How Can Universities Encourage Self-Disclosure by Equity Students?

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Abstract

This paper extends upon a previous study into reasons behind student non-disclosure of equity status (Clark, Kusevskis-Hayes & Wilkinson, 2018). Based on findings from this previous study, this paper proposes good practice guidelines for universities to encourage self-disclosure by students in equity cohorts—Indigenous students, students with disabilities and those from non-English-speaking backgrounds (NESB). The previously published 12-month study, reporting on an equity staff survey on the subject of current university practices and student motivations for disclosure and reasons for concealing equity status, revealed that the primary reasons for disclosure versus non-disclosure varied between these three groups.

Indigenous students were influenced by pride in identity versus popular perceptions of special treatment and may perceive Indigenous programs as primarily intended to achieve bureaucratic goals and meet "diversity" targets (Sullivan, 2008). Students with disabilities appreciated adjustments, but often waited until a crisis moment before seeking help. We advocate removal of barriers rather than a 'medical model' of support (Shakespeare and Watson, 2002). NESB students were least likely to disclose, because in many cases disclosure was not necessary to receive assistance, or no targeted assistance was available despite the apparent frustration of teaching staff (Fildes et al. 2010).

The guidelines urge universities to adopt inclusive practices to reduce the need for self-disclosure, and to define equity groups in a practical and understandable way. Universities should educate staff and students to improve understanding of equity groups. Where disclosure is necessary, universities should offer options for levels of disclosure so students can retain control of their data. They should explain equity programs and services with clear guidelines for benefits and preserving confidentiality. Finally, they should explain the need for disclosure and allow noncommittal responses during enrolment, with later follow up.

Keywords

Equity; disclosure; disability; policy; Indigenous; CALD.

Introduction

Students who are members of equity groups constitute a significant and growing population in Australia's tertiary sector. These students often have special requirements, owing to physical, mental, socio-economic and cultural factors that present challenges and obstacles to their outcomes and achievements in the university environment. However, there has been a perception among education providers that a large proportion of students in these groups do not disclose their status to tertiary institutions, and thus cannot access support to which they are entitled.

The Enhancing Self-Disclosure of Equity Group Membership project (Clark et al. 2018) was an investigation into disclosure patterns of three equity groups:

1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students;
2. Students with disabilities; and
3. Students from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB)

There were four research questions:

1. How many students in the three equity groups do not disclose their equity status?

2. How do students disclose in their equity status?

3. Why do students choose to disclose their equity status?

4. Why do students choose not to disclose their equity status?

The purpose of this study was to inform future policy development by government and future equity practice by higher education providers. From this research, seven good practice guidelines to encourage self-disclosure are proposed, in addition to group-specific recommendations. The Australian tertiary sector has experienced immense growth in enrolments in the past decade, with numbers of students growing from just over 800,000 in 2001 to a total of 1,457,209 domestic and postgraduate students in 2016 (Department of Education and Training, 2016). The proportion of equity students in Australia's tertiary sector has also grown significantly, outpacing this already significant general growth rate in admissions. Between 2008 and 2015, enrolments by students with disabilities nearly doubled, increasing by 94%. In the same period, the proportion of Indigenous student enrolments increased by 74%, from 7,038 students to 12,240. The number of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds increased by 50%, from 90,460 to 135,859 (Department of Education Employment and Training, 2015).

Despite these promising numbers, the true figure of equity students in Australia's tertiary sector is unknown. Many students who have disabilities, who are Indigenous, or have difficulties with the English language, choose not to disclose this to their institutions. This has created a gap between reported equity figures and the true size of the equity student population. In a United States study, Newman and Madaus (2015) found that only thirty-five percent (35%) of youth with disabilities informed their college of their disability. Likewise, in the UK, Aronin and Smith (2016) found that twenty-seven percent (27%) of students self-identified as having a mental illness—more than double the almost thirteen percent (12.7%) of students that have reported a disability according to the Higher Education Statistics Agency UK (cited in Grimes, Scevak, Southgate & Buchanan, 2017).

This disconnect between rates of disclosure and actual equity numbers means that many students are not receiving the services they may need and may genuinely have a right to access. Consequently, some students may suffer unnecessary hardship in their studies and personal lives, as unaware university teaching staff are unable to offer accommodations and alternatives for students that need equity arrangements. Universities also cannot adequately resource equity programs and services for students without accurate numbers. This study set out to examine the proportion of non-disclosing students in each of the three categories, and the reasons for non-disclosure.

Indigenous students

The definition of Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander has long been a source of confusion in Australia, with as many as 67 different definitions reported in various forms of legislation (McCorquodale, 1986). Moreover, as the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) notes, there are variations in the proportions of Australian citizens identifying as Indigenous that are not attributable to population growth or data collection procedures, suggesting that individuals' desire to self-disclose may vary over time. Indeed, race-based categories may be too simplistic to capture nuances of group affiliation.

It should be acknowledged that ethnic self-identification is a rather crude measure of identity and may also be based on incorrect records and assumptions (Hickey, 2015). Moreover, it is possible that ethnic self-identification may change over time, as Hallett, Want, Chandler, Flores and Gehrke (2008) found for Canadian Aboriginal people. However, because this study concerns administrative procedures, we apply standard administrative categories and consider a student to be of Indigenous descent if they identify as such. The definition of the ABS relies on the *Standard Indigenous*

Question (SIQ) to identify people of Indigenous origin—"Is the person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island origin?" (ABS, 2012).

Students with disabilities (SWDs)

Recent advances in disability research have sought to recognize a myriad of conditions and circumstances that qualify broadly as disabilities. There is recognition of varying levels of severity of disability, and of apparent and hidden disabilities (Hernandez, 2011; Mullins & Preyde, 2013; Olney & Brockelman, 2003), as well as the sometimes-temporal nature of disabilities; that is, some disabilities are evident and limiting at some occasions, and latent at others. Essentially, disability research and policy have shifted focus from diagnostics and categorization that often assume lifelong disability and significant and universal impairment, towards understandings of disabilities as multifaceted, and sometimes hidden. These may influence several domains of life, not just physical and mental but also social and emotional—sometimes exclusive to particular activities, situations, and contexts. Highlighted by Cook, Griffin, Hayden, Hinson and Raven, (2012, p. 564), "Current definitions of disability have moved away from the 'medical' model, towards a 'social' model that emphasises the role of institutions in removing unnecessary barriers to learning through flexible provision".

