

## Student Equity Data Guide

# Selecting and Using Equity Reference Values

### What is an Equity Reference Value?

An Equity Reference Value is a benchmark used to evaluate the level of equity within higher education institutions. These values help place the shares or rates of equity students in the proper context, allowing for meaningful comparisons. For example, the participation rate of a particular equity group can be compared to their population share to see whether they are under-represented in higher education. Similarly, completion rates for equity students can be compared to the rate of non-equity students to assess if equity students are completing degrees at a comparable level to their peers.

### How do I choose an Equity Reference Value?

A good Equity Reference Value should:

- be measured in a similar way to the higher education equity share or rate
- provide relevant and appropriate context for the specific equity measure being assessed
- be regularly reviewed and updated to ensure accuracy and relevance.

The choice of an Equity Reference Value depends on the comparison you want to make:

- For share-based equity measures<sup>1</sup> (e.g., access, participation, attainment), a population proportion or share is typically used as the reference.
- For rate-based equity measures (e.g., retention, success, 6- or 9-year completion rates), the rates of non-equity students are commonly used as a reference, or all students if non-equity rates are unavailable.

For area-based equity groups, such as students from regional, remote, or low socio-economic status (SES) areas, state or territory-specific reference values are recommended, as there is significant variation in these population shares across different regions.

### What if there is no suitable Equity Reference Value?

If a suitable Equity Reference Value is not available, institutions can still assess equity performance by using alternative methods:

- Comparing current shares or rates with data from previous years.
- Benchmarking against similar institutions.
- Using the best available reference value, even if it's not a perfect match.

This guide is part of the **Student Equity Data Guide Series** produced by the **Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success (ACSES)**. This series aims to describe key data areas for student equity in higher education.

Student Equity Data Guides are available on the [ACSES website - aces.edu.au/data](https://www.acses.edu.au/data).

Please contact [aces@curtin.edu.au](mailto:aces@curtin.edu.au) with any feedback or queries.

<sup>1</sup> Please see "Student Equity Data Guide: Equity Performance Measures" for explanations of these measures - <https://www.acses.edu.au/publication/student-equity-data-guide-equity-performance-measures>

## Which Equity Reference Values does the Department of Education use?

The Australian Government Department of Education provides Equity Reference Values in its annual Equity Performance Data release for participation, retention, and success measures. The table below summarises the reference values used for each equity measure and equity group.

|                                         | Equity groups <sup>2</sup>                                                                                                                                                                         |                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                         |
|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                         | Low SES students                                                                                                                                                                                   | Regional or Remote students                                                                                                | Students with disability                                                                                                                                                                                           | First Nations Australian students                                                                                       |
| <b>Participation or enrolment share</b> | Participation rate of high SES students (top 25% of Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) "Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas" (SEIFA) Index of Education and Occupation (IEO)) for 15-64 year olds. | Proportion of 15-64 year olds within the state or territory who live in regional or remote areas based on ABS Census data. | Proportion of people with disability in Australia as reported by the Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers <sup>3</sup> .<br><br>This is age-adjusted to reflect the age-distribution of students at university. | Proportion of 15-64 year olds within the state or territory who are First Nations Australians based on ABS Census data. |
| <b>Retention rate</b>                   | Retention rate of students who are not from low SES areas.                                                                                                                                         | Retention rate of non-regional or non-remote students within the institution.                                              | Retention rate of students who have not reported a disability.                                                                                                                                                     | Retention rate of students who are not First Nations Australians.                                                       |
| <b>Success rate</b>                     | Success rate of high SES students.                                                                                                                                                                 | Success rate of non-regional or non-remote students within the institution.                                                | Success rate of students who have not reported a disability.                                                                                                                                                       | Success rate of students who are not First Nations Australians.                                                         |

## Now I have an Equity Reference Value, what do I do with it?

Once you have your Equity Reference Value, the next step is to compare it to your equity share or rate. This is typically done by calculating a ratio, which helps assess how your institution's equity performance measures up against the benchmark.

How to calculate the ratio:

- Divide your specific equity share or rate by the Equity Reference Value.
- Ratio = (Equity Share or Rate) / (Equity Reference Value)
- This calculation provides a ratio that indicates the relationship between the observed equity measure and the benchmark.

How to interpret the ratio:

- Ratio > 1: Your institution's equity measure is higher than the reference value, reflecting positive performance relative to the benchmark.
- Ratio < 1: Your institution's equity measure is lower than the reference value, signaling potential under-performance that may need attention and improvement.

