Survey Research Project Part B - The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes towards Higher Education Reforms

INTRODUCTION

Summary

Part A of this research project outlined the main focus of the survey and reviewed important literature relating to current social attitudes towards the proposed higher education reforms and the way these may influence Australian youth in their choice to attend university. Research is currently lacking on the influence these reforms could have on students' decisions to study at university, so The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes towards Higher Education Reforms aims to provide a new perspective by analysing what factors currently influence students and how these are affected by the socio-economic status and geographical location of the students. Knowledge of factors that impact on students' choices to attend university will help to inform the public about the potential ramifications the government's reforms will have. The overall purpose of this survey is to develop an understanding of how these education reforms might influence the choice to study at university by Australian youth, as any changes would have long-term impacts on Australian society and the career options of the youth.

Research Methods

Utilising online surveying techniques, this survey will be delivered over the web and will be self-administered, utilising a recognised online survey platform such as Survey Monkey. Online surveys are inexpensive, more environmentally friendly and allow data to be collected automatically (Andres 2012, 51). For a survey of this size, an online survey is a more suitable option than telephone or face-to-face interviews. Respondents will have the chance to complete the survey in their own time and in more than one sitting, creating a more enjoyable and convenient experience for them (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011, 280). Self-administered surveys also allow respondents answer questions in the privacy and comfort of their own home and as a result encourage more thoughtful and reflective responses (Andres 2012, 47). However, it is usually more difficult to gain detailed answers from open-ended questions, which is why the majority of the questions will be closed questions (Andres 2012, 47). This survey is also a cross-sectional

study since it produces a snap-shot of a population at a specific point in time (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011, 267).

The data collected will include some quantitative data, with the majority being qualitative. The qualitative data will include nominal data, such as gender and geographical data, as well as ordinal data based on opinions. Data analysis will include frequency counts, descriptive statistics, and some inferential statistics to interpret the differences in responses for the dependant variables based on the independent variables selected (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011, 537-558).

METHODOLOGY

Sampling and sampling approaches

The target population for this survey is Australian citizens aged between 15 and 24 who are not currently completing a university degree but are considering doing so. There are currently around 985,117 Australian students studying at university (Australian Education Network 2014), which means the desirable number of respondents required to obtain 1% of the current university population would be approximately 10,000, so this will be the desired response rate. However, a more realistic and achievable sample of 5000 people, which is 0.5% of current university students, will be the target response rate. For a population of 1,000,000, using a confidence level of 95% and a confidence level or margin of error of 3%, Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011, 147) suggest a minimum sample size of 1,066 is required. If 10,000 individuals from the target population were invited to participate, even a 20% response rate would satisfy this minimum requirement. Since the target population is fairly specific, the sampling method will be non-probabilistic, utilising both convenience sampling and volunteer opt-in panels (Andres 2012, 99). One disadvantage of this method is that more respondents aged between 15 and 18 will be surveyed than the older age groups as it is easier to locate them through high schools, so the results may be skewed towards a younger sample.

The remainder of the respondents will be obtained through the electoral roll to enable participants of the correct age to be located. This type of strategy is also problematic since it is based on voluntary participation, and anyone can

choose not to complete the survey (Andres 2012, 113). Invitation to participate in the survey will be delivered directly to high schools for the younger age groups, but for those over 18 it will be through online advertisements. Using cookies allows web sites such as Facebook to tailor advertisements specifically for each individual user after visiting other websites, which will allow this survey to be advertised to those who search for information on universities. Another method is advertising on YouTube and television, with the aim that a video can then be shared across a variety of social media platforms. This will only be possible if it is assumed reasonable funding will be available.

Survey questions

There are seventeen questions in total, and the first questions in the survey will focus on the independent variables, as avoiding sensitive questions until in order to gain the trust of the respondents (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011, 403). These include items on age, gender, household income and geographic location. Questions relating to the dependent variables or more attitudinal subjects will be listed after this, with questions relating to the importance of university, how students intend to pay university tuition fees and whether or not they support the higher education reforms scheme. A variety of questions types have also been used to collect different types of data, with more closed than open to avoid ambiguity. The full list of survey questions has been provided in Appendix 1.