The description of disability in this study is not greatly different from that the Higher Education Information Managements System (HEIMS)[1]: "Students who have indicated that they have a disability, impairment or long-term medical condition which may affect their studies". Where it differs is that the HEIMS definition assumes what we intend to measure; we are particularly interested in students who have *not* indicated a disability. The statement that it might affect the student's studies is similarly problematic, as it assumes that the respondents (many in their first year, indeed in an orientation week) can judge this accurately.

Disabilities may be undisclosed because they are undocumented, episodic (sometimes affecting the student and sometimes not) or considered by the student to be 'under control'—whether rightly or wrongly. Indeed, we encountered a number of respondents who did not disclose immediately because they did not realise the impact of their condition on their study.

Students from non-English-speaking backgrounds (NESB)

The definition of an NESB student was far from straightforward. There are multiple definitions of NESB and similar terms that all consider essential elements to meet NESB status, with some nuanced differences. The HEIMS definition of NESB[2] is reported by universities based on three data points—residency type, year of arrival less than 10 years prior to reference year (further defined as "the year to which the data relate"), and language spoken at home ("use of a language other than English at the student's/applicant's permanent home residence"). However, the arbitrary 10-year limit is difficult to apply (does a person's background change after 10 years?) as is 'language spoken at home' without a clear definition of home (university students live in a wide variety of domestic situations). Hence, students were presented with a straightforward question on the only common factor to all definitions: "do you identify as an Australian student from a non-English speaking background?"

For the purposes of this study, NESB students are local students, but share the same insecurities and challenges as migrants, albeit in an environment where 'migrant' is a fixed and restrictive term, one that many of them by default do not hold. Some of these individuals are second-generation refugees (Joyce, Earnest, de Mori, & Silvagni, 2010; Kong, Harmsworth, Rajaein, Parkes, Bishop, Al Mansouri & Lawrence, 2016), some are students who have come from overseas and attained citizenship before going on to university study (Fildes, Cunnington, & Quaglio, 2010). Hence,

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[1] http://heimshelp.education.gov.au/sites/heimshelp/2017_data_requirements/2017dataelements/pages/386
[2] http://heimshelp.education.gov.au/sites/heimshelp/dictionary/derived/pages/941

NESB students are a diverse group with some similar and many differing needs.

Although there is little direct research on NESB disclosure/non-disclosure at present, there are suggestions that NESB students face real and perceived barriers in accessing services and seeking help in universities. First, there is a lack of awareness of services in the university. This may be related to language skills or a disconnection from the wider student population. Second, cultural barriers that may make many NESB students uncomfortable seeking help or may see asking for help or assistance in the form of accommodations or extensions as embarrassing or as a personal defeat. Third, as discussed by Fildes et al. (2010), cultural and linguistic differences do not exist alone, and extend a rift between NESB students and teaching staff. This may make students apprehensive to approach staff for help when they need it.

Methods

The methods in this study involved a mixed-methods approach to data gathering and analysis—an online survey of equity unit staff across Australia, a student survey of UNSW students and university students across Australia and face-to-face semi-structured interviews. This triangulation of methods allowed a wide collection of data to identify trends in the equity groups surveyed online, and a deeper inquiry into these trends and the personal experiences that surround them in face-to-face and telephone interviews. This choice of methods also allowed anonymous access to non-disclosing students. The staff survey is detailed by Clark, Kusevskis-Hayes and Wilkinson (2018).

Student survey

The student survey was developed following consultation with a range of stakeholders and during the process of ethics approval. The stakeholders included academic staff specializing in disability services and university equity service practitioners with years of experience working with students from equity backgrounds.

Questionnaire construction followed the steps recommended by Gideon (2012). Key variables of interest were identified as: student equity demographic data (disability; Indigenous; NESB), disclosure status, method(s) of disclosure, type of disability, and perspectives of disclosure. A preliminary survey was written for the first five participants to test empirical validity, link questions to research variables, and test the reliability of the survey software.

Questions were produced according to the goals of the research, namely, to identify the proportion of non-disclosing equity students in Australian universities, and to find out why that gap exists. The survey included multiple-choice and open-ended questions. Drafts of the survey were discussed with service heads at UNSW and with researchers with experience in work with the relevant groups. The questions were also discussed with students and staff members to ensure that the wording was clear. The wording was amended as necessary and errors were removed prior to distribution. Demographic information could be linked by the UNSW student ID to student records. For non-UNSW students who provided contact details, separate questions were asked via email for gender, age and residential postcode when first enrolled. These were compared with the ABS Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) of 2011 to provide an approximation of socioeconomic status (high, medium or low).

Questions on identification were "do you identify as Aboriginal / Torres Strait Islander?"; "do you consider yourself to have a permanent or long-term disability?"; and "do you identify as an Australian student from a non-English speaking background?". There was a section for each category. The online survey used branch logic, so respondents that selected "no" to the above questions were directed to the next section.

In each section, there was a question on disclosure and channels. These were separate for each group, as some students fell into more than one category. Response options were as follows:

1. Disclosed to the university via a tertiary admissions centre (e.g. UAC) during the application process);

2. Disclosed on enrolment;

3. Disclosed to the university by registration with a dedicated [Indigenous/disabilities/language] unit or equity support service;

4. Not disclosed to the university;

5. Unsure whether disclosed to the university;

6. Prefer not to say;

7. Other (please specify).

Respondents were then asked whether they agreed with statements about self-disclosing relevant to their self-identified equity group. These questions were suggested by the literature review or suggestions with equity staff. "Please indicate whether you agree with these statements about self-disclosing as an [equity group] student:

1. Disclosing this information to the university benefits students.

2. I trust the university with this information

3. I fear prejudice in my university life if I disclose

4. I fear prejudice in my professional life after university if I disclose

5. I am concerned about the confidentiality of this information

6. Students do not wish to be 'labelled'

7. The university does not need to know

8. I do not know why I should disclose this information

9. I do not know how to disclose this information"

Responses were scored on a five-point Likert scale anchored by "strongly agree" and "strongly disagree".

One question asks about type of disability: "Can you tell us the general area of disability/disabilities that you have experienced? This is because the type of disability may well influence the student's willingness to disclose. Social/emotional or cognitive disabilities may be more easily concealed than physical or sensory ones, so this may be significant. The categories of disability used were those of the *Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability*.[3] These were: physical, cognitive, sensory and social/emotional. We added a category for "carer for a person with a disability" as this is also disclosable information that may influence a student's study.

