environment studies, students from the Regional University Network, students aged 25 and over and males have been identified by the report as additional risk factors.

Although the report identifies low SES, non-metropolitan and Indigenous students as its key focus the case of EALD Indigenous students warrants a much deeper analysis and this paper aims to dig deeper to elicit factors that have not been considered before and these factors could have significant impact on the participation and completion rates which in turn remain detrimental to the aims and aspirations of achieving parity and equity in higher education. Past data indicates that a male EALD Indigenous student with a below 60 ATAR, aged 25 or above at an institution in the Regional University Network, studying externally as a part-time student, studying STEM, agriculture or environment studies is almost certain to fail to complete their studies.

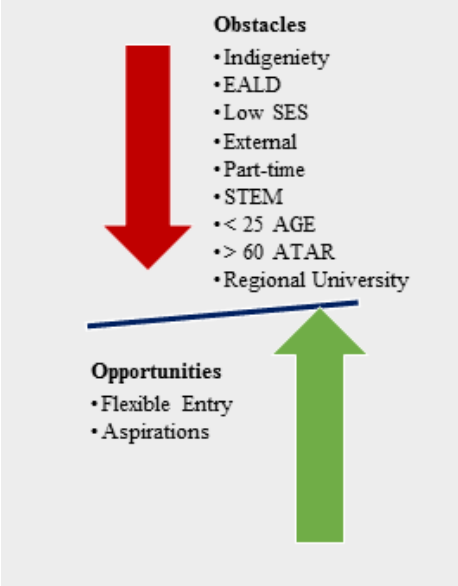

Figure 1. Obstacles Outweigh Opportunities for Indigenous Australians in Higher Education

A consideration of the widening participation agenda and the higher education participation and partnership program initiatives will concur that the Indigenous students commencing university education would have already proven their aspirations and would have relied on their perseverance to have gone past the significant milestone of securing a place to study at the university. Yet, it could be deducted from the analysis in the report as well from other known facts and factors regarding Indigenous Australians that they are being set up for failure by the sheer weight of systemic impediments.

Indigenous students entering university would have already transcended traditional barriers to reach such an aspirational and life changing goal. However, university access is only the first phase of their attempt to attain equity in higher education. Such an effort can be deemed successful only if they are also able to successfully complete their university education. Therefore, let us now consider the completion rates of Indigenous students.

The authors report that only 47% Indigenous students attain a successful course completion. What is of greater concern is the fact that over 'one in five Indigenous students in this cohort had dropped out of university before their second year' (p. v). Among them there could be many of those Indigenous who reach universities through the widening participation and flexible pathways options and could have availed aspirational support as envisaged in various HEPP projects.

Although these students have broken many barriers and achieved a momentous milestone, they do not last at the university beyond their first year. Moreover, the impact of this failure does not limit to just the increase in the attrition rates of a university, it could have scarred the self-respect and self-confidence of the 'failed' student and they may blame themselves to have 'failed' their people and community. The direct implications along with the psychological and attitudinal impacts of Indigenous student failure in higher education need to be investigated separately and this is beyond the scope of the current discussion.

The complexity of the context of Indigenous higher education and the essentiality of its success to enable progress toward social equity and educational parity necessitates a comprehensive understanding of the factors that impede educational progress of these students once they commence university education.

A closer scrutiny of the report confirms that it identifies many significance trends based on the University Experience Survey 2014 and highlights the correlation between the grades (self-declared) achieved by the students and them considering leaving the university. The tendency to discontinue studies was inversely proportional to higher academic achievements (2014 UES National Report, p. 33). However, many complex issues seem to have been clubbed under umbrella terms, understandably perhaps

because of the broader scope of the report. There seems to be practical and logical limitations in getting deeper into some of the parameters or influential elements reported in the document.

