



ORIMA



NCSEHE
National Centre for Student
Equity in Higher Education



Curtin University

National Centre for Student Equity in Higher
Education (NCSEHE), Curtin University
Department of Education

Centring the Voices of Harder to Reach Under-Represented and Disadvantaged Cohorts

August 2023

Our ref: 5543

Quality and Compliance Statement

This project was conducted in accordance with the international quality standard ISO 20252, the international information security standard ISO 27001, as well as the Australian Privacy Principles contained in the Privacy Act 1988 (Cth). ORIMA Research also adheres to the Privacy (Market and Social Research) Code 2021 administered by the Australian Data and Insights Association (ADIA).

Acknowledgments

ORIMA pays respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples past and present, their cultures and traditions and acknowledges their continuing connection to land, sea and community.

We would also like to acknowledge and thank all the participants who were involved in our research for their valuable contribution.

This project was undertaken via a partnership between the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) and ORIMA Research. The NCSEHE team included Professor Shomit Sagar, Professor John Phillimore, Dr. Cathy Stone, Associate Professor Ryan Naylor and Dr. Amma Buckley.

Foreword

The Australian Universities Accord Panel has been set the very important task of establishing a roadmap for Australian higher education for the next two to three decades.

This work commenced with the Accord Panel's *Review of Higher Education* ('the Review'), which has seen underlying research, including discussions with the higher education sector and its key stakeholders, take place since November 2022. This culminated in the release of the Review's Discussion Paper in February 2023 and its Interim Report in July 2023.

At the centre of the Review's deliberations are concerns about the equitable distribution of educational opportunity in Australia higher education, not only in terms of initial access but also retention, completion and post-study outcomes. This is a critical issue, given the Interim Report notes that in the next five years at least 50% of newly created jobs will require a higher education qualification, with BIS Oxford Economics expecting this to increase further in coming decades.

As a result, the Review in its Interim Report sets a target of 55% of the Australian population attaining a higher education qualification. Presently, only 38% of Australians aged 25 to 34 years have a Bachelor's degree or higher, so there is work to do. To meet this target, the Review notes that 300,000 additional higher education students are required each year by 2035, and around 900,000 additional students each year by 2050.

Navigating Better Choices

Readers of this report will be struck by the very clear evidence around the difficulties of navigating Australia's higher education system. These navigational skills are increasingly a requirement of a would-be student, but this is not always a safe assumption to make. Students from non-traditional backgrounds face information asymmetry – i.e., they have access to much less understanding of choice in the system than the university providers.

Since there are so many moving parts in the higher education system today, universities will need to become much better at ensuring that information and understanding align so that informed choice can be made. Indeed, there are very few other areas of life in which long-term financial commitments are made with such a hazy grasp of what these mean in practice.

The goal should be one of knowing that future students from all backgrounds are able to take advantage of learning and debt options with confidence. The information and guidance to do so may not necessarily come from the same university that a student is dealing with, and some degree of separation may help to grow confidence in reliable, accurate information.

The equity challenge will depend on how well universities themselves are able to pivot to placing users at the heart of what they do and to organise themselves accordingly. Some universities already lead others by a clear margin so there is potential to share best practice. A step change in the student-centricity of universities as a whole sector is likely to have disproportionate benefits for traditionally under-represented future students.

The Equity Challenge

The proposed expansion in attainment cannot occur without a strong focus on Australia's under-represented student cohorts. This includes people from low-socio-economic or regional/rural/remote locations, First Nations people, people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, and people with disability.

Each of these groups is under-represented in participation rates in Australian higher education. This is despite a period of considerable expansion in Australian higher education since 2009 that saw overall student numbers increase by 42%, including a 63% increase in enrolments among students

from low socio-economic backgrounds and a 95% increase in enrolments among First Nations Australians. Despite this growth, the enrolment shares of both these groups are only around two-thirds of their population. In addition, educational disadvantage impacts over the course of a student's enrolment. First Nations students have degree completion rates over a six-year period of around 44% compared to 65% for all students. Further, equity tends to compound where students belong to multiple groups. Recent research found that the probability of completing a Bachelor's degree among non-equity students was 72%, falling to 66% for students in one equity group and 60% for those with joint equity status.

This highlights the multi-dimensional aspects of equity status and represents the lived experienced of students who come from areas or backgrounds without advantages in relation to accessing higher education, including those who are the first in their family to attend university and people who must commute or relocate from their local communities to participate in higher education.

The required increase in higher education participation, coupled with the current attainment gap among equity students implies that participation efforts must focus on currently under-represented and disadvantaged cohorts. This is the equity challenge.

What this Study Tells Us

The Review asked the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) to engage with under-represented and disadvantaged cohorts in relation to centring their collective voice and feedback on the themes identified in the Review's Discussion Paper, with a view to incorporating the findings as part of the feedback to the Interim Report.

NCSEHE partnered with ORIMA Research, to undertake a mixed methods study incorporating focus groups, interviews, and a targeted quantitative survey to identify key issues affecting higher education participation among these cohorts.

This study, which draws on the views of over 1,650 current and prospective students, reports back on the findings from that work. As requested by the Review, the Executive Summary to this report contextualises the findings in relation to key questions in its Discussion Paper.

The overarching theme of this work is that under-represented and disadvantaged cohorts share common concerns about higher education participation, but also have distinct concerns and requirements.

Aspirations: While career-orientation was a primary driver of higher education and reflects participants' observations of the advantages of post-secondary education in a changing labour market, non-market influences also prevailed:

- First Nations Australians were more likely to be motivated by a desire to be a leader in their community.
- CALD respondents were more likely to be motivated by family expectations.
- People with disability were more likely to be motivated by notions of respect in view of low expectations and negative stereotypes.

This adds to an established evidence base on the higher education aspiration, one that suggests equity students have different motivations for entering higher education.

Conclusion: The Review should consider how institutional pre-access programs can utilise relevant research and expertise to inform universities' general operations in relation to engagement with prospective students.



Financial Support: Participants in the ORIMA research identified financial measures across the student life cycle as being critical to boosting demand for higher education. This included a greater level of immediate income support for students; reductions in student course contributions and HECS-HELP debt; and greater income support for undertaking work placements. In addition, financial factors were key in influencing their decision to study individual subjects.

Conclusion: The Review should consider exploring financial support options for under-represented and disadvantaged students currently in operation with the Tertiary Access Payment (TAP) for regional, rural and remote students. A targeted approach to student income payments and student contributions are vital to lifting participation among these cohorts.



Flexible Delivery of Education: Flexibility was important to participants. This begins with the greater use of alternative entry pathways by under-represented and disadvantaged students compared with the general population, particularly between the vocational education and training (VET) sector and higher education. This also included their use of enabling programs in higher education. Further, participants valued the availability of online learning – in the case of regional, rural and remote students and older entrants (those aged 21 and above). Finally, greater recognition and support of student life circumstances was viewed as an important way to boost underrepresented student groups.

Conclusion: Populations in under-represented and disadvantaged cohorts rely on flexible approaches to both accessing university study (e.g., alternative pathways; enabling programs), progressing through their studies (e.g., using online learning for after-hours study) and in addressing changing life circumstances. The Review should consider the extent to which higher education funding streams can be channeled to create and maintain infrastructure and expertise in these initiatives, and the extent to which other policy initiatives can bolster them.



These highlights represent only a selection of the higher-level themes from this work. The report details a myriad of other issues which intersect with the broad themes above and which may be of particular interest in connection with various aspects of the Accord Panel's deliberations.

Shamit Saggar

Executive Director

National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE)

August 2023

Contents

Executive summary.....	7
Financial Influences: Considerations around course costs and financial implications of studying	11
Access and Opportunity: Considerations in relation to supporting motivation, preparation and entry.....	11
Education Delivery: Considerations around improved course delivery, accessibility and flexibility.....	11
Research background and objectives	13
Summary of our approach	15
Cohorts of interest	15
Quantitative research methodology.....	16
Qualitative research methodology	16
Reporting approach	17
Understanding the research findings	17
Profile of respondents	19
Quantitative research respondents	19
Qualitative research participants	23
What actions and solutions are needed now to achieve an inclusive higher education system that addresses the major changes underway in our society, economy and environment?	24
Boosting demand from people to study in higher education	24
Pathways between VET and higher education	27
What kind of higher education system does Australia need in two and three decades' time to ensure the ongoing inclusion of all Australians?	33
The future of Australian higher education	33
Quality learning environments	38
Work-integrated learning and professional placements.....	41
Lifelong learning	43
How can we ensure all Australians have the opportunity to participate and succeed in higher education?	48
Motivation for pursuing higher education	48
What is needed to improve access to and preparation for higher education?	53

Changes needed to increase participation and success for under-represented groups in higher education studies	61
Supporting students from under-represented groups to persist and succeed in higher education	65
Reforms to ensure quality student experiences.....	67
Changes to ensure physical and cultural safety while studying	72
Job-Ready Graduates Package	74
Conclusions.....	76
Overarching Key Insights	76
Financial Influences.....	77
Access and Opportunity.....	78
Education Delivery	79
Closing remarks.....	81

Appendices

Appendix A: Map of survey questions to lines of enquiry and Accord question references

Executive summary

The Australian Government is undertaking a review of Australia's higher education system, and an Australian Universities Accord Panel was established to comprehensively consider a range of issues across teaching and learning, funding and regulatory settings, strengthening engagement between the higher education and vocational education and training sectors, research and international education. As part of the Accord Panel review, the panel sought to engage with under-represented and disadvantaged current and prospective students, who were harder to reach as part of the Accord consultation process. The cohorts of interest include people:

- identifying as First Nations people;
- living in regional, rural and remote areas;
- with disability;
- from low socio-economic backgrounds;
- from culturally or linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds;
- who are the first in their family to attend university;
- not currently in employment or training; and
- experiencing cumulative disadvantage.

ORIMA Research, in partnership with the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) captured the views of over 1,650 students (current and prospective) through a mixed methodology approach involving both a large-scale quantitative survey to maximise reach and input of the target cohorts, and more targeted and tailored qualitative focus groups and interviews.

Key findings from the research are presented with alignment to the Accord Discussion Paper questions.

What actions and solutions are needed now to achieve an inclusive higher education system that addresses the major changes underway in our society, economy and environment?

Financial support was identified as a key means to boost demand from people to study in higher education, which reflects the value it has in easing pressures for students to financially support themselves while studying (e.g. balancing study and work) and to reduce future pressures from the debt incurred from studying. Among respondents to the survey, the three most-favoured options to **boost demand for people to study in higher education** reflected different financial concerns associated with study – 'greater financial support while studying' (41%), 'reduce HELP / HECS debt from study' (40%) and 'being paid to undertake work placements' (32%). Current students were more likely to select 'reduce HELP / HECS debt from study' as a way to encourage participation (46% compared to 35% of prospective students).

Movement between VET and university is a strong trend in higher education, but there remains room for improvement when supporting prospective students. Support and communication around the transition, entry processes, recognition of prior study and individualised guidance may be key areas of focus. By providing supports in these areas, it may reduce the risk of prospective students becoming discouraged from pursuing higher education when considering whether such transitions would be viable or worthwhile. Among survey respondents who were current or former higher education students around 1 in 4 (23%) had **moved between a VET course and university degree** (in either direction). While most students noted the pathway as easy (62%), less than half (46%)

described the support they received as good. Several barriers identified relate to support, guidance and communication through the transition process, including being unsure who to talk to (31%), not having enough support to navigate the process (22%), poor communication with providers (21%) and lack of information (20%). Collectively, 82% of respondents who had moved between VET and university nominated at least one support, guidance or communication issue among their top three barriers.

What kind of higher education system does Australia need in two- and three-decades time to ensure the ongoing inclusion of all Australians?

The major theme in creating a more equitable higher education sector in the medium term was recognition of financial barriers to access and participation. The need for improved financial support was heard regarding study generally (identifying fees, relocation support, study assistance and Youth Allowance), and in placements particularly. Respondents rated the degree to which aspects of the higher education system needed to **change in order to meet future job and skill needs**. The aspects identified as needing the greatest change were 'better financial support' (84% of respondents rated this aspect as requiring significant change), 'relationship between education and jobs' (71%) and 'more opportunities to study online or close to home' (69%).

Prospective students were more likely to indicate that opportunities to study online or close to home were in need of change (75%, compared to 64% of current students), as were respondents aged 30 and older (76%, compared to 72% of 21-29-year-olds and 63% of 16-20-year-olds). The importance of study options being **online or closer to home** may also point to financial implications related to travel and/or relocation, but may equally relate to importance of community and the desire for flexibility. These were particularly important for mature-aged students, underlining its importance in supporting lifelong learning.

Overall, 74% of students rated the teaching quality in higher education as positive. That said, flexibility and student support were strongly linked to perceived quality of education. Students identified the most important factors in the provision of a **quality learning environment** as flexibility in learning options (48%), academic and learning support (38%) and the learning resources (33%).

- First Nations respondents rated mental health and well-being support much higher than other cohorts (35% compared to 26% overall);
- Flexible learning options were favoured more among regional, rural and remote students (56% compared to 48% overall); and
- Respondents with disability were more likely to favour accessibility as an important factor in a quality learning environment (34% compared to 22% overall).

Over two-thirds (69%) of respondents rated **practical experience** as among the most important components of employability and success. Both general / broad skills (52%) and specific / technical skills (47%) were considered important, while connections and knowledge of the field was selected by just over half (51%) of respondents.

Suggested changes to **work-integrated learning and professional placements** align with other findings about financial concerns with 62% selecting 'being paid / being paid more during work placements'. Having an income during this period so that the negative financial impact did not overwhelm the benefits of the opportunity was also a primary focus of the qualitative insights.

While 69% of respondents noted that **lifelong learning** was important, perceived barriers were consistent with the abovementioned findings of this consultation, namely **financial influences** (i.e. course fees too high – 47%, financial ability to support myself – 46%) and **flexibility** in studies to cater for personal circumstances (i.e. time required to complete studies – 31%, lack of flexibility in

options – 24%, and other priority commitments – 24%). Suggestions to encourage lifelong learning were reducing course fees (44%), improving students financial position (37%), improving flexibility in study options (28%) and increases in post-study earnings (28%).

These findings suggest that increasing higher education participation may be facilitated by addressing the following structural areas:

- higher education that is aligned with employment and career outcomes by adopting curricula that develops practical skills that can be used in future workplaces; and
- the availability of financial support and flexible arrangements to participate in professional placements and lifelong learning.

How can we ensure all Australians have the opportunity to participate and succeed in higher education?

Financial support as well as the need for flexibility and accommodation around unique life circumstances and challenges are central factors in decisions around undertaking higher education, view about changes needed to increase participation and success in higher education, as well as quality student experiences for under-represented groups.

Systemic interventions or responses from governments and providers may help alleviate these challenges and facilitate more equitable access and opportunity for success. These include reduced course fees, greater availability of scholarships, availability of financial support, paid work placements (where required) and more flexibility in how coursework is delivered (e.g. online delivery and timetabling).

Information gaps and support needs around higher education were evident among prospective students. To facilitate effective decision-making for prospective students in their decision to enter higher education, these gaps and support needs should be addressed so they can plan more fully and consider their options:

- awareness of options to finance the cost of study and future debt – this is particularly important given the centrality of financial considerations in decisions to enter higher education (both living costs and future debts);
- clarity on the different pathways to enter higher education and support through the enrolment process; and
- a picture of the potential benefits and experiences afforded by higher education.

The primary **motivations** for pursuing higher education were reported to be ‘help to get a more interesting or rewarding job / career’ (49% of current / former students, 47% of prospective students), that ‘study was needed for the job / career they were after’ (57% of current, 44% of prospective students) and ‘interest in learning more’ (41% of current, 44% of prospective current students). In other words, establishing a career and intrinsic rewards were the primary motivations for pursuing higher education.

- First Nations respondents were more likely to be motivated by a desire to be a leader for their community (22% compared to 8% overall among prospective students; 14% compared to 7% for current students);
- CALD respondents were more likely to be motivated by the expectations of their family (15% compared to 9% overall); and

- People with disability were more likely to be motivated by wanting to show people that they could do it, to get respect, or overcome low expectations and negative stereotypes (20% compared to 13% overall).

The most important factor influencing decisions on **what to study** was financial support / scholarships (89% of respondents nominated this as important), followed by knowledge of different ways to enter study pathways (81%) and the availability of online learning (79%). The availability of **online learning** was *more* important for:

- those from regional / rural / remote areas (82% compared to 77% for all others);
- those experiencing cumulative disadvantage (81% compared to 73% for all others); and
- respondents aged 21 and above (84% of 21-29-year-olds / 85% of 30+ years, compared to 70% of 16-20-year-olds).

The qualitative research highlighted the complex interaction of the abovementioned influences in **student decision-making** due to their varied personal circumstances – including the need to obtain an income during studies, family / caring commitments, trade-offs based on course expense versus course interest, the mode of study (i.e. online, in-person, blended) and geographic location of study. The importance of good quality information and its lack of availability in the current student experience, and how much support students are given were also highlighted.

Having a fundamental range of broad skills and planning behaviours were endorsed as helpful supports for students to feel better **prepared for higher education** with ‘planning for learning needs’, ‘study skills’ and ‘planning / time management skills’ receiving top rankings (43%, 42%, 41% respectively). The qualitative research uncovered the impact that high school subject selection had on pathways and preparation for higher education, particularly the influence of ATAR scores. Students noted compromising their interests and course preparation in order to achieve higher scores through unrelated subjects, or pursuing high interest subjects with lower scores, which then limited their ability to enter higher education.

Financial / income support was the most commonly reported avenue to **increase higher education success for under-represented student groups** (nominated by 47% of respondents). By way of context, less than half of the respondents were aware of ways to fund course fees (49%), future debt from studying (48%), requirements for future repayments (40%) and scholarships and other support available to help with the costs of study (36%). In the qualitative research, participants raised a range of options that would support students with their cost of living while studying, including additional lending via HECS-HELP, increases in student income supplements, additional scholarships, ceasing HECS-HELP repayments until completion of the degree, payment for work placements and/or programs to support the provision of equipment.

Greater flexibility in courses and **greater support for life circumstances** were the next two most commonly identified methods to facilitate the participation of under-represented student groups (28% and 25% respectively). A broad range of flexibility measures were identified by students relating to the mode of learning, scheduling, self-paced assessments, and course enrolment or completion time. More proactive individualised learning and support measures were also proposed to support greater engagement and likelihood of course success, particularly for students with disability, impairment or more complex learning needs.

There was little consensus on areas of higher education that most need improvement to ensure a **quality student experience**. Respondents to the survey and participants in the qualitative research emphasised the need for a student centric approach based on the diversity of the person’s situation – the need for decision-makers to account for personal circumstances and challenges, such as family demands, mental health considerations and life situations. Therefore, a mix of solutions and/or

broad systemic changes may be required such as supporting improved financial positions of current students, improving adjustments and flexibility to cater to student needs and lifestyles, providing both technical and practical skills to enhance job prospects and better alignment in student learning with what is required from industry.

Improvement in online learning to ensure useability and a quality learning experience was seen as important not only for those that have selected online course delivery but also where students may use a mix of online/in-person studies, participating in online/on-demand content to cater for ad-hoc needs and changes in circumstances. However, the need for online learning did not negate the need for time with teachers / lecturers to address queries and check-in on learning progress.

Only one-in-ten respondents (10%) had heard of the Job-Ready Graduates (JRG) package. When asked about some of the reforms in the JRG package, 84% of respondents supported changes that saw regional universities offering more student places.

Conclusions

To support the Accord, we have distilled the findings from this consultation process into six priorities addressing access, education delivery and financial considerations. Additional considerations are outlined in the remainder of the report.

Financial Influences: Considerations around course costs and financial implications of studying



- **Priority 1:** Consider measures to increase support for students to manage cost of living expenses whilst studying with further exploration around the options to achieve this for people in diverse situations (e.g. income supplements, paid and/or income support during placements and equipment initiatives).
- **Priority 2:** Consider ways to reduce the financial pressures of students using and repaying HECS-HELP loans and how to improve financial literacy regarding this scheme.

Access and Opportunity: Considerations in relation to supporting motivation, preparation and entry



- **Priority 3:** Consider ways to improve the quality and consistency of career advisory services and information to support student decision making, including information on: pathways; subsidies, scholarships and other available financial supports; adjustments and learning support that can be provided; and likely jobs to be obtained following a qualification.
- **Priority 4:** Consider how to address ATAR / entry barriers and disincentives in study areas for students to pursue their interest areas while ensuring they have the necessary study skills to succeed in higher education.

Education Delivery: Considerations around improved course delivery, accessibility and flexibility



- **Priority 5:** Consider introducing education and support mechanisms for academic and professional staff to initiate more proactive approaches in assisting students in their transition to university study as well as supporting them through their learning journey. This may include the promotion and provision of academic skills development, promoting and offering adjustments as needed and offering flexibility tailored to individual student needs.

- **Priority 6:** Consider the supply of online learning and needs of those who want or need to learn remotely, on-campus and through blended approaches. This may involve the development of high quality accessible online materials, co-creation and/or testing with students and measures to ensure that teaching teams have competency in the design and delivery of hybrid (online and in-person) learning and teaching.

Research background and objectives

The Australian Government is undertaking a review of Australia's higher education system, and has established an Australian Universities Accord (the Accord). An Accord Panel was appointed by the Minister for Education to undertake consultations and discussions with a range of stakeholders in higher education (including providers, students, parents, governments, staff, unions, community leaders, and businesses), and to make recommendations for changes to Australia's higher education system in order to meet national priorities more effectively, now and into the future.

As part of the Accord review, the Panel sought to engage with harder to reach under-represented and disadvantaged current and prospective students. The cohorts of interest include people:

- identifying as First Nations people;
- living in regional, rural and remote areas;
- with a disability;
- from low socio-economic backgrounds;
- from culturally or linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds;
- who are the first in their family to attend university;
- not currently in employment or training; and
- experiencing cumulative disadvantage.

The views of these current and prospective students were sought in relation to a wide range of aspects of Australia's higher education system (which includes both university and VET providers). The Panel recognised that there are several cohorts of students who are less likely to engage in traditional consultation mechanisms, or who require reasonable adjustments in order to engage. The Panel's terms of reference sought to ensure that the views of these groups were obtained and represented in their report.

Theme 2 of the Panel's terms of reference ('Access and Opportunity') specifically seeks reforms to "support greater access participation for students from under-represented backgrounds" in all aspects of higher education, for which their lived experience and voice is an essential component.

This research project broadly aimed to capture the experiences and views of under-represented and disadvantaged students (current and prospective) to inform the Australian Universities Accord Panel's consultation process on higher education in Australia. This was undertaken with respect to the Accord Discussion Paper¹, which invited feedback on 49 specific questions across seven themes that were outlined in the Accord's terms of reference.

More specifically, this project sought to:

- Provide a range of mechanisms for people from the targeted cohorts to provide feedback on challenges and opportunities facing Australia's higher education sector, as outlined in the Accord Discussion Paper.
- Provide an opportunity for these cohorts to raise other issues of concern and interest to them, that the Discussion Paper may not have considered or highlighted.