Several questions were projective and open-ended. These were worded indirectly to encourage equity students to describe their perspectives on why they and their peers may be reluctant to disclose, while also mitigating any risk of triggering or raising uncomfortable personal experiences of reluctance and disclosure to the participant (Fisher, 1993; Hojnoski, Morrison, Brown, & Matthews, 2006; Jones, Magee, & Andrews, 2015).

Do you believe students from Indigenous / students living with a disability / NESB students from non-English speaking backgrounds are reluctant to self-disclose a disability? Why?

Three questions asked students for their own input into what universities could do to encourage

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[3] See http://www.schooldisabilitydatapl.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/broad-categories-of-disability.pdf for brief descriptions.

disclosure:

> *What could universities do to encourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander / students living with a disability / NESB students to self-disclose this information?*

To control for dispositional factors in concern for privacy, four items were included from the Privacy Orientation Scale (Baruh & Cemalcilar, 2014). The subscale was "concern about own informational privacy", which in Baruh and Cemalcilar's (2014) study correlated strongly with concern for general online privacy, for example "the extent to which they protected online privacy by taking measures such as giving a false or inaccurate email address". A person with a strong concern for privacy may be disinclined to disclose personal information irrespective of their equity group.

Thus, question 20 was "how strongly do you agree with the following statements?":

  a)   When I share the details of my personal life with somebody, I often worry that he/she will tell those details to other people.

  b)   I am concerned that people around me know too much about me.

  c)   I am concerned with the consequences of sharing identity information.

  d)   I worry about sharing information with more people than I intend to.

Responses were recorded on a five-point scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree".

The survey was distributed as below via SurveyMonkey, an online tool with branch logic—i.e., students were presented with questions according to their choices. Thus, when a student indicated that he/she did not identify as Indigenous, the questions relating to Aboriginality were skipped.

The survey was distributed via several channels:

  1. An equity student newsletter at UNSW (to 6169 UNSW equity students)

  2. A UNSW newsletter to all 46,696 UNSW students

  3. Email lists of equity practitioners at other universities for distribution: these lists included EPHEA and Edequity lists (Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia), Austed (Australian Tertiary Education Network on Disability) and ADCET (Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training)

In addition, interested people at other universities agreed to promote the survey via email lists and websites. Sponsored Facebook and Instagram advertisements were used with keywords such as "disability", "non-English-speaking", "migrant", "Indigenous", "Aboriginal" "university" and "student". The survey was also advertised on Reddit for UNSW.

Student interviews

Student interviews provide a finer-grained source of data than surveys, as well as deeper feedback. Survey respondents who indicated that they would be interested in participating in focus groups were contacted by email (or if they did not respond, by mobile phone text message) and if they agreed then a time was arranged to speak either face to face or by phone. Respondents were offered the option of focus groups as an alternative to interviews.

The final number of interviewees was 14 Indigenous, 25 students with disabilities and 18 NESB.

Interviews were designed according to the methods discussed by Gideon and Moskos (2012). This included asking initial questions to build rapport and trust with participants, asking straightforward questions to begin with, followed by open ended questions to allow elaboration and facilitate further discussion (Gideon & Moskos, 2012, p. 110–115).

All interviews were audio recorded with participants' consent, and participants were given a statement of their rights and the use of the data. These were explained, and the statement signed by interviewer and interviewee before the interview commenced. When the interviewee was in another location, the statement was emailed and recorded verbal consent obtained before commencement.

There were 12 questions asked to participants in face-to-face and over-the-phone interviews:

1. Could you tell me a little about your background: where did you grow up and where do you live now?

2. Regardless of whether you have officially disclosed this to your university or UAC, do you identify as a member of any of these equity groups—Indigenous, non-English-speaking background, or student with a disability?

3. Have you disclosed this to UNSW, for example by registering with the appropriate service, or at any point during the enrolment process? (Was any evidence required?)

4. In your opinion, why do you think people [from this equity group] disclose this information?

5. Why do you think people [from this equity group] might be reluctant to disclose this information?

6. What was your disclosure experience like? Why did you disclose /not disclose your equity status? Did you have reservations?

7. Were you aware of the services available for equity students when you disclosed / decided not to disclose?

8. What support mechanism or services, have you personally used in relation to these issues? Is there any that you would like? e.g. adjustments or facilities such as computer rooms

9. Do you have any other on or off-campus support?

10. Have you accessed any co-curricular services or programs in relation to [your equity group]? e.g. peer mentoring, volunteering, events etc.

11. Have there been any barriers to you disclosing [your equity group membership] at the university? *For example, because of lack of documentation or social constraints.*

12. In your view, is there anything your university or other educational institution could do to make people from [your equity group] more likely to disclose?

Coding of the open questions followed the method outlined by Bazeley (2013: pp. 125–156). Codes were assigned using NVIVO software.

Results

The results of the staff survey are described in more detail by Clark, Kusevskis-Hayes and Wilkinson (2018). Among other items, staff responded to two open questions: "What does your university do to encourage disclosure by or identify students from NESB?" and "In your view, how effective are these measures?" In general, those who rate their services as effective mention strong management support and good methods of communication with students.

There are several points at which students can enrol—when applying for university, on enrolment or after enrolment by registering with a support service. The first opportunity for formal disclosure of a disability, Indigenous ethnicity or non-English speaking background to a university is via a tertiary admission centre form. The New South Wales version conflates two questions: "Do you need support services?" in the heading and "Do you have a disability or illness?" as a question (with an asterisk to indicate that a response is mandatory). For Indigenous and NESB students,

there is no indication why this information is required (other than "statistical reasons"), nor are support services mentioned. It is left to the respondent to define these categories. Although none of these questions are mandatory, there is no option to leave them blank. The default option for the question on whether a language other than English is spoken at home is "no", while that on Indigenous status is "Neither Australian Aboriginal nor Torres Strait Islander". Without an option to decline, the prospective student is thus forced either to disclose the information requested or to submit a false statement.

On enrolment, students complete a paper or online form, which varies according to institution. At UNSW, for example, the student profile includes a section on "Personal statistical profile". This has a brief definition of Aboriginal, in that the person must "identify as such" and "be accepted as such in the community in which you live". The question on language distinguishes between language spoken at home and first language.