Questionnaire design

The survey itself will begin with an introduction outlining the desired outcomes and purpose of the survey, as well as explaining who the researchers are. Instructions on how to complete the survey will be provided after this, as well as a brief message about ethics to inform the respondents that their responses in the survey will be anonymous and that none of their personal information will be used outside of the survey findings. More specific question instructions will be provided alongside more difficult questions to avoid overwhelming the respondents with too much information in the beginning. As the survey will be completed online, the respondents will also be required to click on a box to confirm their consent in completing the survey. The font used throughout the survey will be a sans-serif font as it is simple and easy to understand online. A fact sheet explaining some of the terms used in the survey, such as HECS, will be provided at the end of the survey for reference.

Validity and reliability

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011, 204) suggest that to improve validity it is necessary to reduce bias as much as possible. The three main sources of bias can be found in the attitude of the interviewer, the attitude of the respondent and the questions (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011, 204). To minimize bias, the questions are worded objectively but allow for subjective responses from the participants. Since the survey will be completed online the risk of bias from the interaction between interviewer and respondent will be lowered, as the survey is self-administered. Validity is also improved by selecting an appropriate sample size, which is why a target response rate of 5,000 has been chosen, since this allows for more than a 99% confidence level and a 3% error margin (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011, 147).

In order for a survey to be reliable its findings must be capable of being replicated (Andres 2012, 122), which is why maximizing the response rate is important. To ensure the desired response rate of 10,000, or at least the target response rate of 5,000, is obtained, respondents will be given a month to complete the survey and will have the contact details of the researchers in case they require any assistance. For students still in high school, principals and teachers will be asked to remind students of their time frame and encourage them to complete the survey to the best of their abilities.

Administration

An incentive will be provided to encourage respondents to participate, with the chance to win one of three tablets by completing the survey. Incentives demonstrate an act of good will on behalf of the researcher, and can also encourage the respondents to ensure they have correctly completed the entirety of the survey (Andres 2012, 142).

The survey will be announced in three stages to provide the participants with enough information and support to encourage them to complete the survey successfully. Initially, an invitation will be provided encouraging potential respondents to participate in the survey with a brief overview of the importance of the survey and details regarding the incentive offered. Another announcement will be made when the survey begins with a follow up email, reminding respondents of the time period and how to complete the survey. The final stage to be announced will be the completion of the survey to ensure respondents complete all questions within the survey window and thanking them for their participation.

Ethics

Ethics is about right and wrong, and Andres (2012, 12) suggests that in survey research the ethical focus is on human dignity; that is, showing respect for the people involved and showing a concern for their welfare and justice. The most important ethical aspect to consider when inviting a target population to participate in an online survey is ensuring informed consent. Informed consent means the participants are clearly informed about the nature of the survey, how the information they provide will be used, how their privacy will be protected, the purpose of the survey and how the results will be published and used (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011, 76-78). Providing participants with full details of the survey allows them to make an informed decision to participate, and helps to avoid a range of ethical dilemmas such as coercion, withholding information about the true nature of the survey and involving people without their consent.

Although most surveys require a consent form, those completed on the web do not generally require the researcher to seek formal consent prior to the respondent participating in the survey (Andres 2012, 141). However, given that a portion of the target population will be school students under the age of 18, informed consent for these participants will be required in two stages; first, parental consent, and secondly, consent from the adolescents themselves (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011, 79). Confirmation of consent by the respondents will also be required online by all other participants, as this ensures they understand what their information will be used for in case it is used incorrectly or unethically.

EVALUATION

Although there is no way of determining how successful a survey will be without having respondents complete it, there are still a number of strengths and weaknesses that can be identified in this survey.