To its credit, the report has been forthright that there is 'the potential for further exploration of higher education completion at an even finer level of detail to enhance understanding of factors impacting retention and outcomes' (p. vi). However, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the nature and the extent of factors responsible for the alarming dropout rates of Indigenous students, an insight into some of the key areas of their student experience vis-à-vis their pre-entry preparations, chosen entry pathways, units of enrolment, completion – successful or otherwise – of the units enrolled and indeed their linguistic backgrounds is essential. This significance of such an understanding is that it will pave way for potential policies and practices to overcome and even pre-empt such debilitating impediments.

The report acknowledges and highlights the existence of the multiple at-risk groups and the most complex of them is the cohort of Indigenous students from remote or regional Australia, who are non-school leavers, aged over 25, from low SES backgrounds and who do not speak Standard Australian English at home.

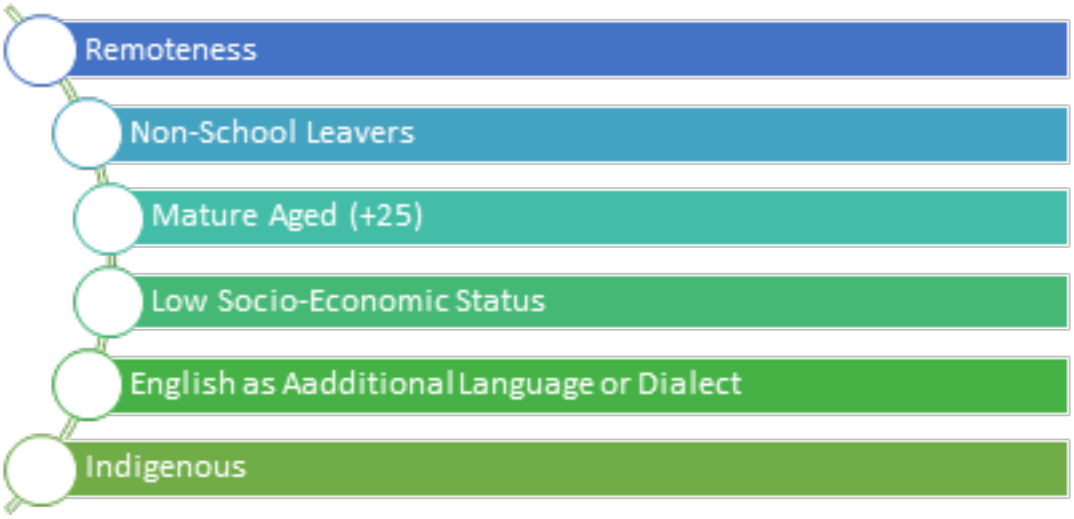

Figure 2. Equity Groups in Australian Higher Education

In addition, 'studying part-time or externally, or having a low ATAR' (Edward & McMillan, 2015 p. vi) are the other characteristics of student enrolment or demography found associated with lower university completion. Increased membership of equity groups results in proportionate increase in the disadvantage and is inversely proportionate to their completion rates. The University Experience Survey (UES) 2013 did not present any identifiable variation between the experiences of the equity groups and the others in the areas of the quality of teaching, availability of resources and student engagement.

A consideration of the later UES (2014) also confirms this lack of identifiable relationship between lower completion and any negative student experience suggesting that what is provided at and by the university is equitable and it is what a student brings to the university, in particular their socio-cultural and linguistic characteristics, that make the difference in their engagement and completion.

It also means that redressal of the issues around engagement and completion can be achieved only by providing targeted interventions at the university. In other words, equal amount of support is not sufficient to overcome the pre-existing disparities between equity groups and non-equity groups and that there should to be additional support frameworks in place for the equity groups once they arrive at the university.

The report also advocates for further research on macro and micro levels. At a macro level, equity groups' post-university progressions should be tracked and understood while at a micro level a 'finer grain' analysis is required of the data pertaining to small subgroups (p. vi). The analysis of graduate outcomes of equity groups on the lines of the 'Graduate Destination Survey, the Graduate Pathways Survey and the Beyond Graduation Survey' (p. vi). Given that there are indicative inferences that university completions enable the erosion of disadvantages of the equity groups on successful university completions, a detailed evaluation of multiple equity groups will provide foresight into potential support mechanisms to be installed at universities (p. vi). Such an analysis is therefore very significant for the efforts to achieve Indigenous parity in higher education and their post-university outcomes as it would enable informed targeted interventions to redress the inherent disadvantages of equity students.