After enrolment, students can still disclose by registering with a support service, at least for students with disabilities or Indigenous students. NESB students may not need or even have any channel to disclose this status but may seek academic support for language difficulties where this is available.

There are a number of areas in which universities differ with regard to disclosure practices.

1. Need for documentation: For most financial assistance for Indigenous students and for adjustments for students with disabilities, documentation is required. Many universities also require proof of Aboriginality for access to facilities for Indigenous students.

2. Confidentiality: All universities are sensitive to data confidentiality, but not all adjustments can be concealed and insufficient staff training (particularly for those inexperienced in the disabilities field, as many academics are) so unintended disclosure can occur.

3. Levels of disclosure: One aspect of disclosure that is sometimes neglected is the level of disclosure and the use to which information may be put. This limits the disclosure to particular courses or learning activities, and this limitation may reassure students with disabilities regarding the uses to which information is put. However, one concern about this approach is that statements put together by academic staff or professional staff who do not work in the disabilities field is that the topic may not be approached with due sensitivity.

4. Timing of disclosure: For students with disabilities, there may be differences in timing of disclosure, as disabilities may be acquired, episodic, or may vary in degree of intensity. This means that adjustments may be required at short notice, but documentation may take time to acquire. Some universities allow immediate adjustments with documentation supplied later, others require documentation presented first.

5. The presence of formal post-enrolment disclosure pathways: NESB students generally have access to academic support but may not have a dedicated service for English support that the student can access without charge.

6. Justification: The extent to which the need for disclosure of Indigenous/NESB status or a disability is explained on university websites and the ease finding this information varies widely.

7. The degree of active outreach to equity students: Some universities place the onus on the student to seek support, while others appear to advertise equity services more

actively. For example, some universities send information on services to all identified NESB students.

Student survey

A total of 1108 students, from 35 universities, responded to the student survey. Of these, 107 did not agree to the terms and conditions or, provided no further answers. Those that did not agree were redirected to the finish page. This left 1001 respondents to the first question on identifying as Indigenous students. Of these, 210 did not belong to any of the equity groups.

The average age of respondents was 23.41 years, with slight variations between groups. Indigenous students had an average age of 23.83 years; SWDs were on average slightly older at 26.88 years, and NESB students somewhat younger, at 22.1 years. For all groups there was a preponderance of female respondents that does not reflect the actual breakdown of gender at universities. The proportions of female respondents were 81% indigenous, 65% students with disabilities, and 63% NESB. For comparison, at UNSW the actual proportion of female students is 47%. This raises the possibility that if gender affects the probability of responding to this survey, it could also be a factor in disclosure of equity group membership.

Table 1: Numbers of survey respondents

Do you identify as:	Yes	No	Prefer not to say / do not know
Indigenous (ATSI)	73	908	20
Student with a disability	253	656	49
NESB student	436	450	10

The most common disclosure channels differ for each group (Figure 1). Most Indigenous students disclose on enrolment (59%). Those with disabilities are more than twice as likely to disclose to a support service than to an admissions centre or on enrolment. NESB students are the only group most likely to disclose through UAC, possibly because at many universities no other channels exist. They are also the only group where a substantial minority (23%) are unsure whether they have disclosed. This suggests that disclosure of NESB status is a decision of no great consequence to students, but it is a considered decision for Indigenous students and those with disabilities.
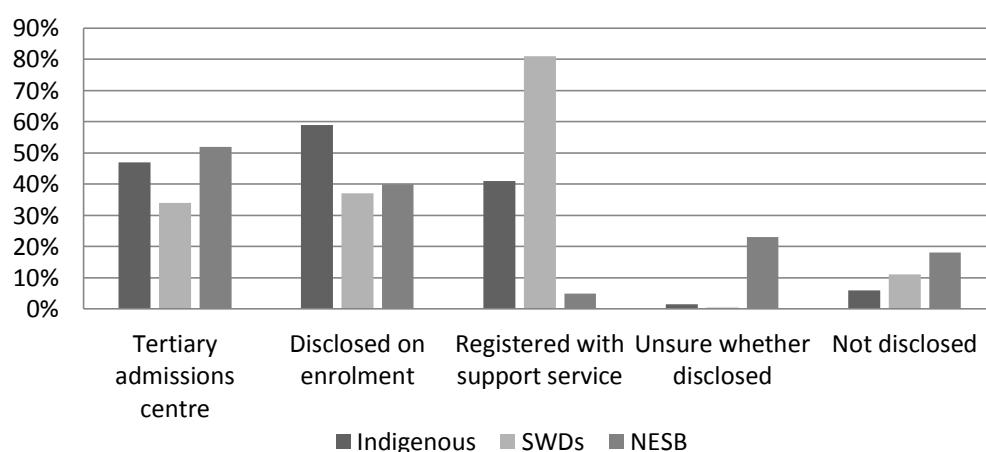
Figure 1: Channels of disclosure by equity group

Students were asked to score their agreement with nine statements shown in Figure 2 The respondents scored the statements on a five-point scale, where "1" indicates strong disagreement, "3" "uncertain or do not know", and "5" indicates strong agreement. The first two measured the belief that disclosure was beneficial to students and that the student trusted the university with the

information. Although the differences are minor, Indigenous students showed the strongest agreement (4.1) with both these statements. NESB were much less sure of benefits, at 3.4, but trusted the university to the same extent, at 4.0.

Fears of prejudice were not pronounced for any of the groups, with NESB and Indigenous students disagreeing slightly (2.6 and 2.5, respectively, where a score of "3" indicates uncertainty). SWDs scored this statement at 3.1, but were more apprehensive of career implications, scoring fear of prejudice after university at 3.6. Confidentiality was not a strong concern for any of the groups. Of more concern, as discussed in the interviews, was the issue of "labelling" or defining the student by equity group rather than as an individual. This raises multiple issues of self-perception, perceptions of others and self-esteem. This issue is discussed further in relation to interview data.

Students did not agree that "the university does not need to know this information", although the responses of the NESB students were uncertain. NESB students were also uncertain (3.1) why they should disclose their status. Both Indigenous and SWD groups were clear that they know why they should disclose. They also appeared to know how to do so (1.9 and 2.0 respectively), although NESB students were less certain (2.7).

