

Student Equity Data Guide

Challenges in Comparing Student Outcomes Across Higher Education Institutions

Comparisons between higher education institutions are made all the time. Students look at rankings, course quality, student experience, and outcomes to decide where to study¹. Leaders in higher education also engage in comparisons, regularly assessing how their institution compares to others.

While these comparisons are valuable, it is important to recognise differences – not all universities are the same and that is a good thing. In addition, not all students are the same, so having a range of higher education institutions benefits the entire sector.

However, comparing outcomes of students, in particular students from equity groups, across higher education institutions is important to understand progress and to identify areas for improvement, both within institutions and across the entire higher education sector.

Outcomes of students from equity groups² include measures such as participation, access, success, and retention rates of historically underserved groups, such as students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, regional and remote areas, and First Nations Australian students. However, useful comparisons must consider key institutional differences that may affect student outcomes.

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 - acses.edu.au/data](https://www.acses.edu.au/data).

Please contact acses@curtin.edu.au with any feedback or queries.

Geographic and operational differences

Geographic and operational factors can have a significant impact on student outcomes, making direct comparisons between institutions challenging. Various factors influence overall student outcomes and success, including:

- **State/territory locations:** Most students enrol in higher education institutions from their home state or territory, leading to variations in student demographics. Differences in population size, geography, and socioeconomic conditions impact students' preparation for university, access to campuses, and digital connectivity.
- **Regional campuses:** Institutions in regional areas often face unique challenges, such as higher infrastructure costs and limited access to resources and technology.

1 Examples of these sites: [Compared.edu.au](https://www.compared.edu.au); [Course Seeker](https://www.courseseeker.com); [Good Universities Guide](https://www.gooduniversitiesguide.com.au)

2 Please see <https://www.acses.edu.au/publication/student-equity-data-guide-equity-performance-measures/>

- **Study modes:** Institutions with a high proportion of online students face unique challenges, such as students' access to reliable and affordable internet, and need for flexible support services.
- **Enrolment and life-study balance:** Institutions with a large number of part-time students often see different retention and success trends compared to those with mostly full-time students. Part-time students frequently juggle work and family responsibilities, which can affect their study progress.
- **Academic preparedness:** Students enter university through many different types of pathways and from varied academic backgrounds – this is particularly true of students from equity cohorts. This can impact on their performance in systems designed for a specific type of learner.

Different institutional missions and focus

Australian higher education institutions have a diverse array of missions³, ranging from research-intensive institutions with high entry cut-offs attracting students with high academic preparedness, to institutions who prioritise widening participation through alternative entry pathways and enabling programs. These differences in institutional focus can lead to significant variation in the composition of student cohorts and student outcomes.

For example, institutions with a strong focus on equity may enrol more students from historically underserved backgrounds, who may be more likely to study online, study part-time, have other commitments outside of study, or have lower academic preparedness. Comparing such institutions to those with more selective admission criteria may not provide a fair assessment of institutional student performance. Instead, comparisons should be made between those with similar missions, student profiles, and equity commitments.

Key considerations for equitable comparisons

1. **Context matters:** The most useful comparisons are between institutions with similar student demographics, missions, and operational settings.
2. **Local benchmarks are important:** Comparing institutions within the same state, territory, or region provides a more accurate picture of performance.
3. **Recognise unique challenges:** Institutions with a strong equity focus, or operating in regional or online settings, face distinct challenges that should be considered when making comparisons.

By taking these factors into account, comparisons can be more informative and better reflect the diverse realities of Australian higher education institutions.

³ These missions are agreed each year between the Department of Education and each Table A and Table B provider in mission based compacts. Available here: <https://www.education.gov.au/collections/higher-education-providers-2024-mission-based-compacts>