

THE PARTICIPATION OF NON-ENGLISH-SPEAKING-BACKGROUND PERSONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Current equity plans for Australian higher education are based on research which claims that non-English-speaking-background (NESB) people are under-represented in the universities. The problem is held to be particularly acute for recent arrivals and equity plans are currently in place to rectify this situation. The background research, however, is inaccurate. Young NESB people have higher participation rates than English-speaking-background people. In some cases, such as the Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese speakers, the level of participation is striking.

BACKGROUND

There has been a longstanding concern about the welfare of disadvantaged groups within Australian society, including people from a non-English-speaking background (NESB). Advocates for the welfare of these groups have claimed that, on social justice grounds, Australian governments should intervene to help overcome the sources of their disadvantage. During the 1980s and 1990s, governments made a concerted effort to meet the claims put for disadvantaged groups in society. To this end, the Government included NESB migrants as one of the social categories deserving assistance in its various equity programs.¹

In the late 1980s, the Government decided that its higher education policy should also place greater emphasis on equity issues. The 1990 discussion paper, *A Fair Chance for All*, issued by the National Board of Employment, Education and Training (NBEET), provides the foundation for current equity policy. It was in this paper that the groups deserving special attention in university equity programs were identified. They were: NESB persons, women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, students with disabilities, persons from rural and remote areas, and those from low socio-economic backgrounds.

The moral foundation for this policy, clearly stated in *A Fair Chance for All*, was as follows:

The overall objective for equity in higher education is to ensure that Australians from all groups in society have the opportunity to participate successfully in higher education. This will be achieved by changing the balance of the student population to reflect more closely the composition of society as a whole.²

In making the case for including NESB persons as disadvantaged in access to higher education, NBEET noted that there was little systematic evidence on the extent of the 'problem', especially in regard to second-generation NESB persons. It also acknowledged that participation rates probably varied greatly between different NESB groups. The Board hoped that, with the collection of data on country-of-birth, date-of-arrival and language-spoken-at-home by universities from 1989, more information would soon be forthcoming. Despite these uncertainties the Board felt that, 'first generation immigrants have real disadvantages' and 'second generation students are still likely to need help to succeed in

higher education'.³

Following Government acceptance of the recommendations of *A Fair Chance for All*, universities were required to prepare equity plans, beginning in the Triennium 1991-1993. These plans required each institution to indicate how it would respond to the presence of any of the disadvantaged groups within its catchment area so as to increase the target group's participation rate among its student body. In the case of NESB persons, NBEET suggested institutions could increase enrolments through 'support programs' (help with language training for example), 'awareness programs' alerting potential NESB students to the institution's courses, and curriculum reviews directed at making courses more relevant to NESB people's concerns.⁴ According to DEET, some 27 of Australia's 37 universities had developed one or more of such programs for the 1992-94 Triennium and were addressing the NESB persons' situation as a 'priority' area.⁵ For the 1994-96 equity planning period, 24 universities stated their intention to institute support programs for NESB students and 14, 'awareness plans'.⁶

Most institutions stipulated targets for NESB enrolments, though often at levels only marginally higher than their existing NESB enrolment. The typical definition of 'NESB' included persons who spoke a language other than English at home. That is, they included both persons born in Australia and overseas, as long as they spoke a language other than English at home. Most of the institutions had difficulty explaining their particular NESB enrolment target. This is understandable, since few would have had much idea about how many potential NESB students lived in their catchment area and thus whether NESB persons were under-represented or not. No institution differentiated between the many NESB country-of-origin or language groups, so none would have been aware whether the NESB students assisted by their programs belonged to a group which was disadvantaged or not.