Figure 2 shows the contrast in graphical form. Overall, the impression is that NESB students place no special weight on disclosing their status but do not attempt to conceal it, Indigenous students have no great concerns about trust in the institution but resist the perception of needing special treatment, and SWDs are very aware of potential negative consequences.
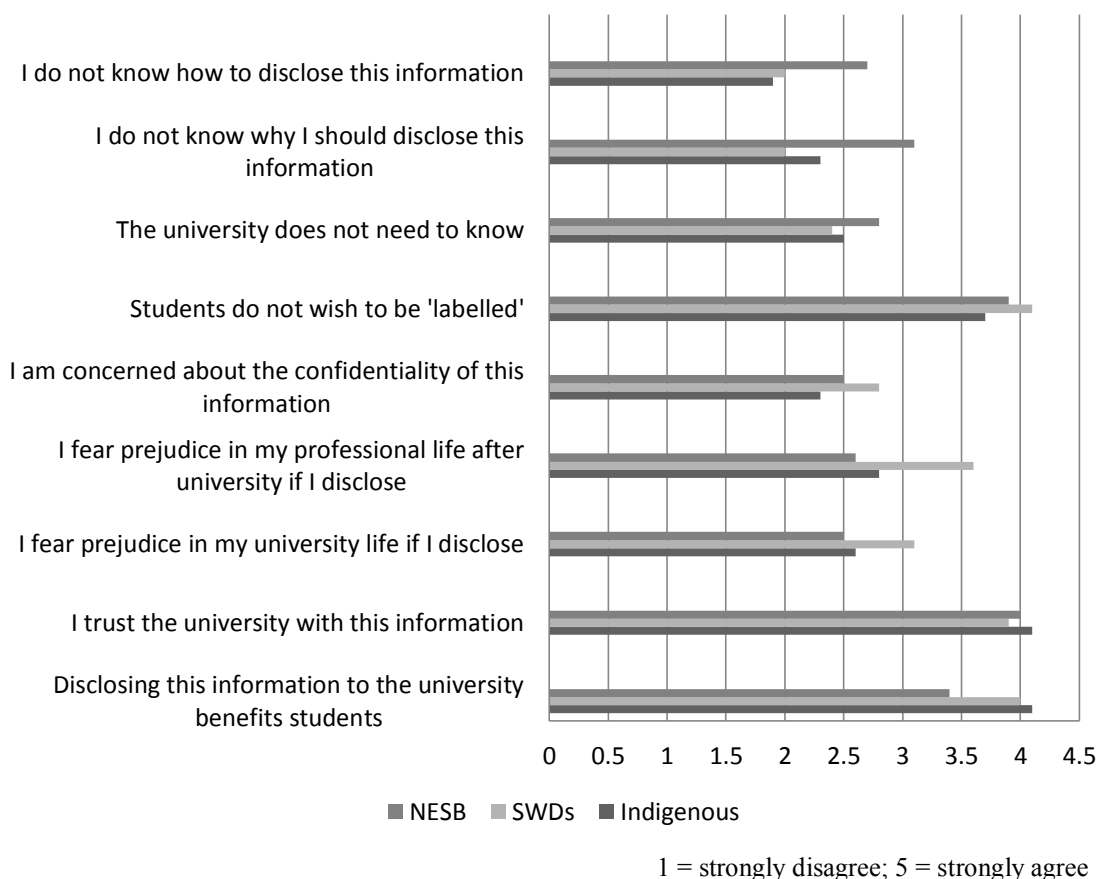
Statements about disclosure

1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree

Figure 2: Statements about disclosure

Concerns about confidentiality may be the subject of individual differences but may be affected by equity group membership if there is a personal or institutional history of discrimination that may

discourage frank disclosure. This study allowed for this possibility by including the four items of the "concern about own informational privacy" subscale from a Privacy Orientation Scale (Baruh & Cemalcilar, 2014). The Concern for Own Informational Privacy scale had good reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.86.

Overall, SWDs showed the highest level of concern for privacy, with Indigenous and NESB students very similar (Figure 3). Independent samples t-tests indicated that students with disabilities in this sample scored all four items significantly higher than others ($p < .01$).

It may be speculated that this reflects the potential stigma of a disability in comparison with ethnic or linguistic characteristics. If so, this may be borne out by a comparison of disability types, with more easily concealed or potentially stigmatised disabilities—cognitive or social emotional— showing higher levels of privacy concern.
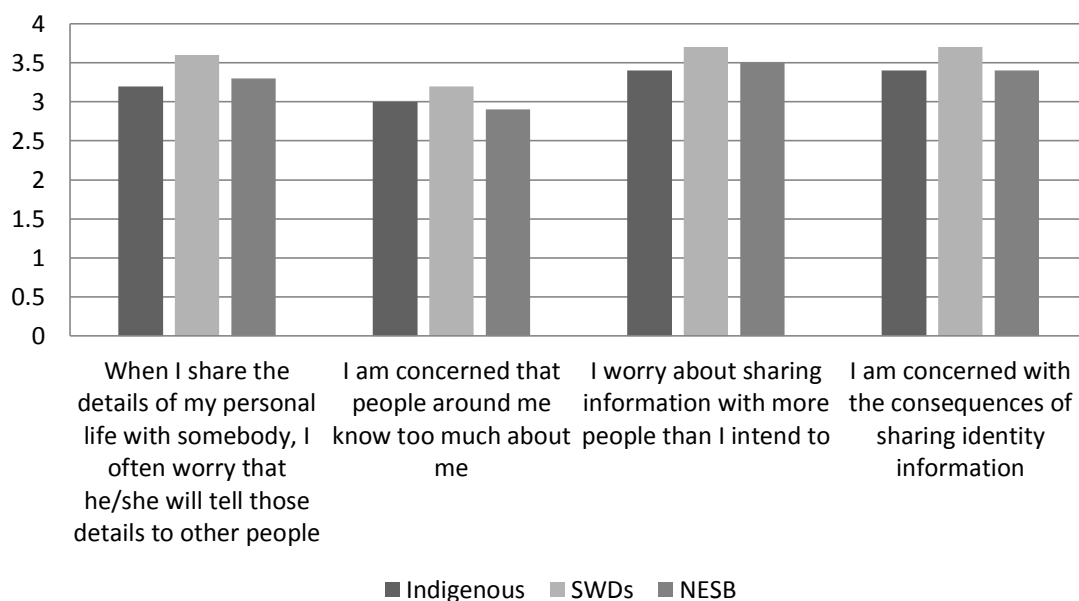