¹ The Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper: February 2023

- Facilitate a student-centred approach to student equity, in order to build an evidence base which reflects the lived experience of a wide range of under-represented and disadvantaged students who were harder to reach as part of the Accord consultation process.
- Address issues of particular importance to this cohort of students across the higher education cycle of access, participation, completion, and transition to employment or further study.

Summary of our approach

This research employed a mixed-methods approach involving both a large-scale quantitative survey to maximise reach and input of the target cohorts, and more targeted and tailored qualitative focus groups and interviews. The qualitative elements were included to ensure access for those who may not be well represented through the survey mechanism, as well as allowing for greater depth of understanding of issues raised and potential solutions.

Prior to the commencement of fieldwork, the ORIMA Research Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) reviewed the research project, granted approval and acknowledged that it meets the requirements of the National Health and Medical Research Council's National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007, incorporating all updates as of July 2018). This approval was granted on 1 May 2023. Reciprocal approval was granted through Curtin University's Ethics Committee on 3 May 2023.

Cohorts of interest

The cohorts targeted in this research included current or prospective students of higher education (defined as Diploma-, or Advanced Diploma-level and higher qualifications, delivered through either a university or VET provider). Research participation quotas were developed for the following demographic cohorts:

- **First Nations:** Self-identified as either Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, or both.
- **Culturally and Linguistically Diverse:** Those who use a language other than English at home or speak an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language.
- **People with disability:** Those identifying as having a disability, restriction or impairment that impacts their daily activities, communication, and/or mobility, with a duration or expected duration of 6 months or longer.
- **Parents of children with disabilities:** To ensure sufficient coverage of feedback for this cohort, parents of children aged 16-20 with disability were also targeted. Parents were encouraged to answer the questions with or on behalf of their child.
- **People with low socio-economic status background (Low SES):** Those indicating that their gross annual household income before tax was less than \$60,000.²
- **Regional, rural and remote respondents:** Based on the postcode of the respondents' home address, using the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) remoteness classifications.³⁴
- In addition, a number of other cohorts were of interest and their responses were collected through natural fallout from the survey:

² Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) ranks areas in Australia according to relative socio-economic advantage and disadvantage. Household income was utilised to more accurately identify individuals in our sampling approach who were from low SES households.

³For the purposes of this research, we have allocated each postcode to a remoteness classification based on the proportion of its population allocated to each ABS remoteness classification (abs.gov.au). For example, in a postcode with 30% inner regional, 30% outer regional, and 40% metropolitan, the combined total of 60% inner/outer regional would result in this being classified as 'Regional' for reporting purposes.

⁴ For the purpose of readability, quotes have been labelled as regional / remote students

- **First in family to attend university:** Based on the highest level of education either parent has achieved. Note that under this classification, this means that respondents are among the first generation within their immediate family to attend university.⁵
- **Not currently in employment or training:** Defined as those not currently studying at all and unemployed (whether seeking work or not). Note that this does not include those who are retired/pensioners, or doing unpaid work.
- **Experiencing cumulative disadvantage:** Defined as those who were classified into more than one of the categories above.

Quantitative research methodology

The quantitative research consisted of an online survey with n=1,615 members of the target audience/s, including n=1,579 respondents from a primary sample (referred to as the 'main sample' throughout this report) and n=36 respondents from a First Nations boost.

Sampling sourcing and survey administration for the main sample was undertaken by ORIMA Research's fieldwork partner, Take2 Research. Fieldwork was conducted between 12 and 31 May 2023. Sample records were drawn from a number of quality-accredited online research panels operating in Australia.

Quotas were developed and applied in partnership with Take2 Research, based on their capacity to source respondents from the desired cohorts from their unique relationships with multiple panel providers. Definitions used to identify those in the target audience are provided above, and a summary of the sample achieved is provided in the chapter 'Profile of respondents' (see page 19).

A sample boost of n=36 First Nations respondents was collected through ORIMA's First Nations survey capabilities, including an online survey respondent database, as well as interviews conducted by ORIMA's team of trained First Nations Community Interviewers. Fieldwork for this First Nations boost was conducted between 24 May and 27 June 2023. First Nations boost respondents were offered \$20 e-gift card as appreciation for their contribution.

The questionnaire for the survey was comprised of questions developed by ORIMA in discussion with NCSEHE based on broad areas and more targeted questions outlined in the Accord Discussion Paper. The final questionnaire was approved by NCSEHE and the Department of Education prior to survey launch.

Qualitative research methodology

Qualitative research was conducted online (via Microsoft Teams and Zoom) and phone calls between 21 June and 7 July 2023, with a total of n=45 participants. This consisted of n=4 student focus groups, 1 industry/ student representative peak focus group and n=11 in-depth individual interviews with students. A profile of participants in the qualitative research is provided in the chapter 'Profile of respondents' (see page 23).

Potential participants were screened and recruited through Focus People, a specialist social research recruitment company. Student participants in the qualitative research were offered \$100 bank transfer payment as appreciation for their contribution. We actively used the qualitative research to increase the participation of students with disability, First Nations students, CALD students, and where students represented one or more of the general target audience cohorts (cumulative

⁵ Parental achievement of a Bachelor or above has been used to depict university participation.

disadvantage). The quotes obtained through qualitative research throughout this report therefore represent this more targeted audience.

The qualitative research was conducted by qualified researchers from ORIMA Research and NCSEHE. The discussion guide for the research was developed with NCSEHE on the basis of the broad areas and targeted questions outlined in the Accord Discussion Paper, as well as areas for further investigation identified from the interim quantitative survey results, and approved by the Department prior to conducting focus groups or interviews.

Reporting approach

The report has been organised into sections based on three key lines of enquiry outlined by the Chair of the Australian Universities Accord Panel:

- How can we ensure all Australians have the opportunity to participate and succeed in higher education?
- What actions and solutions are needed now to achieve an inclusive higher education system that addresses the major changes underway in our society, economy and environment?
- What kind of higher education system does Australia need in two- and three-decades' time to ensure the ongoing inclusion of all Australians?

Within these broad sections, a number of sub-topics are considered, based on the 49 questions posed throughout the Accord Discussion Paper. Note that not all questions in the Discussion Paper were covered in the quantitative and qualitative research. See Appendix A to see how the selected Accord Discussion Paper questions map to the broad themes and survey questions covered in this report.

Understanding the research findings

Understanding quantitative findings

Percentages from the quantitative research presented in the report are based on the total number of valid responses made to the question being reported on. In most cases, results reflect those respondents who had a view and for whom the questions were applicable. 'Don't know / not sure' responses have only been presented where this aids in the interpretation of the results.

All results are presented unweighted. Weighting to population benchmarks would be problematic due to a lack of reliable and up-to-date population data on the cohorts surveyed.

Where responses were received from parents of children aged 16-20 with disability either undertaking or considering higher education, these are included as part of their respective cohorts throughout the report (i.e., 'prospective' or 'current' higher education students).

For stacked bar charts, some numeric labels for categories that are four percent or less of the total proportion have been removed from the chart for ease of reading and clarity.

Percentage results throughout the report may not sum to 100% due to rounding. Some survey questions were presented to respondents with instructions to 'select your top 3', hence results may sum across individual response options to over 100% for these questions.

The sampling method for the online survey was aimed at providing a considerably broader representation of the target audiences than would be possible via traditional opt-in consultation methods. While this aim was achieved, it should be noted that the survey findings are not necessarily fully representative of the entire population of the target audiences. Moreover, as probability-based sampling methods were not feasible, sample survey measures of statistical

precision (statistical margins of error and confidence intervals) are not applicable to the survey results.

Understanding qualitative findings

Qualitative research findings have been used to provide depth of understanding on particular issues. In some cases, qualitative data has been presented without quantitative data. In these instances, it should be noted that the exact number of participants holding a particular view on individual issues cannot be measured.

The following terms used in the report provide a qualitative indication and approximation of the size of the population who held particular views:



Most – refers to findings that relate to more than three quarters of the research participants



Many – refers to findings that relate to more than half of the research participants



Some – refers to findings that relate to around a third of the research participants



A few – refers to findings that relate to less than a quarter of research participants

The most common qualitative findings are reported except in certain situations where only a few have raised particular issues, but these are nevertheless considered to be important with potentially wide-ranging implications/ applications.

Participant quotes have been provided throughout the report to support the main results or findings under discussion.

Profile of respondents

Quantitative research respondents

The proportion of respondents who were classified in each cohort of interest is shown in Table 1. A breakdown of these cohorts by age (16-20 and 21+) and by student status (current student and considering higher education study) is shown in

Table 2. Note that, on average, respondents were classified into 2.1 categories, indicating substantial overlap between cohort membership.

Quotas were developed in partnership with ORIMA Research's fieldwork partner Take2 Research, based on their capacity to source respondents from the desired cohorts in the research timeframes, as facilitated by their unique relationships with multiple panel providers.

Table 1: Cohort targets and achieved sample

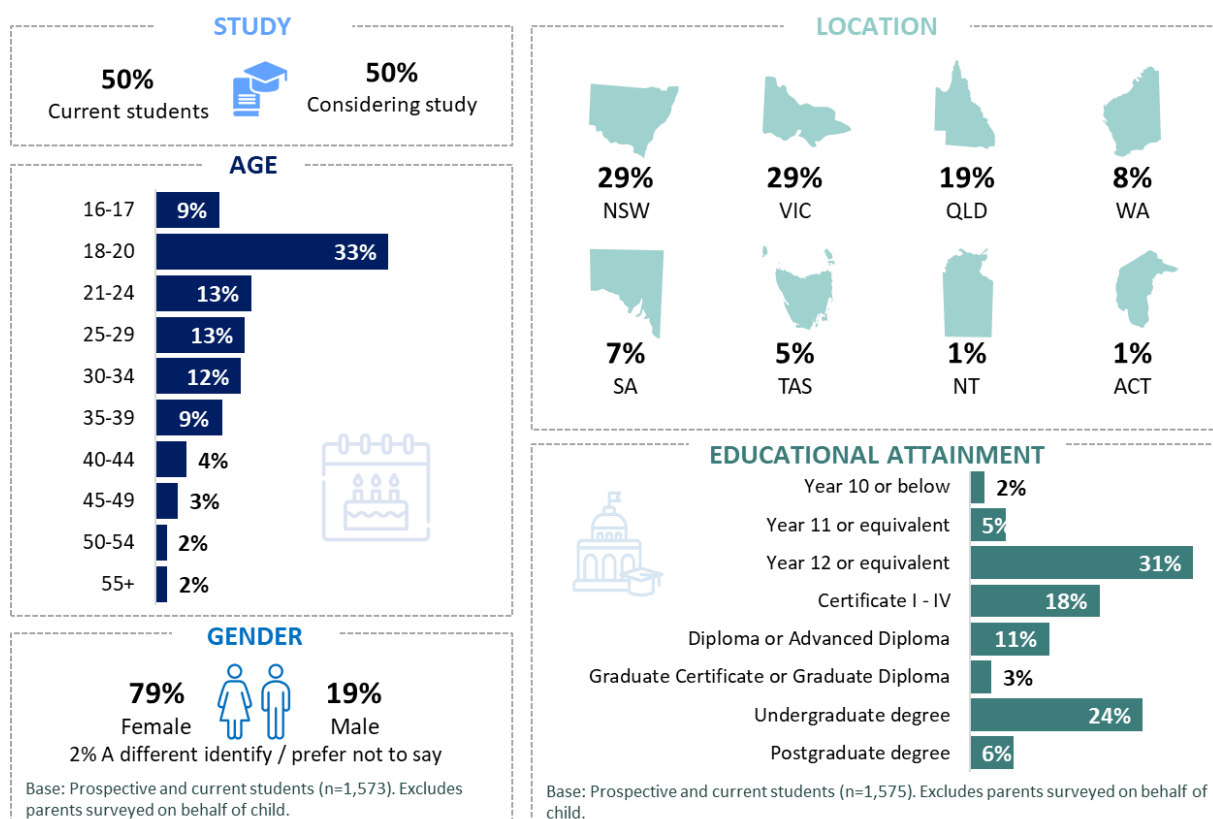
Cohort	Target number of responses	Achieved
First Nations	25	156
Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD)	560	583
People with disability	292	406
Low socio-economic status (Low SES)	560	615
Regional / Rural / Remote	560	606
First in family to attend university	Natural fallout	914
Not currently in employment or training	Natural fallout	44
Experiencing cumulative disadvantage	Natural fallout	1,160
Parent of child aged 16-20 with disability	Natural fallout	42

Table 2: Profile of quantitative research respondents

Age range	Cohort	Current higher education student*		Considering higher education*	
		Target number of responses	Achieved	Target number of responses	Achieved
Aged 16-20	First Nations	1	20	3	22
	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD)	140	145	140	100
	People with disability	37	64	54	73
	Low socio-economic status (Low SES)	140	159	140	99
	Regional / Rural / Remote	140	129	140	116
	First in family to attend university	Natural fallout	180	Natural fallout	164
	Not currently in employment or training	N/A	N/A	Natural fallout	9
	Experiencing cumulative disadvantage	Natural fallout	236	Natural fallout	205
	Total aged 16-20	N/A	377	N/A	297
Aged 21+	First Nations	7	61	14	53
	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD)	140	149	140	189
	People with disability	82	126	119	143
	Low socio-economic status (Low SES)	140	154	140	203
	Regional / Rural / Remote	140	166	140	195
	First in family to attend university	Natural fallout	243	Natural fallout	327
	Not currently in employment or training	N/A	N/A	Natural fallout	35
	Experiencing cumulative disadvantage	Natural fallout	311	Natural fallout	408
	Total aged 21+	N/A	426	N/A	515
Total sample (all classifications)		N/A	803	N/A	812

Other demographic characteristics of the overall quantitative sample are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Other demographic characteristics



Q1. What is your age?; Q2. Do you identify as...?; Q4. What is the postcode of your current home address?; Q17. What is the highest level of study you have completed?

Base: Current or prospective Higher Education students (n=1,615), unless specified otherwise.

Note that the geographic distribution is broadly representative of the Australian population (ABS 2023⁶). The gender balance, however, is not. Although consistent with most research, and while the project did not aim to be representative, this may have implications for the findings reported here. Women are more likely to access and attain higher education qualifications than men, although men are more likely to be fully engaged in work or study (ABS 2021⁷). This data raises concerns about the disengagement of young men from higher education, which may be an issue for consideration by the Universities Accord Panel.

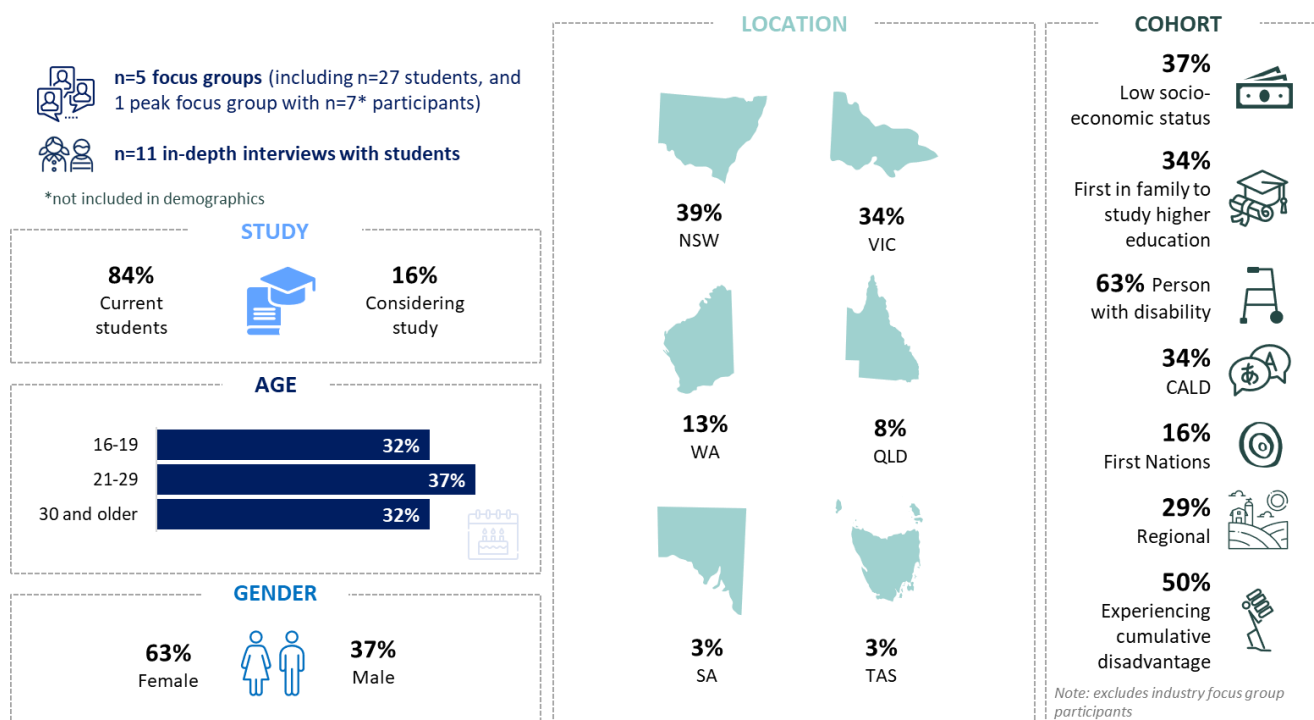
⁶ <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/national-state-and-territory-population/latest-release>

⁷ <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/gender-indicators#education>

Qualitative research participants

The profile of participants across all qualitative fieldwork is presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Profile of qualitative research participants



Age, gender, and postcode supplied by recruitment partner; Q6. Which best describes your living environment?; Q7. Which of the following best describes you?; Q8. Which of the following education and/or training would you consider?; Q11. Which of the following represents your Family's total household (gross) income?; Q12. Are you from a: (Non-English speaking background/Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background/Neither of the above); Q15. Do you have a disability or learning difficulty?

Base: Qualitative research participants who were current or prospective students (n=38).

Additionally, n=7 representatives of education sector organisations attended the industry focus group from the following bodies: Country Education Foundation (CEF), Australasian Council on Open, Distance and E-learning (ACODE), Australian Tertiary Education Network on Disability (ATEND), Australian Coalition for Inclusive Education, National Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (NAGCAS), Adult Learning Australia (ALA) and Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association (ANZSSA).

What actions and solutions are needed now to achieve an inclusive higher education system that addresses the major changes underway in our society, economy and environment?

Discussion Paper question references



Increasing demand from people to study in higher education

Q11. How should Australia boost demand from people to study in the higher education system?

Pathways between VET and higher education

Q20. How can pathways between VET and higher education be improved, and how can students be helped to navigate these pathways?

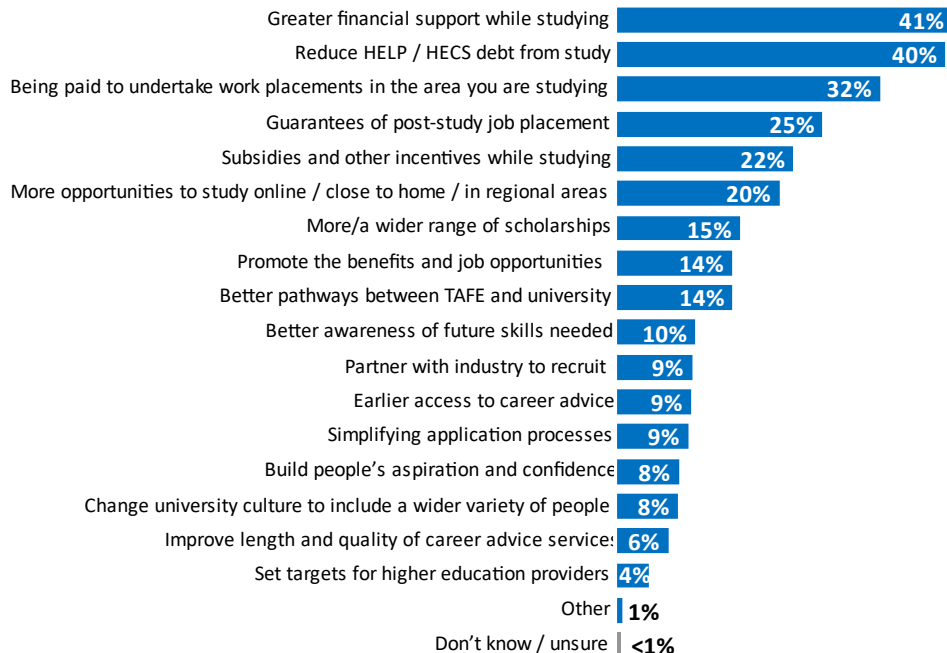
Q21. How can current examples of successful linkages between VET and higher education be integrated across the tertiary education system?

Q22. What role do tertiary entrance and admissions systems play in matching learners to pathways and supporting a sustained increase in participation and tertiary success?

Boosting demand from people to study in higher education

Avenues for encouraging more people to undertake higher education are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Suggestions to encourage more people to undertake higher education



Q41. How could we get more people to undertake higher education? (Up to three options could be selected).

Base: All respondents (n=1,615).

The three most-favoured options reflect different financial concerns associated with study, supporting the centrality of this factor in decision-making, while also highlighting the multifaceted financial considerations of undertaking study.

The top selection, 'greater financial support while studying' (41%) and the third most-selected option, 'being paid to undertake work placements' (32%) suggests challenges students have in balancing study and income. In contrast, the second most-favoured option, 'reduce HELP / HECS debt from study' (40%), shows more concern for the future consequences of debt incurred while studying. While this is not an immediate financial barrier, it may serve as a disincentive to commencing study if confidence is low, or diminish the perceived effort-reward trade-off. Focus on financial support and incentives was also a key theme heard through the qualitative research. A selection of quotes from participants has been included below.

Financial support

"More bursaries, scholarships or grants available for under-represented people – all of this I [feel is] about leveling the playing field. Also provide one-on-one tutoring." – Prospective student with a disability.

"Lowering the costs. Making debt smaller." – Current regional student

"Need to help students financially – not just help to get them in but extra financial support to help them continue." – Current CALD student with disability, regional

"Allocate fund for students on work placements so they can support themselves, so they are not jobless for 20 weeks." Current student with disability

"Programs that guarantee employment or access to training. People should feel that they can do what they want to do" – Current CALD student

"If first year was subsidised [half price], a bit more incentive if they need to change as it is quite a commitment. Maybe they'll be more included to start." – Current student with disability

Other suggested ways to increase higher education participation related to the outcomes and benefits of study, including guarantees of post-study job placement (25%), promoting the benefits and job opportunities achievable through higher education (14%) and partnering with industry to recruit (9%). Increasing trends linking higher education with employment outcomes have been reported among students regardless of background, with 87% of first year students reporting they entered university to improve their job prospects and 77% to gain training for a specific job (Baik, Naylor, Arkoudis, 2015). Baik et al. (2015) did not find significant differences between traditional and non-traditional students in their goals for post-university employment, but their findings suggest stronger barriers due to financial constraints during study, reflecting the top three findings here.