Since the survey will be completed online there may be technical issues that could arise in relation to accessing the internet (Andres 2012, 69). Some people may have older computers while others may have limited access to the internet, which could affect their ability to accurately complete the survey. The survey will be tested in a range of browsers before release to improve accessibility. Respondents may also have more difficulties if they do not understand certain aspects of the survey, as there is no interviewer available to prompt them or explain questions in person (Andres 2012, 47).

It may also be time consuming finding participants, as the target population is quite specific (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011, 273). There is also the possibility that respondents may wish to keep their identity private from the researcher, which can be compromised when using email addresses. As an alternative, a website will be provided through which the respondents can contact the researchers if they do not wish to disclose their email address or other personal information (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011, 281).

Informing respondents of the length of the survey is also important to improve the overall experience, as otherwise respondents may get bored and not fully complete the survey (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011, 284). Since this is not the desired outcome, it is necessary to avoid overloading respondents with information regarding the survey at the beginning, as this may be overwhelming and deter them from completing the survey (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011, 283). Instead, the general instructions will be provided in the introduction, with question-specific instructions provided throughout the actual survey and definitions of terminology used will be provided at the end of the survey.

One of the more positive aspects of this survey is that it is short and simple, with less than twenty questions that should be easily understood by all respondents. Since it is self-administered the bias that can occur with face-to-face interviews is reduced, and by administering it online the costs are also lowered (Andres 2012, 47). Overall, the survey should be easy to complete, take less than an hour to finish, is capable of being completed in more than one sitting and is worded objectively so as to create an enjoyable experience for the respondents to gain the desired data.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Sample Questionnaire

Listed below are the seventeen questions that would be included in the survey questionnaire in the order that they would appear.

1. How old are you?
   a) 15-17
   b) 18-21
   c) 22-24
2. What is your gender?
   a) Male
   b) Female
   c) Other
3. What is your household income?
   a) < $50,000
   b) $50,000 - $100,000
   c) $100,000 - $150,000
   d) > $150,000
4. What is the highest level of education completed by your parent(s) and/or guardian(s)?
   a) Year 10
   b) Year 12
   c) TAFE
   d) Trade
   e) Undergraduate degree
   f) Post graduate qualifications
5. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
   a) Year 10
   b) Year 12
   c) TAFE
   d) Trade
6. Do you live in a metropolitan, rural or remote location? (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2015)
   a) Metropolitan (Capital city or greater than 100,000)
   b) Rural (less than 100,000)
   c) Remote (less than 5,000)

7. How long would it take you to travel by vehicle or public transport to your nearest university?
    a) < 1 hour
    b) 1-4 hours
    c) 5-10 hours
    d) > 10 hours

8. How important is it to you to get a university degree within the next 10 years?
    a) Low priority
    b) Moderately important
    c) Very important
    d) Extremely important

9. From the list provided, rank the factors that would contribute most to your choice of university from 1 to 10, with 1 indicating the most significant factor, and 10 the least significant factor:
    a) Location
    b) Cost
    c) Parent's opinion
    d) Where your friends are going
    e) National or international rank
    f) Size
    g) Extracurricular activities available
    h) College
    i) Degree options
    j) Entry score

10. If the cost of university was to increase, would that have an impact on your decision to study at university?
    a) Yes
    b) No
    c) Not sure

11. If you responded 'yes' to the above question, how might this increase impact on your choice to attend university? (Select up to three from the following, indicating 1 for the most likely impact or choice, and 2 and 3 for the next most likely impacts)
    a) I might not attend at all
    b) I might choose a trade or TAFE qualification instead
    c) I might complete a TAFE course first, then attend university
    d) I may study face-to-face at a university that is cheaper
    e) I may choose a university that is closer to home so I can live with my parents

  f) I may study online so I can work part time and/or live in a cheaper location

  g) I may study part time so I can also work part time

  h) I may defer my studies so I can save money for university

  i) I may chose a university qualification that has cheaper fees

  j) I might only attend university if I am able to gain a scholarship to help with the costs

  k) Other ……………………………

12. Do you plan on paying tuition fees upfront or using the HECS system?

  a) Upfront

  b) Defer my costs using the HECS system

  c) Combination

  d) Not sure

13. If you are using the HECS system, would your choice of degree change if the minimum wage at which you are required to begin repaying your debt was lowered?