Figure 3: Concern for privacy by equity group

In Figure 4, privacy concerns of SWDs are further broken down by disability type. In all categories, carers are most concerned about sharing information. It is not immediately apparent why this is so, but if respondents are parents, their concern for a child may outweigh fears for themselves.
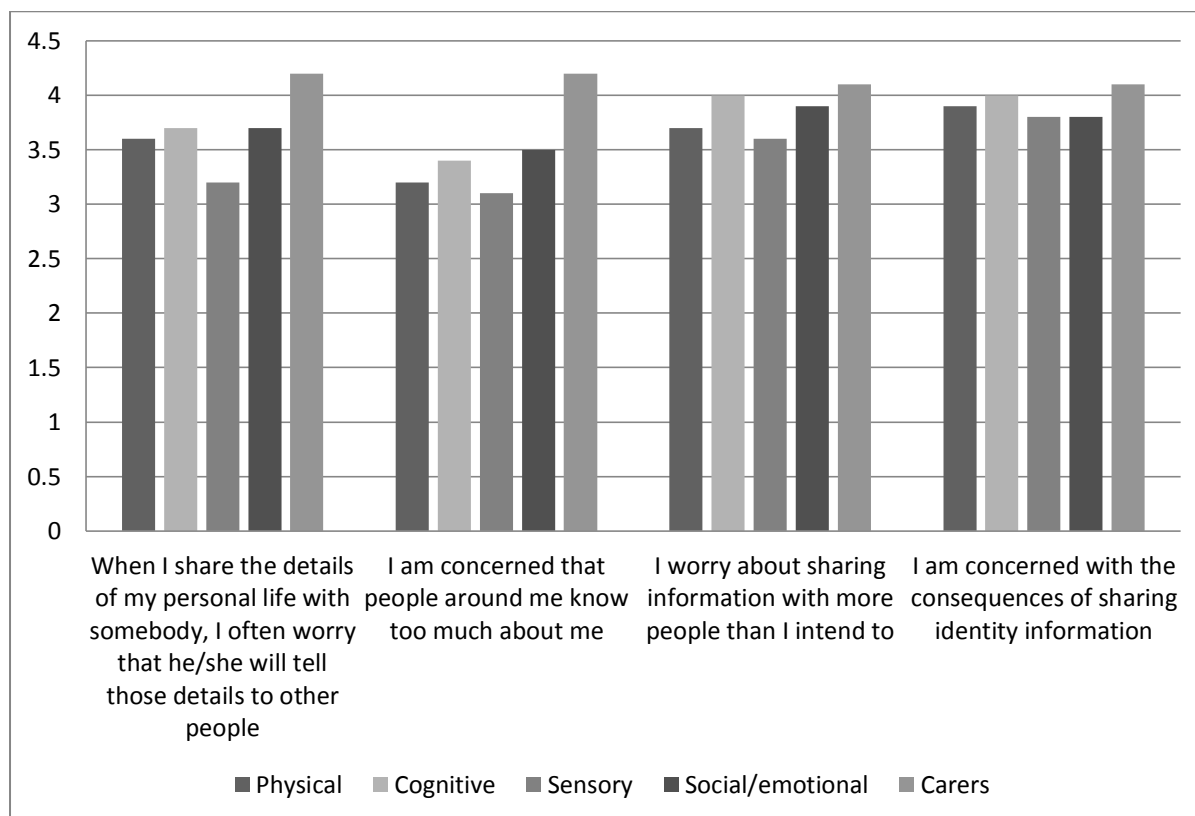
Figure 4: Privacy concerns by disability type

Coding of the open question ""Do you believe students from [your equity group] are reluctant to self-disclose a disability? Why?" followed the method outlined by Bazeley (2013: pp. 125–156).

The responses from Indigenous students indicated a strong concern with the perceptions of others and a rejection of the label of "Aboriginal", either because this created a perception that the student has received special favours because of a racial profile ("we are there for our skin colour—uni management tokens—instead of our brains") or because there may be discrimination. The most common responses related to the perceptions of others, discrimination and challenges to Indigenous identity. Interestingly, some of these challenges appeared to come from other Indigenous students.

Students with disabilities, like Aboriginal/Torres Strait Island students, were primarily concerned with the perceptions of others and the potential effect on their study and careers of misunderstandings. However, the comments reflected a slight difference in that while Indigenous students may feel singled out for special treatment or feel the weight of stereotypes or preconceived ideas, SWDs may be seen as a nuisance:

> *Oh it's that *disability* kid again putting his hand up.*

> *They might just not be bothered with filling out the paperwork that they have to fill out when they approach university support services because they are often tedious and time-consuming and often require a variety of supporting documentation from other stakeholders such as medical professionals, Centrelink and other agencies.*

SWDs may also feel embarrassment about their condition. Both groups fear being seen as people who receive unearned benefits, which would reduce the legitimacy of their degrees:

> *I hate that as a student registered with disability services that I am then required to disclose to tutors and course coordinators at the beginning of the semester. I feel like I am starting off on the wrong foot and like I am not able to prove that I am worthy of my marks with or without adjustments.*

> *The need for and cost of documentation was also a disincentive for disclosure ("My psychologist charges $480 for a report about my autism") and there were commonly expressed doubts about which conditions and degrees of severity "count" as genuine disabilities worthy of disclosure to gain adjustments.*

For students from non-English-speaking backgrounds, similar themes emerged from the coding exercise. One notable difference was the number who responded "no" to the question of whether NESB students were reluctant to disclose this information (34%). As with the previous two groups, some fear was expressed over prejudice and misperceptions, and of unequal treatment. However, comments that there is simply no benefit in disclosure as well as no reason to avoid it were more common.

Disclosure via an online tool

UNSW has an online tool—NavigateMe—which is used as a referral tool for student support services and self-help resources. Students can log onto NavigateMe and respond to questions.

Three questions relate to disability and illness:

1. I have a short-term medical issue / injury that's affecting my well-being and current studies

2. I have a long-term medical condition / disability, and I'd like to know how I can succeed further with my current studies

3. I have a disability and would like to learn about advancing my career opportunities

Because students log in with a student ID, these can be matched to student records to determine whether a particular user has disclosed a disability either on enrolment or to Disabilities Services.

The results are shown in Table 2. Of the 142 students who had selected one of those statements, 99 (70%) had not previously disclosed a disability. Of those 81 who reported long-term illnesses or disabilities, 52 (64%) had not previously disclosed this information. Note that the numbers along the bottom line add to more than 142 because students can disclose disabilities through more than one channel, and those that request assistance must necessarily have first disclosed a disability to a tertiary admissions centre (TAC).