In March 1994 the Government published a review of equity indicators for the higher education system (the 'Martin Report') which was designed to help institutions give more precision to their equity planing.⁷ Martin's project had two related aims - to define and evaluate a set of equity indicators, and to develop computer software for institutions to extract appropriate data from the statistical files which they routinely supplied to DEET. Martin defined three groups of NESBs who might be subject to educational disadvantage on account of their language, cultural characteristics or experience in the Australian school system:

- Overseas-born NESB students recently arrived in Australia
- Overseas-born NESB students, who were long-term residents but living in non-English-speaking households
- Australian-born NESB students whose parents were born in a non-English-speaking country

After reviewing these three categories, the Martin Report recommended the narrowest of these definitions, which limited the NESB category to those who were born overseas and arrived in Australia less than ten years ago, and who speak a language other than English at home. (The reasons for regarding the speaking of a foreign language at home as a possible source of disadvantage are discussed below.) The rationale for excluding other foreign-language speakers was that those born in Australia or resident here over a longer period:

are more likely to have experienced the Australian education system at an early age and therefore may not be disadvantaged in access to a university education because of their cultural and language background.⁸

When feedback was sought from the universities, this restricted definition of NESB students generated the greatest 'variation' in response.⁹ The Project Team for the Martin Report decided to retain the '10 year' restriction for the purposes of developing a NESB equity indicator, 'leaving a re-thinking of the issue to subsequent work'.¹⁰

The Martin Report did not investigate whether recent NESB arrivals were actually experiencing disadvantage in gaining access to the university system relative to other groups. Indeed, the Report's examination of a sample of institutions showed that, in most cases, '10 year NESBs' were over-represented relative to their share of the population.

In May 1995 the Government requested the Higher Education Council to commission a review of equity outcomes in the higher education system since publication of a *Fair Chance for All*. The consultants used the Martin Report equity definitions in their study. Their conclusions, reported in a Higher Education Council Discussion Paper entitled *Equality, Diversity and Excellence* (hereafter the Discussion Paper) were published in November 1995. In the case of NESB group, the Discussion Paper concluded, on the basis of its statistical analysis, that by 1995 NESB persons were participating at just two-thirds the rate of their share of the population and thus: 'Access remains an issue for these students, as their commencement rates are well below population share'.¹¹ As the matter now stands, '10 year NESB' persons remain one of the government's higher-education equity categories, meaning that universities are required to take action to improve their representation in the system.

The Discussion Paper does not report on the conduct of any analysis of NESB persons by language group. This is despite the fact that such data have been available for the past few years, and that it is crucial that universities know about the level of enrolment by language group if they are to effectively target communities which are genuinely under-represented.

If either policy makers or universities are to be aware of which NESB groups are disadvantaged, the first step is to **calculate participation rates** for particular language groups. The data provided below are intended to fill this gap. Other aims of this paper include the identification of **under-represented NESB language groups** and testing the **effect of recent arrival** in Australia (that is arrival within the last ten years) on NESB participation in higher education.

MEASURING NESB

PARTICIPATION RATES

Participation rates have been established by comparing higher education data (for students aged 18-27) with the total numbers of persons in the same language and age group, obtained from the 1991 Census. Participation by **all** students who speak a language other than English at home is considered here, rather than the narrower 'ten year' limit defined by Martin. It seems reasonable to begin with the hypothesis that, if there is any disadvantage associated with NESB status (which cannot be explained by class background), the first place to look for it is with English-language capability. Those who speak a language other than English at

home may not have learned English until either arriving in Australia in the case of immigrants, or when they attended school in the case of second-generation NESB persons. Language may also be a useful marker to indicate immersion in cultural settings different from mainstream Australian society. If coming from a 'different' cultural background handicaps a student's progress, perhaps by creating difficulties in coming to grips with the expectations of Australian teachers and school peers, or by evoking prejudice, then the fact that a student speaks a language other than English at home could be a useful proxy for exploring such handicaps.

The DEET data collections provide information on the country-of-birth, year-of-arrival and language-spoken-at-home for all higher education students. All the students reported in the following are permanent residents or citizens of Australia or New Zealand. The 18-27 age group was chosen because it captures the majority of higher-education students (61 per cent), particularly undergraduate students, and because it provided the capacity to match student enrolments with the total number of non-English-language speakers by each language in the same age group. The latter figures were derived from data on the 15-24 age group collected in the 1991 Census. This is the only possible source from which to calculate the total number of persons who speak a language-other-than-English at home by language group.

