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Final Report: Targeted Review of Student Equity in Higher Education Programs and System Level Policy Levers

Title:	Final Report: Targeted Review of Student Equity in Higher Education Programs and System Level Policy Levers
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Date:	30 October 2023
Revision:	1.1

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Acknowledgements

Suggested citation

Tomaszewski, W., Johnstone, M., Robinson, M., Curry, M., & Kubler, M. (2023). Targeted Review of Student Equity in Higher Education Programs and System Level Policy Levers. Report submitted to the Department of Education.

Acronyms and abbreviations

Acronym	Full name
ASEM	Asia-Europe Meeting
ATAR	Australian Tertiary Admission Rank
CGS	Commonwealth Grant Scheme
CPI	Consumer Price Index
DDA	Disability Discrimination Act
DVC	Deputy Vice-Chancellor
EFTSL	Equivalent Full-Time Student Load
EHEP	Equity in Higher Education Panel
ELP	Enabling Loading Program
FiF	First-in-Family
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
Go8	The Group of Eight
HECS	Higher Education Contribution Scheme
HELP	Higher Education Loan Program
HEPPP	Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program
IRLSAF	Indigenous, Regional and Low SES Attainment Fund
ISSP	Indigenous Student Success Program
ISSR	Institute for Social Science Research
JRG	Jobs-ready Graduates Package
NAPLAN	The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy
NCSEHE	National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education
NDIS	National Disability Insurance Scheme
NPPP	National Priorities Pool Program
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OLT	Office of Learning and Teaching
PVC	Pro-Vice-Chancellor
RLP	Regional Loading Program
RPPPP	Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program
RRR	Regional, Rural and Remote
RUC	Regional University Centres Network
RUN	Regional Universities Network
SEHEEF	Student Equity in Higher Education Evaluation Framework
SES	Socioeconomic status
TAP	Tertiary Access Payment

Acronym	Full name
UD	Universal Design
UDL	Universal Design for Learning
UQ	The University of Queensland
VC	Vice-Chancellor
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WIL	Work Integrated Learning
WP1	Work Package One
WP2	Work Package Two
WP3	Work Package Three

Glossary

Term	Definition
Abstudy	Abstudy provides financial support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and apprentices. Abstudy can assist with school fees, boarding fees, living costs, travel costs and purchasing study materials.
ASEM	The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) is a process of dialogue and cooperation involving 21 Asian countries and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Secretariat along with the European Union and its 27 member states, plus Norway, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. ASEM links Asia and Europe by facilitating discussion on political, economic and cultural relations.
ATAR	The Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) is a number between 0.00 and 99.95 that indicates a student's position relative to all the students in their age group. Universities use the ATAR to help them select students for their courses.
Australian National Data Integration Infrastructure	The Australian National Data Integration Infrastructure (ANDII) is the technical and governance infrastructure that links deidentified data from Australian, state and territory government sources to better understand the life experiences of people with disability.
Austudy	Austudy provides income support to students who meet the following criteria: 25 years old or older; full-time student in an approved course or Australian apprenticeship; meets the criteria for income and assets tests.
Disability Discrimination Act	The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) makes it against the law for an educational authority to discriminate against someone because that person has disability.
Demand driven funding	Demand driven funding enables universities to respond to student demand for places. In contrast, in a supply system, the government allocates student places to universities.
Destination Australia	Destination Australia funds eligible tertiary education providers to offer scholarships to domestic and international students to study and live in regional Australia.

Term	Definition
Disability Support Program	The Higher Education Disability Support Program provides funding to eligible higher education providers to assist with supporting students with disability to access, participate and succeed in Higher Education.
Enabling Loading Program	The Enabling Loading Program (ELP) commenced in 2005 and provides funding to eligible higher education institutions (Table A universities) to offset the cost of student contributions for students in Commonwealth supported enabling programs.
Enabling programs	Enabling programs are non-award courses run by universities that can prepare students for university study. They are aimed typically at students who did not receive an ATAR rank, did not complete year twelve or are returning to study as mature aged students. Enabling programs focus on developing academic skills such as academic writing, maths, research skills, study skills and knowledge for specific disciplines.
Equity groups	Students from identified equity groups include: students from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB); students with disability; women in non-traditional areas; students who identify as Indigenous; students from low socioeconomic status (SES) locations; students from regional and remote locations.
Equity in Higher Education Panel	The Equity in Higher Education Panel (EHEP) is a high level strategic advisory body with a focus on student equity. The EHEP provides advice and makes recommendations to the Department of Education on strategic issues relating to improving student equity in Higher Education.
First-in-Family	Being 'First-in-Family' to attend university means that no member of the student's immediate family (parents, siblings) has completed a university qualification before the student's first year at university.
First Nations students equity group	In Australian Higher Education, First Nations or Indigenous students are defined as students who self-report as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.
Group of Eight	The Group of Eight (Go8) comprises Australia's leading research-intensive universities – the University of Melbourne, the Australian National University, the University of Sydney, the University of Queensland, the University of Western Australia, the University of Adelaide, Monash University and UNSW Sydney.
Higher Education	The Australian higher education sector includes public and private universities, Australian branches of overseas universities, university colleges and institutes of higher education. Higher education providers offer qualifications ranging from undergraduate awards (bachelor's degrees, associate degrees and advanced diplomas) to postgraduate awards (graduate certificates and diplomas, master's and doctoral degrees).
Higher Education Contribution Scheme	The Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) is a student loan system that eligible students can use to pay the student contribution components of their degrees if they attend Table A or Table B universities. HECS loans are available to Australian citizens, some New Zealand citizens and students with a permanent humanitarian visa who are enrolled at Commonwealth-supported institutions.
Higher Education Loan Program	The Higher Education Loan Program (HELP) has four different loan schemes that provide financial support to students. HELP can be used to help pay for student contributions (HECS-HELP); tuition fees (FEE-HELP); overseas study expenses (OS-HELP); student services and amenities (SA-Help). Students can

Term	Definition
	also access financial help for their Vocational Education and Training (VET) tuition fees through (VET Student Loans).
Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program	The Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) provides funding to universities listed in Table A of the Higher Education Support Act 2003 to implement strategies that improve access to undergraduate courses for people from regional and remote Australia, low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, and Indigenous persons. HEPPP also helps to improve the retention and completion rates of those students.
Indigenous, Regional and Low SES Attainment Fund	The Indigenous, Regional and Low SES Attainment Fund (IRLSAF) funds universities to support Indigenous students, students from low SES, regional and remote backgrounds. The IRLSAF realigns existing funding by combining: HEPPP; the National Priorities Pool Program; Regional Loading; Enabling Loading; the new Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program.
Jobs-ready Graduates Package	The Job-ready Graduates package (JRG) was developed to invest in Higher Education in areas of national priority so the higher education system can deliver the best results for students, industry and the community and help Australians reskill and upskill. The objectives of the JRG were to deliver support to students, universities and researchers by: changing and increasing funding arrangements, creating additional university and short course places and prioritising disciplines deemed to be in the national interest; guaranteeing bachelor-level university places for Indigenous students; improving accountability and information for providers; providing more opportunities for regional Australia.
Mature aged students	Mature aged students are students who have taken a gap between school and university and may have taken alternative pathways to university based on other education or experience.
National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education	The National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) is a research and policy centre funded by the Australian Government Department of Education and based at Curtin University.
National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy)	The National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy (NCRIS) is designed to provide Australia's research sector with on-going access to high-quality, operational research infrastructure facilities and supports collaboration between the research sector, industry and government in Australia to conduct world-class research. The objective is to ensure that Australian research continues to be competitive and rank highly on an international scale.
National Disability Insurance Scheme	The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) provides funding to eligible people with disability to gain more time with family and friends, greater independence, access to new skills, jobs, or volunteering in their community, and an improved quality of life. The NDIS can connect anyone with disability to services in their community including doctors, community groups, sporting clubs, support groups, libraries and schools, as well as providing information about what support is provided by each state and territory government.
Non-ATAR pathways	Students without an ATAR ranking may gain university entry via alternative pathways including non-degree courses, enabling programs and technical and further education (TAFE) or private college qualifications. Students may sit a Special Tertiary Admissions Test (STAT) to assess their competencies, or they may be eligible under the Educational Access Scheme (EAS). Some institutions may consider factors such as work history and experience and personal references.

Term	Definition
Regional Campus Growth Program	The Regional Campus Growth Program provides funding based on the proportion of students at campuses in regional, high-growth metropolitan, and low-growth metropolitan areas.
Regional Loading Program	The Regional Loading Program (RLP) provides additional funding to universities with regional campuses to meet the costs of operating those campuses.
Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program	The Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program (RPPPP) is providing $7.2 million (indexed) between 2022 and 2024 to support collaborative outreach projects that enable the higher education aspirations of students in regional and remote Australia, including those who may be experiencing cumulative disadvantage.
Regional University Study Hubs	A Regional University Study Hub (formerly the Regional University Centres program) is a facility in regional and remote locations that students can use to study tertiary courses locally delivered by distance from any Australian institution. The Hubs provide infrastructure such as study spaces, video conferencing and computer and internet access; administrative and academic support services such as developing study skills and managing administrative processes; student support services such as pastoral/wellbeing support and help accessing student services. Some Hubs partner with universities/education providers to support local delivery of courses.
Regional University Study Hubs Network	Regional University Study Hubs (formerly Regional University Centres) help students in regional, rural and remote areas to participate and succeed in tertiary education through the provision of support and facilities. The Network connects the people working in Regional University Study Hubs nationwide.
Rural, regional and remote equity group	The Rural, Regional and Remote equity group refers to students from regional, rural and remote parts of Australia.
Low SES equity group	Low SES equity group comprises students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds.
Student Equity in Higher Education Evaluation Framework	The Student Equity in Higher Education Evaluation Framework (SEHEEF) was developed in response to the 2017 ACIL Allen Review (ACIL Allen Consulting, 2017) of HEPPP. The Framework was developed to collect data to better measure and monitor the impact of HEPPP evaluations and to inform future improvements. The purpose of SEHEEF is to support and guide three levels of evaluation: The overall evaluation of HEPPP; Quality improvement evaluations of university HEPPP-funded activities; evaluations of the effectiveness of university HEPPP-funded programs and activities.
Students with disability	The Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers (SDAC) considers that a person has disability if they have at least one of a list of limitations, restrictions or impairments, which has lasted, or is likely to last, for at least six months and restricts everyday activities. The limitations are grouped into 10 activities associated with daily living – self-care, mobility, communication, cognitive or emotional tasks, health care, reading or writing tasks, transport, household chores, property maintenance and meal preparation.
Table A universities	The Higher Education Support Act 2003 determines categories of higher education providers eligible for public funding. The universities in Table A are all Australian public universities.

Term	Definition
Table B universities	The Higher Education Support Act 2003 determines categories of higher education providers eligible for public funding. The universities in Table B are Australian private universities.
Tertiary Access Payment	The Tertiary Access Payment (TAP) is a non-indexed, means-tested payment to school-leavers from regional or remote areas who need to relocate for full-time, higher-level tertiary education (Certificate IV and above) at an education provider located at least 90 minutes by public transport from their family home.
Tertiary education	The tertiary education sector comprises vocational education and training (VET) and Higher Education.
The Commonwealth Grant Scheme	Through the Commonwealth Grant Scheme (CGS), the Australian Government subsidises tuition costs for higher education students across a wide range of discipline areas and qualification levels. The Commonwealth Grant Scheme (CGS) is the biggest single source of Government funding for universities. It is allocated on the basis of the number of full-time equivalent domestic students in Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs). For each CSP, a university receives a Commonwealth contribution from the CGS. The amount of the Commonwealth contribution depends on field of education.
The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy	The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) is an annual assessment for school students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. It provides a nationwide measure through which parents/carers, teachers, schools, education authorities, governments and the broader community can determine whether or not young Australians are developing the literacy and numeracy skills that provide the critical foundation for other learning; and for their productive and rewarding participation in the community.
Vocational Education and Training	Vocational Education and Training (VET) provides knowledge and practical skills to directly enable Australians at every stage of their work lives to find employment. VET training can be delivered by schools, dual sector universities with VET courses, TAFE institutes, private registered organisations and adult and community education providers.
Work Integrated Learning	Work integrated learning (WIL) refers to a range of practical, on-the-job, learning experiences designed to give students valuable exposure to work-related activities relevant to their course of study.
Youth Allowance	Youth Allowance provides financial assistance to students and Australian apprentices who are 24 years or younger and to full-time job seekers who are 21 years or younger.

Executive summary

Objectives

The Targeted Review of Student Equity in Higher Education Programs and System Level Policy Levers has been conducted for the Department of Education (the Department) to support the Australian Universities Accord in their review and long-term plan for Australia's higher education system. The objectives of this project are to compile evidence for the Department and the Australian Universities Accord Panel to:

- Inform action to address the systemic drivers for inequity, and barriers for equity groups across the student life cycle.

- Support effective and efficient development and implementation of equity programs and policy.

To address the objectives, the project was undertaken across three Work Packages involving: a) a review of literature and data on international equity policies and approaches, inequities specific to under-represented cohorts, and student outcomes b) a review of the structure, effectiveness, implementation and operation of national equity programs and c) consultations with the sector, review of submissions to the Australian Universities Accord, and a synthesis of all findings.

Key Findings, Conclusions and Priority Recommendations

Context, drivers, and systems

🔍 Findings

- Educational disadvantage typically originates before higher education (starts early in life) and accumulates over time.

- The resulting systemic inequalities have persisted over time (in Australia and internationally), despite the massification of education and higher participation/attainment rates.

- In Australia, entry and population attainment rates are comparable or better than other focal countries, yet full-time completion rates tend to be lower.

- Of all OECD countries, Australia demonstrates one of the lowest public investments in tertiary education based on GDP.

- Notably, some countries implement more multilayered approaches to higher education equity. These include higher education strategies and national equity policies that target underlying barriers of structural disadvantage, supplemented by targeted programs, scholarships or bursaries for students from under-represented cohorts which are nested within the national equity strategy.

- In Australia, there is explicit and implicit streaming of students into Higher Education resulting from the ATAR/non-ATAR track divide and a heavily stratified multi-sector schooling system, which contributes to underrepresentation of some groups in Higher Education.

- There are multiple barriers driving under-representation in Higher Education, including economic/material, socio-cultural, geographical and institutional. Material barriers are particularly important and cut across all equity groups. These barriers need to be addressed through different policy levers and at different levels (e.g., individual and institutional levels).

- For many people, barriers intersect and 'accumulate' over time. Different people may be disadvantaged in Higher Education at different points in the student life cycle and to different

extents. This includes accumulation of barriers prior to higher education participation, during early learning and schooling.

- In Australia, growing costs of studying and increasing student debt – both of which have disproportionate impact on students from identified equity groups – are key issues, particularly in the context of the rise in the broader cost of living.

- Current equity-specific funding does not cover the entire higher education sector; it leaves out post-graduate studies and focuses on Table A universities[1].

- The overall scale of funding is currently insufficient to achieve a marked difference in higher education participation and attainment of students from identified equity groups. The views on the required scale of funding vary, with limited modelling that would provide more definitive answers.

⊘ Conclusion

The structural drivers of inequity manifest early, interact with each other and their impacts accumulate over time. The impacts of early disadvantage are exacerbated by institutional barriers, financial pressures and other barriers that are specific to the higher education period. The international literature indicates that while there are increasing higher education enrolments globally, earlier disadvantage, financial pressures, increasing tuition fees and student debt are likely to lead to persistent inequities, including the type of institution attended, and the degree studied. Access and participation programs targeting students from identified equity groups that do not address the structural drivers of inequity are, by themselves, insufficient to counter the impacts of this broader context upon students. Furthermore, the current scale of funding devoted to equity programs is insufficient to make a difference at scale.

→ Recommendations

Recommendation 1:

Develop a long-term national higher education strategy, with an implementation plan and monitoring and evaluation framework that:

- Nests equity in Higher Education within the broader national education and government portfolios.

- Enshrines collaboration across the sectors and government departments that have a role in addressing structural barriers and/or those with which drive early inequities (e.g., early education and schooling systems, housing and transport, family income support and alleviation of other financial pressures).

- Explicitly considers links between tertiary education and the schooling system, including working with state governments to support equitable pathways into Higher Education and VET, and to address broader educational disadvantage and inequalities in the school system.

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[1] Funding from the Enabling Loading Program, HEPPP, Disability Support Program, the Regional Loading Program, the Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program and Demand Driven Access to Commonwealth Supported Places for First Nations Regional (now all First Nations) Students is exclusively available to Table A universities.

Destination Australia and Tertiary Access Payments can reach students at all university and non-university providers conditional on parameters of their studies. Funding for Regional University Study Hubs (formerly Regional University Centres) goes to the community-owned organisations which operate them, who may enter into partnerships involving universities, non-university providers and other community organisations.

- Is driven by a system stewardship approach: thinking about inter-connected programs conceptualised as part of a national approach to equity underpinned by principles aligned with the national interest.

- Has mechanisms for universities to remove institutional barriers (rigid assessment, complex enrolment and admissions criteria and processes) and implement scaffolded supports throughout the student life cycle.

- Invests in high quality research in educational equity and dedicated data and research infrastructure to enable this research. Consideration should be given to aligning the development of research and data infrastructures to other national investments in cognate infrastructure, including the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy (NCRIS) and the Australian National Data Integration Infrastructure (ANDII). Additional investments in high-quality research and evaluation in the areas of educational equity and Higher Education should also be considered to maximise long-term gains.

- Adopts evaluative thinking and evidence-based approaches to design and monitor equity programs.

- Ensures buy-in from all relevant stakeholders to drive long-term change.

- Centralises equity as part of the higher education funding model, supported by dedicated modelling to estimate the required funding levels given intersectionality and complex needs of some students.

- Ensures adequate scale of funding, alongside targeted and transparent allocation, and long-term commitment to equity programs to such measures to foster a more inclusive higher education system for all Australians.

Recommendation 2:

Build on the work of the Australian Universities Accord Panel to undertake review into the financial situation of students as part of long-term government response, which should consider the following:

- The extent to which income support policies and administrative arrangements hinder and/or delay access to higher education/tertiary studies, and progression and completion of these studies, particularly for students from identified equity groups.

- Avenues for integrating and simplifying income payment programs and associated application and administration processes.

- Understanding how financial concerns have impacted on intent to study or participation in study for those not currently studying.

- Reviewing income support programs in the context of living costs and study needs, particularly for students from identified equity groups.

- The levels of debt students are accruing and whether the current income-contingent loan scheme is working by assessing how student loans are impacted by the field of study, who is most impacted and how they are impacted (including career and social implications).

- Reviewing the HECS-HELP scheme with attention to student debt, particularly in the case of students from identified equity groups.

Higher Education Programs (Structure and Delivery)

🔍 Findings

- Higher education programs, including targeted equity programs, can provide invaluable support to those students they reach.

- However, the current suite of equity programs is complex, inconsistent, and disconnected.

- There are imbalances in the current equity funding landscape. Some groups (notably, rural, regional and remote students) are the focus of multiple programs (which are not explicitly connected), while others (like students with disability) are targeted by a single program.

- Equity-specific funding and programs are not integrated with general income support programs for university students and there is a strong perception among equity professionals that the latter (e.g., Youth Allowance) are not well designed nor administered to effectively reduce material barriers for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to enable them to succeed in higher education studies.

- There is a lack of consideration for cumulative disadvantage in program structure and design.

- Many of the current targeted equity programs lack a clearly articulated theory of change, goals and targets.

- Definitional problems with equity groups (e.g., area-based SES, self-reported disability) further compound the issues with the targeted programs.

- Outreach activities do not directly target students that are outside of the identified equity groups (e.g., First-in-Family, mature age etc.) and those not included in Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) (e.g., students with disability)

- Students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts need support throughout the student's life course, from high school, through study and graduation into employment and the supports required will differ from group to group, and from student to student (different barriers may need to be addressed for different groups/students).

- The nature of the equity funding (as it comes from a finite pool) disincentivises universities to collaborate with one another.

- There is no funding for Work Integrated Learning, especially mandatory work placements that can result in students from identified equity groups forgoing income.

- Current funding formulas do not consider differences across the states and territories (e.g., higher costs of outreach in larger states/territories).

✓ Conclusion

The current suite of equity programs is complex, inconsistent and disconnected, with their problems exacerbated by definitional ambiguities and a lack of attention to cumulative disadvantage. They do not always capture identified equity groups, nor target key barriers for those groups. There are imbalances in the current equity funding landscape. Some groups (notably, rural, regional and remote students) are the focus of multiple programs (which are not explicitly connected), while others (like students with disability) are targeted by a single program. This is also reflected in disparities in funding that goes to support different equity groups.

→ Recommendations

Recommendation 3:

As part of the long-term national strategy, undertake work to develop a more holistic, system-lens approach to the funding, design and implementation of higher education equity programs. This should consider:

- A mix of national and institutional outreach and other programs (with sufficient funding to institutions to implement well-designed, evidence-based programs and evaluate their workings).

- Targeting specific cohorts of students, while focusing on removing barriers for these students, such as:

    o Dedicated support for students to cover the costs of living, and alleviate financial pressures and the need to work during semester, through a reformed (and simplified) income support system, or bursaries and grants.

    o Working with the school sector to improve academic preparedness, and investing in programs such as enabling courses, making them cost-free to students so that they do not exacerbate material barriers.

    o Funding for universities to target institutional barriers and provide scaffolded support for students from identified equity groups through to completion.

- Simplifying the program and funding architecture – this could be done through funding programs targeting any of the equity/priority cohorts that universities can use to tailor support to reflect under-represented students in the communities that they serve and widen participation (e.g., as outlined in their mission-based compacts).

- Developing tertiary (integrating VET and Higher Education) approaches to outreach to support informed choices for students and support pathways into Higher Education. This could be achieved by state-based collaborative approaches including universities and VET providers.

- Providing financial support for students undertaking Work Integrated Learning (WIL), both mandatory and optional, to support students in developing critical skills required for success in the workplace.

- Adopting a whole-of–government, systemic approach to providing support for students with disability with coordinated approach to funding and program development, including support for systemic rather than isolated solutions.

- Investments in dedicated research and data infrastructure to enable better program planning, monitoring and evaluation (e.g., data connecting school, VET and Higher Education at a student level and over the whole life cycle).

Higher Education Program Implementation

Findings

- There are marked differences between the institutions in terms of:
    - Equity-related funding mix and the amounts they receive;
    - Using the funding to run initiatives targeting students;
    - Cohorts that they target with these programs;
    - Degree to which equity-related activities are subsidised from other funding sources.

- Different universities have different missions and serve different communities. These factors shape their priorities, including the priority placed on equity.

- Many institutions, particularly those outside the Group of 8 (as they tend to have larger cohorts of students from identified equity groups), report that overall funding levels to support students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts are inadequate. However, the views on the required scale of funding vary and there is limited evidence on the cost of supporting students from identified equity groups, particularly given the complexities associated with cumulative disadvantage.

- There are a number of systemic gaps that result from the way in which programs operate at an institutional level, including:
    - Eligibility requirements that leave some groups of disadvantaged students out of equity funding or income support programs, including many working or mature age students, international students, and students with disability (aside from the Disability Support Program, which has limited uses, and NDIS support).
    - Funding based on EFTSL rather than head counts, which does not account for the higher costs of providing adequate support and more entrenched disadvantage often faced by part-time relative to full-time students.
    - The lack of funding continuity and certainty over the medium- and long-term, which restricts universities' abilities to adequately plan and causes them to fund smaller, piecemeal programs rather than scalable solutions to systemic issues. Short-term funding also limits universities' ability to employ staff in secure contracts, worsens staff wellbeing, impacts recruitment and retention, and undermines the development of institutional knowledge and expertise.
    - The lack of consideration for intersectionality and cumulative disadvantage that leads to inadequate support for students experiencing multiple disadvantage.
    - A lack of funding for students with disability relative to their needs, notwithstanding the specific assistance provided by the Disability Support Program. Given disparities in outcomes between students with and without disability, the lack of targeted funding beyond the specific, individual-level Disability Support Program stood out among consultation participants.
    - While national equity-specific programs are not designed in harness, there is some scope for individual institutions to use the federal funding in a more integrated way (e.g., by integrating scholarships, mentoring, tutoring and social event programs in design, including targeting and implementation). However, this is usually not done because of

lacking institutional equity priorities and associated strategies and coordination, which is also influenced by short-term equity funding cycles.

- o Institutions use internal data and monitoring processes to inform decision-making around equity initiatives and programs, and often evaluate program goals against university-wide strategic plans. However, rigorous causal evidence on primary outcomes (e.g., retention, degree completion) for most interventions is rare.

- o Universities report supplementing targeted equity funding from the Commonwealth with funds from their operational budgets. While even approximate figures are hard to determine – particularly for universities that have large proportions of students belonging to one or more equity groups – universities reported that the amounts they received from targeted equity funds such as HEPPP or the Disability Support Program fell well short of the costs of adequately supporting students from identified equity groups.

⊘ Conclusion

Institutional differences and local contextual factors lead to variation across universities in the amount of targeted equity funding and the primary uses of that funding. The disaggregated structure and short-term nature of these funding streams means that despite their positive effects on student equity, there are large systemic gaps remaining which inhibit efforts to create the systemic change necessary to adequately support all students, especially those who experience multiple and cumulative forms of disadvantage.

→ Recommendations

Recommendation 4:

Improve program operations, delivery and effectiveness. Activities can include:

- Undertaking additional modelling to reliably estimate the full costs of supporting students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts, taking into account: cumulative disadvantage; considering outcomes along the student life cycle; and taking into account institutional contexts (e.g., location, differences in student populations).

- Increasing funding for universities to support students from identified equity groups, particularly for groups that are currently under-funded such as students with disability. The funding could be based on the number of students from different equity/priority groups enrolled in (and graduating from) universities rather than EFTSL, and should be commensurate with the full costs of supporting those students through their higher education.

- Providing clearer guidelines around program implementation and strengthen governance structures to oversee planning and implementation of programs and activities at an institutional level.

- Investing in effective programs, such as those evaluated under the Student Equity in Higher Education Evaluation Framework (SEHEEF) and support ongoing program monitoring and evaluation and relevant data collections at an institutional level.

- Providing incentives to universities (e.g., through additional funding) to support student success and completion.

- Supporting structural solutions to reduce systemic barriers which disproportionately affect students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts , e.g., by using universal design principles, rather than relying on targeted programs only.

Recommendation 5:

Undertake work with the higher education sector, e.g., through a Tertiary Education Commission, to:

- Put equity firmly on the agenda for all universities, while recognising the differences in their missions, the local contexts and the communities they serve. This could be more easily achieved by establishing a role of Equity Commissioner or a similar position to sit within the new Tertiary Education Commission.

- Encourage universities to include 'equity' in their measures of success to generate more intrinsic motivations. One way to raise the status of equity agenda could be through establishing senior roles (at a DVC/PVC level) with responsibility for equity, diversity and inclusion at their institutions and to build equity domain activities into staff development and appraisal processes.

- Work with universities to reduce institutional barriers to access, participation and success (including inflexibility of processes, curriculums and learning, and teaching cultures) for all students, including those from identified equity groups.

- Encourage information sharing between institutions about what works, for whom and under what circumstances.

- Negotiate with universities a set of institution-based goals, consistent with individual universities' missions and introduce mechanisms (via funding incentives and/or regulatory frameworks) to hold universities accountable for achieving those goals. Mission-based compacts could be considered as a mechanism to achieve this.

Targets

Findings

- There are potential benefits for setting and regularly communicating and monitoring targets in the higher education sector. In conjunction with funding programs and regulation, targets can incentivise institutional behaviour change.

- However, targets in policy are often not achieved and come with issues including perverse incentives and unintended consequences:

  o 'Gaming' targets is a common outcome when there is a mismatch between targets and incentives. Gaming is often justified culturally by those doing the gaming as being acceptable because the targets 'don't make sense' in their context and from the perspective of the job they are trying to do. Targets work best when there is a natural alignment between the task and the performance target.

  o Target-setting based on the labour market faces the inherent difficulties of predicting future needs for graduates and allocating resources to meet them.

- Targets may result in students being wooed to enrol at universities with a risk that they will be left worse off (e.g., without degree and with a debt), particularly if there is a lack of adequate support.

- Targets may result in resources going unused because they are locked into target purposes for which there is insufficient demand.

- Targets may encourage problematic competition between universities, e.g., multiple universities competing for students from the same low SES or regional areas, or metro universities trying to 'poach' regional students to reach targets.

- Targets potentially introduce a risk of lowering academic standards, e.g., if universities are incentivised to admit and graduate higher percentage of students from under-represented backgrounds, regardless of their academic preparedness, to meet their performance targets.

- Targets focusing on certain equity groups (e.g., low SES) may result in other groups (e.g., students with disability) being overlooked and might not account for intersectionality and cumulative disadvantage. This also risks introducing new inequalities for groups of students that are not explicitly included in targets.

- Without additional funding, there is a risk of diverting (finite) resources from students that are not explicitly included in targets.

- Targets may introduce risk around data manipulation, e.g., artificially increasing the size of student populations in groups defined based on self-reported status.

- Targets must be linked to reliable and valid measures of performance. Reliable measures of performance accurately indicate real performance; they must be collected systematically and without missing data. Valid measures of performance measure performance that is of value in the real world.

- There are definitional and data issues (equity groups definitions and measurement) that further complicate setting and monitoring higher education targets. Definitions used in Higher Education and in the general population are not aligned (e.g., disability), rely on self-reports (Indigenous, disability) or area measures that are recalibrated every five years (SES and remoteness), all of which can offer 'opportunities' for institutional gaming of the system by strategies to increase numbers through data manipulation. The prevalence of equity statuses also varies by age, which is commonly not considered when monitoring underrepresentation; for example, Indigenous populations are (much) younger than non-Indigenous populations, and disability becomes (much) more likely in older age.

- Additional considerations apply to institutional targets:

  - When considering targets for Higher Education institutions, it is crucial to consider their capacity to influence factors relevant to enhancing equity outcomes, and how this capacity might be subject to change due to external factors beyond their control, such as the cost of living, the school system, the job market, and government income support.

  - Institutions exhibit variations in student demographics, the regional and demographic characteristics of their catchment areas, and their unique identities and missions. These factors will impact their perspectives on equity-related matters and may shape their engagement in future collaborative efforts and negotiations with the government.

> o Designing institutional targets that align with national objectives and gain acceptance and perceived fairness across the sector is critical, but it may present considerable challenges. The governance structure for establishing any targets is a key consideration.