Table 2: NavigateMe reports versus formal disclosure

	Total respondents	Disability (TAC)	Disability (MyUNSW)	Require Assistance (MyUNSW)	Regd. with Disability Service	Previously undisclosed
Short-term issue	61	3	11	8	1	47 (77%)
Long-term issue	40	12	22	20	1	15 (37.5%)
Disability	41	2 (1.5%)	4 (3%)	3 (2%)	0	37 (90%)
TOTAL	142	17 (13%)	37 (27%)	31 (23%)	2 (1.5%)	99 (70%)

Of course, this is not a random sample but a sample of people seeking support. Moreover, it is impossible to determine from this data whether the user has a genuine disability or illness, or when the condition arose. It may be that some users are motivated by curiosity to click on these questions simply to see what is available. However, even if the non-disclosure rate is only a fraction of that suggested by Table 2, there is still support for the notion that disclosure through an impersonal online tool such as NavigateMe presents a lower threshold and may be a productive way to connect students with support services.

Interview responses

Face-to-face and over-the-phone interviews with disclosing and non-disclosing equity students produced a wealth of data and insight into the experiences, perspectives, and opinions of equity students. In total, useable data was taken from 58 student interviews. Of this figure, 25 students had a disability, 14 students were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and 18 students were NESB. Students were interviewed according to semi-structured interviews revolved around 11 open-ended questions. These questions revealed some general trends that presented below.

Student interviews were analysed and coded in two steps using NVivo software. Initially, codes were divided into three categories: Indigenous, SWDs and NESB students. Following initial coding, codes were aggregated for transferability. The main thematic codes and frequencies are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Frequency of codes

	Equity Group Report Rates		
Code	Students with disabilities	Indigenous students	NESB students
Fear Academic Discrimination	7	-	-
Fear General Discrimination	11	-	-
Fear In-Group Discrimination	-	4	-
Concerns Regarding Confidentiality	6	-	-
Inconvenience of Disclosure Process	8	4	-
Distrust of University	10	1	-
Problems Expressing Equity Issue	1	-	-
Fear Implications of Disclosure	5	-	-
Lack Knowledge of Equity Services	8	3	-
No Benefits to Disclosure	4	-	-
Negative Previous Experiences with Disclosure	10	1	-
Outsider Perceptions of Equity Group	6	4	-
Fear of Professional Ramifications of Disclosure	2	-	-
Do Not Understand Qualities that Constitute Equity Status	7	-	-
Reject Equity Label	6	-	-
Shame Associated with Equity Status	8	1	-
Reject Special Treatment Associated with Equity Status	5	1	-
Fears of Stigma Associated with Equity Status	10	-	-
Fears of Tokenism	-	1	-
Disclosed to Access Services	-	-	1
Disclosed Because Isolated	-	-	1
Disclosed "Just Because"	-	-	2
Disclosed to Represent and Overcome Stereotypes	-	-	3
Issues with Service Quality	6	3	2
Cultural Reasons for Non-Disclosure	5	1	3

Comparison of the three groups (Figure 5) shows the contrasts—the wider circle of the SWDs indicates greater levels of concern and greater distrust of processes. Cultural reasons (for non-disclosure) stand out for the NESB group and inconvenience for the Indigenous group.
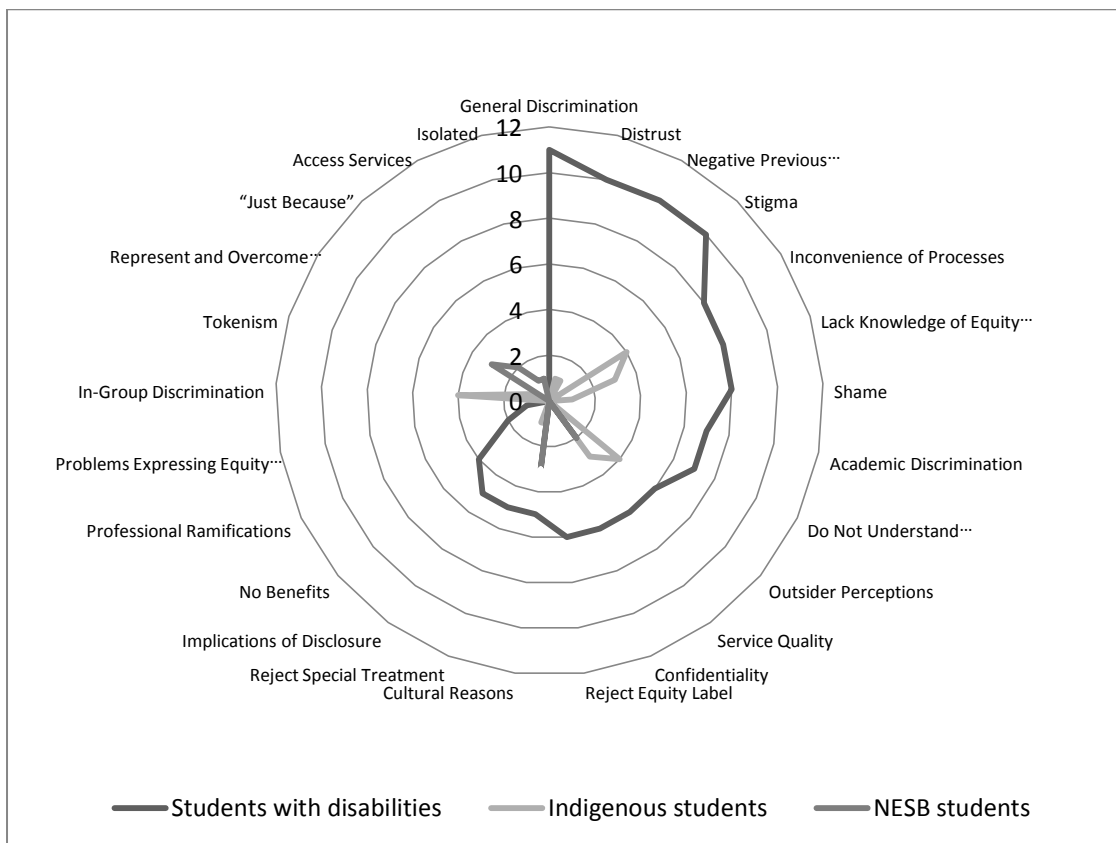
Figure5: Comparison of equity group profiles of concerns

Discussion

This study demonstrated that non-disclosure of equity students is likely to lead to underestimations of the true population of equity students at Australia's universities. The answers to the research questions are below.