Persons aged 15-24 at the time of the August 1991 Census would have reached the 18-27 age group in 1995, the year covered by our enrolment data. To ensure that the numerator would not be inflated, students who arrived in Australia after 1991 have been discounted from calculations of participation rates.

Table 1: Total higher-education enrolments in 1995, and participation rates of students aged 18-27 who resided in Australia before 1992, by language group						
Language group		Total students ^a (all ages)		Students aged 18-27 ^b		No. of language speakers ^c
		Number		Rate per 100 speakers		
Arabic	3,542	2,336	8.1	28,907		
Chinese	21,679	13,722	26.4	52,030		
Croatian	1,769	1,389	10.5	13,225		
German	1,816	964	9.9	9,705		
Greek	8,079	6,397	10.5	60,808		
Italian	5,679	4,079	6.0	68,258		
Khmer	310	245	9.0	2,729		
Korean	1,540	1,228	32.6	3,771		

Macedonian	1,259	999	8.1	12,371
Polish	2,028	1,252	22.7	5,522
Russian	1,090	553	19.4	2,854
Spanish	3,376	2,160	13.0	16,597
Turkish	1,040	734	8.8	8,365
Vietnamese	7,187	5,475	24.9	21,967
Other	21,715	11,724	12.1	97,051
Total NESB	82,109	53,257	13.2	404,160
English	465,215	276,977	12.7	2,172,618
Lang. not stated	10,666	5,930	9.4	63,363 ^d
Total	557,990	336,164	12.7	2,640,141
<p>^a All data for students exclude overseas students, that is those who are not Australian or New Zealand citizens or permanent residents.</p> <p>^b Only includes students aged 18-27 in 1995 who arrived in Australia before 1992.</p> <p>^c Language data for the general population are for persons aged 15-24 at the time of the 1991 Census</p> <p>^d Assumed to be 2.4% of those aged 15-24, as in the share of the total population who did not state their language in the ABS Census Community Profile, Australia 1991</p> <p>Source: Student data, DEET (unpublished); Population data, Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 1991 Census (unpublished)</p>				

Table 1 lists the participation rates which result when enrolments are expressed as a rate per hundred of groups in the comparable Census population. The method described differs from that used in the Martin Report and the recent Discussion Paper, in that those reports matched all commencing students (regardless of age) against the relevant population aged 15-64 or 17-64 (as in the Discussion Paper). By doing so they created a greatly inflated denominator since older persons are marginal to an understanding of the propensity of persons in the prime student ages to gain entry to universities. Recently published figures demonstrate the stark differences in age participation: in 1994 some 14.9 per cent of persons aged 20-24 participated in higher education, compared with just 2.6 per cent of persons aged 25-64.¹² In addition, there are significant differences between the age structure of migrants and non-migrants (a higher proportion of migrants are aged in their mid 30s to mid 60s than

Australian-born persons), another factor which will tend produce a deflated NESB participation rate. According to our calculations, the conclusion drawn in the Discussion Paper that NESB persons are under-represented in the higher education system is partly an artefact of the inflated denominator which they used.

NESB STUDENTS: AN AUSTRALIAN SUCCESS STORY

If considered as a group, NESB persons (defined as all those who speak a non-English language at home) are not disadvantaged as regards access to higher education. The group does slightly better than English-language speakers, despite the inference of disadvantage associated with English-language difficulties and different cultural backgrounds. However, there is a wide divergence of outcomes between the various NESB language categories. People from the Chinese,¹³ Vietnamese, Korean and the Eastern European language groups are doing around twice as well as English-language speakers and some four times better than the Arabic, Italian, Khmer and Turkish speakers. At present, targets are set for **all** NESB students in an undifferentiated manner. This is more likely to assist persons from advantaged than disadvantaged language categories.

