

Discussion Paper: Measuring the Socio-economic Status of Higher Education Students

Response from Griffith University

Griffith University supports the proposal to revisit the validity and reliability of SES measures currently in use for equitable distribution of Government funds to overcome barriers to participation in higher education.

Given the variety of measures in use currently, Griffith supports also a move to a common measure of SES in the sector to address the significant underrepresentation of low SES students in higher education. This latter statistic is identified in a number of key government and other research reports, to the extent that Sinclair, Doughney and Palermo (2003:2) were moved to state “SES is not only a powerful predictor of who participates in higher education, but it governs the type of institution students will attend, what will be studied and at what level”.

The University commends the analysis in the paper of the advantages and disadvantages of various SES measures in current use, as well as potential measures, and welcomes the opportunity to comment on specific issues raised as follows:

1. **Reduction of size of the current geographic ascription of SES from postcode to census collection district (CDs):** The paper states that collection districts should be more accurate than postcodes because they are based on a smaller area of households. Griffith supports the use of CDs.
2. **Use of parents'/caregivers educational attainment and occupation:** Level of parental/caregiver educational attainment as an indicator of student SES has been used in a number of studies as has the use of parental/caregiver occupation level. The discussion paper also considers using parents' income collected by the Australian Taxation Office, which would require institutions to collect the tax file numbers of the students' parents/caregivers. As the paper acknowledges, however, there are a number of privacy and lack of knowledge issues to consider when requesting such data from students themselves. Universities do collect data from students on enrolment relating to a number of personal variables, but the associated reliability and sensitivity issues (including those related to students from non-traditional family structures, and the intrusiveness of collecting parental/caregiver data from students) must be considered when requesting such information. Griffith University supports, in principle, the collection of information from students on enrolment which can assist more equitable targeting of resources to widen access and participation rates of students from low SES backgrounds. This information, as indicated in the discussion paper, could also include data relating to schools attended by students. Any strategy which reduces duplication of existing databases should be supported.

In the Sinclair et al study mentioned above, the researchers used both geo area and individual student measures. Griffith supports the position that there is a need for a measure that can provide quantification of low SES students at the aggregation of an institution, as well as information at the level of the individual student pertaining to

individuals and their relevant family circumstances. This latter information is crucial for equity office staff and others engaged in assisting individual students in need, as well as providing additional information for a more robust, composite measure of student SES for allocation of funds to universities.

3. **Timing and phasing of new measure:** The University supports the concerns in the discussion paper relating to the issue of timing and phasing in of any new measure of student SES, and would support the potential interim measure for use in 2010 that is discussed on p. 12 of the paper. This interim measure is described in terms of the move from reliance on an aggregate postcode measure of SES to a measure based more on the individual circumstances of students with use of both Centrelink data and postcode measure of SES. The University also notes and supports the intention to capture mature students as well in this composite measure.
4. **SES Index:** It would be a laudable outcome to have a multi-dimensional measure of SES reflective of key contributing factors to educational disadvantage as is pre-empted on p. 13 of the paper. However, in the interim, for institutional level analyses and comparisons, area-based aggregates are useful and comparatively easy to use.

Reference

Sinclair, G., Doughney, J. and Palermo, J. (2003) Equity indicators: Measures of socio-economic status at an Australian university. *Journal of Institutional Research*, 12 (1): 1-16.