



# A duty to relieve social disadvantage

**OPINION**  
**Leesa Wheelahan**

WE HAVE known for a long time that students from disadvantaged backgrounds don't get access to universities in the same numbers as students from more privileged backgrounds. What we haven't known is the extent to which students from more privileged backgrounds get access to universities, particularly the elite universities.

If the student population reflected the Australian population, there would be 25 per cent low socio-economic status (SES) students, 50 per cent medium SES students, and 25 per cent high SES students in our universities. Yet we are far from this.

Overall, NSW admits 16 per cent, 47 per cent and 36 per cent from low, medium and high SES backgrounds, which is not much different to the national figures, which are 17 per cent, 48 per cent and 33 per cent, respectively.

The University of Newcastle stands out because it is one of just eight universities that admit more than 25 per cent of its students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

In 2007 it admitted 31 per cent of under-graduate commencing students from low socio-economic backgrounds, and 57 per cent and 11 per cent from medium and high socio-

economic backgrounds respectively.

The only two universities that admit more low SES students than Newcastle are the University of Tasmania, which admits almost 35 per cent, and Central Queensland University, which admits almost 41 per cent.

Low SES students do not get fair access to any metropolitan university in Sydney, but there are eight universities that admit more than 50 per cent of their students from high socio-economic backgrounds, and four of these are in NSW.

Privilege is most concentrated in Macquarie, which admits two-thirds of students are from privileged backgrounds.

The University of Sydney admits just over 60 per cent high SES students. The University of Technology, Sydney, admits almost 58 per cent from a high SES background and the University of NSW admits 54 per cent.

Other universities that admit more than 50 per cent of their students from high socio-economic backgrounds are the University of Canberra (68 per cent), the Australian National University (68 per cent), the University of Melbourne (55 per cent) and the University of Western Australia (52 per cent).

Does this matter? Yes. Isn't this just the politics of

envy? No.

It is the politics of fairness.

Universities will argue that they can only take the most qualified students and it is not their fault that students from low SES backgrounds aren't the most qualified.

However, the University Admission Index and other aptitude tests that are used to select students to universities reflect students' socio-economic background as well as their academic ability.

We need to find new ways of selecting the best disadvantaged students so they have access to our best universities.

Universities will complain that schools are the problem, or that they are situated in privileged areas. Disadvantaged students will travel to go to university if they have the opportunity.

But universities cannot passively sit by and blame others; a university education is the main way that society uses to distribute access to jobs and social positions, and unless they are actively involved in trying to redress social disadvantage, they become part of the problem in reproducing it.

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