Unfair admissions index?

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

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

Once again, parents, teachers and homeworkers 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 warm-up songs of HECS have been heard, the 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 in this enough?

If a UAI of 75 is a girl at a privileged private school who has had more than $10,000 spent on her education really equivalent to a UAI of 75 from an er who has had to struggle in an underperforming school in Sydney's western suburbs? Should the scores 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 "activists".

Tom Ewing, whose company runs SATs, argues that students who have to dodge bullets on the way to school, yet still do well as one from an elite private school, should have their achievements elevated to allocating university places. "They are compensating under those circumstances, they can succeed in college," he says.

He hopes the striving label will allow those universities who have admitted students on the UAI to offer a spot to any student finishing in the top 10 per cent of any high school. Like the strivers schemes, 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 plan. 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 econmic opportunity.

What might the implications be? Lecture rooms would certainly become more diverse, and 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 underestimated 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 focused approach, whereby universities consider not just test scores, but also information about the student's experiences, whether they attended a "loosy school" and if there is evidence of ambition. It is a more sophisticated approach perhaps, but one which would require Australian universities to improve 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. Equities evidently believe that these fee-paying students can keep up with the course work. Otherwise they would not have admitted them. If we, surely the same is true of the strivers, who have reached the same league, despite struggling against economic and social hardships.

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