These themes also align with the qualitative research wherein students suggested building aspiration for higher education achievement and future success as a way to better promote and encourage higher education participation:

Build aspiration/ confidence



“Largely individual experience to change attitudes/self-belief. Given them a reason to think differently.” – Current mature aged student with disability

“Open days to show people what they could learn – get them to sit in on classes they could be interested in. Give them an insight. Get a real feel for the university.” – Current First Nation student, first in family to attend university

“Programs to support the importance of higher education, not to perpetuate the cycle of poverty.” – Current CALD student, low SES.

“Get disability / learning support officers to attend secondary school.” Various students

“An example is the best way to encourage people. In the course information material have people in similar circumstance to me, (show) they have become successful in their study journey.” - Current student with disability, first in family to attend university, regional

Access to higher education was also highlighted by respondents, including better access through online or local study options (20%), better pathways between TAFE and university (14%) and simpler application processes (9%).

Suggestions to encourage participation more broadly would need to be considered in light of their feasibility and benefits – for example, some promotional efforts or aspects of course delivery (such as online options) may be easily incorporated among higher education providers’ current plans and programs, resulting in some increase in participation. However, systematic changes to the financial component of study are likely to have a greater impact but would require greater effort and coordination among providers and governments, ensuring these financial systems work together to achieve the intended outcome.

Minimal meaningful differences were observed among the top three suggestions across key cohorts, as shown in Table 3. More broadly, the following cohorts were more likely to proffer certain suggestions:

- Those identified as CALD were more likely to select ‘promoting the benefits and job opportunities’ (20%, compared to 14% overall); and
- Those with a disability were more likely to select ‘more opportunities to study online / close to home / in regional areas’ (26%, compared to 20% overall).

Among demographic cohorts, respondents aged 30 years and over were more likely to select:

- ‘Subsidies and other incentives’ (29%, compared to 16-20-year-olds: 17%, and 21-29 year olds: 21%); and
- ‘More opportunities to study online / close to home / in regional areas’ (25%, compared to 16-20-year-olds: 16%, and 21-29 year olds: 19%).

These findings show the value of flexibility and financial incentives that ease other life demands among respondents who are returning to or entering higher education when other life needs and obligations have been established, compared to younger respondents whose needs (or ability to manage other demands) may be less demanding.

Also of note is that current higher education students were more likely to select 'reduce HELP / HECS debt from study' as a way to encourage participation (46%, compared to 35% of prospective students).

Table 3: Suggestions to encourage more people to undertake higher education – Top three selections

Rank	First Nations	Low SES	Regional/ rural/ remote	CALD	People with a disability	First in family to attend university	Not currently in employment or training	Experiencing cumulative disadvantage
n=	156	615	606	583	406	914	44	1,160
1 st	Greater financial support while studying (38%)	Reduce HELP / HECS debt from study (41%)	Greater financial support while studying (44%)	Reduce HELP / HECS debt from study (39%)	Greater financial support while studying (43%)	Greater financial support while studying (42%)	Greater financial support while studying (45%)	Reduce HELP / HECS debt from study (41%)
2 nd	Reduce HELP / HECS debt from study (35%)	Greater financial support while studying (41%)	Reduce HELP / HECS debt from study (40%)	Greater financial support while studying (36%)	Reduce HELP / HECS debt from study (43%)	Reduce HELP / HECS debt from study (41%)	Guarantees of post-study job placement (39%)	Greater financial support while studying (41%)
3 rd	Being paid to undertake work placements in the area you are studying (30%)	Being paid to undertake work placements in the area you are studying (34%)	Being paid to undertake work placements in the area you are studying (36%)	Being paid to undertake work placements in the area you are studying (28%)	Being paid to undertake work placements in the area you are studying (33%)	Being paid to undertake work placements in the area you are studying (33%)	Reduce HELP / HECS debt from study (34%)	Being paid to undertake work placements in the area you are studying (33%)

Q41. How could we get more people to undertake higher education? (Up to three options could be selected).

Base: All respondents in each demographic cohort.

Links to academic research

Baik, C., Naylor, R., & Arkoudis, S. (2015). *The first year experience in Australian universities: Finding from two decades, 1994-2014*. Centre for the Study of Higher Education. https://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0016/1513123/FYE-2014-FULL-report-FINAL-web.pdf

Devlin, M., & McKay, J. (2018). The financial realities for students from low SES backgrounds at Australian regional universities. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, 28(1), 121-136.



Pathways between VET and higher education

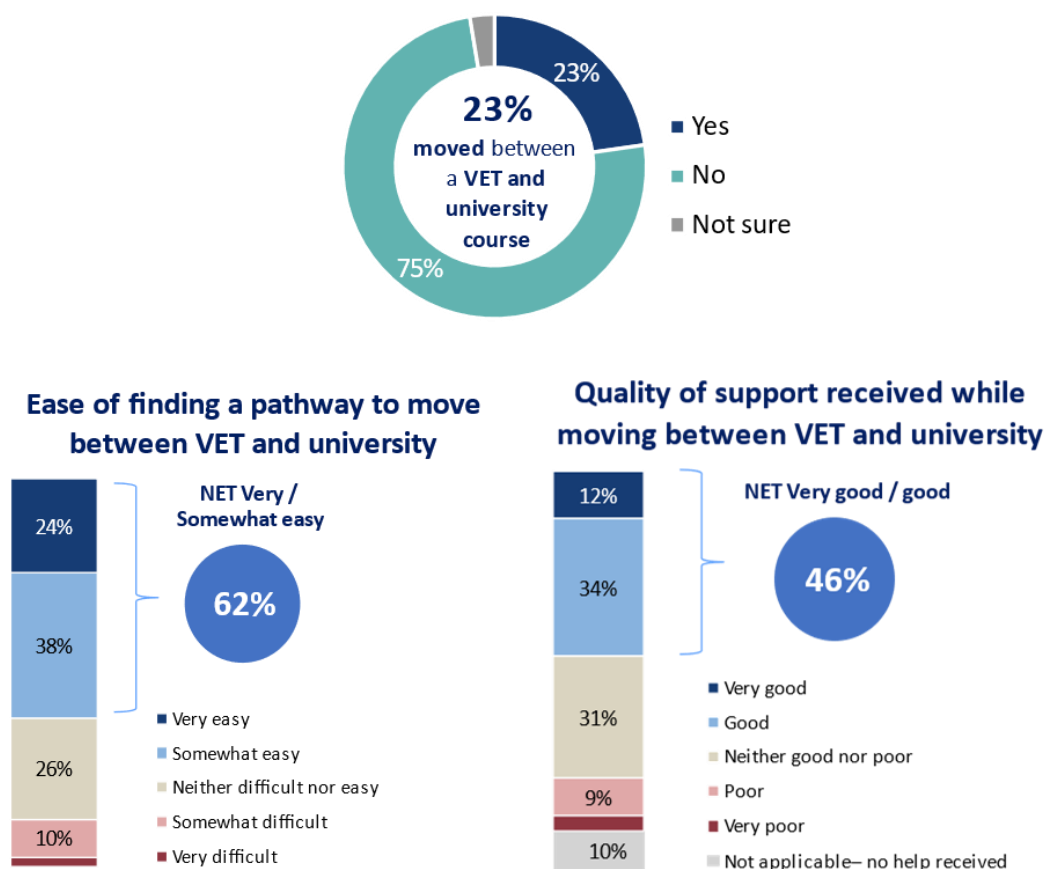
Among respondents who were current or former higher education students considering further study, 23% had moved between a VET course and university degree (in either direction). There were

indications that certain cohorts were more likely to have moved between VET and university, including respondents identifying as:

- First Nations (32%);
- people with disability (31%);
- living in regional /rural / remote areas (27%);
- the first generation in their family to attend university (26%);
- experiencing cumulative disadvantage (26%); and
- aged 21 or older (26%).

As shown in Figure 4, of those who had moved between VET and university, a moderately high proportion (62%) described finding the pathway to move 'very' or 'somewhat' easy. Just under half (46%) of those who had moved between VET and university described the support they received as 'good' or 'very good', (noting that 10% did not receive any support). There were no significant differences among the cohorts surveyed for either of these aspects.

These results demonstrate that movement between VET and university is a strong trend in higher education with around 1 in 4 students using this pathway. This finding is consistent with, albeit at the higher end of, long-term proportions of students transferring from VET to university (Harris, Sumner & Rainey 2005). Although the ease of transition and quality of support received during this process garnered moderate ratings on average, there remains room for improvement, considering the prevalence of these decisions. These findings should also be considered in the context of factors affecting decisions of what to study (see Figure 16), in which knowledge of ways to enter a path of study (81%) and ease of enrolment (75%) were seen as 'quite' or 'very' important. In the context of these results, challenges with the process of moving between VET and university may discourage prospective students who considered such transitions to be viable or worthwhile.

Figure 4: Experiences of moving between VET and university

Q44. Have you moved between a VET course (e.g. TAFE or diploma) and a Bachelor's degree or higher at a university?

Base: Respondents who are current higher education students, plus those who have completed higher education and are considering future study in the next year or 12-24 months (n=1,148).

Q45. How easy or difficult was it to find the pathway you/they wanted between VET and university?

Base: Respondents who have moved between a VET and higher education course (n=245); excludes 'don't know / not sure'.

Q46. How would you/your child rate the support they received when moving between VET and university study?

Base: Respondents who have moved between VET and higher education courses (n=259); excludes 'don't know / not sure'.

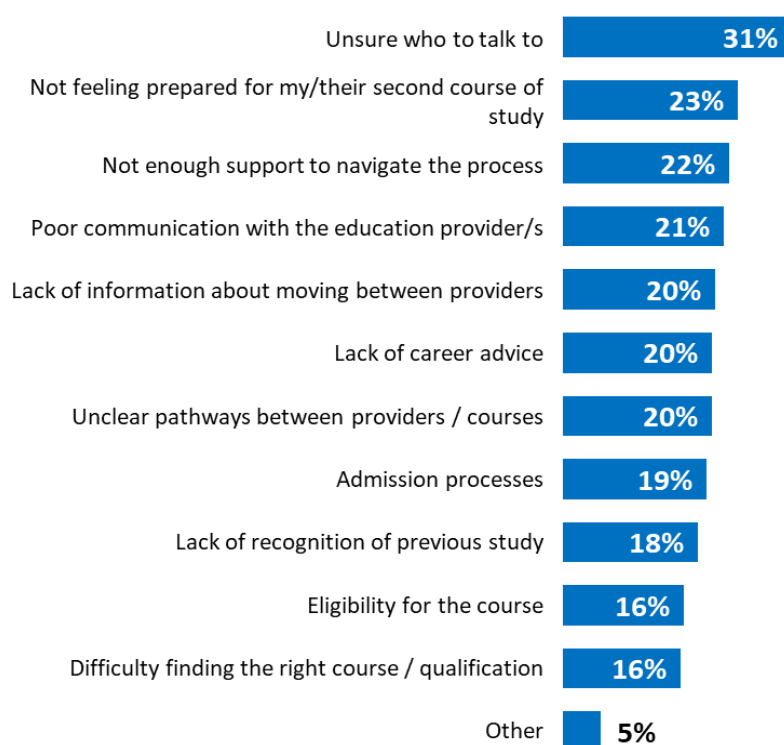
Several barriers experienced during the transition between VET and university were identified, as shown in Figure 5 below. Most barriers were selected by 16-23% of respondents, suggesting that beyond the top selection of students being 'unsure who to talk to' (31%), there may not be a single clear or general target to improve pathways between VET and university.

Some barriers pertain to particular dimensions of the VET-university transition process, and revision or improvement of these may lead to considerable benefits in student opportunities and experiences. For example, several barriers relate to support, guidance and communication through the transition process, including being unsure who to talk to (31% selecting this among their top three), not feeling prepared for their second course of study (23%), not having enough support to navigate the process (22%), poor communication with providers (21%) and lack of information (20%). Collectively, 82% of respondents who had moved between VET and university nominated at least one support, guidance or communication issue among their top three barriers. This suggests that the quality of transition experiences is undermined by a lack of easily-accessible information, and that support and guidance for transition is a prominent source of difficulty in moving between

VET and university rather than course entry requirements. Improvements to support processes are required to ensure that VET-university pathways are functional pathways for more students.

As noted, barriers relating to course entry requirements including a lack of recognition of previous study (18%) and eligibility for the course (16%), were not a prominent source of difficulty to transition between VET and university. While these are not individually highly concerning, they represent around one-third (32%) of the difficulties experienced. This suggests that entry criteria could still be avenues for increasing demand for and consideration of VET-university pathways.

Figure 5: Barriers moving between VET and university



Q48. What barriers did you/your child experience in moving between VET and university? (Up to three options could be selected).

Base: Respondents who have moved between VET and higher education courses (n=261).

No significant differences were noted across the key cohorts of interest. However, there were indications that male respondents across these cohorts were more likely to have identified barriers relating to entry requirements (51%) compared to females (27%). Again, this is consistent with research dating back to 1997, indicating that women dominate transfers from VET to university (Harris, Sumner & Rainey, 2005). This may reflect gender differences in the types of VET qualifications gained: men predominate in apprenticeships, and Certificate I, II and III courses, which are less likely to be eligible for transfer to university, whereas women outnumber men in the Certificate IV, Diploma and Advanced Diploma courses that may lead to university (NCVER, 2022)

Several factors were identified that worked well in the transition between VET and university study, as shown in Figure 6. Notably, several of the top selections relate to entry requirements – course eligibility (41% selecting this among their top three) and recognition of previous study (34%). This suggests that smooth entry requirements serve as an enabler of VET-university pathways for many respondents.

While the experience was more limited within the qualitative research, some students validated the challenges in navigating the VET-University transition and also highlighted the flexibility required in changing course and/or career direction.

“I needed to get permission from the University to do a TAFE course - would like to try before you buy” – Current student

“Big gap from high school to university, TAFE may be a stepping stone to help build confidence and skills” – Current student

“VET straight after school helped me get a job, a good stepping stone” – First Nations student

“Offering free TAFE courses is good but not sufficient if the additional funding to support the participation of higher support needs students is not provided” – Industry Group participant



As a collective though, entry requirements (63%) recorded a similar proportion to various types of support and guidance to navigate the transition (59%, such as career advice and communication with education providers). This again highlights the importance of support processes for navigating the transition for prospective students and the need to enhance them. In light of the barriers identified, such enhancements would enrich experiences and facilitate better engagement in these pathways.

Figure 6: Aspects that worked well moving between VET and university



Q47. What worked well when you/your child moved between VET and university? (Up to three options could be selected).

Base: Respondents who have moved between VET and higher education courses (n=261).

Few significant differences were noted among the various cohorts surveyed, with the exception of:

- First Nations respondents who were more likely to nominate 'support provided to navigate the process' as having worked well compared to other cohorts (32% selecting this among their top three, compared to 14% overall); and
- respondents aged 30 or older who were less likely to nominate 'feeling prepared for my second course of study' (16%, compared to 32% of 16-20-year-olds and 24% of 21-29-year-olds).

Links to academic research

Harris, R, Sumner, R & Rainey, L. (2005). *Student traffic: Two-way movement between vocational education and training and higher education*, NCVER.
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED495183.pdf>



Summary of key insights

- Financial support was identified as a key means to boost demand from people to study in higher education, which reflects the value it has in easing pressures for students to financially support themselves while studying (e.g. balancing study and work) and to reduce future pressures from the debt incurred from studying.
- Movement between VET and university is a strong trend in higher education, but there remains room for improvement when supporting prospective students. Support and communication around the transition, entry processes, recognition of prior study and individualised guidance may be key areas of focus. By providing supports in these areas, it may reduce the risk of prospective students becoming discouraged from pursuing higher education when considering whether such transitions would be viable or worthwhile.



What kind of higher education system does Australia need in two- and three-decades' time to ensure the ongoing inclusion of all Australians?

Discussion Paper question references



The future of Australian higher education

Q4. Looking from now to 2030 and 2040, what major national challenges and opportunities should Australian higher education be focused on meeting?

Quality learning environments

Q8. What reforms are needed to promote a quality learning environment and to ensure graduates are entering the labour market with the skills and knowledge they need?

Work-integrated learning and professional placements

Q14. How should placement arrangements and work-integrated learning in higher education change in the decades ahead?

Lifelong learning

Q16. What practical barriers are inhibiting lifelong learning, and how can they be fixed?

Q15. What changes are needed to grow a culture of lifelong learning in Australia?

The future of Australian higher education

Respondents rated the extent to which aspects of the higher education system need to change in order to meet future job and skill needs. These ratings align with findings about ensuring access and opportunity, and reveal several other important considerations, as shown in Figure 7, and largely align with the themes that emerged from respondents' free-text comments (see below).

Better financial support was considered an area requiring 'quite a bit' or a 'great amount' of change (84%), mirroring the importance of this issue discussed throughout this report, its reported centrality in decision-making, and its perceived impact on success in higher education. In the qualitative research, most students commented along the following lines:

"Make learning affordable." – Current regional / remote student with low SES background, disability

"Financial aid for students who have to relocate/ move out of home to attend universities." – Current student with low SES background, first in family to attend university

"Financial support during studying. My student allowance doesn't even cover my rent." – Current regional / remote student with a disability, first in family to attend university

"Financial support for compulsory travel, placements and learning supplies such as textbooks." – Current regional / remote student, first in family to attend university



Likewise, the accessibility and range of higher education options was considered an important area for change, with many respondents endorsing the need to increase opportunities to study online or close to home (69% selected 'quite a bit' or 'a great amount'), and in the mix of locations and types of education providers (60%). This suggests that there is a common need to find higher education options that suit individuals' life circumstances and demands. To meet this need, greater choice and

flexibility in delivery options and logistics was identified by most students in the qualitative research as a key structural change required in higher education.

“The way the education is delivered to remote areas. More face-to-face options with workplace support would help a great deal.” – Current regional / remote student with a disability, first in family to attend university



“Accessibility and flexibility in learning programs to allow for students coming from a wide variety of backgrounds access to the course they want to study.” – Current CALD student with low SES background, first in family to attend university

“The expectation to show up at a classroom is something which is rather difficult and discourages a lot of students who work or live far.” – Current CALD student

“More flexibility to complete courses at own pace to accommodate for different circumstances. Not everyone studying is going from school to higher education. If you study as a mature age student, you will more than likely need to also support yourself and your family, build experience outside of your current workplace but it is very hard because most people already work to just survive and pay bills, and study and have little time for themselves too.” – Current regional / remote, CALD student, first in family to attend university

Many respondents indicated a need for change in the relationship between jobs and education, with 71% indicating ‘quite a bit’ or ‘a great amount’ of change was needed. Similarly, links between industry and research were nominated by 59% of respondents as an area in need of change. These findings point to a perception that higher education could better align with changing workforce needs, ensuring the practical applicability of education. They also concord with previous results on reported motivators to pursue study, with improvements to career/job prospects being a primary driver of this decision.

“Links between courses and career opportunities.” - Prospective student with low SES background, a disability, first in family to attend university, not currently in employment or training



“The disconnect between academic knowledge and hands-on experience; employers want to know you can apply what you have learned at university, and that you have experience in the area.” – Current CALD student

“I feel universities need to provide more practical study for students that will actually prepare them for their future careers.” – Current student with low SES background, first in family to attend university

“...there also needs to be a greater connection to what work life will look like after coursework is completed.” – Current regional student, first in family to attend university

University offerings and course delivery were seen as slightly less in need of change, with fewer respondents endorsing the need for change in how things are taught in universities (59% selected ‘quite a bit’ or ‘a great amount’ of change), the courses on offer (55%), what’s taught in universities (54%) and the type of research undertaken at universities (50%). These results suggest that these are secondary concerns in meeting future job and skill needs, with primary concerns focused on financial support, accessibility, the mode of delivery and practical connections discussed above.

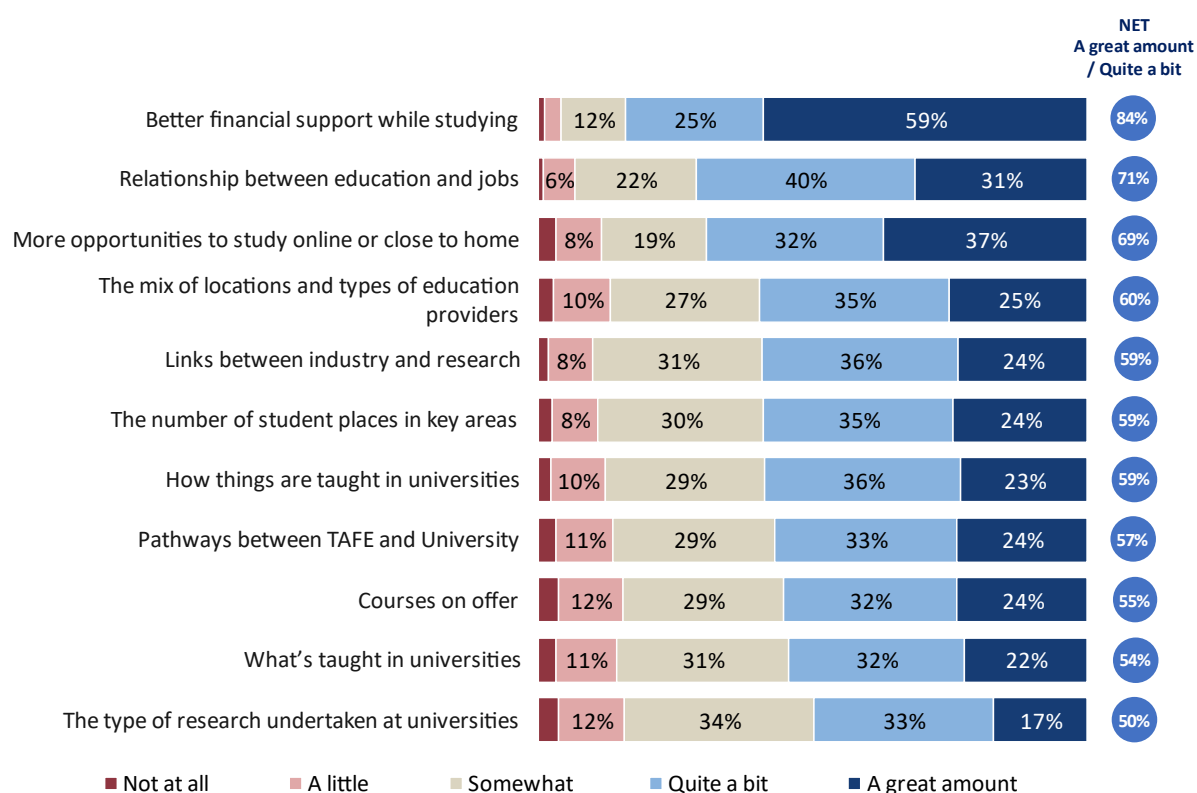
“The way things are taught in uni are not specific to the job the degree will get you. They are largely theory based where practical work is required more.” – Current CALD student



“The resources and actual learning materials – some are poor and don't actually relate to what course you are undertaking.” – Current regional / remote CALD student, first in family to attend university

Overall, these results indicate a general perception that there is a requirement to keep the higher education sector responsive to the changing needs of Australia and its workforce. This includes some need for modifications in the delivery and material product of higher education (namely educating students), but greater importance is placed on changes that best support students to engage and succeed in higher education, through the range and type of study options and financial supports available. Furthermore, there appears to be a desire for greater consonance between education offerings and employment opportunities through more industry / job aligned curricula, reflecting a need to link desired goals and outcomes of higher education.