✓ Conclusion

While there was some support from the sector for setting attainment targets, particularly to incentivise institutions to prioritise equity, the literature review, survey, Australian Universities Accord submissions and feedback from expert advisors highlighted a number of challenges and considerations that need to be taken into account if any targets were to be set.

→ Recommendations

Recommendation 6:

The following issues need to be considered prior to any setting of targets:

- Any setting of targets should be accompanied by a comprehensive implementation plan that:
    - o Includes a feasibility assessment supported by national and state data;
    - o Considers barriers, intersectionality, and outcomes at multiple stages of the student life cycle;
    - o Considers the levels at which targets are to be set (e.g., national, institutional);
    - o Considers timeframes (including differentiation between shorter- and longer-term targets);
    - o Provides adequate national-level and institutional funding to support achieving targets.
- Any targets need to eliminate perverse incentives to over-enrol students without providing appropriate ongoing support, for instance by covering enrolment, participation, attrition and success.
- Any setting of targets needs to be contingent on having accurate, reliable and valid data (including baseline data) and clear operational definitions, and the embedding of evaluation/monitoring through the target setting period.
- Any setting of institutional targets should consider integration with a regulatory framework of the higher education sector, while respecting the autonomy of universities. This should include considerations for setting suitably contextualised targets negotiated with universities that are consistent with their missions and the communities they serve, e.g., as part of mission-based compacts.
- Any setting of targets should be linked to adequate funding to support successful achievement of targets at a national level and to incentivise universities to invest in equity and provide support for students through to completion.

Broader policy levers

🔍 **Findings**

- Addressing gaps, barriers, and inequalities for identified cohorts requires a multi-pronged approach. It would include structural changes that enable holistic cross-education systemic approaches within higher education institutions to reduce institutional barriers and investments in data infrastructure to support program monitoring and evaluation.

- There is a balance to be struck between broad approaches that can be used to improve outcomes for multiple cohorts, e.g., through focusing on key barriers, and more targeted approaches specific to certain equity groups.

- Several issues have emerged in relation to broader funding levers, including:

  o Reviews of higher education equity policies indicate that a combination of monetary and non-monetary programs is more effective in improving outcomes for students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts than single, isolated programs. Stakeholders value programs like HEPPP but suggest increasing funding or providing flexibility for program development.

  o The lack of demand driven funding was seen as a significant concern, particularly for First Nations students, as it exacerbates existing gaps in Higher Education. The recommendation to extend demand driven funding to First Nations students in the Interim Report of the Australian Universities Accord Panel has been welcomed, but there is an opportunity to extend it to other equity groups such as low SES students, regional, rural, and remote students, and students with disability (while noting definitional and implementation issues), or – preferably – to return to a full demand driven system.

  o Stakeholders highlight the potential benefits of a needs-based funding model that enhance equity in Higher Education by directing resources where they are most needed. However, implementing such a model would require substantial government commitment, administrative complexity, legislative changes, negotiations with universities, and challenges related to defining and monitoring student needs. There is a debate over centralisation versus local decision-making, but transparency in funding allocation and the use of mission-based compacts are suggested mechanisms for improving accountability while respecting university autonomy.

- Successfully instrumentalising targets in the Australian higher education sector can be challenging, particularly when seen in the context of the 'intractable problem' of inequity in Higher Education worldwide. This is because:

  o There has been a lack of a bipartisan understanding of equity and associated goal convictions in the higher education space, which is not conducive to setting long-term equity strategy and long-term targets.

  o Under-representations in higher education student and graduate populations are, to a considerable degree, a function of matters outside the scope of the higher education sector.

  o Compared with other OECD countries, Australia has spent relatively little public money on tertiary education institutions in recent years. Notably shifting representations in student

and graduate populations will likely require substantial additional funding over the longer-term (also in other areas such as the school system).

- o Related to the above, Australian universities have increasingly generated alternative revenues upon which they depend. This may have lessened the Federal Governments' capacity to steer universities' behaviours in terms of the power they can enact through financial incentives and coercive measures, which are important elements in target effectiveness.

- o Australian universities have historically had considerable autonomy in their operations and they have developed and maintained different missions and cultures. Evidence suggests that universities may resist institutional targets imposed on them by the Government if they see those targets in tension with their priorities. As universities are often pitted against each other in competition for students and funding, a unified equity approach that includes widely agreeable institutional targets might prove difficult.

✓ Conclusion

There are a number of strategies that could be leveraged to address gaps, barriers, and inequalities affecting under-represented groups within Higher Education. They include leveraging larger funding mechanisms and the integration of equity targets with broader higher education policy levers. Complexities related to educational inequalities, program structures, delivery methods, and institutional implementation and autonomy, need to be taken into account when considering higher education policy levers for government intervention.

→ Recommendations

Recommendation 7:

Prioritise multi-pronged approaches to addressing gaps, barriers and inequalities for identified cohorts, including:

- Promoting structural changes to enable cross-education systemic approaches, improve VET to university pathways, support best-practice enabling and preparatory programs and centralise equity within higher education institutions.

- Working within higher education institutions using a holistic approach that encompasses funding stability, program restructuring, cultural transformation, empowerment of equity representatives, increased flexibility, staff development, standardisation of design principles, inclusive Work Integrated Learning (WIL) and an emphasis on inclusive learning and teaching.

- Supporting systematic and rigorous evaluation of interventions, with a focus on identifying effective approaches for various equity groups (including broad and targeted approaches), monitoring disparities, and measuring progress in terms of outcomes along the student life cycle (including success and completion), underpinned by effective data governance, collection and monitoring.

Recommendation 8:

When leveraging broader funding levers, consider:

- Investing in a mix of programs, including a combination of monetary and non-monetary programs, and striking the balance between broader, more generic approaches and programs targeting specific groups that reflect specific needs of certain cohorts.

- Extending demand driven places to include low SES students, regional, rural, and remote students and students with disability (while noting significant definitional and implementation issues), or – preferably – return to a full demand driven system.

- Undertaking further work to determine the feasibility of a needs-based funding model for Higher Education, and to scope out its parameters.

Recommendation 9:

Consider the following activities that would support setting long-term targets for the higher education sector in the context of broader policy levers:

- Develop a bipartisan vision for equity among political parties and throughout all education sectors (including independent and catholic schools).

- Develop a holistic and long-term national equity strategy with broad national targets based on the bipartisan vision. This should include assessing contributions that different government portfolios can make based on their scope of operations and envisaged role in policy and program implementation towards the national targets along the student life course.

- Undertake research about effectively setting agency-specific, interjurisdictional and institutional targets in the context of broader educational (equity) policies.

- Undertake a comprehensive consultation with universities and communities, building on the work of the Australian Universities Accord Panel to ensure buy-in from the sector and to incentivise universities to invest in equity while not making them compete with one another.
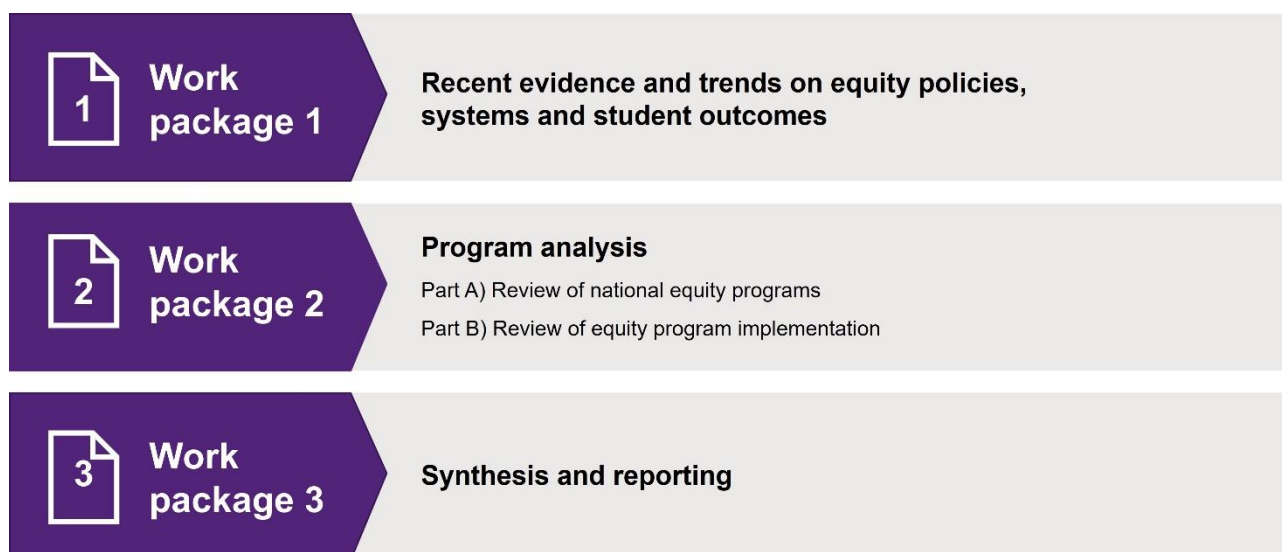
Methodologies

This project was undertaken across three Work Packages (See Figure 1 for an overview).

- **Work Package 1** includes a review of recent evidence and trends on equity policies, systems and student outcomes, through a review of academic and grey literature and synthesis of available international and national data.

- **Work Package 2** included a review of national equity programs (focusing on the structure and effectiveness of programs, as well as an interrogation of their implementation and operation at an institutional level).

- **Work Package 3** included a synthesis of findings from the entire project. This included: findings from the first two work packages; findings from the review of a sample of the Australian Universities Accord Submissions; findings from the analysis of open-ended feedback from the sector consultation survey, and integration with expert feedback throughout the project.

Within scope of the project, were the:

- Equity programs and funding schemes in the higher education sector and broader policy levers. These included: HEPPP; Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program (RPPPP); Regional Loading Program (RLP); Enabling Loading Program (ELP); Disability Support Program; Regional University Study Hubs; Tertiary Access Payment (TAP); Destination Australia; demand driven access to Commonwealth supported places for First Nations regional students; additional growth for regional university campuses; Commonwealth Grant Scheme (CGS); and the Higher Education Loan Program (HECS-HELP).

- Current outcomes across the student life cycle for students from under-represented and historically educationally disadvantaged groups including those from low SES background; people with disability; people from regional and remote areas; First Nations Australians, and people who are the first in their family to attend university.

Figure 1. Overview of Work Packages as part of the project.

Work package 1	**Recent evidence and trends on equity policies, systems and student outcomes**
Work package 2	**Program analysis** Part A) Review of national equity programs Part B) Review of equity program implementation
Work package 3	**Synthesis and reporting**

1. Introduction and Overview

1.1 Project objective

The Targeted Review of Student Equity in Higher Education Programs and System Level Policy Levers has been conducted for the Department of Education (the Department) to support the Australian Universities Accord in their review and long-term plan for Australia's higher education system. The objectives of this project were to compile evidence for the Department and the Australian Universities Accord Panel to:

- Inform action to address the systemic drivers for inequity and barriers for equity groups across the student life cycle; and

- Support effective and efficient development and implementation of equity programs and policy.

1.2 Approach

1.2.1 Overview of Work Packages

This project was undertaken across three Work Packages.

- **Work Package 1:** a review of recent evidence and trends on equity policies, systems and student outcomes from academic and grey literature and synthesis of available international and national data.

- **Work Package 2:** a review of national equity programs (focusing on the structure and effectiveness of programs, as well as an interrogation of their implementation and operation at an institutional level).

- **Work Package 3**: a synthesis of findings from the entire project including: findings from the first two work packages; findings from the review of a sample of the Australian Universities Accord Submissions; findings from the analysis of open-ended feedback from the sector consultation survey and integration of the findings with expert feedback throughout the project.

1.2.2 Work Package 1

The aim of Work Package 1 was to gather evidence on how Australia compares internationally with its approach to equity programs; how well it is meeting the needs of under-represented cohorts; as well as how the gaps, barriers and inequalities specific to under-represented cohorts should be addressed.

Literature review

Work Package 1 included a literature review, involving:

- Generating the search strategy and search terms in consultation with the UQ Expert Librarian and refining these following feedback and input from our Expert Advisory Group;

- Restricting searches to literature published within the last 15 years;

- Searching key grey literature sources (e.g., Open Grey and Social Science Research Network), scholarly databases for relevant academic literature (e.g., Web of Science, Scopus, Journal Storage (JSTOR)) and online searches of targeted websites, and

- Scanning cited and secondary citations of identified key/relevant articles.

In relation to international approaches to higher education equity, and outcomes, the literature review focussed on international comparisons or reviews of higher education equity policies and programs. In addition, the review focussed on selected OECD countries with comparable education systems, including England, Scotland, New Zealand, Canada and the United States, and searched for literature on their national-level higher education policies, programs and systems.

In relation to how gaps, barriers and inequalities could be addressed for equity groups, the literature review employed a new set of search terms and extraction of data. The literature search focussed on reviewing and extracting information on the causes/barriers and manifestations of disadvantage for population groups of interest in this review across the student life cycle.

In addition, targeted government and relevant websites were searched across the pre-identified jurisdictions, with a particular focus on searching for documentation relating to equity policies and funding. Appendix – WP1 provides further details of the methodology, including targeted websites.

Data synthesis

While conducting a rapid review of literature, publicly available national and international data was simultaneously reviewed.

International data on higher education trends and outcomes was reviewed and targeted publications to understand how Australia is currently performing to meet the needs of under-represented cohorts, compared with international jurisdictions were searched. Published data/statistics were extracted and international data/statistics available from targeted websites used in the literature review were drawn upon. Using cross-nationally comparative analyses, the review focussed specifically on higher education data (including OECD publications on socio-economic gaps in educational outcomes).

In addition, the review accessed relevant, publicly available, higher education data and relevant, earlier school data from Australia including, NAPLAN and Higher Education Student Data to inform how gaps, barriers and inequalities related to under-represented cohorts could be addressed. Data provided by the Department related to student outcomes relevant to the project, including data that are not in the public domain such as trends on outcomes for first-in-family students was also reviewed.

1.2.3   Work Package 2

Work Package 2A

The aim of Work Package 2A was to gather information on the structure and intended outcomes of national-level equity programs and their effectiveness.

A data extraction template was co-designed with the Department of Education to capture key descriptive information on program characteristics (see Table 1). The template was populated by Department staff with responsibility or knowledge of the specified programs. If provided, links to further information were explored.

In addition, a systematic but pragmatic and rapid search strategy was undertaken to identify additional information relevant to the programs, particularly in relation to program implementation and effectiveness:

- First, program-specific websites or webpages (if available) were reviewed.

- Second, the 2021 publication "*A guide to Australian Government funding for higher education learning and teaching*" (Ferguson, 2021) was reviewed.

- Third, Google Advanced was used to search the following domains and websites: gov.au; aph.gov.au; ncsehe.edu.au; universitiesaustralia.edu.au; research.acer.edu.au; 26ewcastle.edu.au/research/centre/ceehe. The program name was included in the "*This exact word or phrase*" field, while the following terms were included in the "*Any of these words*" field: evaluation, effect, review, assessment. Reviewers screened no more than the first 10 pages or 100 search results for relevant records. Relevant web pages/reports were captured in Zotero. Finally, the ProQuest Education Collection; Informit A+; and Scopus databases were searched to identify any program evaluations or reviews published in the academic literature. The key terms used in the database searches were the same as for the Google Advanced Searches. Identified articles were imported into Zotero for further screening and review.

Table 1: Program characteristics captured by the data extraction template.

Field	Description
Program summary	A brief description of the program.
Program objectives	A list of the main objectives of the program.
Year commenced	The year the program commenced.
Funding type	Formula-based funding, project-based funding, direct student payment or other/multiple.
Legislative basis	The legislation that provides the basis of the program and any associated guidelines or legislative instruments.
Program funding	The total amount of funding allocated to the program since its inception, by year.
Funding formula	If applicable, a description of the funding formula used to allocate the funding to higher education institutions or students.
Eligibility criteria	A description of any eligibility criteria for universities and/or students receiving the funding.
Institutional funding	The amount of funding received by individual higher education institutions.
Equity group	The equity group(s) that the program is primarily designed to support.
Student life stage	The student life stage that the program primarily targets: Pre-access; Access; Participation and attainment; or All.
Equity barrier addressed	The type of equity barrier primarily addressed by the program according to the typology of: *Individual* (barriers related to individual attributes or skills that are driven by institutional, geographic or material/economic barriers) *Institutional* (barriers related to the processes, structures, cultures, values and professional practices of higher education institutions) *Geographic* (barriers related to the accessibility of Higher Education, particularly for those living in regional and remote areas) *Material* (barriers related to the resources required by students to access and participate in higher education study).
Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)	A list of any KPIs that were used to measure the performance of the program.
Reporting requirements	A description of any reporting requirements for institutions funded through this program.
Program reach	Data on the number of students supported by the program, where possible broken down by equity group (from administrative data).
Program evaluation	An indication of whether the program has been subject to a formal evaluation or review and, if so, further details on these.

All identified articles were reviewed and relevant program information was extracted. A second data extraction template was created to capture information specifically concerning the implementation and effectiveness of the programs (see Table 2).

Table 2. Data extracted in relation to program review and/or evaluations evidence.

Field	Description
Bibliographic information	Document details including: Document Type; Author; Author Affiliation; Year; Title; and URL.
Population	The population considered in the review/evaluation e.g., all higher education students, all higher education institutions, specific institution(s), specific student groups, etc.
Program reach	Data on the number of students supported by the program, where possible broken down by equity group.
Evidence of effectiveness	A description of any evidence of the effectiveness of the program on observed outcomes, including the methods used and estimated effects.
Mechanism	A description of the features of the intervention that may explain any observed outcomes.
Moderators / context	A description of any factors that may moderate or change effects, whether intended or unintended (e.g., different program effects by gender)
Implementation enablers and barriers	A description of any identified factors that helped or hindered implementation and observed outcomes.
Other comments	Any additional data or comments of potential relevance

Work Package 2B

The aim of Work Package 2B was to investigate and understand institutional operation of equity programs. Work Package 2B involved consultations with staff from a sample of universities who oversaw equity programs, as well as a review of equity program data.

Consultations consisted of semi-structured interviews with nominated individuals from a sample of universities who had oversight of equity initiatives and programs. The sample consisted of eight universities from a range of university groups (e.g., Go8, RUN etc.), states and urban/rural locations, and with varying student populations. Eleven consultations with 27 participants for approximately one hour each were conducted with individuals or small groups. Participants were questioned about how the in-scope equity programs operated at their universities, the challenges associated with trying to increase equity in access, participation and student success from an operational perspective, the evidence they used to support decisions and the extent to which their institutions supplemented the in-scope equity funding with other university funding and initiatives. The consultations were recorded with the consent of the participants, and emergent themes relevant for the project review questions (see Table 7) were generated inductively.

The program data came from several sources, including publicly available data, data identified in Work Package 2A, anonymised HEPPP reporting data from 37 universities provided by the Department of Education, internal documentation related to equity programs or initiatives and more detailed HEPPP reporting packs from sample institutions. Examples of the publicly available data include institutional allocations of in-scope equity programs and publicly released financial statements from universities which report various income sources, including equity programs such as HEPPP, Disability Support Program and others.

In relation to the internal documentation, during consultations, participants were invited to provide more detailed HEPPP reporting packs and other documentation that could provide insight into institutional operation of equity programs or provide examples of the types of evidence and information used to inform equity-related operational decisions. These examples included strategy documents, internal statistics and data, evaluations of varying levels of detail, internal evaluation and funding criteria for projects, decision matrices showing

proposals for funding that had been accepted or rejected as well as how they had been evaluated and submissions to state or federal government bodies.

Further detail is provided in Appendix – WP2B.

1.2.4   Work Package 3

The aim of Work Package 3 was to synthesise all findings from the project and draw in expert opinion related to the project review questions.

Expert Advisory Group

The project involved a series of consultations with members of the Expert Advisory Group (see Table 3).

Table 3. Expert Advisory Group members.

Expert Advisor	Organisation
Prof Andrew Harvey	Griffith University
Andrew Hawkins	ARTD Consultants
Prof Lisa McDaid	The University of Queensland
Prof Andrew Norton	Australian National University
Prof Tim Reddel	The University of Queensland
Prof Mark Western	The University of Queensland
Emily Yorkston	ARTD Consultants

The topics included:

- Feedback about the Project Plan and proposed methodology;

- Feeback about the slide decks for the presentations to the Equity in Higher Education Panel (EHEP) (submitted/delivered on 26 May 2023 and 3 August 2023);

- Individual consultations to collect Expert Advisors' insights into the project review questions (see Table 7), and

- Individual consultations to collect Expert Advisors' reactions to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report.

Additionally, feedback from EHEP was received following the presentations on 26 May (Deliverable #1) and 3 August 2023 (Deliverable #2), which included comments on the presentations as well as responses to additional questions asked by the Project Team (See Table 4).

Table 4. Questions posed to EHEP following each deliverable.

Deliverable	Questions posed to EHEP
Deliverable #1:	1. What do you see as the key challenges for universities to improving outcomes for students from identified equity groups?
	2. What policy levers should be prioritised at the system level in order to shift the dial on outcomes for students from identified equity groups?
	3. How could evidence be best leveraged to support the development and implementation of equity programs and policies?
Deliverable #2:	1. What system-wide approaches to increasing access and participation can be implemented that will address the underlying drivers of disadvantage that most impact students from equity backgrounds in Australia?
	2. How can we embed equity within a higher education system of academic excellence?
	3. What are the implications of this work for the next stage of the Accord process?

Review of Australian Universities Accord submissions

In consultation with the Department, a targeted sampling approach to review was taken and a qualitative analysis of submissions to the Australian Universities Accord (submitted in response to the Discussion Paper) undertaken. The aim was to have a spread of representation of regional and metropolitan universities, higher education peak bodies, professional associations, not-for-profit and other advocacy groups, particularly with a focus on equity.

A total of 86 submissions were reviewed, focussing on content related to equity. Table 5 presents a summary of the groupings of the Australian Universities Accord submissions that were read as part of the review. Each submission was read in its entirety to ensure content related to equity was captured and then coded into themes, which were discussed and refined as a team until agreement was reached.

Table 5. Summary of reviewed submissions to the Australian Universities Accord Panel.

Submission Body/Type	Number
Advocacy group or body - Disability	2
Advocacy group or body - Indigenous	2
Higher education peak body	10
Individual	9
Not for profit/ charity	2
Other higher education	14
Professional association	9
Regional networks and support	3
Student representative group	5
University (metro)	14
University (regional)	12
University school/centre/ faculty/college	4

Stakeholder survey

The aim of the stakeholder survey was to confirm, evaluate, and expand on the issues identified through the project components in WP1 and WP2 in the context of selected project questions. These questions related to the functioning of the current equity programs and to ways of improving representation including possible system levers that could be adjusted. As part of the latter questions on system levers, the Consultation Survey was also used to test some of the suggestions in the Interim Report of the Australian Universities Accord Panel's Review of Australia's Higher Education System.

The Targeted Equity Review project specifies five groups of interest: people from low SES backgrounds; first-in-family; people from regional, rural and remote backgrounds; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and people with disability.

While there are some overlaps of issues for groups, each is also associated with unique issues. This especially applies to the latter two groups: educational disadvantages of Indigenous peoples and people with disability could be perceived to be related to drivers, issues and solutions that are unique and do not apply to the larger low SES and RRR groups. Such 'separateness' is reflected in the structure of representative and professional bodies, as well as structures of service administrations and professional roles. Many universities have Indigenous units and/or specialised services roles or support units for people with disability that are separately run from the general equity or student services units.

To reflect the specific situations of the different groups, the Consultation Survey was structured into three components with each one targeting a specialised group of stakeholders.

Component A – Underrepresentation of Low SES, First-in-Family and RRR

This component of the survey was concerned with underrepresentation of these three in-scope groups. Stakeholders that were targeted in the recruitment for this component of the consultation were high-level university managers with strategic oversight over equity or student experience/retention portfolios, managers and professionals working in equity-specific and student services units at urban and regional universities, as well as academics with a publication record in the areas of socio-economic, First-in-Family and/or RRR (educational) disadvantage.

Component B – Underrepresentation of Indigenous peoples

Stakeholders that were targeted in the recruitment for this component of the consultation were high-level university managers with strategic oversight of Indigenous student portfolios and strategies, managers of, and professionals in, Indigenous university support units or centres, professionals working in Indigenous bodies that are concerned with educational disadvantage, as well as Indigenous academics with a publication record in the area of Indigenous (educational) disadvantage.

Component C – Underrepresentation of people with disability

Stakeholders that were targeted in the recruitment for this component of the consultation were professionals who work in bodies advocating for people with disability, managers and professionals working in disability units at universities, as well as academics with a publication record in the area of disability and (educational) disadvantage.

Recruitment and participation

Relevant stakeholders were selected based on their expertise (e.g., work histories) or affiliation (e.g., within disability services or Indigenous units) with the equity groups of interest. Potential stakeholder lists were compiled from ISSR's networks based on previous collaborations and consultations with higher education stakeholders in the equity space over past years, as well as targeted online searches. See Appendix – WP3/Survey for further details on recruitment criteria and process, and participation.

We initially emailed 114 identified stakeholders on 2 August 2023 informing them of the upcoming consultations, details about participation and providing them with an opt-out option. Emails with the survey link to the respective component of the survey (and Participant Information Sheet) were then sent to 50 stakeholders for Component A, 29 stakeholders for Component B and 23 stakeholders for Component C on 10 August 2023. Thirty stakeholders participated in the consultation survey. Table 6 presents the breakdown of participation, by survey component.

Table 6. Stakeholder participation, by component.

Consultation rounds	Participants
Component A – Low SES, First-in-Family, RRR	21
Component B – Indigenous	4
Component C – Disability	5
Total	**30**

Table 7. Source of evidence by the project review questions.

Review Questions		Literature review	Data review / analysis	Program documentation/ data analysis	Institutional consultations	Feedback from expert advisors/EHEP	Accord Submission Analysis	Consultation Survey
Context, drivers and systems	What are the system drivers leading to below parity outcomes for under-represented and educationally disadvantaged groups across the student life cycle?					X	X	
	How is Australia currently performing on meeting the needs of under-represented cohorts, and how does this compare internationally?	X	X			X		
	How does Australia's approach to equity programs compare to international comparators?	X				X		
	What are the system level capabilities and strengths of Australia's higher education System?	X				X		
	Are there gaps, inequalities or unintended consequences at a structural or system level?				X	X	X	
	Is the scale of investment appropriate?			X	X	X		X
HE Programs	Are current equity programs structured in the right way and is a more holistic approach required? (e.g., Small-targeted programs vs greater focus on outcomes)?			X	X	X	X	X
	Are existing Commonwealth student equity in higher education programs meeting their stated purpose and objectives and delivering intended outcomes and benefits?			X	X	X		X
HE Program Implementation	How do current Commonwealth funded equity programs operate at an institutional level, and are there systemic gaps resulting from this approach?		X		X	X		
	Is there evidence of effectiveness of current equity programs at either an institution or program level? What might this evidence look like? What would enable measurement and evaluation in the future?		X		X			
	To what extent do institutions direct other funding beyond targeted equity programs to supporting under-represented students?				X			
Targets	What considerations need to inform student equity targets, and how could these targets be framed? (Including consideration of drivers needed to improve outcomes of particular cohorts, and key measures across the student life cycle such as access, success and attainment)?					X		X
	How could targets be appropriately tailored to reflect particular institutional circumstances such as the catchment from which students are traditionally drawn?				X	X		X
Broader policy levers	How should gaps, barriers, and inequalities specific to identified under-represented cohorts, for example First Nations Australians and people with disability, be addressed?	X				X		X
	How could larger higher education funding levers be leveraged?					X	X	X
	In what ways could adoption of equity targets be linked to broader higher education policy levers?					X	X	X

2. Context, Drivers and Systems

2.1 Findings

- Educational disadvantage typically originates before higher education (starts early in life) and accumulates over time.

- The resulting systemic inequalities have persisted over time (in Australia and internationally), despite the massification of education and higher participation/attainment rates.

- In Australia, entry and population attainment rates are comparable or better than other focal countries, yet full-time completion rates tend to be lower.

- Of all OECD countries, Australia demonstrates one of the lowest public investments in tertiary education based on GDP.

- Notably, some countries implement more multilayered approaches to higher education equity. These include higher education strategies and national equity policies that target underlying barriers of structural disadvantage, supplemented by targeted programs, scholarships or bursaries for students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts which are nested within a national equity strategy.

- In Australia, there is explicit and implicit streaming of students into Higher Education resulting from the ATAR/non-ATAR track divide and a heavily stratified multi-sector schooling system, which contributes to underrepresentation of some groups in Higher Education.

- There are multiple barriers driving under-representation in Higher Education, including economic/material, socio-cultural, geographical and institutional. Material barriers are particularly important and cut across all equity groups. These barriers need to be addressed through different policy levers and at different levels (e.g., individual and institutional levels).

- For many people, barriers intersect and 'accumulate' over time. Different people may be disadvantaged in Higher Education at different points in the student life cycle and to different extents. This includes accumulation of barriers prior to higher education participation, during early learning and schooling.

- In Australia, growing costs of studying and increasing student debt – both of which have disproportionate impact on students from identified equity groups – are key issues, particularly in the context of the rise in the broader cost of living.

- Current equity-specific funding does not cover the entire Higher education sector; it leaves out post-graduate studies and focuses on Table A higher education providers.

- The overall scale of funding is currently insufficient to achieve a marked difference in higher education participation and attainment of students from identified equity groups. The views on the required scale of funding vary, with limited modelling that would provide more definitive answers.

2.2   Context and drivers

This section was guided by the following project review questions:

- What are the system drivers leading to below parity outcomes for under-represented and educationally disadvantaged groups across the student life cycle?

- How is Australia currently performing on meeting the needs of under-represented cohorts, and how does this compare internationally?

- How does Australia's approach to equity programs compare to international comparators?

At an international and national level, we continue to observe inequities in student outcomes, across the student life cycle for students from under-represented and educationally disadvantaged groups. The international literature review finds what is termed, a 'massification' of Higher Education globally. This is supported by the synthesis of publicly available international data on higher education enrolments. However, despite the mass expansion of Higher Education globally, including increased rates of enrolments of students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, there are also sustained inequities globally, as evidenced by higher education enrolments and international completion rates (including England, New Zealand, the United States). There are also inequities in terms of the types of institutions attended (with those from socially advantaged backgrounds being more likely to attend 'elite' or 'prestigious' institutions with high tariffs), and the types of degrees studied (with those from more socially advantaged backgrounds more likely to enter degrees such as law and medicine which are typically associated with better earning potential). Educational disadvantage accumulates over the life course and intersects with other forms of disadvantage. This section discusses these issues and outlines international approaches to tackling them.

