

Transcript

Student equity and success with The Hon. Verity Firth AM

SONAL SINGH: We will now move on to Verity Firth. Verity is the inaugural Vice President of Societal Impact, Equity and Engagement at UNSW. And she is here at UTS, and she will provide an overview from her perspective and also the challenges that universities face when implementing this. Over to you, Verity.

THE HON. VERITY FIRTH AM: I will be quick because I am aware of the time limits we have got. We don't have to cover everything because all the previous speakers have spoken to it. What Sonal wanted me to talk about today is funding and early offers. As already been mentioned, there is no process on funding.

What is needs-based funding? And I'm sure every practitioner online was what it is. But I want to give historical context, needs-based funding was first raised by the Gonski review in Australia. The reason why it was thought of was as most people online would know, Australia has a very segregated education system compared to the rest of the OECD.

We have heavy subsidy of non-government schools by the government, and what that means is the school leavers sector is segregated. We have a disproportionate number of schools with strong concentration of disadvantaged and we have a disproportionate number of schools with strong concentration. One of the things that Gonski discovered was a not just about the additional learning supports or additional well-being support or additional support that is needed for students from underrepresented backgrounds, it is also about the cumulative impacts to what was often called a high concentration of disadvantaged, the fact that the impact of having to teach high concentration of disadvantage was actually in and of itself and more expensive task.

When needs-based funding was first brought into Australia, it was really looking at how the cost would amplify where the school would have a higher concentration of equity cohorts, and the recommendations by Gonski was to ensure the schools with high concentrations of disadvantaged would have the funding they needed to beat the educational impact of a segregated system.

What the research showed us was in fact when you don't have mixed cohorts, when you don't have cohorts with a whole range of different kids with different capabilities with different cultural capacities, cultural support, all those sorts of things. Then in fact the concentration of disadvantage makes the whole support model more expensive to deliver. The interesting thing about applying needs-based funding in a higher education context is the context is not the same as it is with a schooling in Australia, and even at universities with the highest percentages of underrepresented



students do not have the same concentration of disadvantage compared to the disadvantaged schools being targeted in the system.

Having said that, it is still a good model and it is a good model because it recognises that funding needs to be provided for educational support explicitly, and that universities who are doing the heavy lifting in terms of helping Australia meet its participation targets should be rewarded for the effort. A big part of that reward should be money that explicitly support students in their learning and success. What I would say is we don't particularly want the government to follow its Gonski model with what is happening in schools, because it hasn't been implemented in schools yet. We want it to be implemented quicker to implement needs-based funding in higher education. And the other thing is a question that has been raised by many equity practitioners, is a needs-based funding going to replace HECS? How can we help the students and can we have appropriate accountability built back to the government to ensure that the money is going where it needs to go and also in terms of equity practitioners within the system, is it going to be a part of a larger student portfolio or student learning portfolios or will it still be provided equity portfolios within the University?

It might be different in different universities but it is a good one to us, because HECS funding does give it power. And the recommendations also recognises the delivery in regional and remote Australia that it needs additional loading. Again, this is positive and partly because it is our rural and regional universities doing the heavy lifting in terms of a number of equity cohort, particularly lower SES in rural and regional cohorts. And also in the least position to be able to afford that, the least number of research funding and the least number of international students to provide the buffer zones that investors are currently funded in Australia. And of course there will provide a bonus to meet the completion target.

It is positive and it is imported it is not just about access. It is also about success and it is also about completion. All of us in the room knows that not everything is always related to success, when you get employment outcomes, when you finish a degree. My confidence in the academic space or my confidence in gaining knowledge and experience.

But it is important to make sure that the University stay focused on really delivering those two students and helping them succeed. In terms of early school office. This is interesting because it was so controversial and everyone in the room would know that universities computing very hard for school office, particularly before COVID and after COVID. Students are fighting for them. What are the Accord has decided or what the panel has decided was there is a bit of an issue around the early office. Whilst there is evidence for relieving the stress around year 12, there is a risk that it contributes to student disengagement in later months of year 12. Everyone says it could happen, and it also favours students with cultural capital, those who are doing well in year 11, and also social economic advantages around social advocacy, and career guidance as to

Developing a national cross jurisdictional approach on when the offers army, and a transparent framework and post school transitions for early at school office, and also improving data and



analysis, because there are none in this area. Challenges for the sector, quickly, I agree with everything Shamit has said. This is a massive reform, it is 20 years plus of reform. It is enormous. What we are going to need as equity practitioners is clear early direction from government, including around the funding model and the role of ATEC, and the fact that there are other systems impacting us. The cap on international students and be harder entry with immigration systems. Particularly with international students and what does it mean for their budgets and capacity.

We need good and early indications from government run funding. The implementation advisory committee will be appointed. Anyone who has a Vice Chancellor who stands at chance of getting on it should be pushing for it. And when we are most powerful is when we are united and in the lead up to the Accord itself when there are robust submissions on policy design and implementation, we need to do that again. Thank you.