Figure 7: Areas of the higher education system that need to change to meet future job and skill needs



Q38. How much, if at all, will the following parts of higher education need to change to meet Australia's future job and skill needs?

Base: All respondents from main sample (n=1,444-1,566; excludes 'don't know / not sure').

Few differences were observed between the demographic groups surveyed, as shown in Table 4. Among demographics cohorts, prospective students were more likely to indicate that opportunities to study online or close to home needed change (75% selected 'a great amount' or 'quite a bit' of change, compared to 64% of current students), as were respondents aged 30 and older (77%, compared to 72% of 21-29-year-olds and 62% of 16-20-year-olds).

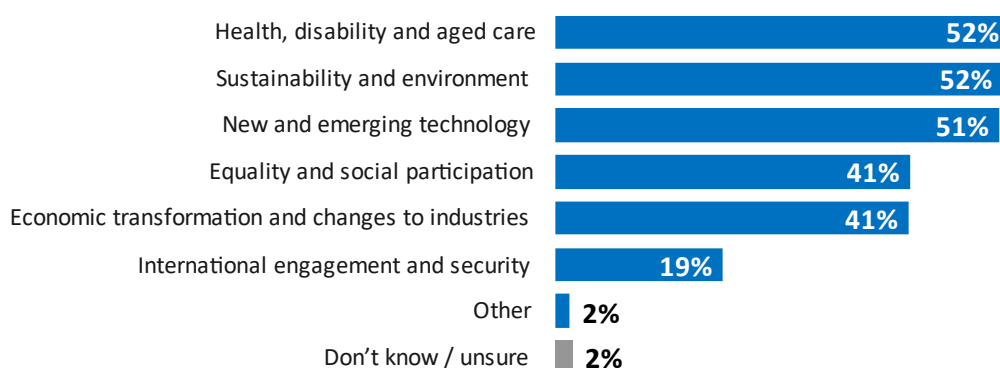
Table 4: Higher education changes needed to meet Australia's future job and skills needs by key demographic groups – Top three selections overall (% 'a great amount' or 'quite a bit')

Rank	First Nations	Low SES	Regional/ rural/ remote	CALD	People with a disability	First in family to attend university	Not currently in employment or training	Experiencing cumulative disadvantage
<i>n=</i>	114-120	545-599	538-583	532-564	348-390	817-879	36-44	1,035-1,115
1 st	Better financial support while studying (83%)	Better financial support while studying (84%)	Better financial support while studying (88%)	Better financial support while studying (82%)	Better financial support while studying (85%)	Better financial support while studying (86%)	Better financial support while studying (89%)	Better financial support while studying (85%)
2 nd	The mix of locations and types of education providers (74%)	Relationship between education and jobs (71%)	More opportunities to study online or close to home (72%)	Relationship between education and jobs (73%)	Relationship between education and jobs (75%)	More opportunities to study online or close to home (73%)	More opportunities to study online or close to home (77%)	Relationship between education and jobs (72%)
3 rd	More opportunities to study online or close to home (73%)	More opportunities to study online or close to home (70%)	Relationship between education and jobs (69%)	More opportunities to study online or close to home (67%)	More opportunities to study online or close to home (72%)	Relationship between education and jobs (73%)	Relationship between education and jobs (76%)	More opportunities to study online or close to home (72%)

Q38. How much, if at all, will the following parts of higher education need to change to meet Australia's future job and skill needs? (Up to three options could be selected).

Base: All respondents in each demographic cohort among main sample; excludes 'don't know / not sure'.

Among the challenges and opportunities for Australia identified in the Accord discussion paper, respondents considered several areas to be key points of focus for the higher education sector in order to meet future needs, as shown in Figure 8 below. Among these, three areas were identified by over half of respondents – health, disability and aged care (52%), sustainability and environment (52%) and new and emerging technology (51%).

Figure 8: Most important areas for higher education to focus on in the next few decades to be ready for future jobs

Q40. What are the most important areas for higher education to focus on in the next few decades to be ready for future jobs? (Up to three options could be selected).

Base: All respondents (n=1,615).

Some differences were noted among the various cohorts surveyed, as shown in Table 5. Most notably, regional / rural / remote respondents and those with a disability were more likely to consider health, disability and aged care to be important areas of focus (60% of both groups selecting this among their top three, compared to 52% overall).

Furthermore, CALD respondents displayed a different profile of priorities overall:

- their top selection was 'new and emerging technology' (57% compared to 51% overall);
- they were more likely to select 'economic transformation and changes to industry' (47% compared to 41% overall), as well 'international engagement and security' (28% compared to 19% overall); and
- they were *less* likely to select 'health, disability and aged care' (43% compared to 52% overall) and 'sustainability and environment' (47% vs 52% overall).

Table 5: Most important areas for higher education to focus on in the future – Top three selections

Rank	First Nations	Low SES	Regional/ rural/ remote	CALD	People with a disability	First in family to attend university	Not currently in employment or training	Experiencing cumulative disadvantage
n=	156	615	606	583	406	914	44	1,160
1 st	Health, disability and aged care (54%)	Sustainability and environment (52%)	Health, disability and aged care (60%)	New and emerging technology (57%)	Health, disability and aged care (60%)	Health, disability and aged care (55%)	Health, disability and aged care (61%) New and emerging technology (61%)	Health, disability and aged care (54%)
2 nd	Sustainability and environment (52%)	Health, disability and aged care (54%)	Sustainability and environment (52%)	Sustainability and environment (47%) Economic transformation and changes to industries (47%)	Sustainability and environment (50%)	Sustainability and environment (51%)	Sustainability and environment (48%) Economic transformation and changes to industries (48%)	Sustainability and environment (51%) New and emerging technology (51%)
3 rd	New and emerging technology (51%)	New and emerging technology (50%)	New and emerging technology (50%)	Health, disability and aged care (43%)	New and emerging technology (47%)	New and emerging technology (50%)	Equality and social participation (30%)	Equality and social participation (41%)

Q40. What are the most important areas for higher education to focus on in the next few decades to be ready for future jobs? (Up to three options could be selected).

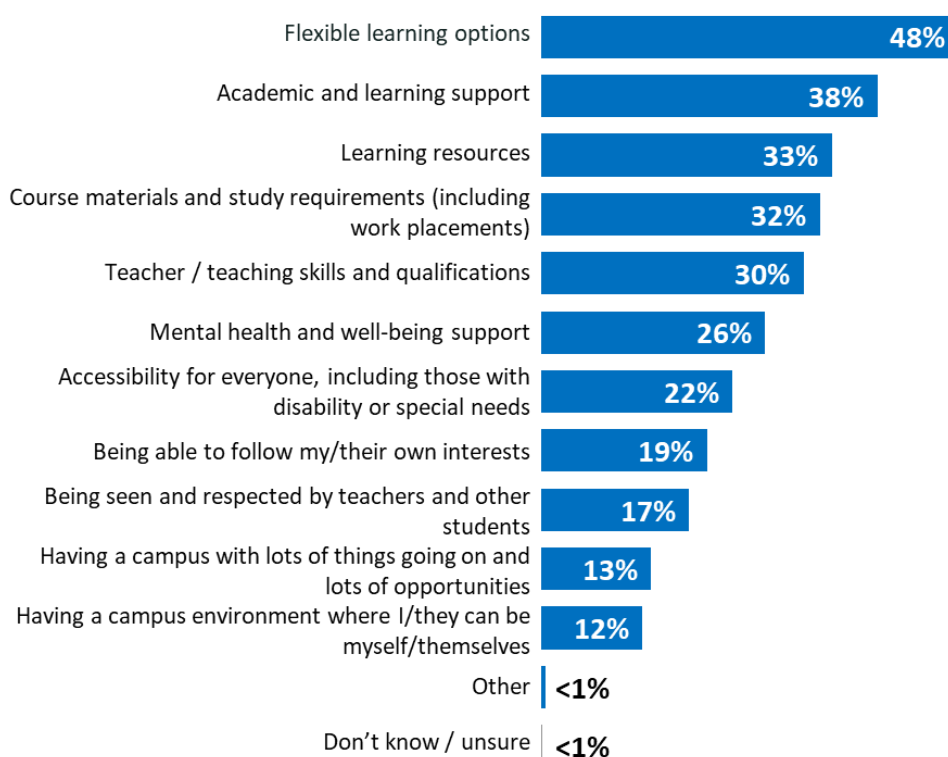
Base: All respondents in each cohort as shown.

Quality learning environments

Ratings of teaching quality in higher education were relatively high among current and former higher education students (74% selected 'good' or 'very good'), indicating general satisfaction with the quality of teaching received. These results were relatively consistent across cohorts, suggesting that none of the demographic groups surveyed who had entered higher education were more likely than others to experience differences in teaching experiences, and that generally teaching practices are meeting the learning needs of a range of students.

However, teaching quality was not the sole factor in quality learning experiences, as revealed when respondents were asked about the most important components of a quality learning environment (i.e., an environment best suited to provide the requisite knowledge, skills and supports to learn effectively). As shown in Figure 9, almost half (48%) of those surveyed nominated flexibility as an important part of a quality learning environment. Beyond this, support and resources were valued aspects of learning environments, with many indicating that academic and learning support (38%), learning resources (33%) and course materials and study requirements (32%) were important. This is consistent with previous research showing that students strongly link support, resources and interpersonal relationships with the quality of their learning experience (Naylor, Bird and Butler, 2021). Despite the positive perceptions of teaching quality discussed above, only 30% indicated that teaching skills/qualifications were one of the most important components of a quality learning environment.

Figure 9: Most important components of a quality learning environment – Top three selections



Q29. What are the most important things that make a quality learning environment? (Up to three options could be selected).

Base: All respondents (n=1,615).

Some differences in these results were observed between cohorts (as shown in Table 6), including:

- First Nations respondents rated mental health and well-being support much higher than other cohorts (35%, compared to 26% overall); ranked as the third most popular component for this cohort. In contrast, no other cohort had this ranked in their top three selections overall. This implies that some First Nations students experience a stronger link between mental health and their learning experience, potentially due to experiences of racism during study as mentioned by one student in qualitative research, and may require greater support in order to thrive to their full potential. This is consistent with previous research (Baik et al., 2015, Behrendt et al., 2012).
- Flexible learning options were favoured more among regional and remote students (56% compared to 48% overall), those who were among the first in their family to attend university (52% compared to 48% overall), prospective students (51% compared to 44% of current students) and those aged 30 or over (63% vs 48% overall). While CALD respondents were less likely to select flexible learning options as one of the most important components (41% compared to 48% overall), it remained the top selection for all key cohorts, including those who were identified as CALD.
- Respondents with a disability were more likely to favour accessibility as an important factor in a quality learning environment (34% compared to 22% overall), ranking as the third-most favoured option among this cohort.

Table 6: Most important components of a quality learning environment by key demographic groups – Top three selections

Rank	First Nations	Low SES	Regional/ rural/ remote	CALD	People with a disability	First in family to attend university	Not currently in employment or training	Experiencing cumulative disadvantage
<i>n=</i>	156	615	606	580	404	914	44	1160
1 st	Flexible learning options (46%)	Flexible learning options (47%)	Flexible learning options (56%)	Flexible learning options (41%)	Flexible learning options (47%)	Flexible learning options (52%)	Flexible learning options (50%)	Flexible learning options (50%)
2 nd	Academic and learning support (44%)	Academic and learning support (37%)	Academic and learning support (39%)	Academic and learning support (39%)	Academic and learning support (36%)	Academic and learning support (38%)	Academic and learning support (45%)	Academic and learning support (38%)
3 rd	Mental health and well-being support (35%)	Learning resources (34%)	Learning resources (33%)	Learning resources (34%)	Accessibility for everyone, including those with disability or special needs (34%)	Learning resources (33%)	Learning resources (36%)	Learning resources (33%)

Q29. What are the most important things that make a quality learning environment? (Up to three options could be selected).

Base: All respondents in each demographic cohort.

These findings further highlight the importance of flexibility in higher education, and the importance of flexibility for learning experiences and outcomes through higher education. Other findings denote the substantial contribution of resources to learning experiences. Of particular note is the role of

academic and learning support, which again represents a need for personal circumstances to be accounted for and managed.

Though nominated by some, social and personal motivators were not highly ranked, with a campus environment in which people can be themselves (12%) and campus activities (13%) among the least-frequently selected options, along with being seen and respected by teachers and other students (17%) and being able to follow personal interests (19%). Taken together with the findings above, this indicates that quality learning environments are largely seen as a product of systemic factors – particularly those that allow for individualised engagement and support.

Respondents appeared to highly value a variety of factors in order to be prepared for future employability, as shown in Figure 10. Among these, over two-thirds (69%) of respondents rated practical experience as among the most important components of employability and success. Both general / broad skills (52%) and specific / technical skills (47%) were broadly considered important, while connections and knowledge of the field was selected by just over half (51%) of respondents. Interpersonal skills (34%) and impressive qualifications (19%) were less frequently seen as the most important factors.

Figure 10: Most important factors for future employability and career success



Q30. Which of the following are most important in order to help you get a job and be successful in the future? (Up to three options could be selected).

Base: All respondents (n=1,615).

It should be noted that these results likely are influenced by respondents' perceptions of prospective employer preferences. This aligns with findings noted earlier (e.g. see Figure 7) in which the practical applicability of study is seen as an area in need of change. They also speak to the importance of the outcomes of the higher education system (in both general and specific skills) and the value respondents place in succeeding in these areas.

Links to academic research



Baik, C., Naylor, R., & Arkoudis, S. (2015). *The first year experience in Australian universities: Finding from two decades, 1994-2014*. Centre for the Study of Higher Education. https://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0016/1513123/FYE-2014-FULL-report-FINAL-web.pdf

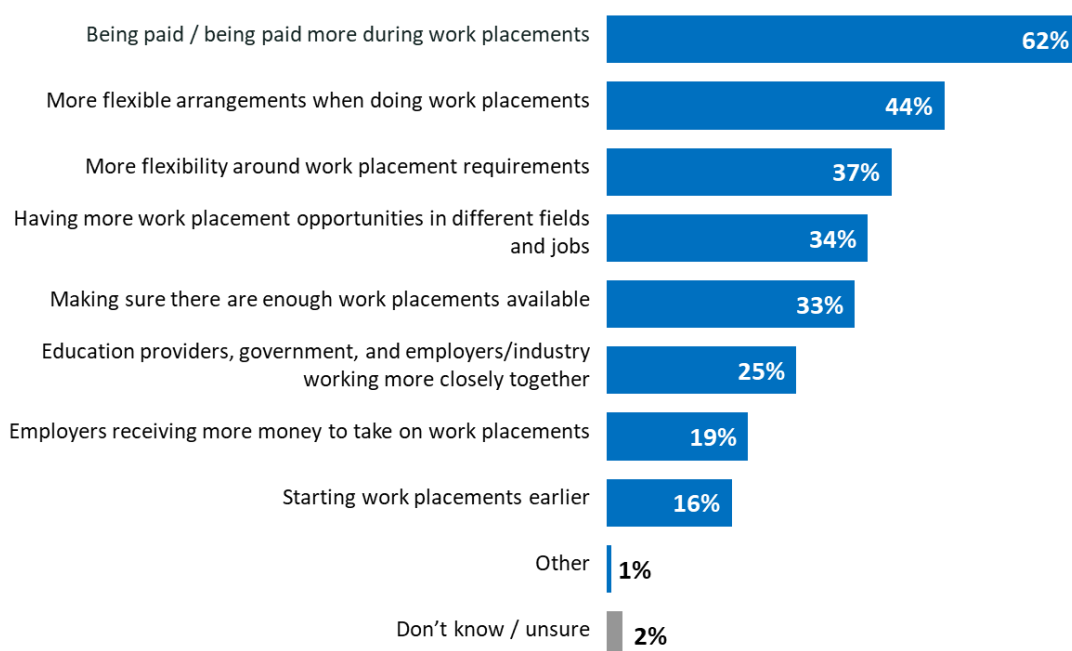
Behrendt, L., Larkin, S., Griew, R., & Kelly, P. (2012). *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People: Final Report* Australian Government.

Naylor, R., Bird, F.L. & Butler, N. (2021). Academic expectations among university students and staff: addressing the role of psychological contracts and social norms. *High Education* **82**, 847–863. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00668-2>

Work-integrated learning and professional placements

Suggested changes to work-integrated learning and professional placements align with other findings about areas of higher education in need of change and support. Among the options presented, financial concerns proved the most prevalent change needed, with 62% selecting ‘being paid / being paid more during work placements’ among their top selections, echoing the significant role of financial pressures and considerations in other aspects of higher education. Flexibility was also a key theme, with flexibility in the work placement arrangement (44%) and the requirements for work placements (37%) receiving considerable support, as shown in Figure 11.

While still receiving support from around one in three respondents, availability (33%) and range of work placements (34%) were less frequently identified as desirable changes, suggesting the most favourable improvements to work placements are not based around the placements themselves, but about how students can best participate in them. These findings evidence the challenges and pressures of individual life circumstances in undertaking study as seen elsewhere, and demonstrate how these factors manifest in work placements too.

Figure 11: Suggestions for improving work placements

Q33. What would improve work placements during higher education? (Up to three options could be selected).

Base: All respondents (n=1,615).

The qualitative research reinforced that placements were seen as a useful and necessary aspect to bringing the 'real world' together with academic learning. However, challenges were identified in the work placement process, including short notice, lack of confidence in making own arrangements and, the area most called out for by students in the qualitative research, the desire for placements to be paid. Some noted that this 'free labour' could be considered unethical, particularly where placements are significantly lengthy (e.g., 150+ hours). We heard of students in the early phases of their studies and working one or two jobs still not having clarity how they would manage their cost of living alongside the need to undertake their placements. Some noted this was a bridge they would cross when they needed to, and others relayed they were aware of students who had not completed studies as they could not be without income during this period.

"Students are struggling to pay cost of living – they should be paid for their placement." – Prospective student, regional

"My university offers mixed-mode (residential) which makes it difficult as a parent and full-time worker." – Current First Nations mature aged student with disability

"How are we meant to get an income for 20 weeks? Some people did not do nursing as they can't afford it. Some placements are now paying minimum wage next year. I would have gone there. I am thinking about changing." – Current student with disability, first to attend

"Husband had to take time off so I could do my placement" – Current First Nations student

"We need to fund placements, there are definitely additional costs involved and students cannot graduate until they undertake placements." – Industry focus group participant



The value of work placements was not disputed, in fact many commented on the importance of having this time to immerse yourself into the role you were preparing for. The concern was more

about having an income during this period so that the negative financial impact did not overwhelm the benefits of the opportunity.

As shown in Table 7, regional / rural / remote respondents were more likely to select payment or increased payment as a desired improvement to work placements (68%, compared to 62% overall), and CALD respondents were the only group for whom ‘having more opportunities in different fields and jobs’ was among their most popular selections (42% in this group endorsing this, compared to 34% overall).

Table 7: Top 3 suggestions for improving work placements by key demographic groups

Rank	First Nations	Low SES	Regional/ rural/ remote	CALD	People with a disability	First in family to attend university	Not currently in employment or training	Experiencing cumulative disadvantage
<i>n</i> =	156	615	606	583	406	914	44	1,160
1 st	Being paid / being paid more (59%)	Being paid / being paid more (64%)	Being paid / being paid more (68%)	Being paid / being paid more (58%)	Being paid / being paid more (60%)	Being paid / being paid more (63%)	Being paid / being paid more (57%)	Being paid / being paid more (62%)
2 nd	More flexible arrangements (44%)	More flexible arrangements (44%)	More flexible arrangements (47%)	Having more opportunities in different fields and jobs (42%)	More flexible arrangements (48%)	More flexible arrangements (45%)	More flexible arrangements (48%) Making sure there are enough work placements available (48%)	More flexible arrangements (46%)
3 rd	More flexible requirements (39%)	Having more opportunities in different fields and jobs (35%)	More flexible requirements (41%)	More flexible arrangements (41%)	More flexible requirements (37%)	More flexible requirements (39%)	More flexible requirements (41%)	More flexible requirements (39%)

Q33. What would improve work placements during higher education? (Up to three options could be selected).

Base: All respondents (n=1,615).

Lifelong learning

Seven in ten (69%) respondents indicated that lifelong learning was either ‘quite’ or ‘very’ important. The reasons provided suggest that there is a range of potential motivators, and a sense of value in lifelong learning and its likely benefits. Among the comments provided, common themes included:

- The need to continually **update individual knowledge**, stay up-to-date with new developments, and remain adaptable in the face of shifting job and skill needs and priorities.

“Staying on top of new knowledge found in your area will make you a better person in that area.” – Current student with low SES background, disability



“The world keeps changing, it's better to learn things to keep with the times.” –

Current student with low SES background, first in family to attend university

“If you don't continue to learn then you will fall behind with competition who will

constantly be up skilling.” – Current CALD student, first in family to attend university

- A more **intrinsically motivated** perspective on further learning, such as **interest and enjoyment**, a sense of empowerment or capability, and the stimulation of study as reasons for continuing learning.

“...improved confidence, self-esteem, and a sense of fulfillment.” – Current regional student, first in family to attend university

“...(it) boosts our confidence and self-esteem.” – Prospective student with low SES background, first in family to attend university

“It stimulates your brain and instils a sense of purpose in the learner.” – Prospective regional / remote student



- Benefits in the **opportunities and perspectives elicited** through lifelong learning.