Drivers of below parity outcomes for students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts

A body of literature has previously identified that educational disparities are driven by financial, socio-cultural, geographical and institutional factors. The impacts of these manifest early in the student life course and accumulate over time. The mechanisms through which these drivers of disadvantage manifest include unequal access to schooling with good resources and quality teaching, limited material resources preventing opportunities and enablers such as tutoring or specialist services, low parental support or investment in education, limited role models and greater geographic distance for needed services and opportunities (Cardak et al., 2017; Fleming & Grace, 2014; Naylor & James, 2016; O'Shea, 2020; Perry, Rowe, & Lubienski, 2022; Rowe & Perry, 2022; Wilks & Wilson, 2012). Over time, these can impact upon the accumulation of the required academic, cognitive, and non-cognitive skills that prepare individuals for the chance of higher education. The same drivers continue to impact upon students in their access and participation in Higher Education. Figure 2 shows a student pathway model that illustrates these interrelationships, and the different contexts: family, community, educational institutions and national policies that shape them.

Figure 2: Student pathway model.
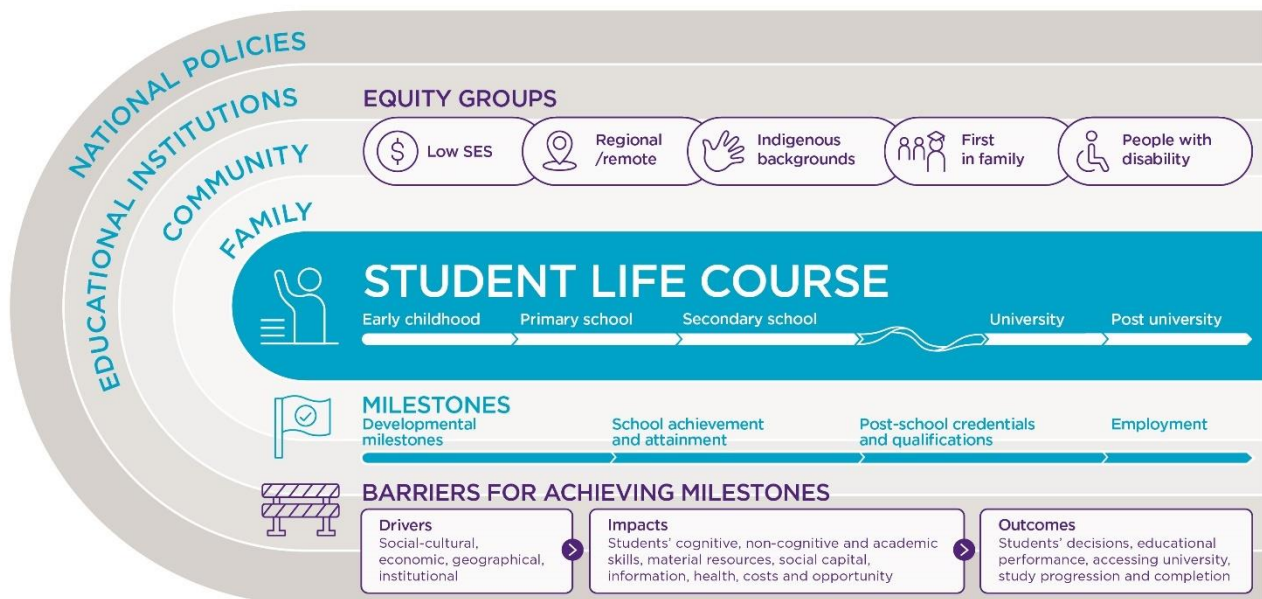
The role of barriers

The Review of Identified Equity Groups in Higher Education (Tomaszewski et al., 2018) has recommended that, over the long term, there is a shift to an approach to monitoring equity in Higher Education that explicitly recognises the longitudinal interdependencies and includes a focus on barriers, in addition to socio-demographic characteristics. Targeting barriers has distinct advantages: barriers cut across multiple equity groups, and as such addressing them can help to shift a dial on outcomes for a number of cohorts at the same time (including those who are not explicitly identified as equity or target groups); they are also easier to operationalise in terms of specific programs and interventions to be implemented and avoid potentially stigmatising the target populations, which can happen if access is based on socio-demographic traits such as low SES or Indigenous background.

A consistent theme that emerged across several sources of evidence pointed to the negative impact that financial barriers had on students. The literature review pointed to the increasing tuition fees imposed on students and the resulting student debt as a key factor contributing to global inequities in student outcomes (Amaral, 2022; Callender, 2022; Dill, 2022), which was also a theme that emerged from the analysis of the Australian Universities Accord submissions. In addition, OECD reports (OECD, 2022) demonstrate that of OECD countries, Australia demonstrates one of the lowest public investments in tertiary education based on GDP, with increasing contributions by students. The financial and social implications of student debt have also been identified in the national documentation, while international research shows that the prospect of high student debt can be a deterrent to higher education studies for students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts (Callender & Mason, 2017).

Additionally, a main theme from the qualitative analysis of a stratified sample of Australian Universities Accord submissions was the rising cost of living (including daily expenses, rental/housing) and how this impacted upon students and their ability to successfully study, rather than engage in paid work. This was consistently discussed across submissions. It was noted that the amount of current Youth Allowance was insufficient (keeping recipients below the poverty line), with many arguing that the scheme did not capture students that needed to be covered due to eligibility conditions around age of independence.

Alongside discussion on material barriers in the stakeholder consultations and analysis of Australian Universities Accord submissions, suggestions emerged on how to address them, including increasing income support to an amount that is liveable, providing other material support, such as rental support, and reviewing the age of independence to ensure the students who need the support are being captured. Similarly, in the survey responses, income support was widely mentioned and there were various suggestions to make available income support to students from equity groups – higher, liveable monetary values while widening eligibility (lowering age of independence – Youth Allowance, higher thresholds for parental, partner and personal income thresholds or the removal of such tests for particular students (e.g., first year, RRR) or all students from identified equity groups.

One suggestion articulated by stakeholders pointed to the need for a bigger review into Student Financial Assistance. Specifically, there were suggestions to:

- Review the current funding amount of income support.

- Review eligibility conditions of income support – e.g., consider allowing part-time study while receiving income support as full-time study for some groups can create unrealistic study and work loads; apply to first year students, younger students.

- Review Centrelink income support payment programs, including their alignment with equity programs, their administration and conditions. This includes reviewing the transparency of the rules, application processes (including the documentary evidence requirements, which are complex and a potential deterrent), the extent to which they promote direct school-leaver pathways to Higher Education and intended consequences of the independence clause.

- Consider national bursaries for under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts of students to remove the need to engage in paid work, without it impacting Youth Allowance or other income supports.

- Review the paid placements to remove the need for paid work or foregone income from relocating for placements.

- Further, review how students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts are being disproportionately impacted by high student debt, such as by their subject choices and rules around completion rates as was the case in the JRG. Indigenous women were frequently mentioned in the Australian Universities Accord submissions as being a subgroup that would be heavily impacted by long-term student debt.

Academic preparedness was another barrier that has been prominent in the literature, stakeholder consultations and input from the expert advisors, which was seen to be driven by broader educational inequalities that originate outside the higher education system, and begin to operate early in people's lives (Bertolin & McCowan, 2022; Sá, Tavares, & Sin, 2022). While a separate Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System is expected to deliver recommendations on how to improve the school system, including reducing educational inequalities, it will take time until significant changes occur. Feedback from stakeholder and expert consultations suggested that increased focus on enabling and pathway courses can help to address educational disadvantage while we wait on the issues in the school system to be solved.

At the higher education stage, there are also a number of identified institutional barriers. Institutional barriers refer to the barriers embedded in the structures of universities and their associated practices, which may exacerbate feelings of not belonging and students' feelings of confidence and capability (Burke et al., 2016). Institutional barriers can include university requirements which may create bottlenecks of entry, inflexible courses, pedagogical practices, schedules and modes of study. Rather than leveling the playing field as it may be assumed, higher education institutions can maintain systems of inequality that reflect broader society, with enmeshed structures of class, privileging those who have been socialised into knowing the ways and expectations of the systems (Threadgold, Burke, & Bunn, 2018).

These barriers were identified from the literature review, from survey respondents as well as from findings from the analysis of submissions to the Australian Universities Accord as a need to be addressed and sometimes dismantled. For instance, the literature review referred to rigid institutional processes (including assessment, admissions, and timeframes) which may favour students from wealthier backgrounds and knowledge of systems, and the need to replace them with equity-driven processes with scaffolded support. Similarly, survey respondents and comments from the Accord Submissions referenced examples of institutional barriers and the need to make institutions more inclusive, particularly in relation to Indigenous students and students with disability. These examples included addressing or dismantling:

- Western-centric teaching methods and processes (e.g., admission, attendance, assessment processes) and Western-centric measures of 'success' which may disincentivise Indigenous students, a lack of cultural safety, racism, discrimination and inadequate representation of Indigenous staff in higher education institutions.

- Inflexibility in studying/learning and fixed systems, course structures and curriculum which may disincentivise students with disability.

Non-linearities and cumulative disadvantage

For many people, barriers intersect and 'accumulate' over time. Different people may be disadvantaged in Higher Education at different points in the student life cycle and to different extents. This includes accumulation of barriers prior to higher education participation, during early learning and schooling, and is further complicated by non-linearities in the educational pathways that people follow. This highlights the need for holistic, multidimensional, and longitudinal perspectives to monitoring disadvantage in Higher Education.

Research on cumulative disadvantage, including a National Priorities Pool-funded project on Investigating the Effects of Cumulative Factors of Disadvantage (Tomaszewski et al., 2020), shows that membership in multiple equity groups has particularly negative impacts on educational outcomes. As noted earlier (see Figure 2), students' educational trajectories can be observed along different stages of the life course, starting with early childhood, and progressing through primary and secondary school, into tertiary education – here university – and out to post-graduate destinations, including the labour market. Evidence shows that while there are some specific combinations of equity groups that are particularly disadvantaged at different stages of the student life cycle, this will vary depending on the outcomes considered and the student life course stage that we look at.

Furthermore, the educational pathways over the student life course are not always linear. In particular, there is a significant group of university students who do not come to university straight after secondary school, and might be taking enabling pathways, might transition from VET courses, or arrive at university later in their lives as mature students. These non-linear pathways are marked by the ribbon-shaped arrow between secondary school and university in Figure 2. The Interim Report of the Australian Universities Accord Panel (Department of Education, 2023a) also highlights the need to consider lifelong learning, including education and training at post-tertiary stage. Therefore, re-entry opportunities and second chance opportunities for first entry need to be considered as a design feature of higher equity systems. The Interim Report also flags up a more integrated tertiary system, with more pathways between Higher Education and VET sectors, whereby opportunities to move back and forth, and increase use of the VET education as a pathway to university also need to be considered.

Australian students' outcomes

While the review of international literature recognised strengths of Australia's higher education system and the comparisons with international data demonstrate high rankings for qualification attainment and entry rates, analysis of national data demonstrates that while there have been increasing numbers of students from identified equity groups in Higher Education, underrepresentation in higher education studies is evident for most identified equity groups:

- Success and completion rates remaining below average for all equity groups (e.g., see Table 8);

- There are clear stratification patterns, and

- There have been declines in completion rates for some equity groups.

These disparities are consistent with international trends which continue to demonstrate inequities by socioeconomic divides, first-in-family status, minority group status and disability status.

Analysis of most recent data (2021) shows the underrepresentation in higher education studies is clear for Low SES, Regional, Remote and Indigenous students in Australia today (Table 8). There was no data for First-in-Family for the general population so no enrolment ratio could be calculated for this group. The high enrolment ratio for students with disability in the table needs to be viewed with a degree of scepticism as the definitions applied to determine the disability status in the student and general populations are not the same. Previous research (Tomaszewski et al. 2018, 2020) rather points to underrepresentation of people with disability in higher education studies. Students from all five groups considered in this project have notably lower chances of succeeding in higher education studies: success rates (units passed of units attempted) and completion rates are notably below average.

Table 8. Enrolment ratios, success rates and completion rates for equity group students and all students (2021).

	Enrolment Ratios	Success rate %	Completion rate %
	Under & Postgraduate		Undergrad
Low SES	0.45	82.5	64.2
First-in-Family	No data	84.4	68.6*
Regional	0.72	85.4	65.6
Remote	0.40	81.4	61.9
Indigenous	0.67	74.3	50.0
Disability^	1.14	80.7	No data
All students	**na**	**87.1**	**71.7**

Notes: Enrolment ratio (called Participation ratio by the Department) = Participation Rate of Equity Group/ Proportion of Equity group in the State Population. Exception: Enrolment ratio of Low SES = Participation Rate of Low SES/ Participation Rate of High SES.
^ Different definitions in Higher Education and general population data collections for Disability.
For further technical notes see Appendix - WP1.

Furthermore, the Review of Identified Equity Groups (Tomaszewski et al., 2018) identified 'horizontal' stratification patterns for students from low SES, regional/remote, Indigenous background and students with disability. Students from all these groups were significantly less likely to study a postgraduate degree and to

study at a Go8 university. In addition, low SES and regional/remote students were also significantly less likely to study Law and Medicine/Dentistry, the fields of study that offered the highest graduate earnings premiums.

This picture needs to be seen in the context of long-term trends, which is illustrated in Figure 3, which shows higher education enrolment shares for the groups that this project has focused on. The data show overall declining trends in share for regional and remote students with the first-in-family share also declining since 2013. The low SES shares fluctuated and have been slightly declining since 2017, while there has been an upward trend in participation shares for Indigenous students and students with disability. However, care needs to be taken when assessing these long-term trends due to changes in definitions and operationalisations of equity groups over time.

Figure 3: Higher education enrolment shares amongst students from identified equity groups.
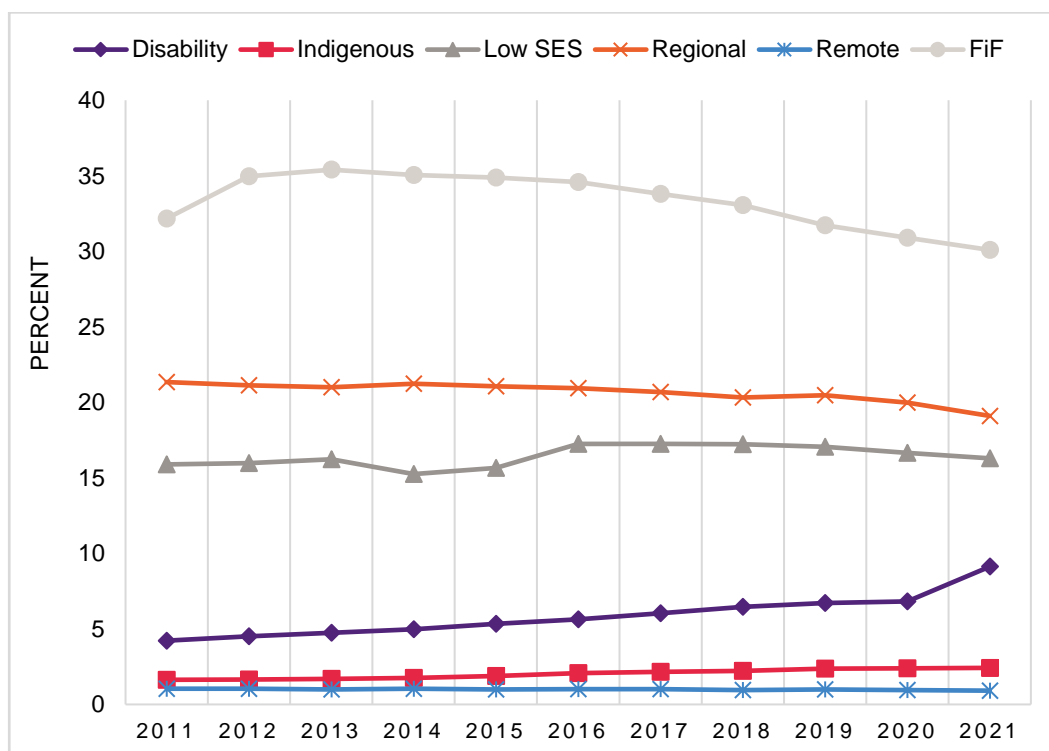
Notes: Statistics for First-in-Family need to be seen carefully, particularly for the early years as the data collection only started in 2010. For example, larger proportions of students have no information on parental education. The increase in the number and share of students with disability in 2021 coincided with changes in collecting data on disability that were introduced with the Tertiary Collection of Student Information. The adding of a 'mental health' category especially is viewed by the Department of Education to have increased the self-reporting of disability in some universities. The Department of Education also advised that data migration issues led to some underreporting of disability in 2020.
For further technical notes see Appendix - WP1.

International approaches: What is being done?

The international literature review found that, globally, common approaches to higher education equity include a range of monetary and non-monetary programs that are rarely guided by a comprehensive higher education equity policy or strategy with the sufficient resourcing, investment and instruments to support equity goals (Nagarajan et al., 2021; Salmi, 2018). For instance, a 2018 survey conducted across 71 countries from all continents (Salmi, 2018), and a different survey in 2020-2021 with higher education ministries from 47 Asian and European nations on their approach to equitable access and success (Nagarajan et al., 2021), found that financial support is the most common approach, often in the forms of scholarships or bursaries for equity target groups. This was reported by 85% (Salmi, 2018) and 92% of surveyed countries (Nagarajan et al., 2021). Other monetary programs include student loans (63%) and no fees (45%), while 17% of surveyed countries

reported using their budget allocation funding formulae or earmarked grants to support equity promotion efforts at the institutional level (Salmi, 2018). A few countries reported a funding formula with built-in equity indicators or incentives for universities themselves, as a way of encouraging institutions to be proactive in improving access and success opportunities.

A high proportion of countries report the use of non-monetary programs for access and success (Salmi, 2018). The most frequently implemented non-monetary programs are affirmative action and reformed admission criteria (being implemented by 54% of surveyed countries), outreach and bridging programs (39%), retention programs (34%), establishing institutions in remote areas or distance learning (31%) specialised institutions (23%) and flexible pathways (23%). Similarly, 68% of surveyed ASEM countries report using non-monetary equitable access/success instruments, the most common of which are preferential admission arrangements followed by national outreach programmes (Nagarajan et al., 2021).

Few countries could be categorised as having an "advanced" strategy (Salmi, 2018), being defined as having comprehensive equity promotion strategies beyond a general equity policy. In some countries, there are dedicated agencies with authority to formulate and implement national and institutional actions and strategies, mobilise sufficient resources targeted for students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts and set concrete enrolment targets.

Approximately a third of countries have specific targets in relation to access and success in Higher Education for equity target groups, with the most common equity target groups being lower income/socioeconomic background students and students with disability (Nagarajan et al., 2021).

Our review of case studies of focal countries on approaches to higher education equity were consistent with the literature providing international reviews. Our case study review found that approaches to higher education equity include:

- A National Higher Education Equity Strategy (e.g., Scotland has the Blueprint for Fairness which has an extensive plan with recommendations covering early education and the schooling system, institutional architecture for better regulation and data monitoring, flexible transitions and bridging programmes, funding).

- Higher Education Strategies or Acts with varying emphasis on equity and variation on the extent to which they play a role in regulation of institutions (e.g., New Zealand has a Tertiary Education Strategy that includes a pillar of equity encompassing barrier-free access to Higher Education. The Strategy is used as criteria for regulation and allocation of funding to institutions).

- Financial aid programs, including national level bursaries (e.g., notably, Scotland, as well as tuition-free education, has a range of bursaries and grants to help students cover cost of living including travel grants, grants for lone parents to cover childcare costs, bursaries and accommodation grants).

- Affirmative action policies (previously the United States).

- Targeted outreach initiatives (all countries, but variation as to who pays - institutions or government or both – and how much).

- National equity targets (e.g., only Scotland, which is backed by their comprehensive equity in higher education plan, The Blueprint for Fairness).

- The development and submission of institutional documentation regarding equity. This includes Diversity and Inclusion Plans (e.g., Canada, where research funding is dependent on these plans, covering representation in staffing and student numbers) and Access and Participation Plans (e.g., England where institutions need to submit their plans to widen access to charge students tuition fees over £6000 for full-time students).

Approaches to higher education equity vary across these case studies depending on the broader educational context, including:

- Whether Higher Education is governed at a state/jurisdictional level (e.g., Canada, United States) or federal level (England, Scotland, New Zealand) and whether there is a regulator (e.g., Scotland, England, New Zealand).

- The extent of financial contributions from students for fees (e.g., England with the highest fees for students and the United States where fees are not regulated) versus no tuition fees (e.g., Scotland).

- The existence of national higher education equity plans or strategies (e.g., Scotland).

- Cross-education plans (with connections and overlaps with the education system earlier in the student life course) (e.g., New Zealand; Scotland).

As is already emerging from the above, there are some countries with multilayered approaches. Notably:

- New Zealand has targeted equity funding programs (similar to HEPPP) for Māori, Pasifika and learners with disability, while also having national Higher Education Acts and Strategies with pillars dedicated to equity, which focus on addressing institutional and other barriers. Further, there are other strategies and plans which include a cross-agency education strategy that considers the early and secondary schooling and post-secondary education, and includes a focus on fair and barrier-free access to education, embedding Indigenous language and culture throughout systems and ensuring education-related policies need consultation with Māori prior to Ministers issuing of statements to education agencies. The fee-free policy introduced in 2017 may have had some impact upon students' perception of attending university (Sotardi, Thompson, & Maguire, 2020; Sotardi, Thompson, & Brogt, 2019).

- Scotland is guided by the Blueprint for Fairness – a national plan to achieve equal access to Higher Education, which is nested within broader national equity policies. It is also nested within the broader Post-16 Education Act 2013 which sets out current strategy regarding equity in Higher Education. Scotland has attainment targets for students from the most socially disadvantaged backgrounds, which encompass a number of equity target groups (e.g., those with care experiences, gender minorities). These strategies and plans have been translated into a range of bursaries and schemes to enable ease of access and success, as well as guidance on bridging programs, outreach and other activities for universities and others to support access into Higher Education, with resourcing to provide support. Scotland does not charge Scottish students higher education fees and demonstrates some evidence of progress towards meeting attainment targets (Scottish Funding Council, 2023).

International approaches: What works?

Although there is currently a dearth of impact evaluation studies that compare international programs and policies, the limited findings indicate that:

- Combining interventions has a stronger effect than individual interventions designed and implemented in isolation (Herbaut & Geven, 2020).

- There are twice as many evaluations of access to Higher Education than success in Higher Education (Herbaut & Geven, 2020). Of these, the findings indicate that outreach-type programs can be effective on access rates when they include active guidance or simplify the university application process, and not effective when they just rely on general information.

- Financial aid schemes (in the form of needs-based grants) can lead to improved enrolment and completion rates for disadvantaged students when they cover unmet costs and when there is an early commitment (Facchini, Triventi, & Vergolini, 2020; Herbaut & Geven, 2020). Needs-based grants which do not meet these conditions do not appear effective (Bowes et al., 2016).

- In addition to monetary measures, non-monetary measures are also needed to address the impacts that have manifested from earlier social disadvantage (e.g., inadequate academic preparation at school, low educational expectations and aspirations and low confidence) (Salmi & D'Addio, 2021).

- Reviews of higher education equity policy acknowledge the role of tuition fees as a deterrent for students, particularly for students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts, and that they can perpetuate existing inequities (Callender, 2022; Callender & Mason, 2017; Salmi & D'Addio, 2021). This is particularly the case when tuition fees are not regulated, regardless of institutional widening of access and participation plans (Millward, 2023).

2.3   Systems and structures

This section was guided by the following project review questions:

- What are the system level capabilities and strengths of Australia's Higher Education System?

- Are there gaps, inequalities or unintended consequences at a structural or system level?

- Is the scale of investment appropriate?

Having outlined the drivers that lead to below parity outcomes for under-represented groups across the student life course, and international approaches to tackling these inequities, this section focuses on the capabilities of and the gaps in the Australian higher education system. As before, the evidence outlined here draws on multiple sources (see Table 7), including national and international literature reviews, analysis of the Australian Universities Accord Panel submissions published in April 2023, and consultations with expert advisors and other stakeholders from across the sector.

Capabilities in the Australian higher education system

Compared to international comparators, findings from the international literature review and case study analysis of focal countries' approaches to higher education equity, show that Australia has various strengths in its approach to higher education equity. For instance, the literature review and case study analysis found that Australia has a more comprehensive package of equity interventions than some other countries, including policies, monetary and non-monetary measures with universal and targeted elements.

International reviews of higher education policy have specifically mentioned Australia as standing out in some regards (Salmi, 2018). The features in which Australia is noted as performing well, include:

- Having a comparatively comprehensive higher education package with a wide array of policies, instruments and measures with universal and targeted elements.

- Having comparatively comprehensive information systems that produce detailed data disaggregated by equity groups to analyse and monitor the equity situation. This factor has enabled proper targeting, adequate accountability, and performance-based funding.

- Having a universal funding system (HECS-HELP).

- Having dedicated equity funding for low SES, RRR and Indigenous students. HEPPP catalysed organisational change by increasing the focus on student equity, promoting understanding of barriers to participation, and building an equity-focussed workforce in higher education institutions

Moreover, a synthesis of publicly available international data shows that, in comparison to other OECD countries, Australia is fairing well in terms of attainment of postsecondary education, including access into bachelor degrees and graduate completions. In terms of attainment of postsecondary education, Australia:

- Continues to rank highly on tertiary education qualification attainment compared with other OECD countries, with overall rates continuing to increase, particularly amongst younger generations.

- Has higher entry rates into bachelor's or equivalent level programs for young people (although a slight decline in recent years) and has had consistently higher rates of graduates from bachelor's degree or equivalent programs, compared with other focal countries.
- Lags slightly behind some other comparable countries on completion rates of students who enter a bachelor's program.

Despite the current capabilities of the Australian higher education system, there are some gaps, inequalities and unintended consequences that result in educational disadvantage for some groups of students. A number of reasons for this have been identified through consultations with the expert advisors, the feedback received through the stakeholder survey, the analysis of the submissions (published in April 2023) to the Australian Universities Accord Panel, and through the literature review. Furthermore, there needs to be sufficient resourcing so that the national and institutional-level interventions are commensurate with the broader equity goals. These issues are discussed in the following sections.

Status of equity in the Australian higher education sector

There has been a perception among expert advisors and stakeholders in consultations that equity as an area has had a relatively low status in Australia – both at the government and institutional level. There has been a lack of bipartisan support and common understandings for equity as an area that would support long-term policy planning and goal-setting. This has been reflected in a limited scale of government funding devoted to higher education equity, compared to other higher education spending, and broader government spending, as discussed further in this section. Likewise, equity is not a priority area for many universities and there are few natural incentives for universities to specifically target students from low SES backgrounds relative to other students. Put directly, universities are motivated to attract high fee-paying students and those with the greatest potential for research careers within the sector that lead to publications in high impact journals and improvements in world rankings. While different institutional cultures exist, as an overall trend, the natural incentives for universities would tend to support the attraction of elite students rather than a focus on equity.

Considering the broader education system

Evidence from expert and stakeholder consultations also highlighted that equity as an area has also been plagued with patronising 'care' models and deficit approaches – instead of focusing on structural problems like broader educational disadvantage, including disadvantage that arises before (and outside) of higher education, but has consequences for higher education outcomes.

A theme that has emerged strongly across survey responses, Australian Universities Accord submissions, the literature review on barriers and expert advisor consultations, was that inequities manifest early in in the student life and can be exacerbated by unequal access to schooling with varying resourcing and quality teaching (Naylor & James, 2016). A recurring theme was that attention also needed to be paid to the schooling system to enable equitable outcomes earlier in the student life course. For instance, international literature shows that the Australian education system has more variable and more unequal school outcomes than the OECD average. Educational gaps emerge early on in people's lives, and then get wider as people progress through education, which can also be reinforced by an educational system that amplifies the inequalities, such as stratification and segregation in the school sector. In Australia, there is explicit and implicit streaming of students into Higher Education resulting from the ATAR/non-ATAR track divide and a heavily stratified multi-sector schooling system, which contributes to underrepresentation of certain groups in Higher Education (Harvey, McDermid, & Wren, 2023).

Importantly, currently there is a 'leaking pipeline' particularly for under-represented groups, including Frist Nations students, where students drop out of education due to various barriers they face before they even have a chance to consider university as an option. Furthermore, as noted earlier, pathways into Higher Education are complex and diverse, and therefore further attention should be paid towards enabling pathways into Higher Education as a way to address inequities experienced by under-represented or educationally

disadvantage cohorts of students. These inequalities that operate at the early stages of people's educational pathways produce a lot of the outcomes that we observe in Higher Education

While shortcomings in the school system need to be addressed to fully solve the problem, it is important that policies and solutions that are designed for the higher education sector work in harness with solutions and policies designed for the school sector. It is therefore paramount that the work of the Australian Universities Accord Panel and the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System are considered jointly by the Government.

In the interim, stakeholder and expert consultations suggest that increased focus on enabling courses might help to plug gaps in academic preparedness and increase participation in higher education among underrepresented groups. Stakeholders commented that enabling courses, which are largely tuition-free, offer a good model for expanding access to education. However, there is mixed uptake among universities, and there is potential for more institutions to offer enabling programs to a larger number of students. Increasing the availability of such programs could help to reduce educational inequalities.

There was general support in the submissions to the Australian Universities Accord, as well as stakeholder and expert consultations, for greater collaboration across education sectors, particularly VET and Higher Education. However, the support for collaboration across sectors went beyond post-secondary education. For instance, submissions to the Australian Universities Accord frequently mentioned the need to simultaneously invest in the earlier schooling period. To some extent, it was also seen that a more holistic approach with the social welfare and housing systems was also needed to meaningfully address barriers that manifest earlier in the life course and continue into the post-secondary period, aligning with the literature that inequities are the result of multilayered and intersecting drivers of disadvantage that commence early in the student life course.