If barriers to university access are being reduced by widening enrolment policies, and graduate employment outcomes are not notably impacted by equity-group background, then the next issue to address is ensuring that progression through university is not compromised by socioeconomic status, region or Indigeneity (Edwards & McMillan, p, 1, 2015)'. The authors of the report thus establish the need for a 'detailed baseline data' to make sense of the rate and the direction of university progression achieved by respective equity groups.

The wave of growth in university enrolment has been rode by students from all sections. If there was exponential growth from 2009 to 2013, a growth of 22% (Kemp & Norton, 2014, p.3), the growth steadied in the next two years (DET, 2015B). The growth in the initial four years was the largest since the 1980s (Edwards & Van der Brugge, 2012a). It is also significant that 'the increase in enrolments of students from equity groups has simply kept pace with the overall growth in enrolments' (Edwards & McMillan 2015, p.2). Once these students are successfully enrolled in universities, the report rightly turns its focus on 'to an ongoing dialogue about support, retention and completion' (p.2).

The basis of this report is the Commonwealth administrative database of undergraduate students since 2005 wherein the students' progress can be tracked by their Commonwealth Higher Education Student Support Number (CHESSN). In limited ways, this database has been analysed and reported initially by Lomax-Smith, Watson, & Webster (2011) in the *Higher Education Base Funding Review* and later by Kemp and Norton (2014) in their *Review of the Demand Driven Funding System.* However, neither of them had the outcomes of equity groups as their focus (Edwards & McMillan 2015). As indicated by Edwards and McMillan (2015) there have also been other studies about university completion including the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth (ILSAY) (Marks, 2007; McMillan, 2005, 2011).

Domestic undergraduate enrolment data from 2009 – 2012 (Kemp & Norton, 2014) indicates a dramatic growth of 25% in Indigenous enrolments, 22.2% in enrolment rates of students from low SES backgrounds and 16.3% growth in non-metro students. Yet when the share of overall enrolments is considered the growth margin differs significantly between Indigenous (0.1% change) and low SES students (0.9% change) or in other words, Indigenous student numbers grew from 7551 to 9441 an increase of only 1890 students.