“By continuing to learn, we can continue to develop into better people through more life experience and understanding of others.” – Prospective First Nations regional / remote student with low SES background, disability, first in family to attend university

“Learning can broaden our horizon, enrich life.” – Current CALD student, first in family to attend university

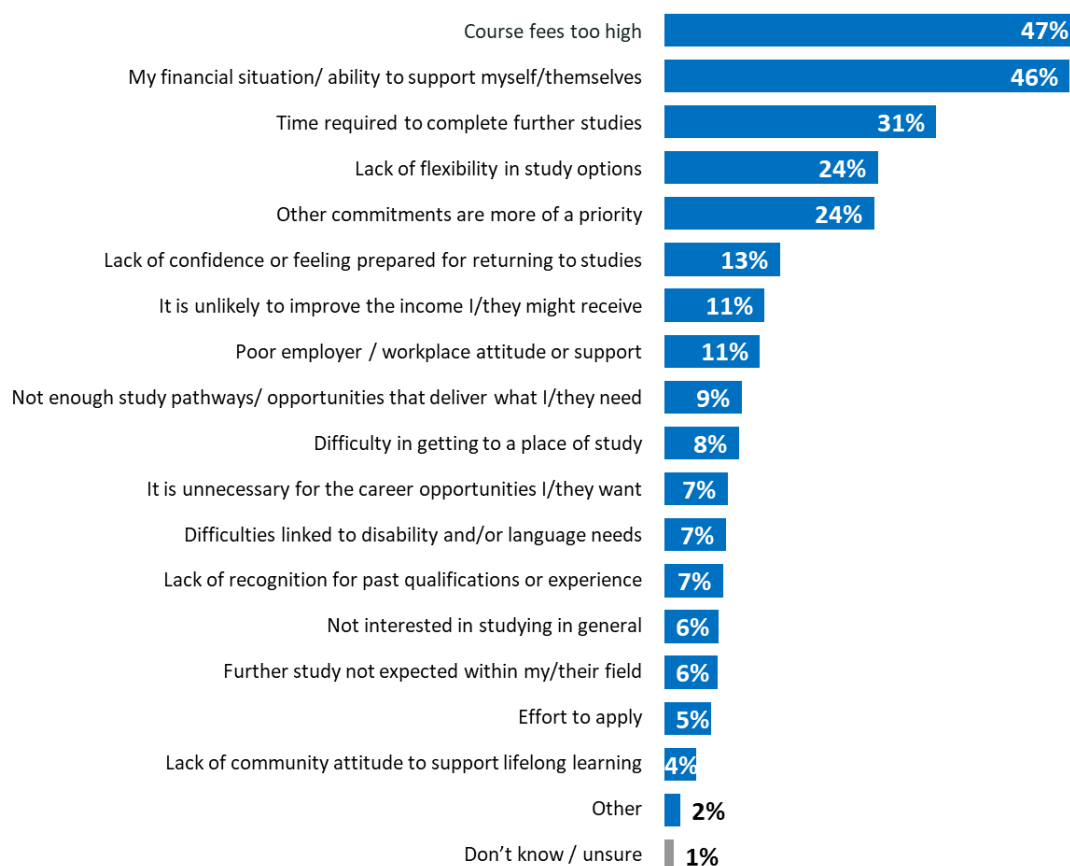
“It enables individuals to expand their horizons, challenge themselves, and reach their full potential.” – Prospective student with low SES background, first in family to attend university

“Learning opens doors to new knowledge, skills, and perspectives. It allows individuals to expand their capabilities, explore their interests, and discover their potential.” – Prospective CALD student, first in family to attend university



Despite this enthusiasm for further learning, several major impediments to lifelong learning were identified by respondents, as shown in Figure 12. Financial considerations were a primary concern for nearly half of respondents, with 47% nominating high course fees as a barrier, and 46% nominating their financial situation as a likely challenge.

The demands and impacts of study were similarly considered a likely barrier by many, with time taken to complete studies identified as a barrier by 31% of respondents, around a quarter (24%) indicating that lack of flexibility in study options would likely hinder further study, and 24% selecting other commitments as a higher priority.

Figure 12: Barriers to lifelong learning

Q36. What is most likely to stop you/your child from keeping on doing formal study throughout your life? (Up to three options could be selected).

Base: All respondents (n=1,615).

While high course fees and their financial situation were the most common barriers identified by all key cohorts, some differences in perceived barriers were observed. These included:

- CALD respondents were less likely to identify their own financial situation as a likely barrier (39% compared to 46% overall);
- both First Nations respondents and those with a disability were less likely to select the time taken for further studies as a barrier (22% and 24% respectively, compared to 31% overall); and
- prospective students were more likely to cite course fees as a deterrent to lifelong study (50% compared to 43% of current students).

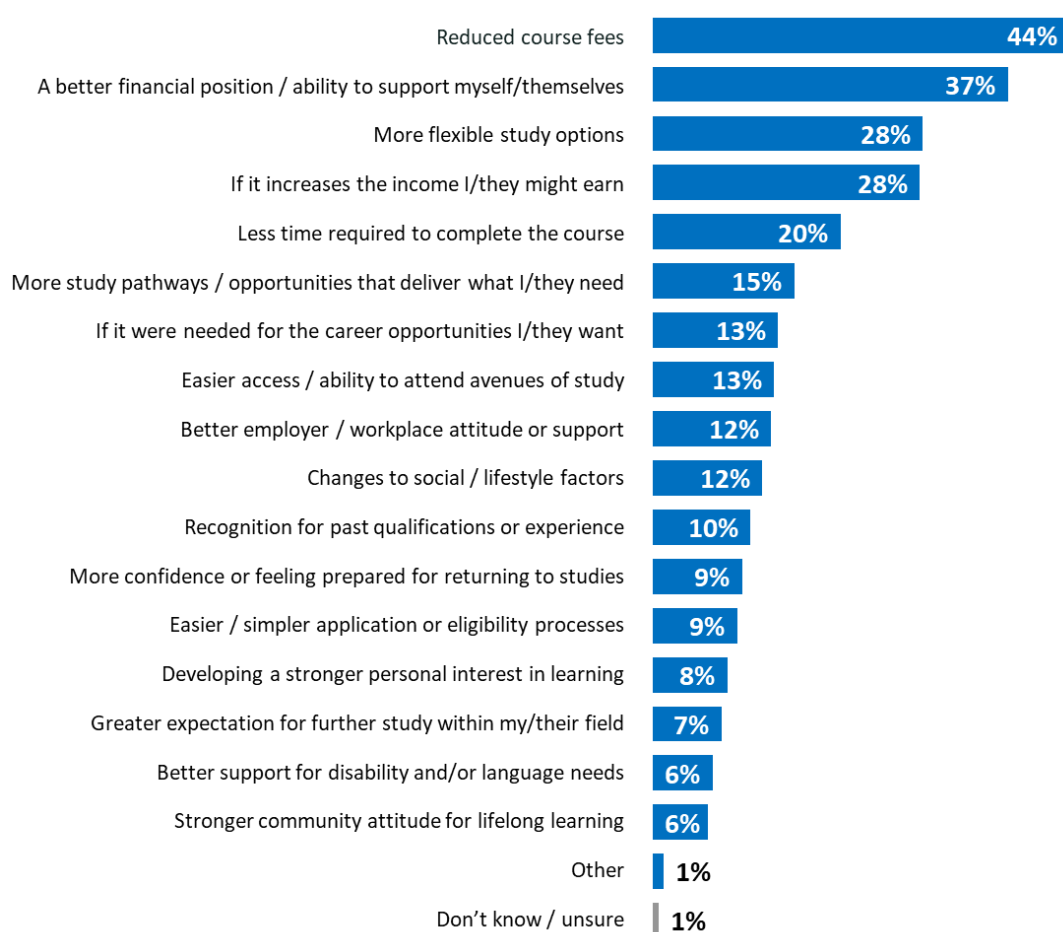
These findings reaffirm financial considerations being a major factor in the decision to study, along with consideration of personal circumstances (time demands of study, need for flexibility, other priorities) featuring prominently. Noticeably absent from these lifelong learning barriers (instead observed among the less-commonly endorsed options) are aspects relating to the individual desire, motivation, or general support for further study (refer to pages 38-39). These were frequently among the reasons given to express the value of lifelong learning, suggesting a conflict between motivation to study and perceived systemic impediments to engaging fully.

This is reflected in the options most cited as potential changes that would encourage lifelong learning, shown in Figure 13. Foremost among these, 44% indicated that reduced course fees would encourage lifelong learning, and 37% nominated a better financial position as a possible way to

better facilitate lifelong learning, mirroring the top two potential barriers in Figure 12. Flexibility also features as a prominent possible change, with 28% indicating greater flexibility in study options could motivate further learning.

Interestingly, 28% indicated that a potential increase in future earnings would encourage further study. While this would not remove barriers, it suggests that sufficient motivation or reward for further study could encourage some people to manage the barriers to lifelong learning. Also of note is the discrepancy between the proportion of respondents citing time taken for study as a barrier (31%) and the proportion indicating that less time required to complete a course would encourage further study (20%). Time may be seen as an inevitable challenge of further study, one that is not as amenable to systemic changes as other options.

Figure 13: Potential changes to encourage lifelong learning



Q37. What changes might encourage you/your child to keep doing formal study throughout your/their life? (Up to three options could be selected).

Base: All respondents (n=1,615).

Few notable differences in top potential changes to encourage lifelong learning were noted among the various cohorts surveyed. Observed differences included:

- Females were more likely to identify reduced course fees (46%, compared to 35% of males) and more flexible study options (31%, compared to 17% of males) as changes that would encourage them;

- CALD respondents were less likely to identify a better financial situation as a likely solution (31%, compared to 37% overall); and
- Prospective students were more likely to cite more flexible study options (31%, compared to 26% of current students).

Summary of key insights



- The major theme in creating a more equitable higher education sector was recognition of financial barriers to access and participation. The need for improved financial support was heard regarding study generally (identifying fees, relocation support, study assistance and Youth Allowance), and in placements particularly.
- The importance of study options being online or closer to home may also point to financial implications related to travel and/or relocation, but may equally relate to importance of community and the desire for flexibility. These were particularly important for mature-aged students, underlining its importance in supporting lifelong learning.
- Overall, flexibility and student support were strongly linked to perceived quality of education.
- Increasing higher education participation may be facilitated by addressing other structural areas, including:
 - Higher education that is aligned with employment and career outcomes by adopting curricula that develops practical skills that can be used in future workplaces
- The availability of financial support and flexible arrangements to participate in professional placements and lifelong learning.
- There was synergy between the themes identified by students around challenges and solutions for boosting access to and participation in higher education, and with building a culture of lifelong learning in Australia.
- An area of difference between the student cohorts arose when considering the focus areas of institutions to meet Australia's future needs, with CALD students identifying areas of technology, economy and international security.

How can we ensure all Australians have the opportunity to participate and succeed in higher education?

Discussion Paper question references



What is needed to improve access to and preparation for higher education?

Q28. What is needed to increase the number of people from under-represented groups applying to and prepared for higher education, both from school and from other pathways?

Q30. How can governments, institutions and employers assist students, widen opportunities and remove barriers to higher education?

Changes needed to increase participation and success for under-represented groups in higher education studies

Q29. What changes in provider practices and offerings are necessary to ensure all potential students can succeed in their chosen area of study?

How can we better support students from under-represented groups to persist and succeed in higher education?

Q31. How can the costs of participation, including living expenses, be most effectively alleviated?

Reforms to ensure quality student experiences

Q32. How can best practice learning and teaching for students from under-represented groups be embedded across the higher education system, including the use of remote learning?

Q39. What reforms are needed to ensure that all students have a quality student experience?

Changes to ensure physical and cultural safety while studying

Q40. What changes are needed to ensure all students are physically and culturally safe while studying?

Job-Ready Graduates (JRG) Package

Q49. Which aspects of the JRG package should be altered, and which should be retained?

Motivation for pursuing higher education

Around half of both prospective students (47%; including those who had previously undertaken some higher education) and current or former students (49%) selected 'help to get a more interesting or rewarding job/career' as a driver of their decision to study, and a similarly large proportion indicated that study was needed for the job / career they were after (57% of current or former students and 44% of prospective students) as shown in Figure 14 and Figure 15. An 'interest in learning more' (44% of prospective students and 41% of current or former students) was also a top reason, revealing a strong intrinsic drive to pursue higher education.

Of note, some sources of motivation differed across age cohorts:

- Respondents aged 16-20 were more likely to be motivated by the requirements of potential jobs / careers (51% of prospective students aged 16-20, compared to 40% among those 21 and older; and 63% of current or former students aged 16-20, compared to 53% among those aged 21 and older).

- Expectations of respondents' family was more likely selected by prospective students aged 16-20 (22%) compared to those aged 21 and older (3%); and 33% of current or former students aged 16-20 compared to 21% of those aged 21 and older).

Additionally, the following differences were observed:

- **First Nations respondents** were more likely to be motivated by a desire to be a leader for their community (22% of prospective students identifying as First Nations, compared to 8% of all prospective students; and 14% of current or former students identifying as First Nations, compared to 7% of all current or former students). Furthermore, current or former students identifying as First Nations were more likely to be motivated to show people that they could do it, to get respect, or overcome low expectations / stereotypes (24%, compared to 14% of all current or former students).
- **People with disability** were also more likely to be motivated by wanting to show people they could do it, to get respect, or overcome low expectations and negative stereotypes (20% of prospective students with disability, compared to 13% of all prospective students; and 20% of current or former students with disability, compared to 14% of all current or former students).
- **CALD respondents** were more likely to be motivated by the expectations of their family (15% of prospective students identified as CALD, compared to 9% of all prospective students; and 36% of current or former students identified as CALD, compared to 25% of all current or former students).

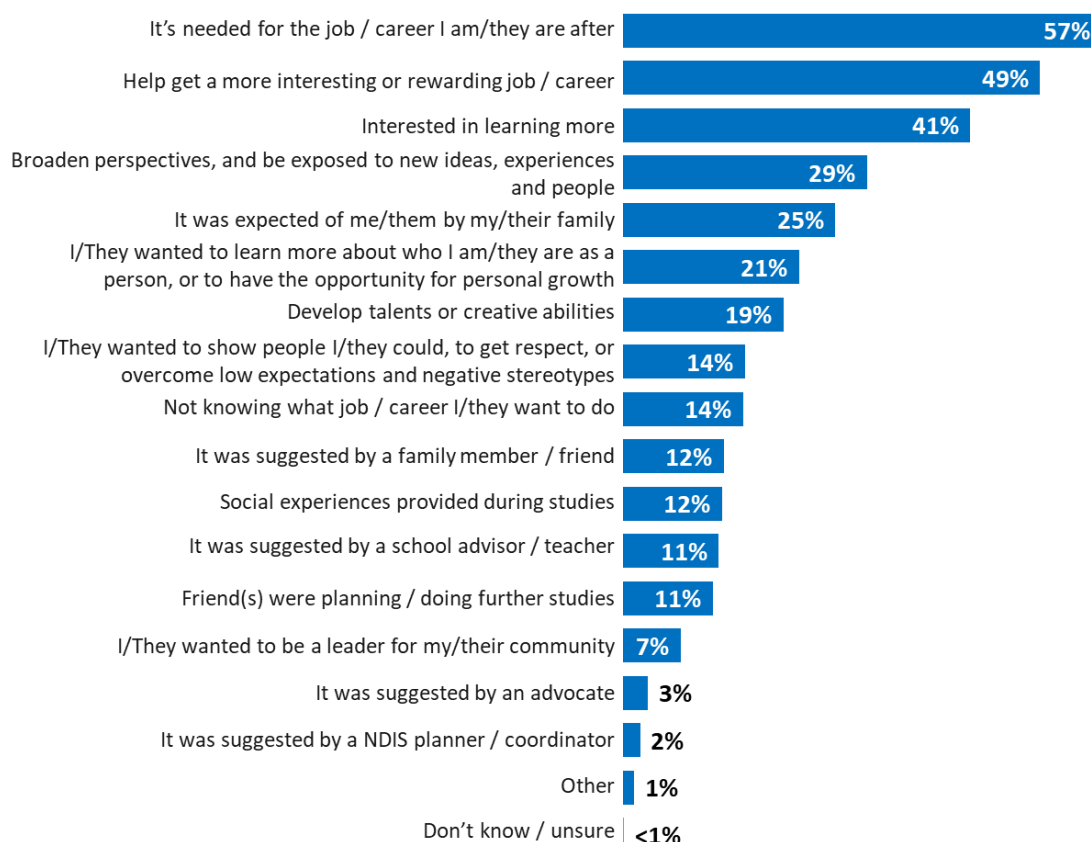
These findings are consistent with previous research for similar groups in Australia (Herbert, 2003; O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018) and overseas (Oh & Kim, 2016, Orellana, 2019). While these differences may merit consideration in efforts to increase participation in higher education, the basis in overcoming negative stereotypes and marginalised identities (in the case of First Nations and people with disability) requires sensitive handling.

Figure 14: Reasons for considering study at university or TAFE (prospective students)



Q28. Why are you thinking of studying? (Up to three options could be selected).

Base: Respondents who are considering higher education (n=811).

Figure 15: Reasons for studying at university or TAFE (current and past students)

Q27. Why did you choose to study at university or TAFE? (Up to three options could be selected).

Base: Respondents who have studied or are currently studying in higher education (n=1,139).

Qualitative research validated these findings, indicating that for most students, future job and income prospects from studying higher education were major motivators – regardless of how clear the student was around what job or course they wanted to explore. A few students relayed that they felt that obtaining a higher education qualification would make them more competitive among other job seekers. This included mature aged students who saw higher education as a means of upskilling. Some students who were less clear were driven by a personal interest and a desire to do well in studies and therefore higher education was a natural progression to continue academic pursuits and explore future opportunities.

It was a surprise to our facilitators that only a few students identified family / parental influences as their primary motivation to study, however again, this notion of self-direction and self-motivation was a consistent theme in the research as demonstrated in motivation for lifelong learning. Expectations of family members was heard more from CALD students and mentioned as influential for First Nations cohorts.

When exploring the experience of those who had more challenging pathways into higher education due to family / financial instability, having a mentor through school or within the community with industry experience was seen as valuable to encourage them and guide the application process. These students tended to weigh up the ability to earn money now with their level of confidence about not only being able to engage in higher education, but also whether sacrifices to study would benefit them in the long run. There still however, seemed to be confidence that higher education would lead to improved prospects and positively impact on their life. The need to build aspiration for these cohorts was raised by some qualitative research participants although other research,

including the survey conducted as part of this project, undermines the view that these cohorts lack aspiration for higher education (see also Gore et al, 2019, James, 2000; Naylor et al., 2013; Rubin et al., 2022).

“What we need is aspiration building at scale for these cohorts, it is not enough to just provide additional funding for career advice.” – Industry focus group participant



“What is needed is an intersectional approach to our learners – to recognise the diversity amongst our students. Educators are not always equipped to cater for the different needs of students. How do we build educator capability to support our students to be retained?” – Industry focus group participant

“It would be good to talk with other mature students about they have managed the transition to higher education later in life.” – Current CALD mature aged student with disability

“Didn’t know what I wanted to do...Parents said whatever you do, just make sure you get a degree... People doing the course said it was better to get experience in job or via TAFE and go back to uni (to get a job).” – Current student with disability, first to attend university (now in TAFE)

“Current labour market environment with low unemployment is resulting in low uptake straight from school. We should be focusing our efforts on mature aged entry and improving the qualifications of those who have already undertaken some study” – Industry Group participant

Links to academic research



Gore, J., Fray, L., Patfield, S., & Harris, J. (2019). Community influence on university aspirations: Does it take a village.... *Teachers & Teaching Research Centre, The University of Newcastle*. <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/community-influence-university-aspirations/>

Herbert, H. (2003). *Is success a matter of choice? Exploring Indigenous Australian notions of success within the context of the Australian university*. RMIT University. Melbourne.

James, R. (2000). *Socioeconomic background and higher education participation: An analysis of school students’ aspirations and expectations*. Department of Education, Science and Training. Canberra.

Naylor, R., Baik, C. & James, R. (2013). *A critical interventions framework for advancing equity in Australian higher education*. Centre for the Study of Higher Education. Melbourne.

O'Shea, S., & Delahunty, J. (2018). Getting through the day and still having a smile on my face! How do students define success in the university learning environment? *Higher Education Research & Development*, 37(5), 1062-1075. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2018.1463973>

Oh, C. J., & Kim, N. Y. (2016). “Success Is Relative” Comparative Social Class and Ethnic Effects in an Academic Paradox. *Sociological Perspectives*, 59(2), 270-295. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0731121415587115>

Orellana, D. A. (2019). *Organizational Culture in Community Colleges: Making Connections to Diverse Student Success* University of Massachusetts. Boston, Massachusetts.

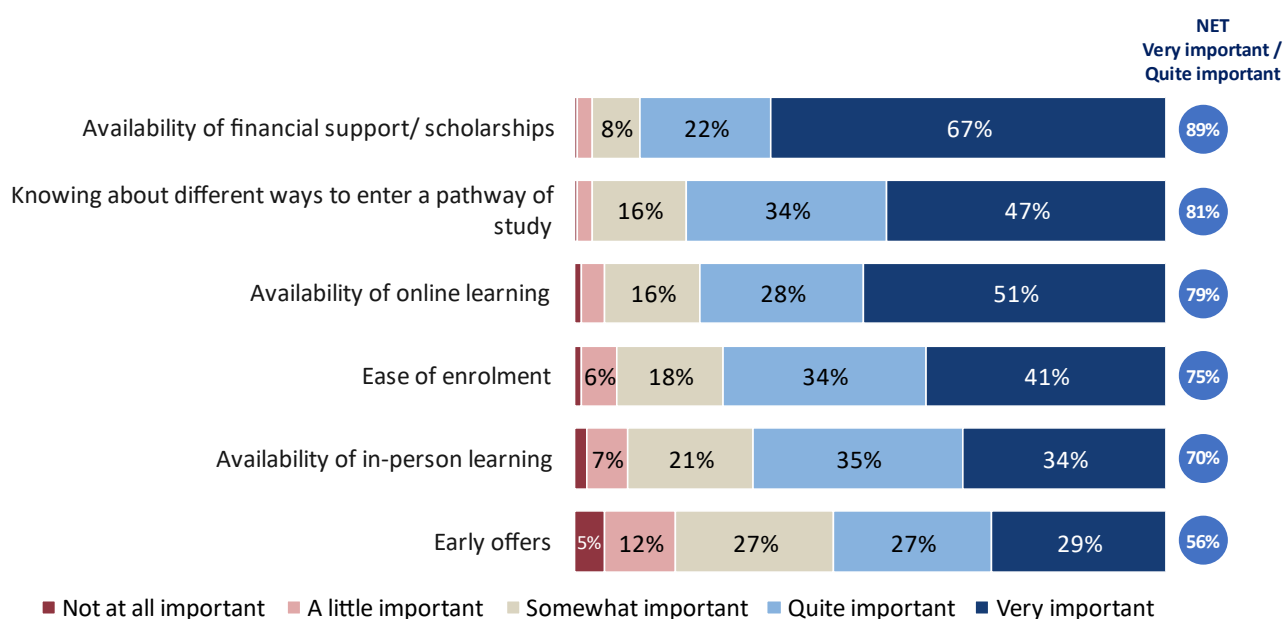
Rubin, M., Burke, P.J., Bennett, A., Evans, O., O'Shea, S., et al. (2022). *Success from the perspective of the successful: equity, success and completion in higher education*. University of Newcastle.
<http://hdl.handle.net/1959.13/1433458>

What is needed to improve access to and preparation for higher education?

Improving access to higher education

Among factors influencing decisions on what to study presented to respondents, nine in ten current or prospective students (89%) indicated that the availability of **financial support/scholarships** was either 'quite' or 'very' important, demonstrating the centrality of financial considerations in decisions about higher education (Figure 16). This was followed strongly by **knowledge** of different ways to enter study pathways (81% indicated that this was 'quite' or 'very' important) and the availability of **online learning** (79% indicated that this was 'quite' or 'very' important).

Figure 16: Importance of various factors in deciding what to study



Q42. How important do you think the following are when deciding what to study?

Base: All respondents from main sample (n=1,531-1,572); excludes 'don't know / not sure'.

Overall, each of the student cohorts were aligned in the key influences for decisions about attending higher education and what to study. While there were very few differences, some exceptions were:

- The availability of early offers was *less* likely to be important for those with a disability (48% indicated that this was 'quite' or 'very' important, compared to 59% of those without a disability);
- The availability of online learning was *more* likely to be important for those experiencing cumulative disadvantage (81%, indicated that this was 'quite' or 'very' important, compared to 73% of those not identified as having cumulative disadvantage);

- The availability of online learning was *more* important for respondents aged 21 and above (85% of those aged 21 and over indicated that this was ‘quite’ or ‘very’ important, compared to 70% of 16-20-year-olds); and
- Conversely, the availability of in-person learning was more of a priority for 16-20-year-olds (76% indicated that this was ‘quite’ or ‘very’ important, compared to 65% of those aged 21 or over).

