EDUCATION

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

Two new "Opportunity Classes" for gifted and talented primary school children are being opened over the next two years in the Hunter and South Coast regions of NSW.

Last week the Minister for Education, Mr John Aquilina, announced a new OC class would be opened at the Soldiers Point Public School on the Port Stephens peninsula while another would open at Nowra in 2001.

Specialist teachers trained to support gifted and talented children will be appointed to the two schools.

Over the past four years, the Labor Government has started OC classes in 11 primary schools. With Nowra and Port Stephens, 65 of NSW's 1,650 State schools now have such facilities.

Students sit a test in Year 4 and successful candidates join OC classes for Years 5 and 6. A significant proportion of OC students move on to government selective high schools.

FIRE WATCH

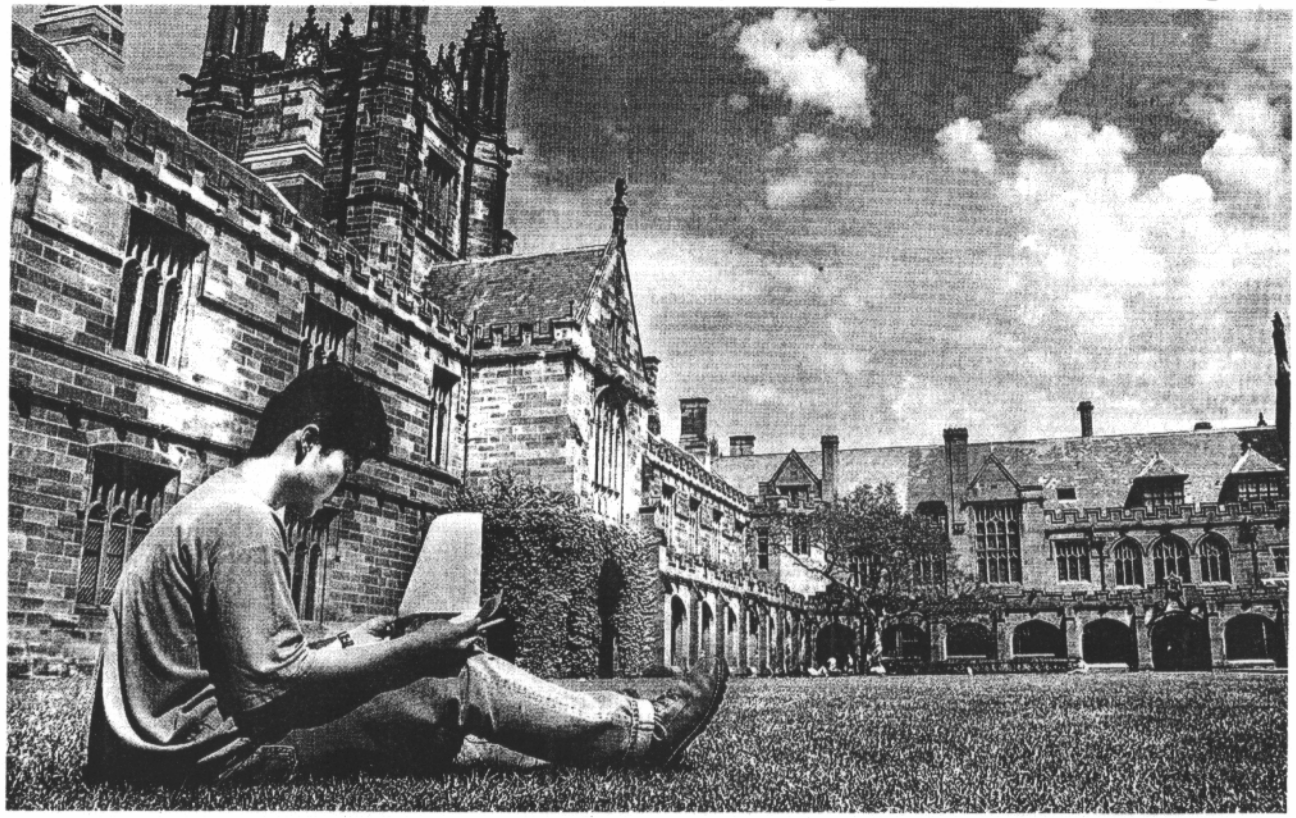
Parents, citizens and other people of good cheer are being asked to help in keeping an eye on suspicious activities around schools this summer. The season to be jolly too often turns into a season of cinders. Even before the official end of the school year at the end of this week, there have been three serious fires in the past week – at Heaton Public School near Newcastle, where 10 classrooms burnt down, at Westfields Sports High where the gym went up in smoke and at Mosman High where a classroom burnt. Despite an Education Department budget of $5 million for school security, including electronic and video surveillance, security patrols, perimeter fencing and flood lighting, the fires seem to keep on burning. The school security hotline is 1800 809 604 in Sydney and 1800 244 461 in country areas.

