

# SCHOOLS AND CAREER GUIDANCE KEY TO WIDENING UNIVERSITY PARTICIPATION

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University attendance is one of the strongest predictors of labour market success, personal health and wellbeing, and positive social outcomes; however, people from low socioeconomic backgrounds are disproportionately excluded from the benefits of tertiary education.

Since the release of the *A Fair Chance for All* report in 1990, Australian Higher Education policy has focused on increasing the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds attending university; yet, despite more than 25 years of policies aimed at reducing the gap, there is still a significant difference between

the numbers of students from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds enrolling in university.

This policy brief provides a summary of our research findings, which highlight the key role of teachers and schools in supporting students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to enrol in university. Good teachers and supportive school environments have the capacity to compensate for some deficits that are felt more strongly by students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (such as a lack of Higher Education aspirations, information about university, and role models).

## KEY FINDINGS

- By age 25, only 35% of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds have enrolled in university, compared to 64% of students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds.
- Positive school experiences (such as good student-teacher relationships and a positive attitude towards school) and some forms of career guidance (talks by TAFE or university representatives, and school career advisors) increase the chances of university enrolment by students of all backgrounds.
- The positive effect of student-teacher relationships and talks by career advisors on university enrolment are greater for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds compared to students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- School-based interventions can be helpful in reducing the university enrolment gap between students from higher and lower socioeconomic backgrounds.
- Institutional interventions need to incorporate school factors with proven success in reaching students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. These include:
  - Career advice and guidance delivered by school, TAFE, or university representatives
  - Measures aimed at ensuring positive school experiences through student-teacher relationships, and student engagement with school in the learning process.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF UNIVERSITY PARTICIPATION

Participation in university and attainment of tertiary-level qualifications play a significant role in improving a person's lifelong prospects. Not only are they a strong predictor of labour market success, but they also increase the likelihood of maintaining good health, and reduce the probability of family breakdown. Due to improved work prospects, university educated individuals are also less likely to live in households reporting financial difficulties, or to

become dependent on income-support from the Government.

For more than two decades, successive governments in Australia have attempted to increase the number of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds attending university through the Higher Education Participation Program, yet a large difference in participation rates between young people from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds remains.

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## WHY ARE SCHOOL FACTORS IMPORTANT?

Policymakers have the greatest potential to influence university participation through institutional means such as the school and its environment; whereas other key influencers, such as parental guidance and peer support, are outside direct policymakers' control.

We focus on two factors within the school environment that can lead to greater university enrolment: career guidance, and school experiences.

Career guidance refers to the support and advice students receive at school in planning their post-school educational and professional pathways. School experiences capture a broad set of

processes defining students' interactions with the education system, such as their emotional attachment to their schools, and student perceptions of learning and relationships with teachers.

We expected these factors to be particularly influential on students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who face complex choices when deciding between post-school pathways. If that is the case, then policymakers could allocate resources to utilise these factors for closing the gaps in university participation between students from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds. We tested these premises empirically.



## OUR RESEARCH

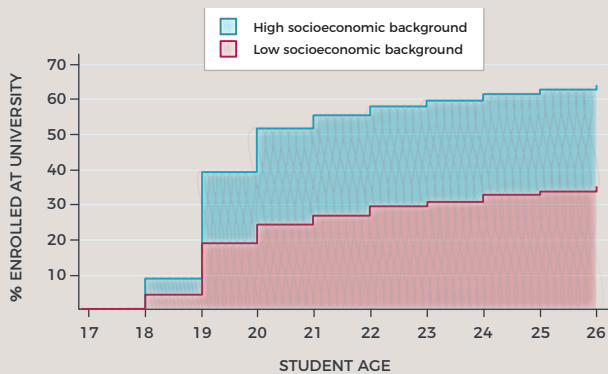
Our research leveraged high-quality, nationally representative longitudinal data from the 2003 cohort of the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth (spanning from 2003 to 2013), and state-of-the-art event-history regression models to investigate three questions:

1. How is socioeconomic background associated with students' likelihood to enrol in university?
2. How are school factors, such as career guidance and school experiences, associated with students' likelihood to enrol in university?
3. Are the impacts of school factors on university enrolment different for young people from higher and lower socioeconomic backgrounds?