These findings suggest that **financial support** is the primary consideration among all factors presented (consistent with other findings detailed throughout this report). These results also highlight the differing impact of personal circumstances at different ages, with those aged 21 years or older emphasising the availability of online learning more in their decision-making. These findings are consistent with recent research on barriers to higher education for students from equity or under-represented backgrounds, particularly those from regional and remote; low SES; and First Nations backgrounds (see for example, Gale et al., 2013; Katersky Barnes et al., 2019; O’Shea et al., 2019; Stone et al., 2022; Vernon et al., 2018). Together with the importance of online learning these findings reveal how **personal financial circumstances and individual learning needs** play into decisions about higher education.

The qualitative research strongly painted a picture of individual decision-making revolving around how to navigate their personal circumstances. We heard that the decision to study was not made in isolation of the considerations regarding their need to obtain an income during studies, family / caring commitments, any trade-offs needed to be made based on the course expense versus course interest, the mode of study (i.e. online, in-person, blended) and geographic location of study.

Financial considerations were particularly top of mind for those living out of home (rental) and with mortgages, albeit most students identified general costs of living as a current challenge. Most students were working at least one job, with many working two part-time or casual jobs, in order to meet their day-to-day financial commitments. We heard of a few people making quite drastic decisions on where they live in order to study, including international moves away from family to access free education and interstate or regionally for better accommodation and daily living costs. There was great diversity in the preferences for online or in-person studying but most participants supported both options being available to allow individuals to make choices based on their ability to attend or juggle other commitments, with some people attending in person noting that at times online or recorded lectures can be useful to avoid long commutes (particularly if there were long wait-periods between classes), or ad-hoc life situations that make it harder to attend.

“Expensive to be alive...people need to choose between studying and taking a shift. Harder to study and live out of home. It’s not always easy to move in with parents. It’s not fixable at university level. Raise welfare and income.” – Current student with disability, low SES



“The financial hit for me and the family has been so (big) for me to study, that it has felt so disappointing that there is not an incentive or assistance in any way for me to gain a qualification that will have me in work that is suitable. I am privileged to have a partner with a good job. I spend so much on my medication and health care, but I really want to get back out to the workforce.” – Current mature student with disability, regional

“University students main thing isn’t just uni. They have jobs, people to care for and the way uni is set out is not very flexible.” - Current student with disability, first in family to attend

“The importance and complexity of trying to build new support systems in a system that is difficult to navigate is essential to improve access.” – Industry focus group participant.

“The cognitive load on students considering access to higher education is incredible – which programs, what funding sources, leaving home, finding work, establishing new support networks.” - Industry focus group participant

The impact of personal circumstances on decisions around higher education is consistently demonstrated throughout the report and highlights that governments and institutions should take into account the diversity of people’s needs and the real-life balancing act of students when widening opportunities and removing barriers to higher education.

Information / communication

Institutions’ communication of different pathways to enter study pathways and their support through the enrolment process are also important factors. Any deficiencies in communication or support should be addressed to enable effective decision-making for prospective students. Findings from a number of recent research studies indicate that students from equity or under-represented backgrounds are further disadvantaged by inadequate or insufficient information from schools and universities about study pathways, enrolment processes and support available, including financial support such as scholarships and government allowances (see for example, Austin et al., 2020; Bennett et al., 2022; Dollinger et al., 2022; Gore et al., 2019; Kilpatrick et al., 2022; King et al., 2022).

This was further reinforced through the qualitative research, with nearly all participants sourcing their information independently through online web searches. Where relevant, the experience of support available in school for advice and to make decisions was variable and there was a lack of consistency in expectation of the type of support that might be offered. Some experienced a ‘light touch’ approach of 1-2 meetings and tended to perceive the support as unhelpful. Those who had more intensive support noted this as more helpful, and tended to describe attributes of more frequent interactions focused on the person’s skills and interests with a few describing mentoring and coaching processes. This was particularly so for a few of the First Nations students who had interacted with government or social impact initiatives such as Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME) and NRL School to Work.

“Being an Aboriginal student, I worked with people outside of the school who helped me. They come every second week and talk for a double period. My mind was set on going to the army for a long time – he showed different pathways and helped me.” – Prospective First Nations student (recently offered a course)



This variability extended to the information that students felt was provided. Some identified they had positive experiences with advisory services providing relevant information and guidance based on their interest. However, for many it appeared that information was largely what was available in the course handbook and may not have gone into sufficient detail about the types of jobs that might result from studying particular courses. Attending ‘Career Expos’ was highlighted by some as being a very effective way of gathering information and discussing options. When exploring the knowledge of scholarships, subsidies or other financial support, most relayed they had not been provided or found this information online.

“One meeting with guidance person. Don’t really remember what she said.” – Current student with disability, low SES

“Some unis subsidise courses, but I didn’t know that until today at the careers expo...If they marketed it better they could tell school counsellors and they could tell us.” – Prospective CALD student with disability, regional



- When discussing the type of information that was or would be most useful, many students raised that decision making to undertake higher education and selecting an appropriate course would have been enhanced through a greater understanding of the type of job they might obtain at the end of the degree. Students identified ways this information could be conveyed, or they had found helpful:
 - Having calls or virtual meetings with people in the industry;
 - A day in the life type You Tube videos; and
 - Shadowing someone for a day in that career.

Links to academic research



Austin, K., O'Shea, S., Groves, O., & Lamanna, J. (2020). Partnerships and career development learning: Creating equitable shared futures. *ETH Learning and Teaching Journal*, 2(2), 43–38. <https://learningteaching.ethz.ch/index.php/lt-eth/article/view/99>

Bennett, D., Coffey, J., Bawa S., Carney, D., Dockery, A. M., Franklyn, K., Koshy, P., Li, I. W., Parida, S., & Unwin, S. (2022). *Ameliorating disadvantage: Creating accessible, effective and equitable careers and study information for low SES students*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education.

Dollinger, M., Harvey, A., Naylor, R., Mahat, M. & D'Angelo, B. (2022). *A student-centred approach: Understanding higher education pathways through co-design. Final Report*. Perth: National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University.

Gale, T., Sellar, S., Parker, S., Hattam, R., Comber, B., Tranter, D., & Bills, D. (2010). *Interventions early in school as a means to improve higher education outcomes for disadvantaged (particularly low SES) students. A design and evaluation matrix for university outreach in schools*. National Centre Student Equity in Higher Education. <http://hdl.voced.edu.au/10707/52689>

Gore, J., Fray, L., Patfield, S., & Harris, J. (2019). *Community influence on university aspirations: Does it take a village ...?* Teachers & Teaching Research Centre, The University of Newcastle. <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/community-influence-university-aspirations/>

Katersky Barnes, R., Kilpatrick, S., Woodroffe, J., Crawford, N., Emery, S., Burns, G., & Noble, M. (2019). *Regional communities' influences on equity participation in higher education*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University. <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Barnes-et-al.Report-Final.pdf>

Kilpatrick, S., Fischer, S., Koirala, S., Woodroffe, J., Barnes, N., Groves, O., Katersky Barnes, R., Austin, K., (2022). *Informing key influencers of low SES regional, rural and remote students' education and career pathway choices: A whole community approach: Final report*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/key-influencers-low-ses-regional-rural-remote-students/>

King, S., Stone, C., & Ronan, C. (2022). *Investigating transitions to university from regional South Australian high schools. Final report*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University. https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/King_UniSA_Final_2022.pdf

O'Shea, S., Southgate, E., Jardine, A., & Delahunty, J. (2019). "Learning to leave" or "striving to stay": Considering the desires and decisions of rural young people in relation to post-schooling futures. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 32, 100587. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2019.100587>

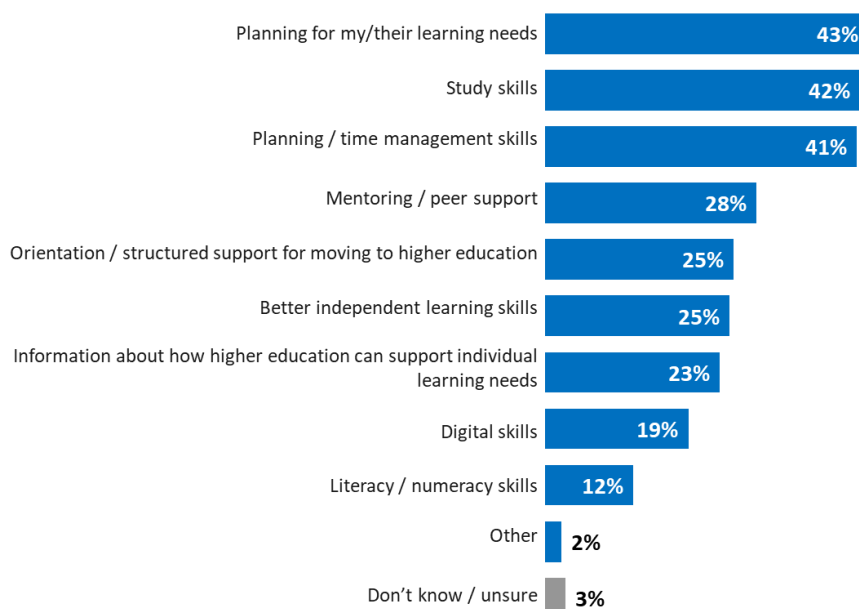
Stone, C., King, S., & Ronan, C. (2022). They just give us the shiny picture, but I want to know what it's really like: Insights from regional high schools on perceptions of university outreach in South Australia, *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, 23(3), 73-89.

Vernon, L., Watson, S., & Taggart, A. (2018). University aspirational pathways for metropolitan and regional students: Implications for supporting school-university outreach partnerships. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, 27(1), 87-103. <https://doi.org/10.47381/aijre.v28i1.167>

Preparation for higher education

Among current or former students, having a fundamental range of broad skills and planning behaviours were endorsed as helpful supports for students to feel better prepared for higher education, as shown in Figure 17. Such results suggest that these foundational skills are a major contributor to success in engaging with study, and ensuring that once students commence higher education, they are able to meet the demands of their course. Research in relation to Enabling Education programs, offered by a range of universities, provides further evidence for the link between foundational skills and student success in higher education, particularly for students from equity groups (e.g., Baker et al., 2022; Bennett et al., 2015; Syme et al., 2022; Zepke, 2018).

Figure 17: Helpful supports to feel prepared for higher education – Top 3 selections



Q49. What would have been helpful for you/your child to feel better prepared for higher education? (Up to three options could be selected).

Base: Current or former students (n=1,147).

Results were broadly consistent across different diversity groups of interest, with the notable exception among respondents with a disability, who were more likely to select 'planning for learning needs' compared to all other respondents (53% compared to 43% overall). This cohort was also *less* likely to indicate that study skills were among their top supports for feeling prepared (31% vs 42%

overall). These differences are likely to reflect difficulties this cohort may have in fully engaging with courses in the way they are delivered to other students, and the extra support and flexibility they may need in planning for and engaging in learning and realising their potential through study.

When exploring these issues as part of the qualitative research, it was found that the level of preparation in secondary school was somewhat dependent upon what course the school students attended, but most students felt that there could be improvements to preparing them better for higher education. Many students commented on the impact that secondary school subject selection had on pathways and preparation for higher education including:

- Some students chose subjects to improve ATAR scores meaning they were not always engaging in subjects of interest or related to their likely course/career pathway;
- Some students selected VET subjects to avoid school classes – for some this created an interest, while it distracted others from their genuine desire to learn;
- Students who chose subjects related to their desired study / employment interests may not obtain sufficient ATAR scores to enter the degree of their choosing;

Many students commented that all of the factors above meant that when/should they be successful they might lack the fundamental study skills necessary for their higher education course such as research and analysis as they were busy doing ‘double maths’ to improve their ATAR scores.

“Start talking about it earlier – year 9 and 10. If people feel like they might want to study, they need to think about the subjects they may want to do. What held me back was I didn’t do Science and I couldn’t get into the courses I wanted to do.” –

Current CALD student with disability, first to attend, low SES



“Scared I might not get the ATAR that’s needed to start in Finance. [ATAR Requirements] restrict [students] when they’re really passionate about a degree.” – Current regional / remote CALD student with a disability

“It’s all about getting the right ATAR score to get in – what happens next?” – current CALD student

“I did TAFE so I could drop a subject I didn’t like at school...After TAFE, helped my interest [in studying]One thing I have gained through TAFE, I can prioritise my time and tasks.” – Current First Nations student

“I really didn’t like the TAFE course. I really wanted to stick my head down and learn, others were mucking around. I thought it was a waste of time.” – Current student with disability, first in family to attend university

“I applied like Tinder. I applied for everything I could [close to home]” (referring to applying for courses that their ATAR scored allowed) – Current First Nations student

“More funding to help people get to uni. Tutoring available to help them get the ATAR they want if they are at a bad school.” – Prospective student, regional, first in family to attend university

Suggested solutions to improve access to higher education by under-represented groups

When asked in the survey how students who are currently under-represented could be supported to access higher education, respondents suggested similar options to those highlighted in the findings above. These findings converge on the need to accommodate unique situations, abilities, and circumstances in order to encourage access to higher education, and enable students to thrive once they commence.

Financial support, including reduced higher education fees and having more scholarships.



“Personally, I think a big area to be addressed is financial support.” – Current regional / remote student

“With reduced fees and more financial support.” – Current regional / remote student with a disability, first in family to attend university

“Make it cheaper.” – Prospective CALD student

“Providing more scholarships.” – Current CALD student

“Scholarships for those who are disadvantaged...” – Current CALD student

Tailoring study options to individual needs.

“Alter the courses to meet those groups so it’s more compatible and accessible to them.” – Prospective student with a disability

“Have special options for students who need extra help and train teacher to help those with extra needs.” – Prospective First Nations student

“Offer them specific programs that will help them during their course in university.” – Prospective CALD student with low SES background

Further suggestions were offered around the information provided about higher education. These included the possibility of targeting advertising to under-represented students in an effort to increase awareness of options and build confidence that higher education was a viable option for them. Also raised was providing more information to prospective students who are making the decision to study (such as high school students) or transitioning into higher education, and information that provides a picture of the potential benefits and experiences afforded by higher education.

“Promoting this in the community. A lot of people are not aware of the options available at university. Communication channels so people can easily speak with [universities to also] find out.” – Current student with a disability, with low SES background, first in family to attend university



“Supported places advertised and available. Widely advertised in relevant places. Genuine support in place.” – Current student with low SES background, first in family to attend university

“More information about course and options.” – Current CALD student

“More advertisement of pathways and support available to people to encourage them and make available these opportunities.” – Current regional / remote student with low SES background, first in family to attend university

“Really emphasise that there are many ways to get into the fields they want to.” – Prospective CALD student with disability, first in family to attend university

“By showing the different pathways to get into uni and possible job prospects that uni could lead to.” – Prospective regional / remote First Nations student with low SES background

“We need to support these students better to retain them in higher education, not just to assist them to enter – the outcomes for these cohorts of students have not improved at all over recent years.” - Industry focus group participant

“Focus on retention and success not just the front door.” - Industry focus group participant

These findings provide a rationale for greater outreach and support efforts, particularly around entry and enrolment processes where information and assistance appear to be needed to ensure accessibility of important information, and a smooth transition into higher education. The importance of outreach to regional, rural, remote and low SES communities and schools in making this type of information accessible is highlighted in other research (such as that by Austin et al., 2020; Baker, 2021; Dollinger et al., 2022; Fray et al., 2019; Gore et al., 2019; Katersky Barnes et al., 2019; Stone et al., 2022). Flexibility in offerings themselves (e.g. timetabling, delivery modes, etc) may help in addressing the demands of personal circumstances that often hinder full engagement with higher education, and could be further promoted to ensure prospective students are fully aware of all options to balance study with other demands. Similarly, knowledge of, and support for, financial assistance options could be promoted, but financial demands may also be addressed through aspects of course delivery, including flexible scheduling that facilitates the need to work, paid work placements (where placements are required during study) and balancing study load with the need to maintain an income.

These areas are further explored in the following sections and were teased out in more detail through qualitative research.

Links to academic research



Baker, S. (2021). *Outreach initiatives for equity groups in higher education*. Gonski Institute for Education, UNSW. <https://www.gie.unsw.edu.au/research/outreach-initiatives-for-equity-groups-in-higher-education>

Baker, S., Ulpen, T., & Irwin, E L., (2021). A viable equity mechanism for all? Exploring the diversity of entry requirements and supports in Australian enabling education, *Higher Education Research & Development*, 40:5, 932-946, DOI: 10.1080/07294360.2020.1801600

Bennett, A., Naylor, R., et al (2015). *The Critical Interventions Framework Part 2: equity initiatives in Australian higher education: a review of evidence of impact*. University of Newcastle. <http://hdl.handle.net/1959.13/1389888>

Dollinger, M., Harvey, A., Naylor, R., Mahat, M. & D'Angelo, B. (2022). *A student-centred approach: Understanding higher education pathways through co-design. Final Report*. Perth: National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University.

Fray, L., Gore, J., Harris, J., & North, B. (2019). Key influences on aspirations for higher education of Australian school students in regional and remote locations: A scoping review of empirical research, 1991–2016. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 47, 61–93. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-019-00332-4>

Gore, J., Fray, L., Patfield, S., & Harris, J. (2019). *Community influence on university aspirations: Does it take a village ...?* Teachers & Teaching Research Centre, The University of Newcastle. <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/community-influence-university-aspirations/>

Katersky Barnes, R., Kilpatrick, S., Woodroffe, J., Crawford, N., Emery, S., Burns, G., & Noble, M. (2019). *Regional communities' influences on equity participation in higher education*. National

Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University. <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Barnes-et-al.Report-Final.pdf>

Naylor, R., Baik, C., & James, R. (2013). *A critical interventions framework for advancing equity in Australian higher education*. Department of Industry, Innovation, Climate Change, Science, Research and Tertiary Education.

Stone, C., King, S., & Ronan, C. (2022). They just give us the shiny picture, but I want to know what it's really like: Insights from regional high schools on perceptions of university outreach in South Australia, *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, 23(3), 73-89.

Syme, S., Roche, T., Goode, E., & Crandon, E. (2022.) Transforming lives: the power of an Australian enabling education, *Higher Education Research & Development*, 41:7, 2426-2440, DOI: 10.1080/07294360.2021.1990222

Zepke, N. (2018). Learning with peers, active citizenship and student engagement in enabling education. *Student Success*, 9(1), 61–73.
<https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.593106126746216>

Changes needed to increase participation and success for under-represented groups in higher education studies

Respondents identified a range of potential changes to higher education provision and supports, though most strongly favoured changes to financial or income support while studying (47%). Among the other options presented, 28% indicated their preference for **greater flexibility** in the provision of course content and assessment, and 25% suggested the need for **greater support** for life circumstances such as work and family, as shown in Figure 18. Students' desire for greater flexibility, particularly among non-traditional student cohorts has also emerged strongly in other research studies, including the TEQSA report on students' experiences during Covid-19 (Martin, 2020) as well as other pre- and post-pandemic research (such as James et al., 2021; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2022; Savage, 2021; Stone et al., 2019).

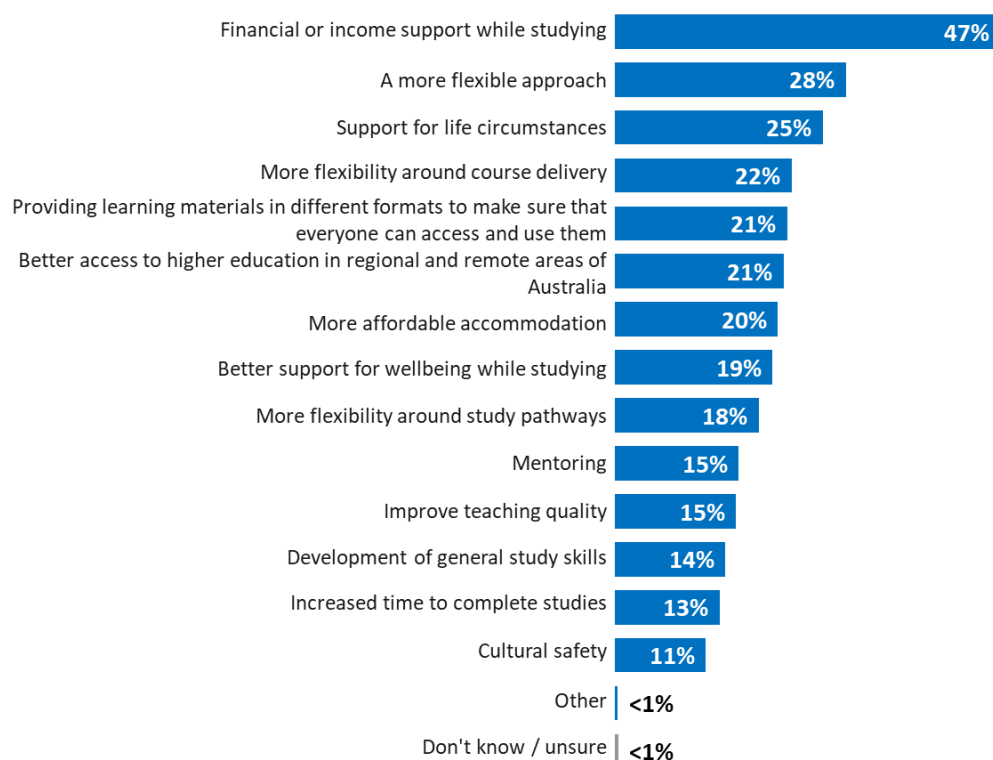
The concept of **flexibility** was further explored through the qualitative research. Some of the features that students thought would be helpful to enable more underrepresented students to participate and complete higher education are set out below. The point was raised in the industry focus group that institutions need to be provided with resources to better support 'vulnerable students' in an intersectional way - 'they don't all fit into one box.'

Flexibility in higher education as described by students

- Hybrid online and in-person course options.
- Greater understanding and ability to support students' need for extensions or time off which only needs to be evidenced once not every time it is required.
- Giving students assessments to complete in their time – not a set date for each assessment rather working to a self-learning pace.
- Being able to defer courses with greater ease and no perceived 'punishment'.
- Dropping down to single units at a time.
- Non-metro 'study hubs' for people that can't study at home and/or travel long distances.

- Promoting metro 'study hubs' as sometimes it is not safe or practical to study at home.
- Being able to try a course either through a free taster course, semester or ability to change to another course without experiencing additional debt.
- Scattering lengthy placements throughout the year to enable managing home/income.
- Offering classes at different times or 'on demand' lectures to give people options to participate outside of work hours.
- Greater support and opportunity to meet with lecturers to ask questions outside of class times.
- Educators need to keep learning – teach our teaching staff how to deal with diversity.
- Engage professionals to educate lecturers about the impact of a person's unique disability/impairment, and how this impacts on the person's learning in order to design a suitable plan.
- Family friendly campuses, including childcare that remains open during evening classes.
- Provision or loan of resources to assist in study (e.g. internet dongles, laptops).
- Lifting timeframes for course completion to enable people to learn at their own pace.