PARTICIPATION RATES

AMONGST RECENTLY ARRIVED NESB MIGRANTS

We were unable to directly assess the Discussion Paper's conclusion that NESB migrants who arrived in Australia within the last ten years were under-represented in the higher education system. This is because it is not possible to calculate participation rates by time of arrival in Australia for 1995 student enrolments. We know which language is spoken at home by students who arrived in Australia over the 1985-1995 period. This information comes from DEET. But we do not know how many NESB migrants arrived in Australia during the 1985-1995 period who speak a language other than English at home. These data will not be available until after 1996 Census results are published. The Discussion Paper provides a participation rate for all those arriving in Australia in the last ten years. Such a rate implies an estimation of the required denominator, but the Paper provides no information on how this feat was managed.

Nevertheless, it is possible to assess the relative access of recently-arrived migrants to the higher-education system by examining the time of arrival in Australia, and Australian birthplace (where relevant) distributions for the students from each language group listed in Table 1. These data are shown in Table 2.

It is evident that the language groups with the highest participation rates in Table 1 are drawn predominantly from recently-arrived communities. The Discussion Paper's claim that people from these groups are under-represented in the higher education system is incorrect. This is most obvious with the highly successful Chinese-speaking group, 59.1 per cent of whom arrived in Australia between 1985 and 1991. Had we included those who arrived after 1991 (as listed in column 1 of Table 2), the proportion recently-arrived would have been even more striking. This also applies to the Korean group and to some extent the Vietnamese speakers, (of the Vietnamese-speaking students resident before 1992, 43.3 per cent arrived after 1984). On the other hand, the language groups with relatively poor participation rates are primarily drawn from language groups where most students have lived in Australia for more than ten years or were born in Australia. This is obvious with Italian speakers, who

have the lowest participation rate of all major language groups. But it also applies to the four next lowest participating groups: the Macedonian speakers, only 6.1 per cent of whom arrived between 1985 and 1991; the Khmer speakers, of whom 28.2 per cent are 1985-91 arrivals; and the Arabic and Turkish speakers, just 22.9 per cent and 11.4 per cent respectively of whom arrived in Australia between 1985 and 1991.

Table 2: Higher education enrolments aged 18-27 in 1995, showing numbers arrived 1992-95, and those resident before 1992 (by Australian birthplace or time of arrival), by major language group							
Language group	Students arrived 1992-95		Students resident before 1992				
			% Aust-born	% arriving pre 1985	% arriving 1985-91	Total pre-1992 students ^a	
					%	No.	
Arabic	171	57.4	18.3	22.9	100.0	2,336	
Chinese	1,048	9.3	29.5	59.1	100.0	13,722	
Croatian	19	90.2	6.2	3.0	100.0	1,389	
German	31	41.2	44.6	13.0	100.0	964	
Greek	19	91.2	6.3	1.9	100.0	6,397	
Italian	10	93.0	5.0	1.3	100.0	4,079	
Khmer	5	2.9	64.1	28.2	100.0	245	
Korean	78	2.6	28.7	67.2	100.0	1,228	
Macedonian	6	80.2	12.9	6.1	100.0	999	
Polish	41	21.8	46.8	28.8	100.0	1,252	
Russian	154	31.1	33.3	33.8	100.0	553	
Spanish	24	28.4	40.0	29.4	100.0	2,160	
Turkish	24	50.1	36.8	11.4	100.0	734	
Vietnamese	184	1.2	52.6	43.3	100.0	5,475	
Other NESB	874	34.0	28.1	36.1	100.0	11,724	

Total NESB	2,688	37.9	26.9	33.4	100.0	53,257
English	1,472	89.8	7.3	2.5	100.0	276,977
Not stated language	29	55.0	5.1	3.0	100.0	5,930
Total	4,189	80.9	10.3	7.4	100.0	336,164

^a Total includes not stated time of arrival and not stated birthplace but does not include the overseas-born who arrived after 1991 who are listed in the first data column. These two columns summed give the total number of students aged 18-27 enrolled in 1995 (340,353). This age group formed 61 per cent of the 557,990 enrolments in 1995.