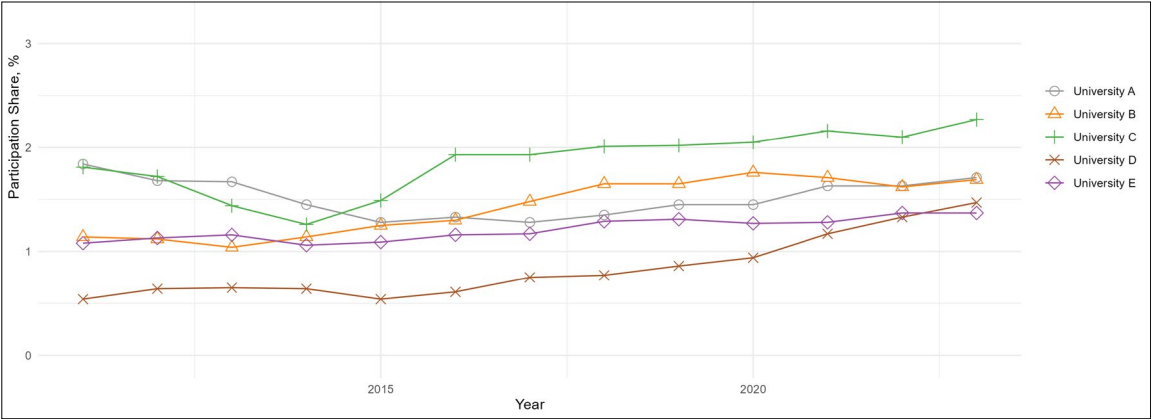
## A worked example – calculating participation ratios

Let's consider the participation share of First Nations Australians in five universities within a state, as shown in Figure 1. Over time, the share of First Nations Australians enrolled at these universities is increasing.

2 Please see "Student Equity Data Guide: Defining Equity Groups" for how these equity groups are defined: <https://www.acses.edu.au/publication/student-equity-data-guide-defining-equity-groups/>

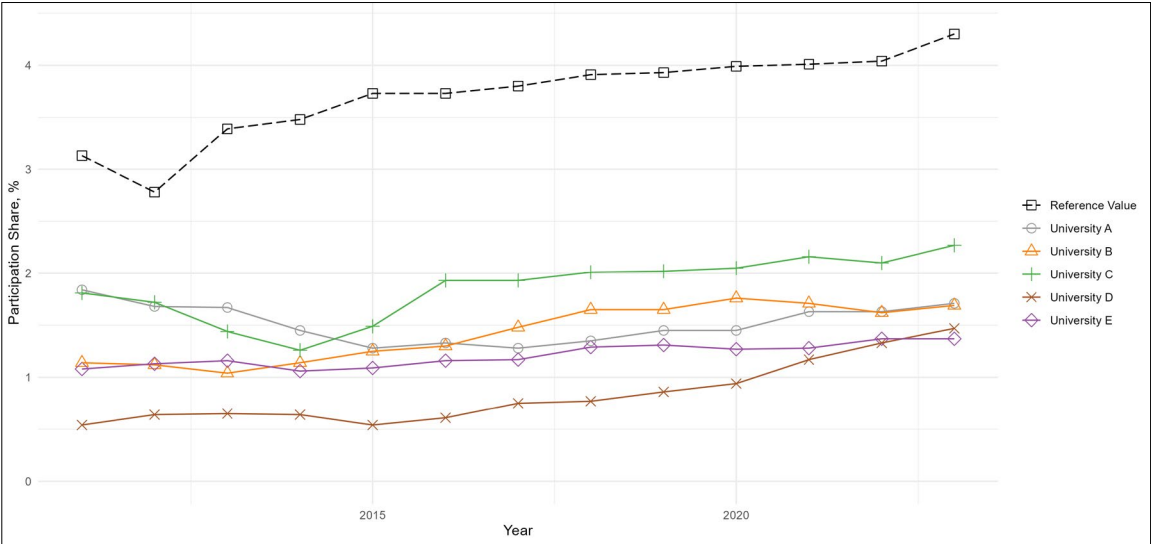
3 <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/disability/disability-ageing-and-carers-australia-summary-findings/latest-release>

Figure 1: Participation shares of First Nations Australians for five universities



Next, we can also plot the Equity Reference Value, representing the state population share of First Nations Australians. As can be seen in Figure 2, this population share is also increasing over time.

Figure 2: Participation shares of First Nations Australians for five universities and the corresponding Equity Reference Value (shown with a dashed line)



We can then calculate the participation ratio by dividing the share by the Equity Reference Value for each year. These ratios are shown in Figure 3. In most universities, the participation ratio has remained steady because the participation and population shares have increased at a similar rate. However, the ratio remains below 1, indicating that First Nations Australians are still under-represented at these universities.

Figure 3: Participation ratios for First Nations Australians for five universities