Figure 18: Changes needed to ensure students can do well in higher education



Q51. What changes are needed to ensure all students can do well in higher education? (Up to three options could be selected).

Base: All respondents (n=1,614).

“The university has been unforgiving saying ‘this is what you signed up for’. How are we meant to get an income for 20 weeks. Some people did not do nursing as you can’t afford this.” – Current student with disability, first to attend university in their family



“No 8AM starts! People with ADHD have sleep issues.” – Current student with disability

“Not being pigeonholed – if I decide if this is not for me, I could move courses.” – Current CALD student

“I selected a course because it was online and part-time. It was the only course I could find online that was a graduate course, that I would be qualified to do.” – Current regional student with complex health / disability

“I am very smart; I understand the content but I get very tired and can’t produce the output at the same speed as an able-bodied student. ...Make reasonable and necessary adjustments so that you are unlocking diverse potential.” – Current student with disability

As highlighted in the quotes above, when discussing flexibility, the need for greater understanding of accessibility for people with disability, impairment or complex health issues was often raised. Some students with disability including mental health issues also emphasised the need for lecturers to be more proactive in supporting adjustments. While a few students were aware of disability and learning support officers, a few raised the concerns of stigma attached with reaching out for assistance, or not having the ability to recognise that they needed assistance due to the nature of their impairment / condition.

“With disability it is hard enough to get out of bed (takes 2 hours), then travel to work. The set up of the [university] system is still very tailored to able bodied individuals. People see I can communicate well; they don’t see that I get exhausted. They don’t see the physical toll it has on my body. They understand my wheelchair, but because I am engaging in conversation, I am overestimated.” – Previously attempted higher education and prospective student with disability



“There was not enough awareness of issues with learning and development. It was put down to ‘not trying enough’. [When started failing units] they could have explored other issues, intervened at that time.” – Current student with disability (resulted in changing courses to avoid failing and reduced to part-time hours)

“If we are in uni it is because we want to be there, even if we’re struggling or grades aren’t as good – one person’s best is different to other’s best. Some of us need a little extra help, support or understanding.” – Current student with disability (mental health), low SES

“I identified that I had a disability in order to access supports if needed. Onus is on the student to follow up after the initial flurry of contact.... I fell behind and I should have put my hand up at the time, however due to disability I didn’t recognise this...No-one followed up to check and see if anything needed to be put in place.” – Current student with disability, first to attend, regional

The challenges of supporting flexibility given diverse needs was not lost on the students, and was also raised by industry / student peaks noting the likelihood of it being an expense for institutions.

“Invest into research into adaptive design and technology. Invest more into existing systems and how to use adaptive design.” – Current CALD student



“To talk about being more flexible is very difficult to do. How expensive is it to be flexible? Added expense.” – Industry peak

“Don’t try to fit all these different cohorts into the same boxes.” – Industry peak

“Easy to offer but not always able to implement them.” – Current student with disability, first to attend, regional

These findings on changes required did not differ substantially across the various interest groups surveyed. Notably, CALD respondents were less likely to endorse a need for support for life circumstances (21%, compared to 25% overall), suggesting that life circumstances may have a slightly lower impact on doing well in higher education, as compared to other groups. Cultural safety was an issue for First Nation respondents (18% compared to 11% overall) and people with disability were more likely to selected ‘increased time to complete studies’ (18% compared to 13% overall).

Furthermore, those in regional/remote areas were more likely to indicate a need for better access to higher education in regional and remote areas (25%, compared to 18% of others) and more affordable accommodation (24%, compared to 18% of others), pointing to substantial challenges inherent in either accessing higher education outside of metropolitan areas, or in the change of life conditions entailed by moving away from regional/remote areas in order to study.

Among demographic cohorts, accommodation was a more prominent concern for those aged 16-20 years (28% compared to 15% of those aged 21 or over), most likely reflecting the different accommodation needs or transition into accommodation among this group together with the financial implications to fund their accommodation. Financial support was a lesser concern among male respondents (38%, compared to 50% of females).

Some of the students in the qualitative research found that bridging courses offered to First Nation students and some community colleges were valuable in preparing for higher education, and tutoring was mentioned by many students (albeit this was noted as an expense) to assist with:

- improved understanding of content;
- an avenue to ask questions;
- building foundational skills; and
- planning their work.

“Would be great if could have had 1:1 tutor to talk through the work – not to do the work, but sit down and help me organise myself and explain things. I know that they have these [things], but when I was doing it, it all felt a bit overwhelming.” – Previously attempted higher education and prospective student with disability.



Links to academic research

James, T., Toth, G., Tomlins, M., Kumar B., & Bond, K. (2021). Digital disruption in the COVID-19 era: The impact on learning and students’ ability to cope with study in an unknown world. *Student Success*. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.1784>

Martin, L. (2020). *Foundations for good practice: The student experience of online learning in Australian higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic*. TEQSA. Australian Government.



<https://www.teqsa.gov.au/latest-news/publications/foundations-good-practice-student-experience-online-learning-australian>

Mercer-Mapstone, L., Fatnowner, T., Ross, P., Bricknell, L., Mude, W., Wheat, J., Barone, R.P., Martinez, D.E., West, D., Gregory, S.J., Venderlelie, J., McLaughlin, T., Kennedy, B., Able, A., Levy, P., Banas, K., Gabriel, F., Pardo, A., & Zucker, E. (2022). *Recommendations for equitable student support during disruptions to the higher education sector: Lessons from COVID-19*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University Australia.

<https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/equitable-student-support-disruptions-higher-education-covid-19/>

Savage, S. (2021). The experience of mothers as university students and pre-service teachers during Covid-19: recommendations for ongoing support. *Studies in Continuing Education*.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2021.1994938>

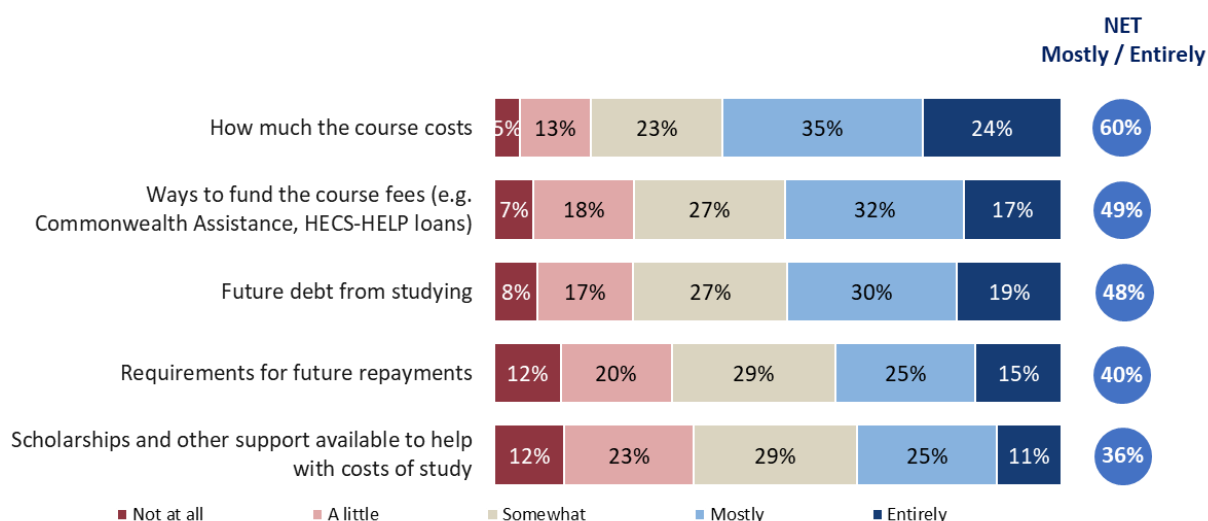
Stone, C., Freeman, E., Dymont, J., Muir, T., & Milthorpe, N. (2019). Equal or equitable? The role of flexibility within online education. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, 29(2), 78-92. <https://journal.spera.asn.au/index.php/AIJRE/article/view/221>

Supporting students from under-represented groups to persist and succeed in higher education

As noted in the section above, financial or income support was nominated as a major necessity for supporting under-represented students to succeed in higher education. When asked about their understanding of various aspects of higher education costs and financial considerations, six in ten (60%) respondents entirely or mostly understood the cost of their course. However, less than half were mostly or entirely aware of all other aspects including ways to fund course fees (49%), future debt from studying (48%), requirements for future repayments (40%) and scholarships and other support available to help with the costs of study (36%) – see Figure 19.

These findings suggest that there is a substantial information gap in terms of avenues to both finance and support the cost of higher education courses, as well as the financial implications of course costs. Given that financial considerations are a central issue in considering study, addressing this gap may enable prospective students to consider the currently available options for financial support more fully, and better plan for debt and the future repayment of course costs. However, it should be noted that in other findings, financial concerns related to study refer both to funding for courses, as well as the financial impact of balancing study and work.

Of note, prospective students were less likely to indicate that they ‘mostly’ or ‘entirely’ understood these aspects of course costs (ranging from 32-56% compared to 41-64% among current students), suggesting an opportunity to increase this understanding through information and advice made available prior to enrolment, to ensure people are fully prepared for the financial commitment and can plan for this thoroughly in their decision-making.

Figure 19: Understanding of aspects of funding and costs

Q55. How well do you understand the following aspects of funding and costs related to your (potential) study?

Base: All respondents (n=1,578-1,593); excludes 'don't know / not sure'.

When delving into how much the financial aspects of studying impacted on the decision to study as part of the qualitative research, a common theme arose that the *cost of now* was more important than future debt. Most students engaged had HECS loans, however there was variability in understanding the future financial implications. Most put it down to something that they would worry about when they had a job and needed to pay this back. There was significant confusion between how HECS-HELP works with many referring to 'interest' on the debt rather than 'indexation'.

"Every time I receive a [HECS] statement a little piece of me dies" (referring to increasing HECS debt) – Current student, regional, low SES



As part of the qualitative research, we also explored student sentiment on meeting daily living costs through a loan-type scheme. There were many different views expressed ranging from concern about taking on additional debt and unintended consequence of further disadvantaging those already in disadvantaged positions; to a consideration to ease student concerns on covering demands of their daily life (e.g., juggling accommodation costs, jobs, family expenses etc) which may have also impacted on their decision to study full-time instead of part-time.

However, the general view of this small sample was that it would depend a lot on how it was to be repaid in terms of time-frames, whether it would attract interest and so on. These students were already concerned about debt and indicated they would only be interested if it were a 'no interest' debt that did not have to be repaid until they were earning sufficient amounts to be able to comfortably repay.

When further discussing the principles of a loan-type option, students noted the following considerations:

- The preference for this to be interest-free and not indexed – a stable amount that students can work out a plan to pay off (i.e. the provision of loans at negative real interest rates).
- Ensure that repayments consider the need to pay for HECS or other debts, while maintaining ability to pay for day-to-day costs.
- Consideration if this is ongoing throughout the course or if this is for time limited periods where a person is unable to obtain an income (i.e. during placements, or to cover specific costs to support their success, such as tutoring).
- It should not disadvantage those who are already in hardship – and should not place students in an ‘American style system’ and end up with debt so big they are paying it off for life.
- Ensure the right people are getting it – those that genuinely need this support.
- Financial counselling / literacy support being provided to the person so they are educated about the scheme and have a plan to pay off the loan.
- A few noted a preference for this to be aligned with the HECS scheme and not offered through Centrelink due to lack of trust and negative experiences.

We also heard support for other options to support students with their cost of living while studying which included sentiments around meeting this need through increases in current student income supplements (e.g., Youth Allowance, Austudy), additional scholarships, no HECS-HELP repayments until completion of the degree, payment for work placements and/or programs to support the provision of equipment.

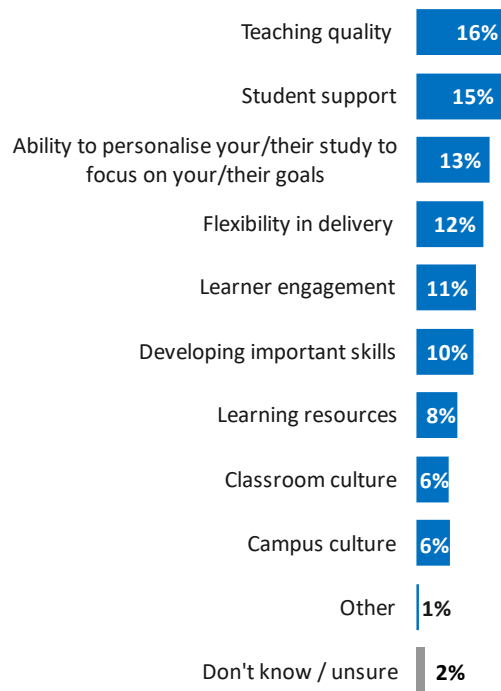
Reforms to ensure quality student experiences

Areas of improvement to ensure quality student experiences

As shown in Figure 20, there is little consensus on areas of higher education that most need improvement to ensure a quality student experience. There was no clear majority or large minority in the range of options selected, which included course quality, flexibility, support, learning resources, and skills outcomes (selected by 8-16% of respondents). More abstract notions such as classroom culture or campus culture were endorsed by fewer people (both 6%), with the exception of CALD respondents, who were more likely to indicate that campus culture needed improvement (9%). Although the proportions of top selections varied somewhat among different diversity groups, no clear trends or outliers were identified – see

Table 8.

Figure 20: Areas of improvement to ensure quality student experiences



Q53. What area most needs to improve to ensure everyone has a quality student experience?

Base: All respondents from main sample (n=1,579).

Table 8: Areas of improvement to ensure quality student experiences

Rank	First Nations	Low SES	Regional/ rural/ remote	CALD	People with a disability	First in family to attend university	Not currently in employment or training	Experiencing cumulative disadvantage
n=	120	602	588	570	393	886	44	1,126
1 st	Ability to personalise study to focus on goals (18%)	Student support (16%)	Student support (17%)	Teaching quality (18%)	Teaching quality (16%)	Teaching quality (15%)	Teaching quality (23%)	Teaching quality (15%)
2 nd	Student support (15%)	Ability to personalise study to focus on goals (15%)	Ability to personalise study to focus on goals (16%)	Student support (15%)	Ability to personalise study to focus on goals (16%)	Student support (15%)	Ability to personalise study to focus on goals (16%)	Student support (15%)
3 rd	Developing important skills (14%)	Teaching quality (14%)	Teaching quality (15%) Flexibility in delivery (15%)	Developing important skills (12%)	Flexibility in delivery (15%)	Ability to personalise study to focus on goals (15%)	Flexibility in delivery (16%)	Ability to personalise study to focus on goals (15%)

Q53. What area most needs to improve to ensure everyone has a quality student experience?

Base: All respondents from main sample in each demographic cohort.

In general, qualitative research participants found teaching to be of reasonable quality. The research found that advancing engagement and success for under-represented students is likely to require a holistic approach based on the person's situation. A mix of solutions may be required such as supporting improved financial positions of current students, improving adjustments and flexibility to cater to student needs and lifestyles, providing both technical and practical skills to enhance job prospects, and better alignment in student learning with what is required from industry.

There was a balance of views around a quality educational experience providing the technical skills, theoretical models, problem solving ability, and personal skills such as soft skills (e.g. communicating with others). A key theme that emerged was the desire for greater assurance that what was being taught aligned with industry expectations and therefore would improve the ability of the student to gain employment. A student with chronic health issues also raised that this connection was important around potential employers explaining their diversity policies and removing perceived barriers.

“Direction is important, making sure everything has a purpose towards building your skills and expertise... More communication with people who are doing the jobs you are studying for. Get opportunities to make those connections with people you might work for.” – Current First Nation student with disability



“Want the scholarly side not to be lost, but merged with practical solutions. (Student noted that case studies were ‘overboard’) – was not getting enough of the theory. Need some industry experts and connection to industry.” – Current student with disability

“If interested in a career pathway, having (practitioners) talk about their diversity policies (so students) can see themselves working with the company or industry.” – Current student with disability

“Uni was not what was promised, not as expected so I dropped out. [Then] found the job I wanted and worked backwards to find what I needed to study to excel in that job or have a foot in the industry. There is a gap in terms of what we learn and what we require for the workplace.” – Current mature aged CALD student with disability

“The real world is very different from study.” – Current mature aged student, low SES

Elsewhere, respondents described what they would like decision-makers to know about their situation when decisions about higher education policy are being made. Among the responses given, a recurrent theme was the need for decision-makers to account for personal circumstances and challenges, such as family demands, mental health considerations, and life situations. This is consistent with findings from other parts of the research and suggests that recognition of these considerations may contribute to better student experiences. Examples of verbatim comments are presented below.

“They should know individuals all have different home life so they should take that into consideration.” – Current First Nations student, first in family to attend university



“I am currently wanting to study higher education, however my financial and personal situation makes it very hard, I wish I had the support to be able to commence study and feel comfortable.” – Prospective regional / remote student with a disability, first in family to attend university

“That it is an individualised experience. Not everyone has the same experience/opportunities.” – Current student with low SES background, disability

“That everyone is different, not everyone is straight into university/TAFE and some people do need help/support.” – Current regional / remote student, first in family to attend university

“My age, race, financial position, family background and current personal circumstances.” – Prospective CALD student

“That mental health really matters and impacts a student greatly when they are not receiving the right amount of help or support from those around them.” – Prospective CALD student

Changes to online learning

When asked about what changes are needed to how online learning is offered by higher education providers, the following suggestions were given:

- While several comments signalled a desire for more courses to be available online, others expressed a desire for a mix or balance between online and in-person learning to ensure practical knowledge could be sufficiently incorporated. This is consistent with the results shown in Figure 16, which indicate that both online and in-person learning are important to a large majority of respondents.

“More courses being offered for online learning.” – Prospective student with a disability, first in family to attend university



“Just offer more online learning opportunities and services to support online learning.” – Current student with low SES background, first in family to attend university

“More online learning to make schooling easier.” – Current CALD student

“It is important to have both online and in person learning ad much as possible.” – Prospective regional / remote student

“Options for both online and in-person learning.” – Current CALD student

“I think it should be offered more in general, or at least implementation of an online/in-person hybrid style would really benefit peoples' schedules and willingness to commit to higher education.” – Current CALD student

Other suggested improvements to online learning revealed potential deficits in online delivery, such as:

- Improvements needed to **online learning** platforms, including their user-friendliness and quality of content and delivery; and

“Update the online content regularly.” – Current regional / remote student

“Lectures online are tedious and drag.” – Prospective student with a disability, first in family to attend university



“Consider whether some assessments can be open-book instead of closed-book in order to reduce worries of intrusiveness of the online proctoring services.” – Prospective CALD student with a disability

“Better technology to use.” – Current student with a disability

“More IT friendly course.” – Current CALD student, first in family to attend university

“Ensuring that online learning portals are intuitive to learn and glitch free. With the increase in remote study and jobs on a nation that has comparably terrible internet to other nations, online learning has to be on a platform that can handle lots of traffic.” – Prospective student with a disability

“Support with technology and access online learning.” – Current regional / remote student

- Improved **engagement or connection** with tutors, lecturers, and other students.

“Ensuring that students still have the same access to engaging with each other during group tasks to build social connections.” – Current CALD student

“I’ve found when doing online learning teachers don’t put in as much effort and guidance.” – Prospective regional / remote student with low SES background, first in family to attend university



“More frequent check ins with students. Getting back more promptly.” – Current regional / remote student with low SES background, first in family to attend university

“It would be nice if they checked up on a student regularly to see how they were doing...” – Current First Nations regional / remote student, first in family to attend university

In the qualitative research, the same themes were picked up noting the advantages and limitations of online studying. The quality of online content was put down to the effort of the teacher. Some

noted the material as dry, not engaging and did not feel they got a lot more from the class than reading the information. Students called for some 'standards' or guidelines around online content to ensure it is engaging and contemporary, with a further suggestion that online courses should be 'tested' by students ahead of content being released. While a few students noted that they can provide feedback to lecturers on the content, there was a sense that this is not actioned.

"Even though some courses are difficult online, it really suits me as a full-time working parent." – Current mature aged CALD student with disability

"Online can really help with accessibility – you don't have to move out of home (if you are in regional area) and it can lower costs." Current student, regional, low SES



These findings are supported by many other research studies over the past decade and more (as summarised in Stone, 2022) which provide consistent recommendations for improving student outcomes in online learning, including a clear set of guidelines for institutions on 'best practice' online education delivery that engages and supports students in their learning (Stone, 2017). The importance of online options for regional and remote students has also been highlighted in other research, along with the opportunity for social contact and study support through study hubs such as the previously called Regional University Centres (now Regional University Study Hubs), which has been shown in a number of studies to be a lifeline for regional online students and playing a role in widening participation in higher education not only for mature age students but also for regional high school leavers (see for example, Stone et al., 2022).

Links to academic research



Stone, C. (2017a). *Opportunity through online learning: Improving student access, participation and success in higher education. 2016 Equity Fellowship final report.* National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University, Australia. <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/opportunity-online-learning-improving-student-access-participation-success-higher-education/>

Stone, C. (2022). From the margins to the mainstream: The online learning rethink and its implications for enhancing student equity. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 38(6), 139-149. <https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.8136>

Stone, C., King, S., & Ronan, C. (2022). Taking university to the students: Forging connections and inclusion through Regional University Centres (RUCs). A practice report. *Student Success*, 13(3), 46-53. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.2434>

Changes to ensure physical and cultural safety while studying

Among the potential changes that could be made to ensure students are physically and culturally safe while studying, around four in ten respondents endorsed promoting avenues of support for individuals experiencing stress around cultural/physical safety (42%), along with general training for both staff (41%) and students (39%) – see Figure 21. These were noticeably more popular than changes to promote accountability/reporting of behaviour that threatens cultural/physical safety (33%), or student organisations (26%) or university policies (25%) that address these issues.

These findings recognise that acknowledging and supporting those who experience physically or culturally unsafe environments plays a role in enabling them to continue participating fully in higher

education, while general training provides an efficient and effective way to maintain awareness and develop general skills to prevent adverse experiences.

While limited to one aspect of safety, this is well summed up by the following quote from the qualitative research:

“Make it mandatory to have teacher and lecturers trained in mental health as part of their professional development. Alongside First Aid training. Having someone listening and open to helping you makes a really big difference. Recognising students who might be struggling and reach out and see what could be done.” – Current student with disability (mental health), low SES

Mental health is increasingly recognised as a major contributor to attrition and poor student outcomes at university, and likely to arise from and affect different cohorts in different ways (Baik et al., 2015; Naylor, 2022).

Figure 21: Changes needed to ensure students are physically and culturally safe while studying



Q52. What changes are needed to ensure students are physically and culturally safe while studying? (Up to three options could be selected).

Base: All respondents (n=1,614).

There were few noteworthy differences among the various cohorts surveyed. Most notably, First Nations respondents expressed a stronger preference for coursework addressing cultural competency and safety (35%, compared to 25% overall), indicating that First Nations students may see cultural competency as needing to be embedded in course content, rather than a general issue that can be addressed solely through generic/general training (Anderson & Riley, 2021). It was also observed that CALD respondents had a slightly higher preference for student organisations dedicated to ensuring cultural/physical safety (31% compared to 26% overall).