MORE SMARTIES

Almost one in five of those over the age of 15 is studying some course or another, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Its latest edition of the blockbuster Transition from Education to Work, an insomniac's heaven, shows there were 2,257,200 students in the 15 to 64 age group at schools, unis, TAFEs, colleges and other institutions. Curiously, the ABS found that 57 per cent of these "students" were working, suggesting that Australians are at

Unfair admissions index?

A poor, determined student may be more worthy of a university place than a wealthy rival, argue **Justin Wolfers** and **Andrew Leigh**.



AS final year high school students throughout NSW wait anxiously for their results, educators are bracing for another annual ritual – the debate over university admissions index (UAI) scores.

Once again, parents, teachers and bureaucrats will argue over the process of statistical adjustment; such as which should be worth more, 70 per cent on a chemistry exam, or 70 per cent on a Japanese exam?

But is this really the right focus of debate, or should we be thinking more broadly about scaling? Fundamental to equality of opportunity is the notion that a hard-working student born into a poor family should be able to gain a university degree. Although the rough winds of HECS have shaken somewhat Gough Whitlam's dream of free higher education, this democratic ideal is still central to the way in which most Australians think about access to universities.

Statistical scaling ensures equality on one level by making sure that we are comparing apples earned in the English classroom with apples earned in the maths classroom. But is this enough?

Is a UAI of 75 from a girl at a privileged private school who has had more than $10,000 per year spent on her education really equivalent to a UAI of 75 from one who has had to struggle in an underperforming school in Sydney's western suburbs? Should the score of a professor's son who has grown up surrounded by books really be treated as identical to that of a boy who has had to struggle for emotional stability through his parents' divorce?

Those who calculate the tertiary entrance scores in the US, the so-called SATs, do not think so. They suggest students who excel despite coming from a disadvantaged family, neighbourhood or school be labelled "strivers".

Tom Ewing, whose company runs SAT, argues that a child who has to dodge bullets on the way to school, yet still does as well as one from an elite private school, should have an advantage when it comes to allocating university places. "If they can succeed under those circumstances, they can succeed in college," he says.

He hopes the striver label will give university admissions committees "an indication that there's more than meets the eye". When the proposal was put forward in the US, an angry debate ensued, with the supporters and opponents of affirmative action taking predictable positions. Yet the conflict mostly focused on whether race should be a factor in describing strivers, rather than on the underlying concept of identifying those who have overcome disadvantage.

Following a court decision that banned explicit affirmative action by Texas universities, the State Governor and Republican presidential hopeful, George W. Bush, required State-funded universities to offer a spot to any student finishing in the top 10 per cent of any high school. Like the strivers scheme, Bush's plan recognises the importance of extending the opportunity of a university education beyond the privileged few.

Adjusting tertiary entrance scores in Australia is not new either. Those who administer the UAI regularly boost the scores of students who are disadvantaged by an unexpected illness or family crisis. Universities also have their own equity plans. The University of Newcastle, for example, adds four extra UAI points to students from schools in particular parts of NSW, including the Hunter and the Central Coast.

If we can adjust the scores of sick children and those from regional schools, there seems no obvious reason not to broaden it to a system of affirmative economic opportunity.

What might the implications be? Lecture rooms would certainly become more diverse, marking the end of the socioeconomic and ethnic homogeneity of institutions like the University of Sydney. But what would happen to the quality of education? Would the newly admitted strivers be up to the task?

Asked whether tertiary entrance exams understated the academic potential of students from low-income families, the noted Harvard sociologist Christopher Jencks says: "I know no evidence that supports the theory." He argues instead for a more nuanced approach, whereby universities consider not just test scores, but also information about the student's experiences, whether they attended a "lousy school" and if there is evidence of ambition. It is a more sophisticated approach perhaps, but one which would require Australian universities to change their long-held reluctance towards broadening the criteria for admission.

Perhaps any reluctance towards boosting the scores of disadvantaged students should be tempered by one other fact. Rich students who just miss the cut-off can buy a place in most university courses. Educators evidently believe that these fee-paying students can keep up with the course work. Otherwise they would not have admitted them. If so, surely the same is true of the strivers, who have reached the same league, despite struggling against economic and social hardships.

Justin Wolfers is a PhD student at Harvard University. Andrew Leigh studied at Sydney University.