Source: DEET (unpublished), 1995

Current Government equity planning is ostensibly designed to assist disadvantaged NESB persons to gain access to higher education. These data show that it is focussed in the wrong direction. Government policy favours groups which, in most cases, are already over-represented in the higher education system and ignores most of the genuinely disadvantaged language groups.

The high enrolment numbers amongst recent arrivals have been widely reported.¹⁴ Indeed, it is well known that one of the attractions of immigration to Australia for Asian families has been the prospect of access to Australian higher education under the same conditions as locals, immediately on arrival in Australia.¹⁵

FACTORS SHAPING NESB ACHIEVEMENT

The hypothesis that the shorter the period of residence in Australia of a language group the more members of this group are likely to be educationally disadvantaged has intuitive appeal, but it is wrong. Recent arrival may be a factor where other things are equal. But other things are not equal. The point can best be made with the Chinese speakers. Any disadvantage which they may encounter through lack of experience in Australian schools appears to be more than compensated for by the class factor. The birthplaces of the 21,679 students enrolled in 1995 who spoke a Chinese language at home are: 7,812 Hong Kong, 3,065 Malaysia, 2,005 Vietnam, 2,077 Taiwan, 2,995 People's Republic of China (PRC), 1,582 Australia, 586 Singapore and 1,552 in other countries. With the possible exception of the PRC and Vietnam-born, most of the rest appear to come from relatively high socio-economic status families, many of whom are prepared to invest substantial resources in their children's education. We know from Census analyses that migrants from these countries are disproportionately employed in managerial and professional positions.¹⁶

Table 3: Socio economic distribution of all higher education enrolments by selected language groups (%), 1995

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Language group	Socio-economic level (%)				Total students	
	High	Middle	Low	No data	%	No.
Chinese	48.1	33.4	10.1	8.3	100	21,679
Greek	26.6	54.6	17.9	0.9	100	8,079
Italian	23.7	51.4	22.8	2.1	100	5,679
Khmer	9.4	52.6	35.8	2.3	100	310
Turkish	11.9	40.7	43.3	4.1	100	1,040
Vietnamese	12.5	40.9	44.1	2.5	100	7,187
Other NESB	30.3	46.5	18.1	5.1	100	38,135
Total NESB	32.4	43.6	18.9	5.1	100	82,109
English	39.4	42.5	13.9	4.1	100	465,215
Not stated lang.	38.9	9.4	33.2	18.5	100	10,666
Total	38.4	42.5	14.6	4.5	100	557,990
Source: DEET, 1995 (unpublished)						

Unfortunately, the DEET student data collections do not include anything on parent's place of birth or occupation. However, they do indicate the residential postcode of the student. The Martin Report used a methodology which allocated all Australian postcodes to high, middle and low socio-economic locations based on the education and occupation of residents. The top 25 per cent of postcodes on this index were included in a 'high' socio-economic category, the next 50 per cent in a 'middle' category and the bottom 25 per cent in a 'low' socio-economic category. Using this classification we have allocated all students enrolled in 1995 (all age groups, and all time-of-arrival groups, in this case) by certain language groups into these three categories. The results are shown in Table 3. The Chinese speakers stand out as the most favoured socio-economic category, since nearly half reside in 'high' status postcodes. This is a far higher proportion than for any other language group identified, including English-language speakers.

CLASS AND NESB PERSONS' UPWARD MOBILITY - THE CASE OF VIETNAMESE SPEAKERS

For the great majority of students who come from English-speaking households, class seems to be a crucial determinant of their educational mobility. Though around 25 per cent of all English-speaking households are in areas defined as low socio-economic status postcodes, only 13.9 per cent of the English-speaking students enrolled in higher education in 1995 came from these postcodes. Class also appears to be a factor for persons coming from

households speaking a language other than English, but not to the same extent, since 18.9 per cent of NESB students come from these low socio-economic status postcodes. This finding invites the conclusion that, if one holds class constant, a non-English speaking background is not a source of disadvantage.