  a) Yes

  b) No

  c) Not sure

14. Will you be more likely to choose a regional or metropolitan university if the prices of university degrees change?

  a) Regional

  b) Metropolitan

15. In your opinions, would the proposed higher education reforms improve the rate at which Australian student's complete undergraduate degrees?

  a) Yes

  b) No

  c) Not sure

16. What do you believe is the main purpose of the higher education reforms? (Select one from the following list)

  a. Increase competitiveness of Australian universities internationally

  b. Reduce the cost of higher education for the Australian Government

  c. Increase the number of Australian students attending university in Australia

  d. Improve the rate at which Australian students' repay their HECS debts

  e. Allow Australian universities to set their own fees

17. Do you have any further thoughts or opinions you would like to share with us on the subject?

Appendix 2 – Survey Research Project Part A

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this survey research project is to determine if the changes implemented by the government's higher education reforms will result in changes to university participation for Australians. Currently, the Australian Government is in the process of attempting to introduce a number of reforms into the education system, the most significant of these being the deregulation of tertiary education institutions. The government believes that these reforms will give higher education providers the ability to operate within a 'dynamic economic environment' (Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee 2014, 20), and will boost equity and innovation by allowing institutions to focus on offering students the best possible product (Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee 2014, 24). In the 2014 Budget, it was suggested that the reforms were necessary for ensuring Australia can compete with international universities and is not left behind at a time of rising global performance by universities (Australian Government 2014, 2). These claims suggest the government is focusing on higher education as an international business rather than on the impact the new reforms could have on university participation amongst Australians.

While the Australian Government's position is that prices may decrease as a result of the reforms, most opinions appear to favour an increase as the most likely outcome. The focus of both the government and the media has been on universities themselves and how they will respond, rather than focusing on student needs. Little data appears to be available on the individual student and the factors that impact on university choice. Access to this data would help interpret the impact of changes in our society.

Research question: Will changes implemented by the government's higher education reforms result in changes to university participation for Australians?

Sub questions:
    a) What factors impact on the choice to attend university?
    b) How would participation change if university degree prices increase?
    c) How do these factors change with socio-economic status and geographic location?

Null hypothesis: The implementation of the Australian Government's higher education reforms would result in no changes to university participation by Australians.

The survey will be conducted online, as a cross-sectioned study aiming to produce a 'snap-shot' of the target group at this point in time (Cohen et al. 2011, 267). It will target 15-24 year old Australians who have not studied at university but are considering doing so. The age group selected is appropriate as it represents 59% of the students at university (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013, para. 3). Nominal data such as gender, age and geographic location will be collected in addition to range of data on attitudes and preferences. The intention will be to use the data collected on these independent indicator variables to analyse and understand the factors impacting on the choice to attend university, and how this choice might be affected by higher education reforms.

The higher education system is extremely important for assisting students in accomplishing their career goals and attaining a higher level of knowledge in their area of interest. The more people that receive a tertiary education degree, the better it is for Australian society, as more people will be educated and skilled in particular professions. On average, Australian university graduates earn 75% more than those who only complete year 12 (Australian Government 2014, 5). Job prospects also improve by studying at university, and one of the common reasons for studying is to improve the chances of gaining employment (Norton 2013, 11). If more Australians are educated, unemployment rates will most likely decrease and the standard of living will improve, with more people working in highly skilled, highly paid jobs. For Australian society to continue as it is, the education system needs to remain accessible to as many different students and demographics as possible.

