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Fair society needs fair access to universities

Leesa Wheelahan makes the case for those now locked out of university.

THE University of Newcastle makes an important contribution to a fairer Australia because, compared to most other universities, it admits a high percentage of students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

If universities reflected the Australian population the student population should be 25 per cent from low socio-economic backgrounds, 50 per cent medium, and 25 per cent high. Most universities do not achieve this.

There are 37 public universities in Australia and the University of Newcastle stands out because it is one of just eight that admit more than 25 per cent of its students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

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

The only two universities that admit more disadvantaged students

than Newcastle are the University of Tasmania, with almost 35 per cent, and Central Queensland University, with almost 41 per cent.

Charles Sturt, Southern Cross and New England universities, all regional, come close to the 25 per cent threshold.

Students from low socio-economic backgrounds do not get fair access to any metropolitan university in Sydney and NSW is not an equitable state for low-SES students.

There are eight universities in Australia that have the dubious honour of admitting more than 50 per cent of their students from high socio-economic backgrounds, and four of these are in NSW.

Privilege is most concentrated at Macquarie University, which admits two thirds (67 per cent) of its students from privileged backgrounds, followed closely by the University of Sydney, with just over 60 per cent.

Does this matter? Yes. Isn't this just the politics of envy? No. It is the politics of fairness. A fair society is one where everyone has fair access to our best universities.

Universities will argue that they can only take the most qualified students and it is not their fault that

students from low socio-economic backgrounds aren't most qualified.

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

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

Universities will complain that schools are the problem, or that they are situated in privileged areas.

But disadvantaged students will travel to go to university if they have the opportunity.

Universities cannot sit by and blame others.

A university education is the main way society uses to distribute access to jobs and social positions, and unless they are actively involved in trying to redress social disadvantage, they become part of the problem by reproducing it.

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