

**Social inclusion in education:**  
**The challenge of creating capable students in higher education**  
**October 2009**

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In March this year the Minister for Education Julia Gillard announced the Government's aim to increase the proportion of students from low socio-economic (SES), rural, regional and indigenous backgrounds participating in higher education to 20 per cent by 2020. Achieving this target requires a holistic approach to social inclusion policies, with a specific focus on addressing the causes and consequences of educational exclusion of low SES, rural, regional and Indigenous students. This includes tackling the health, financial, cultural and systemic barriers to educational attainment within specific schools, families, and communities; promoting high quality early childhood programs; and improving school retention rates and supporting students through crucial educational transition periods.

The roundtable is an exercise in *knowledge transfer*, allowing researchers, MPs and Senators to discuss what we know and don't know about the question of social inclusion in education, and the key programs and policies needed to achieve the Bradley Review target of 20 per cent participation in higher education from socio-economic groups disadvantaged through social and educational systems, low incomes, remoteness and other factors. The roundtable will be chaired by Professor Ross Homel AO (CHASS Vice-President and Director of the Griffith Institute for Social and Behavioural Research) and Professor Trevor Gale (Director, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, University of South Australia).

Social sciences researchers have a strong track record on the question of improving the educational achievement of socially marginalised children and young people. We can draw on a large international and Australian evidence base pointing to the importance of early childhood development and primary schooling in improving educational outcomes in the long term. Much is also known about the ways in which our educational systems reproduce advantage and disadvantage, and what can be done to overcome systemic barriers to achievement. In this regard, universities have a distinct role to play in targeting outreach programs at preschools, primary and high schools and at crucial educational transitional periods. What is needed is a co-ordinated approach involving the higher education sector, schools, government departments and non-government organisations, aimed at building capacities in communities, preschools, schools and universities.

#### **Discussion questions**

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1. How do children and young people negotiate the Australian education system, particularly the key life transitions of starting school, going to high school, and leaving school?
2. What programs and policies are effective in improving the pathways of socially marginalised children and young people through the school system?
3. What policies and programs are effective at the tertiary level in encouraging participation by marginalised groups in higher education?
4. What are the effective means of evaluating what works and what doesn't in encouraging participation by marginalised groups in higher education?