Introduction

The University of Western Sydney is committed to equity and fairness. One of the key values underpinning all that it does is the equity of access and inclusiveness (UWS Strategic Plan). This clearly indicates the commitment and importance that UWS places on having a diverse student body, and actively encouraging and supporting endeavours to ensure that all members of society are provided with the opportunity to attend our University.

As stated in the UWS Strategic Plan, the University is also closely tied to its geographic region. 73% of students attending the University are from the Greater Western Sydney Region. Just under half the students at UWS are the first in their family to attend university. The Region encompasses areas of great socio-economic disadvantage and many of the most seriously disadvantaged areas of metropolitan Sydney. Building the social and cultural capital of the people of GWS to enable more students from our region to aspire to and attain success in higher education is recognised as a key element of UWS community engagement.

The 2009-2011 Student Equity Directions (SED) document supports the mission and values of the University by fostering an environment of support and inclusiveness for the educationally disadvantaged. It also supports the major strategic plans of the University by reflecting the commitment of UWS to providing educational opportunity for all peoples particularly those of Greater Western Sydney (GWS).

UWS recognises that educational disadvantage still exists for groups within our society including many within our region. The overall aim of the SED document is to enable people from the identified equity groups to fulfil their educational potential. The success of the SED will be measured by the entry into, retention and further academic success at UWS of equity group students. Specific emphasis has been placed upon the area of disadvantage due to socio-economic circumstances. The importance of identifying other groups specific to the GWS region has also been highlighted in the Plan.

While it is recognised that achieving the UWS Student Equity objectives is the responsibility of the UWS community as a whole, Student Support Services will continue to take overall carriage of the planning, promoting and reviewing of student equity matters within the University.

The 2009-2011 SED document is a university wide enabling plan designed to inform the operational plans of functional areas in matters relating to student equity.

It does not address the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as these have been addressed elsewhere.

Background

Equity can be defined as ‘a fair go for all’. This document is aimed at promoting a fair go for all within the context of higher education opportunities through the development of strategies to address the educational disadvantage of specific groups of the community identified in 1990 by the Federal Government in the paper ‘A Fair Chance for All’. The six groups identified nationally as being at significant disadvantage in gaining access to the higher education system are:
1. People from low socio-economic backgrounds (LSES) - defined by postcode using the ABS National Index of Education and Occupation.
2. People with disabilities – self disclosed by the student.
3. People from non English speaking backgrounds – defined as born overseas, speaking a language other than English at home and being resident in Australia for less than 10 years at the time of enrolment.
4. Women in non traditional areas of study - eg Engineering, higher Degrees.
5. People from regional and remote areas
6. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

As part of its higher education equity agenda the Federal Government monitors the performance of Universities. Universities report to DEEWR annually. Key performance indicators (KPIs) are:

1. **Access** – defined as the number of commencing students for each equity group expressed as a percentage of total domestic commencing students.
2. **Participation** – defined as the number of students for each equity group expressed as a percentage of total domestic students within the appropriate cohort (eg Students under 25 years of age from LSES backgrounds are expressed as a percentage of all enrolled domestic students under 25 years of age).
3. **Retention** – defined as the number of students in each equity group who re-enrol in a given year expressed as a percentage of the equity group students who were enrolled in the previous year and were expected to re-enrol
4. **Success** – defined as the proportion of units passed by students within each equity group compared with the total number of units enrolled.

The Federal Government will from 2010 roll the current funding received under the Higher Education Equity Support Program (HEESP) into a larger equity funding program based on 2% of Teaching and Learning funding to support low SES participation. This will increase to 4% of Teaching and Learning funding in 2012 and beyond. Another source of funding will be the School partnerships funding to link post secondary educational providers with low SES schools. Funding will be performance based using agreed KPIs.