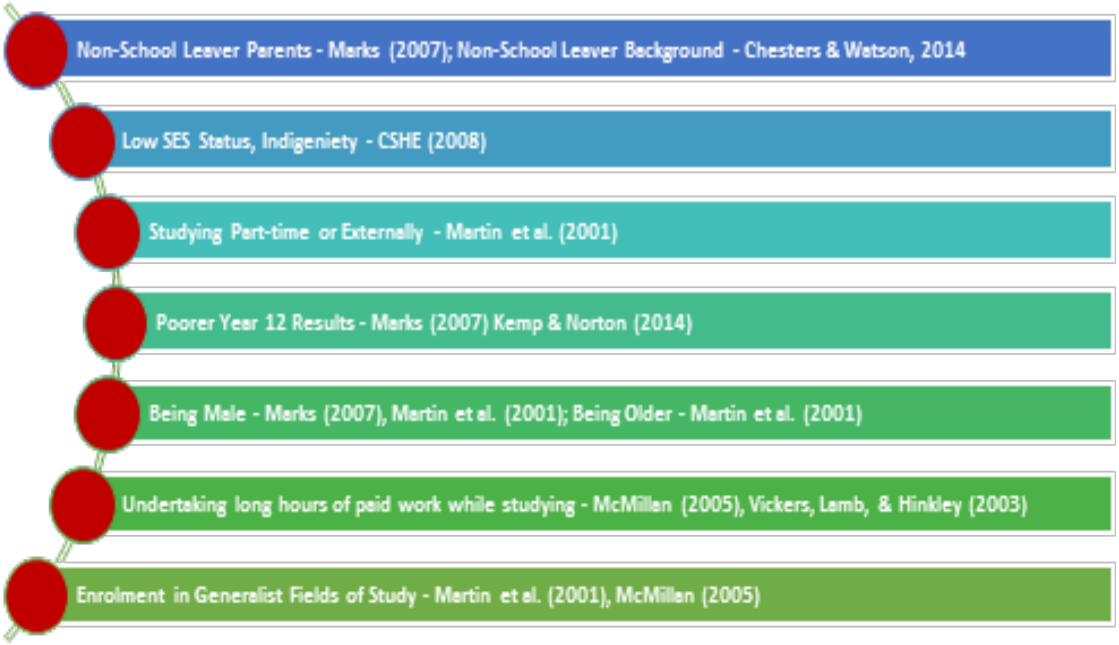

Figure 3. Indicators of Poorer University Participation and Completion

The report reiterates the need for further and closer scrutiny of data to make better sense of the real factors impacting negatively the university experience of equity groups and thus contributing to the significant rate of attrition. Therefore, to enable an earnest and sufficiently elaborate investigation of factors contributing to the attrition this paper will focus on the worst off and the most disadvantaged Indigenous student cohort who also could also have multiple equity group memberships.

Indigeneity remains the single significant and recurring factor that remains associated with the worst of all performances both in the case of enrolments and completions. The higher education student population had only 1.1 per cent Indigenous representation as per the 2011 data ((Edwards & Van der Brugge, 2012a) while their completion rate was the lowest at 46.7 per cent. This cohort experienced over 20% drop out rates before their second year and another 25% of them dropped out sometime after the first year. The most worrisome trend of all the high number of Indigenous students who had considered or who still consider leaving the university at some point in time. Thus, the difference of outcomes between Indigenous students and their non-Indigenous counterparts remained consistently substantial though out the report.

While lamenting the far below par enrolment and completion outcomes of Indigenous students in higher education, Edwards & McMillan (2015) also notes that the small number of these students and potential issues around accuracy and confidentiality curtails the potential to analyse the data to identify potential indicators of impediments and appropriate support to this group of potentially multi-equity group members. Yet there are some overarching trends identified like the likelihood of the Indigenous student cohort being 'older, part-time, regional or remote, and low SES, all variable associated with lower completion rates' (p. 22) and together with other analysis by the Department of Education reinforces that Indigeneity as a strong factor associated with higher attrition rates.

In a nutshell, approximately 47% Indigenous students achieved completion as against 74% of the non-Indigenous groups, a whopping 20.4% of Indigenous students never returned after their first year which is 2 ½ times worse than their counterparts. Another 25% (against 13.9% of others) Indigenous students dropped out some time after their first year at university and eight per cent Indigenous students have been prolonging their completion even after 9 years as against on 4.2 percent of other students. Considering the compounding impact of belonging to more than one of the equity groups discussed above many Indigenous students remain severely disadvantaged and adversely affected in higher education because many of these students could be aged over 25, belonging to low SES and coming from regional or remote areas.

These are significant findings and substantial to understand Australian university student progression. Yet, as envisaged by the report, it also raises more questions than answers about the components of English and academic language proficiency, their roles and implications for students who do not speak SAE as their home language. This question in particular is critical for the EALD Indigenous students given their well identified and evidenced multiple equity group membership and vulnerability to dropping out from the university.

It is therefore necessary to further examine the reasons for considering leaving university early to identify factors related to the linguistic backgrounds of students as well the (currently nonnegotiable) medium of instruction. This observation will focus predominantly on the Indigenous students and will also remain conscious of the fact that there could be students from Indigenous backgrounds who have not identified themselves as such among the 'not-stated' category, whose size comes to 82% of the size of those with Indigenous status. This approach is also justified given that the other negative factors including low SES and geographical locations have similar impact on all.