Many students engaged in the qualitative research felt their campuses generally fared well in terms of physical and cultural safety, with some struggling to identify what would support a safer and more welcoming environment. Some students identified that cultural and physical safety might be enhanced through the following measures:

- CALD / First Nations spaces to bring friends and relax – akin to LGBTQIA+ safe spaces at some campus;
- Improved lighting at night;
- Privacy for women to respect their cultural belief (e.g. wearing Hijabs);
- Counselling services to improve psychological wellbeing and stress management resources. This may include assistance to help manage timetables and having someone to talk to about your stress;
- Being mindful in scheduling and course load, and the importance of attending social clubs and having peer connection opportunities; and
- During peak points in semester – lecturers reinforcing wellbeing and encouraging students that are struggling to contact them.

A few students noted they had completed online training ahead or as part of their course covering respectful relationships and related content, however the impact of this was seen as questionable (see also Heywood et al, 2022). Perhaps this might be due to what was explained by one student as cultural safety being a societal issue, and therefore might be most effectively addressed via a generational approach with education starting much earlier than in higher education.

Links to academic research

Anderson, L., & Riley, L. (2021). Crafting safer spaces for teaching about race and intersectionality in Australian Indigenous Studies. *The Australian journal of indigenous education*, 50(2), 229-236.

Heywood, W., Myers, P., Powell, A., Meikle, G., & Nguyen, D. (2022). *National Student Safety Survey: Report on the prevalence of sexual harassment and sexual assault among university students in 2021*. Melbourne: The Social Research Centre.

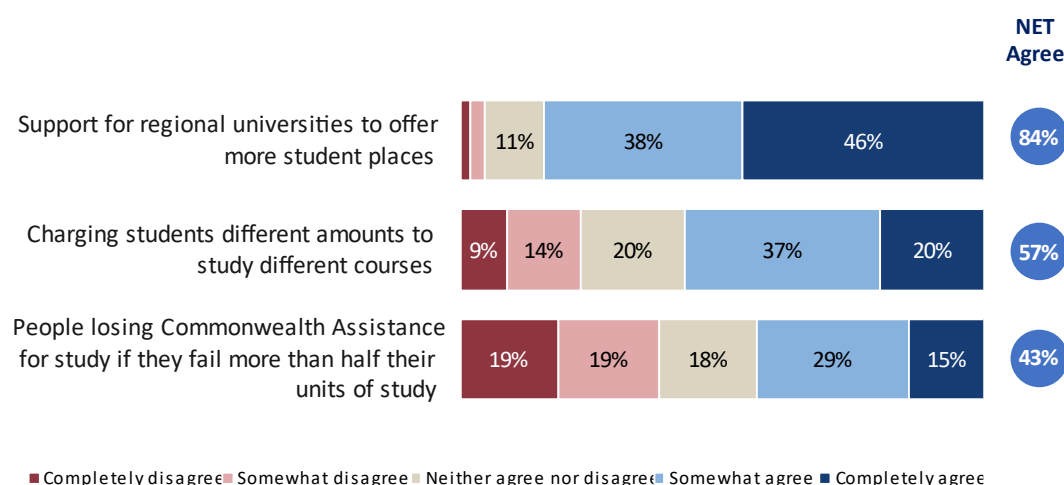
Naylor, R. (2022). Key factors influencing psychological distress in university students: The effects of tertiary entrance scores. *Studies in Higher Education*, 47(3), 630-642



Job-Ready Graduates Package

Only one-in-ten respondents (10%) had heard of the Job-Ready Graduates (JRG) package. Among the aspects of the JRG package respondents were asked about, support for regional universities garnered a large degree of support, with 84% indicating that they either 'somewhat' or 'completely' agree. Other aspects proved less favourable, with 57% indicating agreement with different student contributions for different courses of study, and less than half (43%) indicating agreement with the withdrawal of Commonwealth Assistance for study if over half of study units are failed, as shown in Figure 22.

Among the cohorts of interest, the only difference of note was that respondents in regional or remote areas were more likely to agree with support for regional universities to offer more student places (88% agreed compared to 84% overall), however support for regional providers was widespread.

Figure 22: Aspects of the JRG that should be changed or retained

Q57. How much do you agree or disagree with the following?

Base: All respondents from main sample (n=1,529-1,553); excludes 'don't know / not sure'.

Summary of key insights



- Financial support as well as the need for flexibility and accommodation around unique life circumstances and challenges are central factors in decisions around undertaking higher education, views about changes needed to increase participation and success in higher education, as well as quality student experiences for underrepresented groups.
- Systemic interventions or responses from governments and providers may help alleviate these challenges and facilitate more equitable access and opportunity for success. These include reduced course fees, greater availability of scholarships, availability of financial support, paid work placements (where required) and more flexibility in how coursework is delivered (e.g. online delivery, and timetabling).
- Information gaps and support needs around higher education were evident among prospective students. To facilitate effective decision-making for prospective students in their decision to enter higher education, these gaps and support needs should be addressed so they can plan more fully and consider their options:
 - awareness of options to finance the cost of study and future debt – this is particularly important given the centrality of financial considerations in decisions to enter higher education (both living costs and future debts);
 - clarity on the different pathways to enter higher education and support through the enrolment process; and
 - a picture of the potential benefits and experiences afforded by higher education.

Conclusions

The priority for this project was to ensure that the independent voice of current and prospective students that are often not well represented in higher education was at the forefront of the Australian Universities Accord Panel's considerations, as it makes recommendations to government on reforms to Australia's higher education system.

Overarching Key Insights

Throughout this consultation process under-represented and disadvantaged students engaged have raised recurring themes around the systemic challenges of studying and the need for a more responsive higher education system that has greater appreciation for their situation. The below overarching **key insights** are drawn from the most prevalent views across the diversity of under-represented and disadvantaged student cohorts.



Costs of studying	Student centricity	Fit-for-purpose systems
Financial considerations have a significant bearing on decision making in relation to participation in higher education. 'Cost of now' decisions to enter higher education not only impact on entry, but also the course(s) students apply for, their study mode and completion time (full / part-time). Students are balancing financial consideration with living decisions. Students also relayed that acquiring debt may perpetuate disadvantage, and that reducing impacts of debt could be a primary area of focus for students that are under-represented – whether this be through HECS-HELP reforms and/or greater access to subsidies / scholarships etc. For many this will be the only way they can enter.	Students want an educational experience more focused on them which recognises their personal diversity and responds to this through flexibility in the course delivery and greater support for life circumstances. Students are seeking more proactive and transparent responses from higher education, which means shifting the onus from the students to institutions. This is also a key factor in defining a 'quality education'.	Systems that have been put in place may have unintended positive or negative consequences. The ATAR system is creating a range of potentially problematic incentives; online learning during COVID-19 created greater flexibility and accessibility; there is an expectation that a mix of online and face-to-face options will be available to meet different life circumstances and support needs.

Within this consultation process on the Accord Discussion Paper, we sought to obtain the views of under-represented and disadvantaged student cohorts on the priorities and solutions to improve Australia's higher education system. To support the Accord Panel, we have distilled the conclusions

from this consultation process into **three key areas of consideration** aligned with the Accord's Terms of Reference (TOR), and identified proposed priorities for consideration by the Accord Panel, supplemented by other key considerations. Each of these is presented below.

Financial Influences

Considerations around course costs and financial implications of studying

TOR #3: Investment and affordability

Explore funding and contribution arrangements that deliver equity, access, quality and longer-term investments to meet priorities in teaching, research, workforce and infrastructure. This will include a review of the Job-ready Graduates Package.



By far the most prominent factor that students identified as being related to their prospects of successful participation in higher education was financial capability. Financial matters are pervasive across all elements of the higher education journey and were seen as the most impactful driver to improve the engagement and experience of higher education.

Two key elements that arose were:

- Course costs - particularly the future costs of debt; and
- Living costs - the costs of now.

While students may have access to HECS-HELP loan to pay for studies, there appears to be limited understanding about the scheme beyond it being a 'buy now pay later' arrangement. The stressors of debt became apparent with tax statements and seeing a rising amount of debt. Improving general understanding of this arrangement while also supporting improved financial literacy in how to pay off this debt would provide greater transparency about any longer-term impacts of this debt, but also correct misconceptions around interest being charged.

Students were selective based on the cost of the course chosen weighing up the comparative cost / benefits of going to various institutions and/or completing different degrees. Students are investing significant amounts of time and effort in this research to try to find the right fit for their interests and circumstances. A common concern that arose was the financial repercussions of choosing the wrong course, and wasted debt, which could lead to people ceasing higher education completely. The ability to try courses for free and/or without financial penalties (such as is currently possible with some university enabling programs), was seen as a way to reduce the pressure of course selection and potentially provide an incentive to try for some students.

Present financial stresses and the ability to earn an income to cover everyday living costs during studies, including placements, was the paramount concern for students and therefore a key mechanism for improving access and success in higher education for students. The diversity in people's situation however may require a range of responses to incentivise higher education by maintaining income and/or covering expenses while studying.

Considerations to address course costs, debt and everyday expenses while studying

Priority 1: Consider measures to increase support for students to manage cost of living expenses whilst studying with further exploration around the options to achieve this for people in diverse situations (e.g. income supplements, paid and/or income support during placements and equipment initiatives).

Priority 2: Consider ways to reduce the financial pressures of students using and repaying HECS-HELP loans and how to improve financial literacy regarding this scheme.

Other considerations:

- Consider how to increase the awareness and use of scholarships and subsidies which may include ensuring access to a broader range of students.
- Further research into a new loan type scheme as a form of financial support. Students contemplated how such a scheme could be tailored to assist those in genuine need or situations (e.g. placement periods, the impact of combined future debt and stability in repayment amounts).
- Financial counselling and/or literacy training.
- Allowing students to take a foundation-level subject without incurring debt, so that they can determine if they wish to continue.

Access and Opportunity

Considerations in relation to supporting student motivation, preparation and entry

TOR #2: Access and opportunity

Improve access to higher education, across teaching, learning and research. This will include recommendations for new targets and reforms to support greater access and participation for students from under-represented backgrounds (including First Nations Australians, those from low socio-economic backgrounds, people with disability, and regional and rural Australians).



Students conveyed how important good quality information and advisory support was to ensure they understand the options and pathways available to them. For those that are less clear on the pathway or future career interest, more intensive support and/or mentoring can also heavily influence the consideration of and navigation of applications in entering higher education. Aspirations however were not only nurtured by those that directly support them, but also greater engagement with those in the sector, including peers. For people who may have less familial exposure to higher education or less confidence in their abilities or 'right' to access further education, seeing people 'like themselves' was perceived as a powerful mechanism to break down these misconceptions. Likewise, bridging or enabling courses may also support students with building these foundational skills and, ultimately, confidence in their ability to undertake higher education.

Subject selection in high school has a clear bearing on post-school entry into higher education by virtue of students' ATAR scores. Some students pursue their interest areas in high school but compromise their ability to obtain a high enough ATAR to continue with their chosen courses, while others sacrifice their interest areas in high school to obtain scores that would facilitate entry into their chosen career path in higher education. This appears to be potentially problematic in motivating and preparing students for their higher education studies as either way students may not develop the necessary study skills to help them succeed should they be successful in accessing higher education.

As with movement into higher education, transition processes between VET and university were also seen to face challenges resulting from a lack of information and support. Improving these elements,

along with ensuring ease of processes to recognise prior learning will support continued engagement in learning as people progress and/or change the focus of their learning. It is also important to recognise that many of the suggestions related to financial and learning support challenges are relevant in this environment given the relatively high proportion of students that may use this pathway.

Considerations to improve access, preparation and entry should consider the merits of the following areas

Priority 3: Consider ways to improve the quality and consistency of career advisory services and information to support student decision making, including information on pathways; subsidies, scholarships and other available financial supports; adjustments and learning support that can be provided; and likely jobs to be obtained following a qualification.

Priority 4: Consider how to address ATAR / entry barriers and disincentives in study areas for students to pursue their interest areas while ensuring they have the necessary study skills to succeed in higher education.

Other considerations

- Increased availability of mentoring programs and/or more intensive advisory support to be more widely available for students who are less clear on their direction – whether this be in schools or in partnership with industry contacts.
- Improved support to navigate transitions between TAFE and University – particularly information, communication and recognition of prior learning.
- Supporting the development of basic study skills in order to prepare students for research, analysis and study planning with higher education, including the availability of enabling or preparatory courses.

Education Delivery

Considerations around improved course delivery, accessibility and flexibility

TOR #1: Meeting Australia's knowledge and skills needs, now and in the future

Enhance the delivery of quality education that meets the needs of students across all stages of lifelong learning and develops the skills needed now, and in the future. This will include recommendations for new targets and reforms recognising that more than nine in ten new jobs will require post-school qualifications, and fifty per cent of new jobs are expected to require a bachelor's degree or higher.



There is a need for the higher education system to acknowledge and keep pace with the diversity in student needs – not just around their learning needs but also their life situations.

Decision making for entry into higher education, course and campus selection is not made in a vacuum but considers the multifaceted lives that people are within as workers, carers, partners, parents, social peers and learners. Decisions are made based on tradeoffs of each aspect of their lives including where they live, how much income they need or will lose, how far they are from campus or facilities, how they fit in home responsibilities, and ultimately the likely benefit of these tradeoffs in pursuing higher education to improve their future situation. What came through strongly is that these students have differing needs and the system as a whole may need to cater to this.

Identifying ways to meet these needs will be important into the future to retain under-represented students within higher education. Flexibility was seen as needed in *administrative* processes such as the ease and ability to defer, study part-time, add/remove units or otherwise vary enrolment and mode of study without a sense of failure or financial loss – particularly due to life situations, personal needs, family and community responsibilities, and financial constraints and need for part-time work. A further strong theme in providing greater flexibility was the desire to move between courses, particularly in the early stages of higher education. This topic is explored further in the financial influencers.

Additionally, flexibility was sought in the *learning environment* through having greater options for scheduling, universal approaches for recorded lectures and/or on-demand materials, self-paced learning and assessment, and greater flexibility in how placements occur – both the timing and length.

While the theme of flexibility was strongly emphasised by students with disability, it was not exclusive to this cohort of students given the diversity in needs, abilities, responsibilities and lifestyles of the students involved in this research.

A quality learning environment for under-represented students, particularly for those with more complex learning needs or personal situations, was seen to have in place **proactive** learning and support mechanisms. The shift of burden of responsibility needs to be one from necessitating a student speaking up, to one where student welfare and success is paramount to the learning environment – and therefore mechanisms and programs are in place to reinforce this message, monitor student success, and follow up should there be changes or concerns. It is important to note that not all students will approach learning support officers nor have a ‘need’ for a formalised plan. Likewise, some students may develop health and/or impairment issues during the course of their study. Therefore, raising awareness of adjustment and supports is required more broadly and throughout the learning journey. Aligned to prevention of students falling behind, the ability of students to access teachers or tutors to resolve questions arising from their studies and/or to support their planning and approach to studies was seen as valuable.

Students have highlighted the important role of online / video learning as a mechanism for greater flexibility accounting for student’s life circumstances – whether this be an ad hoc need, to supplement in-person learning, or the only way they can engage in higher education. This indicates the need to ensure provision of online options for higher education, whether fully online or through a mix of online and face-to-face. In providing online options, attention to the quality of online delivery and appropriate support for online students is required – including through the availability of study centres or hubs (e.g. Regional University Study Hubs) that offer in-person contact and study support. While particularly beneficial for regional students these also may offer solutions for people unable to study at home and those who seek to avoid long commutes.

Considerations for quality educational delivery for under-represented student cohorts

Priority 5: Consider introducing education and support mechanisms for academic and professional staff to initiate more proactive approaches in assisting students in their transition to university study as well as supporting them through their learning journey. This may include the promotion and provision of academic skills development, promoting and offering adjustments as needed, and offering flexibility tailored to individual student needs.

Priority 6: Consider the supply of online learning and needs of those who want or need to learn remotely, on-campus and blended approaches. This may involve the development of high quality accessible online materials, co-creation and/or testing with students, and measures to ensure that

teaching teams have competency in the design and delivery of hybrid (online and in-person) learning and teaching.

Other considerations

- Flexibility that considers students' ability to enter, exit, pause and take longer to complete courses without failure or financial loss.
- Improved access to teacher and/or study support to resolve technical questions and knowledge challenges.
- Improving the ability for more regional students to study remotely, and consideration of a study hub type model for those students that have long commutes or are unable to study at home.

Closing remarks

With changes to higher education being considered and implemented throughout this Accord process, of utmost importance is that students have multiple avenues and trusted sources to access good quality information to guide their decisions and know what supports are available to support them.

Measures should also be cognizant of the diversity in personal situations of the students in these under-represented and disadvantaged student cohorts. As demonstrated by this consultation process, belonging to one or many of these cohorts does not represent a homogeneous group. While there has been significant consensus on many issues which may form the basis of change to benefit many of these students, experiences are different, and it is critical that any broad change does not further alienate or marginalise students that may be less represented. Due to the unique nature of people's circumstances some students that are more greatly educationally disadvantaged may require more targeted initiatives.

This project illustrates the importance of listening to the student voice in the design or delivery of measures to better respond to the diversity of student needs.

Appendix A: Map of survey questions to lines of enquiry and Accord question references

Chapter heading / broad theme	Subheading / broad question	Accord discussion paper question	Survey question
How can we ensure all Australians have the opportunity to participate and succeed in higher education?	What is needed to improve access to and preparation for higher education?	Q28. What is needed to increase the number of people from under-represented groups applying to and prepared for higher education, both from school and from other pathways?	<i>Q49. What would have been helpful for you to feel better prepared for higher education?</i>
			<i>Q50. How could higher education be promoted to students that are currently under-represented?</i>
			<i>Q27. Why did you choose to study at university or TAFE?</i>
			<i>Q28. Why are you thinking of studying?</i>
		Q30. How can governments, institutions and employers assist students, widen opportunities and remove barriers to higher education?	<i>Q42. How important do you think the following are when deciding what to study?</i>
			<i>Q54. What would you like decision-makers to know about your situation when they are making decisions about higher education policy?</i>
	Changes needed to increase participation and success for	Q29. What changes in provider practices and offerings are necessary to ensure all potential	<i>Q51. What changes are needed to ensure all students can do well in higher education?</i>

Chapter heading / broad theme	Subheading / broad question	Accord discussion paper question	Survey question
	under-represented groups in higher education studies	students can succeed in their chosen area of study?	<i>Q30. Which of the following are most important in order to help you get a job and be successful in the future.</i>
	How can we better support students from under-represented groups to persist and succeed in higher education?	Q31. How can the costs of participation, including living expenses, be most effectively alleviated?	<i>Q55. How well do you understand the following aspects of funding and costs related to your study?</i>
	Reforms to ensure quality student experiences	Q32 How can best practice learning and teaching for students from under-represented groups be embedded across the higher education system, including the use of remote learning?	<i>Q43. Are there any changes needed to how higher education providers offer online learning?</i>
		Q39. What reforms are needed to ensure that all students have a quality student experience?	<i>Q53. What area most needs to improve to ensure everyone has a quality student experience?</i> <i>Q54. What would you like decision-makers to know about your situation when they are making decisions about higher education policy?</i>
	Changes to ensure physical and cultural safety while studying	Q40. What changes are needed to ensure all students are physically and culturally safe while studying?	<i>Q52. What changes are needed to ensure students are physically and culturally safe while studying?</i>

Chapter heading / broad theme	Subheading / broad question	Accord discussion paper question	Survey question
			<i>Q57. How much do you agree or disagree with the following?</i>
	Job-Ready Graduates (JRG) Package	Q49. Which aspects of the JRG package should be altered, and which should be retained?	<i>Q56. Have you heard of the Job-ready Graduates Package?</i>
			<i>Q57. How much do you agree or disagree with the following?</i>

Chapter heading / broad theme	Subheading / broad question	Accord discussion paper question	Survey question
What actions and solutions are needed now, to achieve an inclusive higher education system that addresses the major changes underway in our society, economy and environment?	Pathways between VET and higher education	Q11. How should Australia boost demand from people to study in the higher education system?	<i>Q41. How could we get more people to undertake higher education?</i>
		Q20. How can pathways between VET and higher education be improved, and how can students be helped to navigate these pathways?	<i>Q44. Have you moved between a VET course (e.g. TAFE or diploma) and a Bachelor's degree or higher at a university?</i>
			<i>Q45. How easy or difficult was it to find the pathway you/they wanted between VET and university? Base: Respondents who have moved between a VET and higher education course</i>
			<i>Q46. How would you/your child rate the support they received when moving between VET and university study?</i>
			<i>Q48. What barriers did you/your child experience in moving between VET and university?</i>
		Q21. How can current examples of successful linkages between VET and higher education be integrated across the tertiary education system?	<i>Q47. What worked well when you moved between VET and university?</i>

Chapter heading / broad theme	Subheading / broad question	Accord discussion paper question	Survey question
		[Additional line of enquiry] What is the value of higher education?	<i>Q31. What is most important to you about going to higher education (e.g. university or Diploma-level TAFE)?</i>

Chapter heading / broad theme	Subheading / broad question	Accord discussion paper question	Survey question
What kind of higher education system does Australia need in two- and three-decades' time to ensure the ongoing inclusion of all Australians?	The future of Australian higher education	Q4. Looking from now to 2030 and 2040, what major national challenges and opportunities should Australian higher education be focused on meeting?	<i>Q38. How much, if at all, will the following parts of higher education need to change to meet Australia's future job and skill needs?</i>
			<i>Q40. What are the most important areas for higher education to focus on in the next few decades to be ready for future jobs?</i>
			<i>Q39. What needs to change?</i>
	Quality learning environments	Q8. What reforms are needed to promote a quality learning environment and to ensure graduates are entering the labour market with the skills and knowledge they need?	<i>Q29. What are the most important things that make a quality learning environment?</i>
			<i>Q30. When studying in higher education (e.g. university or Diploma-level TAFE), which of the following are most important in order to help you get a job and be successful in the future?</i>
			<i>Q32. How would you rate the quality of teaching/learning you have had in higher education? If you have studied multiple qualifications, please think about your most recent experience.</i>
	Work-integrated learning and professional placements	Q14. How should placement arrangements and work-integrated learning in higher education change in the decades ahead?	<i>Q33. What would improve work placements during higher education?</i>

Chapter heading / broad theme	Subheading / broad question	Accord discussion paper question	Survey question
	Lifelong learning	Q16. What practical barriers are inhibiting lifelong learning, and how can they be fixed?	<i>Q36. What is most likely to stop you/your child from keeping on doing formal study throughout your life?</i>
		Q15. What changes are needed to grow a culture of lifelong learning in Australia?	<i>Q51. What changes are needed to ensure all students can do well in higher education?</i>
			<i>Q34. How important do you think it is to continue to learn through formal study throughout your life?</i>
			<i>Q35. Why do you believe it is important to keep learning?</i>
			<i>Q37. What changes might encourage you to keep doing formal study throughout your life?</i>
		Q7. How should the mix of providers evolve, considering the size and location of existing institutions and the future needs of communities?	<i>Q38c. The mix of locations and types of education providers</i>