**Objectives**

The major student equity objectives for the next triennium are to:

1. Foster a culture where the achievement of student equity related objectives is a UWS wide responsibility by embedding student equity as an integral part of operational planning across the University.
2. Promote broader based participation in student equity across the University through the continued development of collaborative educational support initiatives and the provision of regular equity forums, updates and performance results.
3. Further develop the approach to widening participation for students from low SES backgrounds by building upon current programs, further developing
schools partnerships and researching and developing a range of innovative educational development initiatives focussing on low SES that assist in the enhancement of social and cultural capital in relation to higher education across the Region.

4. Establish and embed ongoing equity support programs that address the educational disadvantage of identified UWS student cohorts such as mature age students and first in family.

5. Identify the characteristics, and combinations of characteristics, that pose the greatest risk of attrition and underachievement for UWS students. Develop strategies to address these risks.

Priorities

The priorities for 2009-2011 reflect the strategic priorities of the University and are aligned to the Federal Government’s agenda on "Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System". The priorities will underpin the major focus of strategies for the next Triennium. They are to:

1. Achieve measurable gains in the key performance indicators relating to students from low socio-economic backgrounds, with particular emphasis on access and widening participation and students over 25 years of age.

2. Improve the retention of students from all equity groups.

3. Improve the success of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

4. Identify specific groups of UWS students whose educational disadvantage, as indicated by their access, participation, success and retention rates, is of particular concern and develop strategies to assist such groups.

Strategies

Over the years, UWS has piloted a number of successful educationally based outreach, research and support strategies. During the next triennium work will continue to embed the programs into the normal activities of the University. The development of specific programs, activities and initiatives will not only be informed by the SED document and the agenda set by the federal government but also institutional data collected through mechanisms such as the UWS Exit Survey, TILT data and IAF Equity data.

Of particular relevance is the outcomes of the Students at Risk Project, which has identified a number of particular cohorts with increased risks of underachievement and early withdrawal.

The strategies for 2009-2011 are:

1. **Identification**
   Develop strategies to identify students and potential students who experience disadvantages in their access, participation and success at university and the major issues they face in achieving their educational goals and potential.
2. **Monitoring & Reporting**  
Develop a detailed set of monitoring and reporting mechanisms on equity performance for UWS in terms of access, participation, success and retention rates for various equity groups and other disadvantaged groups identified by UWS research.

3. **Promotion and Consultation**  
Promote the student equity agenda at UWS through the continued provision of regular reporting, the continued development of web based information and updates and the establishment of regular UWS Equity forums.

4. **Collaboration and Engagement**  
Continue the introduction of a range of collaborative educational development initiatives with targeted schools and community groups within GWS to promote widening participation for low SES groups and the development of the social and cultural capital of GWS. Develop collaborative activities with relevant functional units of UWS.

5. **Outreach**  
Continue to develop a range of strategies and initiatives in conjunction with UWS units, schools, parents and the GWS community to encourage greater participation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in Higher Education. Investigate successful initiatives to foster greater participation from Australia and overseas. Develop strategies to evaluate the effectiveness of any initiatives.

6. **Transition**  
Work with UWS units, schools and the GWS community to enhance the effective transition of students from disadvantaged backgrounds from school, TAFE, employment and other circumstances into study at UWS.

7. **Success and Retention**  
Identify students at risk of underachievement, failure or withdrawal and develop strategies and initiatives to improve the success and retention of these students.

8. **Support**  
Work with other Student Services, Academic units, Administrative units and students to improve the awareness of support for students at risk, enhance the type, quality and accessibility of support and encourage greater usage of the full range of academic, personal, social and spiritual support for students.

9. **Research**  
Collaborate with and support UWS and other research into a range of issues and strategies to foster greater participation and success in higher education for people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Encourage more extensive evaluation and research into Equity-funded projects, initiatives and strategies.

10. **Structural & Cultural Change**  
Develop strategies and initiatives to foster greater diversity at UWS and to encourage wider acceptance of a diverse student population. Contribute to the development of UWS policies, strategies and initiatives to foster greater understanding, acceptance and participation in study at UWS, including working collaboratively with other UWS functional units to maximise the impact and effectiveness of strategies.