Table 1. Identified Key Reasons for Indigenous Attrition

Reasons for Discontinuing	%	Further Consideration in the Case of EALD Indigenous
Workload difficulties	35.3	Could difficulties faced by these students with English language both in understanding study materials as well in articulating their understanding have made the 'workload' more daunting?
Study/life balance	33.2	Could these students be finding study more demanding than others, perhaps due to insufficient preparation and/or support including in terms of English/Academic language proficiency?
Personal reasons	27.2	Could these students be citing personal reason as an articulation of a lack of confidence in expressing and interacting in English? It has been noted that a lack of confidence in English leads to a diminished self-confidence for EALD Indigenous students.
Academic support	20.0	Could a great deal of this be related to insufficient support with the understanding study content and understanding and meeting assessment requirements? This is a major one given that one in five Indigenous students have identified this as a reason.
Academic exchange	10.2	Could this be impacted by a combination of difficulties in English/Academic language, self-confidence, foreign academic culture and a lack of sufficiently exposure to all these (alternate entry pathways could create such a situation)?

With 23.9% of Indigenous students considering early departure due to the reasons mentioned above along with the reality that 20.4% of Indigenous students never returned after the first year while a massive 25% of them dropped out sometime after their first year at university makes attrition the single major impediment in attaining educational parity for the most disadvantaged Australian student cohort. This severely undermines any positive change in enrolments as well the investment and efforts made in getting Indigenous students into a university. This guaranteed failure at the rate of 1:1 of Indigenous students commencing university education in Australia could also have damaging and long-lasting impact on the self-respect of the individual students, the prevalent family and community aspirations on which significant amounts have been spent in recent years through HEPP and related funding, the whole mechanism of widening participation agenda and the flexible pathway options provided by the universities.

It should also be noted here that the percentage of Indigenous students considering early departure have worsened since 2013 and as per the latest 2016 UES this stands at a severely dangerous level of 28% (QILT 2017). It is also interesting that in the same context, the international students who have a very large number from EALD backgrounds have the lowest threat of attrition at 14%. The pertinent question here is that if there could be a link between their pre-assessed English language requirements, well identified and wider English and academic language support and their personal

awareness about their English language proficiency, needs and challenges.

The most recent '*Factors Influencing University Student Satisfaction, Dropout and Academic Performance: An Australian Higher Education Equity Perspective'* (Li, & Carroll, 2017) is the latest in the genre that focuses on university experience, academic performance and attrition. Unfortunately, they remain an exercise in number crunching, perhaps because of the rigid boundaries set by the scope of these reports. Such reports remain statistical analysis and seem to lack a 'human touch'.

These reports have their purpose and place both in the academy as well in the domains of governance and public policy. However, there is no substitute for a quantitative, inclusive, respectful and humanely sensitive understanding of the real student experiences for the students who make it to the universities, and especially those who come from disadvantaged and marginalized groups, are fundamentally human beings.

The context of very complex Indigenous education has always been marred by systemically inflicted complications. The current surveys and assessments seem to have made some progress in appropriately zeroing in on Indigenous specific issues but they still leave a wider range of aspects untouched and indeed unnoticed. This could be seen as an extension of the invisibility of the impediments the Indigenous students face the invisibility as well of EALD Indigenous students as a linguistically diverse cohort (Koramannil, 2016). Given that there seems to be an increasing equality in terms of the university access, the participation and completion rates also need to be brought within similar parameters. This warrants some significant efforts and funding to understand the yet unknown and invisible factors that results in the significant letting down of the multi-disadvantaged Indigenous students where at present failure is guaranteed as much as their potential success. Only focussed and deliberate attempts to understand these veiled impediments will help later this awful equation.

Perhaps the acknowledgement and appreciation that higher education is fundamentally a human experience and it should not be restricted to mere numbers and rates would enable more sensitive inquisitions into the experiential aspect of learning at the universities. This is extremely critical for the most vulnerable sub-equity group of Indigenous students. Perhaps it is time to see them, talk and listen to them out. Perhaps it is time for every genuine researcher to learn to hear them and try to follow them to their real problems with consideration, empathy, and a respectful sensitivity. Only sensitive researchers with sensitive research can make genuine connections with sensitive human issues and only such genuine connections can pave the ways to connect problems with potential solutions.

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