Diversity goals fall far short

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SCEPTICISM about whether the Gillard government’s university participation targets will be met is sparking calls to rethink ways to attract students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds. They are still chronically under-represented three years after measures to increase their participation were introduced.

While a fairer and improved school system is seen as a key factor for meeting the target, Deakin University equity expert Trevor Gale believes universities remain out of touch with the needs and aspirations of many potential students.

Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans says the government is on track to raise the proportion of 25-34 year olds with a degree to 40 per cent by 2025 (from 36.8 per cent now).

But critics warn that progress has been inflated by a blowout in immigration. There are now expectations that growth will slow as universities struggle to attract students and the school system finds it hard to boost achievement.

By 2020 the government also aims to increase the proportion of degree-holders from poor backgrounds to 20 per cent compared with population parity at 25 per cent. But the proportion only rose to 16.8 per cent in 2011 from 16.5 per cent in 2010.

A spokeswoman for Senator Evans says the equity target is on track and growth in 2011 is slightly ahead of original forecasts. She says the key to meeting the target is building aspiration at school and providing more academic support.

"Once students from disadvantaged backgrounds have entered university the likelihood of them completing their course is broadly similar to that of the general higher education population," she says.

However, Professor Gale says neither target will be met, especially once immigration is excluded.

Growth in first-year enrolments in 2009 totalled 14,721 and this slowed to 12,835 in 2010 and 6242 in 2011. He says the sector needs to grow at 25,000 a year to meet the 2025 target.

"These are times for some evaluation of what we are doing," he says.

Professor Gale says blaming the school system is "an easy out".
"We have tried to open the doors a bit wider because we think everyone naturally wants to go to university. But people are finding that the university education on offer doesn't appeal, so they aren't going," he says.

Grattan Institute higher education expert Andrew Norton also agrees the target for students from low socio-economic backgrounds will not be met despite increased opportunity from the deregulation of demand.

He says the target should be dumped because it encourages universities to engage in "borderline unethical behaviour" if they market courses to unprepared students who are at greater risk of dropping out.

Rather than blaming students, Professor Gale says, universities need to take responsibility for supporting and engaging those from different backgrounds.

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