How many students do not disclose?

Overall, it was found that roughly 11% of these three groups of equity students do not disclose their equity status to their university. Of this number, 6% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students reported not disclosing, as did 11% of students with a disability, and 18% of NESB students. Moreover, 13% of the total population surveyed reported being unsure whether they have or have not disclosed. This includes 1.5% of Indigenous students, 0.4% of students with disabilities, and 23% of NESB students.

How do students disclose?

Of 1108 students surveyed, several trends were identified regarding how students choose to disclose their equity status. Students also disclose through various means, so that some of these figures overlap. On average, 45% of students disclose via a tertiary administration centre. 41% disclosed at enrolment. 34% disclosed when registering with a support unity such as a disability unit, Indigenous centre, or language service.

Why do students choose to disclose?

Students in each group saw implications for disclosure. This is reflected in the feedback from the student surveys. All groups, Indigenous students, students with disabilities, NESB students—report that disclosing equity information to the university benefits students (4.1; 4.0; 3.4 respectively[4]) and

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[4] Measured from 1.00 (strongly disagree) to 5.00 (strongly agree)

report a high degree of trust in the university with their equity information (4.1; 3.9; 4.0). The three groups had similar attitudes to concerns regarding the confidentiality of their disclosed information (2.3; 2.8; 2.5). Students with disabilities expressed the greatest desire not to be 'labelled', (4.1), followed by NESB students (3.9), and Indigenous students (3.7). NESB students expressed the highest rates of the university not needing to know their personal information (2.8), as well as the highest rate of not knowing why they should disclose this information (3.1), as well as not knowing how to disclose (2.7).

Why do students choose not to disclose?

Overall, these results suggest crucial differences between equity groups regarding what factors matter when disclosing, and what factors possibly inhibit disclosing. Research by Mullins and Preyde (2013) on disability disclosure suggests that much of this apprehension also involves the nature of the disability (hidden disabilities such as dyslexia are considered as less widely understood and accepted). Furthermore, much of this involves the private nature of disability: "many participants said that they will only disclose in close relationships or when necessary, such as in an attempt to receive understanding for their specific challenges or to be able to receive certain accommodations" (2013, p.155).

Conclusion and recommendations

Education and teaching methods should widen participation in education by recognising the diversity of backgrounds, abilities and preferences of students. While disclosure is the primary route to obtaining support, it is not the primary goal of widening participation.

Where disclosure is necessary, it should be in a university community that understands the need for equity and is sensitive to the needs of minority students. Universities should actively protect students' interests, allow them control over their own information, and respect their differences. The guidelines below seek to create such environments.

Adopt inclusive university practices and procedures

This study proposes that universities adopt inclusive practices that maximise access to the university community and educational content by those with diverse needs. These inclusive practices could be adopted in university teaching and course design, such as close-captioned lectures, screen reader software and accessible online materials so students that choose not to disclose are less likely to reach a 'crisis point' where circumstances force them to disclose. Moreover, if such adjustments are available to everyone, their use does not constitute special treatment or reveal private information about the student. Inclusive practice focuses on individual needs rather than labels such as "disability" or "non-English-speaking background".

Offer options of disclosure channels and times where students retain control over their information

This study has shown student-process interactions to be key sites of stress and anxiety for equity students. One factor in this stress is a sense of a lack of control in the disclosure process. These, and similar processes, offer students a sense of control and involvement in their disclosure process. While most universities offer online disclosure options at point of enrolment, online tools are useful for inclusive and effective disclosure pathways throughout the academic career.

Explain equity programs and services to students at university, with clear guidelines of benefits, confidentiality and the disclosure process

According to the quantitative and qualitative results of this study, students are more likely to disclose when they see benefits in doing so and trust the university. These concerns suggest that students who are more aware of the benefits of disclosure and the safety and handling of their information are more likely to disclose. Hence, this study recommends training equity staff and service providers to clearly and accessibly provide information about the rights of equity students,

their right to confidentiality and the ways their private information will be used and where, and the outcomes of disclosing for the student.

Adopt clear, consistent and easily understood definitions of equity groups for applications, enrolment and support

As discussed in the 'definitions' section of this report, Australian universities employ multiple differing definitions of disability. Some of these are derived from Federal and State legislation, while others are ad-hoc. Some are medically based, while others are limitations based.

Similarly, some Indigenous students expressed fears of both inter- and intra-group discrimination, especially those that do not conform to a stereotypical image. The ABS definition (identifies as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by a community) is clear enough, but there appear to be differences between universities' requirements for certification.

Some students are also unsure over their NESB status, which in the popular imagination may be confused with foreign citizenship. NESB status is seldom identified as such, and the current Department of Education definition is a statistical construct based on multiple data points that do not reflect student needs.

Encourage a wider understanding of equity group membership among staff and students

In addition to definitions, there is a perceived need for a broader understanding of the diversity of students in these equity groups, who may not conform to an image projected by the press and news media. It was suggested by participants in this study that some equity services—and academic adjustments—appeared to be reserved for stereotypical cases of 'ideal' equity students.

During application and enrolment, explain requests for relevant equity group information, and allow non-responses for students who prefer not to answer, with later follow-up

During this study, it became apparent that some enrolment forms do not have alternatives to 'yes' and 'no' for questions regarding equity group status. This creates a situation where a student in the respective equity group must either lie or disclose. Students who prefer not to answer may be sent information about equity status or disclosure (as mentioned in other Guidelines) to reassure and connect with reluctant disclosers.

Limitations to the study

While this study has presented survey and interview data with equity students around Australia, there are a number of limitations that were encountered during research that offer future research pathways. The largest of these is that this study could only consider a relatively small sample size. In total, 1108 students responded to the survey, 52 students were interviewed either face-to-face or over the phone, and 130 staff members took part in the staff survey. Respondents were drawn from 27 Australian universities, including Go8 universities, regional universities, and smaller urban universities. Despite the numbers, this only represents a small proportion of students.

Another limitation is that at each university it was apparent that no single unit or organisation had a comprehensive grasp of equity issues in relation to disclosure. Each organisation was familiar with its own constituency, but knowledge of rules, practices and procedures was limited among staff, and their interpretations varied such that staff members from the same university could report different practices.

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