Cost of education as a barrier

Even though a number of countries around the world (including Europe) offer taxpayer-funded higher education places, free (for students) university was not considered feasible in Australia by the expert advisors engaged on the project. HECS-HELP was considered a good 'middle-ground' model, however, it needs to be recognised that any cost (even with HECS-HELP) is a barrier for higher education participation and success, especially for students from identified equity groups.

Evidence from the literature review, and stakeholder and expert consultations strongly suggests that even with HECS-HELP in place, the cost of studying remains a significant barrier for many students. This cost includes not only tuition fees but also the rising cost of living, student debt accumulation, access to income support, and employment opportunities. Addressing this issue requires a careful balance of funding allocation to avoid creating new problems.

Structural features like CPI indexation can compound the issues, which can disproportionately disadvantage students who take longer to repay their debts, including students from identified equity groups. These indexation mechanisms can therefore contribute to widening educational inequalities. Evidence suggests that rising levels of HECS-HELP debts, longer repayment periods, and gender-based disparities in earnings post-graduation have adverse effects on students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts, particularly Indigenous women.

The changes in the JRG exacerbated these issues, contributing to higher levels of student debt for underrepresented groups. The JRG has had unintended consequences for students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts. It negatively impacts their subject choices, with high fees attached to courses that students from identified equity groups are more likely to enrol. Additionally, the 50% pass rule associated with the JRG could disadvantage students from identified equity groups, as they may have incurred debt without obtaining a qualification to support their income. In this context, the recommendation

from the Interim Report of the Australian Universities Accord Panel to remove the 50% pass rule has been widely welcomed by the higher education sector.[2]

Equity Program landscape

While the questions around structure and delivery of equity programs are discussed in detail in Section 3, some structural issues are highlighted here. Evidence from the stakeholder survey suggest that equity-specific funding may inadvertently promote a narrow focus on specific student groups, while potentially overlooking the benefits of broader, more generic approaches to improving equity that could be pursued by universities. Such more generic approaches have the potential to benefit all students, and include flexible enrolment (e.g., reducing or restructuring financial and academic penalties for withdrawals after currently set dates), assessment (e.g., providing choice to students in terms of types of assessments, modes of administration and timings of administration), and broad support options based on barriers (e.g., academic preparedness, financial difficulties, mental health, or mode of study). The current group-focused funding and its associated rules of spending were seen by stakeholders as having the potential to reduce the likelihood that effective institutional approaches are developed and pursued by universities, instead of those that are compliance-driven.

Furthermore, eligibility rules for equity-specific funding focus on Table A higher education providers and postgraduate studies. While Table B and non-university providers currently only enrol a relatively small student population, this issue may become more pronounced in the future because the need for an expansion of the higher education system may well see an increase in the number of students enrolled at non-Table A higher education providers. The omission of postgraduate studies is relevant as inequities in Higher Education have been increasingly reflected in a stratification within higher education studies (i.e. differences across universities and fields of study), accompanied by a relative loss of the value of undergraduate degrees in the labour market as a result of massification of such degrees. Combined, these structural issues may hinder the expansion of the higher education system to accommodate a more diverse student population, perpetuating inequalities.

Scale of investment

The question of whether the current scale of government investment in higher education equity in Australia is appropriate is of paramount importance in shaping the future of higher education accessibility and inclusivity. This section reviews the adequacy of government funding for higher education equity programs in Australia based on the evidence from the literature review, program analysis, and expert and stakeholder consultations.

The Australian Government has invested in equity largely through targeted programs analysed in detail in Section 3, and other programs. These programs, including HEPPP, TAP, ISSP, Disability Support Program and others, play an important role in addressing educational inequalities. However, the evidence from the stakeholder survey reveals a consensus among respondents that the current level of funding for higher education equity programs in Australia is insufficient to achieve substantial, macro-level impacts.

Stakeholder responses indicated that while the inadequacy of funding was an underlying theme, it varied in its nuances. Specifically, some respondents highlighted that there was insufficient funding for regional or equity-focused higher education providers. This insufficiency undermines the ability of these institutions to address the specific needs of their student populations effectively (this is also discussed in more detail in Section 4 – Program Implementation). At the same time, there were concerns that the universities where equity has been sidelined may be lacking sufficient funding to implement meaningful changes in their approaches to prioritise equity.

It is crucial to contextualise the equity program funding amounts within the broader landscape of government funding for Higher Education. When compared to funding for CGS and HELP, funding for equity programs, including HEPPP, appears very small (Figure 4). This underscores the need for a critical examination of the

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[2] It is worth noting that since the publication of the Universities Accord Interim Report, the repeal of the 50% pass rule has gone beyond a recommendation to legislation in the Parliament.

scale of investment in higher education equity. Notably, HEPPP, the largest equity program, was still described as "a drop in a bucket" by one expert adviser.

In conclusion, the current scale of government investment in higher education equity in Australia faces criticisms regarding its adequacy from various stakeholders. To achieve meaningful progress in addressing educational inequalities and ensuring equitable access to Higher Education, it is recommended that the Australian Government considers increasing the scale of funding, alongside targeted and transparent allocation, and long-term commitment to the equity programs. Such measures will help ensure that the equity goals outlined in the Interim Report of the Acord Panel and broader attainment targets can be realised, fostering a more inclusive higher education system for all Australians.

While there were suggestions to improve the structure and scale of funding, there were limited recommendations regarding the specific scale of funding that is required. This is because views on this vary, with the general consensus about the lack of robust evidence and need for more dedicated modelling to properly estimate cost of supporting students to achieve positive outcomes along the higher education life cycle.

Figure 4: Representation of Australian higher education funding.
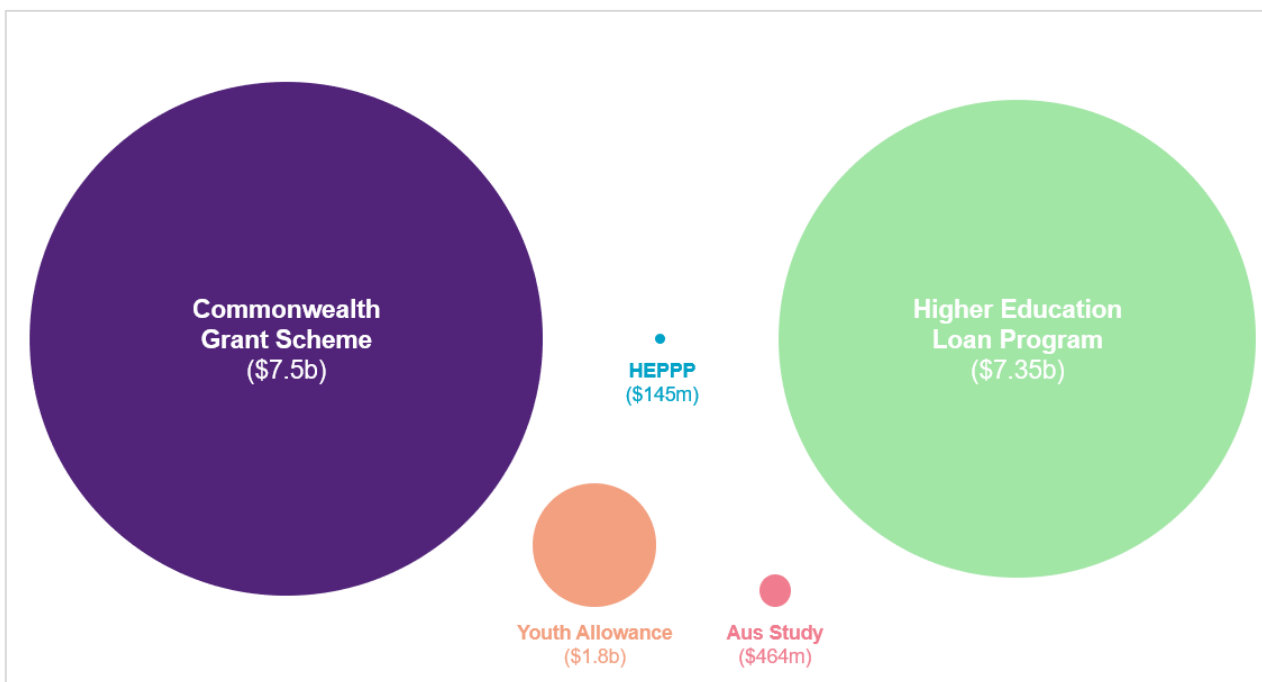
A more general point that has emerged strongly, particularly in consultations with the expert advisors, is the relative dearth of funding for research in higher education equity (and in Higher Education more broadly), and for dedicated research infrastructure to support this research. The funding from the NPPP has been limited to a small number of projects in the recent years, and while there are other sources of funding, including research grants funded through NCSEHE, these tend to be small-scale and for relatively short projects. Larger investment in high quality research (using different methodologies) should be prioritised to provide a robust evidence base, including on government investment, to maximise long-term gains. Similarly, additional investments are needed in dedicated research and data infrastructure, including integrated administrative data and systems to capture participation in equity initiatives at the pre-access stage to support high quality research and evaluation. Consideration should be given to aligning the development of

research and data infrastructures to other national investments in cognate infrastructure, including the NCRIS and ANDII. These other investments, with their large funding scale, provide good models for the solutions that could be implemented in the higher education equity space.

2.4 Summary and recommendations

The structural drivers of inequity manifest early, interact with each other and their impacts accumulate over time. The impacts of early disadvantage are exacerbated by institutional barriers, financial pressures and other barriers that are specific to the higher education period. The international literature indicates that while there are increasing higher education enrolments globally, earlier disadvantage, financial pressures, increasing tuition fees and student debt are likely to lead to persistent inequities, including the type of institution attended, and the degree studied. Access and participation programs targeting students from identified equity groups that do not address the structural drivers of inequity are, by themselves, insufficient to counter the impacts of this broader context upon students. Furthermore, the current scale of funding devoted to equity programs is insufficient to make a difference at scale.

2.4.1 Recommendations

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Recommendation 1

Develop a long-term national higher education strategy, with an implementation plan and monitoring and evaluation framework that:

- Nests equity in Higher Education within the broader national education and government portfolios.

- Enshrines collaboration across the sectors and government departments that have a role in addressing structural barriers and/or those with which drive early inequities (e.g., early education and schooling systems, housing and transport, family income support and alleviation of other financial pressures).

- Explicitly considers links between tertiary education and the schooling system, including working with state governments to support equitable pathways into Higher Education and VET, and to address broader educational disadvantage and inequalities in the school system.

- Is driven by a system stewardship approach: thinking about inter-connected programs conceptualised as part of a national approach to equity underpinned by principles aligned with the national interest.

- Has mechanisms for universities to remove institutional barriers (rigid assessment, complex enrolment and admissions criteria and processes) and implement scaffolded supports throughout the student life cycle.

- Invests in high quality research in educational equity and dedicated data and research infrastructure to enable this research. Consideration should be given to aligning the development of research and data infrastructures to other national investments in cognate infrastructure, including the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy (NCRIS) and the Australian National Data Integration Infrastructure (ANDII). Additional investments in high-quality research and evaluation in the areas of educational equity and

Higher Education should also be considered to maximise long-term gains.

- Adopts evaluative thinking and evidence-based approaches to design and monitor equity programs.

- Ensures buy-in from all relevant stakeholders to drive long-term change.

- Centralises equity as part of the higher education funding model, supported by dedicated modelling to estimate the required funding levels given intersectionality and complex needs of some students.

- Ensures adequate scale of funding, alongside targeted and transparent allocation, and long-term commitment to equity programs to such measures to foster a more inclusive higher education system for all Australians.

Recommendations 2

Build on the work of the Australian Universities Accord Panel to undertake review into the financial situation of students as part of long-term government response, which should consider the following:

- The extent to which income support policies and administrative arrangements hinder and/or delay access to higher education/tertiary studies, and progression and completion of these studies, particularly for students from identified equity groups.

- Avenues for integrating and simplifying income payment programs and associated application and administration processes.

- Understanding how financial concerns have impacted on intent to study or participation in study for those not currently studying.

- Reviewing income support programs in the context of living costs and study needs, particularly for students from identified equity groups.

- The levels of debt students are accruing and whether the current income-contingent loan scheme is working by assessing how student loans are impacted by the field of study, who is most impacted and how they are impacted (including career and social implications).

- Reviewing the HECS-HELP scheme with attention to student debt, particularly in the case of equity group students.

3.   Australian Higher Education Programs (Structure and Delivery)

3.1   Findings

- Higher education programs, including targeted equity programs, can provide invaluable support to those students they reach.

- However, the current suite of equity programs is complex, inconsistent, and disconnected.

- There are imbalances in the current equity funding landscape. Some groups (notably, rural, regional and remote students) are the focus of multiple programs (which are not explicitly connected), while others (like students with disability) are targeted by a single program.

- Equity-specific funding and programs are not integrated with general income support programs for university students and there is a strong perception among equity professionals that the latter (e.g., Youth Allowance) are not well designed nor administered to effectively reduce material barriers for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to enable them to succeed in higher education studies.

- There is a lack of consideration for cumulative disadvantage in program structure and design.

- Many of the current targeted equity programs lack a clearly articulated theory of change, goals and targets.

- Definitional problems with equity groups (e.g., area-based SES, self-reported disability) further compound the issues with the targeted programs.

- Outreach activities do not directly target students that are outside of the identified equity groups (e.g., First-in-Family, mature age etc.) and those not included in HEPPP (e.g., students with disability).

- Students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts need support throughout the student's life course, from high school, through study and graduation into employment and the supports required will differ from group to group, and from student to student (different barriers may need to be addressed for different groups/students).

- The nature of the equity funding (as it comes from a finite pool) disincentivises universities to collaborate with one another.

- There is no funding for WIL, especially mandatory work placements that can result in students from identified equity groups forgoing income.

- Current funding formulas do not consider differences across the states and territories (e.g., higher costs of outreach in larger states/territories).

This section was guided by the following project review questions:

- Are current equity programs structured in the right way and is a more holistic approach required? (E.g., Small-targeted programs vs greater focus on outcomes)?

- Are existing Commonwealth student equity in higher education programs meeting their stated purpose and objectives and delivering intended outcomes and benefits?

A pre-defined list of 'in-scope' equity programs was assessed as part of this review to determine whether they are structured appropriately or whether a more holistic approach would produce better outcomes for students

from identified equity groups in Higher Education. Figure 5 provides a timeline showing the introduction of each of the programs in scope of the project and includes notable program milestones, such as changes in eligibility or design, and program reviews or evaluations.

Figure 5: Timeline of in-scope equity programs in Australian universities.
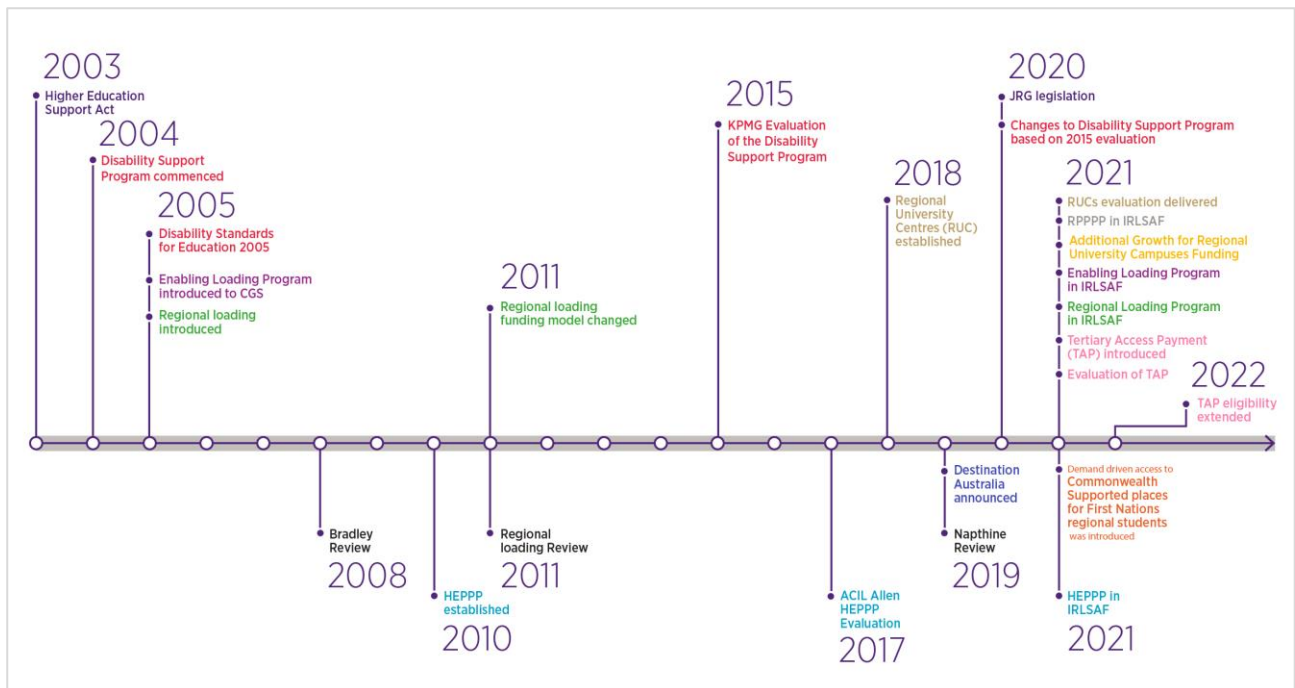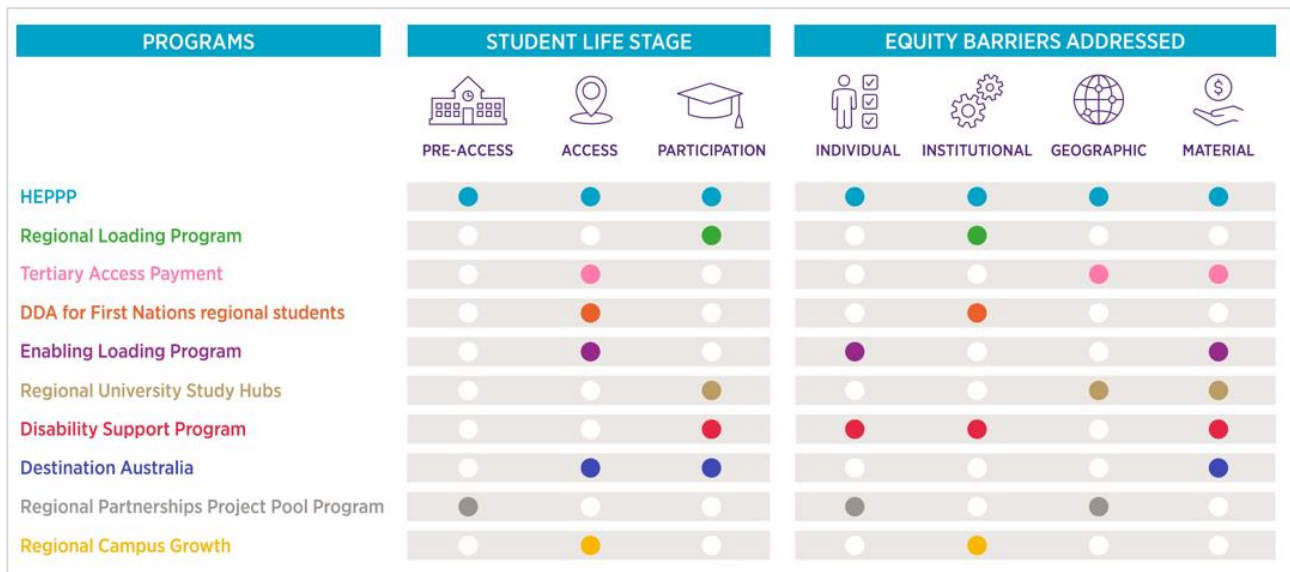

Relevant insights were obtained from a systematic but pragmatic and rapid review of relevant data and literature, institutional consultations, responses to the stakeholder survey and input from expert advisers and EHEP members. Analysis of program documentation, combined with insights from key sector stakeholders, suggests that the current suite of equity programs is complex, inconsistent, and disconnected, as outlined further below.

The design and purpose of equity programs

Figure 6 compares the student life stage(s) that the equity programs *primarily* target(s). In other words, the student life stage at which students are most likely to be affected by the funding provided by the program. As shown, most programs are aligned with the access and participation stages, that is the stage of applying to and preparing for university and while studying at university. Fewer programs are primarily focused on outreach to schools and the community. HEPPP is the only program that explicitly targets each of the student life stages.

In relation to the barriers that the programs are aiming to address (which gives an indication of the underlying logic of the programs), HEPPP is the only program that is designed to support activities that can address all four of the barriers in the particular typology used here (i.e. individual, institutional, geographic, and material), as was the case with student life stages. The remainder of the programs all target selected barriers only.

Figure 6: Student life stage(s) and equity barrier(s) primarily addressed by the equity programs.

PROGRAMS	STUDENT LIFE STAGE			EQUITY BARRIERS ADDRESSED			
	PRE-ACCESS	ACCESS	PARTICIPATION	INDIVIDUAL	INSTITUTIONAL	GEOGRAPHIC	MATERIAL
HEPPP	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Regional Loading Program			●		●		
Tertiary Access Payment		●				●	●
DDA for First Nations regional students		●			●		
Enabling Loading Program		●		●			●
Regional University Study Hubs			●			●	●
Disability Support Program			●	●	●		●
Destination Australia		●	●				●
Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program	●			●		●	
Regional Campus Growth		●			●		

Note: Equity barriers characterised according to the typology of: **Individual** (barriers related to individual attributes or skills that are driven by institutional, geographic and material barriers); **Institutional** (barriers related to the processes, structures, cultures, values, and professional practices of higher education institutions); **Geographic** (barriers related to the accessibility of Higher Education, particularly for those living in regional and remote areas); **Material** (barriers related to the resources required by students to access and participate in higher education study).

Despite this seemingly reasonable spread of equity programs across student life-stages and the barriers being targeted, multiple equity programs - particularly when considered in the context of funding provided by other agencies - seem to overlap in their intent. In addition, while each of the programs has a clear high-level purpose, the mechanisms through which this purpose is expected to be realised are often unclear. This is particularly the case for those 'programs' that essentially represent a payment to higher education institutions. Due to a lack of governance and reporting processes, including agreed key performance indicators, it is unclear for what purpose these payments are being used in practice (see Section 4 for more information). Stakeholders corroborate these concerns. Equity programs were often perceived as disjointed, lacking a cohesive articulation of overarching goals and targets. The separate administration of relevant programs by different agencies (including those not in-scope for this review) further exacerbates this disconnect.

Toward a simpler and more holistic approach

The evidence collated as part of this review process suggests the sector stands to gain significantly from embracing a more comprehensive approach to funding, design, and implementation of higher education equity programs. The current process is characterised by expert advisers as a 'fragmented approach' with a lack of connection between programs. A simplification of equity program funding was highlighted by some stakeholders, with suggestions to move away from equity-specific funding and equity-specific programs to 'one bucket' of equity funding per university or per student life course stage. As one stakeholder remarked in the consultation survey *"We need to fund the whole system, not add more complexity around funding for underrepresented groups."* This was reinforced by an expert advisor who stated clearly *"Equity programs are currently not designed in the right way – feel like add-on or an afterthought.*

Interactions with broader systems (including income support and labour market) emerged as a key theme from the multiple stakeholder consultations. It was emphasised that the equity programs must work in harness with broader programs and policies, both within and outside of Higher Education. Student income support programs (including Austudy, Abstudy and Youth Allowance), as outlined elsewhere in this report, are particularly important in the context of addressing inequities in higher education access, participation and success. Easing the challenge of navigating these multiple support schemes is particularly important for under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts of students.

There is strong recognition that the inequities that exist in Higher Education are manifestations of educational disadvantage in schools and that these have common structural drivers. As such, a greater emphasis on targeting the structural barriers that affect multiple groups, rather than a concentrated focus on specific equity groups, was supported by several expert advisers and feedback from EHEP members. These approaches were not seen as mutually exclusive, but rather as complementary approaches in need of rebalancing. As one expert adviser commented, solutions addressing structural issues are likely to be able to shift the dial at scale, but solutions to issues experienced by specific groups help to ensure that people 'don't fall through the cracks'. Nonetheless, should the existing suite of programs continue in its current structure, there is a need to better define the intended objectives and outcomes of these programs, both individually and collectively, alongside the pathways through which program activities are anticipated to achieve these outcomes.

Program delivery and outcomes

The review of program documentation highlights that there is a lack of robust evidence to determine whether the equity programs are meeting their stated purpose and objectives and delivering their intended outcomes. In general, there are minimal requirements for institutions receiving funding through an equity program to measure and report on the use of the funds or on program performance. The specification of KPIs is required only for those programs that are project based, and the KPIs are specific to the nature of the project being delivered by the funded institution. This includes HEPPP, which receives the most funding, although the recently published SEHEEF (Robinson et al., 2022) aims to introduce more standardisation across the sector despite the diverse range of activities that HEPPP funds.

As shown in Table 9, several of the equity programs have no clearly specified KPIs and variation across reporting requirements, such as the number of students supported through the demand driven access for First Nations regional students. Stakeholders cited the complex funding structure across the different programs, the lack of sufficient financial accounting as to where the money goes and insufficient cross-reporting as key reasons as to why a clear understanding of the implementation and outcomes of programs cannot be ascertained.

Table 9. Key Performance Indicators and reporting requirements of the equity programs.

Program	Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)	Reporting Requirements
HEPPP	Project specific	Annual report (template provided by Department of Education)
Regional Loading Program	None	Providers report annually through TCSI (Tertiary Collection of Student Information) on student load
Tertiary Access Payment	• ≥80% of claims processed within 42 calendar days of claim lodgment • Number of TAP claims 'processed' and 'in progress' from 1 January 2022; broken down by: number of TAP claims progressed by claims status, 'granted', 'pending' and 'rejected'; and number of TAP claims rejected, by reason	Monthly and annual progress reports
DDA for First Nations regional students	None	Number of students supported (per year)
Enabling Loading Program	None	Providers report annually through TCSI (on student ELP commencements
Regional University Study Hubs	Project specific	Progress report every 6 months; student data including Tertiary Provider, Field of Study, sociodemographic characteristics (age, gender, First-in-Family, disability, First Nations status), and student outcomes (where this is available -including course completion, further study, and employment)
Disability Support Program	Project specific	Annual report
Destination Australia	None	Progress report every 6 months
Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program	Project specific	Progress reports with program logic and evaluation plans aligned to SEHEEF.
Regional Campus Growth	None	Student load data reported via TCSI is used to determine if universities have used the growth funding. Enrolment, completion and attrition data available via TCSI

This lack of consistent monitoring might explain the challenge to obtain accurate and up-to-date figures on the student reach of the different equity programs. Such data were available for the Tertiary Access Payment, Enabling Loading Program, Regional University Study Hubs, and Destination Australia, but not for the other programs, including HEPPP, which receives the highest level of funding.

Six of the ten in-scope equity programs have been subject to formal reviews or evaluations since their inception (Figure 7), and these have often resulted in some substantive changes to program design, implementation, and eligibility criteria. For those programs that have been evaluated, the evidence of program effectiveness tended to be weak, relying on surveys or interviews at a single point of time, or focusing on immediate outcomes rather than longer term outcomes (see Figure 7). However, several programs are younger than 5 years old and the primary purpose of some program evaluations was not necessarily to assess program effectiveness, but rather to provide formative evidence to improve program design and implementation.

Figure 7: Evaluation status of equity programs and strength of evidence of program effectiveness.

PROGRAMS	EVALUATION CONDUCTED	LAST 5 YEARS	STRONG	MODERATE	WEAK	UNCLEAR
HEPPP	●	○	○	●	○	○
Regional Loading Program	●	○	○	○	○	●
Tertiary Access Payment*	●	●	○	○	●	○
DDA for First Nations regional students*	○	○	○	○	○	●
Enabling Loading Program	●	○	○	●	○	○
Regional University Study Hubs	●	●	○	○	●	○
Disability Support Program	●	●	○	○	●	○
Destination Australia*	○	○	○	○	○	●
Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program*	○	○	○	○	○	●
Regional Campus Growth*	○	○	○	○	○	●

*Program is less than 5 years old

Note: A pragmatic approach was taken to categorise the evidence of effectiveness available from the evaluation and review reports. It was based on whether the evaluation assessed the program's impact on primary outcomes, as well as the methods used to determine attribution or contribution of effect. **Strong**: Independent evaluation has been undertaken using mixed methods including quantitative analysis of primary outcomes (as defined in SEHEEF); robust methods used to determine attribution/contribution (e.g., pre-post with control group; natural experimental approach). **Moderate**: Independent evaluation has been undertaken; may include primary outcomes and/or supporting outcomes; moderately robust methods used to determine attribution/contribution (e.g., pre-post but no control group). **Weak**: Independent or in-house evaluation has been undertaken; methods include data collected at a single time point only.

The evaluation evidence that is available provides a moderate level of evidence in support of HEPPP and ELP in making a positive difference to students in terms of both immediate, supporting outcomes (e.g., confidence, skills, knowledge) and some primary outcomes (e.g., first year retention). Attributing observed improvements specifically to the programs, however, has proven methodologically challenging in the absence of routine, interrogatable data. Furthermore, these evaluations were completed well over five years ago. A positive impact on supporting outcomes has also been observed for other programs that have been subject to an evaluation, although the strength of evidence is considered weak, relying on surveys or interviews at a single point of time.

The lack of evidence of program effectiveness is likely best interpreted as an absence of evidence (i.e. a limited evidence base) rather than evidence of absence (i.e. evidence of no effect). The stated purposes and objectives of the equity programs are often worded in terms of longer-term goals, such as increased educational attainment or widened aspiration for higher education among equity groups. While whole-of-sector trends in participation and attainment would not support the assertion that the programs have helped to achieve parity in such outcomes, it is unknown what would have happened in the absence of the programs. Indeed,

the sentiment among the sector, based on the documentation identified in the program review and the stakeholder consultation activities, was generally positive for most programs. For example, some stakeholders reported that Enabling Programs and Regional University Study Hubs 'work', and there was some appreciation that the equity programs generally and HEPPP in particular, created a focus on equity in the sector by making funding available for equity-specific activities and requiring associated reporting. Generally, there is recognition that higher education access and outcomes are driven by broader societal inequities and that funding for the equity programs, while small in aggregate terms, can serve to mitigate the impacts of these and provide invaluable support to individuals.