The achievement of Vietnamese-speaking students is especially notable in this context. As shown in Table 3, a high 44.1 per cent of students with this background live in areas defined as being of low socio-economic status. These students therefore deserve closer scrutiny. The following discussion is restricted to the 7,187 Vietnamese-speaking students enrolled in Australian universities in 1995. Nonetheless, the findings apply equally to the additional 2,005 Vietnam-born students who speak a Chinese language at home. (Only a tiny number of Vietnamese speakers were born in Australia.)

The Vietnamese speakers appear to embody all the social and economic characteristics which have prompted equity planners to classify NESB people as a disadvantaged group. By definition, none are native English speakers, and all appear to lack exposure to the English language in their family setting. If limited experience in the Australian school system is a handicap, then a substantial proportion have to cope with this deficiency too, since more than 43 per cent of the Vietnamese-speaking students aged 18-27 arrived in Australia after 1984. All belong to the culturally distinct Vietnamese community. This, too, might be expected to create difficulties in coping with the Australian school environment. Finally the community from which they are drawn is predominantly lower class in occupational terms. Only 12.2 per cent of the total employed Vietnamese workforce were managers or professionals in 1991 compared with 25 per cent of all Australian-born workers.¹⁷

Despite these socio-economic 'handicaps', the Vietnamese-speaking group has achieved a participation rate in higher education which is double that of students from English-speaking backgrounds. Remarkably, large numbers come from residential areas which are popularly imagined to be enclaves beset by problems of unemployment, crime and low income industries like textiles. Some 30 per cent (774 out of 2,574 Vietnamese-speaking students) enrolled in New South Wales universities in 1995 indicated Fairfield municipality postcodes, almost all of which were clustered around the Cabramatta area. These students have also done very well in gaining entry to the universities with high school-achievement entry standards. Of the 2,574 students, 648 were attending the University of New South Wales, 624 the University of Sydney, 577 the University of Technology Sydney, and 385 the University of Western Sydney.

The explanation for the Vietnamese achievement probably derives from aspects of their position as recently-arrived migrants. They are repeating the classic migrant success story in which the parental drive to succeed is successfully transferred to the younger generation in such a way that they overcome class and other handicaps which other less motivated groups find to be impassable obstacles. But this progress could not have occurred without the educational opportunity provided by Australia's publicly financed state secondary and tertiary education system.

NESB PEOPLE AS AN EQUITY GROUP

NESB people, enumerated as an aggregate, should not be targeted in equity planning in the higher-education system. If the government followed the principle underlying its equity

planning philosophy stated at the outset, that student numbers should match their share of the population, NESB people would not constitute a suitable target. If the Government wishes to follow this principle it would make more sense to target students from English-language-speaking households, and especially those from lower status areas.

However, there are grounds for keeping NESB people as an equity category if the focus is individual language groups and if the present restricted NESB definition is widened to include all people from a non-English-speaking-background regardless of birthplace or recency of arrival. One conclusion which can be drawn from this study, which matches the observations made in *A Fair Chance For All* and in the Martin report, is 'that these [NESB] indicators suggested a deceptive homogeneity which does a disservice to those located in pockets of disadvantage'.¹⁸ There are some NESB language groups which are under-represented in universities relative to their population. While it may not be practical for the government to establish targets for individual language groups, at the very least universities should be given more advice on the relative achievement of these groups so that they can better interpret the enrolments of such students within their catchment.

A number of language groups showed relatively low participation rates yet were predominantly made up of Australia-born residents, or persons resident in Australia more than ten years. They included the Italian, Macedonian and Turkish speakers. It was surprising to note that the Greek and Croatian speakers, almost all of whom are Australia-born, were also under-represented. Studies of Southern European student performance covering the years prior to the 1990s have uniformly shown that such groups (particularly Greek Australians) exhibited higher-education participation rates more akin to the Vietnamese achievement.¹⁹ Perhaps an explanation is that, with time, these NESB communities are losing the motivation often associated with recent migration and are converging to the Australian norm in their attitudes towards their children.

Acknowledgment

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¹⁸ Martin, *op. cit.*, p. xvii

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