The reason for undertaking this study is to determine the consequences that may arise from implementing the government's higher education reforms, and how these consequences will affect Australia as a whole. If the cost of gaining a university degree increases as a result of the deregulation, choosing whether or not to continue onto tertiary education after high school may become a much more difficult decision. More students may drop out in year 10 if they believe they will never be able to afford university costs, or people may take longer to complete their degrees while being forced to work full or part-time in order to afford the high expenses. Overall, this could result in a

less educated population and an increase in unemployment rates, which is a serious consequence for the people of Australia and the government.

Many different socio-economic groups already struggle with the financial and emotional stress of tertiary education, so it is important to understand how these stressors could change with the introduction of the government's education reforms. After graduating from high school, many intelligent young women have to face societal expectations of achieving a successful marriage and children in addition to developing their talents and pursuing their chosen career (Lea-Wood 2003, 40). They are expected to be able to accomplish these goals without compromising the traditional societal values of selflessness and nurturance placed on them, which will become increasingly difficult if they are left with greater debt after completing a university degree (Lea-Wood 2003, 40). Rural students also struggle to find full time employment after finishing high school, and many are disadvantaged by their restricted access to tertiary education (Franklin 2010, 5). As a result, Franklin believes they are at risk of becoming marginalised since they do not have the qualifications to access 'wealth industries of knowledge management and information technology' (Franklin 2010, 5). In addition to this, students from low socio-economic status groups are already underrepresented in the higher education system, and it is likely that these reforms will only decrease their participation (Karimshah et al. 2013, 5). It is important to determine what a potential increase in university tuition fees could have on participation, because otherwise the divide between institutions that can generate resources internally compared to those that cannot will only increase, forcing them to offer a less enjoyable experience for their students (O'Connor and Moodie 2007, 3).

BACKGROUND

The *Budget 2014-15: Higher Education* released by the Australian Government in 2014 identified a range of problems with the current higher education system and proposed reforms that would 'ensure that Australia's higher education system is sustainable into the future' (Australian Government 2014, v). While providing a detailed overview of the proposed plans and reasons for implementing the new measures, the Government provided a biased report, leaving out important data so as to skew the information to their favoured position. Although it is true that Australia only has 5 universities in the top 100 in the world compared to the United States' 46 (Australian Government 2014, 4), when compared to the number of

universities each country has and the population, Australia has a much higher percentage in the top ranking list. With a population of around 316 million (Google 2015), the USA has 4,599 universities (U.S. Department of Education 2013, para. 1), which means that only 1% of their universities are in the top 100. On the other hand, Australia has a population of only 23 million (Google 2015) and has a total of 41 universities (Australian Government 2012), which means that they have approximately 12.2% of their universities in the top 100 worldwide. Although the government claims that 'our universities have limited prospects of competing with the best in Europe and North America' (Australian Government 2014, 3), this is not true, and in fact Australia has a higher percentage of top ranking universities than the United States. The government also pointed out that their main focus is on having universities respected among the best in the world, and allowing universities to pursue their own goals to cater to communities (Australian Government 2014, 2). These suggestions all focus on the desires of the higher education institutions to compete internationally rather than focusing on the need for improving access to quality and affordable tertiary education for Australians.

Another important document to consider is the *Higher Education and Research Reform Amendment Bill 2014 [Provisions]* released by the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee (2014). Much longer and more detailed than the original budget report on higher education, this document discussed many of the issues raised in relation to the education reforms, and attempted to assure those concerned about the possibility of the significant rise in tuition fees that there is 'no compelling evidence supporting assertions that fees will rise so dramatically' (Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee 2014, 28). While this document contains less evidence of bias, and includes opinions from organisations such as the Australian Council of Trade Unions and the National Tertiary Education Union, it still focuses primarily on the benefits for the industry rather than on the benefits for Australians.

The report published by the Review of Higher Education Regulation in 2013 outlined the problems impacting on the education sector and how these could be solved. In the report, the government indicated that the number of Australians participating in higher education had increased, and that Australia had maintained an 'outstanding reputation for delivering quality education' (Review of Higher Education Regulation 2013, 1). However, the government's interpretation of data does not appear to be consistent, as a report in the subsequent year claimed that Australian universities would need to meet high

quality standards to compete with the world's best (Australian Government 2014, 4). This report does highlight a number of important measures for improving the higher education system, such as the need for a shared understanding between universities regarding entry criteria, and for more collaborations across networks and institutions (Review of Higher Education Regulation 2013, 27).