A key theme that emerged from the consultations with expert advisers and the feedback from EHEP was that the design of equity programs is disconnected from evidence. This is compounded by a lack of attention on how the programs will be evaluated prior to their implementation. Moving beyond routine compliance reporting to more embedded evaluative thinking, as well as investment in data and data infrastructure (e.g., linking school and tertiary data), were highlighted as key enablers of building the evidence base. These challenges and opportunities have been highlighted in the context of HEPPP and underpin the design and ambitions of the recently published SEHEEF.

Funding for equity programs

There is wide variation in the levels of funding allocated to the equity programs considered in this review. Using data from 2023/24 Portfolio Budget Statements (Department of Education, 2023b) and 2023 Determination for the Department of Education (HEIMS Online, 2023), Figure 8 shows that HEPPP is the single largest program by dollar value ($145.2m), accounting for 40% of the total program funding allocation for which funding data were available. This was followed by the Regional Loading Program ($79.8m, 22%) and the Tertiary Access Payment ($50.9m, 14%).

Figure 8: Funding allocated to the in-scope equity programs.
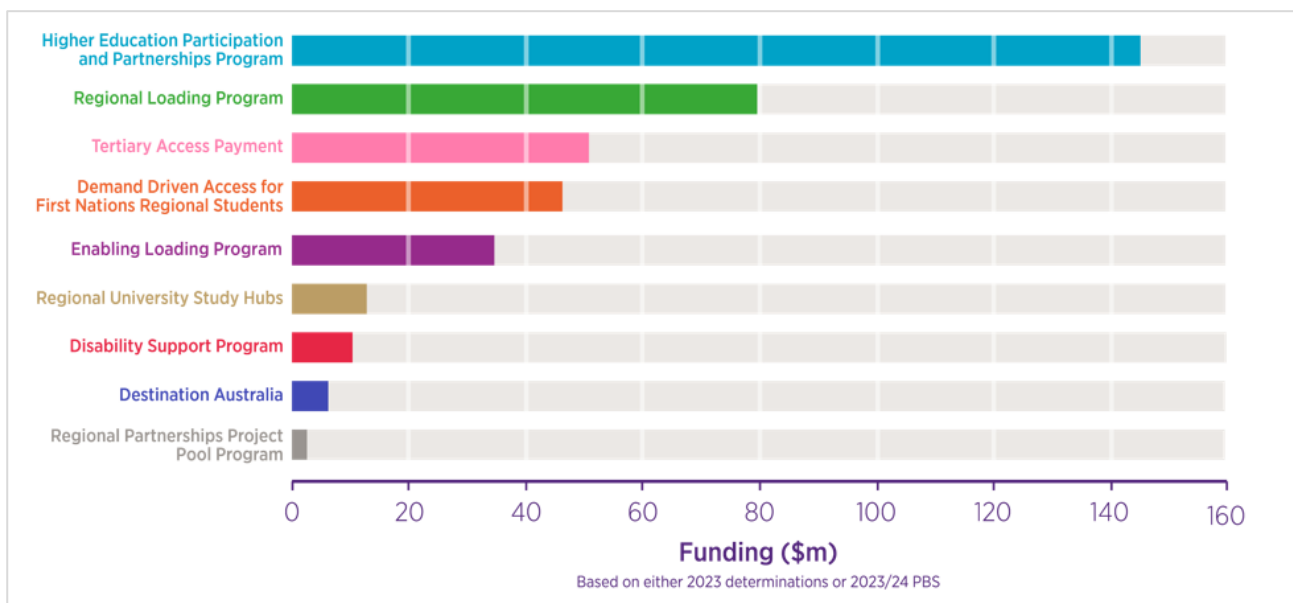
Funding allocation within the programs is disproportionately skewed, failing to align with the respective sizes of the student populations within equity groups (see Figure 9). For example, of the seven programs that are explicitly targeted at one or more equity groups, six are wholly or partially focused on students living or studying in regional and remote areas (representing a funding allocation of >$300m). In contrast, only one program is

explicitly targeted at students with disability, with a funding allocation of $10.4m, despite being an equity group with a sizable number of students (over 100,000 participating students in 2021).[3]

Figure 9: Funding allocated to the in-scope equity programs, linked to the student equity group(s) the program explicitly targets.
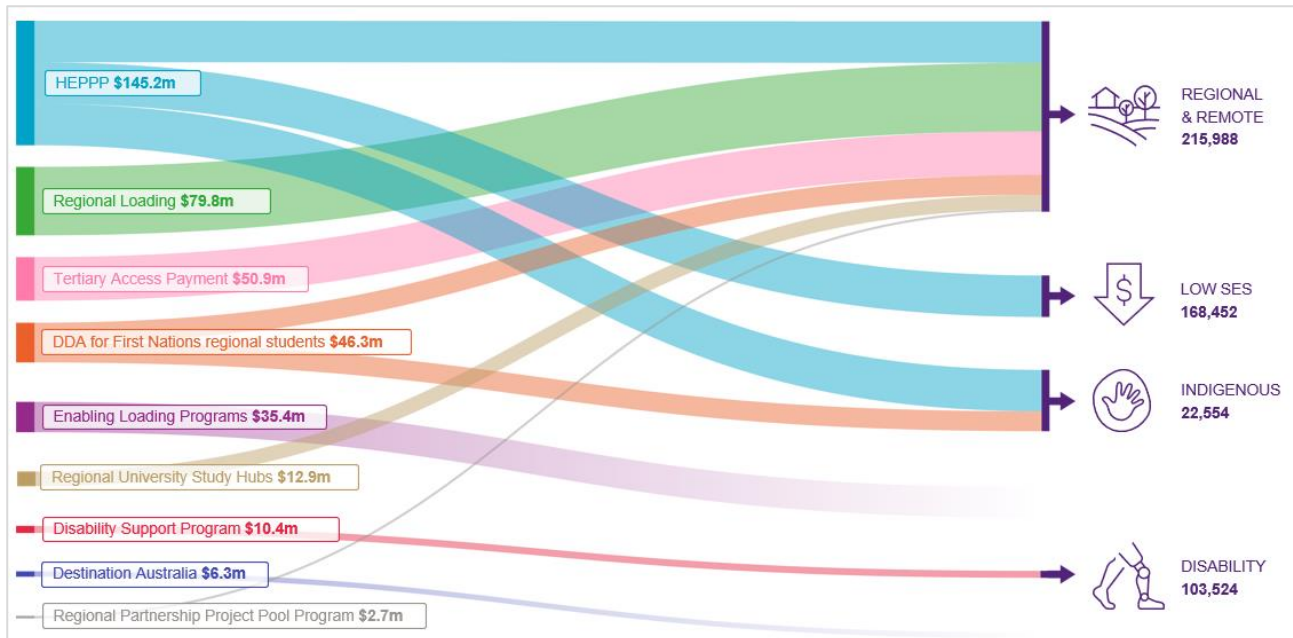
Note: Funding based on either 2023 determinations or 2023/24 PBS. Student numbers based on 2021 Table A participation; regional/remote based on First Address measure.

Interviews with institutional stakeholders highlighted other concerns in terms of the structure of equity program funding. Eligibility requirements were noted as leaving some groups of disadvantaged students out of equity program funding, including many working or older students, international students, and students with disability (aside from the Disability Support Program, which has limited uses). Indeed, disability specialists stated there is little regard for disability in higher education policies, considering the Disability Support Program to be "*the poor cousin of HEPPP*"- and that students with disability are not targeted in the pre-access phase as the Disability Support Program does not fund outreach or pathways into Higher Education. There is also an absence of an explicit equity program for first-in-family students and a lack of funding for students from identified equity groups embarking on postgraduate pathways and Higher Degree Research. Another gap highlighted in the consultations is the lack of equity funding for WIL, especially mandatory work placements that can result in students from identified equity groups forgoing income.

Another key issue emerging from various stakeholder consultations was that funding for equity programs is generally insensitive to the fact that students often belong to multiple equity groups, thereby experiencing cumulative disadvantage through this intersectionality. It was felt that this can lead to a severe deficit in the amount of funding available to support disadvantaged students. Funding based on EFTSL rather than head counts, which does not account for the higher costs of providing adequate support for the more entrenched disadvantage often faced by part-time students relative to full-time students, was also cited as problematic. Finally, the lack of funding continuity and certainty over the medium and long term was reported as constraining universities' abilities to adequately plan, causing them to fund smaller, piecemeal programs rather than scalable solutions to systemic issues.

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[3] There were changes in the collection of disability status between 2019 and 2020 which resulted in a large increase in numbers in 2021. Additionally, a data migration issue caused the 2020 figures to be underreported.

3.2   Summary and recommendations

The current suite of equity programs is complex, inconsistent and disconnected, with their problems exacerbated by definitional ambiguities and a lack of attention to cumulative disadvantage. They do not always capture identified equity groups, nor target key barriers for those equity groups. There are imbalances in the current equity funding landscape. Some groups (notably, rural, regional and remote students) are the focus of multiple programs (which are not explicitly connected), while others (like students with disability) are targeted by a single program. This is also reflected in disparities in funding that goes to support different equity groups.

3.2.1   Recommendations

Recommendation 3

As part of the long-term national strategy, undertake work to develop a more holistic, system-lens approach to the funding, design and implementation of higher education equity programs. This should consider:

- A mix of national and institutional outreach and other programs (with sufficient funding to institutions to implement well-designed, evidence-based programs and evaluate their workings).

- Targeting specific cohorts of students, while focusing on removing barriers for these students, such as:

  o Dedicated support for students to cover the costs of living, and alleviate financial pressures and the need to work during semester, through a reformed (and simplified) income support system, or bursaries and grants.

  o Working with the school sector to improve academic preparedness, and investing in programs such as enabling courses, making them cost-free to students so that they do not exacerbate material barriers.

  o Funding for universities to target institutional barriers and provide scaffolded support for students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts through to completion.

- Simplifying the program and funding architecture – this could be done through funding programs targeting any of the equity/priority cohorts that universities can use to tailor support to reflect underrepresented students in the communities that they serve and widen participation (e.g., as outlined in their mission-based compacts).

- Developing tertiary (integrating VET and Higher Education) approaches to outreach to support informed choices for students and support pathways into Higher Education. This could be achieved by state-based collaborative approaches including universities and VET providers.

- Providing financial support for students undertaking Work Integrated Learning (WIL), both mandatory and optional, to support students in developing critical skills required for success in the workplace.

- Adopting a whole-of–government, systemic approach to providing support for students with disability with coordinated approach to funding and program development, including support for systemic rather than isolated solutions.

- Investments in dedicated research and data infrastructure to enable better program planning, monitoring and evaluation (e.g., data connecting school, VET and Higher Education at a student level and over the whole life cycle).

4. Australian Higher Education Program Implementation

4.1 Findings

- There are marked differences between the institutions in terms of:
  - Equity-related funding mix and the amounts they receive;
  - Using the funding to run initiatives targeting students;
  - Cohorts that they target with these programs;
  - Degree to which equity-related activities are subsidised from other funding sources.

- Different universities have different missions and serve different communities. These factors shape their priorities, including the priority placed on equity.

- Many institutions, particularly those outside the Group of 8 (as they tend to have larger cohorts of students from identified equity groups), report that overall funding levels to support students from identified equity groups are inadequate. However, the views on the required scale of funding vary and there is limited evidence on the cost of supporting students from identified equity groups, particularly given the complexities associated with cumulative disadvantage.

- There are a number of systemic gaps that result from the way in which programs operate at an institutional level, including:
  - Eligibility requirements that leave some groups of disadvantaged students out of equity funding or income support programs, including many working or mature age students, international students, and students with disability (aside from the Disability Support Program, which has limited uses, and NDIS support).
  - Funding based on EFTSL rather than head counts, which does not account for the higher costs of providing adequate support and more entrenched disadvantage often faced by part-time relative to full-time students.
  - The lack of funding continuity and certainty over the medium- and long-term, which restricts universities' abilities to adequately plan and causes them to fund smaller, piecemeal programs rather than scalable solutions to systemic issues. Short-term funding also limits universities' ability to employ staff in secure contracts, worsens staff wellbeing, impacts recruitment and retention, and undermines the development of institutional knowledge and expertise.
  - The lack of consideration for intersectionality and cumulative disadvantage that leads to inadequate support for students experiencing multiple disadvantage.
  - A lack of funding for students with disability relative to their needs, notwithstanding the specific assistance provided by the Disability Support Program. Given disparities in outcomes between students with and without disability, the lack of targeted funding beyond the specific, individual-level Disability Support Program stood out among consultation participants.
  - While national equity-specific programs are not designed in harness, there is some scope for individual institutions to use the federal funding in a more integrated way (e.g., by integrating scholarships, mentoring, tutoring and social event programs in design, including targeting, and implementation). However, this is usually not done because of lacking institutional equity

priorities and associated strategies and coordination, which is also influenced by short-term equity funding cycles.

o Institutions use internal data and monitoring processes to inform decision-making around equity initiatives and programs, and often evaluate program goals against university-wide strategic plans. However, rigorous causal evidence on primary outcomes, (e.g., retention, degree completion), for most interventions is rare.

o Universities report supplementing targeted equity funding from the Commonwealth with funds from their operational budgets. While even approximate figures are hard to determine - particularly for universities that have large proportions of students belonging to one or more equity groups – universities reported that the amounts they received from targeted equity funds such as HEPPP or the Disability Support Program fell well short of the costs of adequately supporting under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts of students.

This section was guided by the following project review questions:

- How do current Commonwealth funded equity programs operate at an institutional level, and are there systemic gaps resulting from this approach?

- Is there evidence of effectiveness of current equity programs at either an institution or program level? What might this evidence look like? What would enable measurement and evaluation in the future?

- To what extent do institutions direct other funding beyond targeted equity programs to supporting under-represented students?

Program operation at an institutional level

The in-scope equity programs—especially HEPPP, RLP, ELP, and the Disability Support Program —operate differently and independently across institutions. First, how universities go about using the funding they receive from the in-scope equity programs differs across institutions. Consultations with sample institutions, including reviews of internal documentation for some, suggest that internal processes for allocating funding to projects or initiatives vary in terms of formality. Some institutions have processes driven by key senior administrators or small committees of administration staff deciding which internal projects to fund. New initiatives may arise organically either from senior leadership (e.g., VCs, DVCs) pushing new initiatives or from lower-level staff (e.g., Equity Offices, academic staff in schools) feeding ideas and funding requests up.

Other institutions have implemented internal EOI processes where a call for proposed projects utilising HEPPP or other funding is publicised within the university and proposals are explicitly evaluated against set criteria, such as goals specified in a university-wide strategic plan. While these internal allocation processes across universities differ, there is currently no evidence as to whether a given approach produces better or worse equity outcomes for students. However, the general feeling among staff was that more proscribed allocation processes increased transparency and that being able to map proposed initiatives against university-wide strategic goals helped to maintain the integrity and focus of the equity funding.

There are also differences in how universities choose to prioritise spending for the access and participation phases of the student life cycle. An analysis of anonymised HEPPP reporting data showed wide variation in the primary activity and life cycle stage of HEPPP funding across institutions, but there were not clear patterns of use when considered across total funding amounts (as a proxy for student disadvantage). That is, while institutions differed in how they allocated their budgets, institutions with large numbers of HEPPP-eligible students did not necessarily choose to spend their funds in systematically different ways from universities with small HEPPP receipts. Thus, prioritisation and funding decisions seem to depend much more on local context and institution-specific priorities rather than the amount of HEPPP dollars received.

Many of these local contextual factors, including the challenges of the specific student population and the overall level of resources at the university, were identified explicitly in the consultations with university staff. For instance, those with greater support from their own operational budgets or philanthropic funds reported being able to offer more scholarships to equity cohorts and were able to shift targeted funding such as HEPPP toward scholarships while funding other equity-related activities (e.g., student support initiatives) from their operational budgets, thereby avoiding HEPPP reporting requirements for those activities which can include some students who are not identified as from an equity group. The amount of funding from university central budgets devoted to student equity and student support relative to need is a function of several factors, including overall student need and disadvantage, institutional wealth, and the extent to which student equity and support are prioritised by senior leadership. Consultations with university staff suggested that having greater resources from central budgets for equity purposes allows for initiatives and staff to be funded more securely rather than relying on year-to-year funding from HEPPP or other programs, which provides more continuity and avoids losses of institutional knowledge and expertise.

Systemic gaps

Consultations with university staff, expert advisors, and the consultation survey suggested that the current structure of the in-scope equity programs and how they interact with university structures leaves a number of gaps which work against the goals of greater student equity in Higher Education.

One theme that emerged from the expert advisors and consultations with university staff was that of fragmentation – at the program level, across universities, and within universities. Equity programs, for instance, are often not seen as coherent set, but instead as "lots of small pots." While institutions and other stakeholders saw a need for accountability to ensure that funding earmarked for equity purposes was being utilised in line with program goals, university staff suggested that various reporting requirements created inefficiencies and was costly and time-consuming. This reporting burden was made worse when considering other programs outside the scope of this project, but relevant for equity purposes, such as ISSP. Staff consultations suggested that a further streamlined and consistent reporting structure across programs was necessary to increase efficiency, although they reported positive feedback to recent changes in HEPPP reporting.

The fragmented nature of equity programs is one cause of universities themselves having an incomplete view of equity programs, with different parts of the university often responsible for implementing single programs. In these cases, a lack of communication or competing priorities between administering units may lead to a lack of cohesion in program goals and activities. Furthermore, universities may not have (or, the relevant units or people may not all be aware of or have access to) data on the performance of their equity programs as an overall, coherent set. For example, while HEPPP funding can be used to support Indigenous students, many of the officers who oversee HEPPP within their universities did not have access to ISSP data, which is most often administered from a DVC or PVC of Indigenous Engagement. Thus, redundancies or potential synergies were potentially being missed. Expert advisors also suggested that without senior leadership playing an active role in driving specific and coherent goals, individual programs might be implemented by lower-level managers whose primary objectives were, understandably, ensuring compliance with legal requirements rather than having a vision of how the specific program fits within the institution's larger equity strategy. Similar sentiments were expressed by university staff in consultations, who emphasised the importance of a relatively explicit strategic vision relating specifically to student equity to help guide programmatic decisions being made or recommended at lower levels.

In the consultations, programmatic support for specific cohorts, such as low SES students, First Nations students, students with disability, and regional and remote students was understandable and seen as vital. However, this fragmented view of equity and of identities fails to reflect the intersectional nature of multiple and cumulative forms of disadvantage. A more fragmented approach to student equity has its merits for ensuring accountability and simplifying targets. However, it can work against more integrated and universal solutions, which are difficult to cost against programs that require all money to be spent on specific equity cohorts. By contrast, universal programs reduce inequity not by providing extra targeted assistance, but by changing university structures and systems such that the need for extra targeted assistance for equity cohorts

is reduced. Recognising intersectionality and integrating universal solutions were both seen as particularly important for assisting students with disability, who are comparatively underfunded given their large numbers. Students with disability are often, although not always, members of other equity groups, and their disability often interacts with other forms of disadvantage and the structure of the university or other systems (e.g., transport) to create unfair barriers to their success. Ignoring cumulative disadvantages in this way leads to underfunding, with universities reporting that the overall amount of equity funding does not match the costs of ensuring student success, particularly for those facing multiple forms of disadvantage.

The specific eligibility requirements of both in-scope (e.g., HEPPP) and out-of-scope equity-related funding (e.g., income support via Youth Allowance, etc.) also leave several categories of disadvantaged students out of funding allocations. For example, several universities reported that older working students with care responsibilities were often ineligible for income support even though they experienced financial hardships, which made things like placements for nursing or teaching cost-prohibitive. Funding eligibility based on EFTSL rather than on headcounts was also seen as problematic, as it fails to recognise that from a university standpoint, supporting students is about the person rather than their enrolment load. While reduced funding amounts for part-time students is logical for course delivery costs, for student support, it is often more costly to effectively support students who are marginally attached to the university, or who may be attending part-time because they are facing difficult circumstances that require more, not less, attention. The short-term nature of funding also leads to inefficiencies in staff recruitment and retention and incentivises universities to fund small initiatives rather than projects at a larger scale.

Fragmentation across universities can lead to competition in areas that would benefit from cooperation and the pooling of resources. For example, increasing enrolment of students from one or more equity groups should be a sectoral goal rather than only an institutional goal. However, the current funding system incentivises universities to compete over students from identified equity groups, rather than coordinating with each other to cover more secondary schools for pre-access outreach.

Assessing the effectiveness of current equity programs at an institutional level

Institutions frequently assess the performance of internal programs or initiatives against equity goals by collecting institutional and program data to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of equity programs. Equity goals are codified in university-wide strategic plans, with some institutions developing specific frameworks for equity or social justice. They collect and analyse institutional data on enrolments, attrition, student success measures, and completions to track the effectiveness of programs or initiatives, such as scholarships or bursaries, or particular student support interventions. They also collect data directly from programs they administer to help monitor and evaluate these programs, including engagement numbers, surveys of participants, or qualitative interviews.

These data often provide signals as to the effectiveness of single initiatives; however, they are often unable to provide strong causal evidence of effects on "primary" outcomes such as student completions. Sometimes, there is evidence that might fall short in a research context that requires taking account of all potential sources of bias but is nevertheless compelling, for example, correlations between scholarship receipt and retention for students demonstrating financial need or between being exposed to pre-access outreach activities and later enrolling in university. This is partly because there are ethical considerations with some potential random control trials and because quasi-experimental methods can be difficult to implement depending on the program due to data or other limitations. However, even in the best case, the evidence often suggests that some intervention is better than none but cannot tell whether a specific intervention is optimal. As such, institutions often recognise that specific answers to causal questions are very difficult to answer (e.g., the optimal amount of scholarship funding to reduce attrition).

The stakeholder survey also suggested that part of the reason for the lack of evidence of effectiveness is the complexity of the funding structure of equity programs and the lack of cross-reporting of expenditures, such that overall funding and impact cannot be ascertained.

Feedback from institutional consultations suggested one way to obtain better evidence would be to track students across universities. Currently, when a student changes institutions, they no longer appear in institutional data, but the institution may have no insight into why their enrolment ceased. Some consultations suggested a greater role for NCSEHE or the Commonwealth Department of Education in collecting and spreading evidence of best practices throughout the sector, which they reported was currently encouraged, but not properly incentivised or funded.

How institutions use funding to support underrepresented students

First thing to note is that universities receive different levels of funding. Some programs are funded based on enrolment of students from specified equity cohorts (e.g., HEPPP, Disability Support Program, TAP), so institutions that enrol more of those students on an EFTSL basis receive proportionally more funding. Funding for other programs is based on the regional locations of campuses, meaning that institutional location rather than student characteristics lead to differential funding amounts (e.g., RLP, Destination Australia). The institutions receiving the highest levels of HEPPP, Disability Support Program, RLP, and ELP funding receive over 20 times as much as the lowest-receiving institutions (see Figure 10), suggesting wide variation in the extent to which institutions rely on these funds to support students from identified equity groups or to carry out core functions of the university.

Figure 10: Allocations of selected equity programs by institution, 2021 ($m).
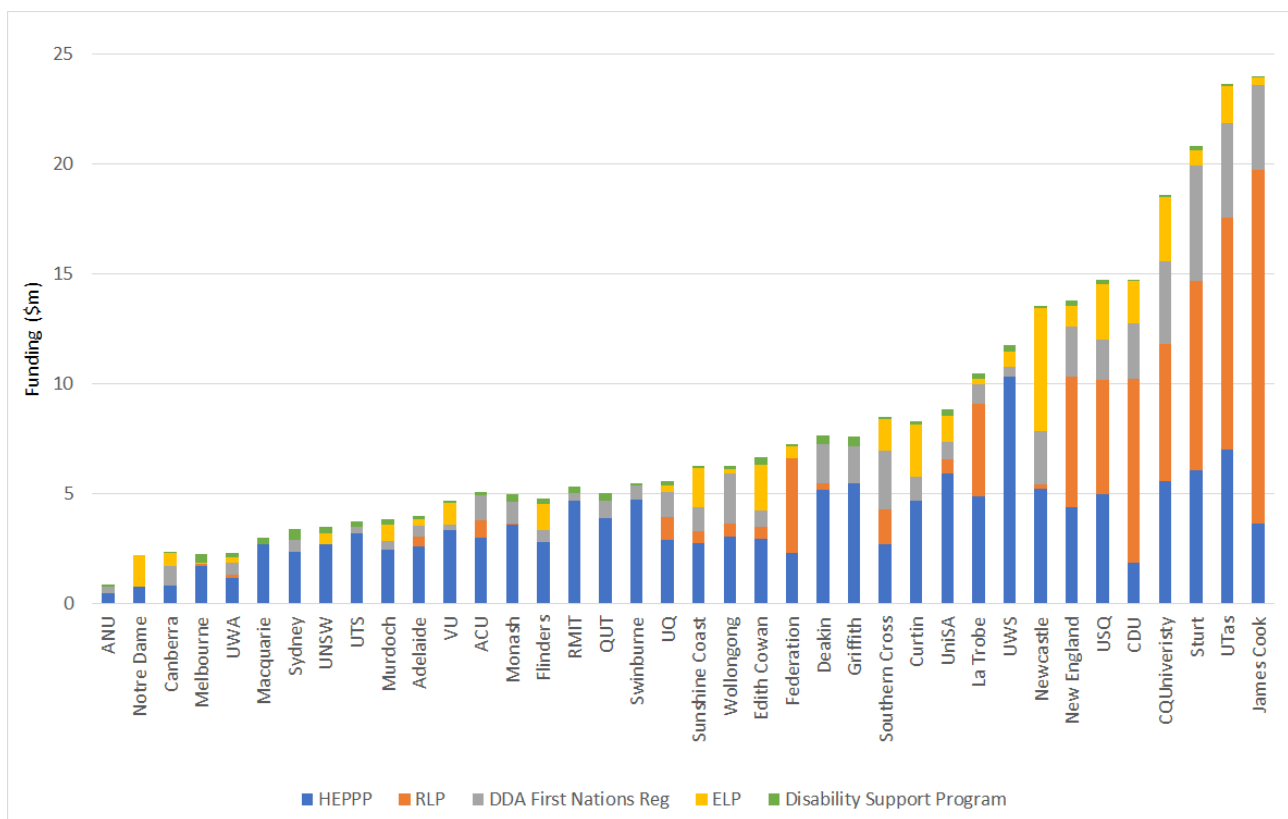
Consultation participants suggested that each institution supplements funding for supporting under-represented students. Central operational budgets are used to provide support with a range of issues to students who are members of one or more equity groups Some operational funds are also used to provide scholarships or bursaries to those demonstrating financial need. Institutions suggested that the costs of adequately supporting students from low SES areas or those with lower levels of academic preparation were much greater than supplements or loadings that were offered by various Commonwealth-funded equity programs.

Some institutions reported supplementing their enabling programs beyond their CGS and ELP funding. Staff were funded from operational budgets to support students undertaking enabling courses as well as the general student population. They also reported that students with disability and mental health challenges were more likely to face difficulties that required support that was unable to be funded by programs such as HEPPP, but which fell outside the specific uses of the Disability Support Program, and as such had to be funded from operational budgets.

Many institutions, particularly regional universities and those with a high proportion of students from identified equity groups and which had lower levels of financial resources relative to the needs of their students, suggested that the framing of funding students as 'supplemental' to their normal operations is inapplicable. They reported that because a large majority of their students come from one or more underrepresented groups, equity is a 'core business' or part of 'mainstream operation' and as such they need to draw on other funding sources to provide support for their cohort of students from identified equity groups.

While there was broad agreement that the scale of equity funding provided to universities is currently insufficient to provide the required support to students who need it, there was no agreed view on the required scale of funding. Review of literature revealed that there is limited modelling that would provide more definitive answers, with previous estimates contested by the sector.

As a first step, it was suggested that research be undertaken at the sector level or by NCESHE to determine an average hypothetical loading that would adequately support different types of underrepresented students in different contexts. This would inform government of how much funding needs to be increased to improve attainment rates of students from equity backgrounds. For example, stakeholder consultation suggested that student support costs were three to four times higher for low SES students than typical school leavers on average; however more research is required to establish overall funding increases for different equity groups. It was also pointed out that the funding needed to increase university attainment would probably need to be assessed in a more nuanced and granular way as some students require more support than others.

4.2 Summary and recommendations

Institutional differences and local contextual factors lead to variation across universities in the amount of targeted equity funding and the primary uses of that funding. The disaggregated structure and short-term nature of these funding streams means that despite their positive effects on student equity, there are large systemic gaps remaining which inhibit efforts to create the systemic change necessary to adequately support all students, especially those who experience multiple and cumulative forms of disadvantage.

4.2.1 Recommendations

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Recommendation 4

Improve program operations, delivery and effectiveness. Activities can include:

- Undertaking additional modelling to reliably estimate the full costs of supporting students from identified equity groups, taking into account: cumulative disadvantage; considering outcomes along the student life cycle; and taking into account institutional contexts (e.g., location, differences in student populations).

- Increasing funding for universities to support students from identified equity groups, particularly for groups that are currently under-funded such as students with disability. The funding could be based on the number of students from different equity/priority groups enrolled in (and graduating from) universities rather than EFTSL, and should be commensurate with the full costs of supporting those students through their higher education.

- Providing clearer guidelines around program implementation and strengthen governance structures to oversee planning and implementation of programs and activities at an institutional level.

- Investing in effective programs, such as those evaluated under SEHEEF and support ongoing program monitoring and evaluation and relevant data collections at an institutional level.

- Providing incentives to universities (e.g., through additional funding) to support student success and completion.

- Supporting structural solutions to reduce systemic barriers which disproportionately affect students from identified equity groups, e.g., by using universal design principles, rather than relying on targeted programs only.

Recommendation 5

Undertake work with the higher education sector, e.g., through a Tertiary Education Commission, to:

- Put equity firmly on the agenda for all universities, while recognising the differences in their missions, the local contexts and the communities they serve. This could be more easily achieved by establishing a role of Equity Commissioner or a similar position to sit within the new Tertiary Education Commission.

- Encourage universities to include 'equity' in their measures of success to generate more intrinsic motivations. One way to raise the status of equity agenda could be through establishing senior roles (at a DVC/PVC level) with responsibility for equity, diversity and inclusion at their institutions and to build equity domain activities into staff development and appraisal processes.

- Work with universities to reduce institutional barriers to access, participation and success (including inflexibility of processes, curriculums and learning and teaching cultures) for all students, including those from identified equity groups.

