

An act of reason, not “faith”: effective scholarships for equity students’

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This presentation reports on findings from a mixed methods Australian study which investigated the relationship between equity scholarships and recipients’ retention and success outcomes. In the context of proposed higher education policy reforms to the financial support arrangements of disadvantaged students, the study aimed to address a research gap around the effectiveness of equity scholarships in terms of student outcomes to inform policy and practice.

The study involved three institutions, deliberately chosen for their difference: a Group of 8 university, a member of the Australian Technology Network and an unaligned university with regional origins. It investigated which type of scholarship is most effective for students from equity groups. Designed as comparative case studies, using retrospective cohort analysis, the study triangulated institutional data on 2013 scholarship holders with data from a survey of the same cohort. Findings concurred with time series data collected by one of the participating universities. The study found that equity scholarships positively influence retention outcomes for all recipients. Findings suggest that recipient characteristics were generally more influential on student retention outcomes than scholarship type. The relationship between scholarships and success varied by institution, suggesting a relationship between scholarship eligibility criteria and success. Recommendations address scholarship program design and targeting, the need for integration of equity scholarships with other student support services as well as the importance of income support of disadvantaged students provided by the Commonwealth.