In a more opinionated article by Antonia Maiolo, the potential risks of deregulating higher education institutions are highlighted in a short and concise manner (Maiolo 2014, 5). Maiolo emphasised the importance of preventing the Government from passing the reform bill by quoting economists such as the architect of the HECS-HELP program Bruce Chapman, who claimed that 'outstanding student debt would exceed the level the federal Budget implied under a deregulated fee system' (Maiolo 2014, 5). The article also outlined the consequences for students, suggesting students will have higher debts at the end of their working lives, and will gain no additional value from the deregulations for the additional money they will be paying (Maiolo 2014, 5). Maiolo also pointed out that caps on university course fees could be removed if the reforms are implemented, which gives institutions the power to determine the price they choose to charge students for an education (Maoilo 2014, 5).

In an article by Nathan, Shawkataly and Tan Gek Siang, the differences between industry-driven and society-driven higher education systems are outlined in detail (Nathan et al. 2013, 113). The authors point out that while industry-driven universities tend to focus on building 'factory-ordered-graduates', society-driven institutions emphasise a more balanced perspective, focusing on the students' personal lives, careers and role in society (Nathan et al. 2013, 113). It is suggested in the article that the syllabus' in industry-driven education systems are designed to meet the specific standards that industries demand, aiming to enhance the employability of the students so they can secure jobs once they have graduated (Nathan et al. 2013, 112). However, as the authors note, students also need to be able to contribute to communities and be involved in society, since interpersonal skills are a good indicator of job performance (Nathan et al. 2013, 112).

Published by the Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education (DIISRTE), the *Review of higher education access and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People: final report*

outlined many of the adversities that indigenous students are still facing when entering the tertiary education system. The report stated that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are still less likely to complete year 12 and participate in university, emphasising the financial and emotional pressure they face when attempting to attend a tertiary education institution (DIISRTE 2012, 79). In 2012, 40% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students were from regional or remote locations. If financial costs of university have a greater impact on the choice to study for regional and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, then any increase in tuition fees due to deregulation would have a significant impact on their attendance.

Karimshah et al. (2013) provided and in-depth discussion of the factors influencing the attendance of low socio-economic status (SES) groups at university in their article. The authors claimed that the main factors affecting low SES students are unfamiliar cultural practices, lack of outreach programs and lack of transitional support (Karimshah et al. 2013, 6). While most students will experience stressors such as financial problems, health problems, family issues and relationship problems, students from a low socio-economic background are more likely to experience multiple of these at once (Karimshah et al. 2013, 9). Although both low SES and other groups both suffer from some kind of financial stress, it is those from a low socio-economic background who are more likely to be significantly affected by it (Karimshah et al. 2013, 9). The authors also note that the attachment of low SES students to university studies is much more precarious than of higher SES students, which suggests that any changes to the stressors already impacting on them could significantly affect their attendance (Karimshah et al. 2013, 12).

Despite the extensive range of literature about the higher education reforms, there appears to be a gap regarding what factors influence student participation at university. The Australian Bureau of Statistics has data on where students are more likely to study, suggesting most students from capital cities will remain there, and those who lived outside of capital cities will study in regional areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013, para. 8). There is also research data on factors that influence students from low socio-economic groups, but these focus mostly on social factors and methods for preventing such students from dropping out part-way through their degree (DIISRTE 2012, 75). What is lacking is research showing how these education reforms could impact on students' decisions to study at university. If they have to study part-time, whether or not they will have to defer studying until

they have financial security, and where they will study if degrees are more expensive are all important questions that are unable to be answered with current research. This research project will aim to fill the gaps regarding how changes to the government's higher education reforms will affect university participation in Australia.