- Encourage information sharing between institutions about what works, for whom and under what circumstances;

- Negotiate with universities a set of institution-based goals, consistent with individual universities' missions and introduce mechanisms (via funding incentives and/or regulatory frameworks) to hold universities accountable for achieving those goals. Mission-based compacts could be considered as a mechanism to achieve this.

5.   Targets

5.1   Findings

- There are potential benefits for setting and regularly communicating and monitoring targets in the higher education sector. In conjunction with funding programs and regulation, targets can incentivise institutional behaviour change.
- However, targets in policy are often not achieved and come with issues including perverse incentives and unintended consequences:
    - 'Gaming' targets is a common outcome when there is a mismatch between targets and incentives. Gaming is often justified culturally by those doing the gaming as being acceptable because the targets 'don't make sense' in their context and from the perspective of the job they are trying to do. Targets work best when there is a natural alignment between the task and the performance target.
    - Target-setting based on the labour market faces the inherent difficulties of predicting future needs for graduates and allocating resources to meet them.
    - Targets may result in students being wooed to enrol at universities with a risk that they will be left worse off (e.g., without degree and with a debt), particularly if there is lack of adequate support.
    - Targets may result in resources going unused because they are locked into target purposes for which there is insufficient demand.
    - Targets may encourage problematic competition between universities, e.g., multiple universities competing for students from the same low SES or regional areas, or metro universities trying to 'poach' regional students to reach targets.
    - Targets potentially introduce a risk of lowering academic standards, e.g., if universities are incentivised to admit and graduate higher percentage of students from underrepresented backgrounds regardless of their academic preparedness, to meet their performance targets.
    - Targets focusing on certain equity groups (e.g., low SES) may result in other groups (e.g., students with disability) being overlooked and might not account for intersectionality and cumulative disadvantage. This also risks introducing new inequalities for groups of students that are not explicitly included in targets.
    - Without additional funding, there is a risk of diverting (finite) resources from students that are not explicitly included in targets.
    - Targets may introduce risk around data manipulation, (e.g., artificially increasing the size of student populations in groups defined based on self-reported status).
- Targets must be linked to reliable and valid measures of performance. Reliable measures of performance accurately indicate real performance; they must be collected systematically and without missing data. Valid measures of performance measure performance that is of value in the real world.
- There are definitional and data issues (equity groups' definitions & measurement) that further complicate setting and monitoring higher education targets. Definitions used in Higher Education and in the general population are not aligned (e.g., disability), rely on self-reports (Indigenous, disability) or area measures that are recalibrated every five years (SES and remoteness), all of which can offer 'opportunities' for institutional gaming of the system by strategies to increase numbers through data manipulation. The prevalence of equity statuses also varies by age, which

is commonly not considered when monitoring underrepresentation; for example, Indigenous populations are (much) younger than non-Indigenous populations, and disability becomes (much) more likely in older age.

- Additional considerations apply to institutional targets:

    o When considering targets for higher education institutions, it is crucial to consider their capacity to influence factors relevant to enhancing equity outcomes, and how this capacity might be subject to change due to external factors beyond their control, such as the cost of living, the school system, the job market, and government income support.

    o Institutions exhibit variations in student demographics, the regional and demographic characteristics of their catchment areas, and their unique identities and missions. These factors will impact their perspectives on equity-related matters and may shape their engagement in future collaborative efforts and negotiations with the government.

    o Designing institutional targets that align with national objectives and gain acceptance and perceived fairness across the sector is critical, but it may present considerable challenges. The governance structure for establishing any targets is a key consideration.

This section was guided by the following project review questions:

- What considerations need to inform student equity targets, and how could these targets be framed? (Including consideration of drivers needed to improve outcomes of particular cohorts, and key measures across the student life cycle such as access, success and attainment).

- How could targets be appropriately tailored to reflect particular institutional circumstances such as the catchment from which students are traditionally drawn?

The Interim Report of the Australian Universities Accord Panel (Department of Education, 2023a) reflects a serious intent to set ambitious equity targets. It largely justifies the need for higher education attainment for equity groups with anticipated workforce requirements in the future. It recommends an overall 55% higher degree attainment target by 2050 and the idea of parity participation and attainment outcomes for equity groups by 2035. It also states that "*Long-term targets could be supported by short-term step-change targets set in a jurisdictional and institutional context, for example disaggregated by state, region and provider*." (p43)

This section discusses matters that need to be considered prior to setting targets, including for setting step-change targets in institutional context as guided by the above review questions. The section has been informed by the literature and project advisors and stakeholders who participated in the consultation survey.

Issues to consider prior to any setting of targets

Feedback from expert advisors and consultation stakeholders emphasises that setting effective targets is a complex process that goes beyond isolated considerations. Targets should be linked to long-term policy goals and tied to incentives and regulatory mechanisms. While this may seem self-evident, it's worth noting that in practice, targets are often set through a technical or mathematical process, defining specific achievements within a system at certain local and temporal points, with broader system goals as an afterthought. Ideally, targets should be developed concurrently with incentive and regulatory frameworks, creating a cohesive and integrated approach.

Achieving equity targets in Higher Education, particularly those aimed at achieving parity, necessitates significant societal changes, including reforms within the higher education system. While we possess theoretical knowledge about potential strategies to enhance equity in higher education participation and

attainment, we have limited insight into the practical impact of various policy measures, such as those outlined in the Interim Report of the Australian Universities Accord Panel.

There are several issues that need to be considered prior to setting targets. Specifically, student equity targets in the context of equity in higher education policy could be framed in relation to different aspects of (achieving) equity in higher education studies, such as:

- Program inputs (e.g., funding per program/ institution/ student);
- Program activities/processes/outputs (e.g., students receiving income support, students accessing services, students using WIL, courses using universal design, staff attending cultural sensitivity training);
- Educational outcomes (e.g., NAPLAN results, students completing Year 12, enrolling in Higher Education, completing Higher Education);
- Other matters associated with enablers/barriers for equity in Higher Education (e.g., SES school segmentation, student satisfaction or engagement, sense of belonging, graduates employed in ways that match their qualifications, debt-to-income ratios, equity representation among university staff).

Regardless of how they are framed, targets must be linked to reliable and valid measures of performance. Reliable measures of performance accurately indicate real performance; they must be collected systematically and without missing data. Valid measures of performance measure performance that is of value in the real world.

Furthermore, targets need to be supported by a comprehensive implementation plan and supported by appropriate funding incentives and regulatory frameworks. Defining targets and associated incentives and regulation in particular ways should reflect a well-reasoned, ideally evidence-based underlying rationale of how to effectively change equity outcomes. A focus on incentivising institutional outcomes (e.g., increase of university completion rates), for example, would leave universities with the flexibility to achieve such outcomes and align them with their desired autonomy. A focus on incentivising specific institutional processes/activities/outputs could stimulate the realisation of the Government's vision for how to achieve better equity outcomes in Higher Education at universities. The Government could, for example, set institutional targets for parameters of enabling programs (e.g., the number of yearly free places for enabling programs that are run according to best practice principles). Or, it could set institutional targets for Indigenous peoples or people with disability to be employed in academic and professional positions if it wanted to stimulate university action in this area. Prioritising certain institutional ways/processes over others to improve equity outcomes would benefit from evidential arguments to facilitate buy-in from universities.

Considering life course and outcome domains

As previously highlighted, effective policy packages that include targets should be well-integrated and designed to function cohesively, ensuring that all components are aligned to achieve common objectives. This approach not only minimises the risk of unintended consequences but also avoids situations where an excessive focus on a particular metric might come at the expense of broader outcomes in the same area or in other related domains.

When setting targets for student equity, it is essential to recognise the complex and long-term nature of the factors contributing to inequity, as well as the multiple domains involved in the dynamic. One issue that emerged with prominence during our consultation survey was the risk of attracting more students from identified equity groups to university (in pursuit of access targets and associated incentives), only for many of them to face challenges and potentially fail to succeed due to a lack of targets around success and retention, and associated incentives and scaffolded supports.

Stratification of higher education outcomes is another important concern (Tavares, Sin, & Sá, 2022). This stratification – sometimes referred to as 'horizontal' inequalities – encompasses the differences in access to prestigious institutions or the opportunity to pursue higher-status degrees. In the Australian context, higher-

status degrees typically refer to postgraduate programs and degrees in Medicine and Dentistry (Tomaszewski et al., 2018). Despite this stratification, Australian government-driven equity policies and performance measures have traditionally focused on facilitating access to and completion of undergraduate studies. An important consideration for framing equity targets is the explicit inclusion of addressing stratification in higher education access and attainment targets and policies.

Failure to incorporate targets aimed at reducing stratification within the equity policy framework leaves a gap in monitoring in what Lucas (2001) refers to as "*effectively maintained inequality*." This underscores the need to enhance the relevance of equity measures by addressing common facets of contemporary inequity in higher education participation and achievement.

In addressing the above issues, it becomes apparent that any targets should strike a balance across various domains and stages of the educational journey, aiming for holistic equity outcomes throughout a student's life course. They should also move beyond the typical 'vertical' inequalities and consider stratification of higher education outcomes though incorporating 'horizontal' inequalities, including access to post-graduate studies, different universities, and fields of study.

Issues with targets for equity groups

Definitions of equity groups have been established to channel efforts toward these specific groups and to monitor the progress of these efforts. However, there are well-documented challenges related to defining and collecting data on equity groups, which can complicate the target-setting process.

Definitions of equity groups in Higher Education do not always align with those in the general population. Additionally, some equity indicators rely on self-reports (such as Indigenous or disability status) or area-based measures that are recalibrated periodically (such as SES and remoteness). These broad definitions can make it challenging to accurately track trends and may create opportunities for institutions to manipulate the system to boost their numbers in specific indicators, potentially undermining equity objectives. For example, universities might be incentivised to focus on higher SES schools in inner regional areas, as these students might be perceived as easier and less costly to recruit and support compared to students from low SES or remote areas. This approach could unintentionally exclude equity populations that are intended to benefit from the policy.

Furthermore, the prevalence of equity statuses can vary by age, which is often not considered when assessing under-representation of these groups. For example, Indigenous populations tend to be younger than non-Indigenous populations, and disability becomes more likely with age. Parity targets may look different if age distributions and associated differences in educational participation probabilities are considered.

While widely accepted performance measures such as retention rates, are commonly utilised in the Australian higher education sector, it is important to acknowledge that not all of these measures are necessarily well-suited for expressing targets concerning equity groups. Students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts often pursue their education along non-traditional pathways, including part-time study or disruptions to study, which can extend their educational journeys. These unique trajectories should not necessarily be seen as indicators of failure, as is often the prevailing perspective when based purely on statistics, but rather as potential indicators of future success for students from identified equity groups.

Given that students from identified equity groups are likely to continue facing circumstances that lead to extended study patterns, it becomes imperative to revisit the conceptual framework for defining target and performance measures for equity groups. This underscores the importance of understanding equity issues and how institutions can be motivated to take appropriate action. For example, in the context of part-time students, considering success measures in conjunction with incentives could encourage institutions to provide greater support for these students.

Furthermore, it's crucial to recognise that students from identified equity groups may have diverse definitions of success that may not align with the conventional metrics of success and retention employed in the Australian higher education sector. For example, feedback from consultations identified that many students from under-

represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts prioritise personal growth, including increased confidence and a sense of belonging within wider society, as highly valuable and meaningful achievements. Engaging in meaningful consultations with relevant communities, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and individuals with disability, when establishing targets specific to them is not only advisable but essential.

The above points also alert to a more general point about possible unintended consequences, which is that defining targets in terms of specific groups can make institutions overly focused on achieving the required metric at the cost of achieving objectives in the spirit of the policy that the target is a part of and/or at the cost of achieving other worthy objectives. This was variously expressed by project advisors and stakeholders in the consultation survey, for example:

- Targets may result in students being wooed to enrol at universities with a risk of leaving them worse off (e.g., without degree and with a debt, or with a degree than leads to postgraduate outcomes [e.g., income] that is lower compared to what could have been obtained via other tertiary qualifications [e.g., VET]).

- Targets focusing on certain equity groups (e.g., low SES) may lead to overlooking other groups (e.g., students with disability) and might not account for intersectionality and cumulative disadvantage. This also risks introducing new inequalities for groups of students that are not explicitly included in targets.

- Targets may result in resources going unused because they are locked into target purposes for which there is insufficient demand.

- Targets may come with a risk of lowering academic standards, e.g., if universities are incentivised to admit and graduate higher percentage of students from underrepresented backgrounds regardless of their academic preparedness, to meet their performance targets.

- Without additional funding, there is a risk of diverting (finite) resources from students that are not explicitly included in targets.

Targeting groups versus targeting barriers

To some extent, issues related to equity group definitions can be addressed by defining targets that do not explicitly rely on equity characteristics. Targets related to inputs, activities, outcomes and barriers could, in principle, be framed generically. For instance, increasing the proportion of students meeting early childhood development benchmarks or achieving minimum standards in NAPLAN results, or improving higher education retention rates, has the potential to benefit students from equity backgrounds to a greater extent, while not excluding other students.

However, some stakeholders emphasised the importance of equity-specific reporting alongside equity funding to enhance institutional accountability for equity actions, and to improve monitoring and evaluation. In this context, some argued for a focus on specific equity groups within the broader equity spectrum. As one stakeholder put it "*For disability, any time in history where a deliberate focus has not been provided it slips to the bottom of the priority list and is already the lowest dollar per student funding allocation of any current funded equity group.*"

This presents a dilemma between using equity definitions that may have shortcomings and not using them, potentially resulting in a loss of focus on equity. Nonetheless, there is room for framing equity-relevant targets effectively without relying on equity group definitions that can be applied to certain barriers or enablers for equity, including institutional barriers. For example, targets related to the number or proportion of staff participating in cultural awareness training or courses based on Universal Design for Learning, for example, can be relevant for improving equity outcomes. Similarly, targets related to the number of students successfully completing enabling programs delivered according to effective practice principles fall into this category of target framing. As noted earlier in this report, other notable barriers that have been identified in the project include material barriers and academic preparedness. Targeting barriers like these has the potential to improve the outcomes for all students, while bringing more benefits to students from identified equity groups.

Role of institutional circumstances

Australian universities have historically developed and maintained different status orientations, missions and cultures, which are influenced by the regional and demographic contexts in which universities are situated. Some universities enrol high proportions of students from identified equity groups, others enrol low proportions (see also Section 4). While all universities may share some equity vision in the abstract, recent history surrounding the attempt of institutionally implementing the national Bradley Review targets has shown that universities might resist institutional targets imposed on them by the Government if they see those targets in tension with their (status) orientations (Pitman, 2014), and as foreseen by Putnam & Gill: "*It is envisaged that some higher education institutions will welcome this change, while others may fight to maintain traditional ways of operating. For the latter, the transition from elite to mass education may be viewed as relinquishing their position of power*" (Putnam & Gill, 2011, p. 188). They further predicted: "*However, until these issues are addressed, the Bradley report's recommendations and targets will not be achieved, and Higher Education will continue to be stratified, favouring the traditional student and reproducing class inequalities.*" (ibid.)

Stakeholder feedback in the consultation survey reflects the different university orientations in different ways, by:

- Suggesting more funding for universities that cater for higher proportions of students from identified equity groups;

- Suggesting funding is used to incentivise behaviour change in universities with low proportions of students from identified equity groups; and

- Suggesting that targets should be based on institutions' missions to work within (rather than against) the current different university orientations.

When targets are not in alignment with institutional missions, efforts to meet them are more likely to be sabotaged by gaming behaviours. Feedback from expert advisors was that gaming is often justified culturally by those doing the gaming as being acceptable because the targets 'don't make sense' in their context and from the perspective of the job they are trying to do. Incentives and targets to shape the behaviour of institutions to increase participation and outcomes for equity groups need to be designed in such a way that they do not create perverse incentives and unintended outcomes. Targets work best when there is a natural alignment between the task and the performance target. Mechanisms need to be put in place to make sure that gaming the target, i.e., achieving the indicators without achieving the underlying goal, is not possible.

As universities are often pitted against each other in competition for students and funding, a unified equity approach that includes widely agreeable institutional targets will likely prove difficult. The competitiveness between universities was a notable observation of stakeholders in the consultation survey with the possibility expressed that targets may (further) encourage problematic competition between universities, such as multiple universities competing for students from the same low SES or regional areas including metropolitan universities trying to 'poach' regional students to reach targets.

A recent research project undertaken by a group of higher education specialists (Pitman et al., 2020) to design institutional equity ranking measures for the Australian higher education sector should further serve as a caution for achieving a common vision for higher education equity across institutions. The study employed the expert-decided method, which consisted of consulting with 31 higher education stakeholders, including equity stakeholders to inform ranking measures. It concluded: "*Based on the evidence from this study, whilst it may be possible to achieve consensus on the broad dimensions of higher education equity, it is far more difficult to quantify which indicators should be used to measure performance and even further, which indicators should be prioritised over others. Some stakeholders prioritise access and participation, others retention and completion and yet others a neutral position. Each approach significantly affects the final rank.*" (Pitman et al., 2020).

Higher education institutions with their different cultures and missions, may pose challenges for achieving equity target effectiveness, because:

- Below the abstract level, achieving a unified position on, and vision for, equity in the higher education sector may prove difficult;

- Compromises on institutional targets that are designed in collaboration with others (including governments, independent bodies or other higher education institutions) may prove difficult and costly to achieve;

- Achieved compromises on institutional targets may not be sufficient to achieve overall targets;

- Targets imposed by third parties on institutions may not be accepted by institutions, which would likely be manifested by lacking cooperation in efforts to achieve such institutional targets.

These points alert to the importance of developing appropriate incentives and regulatory frameworks alongside setting of any targets, to create a cohesive and integrated approach.

Considerations for setting targets at an institutional level

As noted earlier, it is well recognised that disparities in higher education student and graduate populations develop over the life course. While universities can take certain steps to make their operations more inclusive of students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts, it is important not to overestimate their ability to influence the broader material and social factors that shape the capabilities, dispositions, and resources essential for successful higher education participation.

In the higher education sector, it is commonly acknowledged that targets for institutions should take into account their geographical and demographic contexts (i.e., their traditional 'catchment areas'), including the density of equity populations and distances involved. This perspective leads to two typical considerations:

- Different institutions may have varying degrees of accessibility and recruitment costs for equity populations. Targets and associated incentives should reflect these differences. These considerations have often been voiced by stakeholders from metropolitan, often (Go8, universities, sometimes emphasizing the costs of outreach programs.

- The concentration of populations of students from identified equity groups in higher education institutions can affect the costs of teaching and supporting them to completion. Targets and associated funding should recognise these variations in required support costs. These points have often been made by stakeholders from universities with higher proportions of students from identified equity groups.

Additionally, some stakeholders have argued that targets should align with the 'missions' of individual institutions, which can be tied to their catchment areas and institutional autonomy. Determining how differences in university characteristics, missions, and cultures should inform institutional targets is a complex matter. It involves questions about the economics and logistics of recruiting and servicing equity populations, institutional autonomy, catchments, markets, competition, and the meaning of institutional equity within specific catchment contexts.

The Interim Report of the Australian Universities Accord Panel also suggests the possibility of state-level targets and presents recent attainment figures. If such targets are established at the state level, they should take into consideration the regional economic roles, contextualised against the history of the Australian settlement system. For example, Sydney and Melbourne have historically attracted young adults for higher education and post-graduate employment opportunities, alongside international migrants who often hold higher education qualifications. It is important to recognise that population attainment measures (such as those based on Census) do not account for these influences and may not accurately reflect the distribution of degrees.

Considering the above issues is fundamental to framing institutional targets, which should align with the national, long-term vision of equity and its overarching goals.

5.2 Summary and recommendations

While there was some support from the sector for setting attainment targets, particularly to incentivise institutions to prioritise equity, the literature review, survey and submissions to the Australian Universities Accord, and feedback from expert advisors highlighted a number of challenges and considerations that need to be taken into account if any targets were to be set.

5.2.1 Recommendations

Recommendation 6

The following issues need to be considered prior to any setting of targets:

- Any setting of targets should be accompanied by a comprehensive implementation plan that:
  - Includes a feasibility assessment supported by national and state data;
  - Considers barriers, intersectionality, and outcomes at multiple stages of the student life cycle;
  - Considers the levels at which targets are to be set (e.g., national, institutional);
  - Considers timeframes (including differentiation between shorter- and longer-term targets);
  - Provides adequate national-level and institutional funding to support achieving targets.

- Any targets need to eliminate perverse incentives to over-enrol students without providing appropriate ongoing support, for instance by covering enrolment, participation, attrition and success.

- Any setting of targets needs to be contingent on having accurate, reliable and valid data (including baseline data) and clear operational definitions, and the embedding of evaluation/monitoring through the target setting period.

- Any setting of institutional targets should consider integration with a regulatory framework of the higher education sector, while respecting the autonomy of universities. This should include considerations for setting suitably contextualised targets negotiated with universities that are consistent with their missions and the communities they serve, e.g., as part of mission-based compacts.

- Any setting of targets should be linked to adequate funding to support successful achievement of targets at a national level and to incentivise universities to invest in equity and provide support for students through to completion.

6.   Broader Policy Levers

6.1   Findings

- Addressing gaps, barriers, and inequalities for identified cohorts requires a multi-pronged approach. It would include structural changes that enable holistic cross-education systemic approaches within higher education institutions to reduce institutional barriers and investments in data infrastructure to support program monitoring and evaluation.

- There is a balance to be struck between broad approaches that can be used to improve outcomes for multiple cohorts, e.g., through focusing on key barriers, and more targeted approaches specific to certain equity groups.

- Several issues have emerged in relation to broader funding levers, including:

  o Reviews of higher education equity policies indicate that a combination of monetary and non-monetary programs is more effective in improving outcomes for students from under-represented or educationally disadvantage cohorts than single, isolated programs. Stakeholders value programs like HEPPP but suggest increasing funding or providing flexibility for program development.

  o The lack of demand driven funding is seen as a significant concern, particularly for First Nations students, as it exacerbates existing gaps in Higher Education. The recommendation to extend demand driven funding to First Nations students in the Interim Report of the Australian Universities Accord Panel has been welcomed, but there is an opportunity to extend it to other equity groups such as low SES students, regional, rural, and remote students, and students with disability (while noting definitional and implementation issues), or – preferably – to return to a full demand driven system.

  o Stakeholders highlight the potential benefits of a needs-based funding model that enhances equity in Higher Education by directing resources where they are most needed. However, implementing such a model would require substantial government commitment, administrative complexity, legislative changes, negotiations with universities, and challenges related to defining and monitoring student needs. There is debate over centralisation versus local decision-making, but transparency in funding allocation and the use of mission-based compacts are suggested mechanisms for improving accountability while respecting university autonomy.

- Successfully instrumentalising targets in the Australian higher education sector can be challenging, particularly when seen in the context of the 'intractable problem' of inequity in Higher Education worldwide. This is because:

  o There has been a lack of a bipartisan understanding of equity and associated goal convictions in the higher education space, which is not conducive to setting long-term equity strategy and long-term targets.

  o Under-representations in higher education student and graduate populations are, to a considerable degree, a function of matters outside the scope of the higher education sector.

  o Compared with other OECD countries, Australia has spent relatively little public money on tertiary education institutions in recent years. Notably shifting representations in student and graduate populations will likely require substantial additional funding over the longer-term (also in other areas such as the school system).

- Related to the above, Australian universities have increasingly generated alternative revenues upon which they depend. This may have lessened the Federal Governments' capacity to steer universities' behaviours in terms of the power they can enact through financial incentives and coercive measures, which are important elements in target effectiveness.
- Australian universities have historically had considerable autonomy in their operations and they have developed and maintained different missions and cultures. Evidence suggests that universities may resist institutional targets imposed on them by the Government if they see those targets in tension with their priorities. As universities are often pitted against each other in competition for students and funding, a unified equity approach that includes widely agreeable institutional targets might prove difficult.

This section was guided by the following project review questions:

- How should gaps, barriers, and inequalities specific to identified under-represented cohorts, for example First Nations Australians and people with disability, be addressed?
- How could larger higher education funding levers be leveraged?
- In what ways could adoption of equity targets be linked to broader higher education policy levers?

Previous sections of this report laid out issues and complexities associated with tackling the wicked problem of educational inequalities including program structure, delivery and institutional implementation. This section brings together the evidence obtained from the various components of the project on possible solutions, particularly in terms of higher education policy levers that might be available to the Government.

Structural enablers to addressing gaps, barriers and inequalities for identified cohorts

The evidence from across the various project components has suggested several structural enablers and broader policy levers that can help address systemic gaps, inequalities and barriers for equity cohorts. Based on the international literature review, international examples include higher education sectors working alongside the earlier schooling period through cross-education strategies that spanned early childhood to tertiary education (e.g., Scotland, New Zealand). Such cross-educational system approaches could, as conducted in some countries, be led by a clearly articulated national equity promotion strategy with aligned policies, programs and interventions (Nagarajan et al., 2021; Salmi, 2018). Similarly, one structural enabler recommended by the literature review of international higher education equity policies, would be to develop secondary education systems that enable streaming between general education and vocational training within high schools (Salmi, 2019; Salmi & D'Addio, 2021).

Feedback from the stakeholder survey further suggested the need to improve pathways from VET to university, while also acknowledging the need to review the evidence on student success associated with these pathways. One suggestion that could be trialled and evaluated for effectiveness is adding an enabling component to this pathway (i.e. VET-preparatory-undergraduate). More broadly, the feedback obtained in the survey emphasised the need to support best-practice enabling and preparatory programs that are well linked to institutions' undergraduate programs, making them freely available, and increasing the number of available places. The need to introduce shorter, stackable qualifications to allow for flexibility and as part of offering more flexible entry and exit points – which is consistent with recommendations from the Interim Report of the Australian Universities Accord Panel – was also emphasised.

Furthermore, across various sources of evidence there were suggestions to alter the structure, funding and governance features of higher education institutions to centralise equity. These suggestions included:

- Reviewing funding models so that equity is centralised. The findings from the Accord submissions suggested that equity funding should be centralised within a broader university funding model (e.g., international reviews of higher education policies mention examples of university funding formulae with built-in equity indicators on measures of widening access as well as completions), in place of separate funding allocations for add-on programs.

- Consider demand driven funding/uncapped places. This was a main theme that emerged from the analysis of the Australian Universities Accord submissions with Indigenous students frequently mentioned.

- Improve governance of administration, delivery and allocation of funding related to students from identified equity groups.

- Improve data collection processes and monitoring of student outcomes for students from identified equity groups.

- Pay attention to the selectivity in the admission policies of universities as well as the degree of institutional differentiation of higher education systems, and

- Improve access to financial aid for students from equity groups.

The evidence from the reviews of equity promotion policies (involving literature and documentation reviews, surveys and case study analysis) suggest the following recommendations for broader national policies (noting, that this will also require national-level governance):

- Equity policies should take a comprehensive approach, considering both financial and nonmonetary aspects, coordinating national-level and institutional level actions in a complementary manner, and putting as much emphasis on completion/success as on access (with the former having previously had less focus) (Salmi, 2023).

- Aligning broad equity goals and a comprehensive set of policies, strategies and resources commensurate with the national equity agenda (Salmi, 2018).

- Evaluating which interventions and combinations of interventions are most effective more systematically and rigorously, using strong datasets to identify all equity groups, monitor disparities and measure progress in terms of access and graduation and effectiveness of interventions (Salmi, 2019).

- Giving greater priority to students with disability, with clearer definitions of needs, providing sufficient resources, and empowering higher education institutions to place this dimension high on their equity agenda (Salmi, 2019).

There was a commonality across the survey responses, the findings from the analysis of the Australian Universities Accord submissions and the literature review regarding the need to dismantle rigid institutional processes and replace them with equity-driven processes with scaffolded support. To remove institutional barriers and make institutions more inclusive, survey respondents and comments from the Australian Universities Accord submissions referenced examples in relation to Indigenous students and students with disability. These examples included:

- Cultural matters, including paying attention to western-centric teaching methods and processes (e.g., admission, attendance, assessment processes) that may disincentivise students, particularly Indigenous students; cultural safety and discrimination. To improve inclusivity for Indigenous students, there needs to be greater representation of Indigenous staff in higher education institutions, and more Indigenous-specific monitoring and evaluation frameworks; this would also entail a definition of 'success' for Indigenous students, which is not consistent with such notions underlying HEPPP, including NPPPP funding.

- Changes to processes for students with disability. Stakeholders in the disability component of the survey also called for increased staff numbers and called for greater emphasis on changing institutional processes to introduce more flexibility in studying/learning, moving from fixed reference points to flexible systems, course structures and curriculum. Further, additional funding and attention was required to prioritise student experience and wellbeing. While this is considered important for all students, with the broadening of the definition of students with disability to include those with mental health issues, this was a strong area of focus in the Australian Universities Accord submissions.

- Finally, as noted earlier in this report, a clear theme from the survey respondents was that to improve the effectiveness of widening participation, student success and institutional change, there firstly needs to be improvements to governance, data collection and monitoring systems.

Working with universities to address gaps and barriers in equity

The Interim Report of the Australian Universities Accord Panel suggested a possible re-establishment of the Tertiary Education Commission, which could play a role in overseeing the coordination of and expert advice to the higher education sector. This could be one mechanism to support collaboration between the government and the higher education sector. Stakeholder consultations reveal several areas where such collaboration could help to address the structural gaps and barriers and improve outcomes for underrepresented groups.

There have been several suggestions regarding outreach activities, including reviewing the quality of outreach programs and the idea of developing and standardising aspects of outreach programs for the different groups across the sector. Such review would need to consider:

- The content of outreach programs, such as the balance between career and pathway information and capability development;

- Best practice in all components;

- Who is best suited to lead outreach (communities vs universities vs shared leadership models).

The introduction of higher level (national or state) coordination of outreach activities to minimise competition and increase areas not currently covered by outreach activities could also be considered as part of such a review. The outcomes of the review could help to fill current gaps in outreach, such as targeting of students with disability and mature-age students by designing funding schemes that incentivise outreach to these groups.

There have also been suggestions regarding outreach activities specific to particular equity groups:

- For Indigenous outreach, it was suggested to include a focus on the community and family, promote the value of Higher Education to Indigenous communities, and focus on cultural safety and identity.

- For outreach targeting people with disability, it was suggested to include a focus on developing self-advocacy capabilities and to promote the value of Higher Education for people with disability (taking account of poor employment outcomes of graduates with disability and experiences of harassment).

- For regional outreach, it was suggested to promote the value of Higher Education while considering actual/likely job opportunities in regional/remote economies.