# WHAT WE FOUND: CAREER ADVICE AND POSITIVE SCHOOL EXPERIENCES FACILITATE UNIVERSITY ENROLMENTS

Using contemporary data, our research confirmed that the gap in university enrolment between advantaged and disadvantaged students' remains (Figure 1).

Figure 1. UNIVERSITY ENROLMENT RATES, BY SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUND



There is still a large gap in university enrolment rates between young people from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds in Australia

**Note:** Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are those whose families are within the lowest quartile of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) index of Economic, Social and Cultural Status, while students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are those whose families are within the three highest quartiles of this index.

More significantly, the research demonstrated the critical role schools play in influencing young people's educational outcomes, acting as both enabling and equalizing agents.

Of the two sets of school factors investigated, **both career guidance and school experiences were associated with an increasing probability to attend university.** That is, students who held positive attitudes towards school, who reported having a positive relationship with their teachers, and who received career guidance, were more likely to enrol at university across all socioeconomic backgrounds. These school factors are universally beneficial to all students.

Importantly, **not all forms of career guidance were equal** in terms of their influence on university enrolment. The strongest **positive outcomes** were associated with **talks by TAFE or university representatives, and schools' career advisors.** By contrast, employer representative talks and group discussions about careers negatively affected the chances of university enrolment. Figure 2 shows the impact of selected school factors on university enrolments.

Finally, the level of impact of school factors on university enrolment varied for students from different backgrounds. Talks by school career advisors and university or TAFE representatives, along with positive student-teacher interactions, **ha a stronger influence on students from low socioeconomic backgrounds** than their more advantaged peers.

These findings highlight how central schools are to developing interventions to widen university participation.

Figure 2. UNIVERSITY ENROLMENT RATES, BY SCHOOL FACTORS



Positive school experiences, good student-teacher relationships and career advice benefit all students

**Note:** This graph shows university enrolment rates at age 19. School experiences and student-teacher relationships were measured at age 15. Career advice indicators refer to whether a student has ever received that sort of advice while at school.



# SCHOOL-BASED INTERVENTIONS ARE EFFICIENT AND EFFECTIVE AT CLOSING THE UNIVERSITY PARTICIPATION GAP

School-based interventions can positively influence students' university enrolment and save government expenditure in the long run. Given the known benefits of tertiary education participation across life domains, having a greater pool of university-educated individuals will be beneficial for individuals and society as a whole.

Policy initiatives aimed at providing career guidance and positive school experiences have the potential to not only increase, but also widen, university participation amongst young Australians. This is because they can compensate for deficits in important resources, such as Higher Education aspirations or information, which are often not available to young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Interventions to widen participation in Higher Education can be implemented at all phases of the student life course. This research highlights the importance of pre-admission interventions

that take place during secondary school, prior to students deciding whether or not to attend university. This is a critical stage when aspiration building, appropriate role modelling, and targeted information can strongly influence young people's plans to enrol in university. By contrast, policies that provide support to students once they have enrolled at university miss the opportunity to influence the outcomes of those students who chose not to or could not enrol.

School-based interventions are also cost effective for government in the long term. They are preventative strategies which have fewer costs and greater returns on investment than remedial strategies which compensate for social disadvantage due to poor education.

With lower costs and better potential outcomes, investments into school-based initiatives should be prioritised.

To read more about this research visit [lifecoursecentre.org.au/uni\\_participation](http://lifecoursecentre.org.au/uni_participation)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**Dr Wojtek Tomaszewski** is a quantitative sociologist with expertise researching the impact of disadvantage on educational outcomes

in young people. He is passionate about applied research that has a tangible influence on policy and practice. He currently leads a number of projects in the areas of educational disadvantage, school engagement, and access to higher education.



**Dr Francisco Perales** is a life-course social scientist who uses longitudinal data to uncover fresh insights across gender, family and

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## CONTACT US

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