Another prominent theme in the consultations was working with universities to reduce institutional barriers, including to:

- Ensure that equity funding is allocated over longer timeframes to promote employment stability, enabling institutions to plan and evaluate their equity initiatives effectively;

- Revise existing equity programs (e.g., Disability Support Program and HEPPP) to shift the focus from an individual deficit perspective to encouraging inclusive practices;

- Elevate the strategic importance of equity within universities, emphasising its role in shaping institutional policies and practices;

- Establish respect and inclusivity as fundamental principles embedded within higher education institutions' culture and operations;

- Facilitate the participation of individuals from equity groups in program design and delivery at all levels, including government, schools, communities and universities;

- Enhance inclusivity by introducing greater flexibilities in various operational areas, including admissions, enrolment, marketing, administrative processes, online and physical accessibility, learning, assessment, academic concessions, student services, graduation ceremonies and entry and exit points. Procurement practices should also prioritise accessible products as part of inclusivity strategies;

- Attract staff members from underrepresented backgrounds and provide education and training to university staff on equity-relevant matters. This includes cultural sensitivity, disability rights, support standards, equity rationales and best practices in curriculum design and delivery;

- Standardise the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Universal Design (UD) across the sector, ensuring consistency and accessibility in education. Disability support services should also align with these principles;

- Develop and implement inclusive WIL programs that consider the diverse needs of students from equity groups;

- Recognise the value of learning and teaching within the higher education sector, emphasising its significance in delivering quality education. Models like the Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT) can serve as references for prioritising these aspects.

Funding levers

Reviews of higher education equity policies suggest that a mix of monetary and non-monetary programs are needed to improve student outcomes for students from under-represented or educationally disadvantage cohorts, and that a combination of programs appears to be more effective than single programs delivered in isolation. The findings from the Australian Universities Accord submissions highlighted that the sector saw value in these programs, with HEPPP frequently mentioned. There were suggestions to either increase equity funding by increasing amounts provided for existing programs (particularly HEPPP) or offer more flexibility for equity program development.

The lack of demand driven funding arose repeatedly as a structural issue that could exacerbate inequalities in Higher Education. This was particularly raised in the context of First Nations students, where lack of demand driven funding was seen to exacerbate existing gaps and inequalities. The recommendation of the Interim Report of the Australian Universities Accord Panel to extend demand driven funding to metropolitan First Nations students has been widely welcomed by the sector. The next step would be to consider further extending demand driven funding to students of the identified equity groups where robust evidence of educational disadvantage exists, namely low SES students, regional, rural and remote students (particularly remote students), and students with disability, or returning to a full demand driven system, which was a clear preference for many expert advisors and consultation stakeholders.

However, it needs to be noted that definitional and other issues can make it difficult to implement demand driven funding restricted to low SES students, regional, rural and remote students and students with disability. First, unless there is an additional funding, such "mini demand driven systems" pose risks, including universities being left with stranded resources, and funding that needs to be clawed back from general university grants (Norton, 2023). Second, as noted in Sections 3 and 4, there are issues with some of the equity groups definitions, which can make implementing such a restricted demand driven system difficult. For

example, disability is self-defined, and is a status that can change over time. Demand driven places could encourage increased (self-)reporting of disability, and lead to issues with people acquiring or reporting disability only while studying (but not at the time of enrolment). Similarly, current postcode-based low SES definition could encourage people to move between areas, or buy/rent properties in areas eligible for demand driven funding, similar to the mobility observed around school catchment areas. In this context, a return to full demand driven system may be the preferred option.

Another theme reflected in stakeholder and expert consultations was that of a needs-based funding model that could potentially enhance equity in Higher Education by directing resources to students and institutions with the greatest needs. One advantage of needs-based funding, if implemented well, is that resources would be allocated where they are most needed, which would enable universities to develop tailored programs, support services, and outreach efforts to help students in the communities they serve to access and succeed in Higher Education.

However, to work well, needs-based funding models need to be designed with mechanisms for accountability, ensuring that universities use funds effectively to support the students that they are funded to support. There was a view among stakeholders that implementing a needs-based funding model would require a significant financial commitment from the government and would be likely to face a range of challenges. Transitioning to a needs-based model would be administratively complex and may require changes in legislation, negotiations with universities, and it may take a long time to implement new funding mechanisms effectively. Resistance from some universities and political opposition to changes in funding models can pose a significant challenge; this was evident when trying to implement a needs-based funding model across the school sectors following the recommendations of the Gonski review.

Furthermore, identifying and quantifying the specific needs of individual students and institutions can be complex and contested. Unlike schools, where catchment areas and student populations are more clearly defined, determining higher education student needs and allocating funds can be far more complex. Definitions of terms like 'regional' or 'disability' come with issues and limitations and can vary and change over time. As such, the possibility of institutions manipulating data for financial gain is a potential concern. Finally, establishing mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of a needs-based funding model can be challenging. Ensuring that funds are used to genuinely improve equity and access for students that are meant to benefit from this support is essential and was highlighted by consultation stakeholders who emphasised the need to ensure that the money goes where it is 'needed' and where it is meant to go. However, this requires robust evaluation processes and robust data.

These considerations need to be made with attention given to university autonomy and institutional and local contexts. As was discussed earlier in this report, universities differ significantly in what they do and what kind of graduates they produce, necessitating tailored approaches to meet student needs. Given the differences in universities' missions and interests and the variation in their educational offerings, determining need and allocating funds fairly can be highly contentious and has the potential to become politicised. The debate over centralised versus localised fund allocation persists, with some stakeholders advocating for universities to make decisions based on their communities and support systems, while others arguing for centralisation to ensure fairness and consistency. However, transparency in funding allocation is seen as a vital issue. Consultations with stakeholders observed that there needs to be clarity on how funding corresponds to specific equity groups and goals, which could be set by universities to reflect their local contexts and the communities in which they operate. A mechanism that was suggested to achieve this is through mission-based compacts, which could be negotiated between each university (or groups of universities) and the government. This could involve mutually agreed goals or targets agreed upon based on the universities' missions, with universities then being held accountable to achieve these goals and targets. The Government could incentivise universities to set more ambitious goal or targets through funding incentives, and accountability could be also reinforced through regulatory mechanisms – while recognising the autonomy of universities.

Targets as a part of border policy levers

Australia's approach to equity in Higher Education is characterised by diverse perspectives within our society and politics, which has, at times, led to a lack of bipartisan consensus. While the idea of achieving parity in higher education outcomes has been discussed in various communications, including the recent Interim Report of the Australian Universities Accord Panel, there remains uncertainty about the widespread acceptance of such outcomes and determining for which specific groups they are considered desirable. In practice, Australian governments have historically held varying views on equity and its importance in Higher Education, resulting in differing priorities. To pursue long-term equity targets as proposed in the Interim Report and to establish a consistent equity strategy, it needs to be recognised that these efforts cannot solely rely on the views and commitments of the current government. Divergent political perspectives on equity pose challenges to making targets achievable.

While there are valid social justice arguments for equity, appealing to a broader audience across the political spectrum requires a compelling economic argument, as was presented in the Interim Report. This argument is rooted in the perception of future workforce needs and qualification requirements. If there is alignment across the political spectrum regarding these future workforce needs, it will become more feasible to establish a shared, long-term vision for equity in higher education participation and attainment.

The Australian Government oversees higher education policy, funding, and regulation. However, Australian universities hold a degree of autonomy and have diversified their revenue sources, including income from international students, upon which they increasingly rely. Their greater autonomy may limit the national government's capacity to direct university behaviour solely through financial incentives and coercive measures, which are seen as crucial components of effective target implementation (Howlett 2011). For instance, it might raise the costs for governments to provide incentives and regulations powerful enough to guide higher education institutions toward behaviours they may view as conflicting with their core missions or primary objectives. This dynamic may encourage governments to seek strategies that align with the diverse missions of individual institutions, a viewpoint expressed by university stakeholders in the Accord submissions and the consultation survey for this review.

In comparison to other OECD countries, Australia has allocated relatively modest public funds to tertiary education institutions in recent years (OECD, 2021). Effecting substantial shifts in underrepresented groups' shares of student and graduate populations, which have remained relatively stable for decades, is likely to require considerable additional funding over an extended period, encompassing various areas, including the school system. This would involve providing funding for incentive programs, administration, and regulatory schemes related to equity targets. Achieving such a long-term transformation in entrenched historical patterns of public funding for Higher Education, underpinned by liberal welfare principles, may be challenging. This underscores the urgent need for a bipartisan vision on equity, equity objectives, and their significance in Australian politics, as discussed above.

In this context, equity targets for higher education participation and attainment should therefore be a collective effort, involving various stakeholders across the education system, including federal and state governing bodies, independent and Catholic school sectors, and both public and private tertiary education providers. As previously discussed, one key consideration when setting targets is the scope of influence that agencies and institutions have over factors relevant to higher education outcomes. This scope can be constrained by external factors beyond their control, such as changes in the cost of living, housing availability, the school system, international migration, and labour market dynamics, all of which can impact access and completion rates.

6.2 Summary and recommendations

There are several strategies that could be leveraged to address gaps, barriers and inequalities affecting underrepresented groups within Higher Education. They include leveraging larger funding mechanisms and the integration of equity targets with broader higher education policy levers. Complexities related to educational

inequalities, program structures, delivery methods and institutional implementation and autonomy need to be taken into account when considering higher education policy levers for government intervention.

6.2.1   Recommendations

Recommendation 7

Prioritise multi-pronged approaches to addressing gaps, barriers, and inequalities for identified cohorts, including:

- Promoting structural changes to enable cross-education systemic approaches, improve VET to university pathways, support best-practice enabling and preparatory programs and centralise equity within higher education institutions.

- Working within higher education institutions using a holistic approach that encompasses funding stability, program restructuring, cultural transformation, empowerment of equity representatives, increased flexibility, staff development, standardisation of design principles, inclusive Work Integrated Learning (WIL) and an emphasis on inclusive learning and teaching.

- Supporting systematic and rigorous evaluation of interventions, with a focus on identifying effective approaches for various equity groups (including broad and targeted approaches), monitoring disparities, and measuring progress in terms of outcomes along the student life cycle (including success and completion), underpinned by effective data governance, collection and monitoring.

Recommendation 8

When leveraging broader funding levers, consider:

- Investing in a mix of programs, including a combination of monetary and non-monetary programs, and striking the balance between broader, more generic approaches and programs targeting specific groups that reflect specific needs of certain cohorts.

- Extending demand driven places to include low SES students, regional, rural, and remote students and students with disability (while noting significant definitional and implementation issues), or – preferably – return to a full demand driven system.

- Undertaking further work to determine the feasibility of a needs-based funding model for Higher Education, and to scope out its parameters.

Recommendation 9

Consider the following activities that would support setting long-term targets for the higher education sector in the

- Develop a bipartisan vision for equity among political parties and throughout all education sectors (including independent and catholic schools).

- Develop a holistic and long-term national equity strategy with broad national targets based on the bipartisan vision. This should include assessing contributions that different government portfolios can make based on their scope of operations and envisaged role in policy and

context of broader policy levers:	program implementation towards the national targets along the student life course.
	• Undertake research about effectively setting agency-specific, interjurisdictional and institutional targets in the context of broader educational (equity) policies.
	• Undertake a comprehensive consultation with universities and communities, building on the work of the Australian Universities Accord Panel, to ensure buy-in from the sector and to incentivise universities to invest in equity while not making them compete with one another.

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THE UNIVERSITY
OF QUEENSLAND
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CREATE CHANGE

Final Report: Targeted Review of Student Equity in Higher Education Programs and System Level Policy Levers Appendix: Work Package 1 – Context and Trends

The Institute for Social Science Research at the University of Queensland (UQ) acknowledges the Traditional Owners and their custodianship of the lands on which UQ operates. We pay our respects to their Ancestors and their descendants, who continue cultural and spiritual connections to Country.

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1.   Introduction

1.1   Objective and approach

This component of work aims to provide evidence on three review questions, with the methodology of each review question being guided by the following sub-questions:

RQ1: How does Australia's approach to equity programs compare to international comparators?

RQ2: How is Australia currently performing on meeting the needs of under-represented cohorts, and how does this compare internationally?

The methodology is guided by the following sub-questions:

- How do post-secondary qualification participation and attainment rates compare internationally?
- What are the global trends in higher education equity?
- What are the approaches to higher education equity, amongst selected countries?

RQ3: How should gaps, barriers, and inequalities specific to identified under-represented cohorts, for example First Nations Australians and people with disability, be addressed?

- What are the key barriers for students from identified equity groups in accessing and participation in higher education?
- What insights emerge from the literature as to how these barriers could be addressed?

1.2   Methodology

1.2.1   Literature review

Work Package 1 involved a literature review (with search terms segregated by review questions) and a synthesis of existing national and international data. The search strategies and search terms are described below. For both review questions, the search strategy and search terms were generated in consultation with the UQ Expert Librarian and were refined following feedback and input from our Expert Advisory Group. For both review questions, we restricted our search to the last 15 years, we searched key grey literature sources, (e.g., Open Grey and Social Science Research Network), and scholarly databases for relevant academic literature (e.g. Web of Science, Scopus, Journal Storage [JSTOR]) and conducted online searches of targeted websites.

RQ1 – International approaches to higher education equity and outcomes

The focus of this literature review was to review and extract information on national-level higher education policies, programs and systems, and how they are structured in Australia and comparable countries. We focussed on selected OECD countries with comparable education systems, including England, Scotland, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States and searched for evaluations of national-level policies and reviews of equity programs of these countries. We also scanned citations and secondary citations of identified key/relevant articles.

We employed the search terms: "Higher education" + "policy and/or systems" + "international and/or global and/or Canada and/or United States and/or United Kingdom and/or New Zealand" + "(in)equity and/or disadvantage" + "access and/or participation".

In addition, we searched targeted government and relevant websites, across the pre-identified jurisdictions (see Table 1), with a particular focus on searching for documentation relating to equity policies and funding.

Table 1. List of websites targeted in online search to understand how Australia's approach to equity compares internationally, by jurisdiction.

Jurisdiction	Website
International	• www.oecd.org
	• www.unesco.org
	• https://worldaccesshe.com/
Australia	• www.ncsehe.edu.au
	• www.education.gov.au
	• www.research.acer.edu.au
	• www.newcastle.edu.au/research/centre/ceehe
	• www.abs.gov.au
UK	• https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/
	• www.gov.scot
	• www.universitieisuk.ac.uk
	• www.gov.wales
	• www.offfice forstudents.org.uk
	• www.ifs.org.au/topics/education-and-skills
	• https://www.sfc.ac.uk
New Zealand	• www.education.govt.nz
	• www.tec.govt.nz
	• www.educationcounts.govt.nz
Canada	• www.univcan.ca
	• https://studying-in-canada.org/
	• https://www.educanada.ca
United States	• https://eric.ed.gov
	• https://educationusa.state.gov/
	• https://www.ed.gov/

RQ3 – Gaps and barriers to be addressed for equity groups

For this component of work and to address this research question, our literature review employed a new set of search terms and extraction of data. The literature search for this review question focussed on reviewing and extracting information on causes/barriers and manifestations of disadvantage for population groups of interest in this Review across the student life cycle.

We employed the search terms: "higher education" + "gaps and/or barriers and/or inequities and/or policy and/or equity and/or access: + "Australian equity groups (listed)".

In addition, we searched the following Australian websites:

- o National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (www.ncsehe.edu.au)

- o www.education.gov.au

- o www.research.acer.edu.au

- o Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (https://www.newcastle.edu.au/research/centre/ceehe)

We again scanned citations and secondary citations of identified, key/relevant articles.

1.2.2 Data synthesis

At the same time as conducting the rapid review of literature, we reviewed and synthesised publicly available national and international data.

RQ2: How is Australia currently performing on meeting the needs of under-represented cohorts, and how does this compare internationally?

For RQ2, we reviewed international data on higher education trends and outcomes. We searched targeted publications, using the search strategies listed above and extracted published data/statistics, and drew upon international data/statistics available from sources in Table 1. Using cross-nationally comparative analyses, we had a particular focus on higher education data (including OECD publications on socio-economic gaps in educational outcomes).

RQ3 – Gaps and barriers to be addressed for equity groups

For RQ3, we again searched targeted publications, using strategies listed above and extracted published data/statistics. We accessed relevant publicly available Higher Education data (and relevant earlier school data) from Australia, including NAPLAN, and Higher Education Student Data. We reviewed data provided by the Department from any internal special projects that comprise ready-to-use curated student outcomes relevant to the project, including data that are not in the public domain, such as trends on outcomes for first-in-family students.

1.3   Outline of report

Section 2 presents international trends in post-secondary education outcomes and international trends in inequities in student outcomes. We include rates for post-secondary education more broadly by looking at tertiary education, before focussing more specifically on higher education. The purpose of presenting both tertiary education and higher education trends is to enable a broader understanding and evidence-base around post-secondary education rates to:

- Inform discussions that may follow from the release of the Universities Accord Interim Report. A key theme that emerged from the analysis of Accords submissions—and identified in the Universities Accord Interim Report—was a call for a single operating system (encompassing VET and higher education), or at least a system that enables an ease of movement between the two systems (see *Appendix - WP3AccordSubs* for the summary of findings from the analysis of Accords Submissions)

- Understand the changing trends that reflect the demand for individuals with a broader knowledge base and more specialised skills as globalisation and technology continue to re-shape the needs of labour markets worldwide (OECD, 2023)

In Australia, tertiary education is an umbrella term that encompasses both higher education (including universities) and vocational education and training (VET). In international classifications, such as that of the OECD, tertiary education encompass a broader category of qualifications than just higher education. Higher education qualifications include bachelor and higher degrees (ABS, 2019). Tertiary education also includes

short-cycle tertiary qualifications, including diplomas, advanced diplomas, and associate degrees (OECD, European Union, & UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015).

Section 3 then presents the findings relating to international approaches to higher education equity, including international trends relating to massification and different country approaches to address inequities.

Section 4 presents findings relating to gaps and barriers relating to equity group students in Australia, including a discussion of the underlying drivers of disadvantage. We conclude with the presentation of the Student Pathway Map, which is a conceptualisation of the influences and barriers that impact upon equity group students across the student life course.

2.   International trends in post-secondary education and student inequities

International trends: Post-secondary education

- Overall, Australia ranks highly in the attainment of post-secondary education, compared with other OECD countries.

  - In terms of tertiary education qualification attainment, Australia continues to rank highly compared with other OECD countries, with rates continuing to increase and with an increasing proportion of younger generations attaining tertiary qualifications.

  - In terms of higher education, Australia, in comparison to other focal countries, has higher entry rates into bachelor's or equivalent level programs for young people (although a slight decline in recent years) and has had consistently higher rates of graduates from bachelor's degree or equivalent programs.

  - However, the completion rates of students in Australia who enter a bachelor's program lags behind several other comparable countries.

International trends: Inequities in student outcomes

- For student outcomes relating to tertiary education, the findings demonstrate that there are clear inequities according to socioeconomic status and first-in-family status.

  - Educational divides by socioeconomic advantage/disadvantage manifest before post-secondary education, with disadvantaged students having lower expectations for tertiary education compared to advantaged students.

  - Socioeconomic divides are evident even when focussing solely on high-achieving students.

  - In Australia, the gap is stark between advantaged and disadvantaged students in expectations for tertiary education.

- For student outcomes related to higher education, there are again evident divides according to first-in-family status for access and attainment rates.

  - Although patterns are similar across focal countries, Australia has lower levels of bachelor's attainment for those whose parents have not completed tertiary education. There are also clear stratification patterns by parental qualification.

- There are observed inequities by disability status with lower rates of undergraduate degree completion for students with disability.

## 2.1 International trends: Post-secondary education

This section presents international trends in post-secondary participation and attainment rates. It includes rates for post-secondary education more broadly by looking at tertiary education, before focussing more specifically on higher education.

2.1.1 Tertiary education

Australia ranks highly in terms of tertiary education qualification attainment compared to other OECD countries. Figure 1 provides an international comparison of the share of 25-34 year olds with a tertiary qualification in 2000 and 2021. Australia ranks highly in terms of the attainment of tertiary educational qualifications for the 25-34 year olds, in comparison to the OECD average. In addition, like other OECD countries, Australia has seen an increase in the share of 25-34 year olds with a tertiary qualification from 2000 to 2021. The rate of increase between 2000 to 2021 has not been as dramatic as other countries. However, in Australia, the proportion of 25-34 year olds with a tertiary qualification in 2000 was higher than many other countries.

In comparison to other countries, particularly the United Kingdom, United States, New Zealand and Canada, countries in which we focus more closely in other parts of this report, the share 25-34 year olds in Australia with a tertiary qualification in 2021 was roughly equivalent to the United Kingdom, New Zealand and the United States, while lower than that in Canada.

Figure 1. Trends in the share of 25-34 year olds between 2000 and 2021 who were tertiary educated.
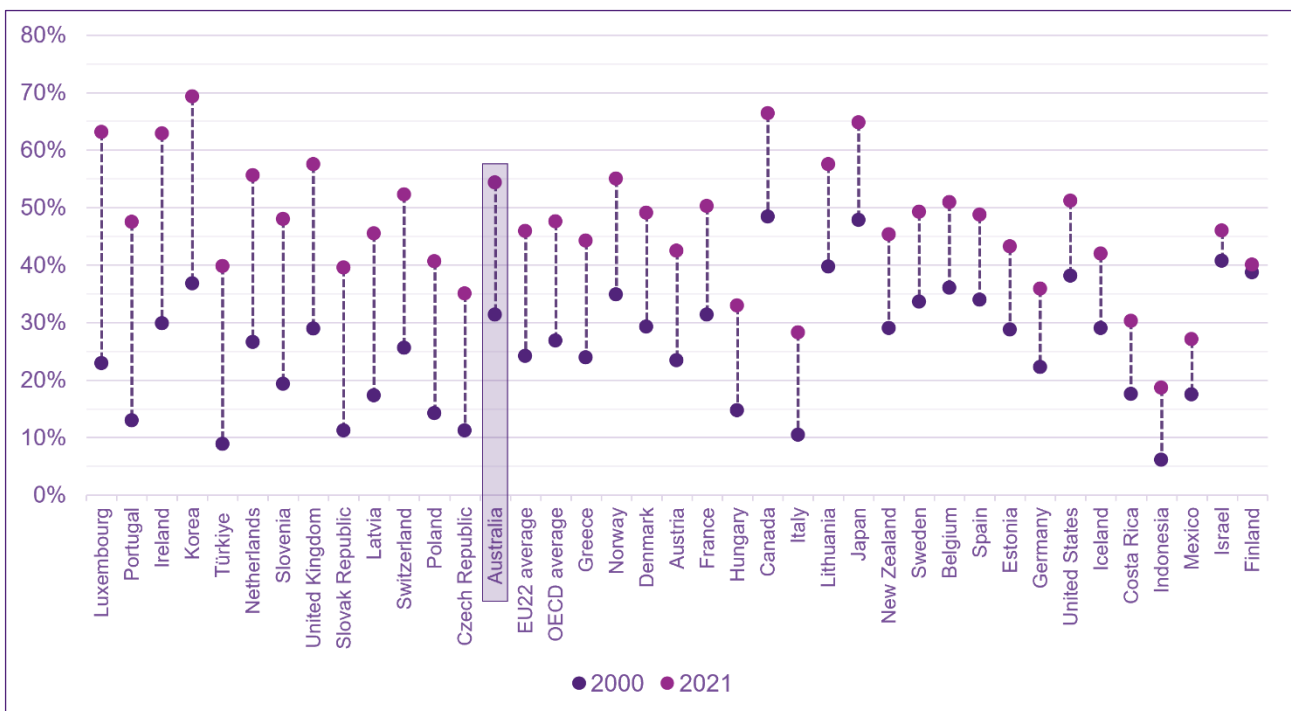
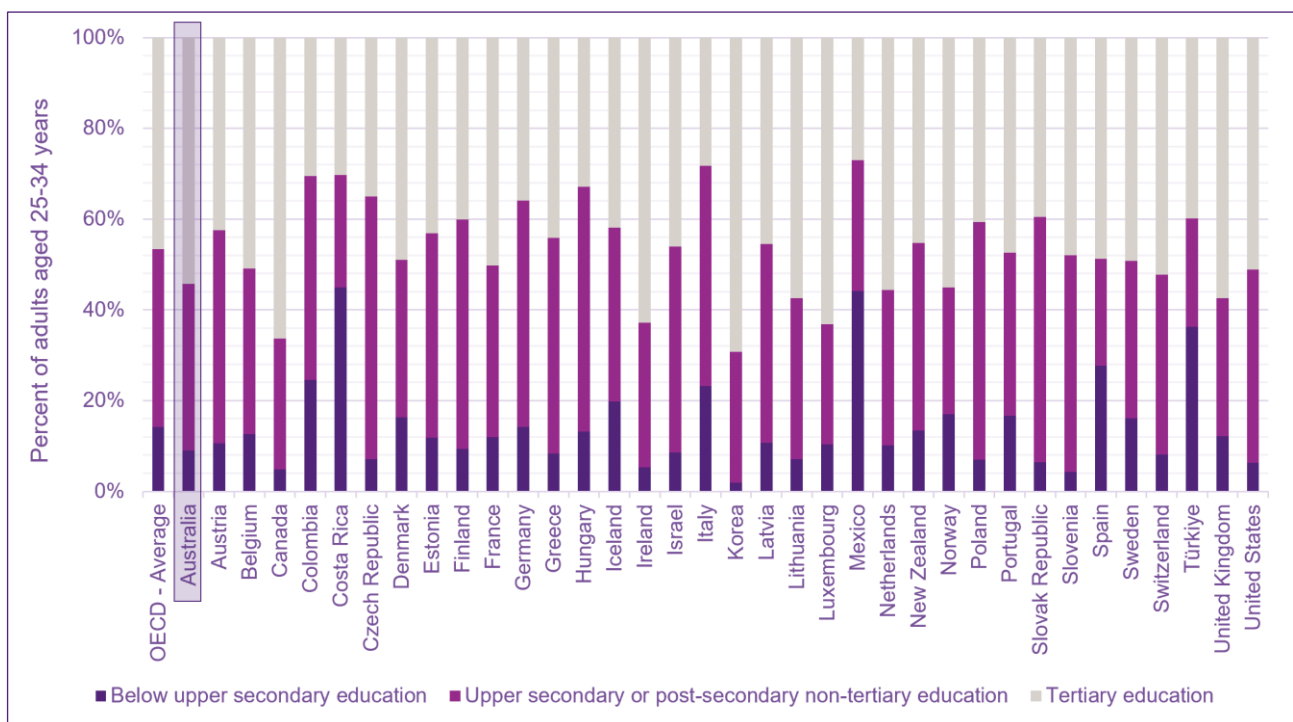Source: OECD (2022) Education at a Glance 2022.
Notes: Data were collected from each countries' labour force surveys, typically administered by the national statistics bureau. Classifying tertiary educational attainment is based on the International Standard Classification of Education 2011 (ISCED-2011) and refers to qualifications classified into codes 5, 6, 7, and 8.

Figure 2 presents the percent of adults aged 25-34 years, according to their highest level of qualification, while Figure 3 presents the percent of adults aged 35-44 years by their highest level of qualification. Data from both figures are from 2021.

Australia is roughly equivalent to the OECD average across both figures. A majority of adults aged 25-34 and 35-44 years have a tertiary qualification as their highest level of education. Although small, there is a higher percentage within 25-34 year olds who have tertiary education relative to the percentage of tertiary educated adults in the 35-44 year old cohort. This shows that, as per other countries, there is a greater proportion of the younger cohorts with a tertiary qualification than the older cohort with a tertiary qualification, indicating that more people are obtaining tertiary education now than in the past.

Further, we can see that, similar to the OECD averages, Australia has relatively low rates of below upper secondary education as the highest qualification level, and approximately 40% who have an upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary qualification.

Figure 2. Distribution of highest qualification attained across countries in 2021 for adults aged 25-34 years.

Source: OECD.Stat (2023)
Notes: Data were collected from each countries' labour force surveys, typically administered by the national statistics bureau. Educational attainment levels are categorised by National Educational Attainment Categories. Classifying tertiary educational attainment is based on the ISCED-2011 and refers to qualifications classified into codes 5, 6, 7, and 8.

Figure 3. Distribution of highest qualification attained across countries in 2021 for adults aged 35-44 years.
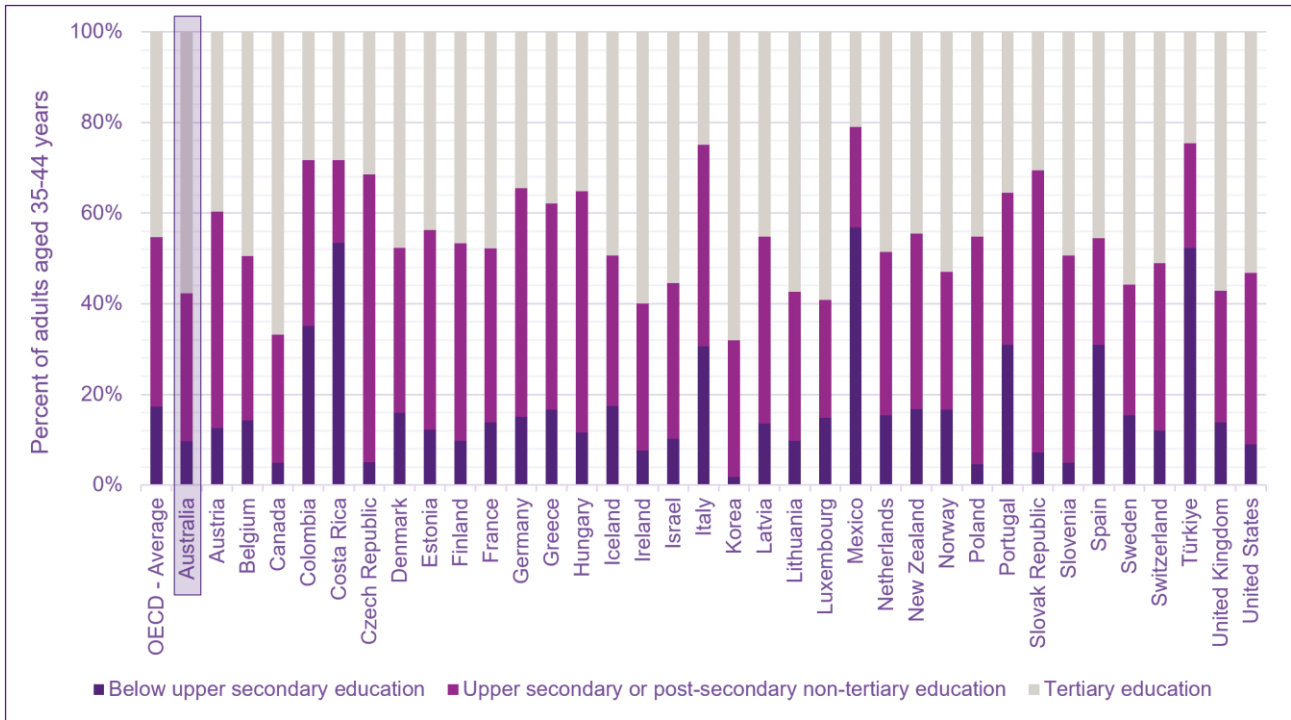

Source: OECD.Stat (2023)
Notes: Data were collected from each countries' labour force surveys, typically administered by the national statistics bureau. Educational attainment levels are categorised by National Educational Attainment Categories. Classifying tertiary educational attainment is based on the ISCED-2011 and refers to qualifications classified into codes 5, 6, 7, and 8.

Younger cohorts are also attaining tertiary education at consistently higher rates in recent years. Australia has been following a similar trend to comparative contexts in that there has been a steady rise in the percentage of 25-34 year olds who have attained a tertiary education between 2014-2021 (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Percentage of the 25-34 year old population who have attained a tertiary education (2014-2021) for Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the OECD Average.
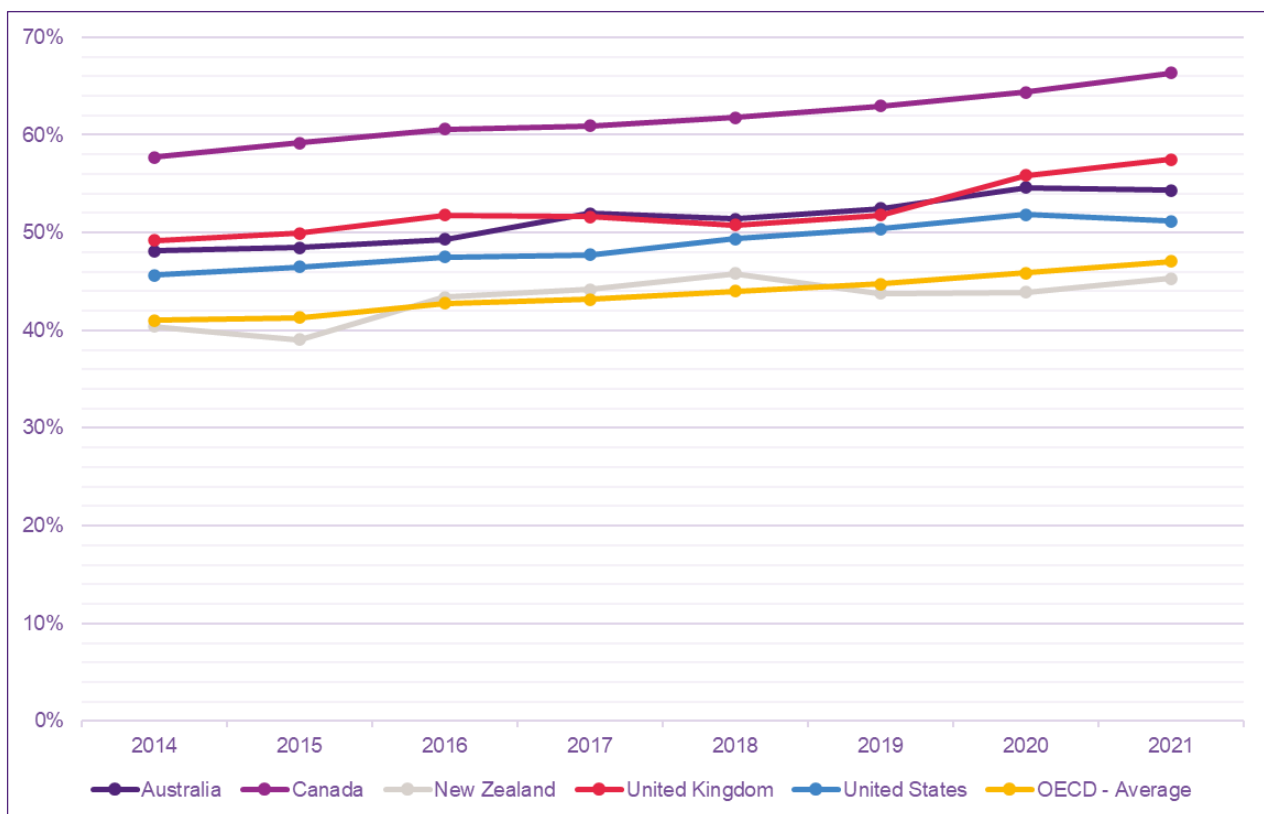
Source: OECD.Stat (2023)
Notes: Data presented in this figure are drawn from the Survey of Adult Skills, a product of the OECD Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC).

2.1.2   Higher education

As shown in Figure 5, Australia has seen higher entry rates into bachelor's or equivalent level programs (aged 25 years or under) relative to Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. There has also been a gradual increase in entry rates from 2013 to 2019. However, unlike the United Kingdom but similar to New Zealand, the entry rates declined in 2020.

Figure 5. Entry rate into bachelor's or equivalent level programs for individuals aged 25 years or under for Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom between 2013 and 2020.
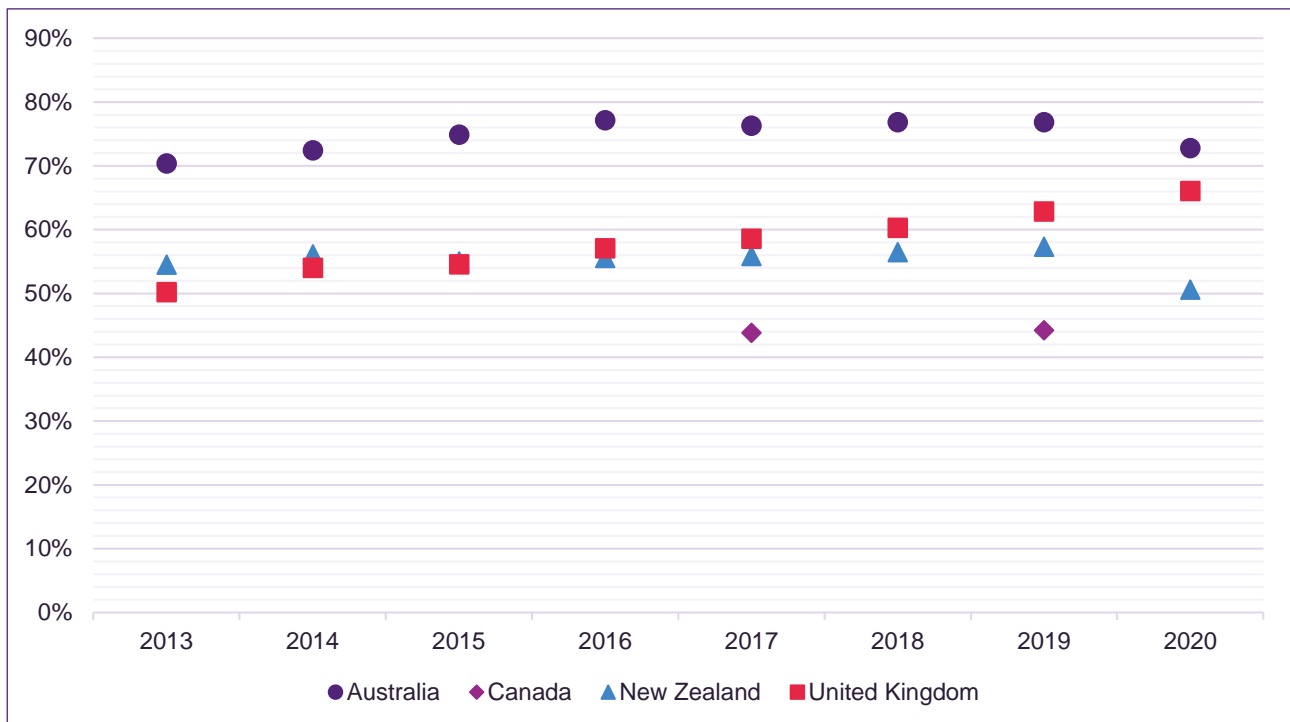
Source: OECD.Stat (2023)

Notes: Data for Australia were from the Australian Government, Department of Education, Skills and Employment. Data for Canada were drawn from The Education and Labour Market Longitudinal Platform by Statistics Canada. Data for New Zealand were from the New Zealand Ministry of Education. Data for the United Kingdom were from the Higher Education Statistics Agency Student Records.

Australia has also seen a consistent rate of new graduates from bachelor's degree or equivalent programs between 2013 to 2020 (as shown in Figure 6). The percentage of new graduates indicates the percentage of an age cohort (e.g., aged 30 years or under) expected to graduate higher education in their lifetime (OECD, 2018c). Australia, although consistent in its graduate rates, has consistently higher rates relative to Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom.

Figure 6. First-time graduate rates from bachelor's degrees, aged 30 years or under for Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom between 2013 and 2020.
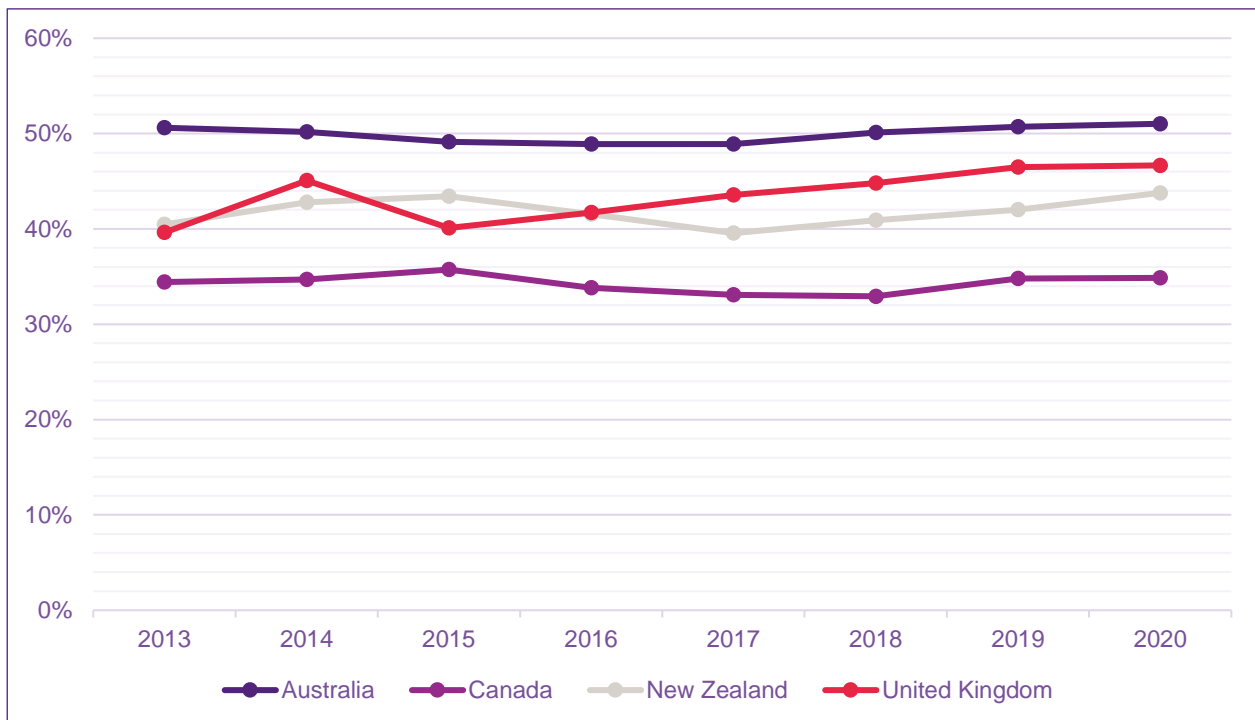
Source: OECD.Stat (2023)
Notes: Graduation rates represent the estimated percentage of the age cohort expected to graduate at some point in their lifetime (OECD, 2018). First-time graduates include those who have never graduated from the corresponding level of program before.

Although Australia has higher graduate rates for bachelor's degree programs, the completion rates of students who enter a bachelor's program is comparatively lower than similar contexts. As shown in Figure 7, Australia has the highest percentage of non-completion amongst bachelor's degree entrants compared to the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and New Zealand (OECD, 2022). Some of these rates may be accounted for by students who remain studying beyond the theoretical completion time of their entry programs.

Figure 7. Status of full-time students who entered a bachelor's program, by the end of the theoretical duration of their program plus three years (2020) for the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia.
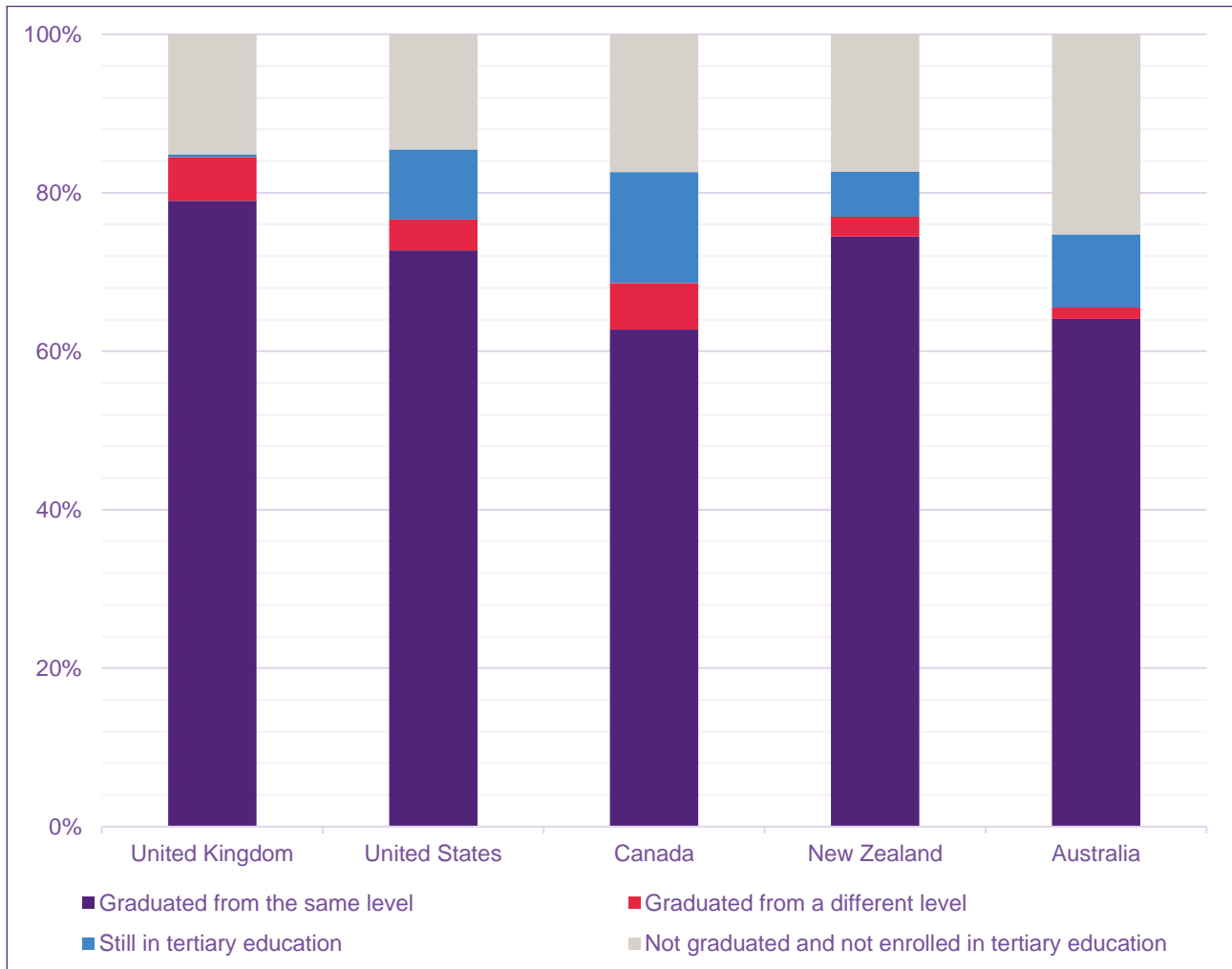
Source: OECD (2022)

Notes: Theoretical duration of a program is typically defined as three years of full-time study. Theoretical duration is often shorter than actual enrolment duration. Data for the United Kingdom were drawn from the Higher Education Statistics Agency Student Record. Data for the United States were drawn from the Beginning Secondary Students Survey. Data for Canada are from the Education and Labour Market Longitudinal Platform and the Postsecondary Student Information System. Data for New Zealand were from regular administrative collections from tertiary institutions. Data for Australia were from Australian Government, Department of Education, Skills and Employment, University Statistics Data Collection.

2.2 International trends: Inequities in student outcomes

This section presents available international comparative data on student outcomes by equity group status. We again present findings for tertiary education first, followed by findings related to student outcomes for higher education.

For student outcomes relating to tertiary education, the findings demonstrate that there are clear inequities according to socioeconomic status and first-in-family status. For student outcomes related to higher education, there are observed inequities by first-in-family status and disability status.

2.2.1 Tertiary education

2.2.1.1 Socioeconomic status

Socioeconomic background is related to whether adults have completed a tertiary qualification. As shown in Figure 8 below, presenting UNESCO data, adults who are in the highest socioeconomic groups complete tertiary education at higher rates, particularly in comparison to people from lower socioeconomic groups. There also appears to be contextual differences between Australia and the United States (the only comparable country with data available). There is a larger gap in tertiary education completion, depending on socioeconomic status in the United States, with 71% of the highest socioeconomic group completing tertiary education compared to only 22% of the lowest socioeconomic group. Contrastingly, rates of tertiary education completion are more similar between socioeconomic groups in Australia with 63% of the highest socioeconomic group completing tertiary education and 37% of the lowest socioeconomic group.

Figure 8. Percentage of adults aged 25-29/30-34 who have completed a tertiary qualification, by socioeconomic status for the United States and Australia.
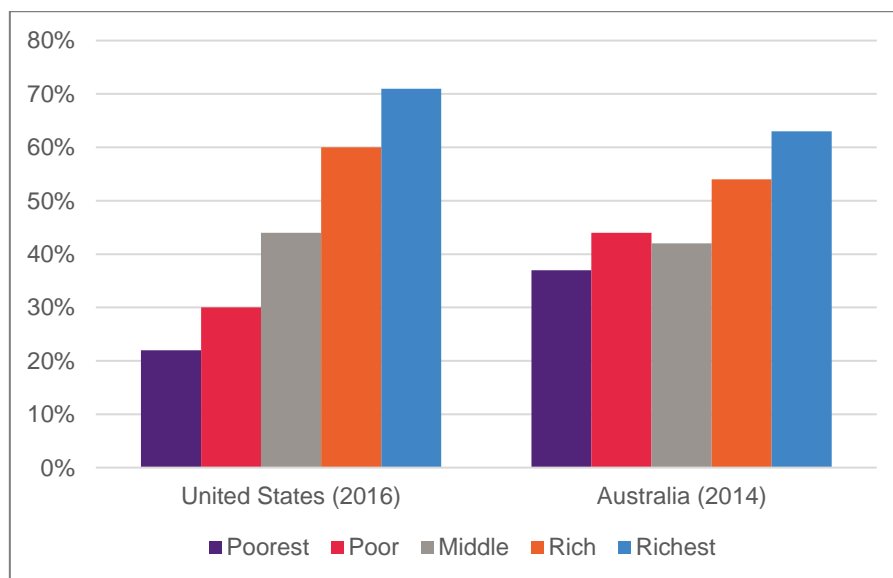
Source: UNESCO (2023)
Notes: Data for the United States were from the Annual Social and Economic Supplement of the Current Population Survey. Data for Australia were from the Survey of Income and Housing.

In addition, socioeconomic disadvantage also predicts the likelihood adults complete their tertiary programs. Data from the OECD (2018b) has shown that advantaged adults are more likely to complete tertiary education relative to their more disadvantaged counterparts. In Australia, adults who are advantaged are 5.9 times more likely to complete tertiary education compared to disadvantaged adults (see Figure 9). When

compared to similar contexts, the advantage afforded by higher socioeconomic background in tertiary educational completion is higher than New Zealand and Canada but lower than England, the United States, and Northern Ireland.

Figure 9. Likelihood of completing tertiary education among advantaged adults relative to disadvantaged adults (aged 26-65).
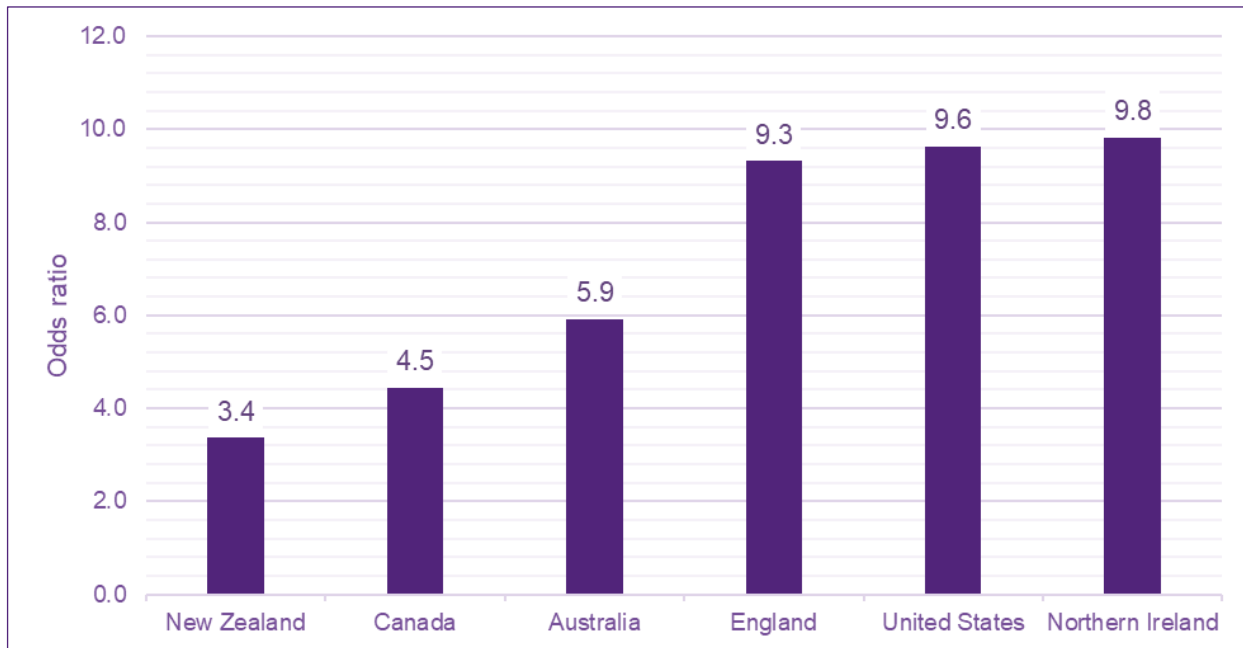
Source: OECD (2018b)
Notes: Data from 2011-2018 and collected by the OECD from the PIAAC. Adults from a disadvantaged background defined as those who have parents who had completed less than upper secondary education. Adults from an advantaged background have at least one parent who had completed tertiary education.

In addition to differences in tertiary education completion by socioeconomic status shown above, these gaps appear to differ by age cohort, reflecting contextual differences over time. According to data from 2011 to 2018 from the OECD (2018b), younger cohorts (aged 26-35) of disadvantaged adults (defined as adults whose parents completed less than upper secondary education) have completed tertiary education at higher rates than older similarly disadvantaged cohorts (aged 56-65). As shown in Figure 10, this trend is seen in Australia as well as similar contexts such as Canada, England, Northern Ireland, and New Zealand.

Figure 10. Percentage of disadvantaged adults who completed tertiary education.
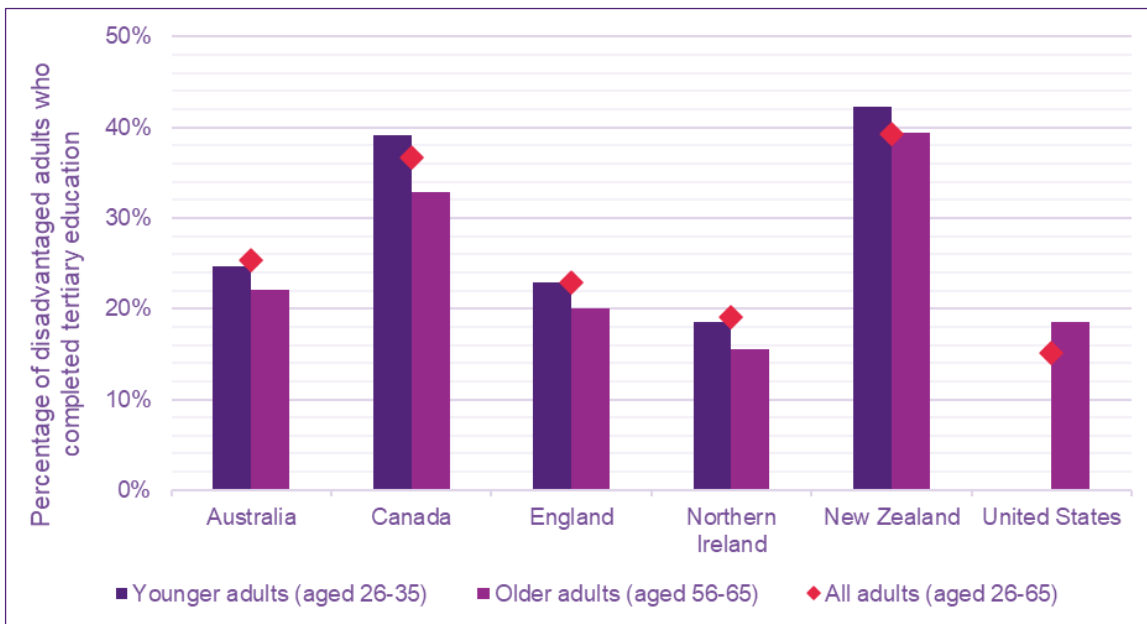
Source: OECD (2018b)

Notes: Data from 2011-2018 and collected by the OECD from the PIAAC. Adults from a disadvantaged background have parents who had completed less than upper secondary education. Adults from an advantaged background have at least one parent who had completed tertiary education.

The disparities by socioeconomic status manifest well before the period of tertiary education, as evidenced by divides in secondary school student expectations for tertiary education by socioeconomic advantage/disadvantage. Drawing upon data from 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) report, more students from advantaged backgrounds reported expecting to complete tertiary education relative to disadvantaged students across all the countries surveyed (OECD, 2019b).

In Australia, the gap is stark between advantaged and disadvantaged students in expectations for tertiary education. In Australia, there was a 35.5% difference between advantaged and disadvantaged student expectations to complete tertiary education. There was also considerable variation between countries in the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged student expectations. Students in the United States and Canada were comparatively similar in their expectations of completing tertiary education relative to Australia, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand (shown in Figure 11).

Figure 11. Percent of students aged 15 years who expect to complete tertiary education, by level of socioeconomic advantage and disadvantage.
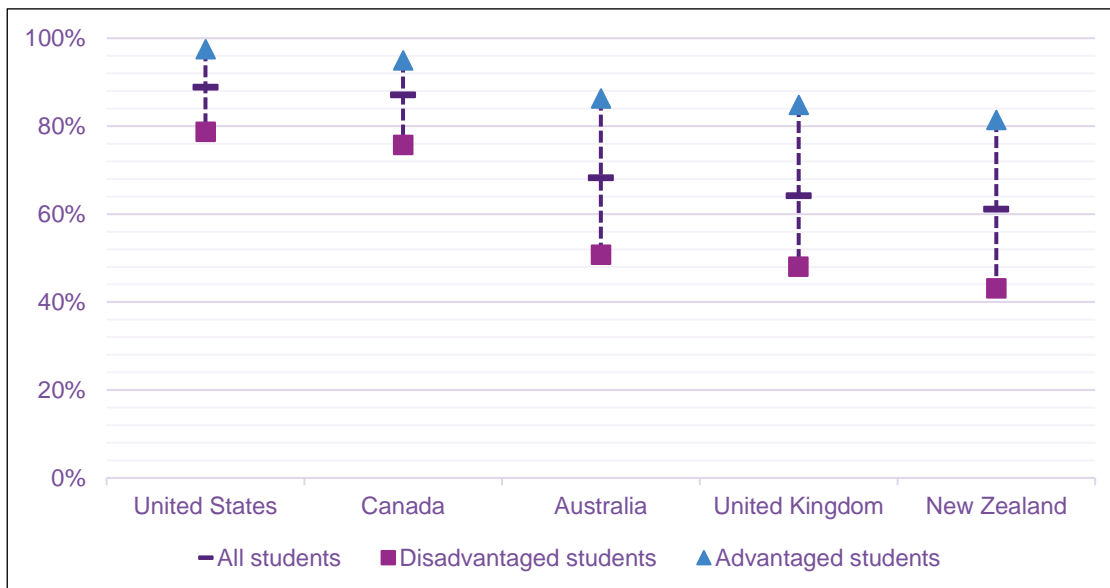
Source: OECD (2019b)

Notes: Students from a disadvantaged background are those in the bottom quarter of the national distribution of the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status (ECSC index). Students from an advantaged background are those in the top quarter of the ECSC index. Data were collected by OECD for PISA.

The influence of socioeconomic background on expectations for further education pervades even for academically high-achieving students (OECD, 2019b). As shown in Figure 12, of high-achieving students, more disadvantaged students do not expect to complete tertiary education relative to advantaged students, a trend seen across countries. Again, fewer students from the United States and Canada expect to not complete tertiary education compared to Australia, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand. Furthermore, the percentage difference between advantaged and disadvantaged high-achieving students in Australia was 26.9% compared to 10.5% in the United States and 15.0% in Canada.

Figure 12. Percentage of students aged 15 years who are high academic performers and do not expect to complete tertiary education, by socioeconomic advantage and disadvantage (2018).
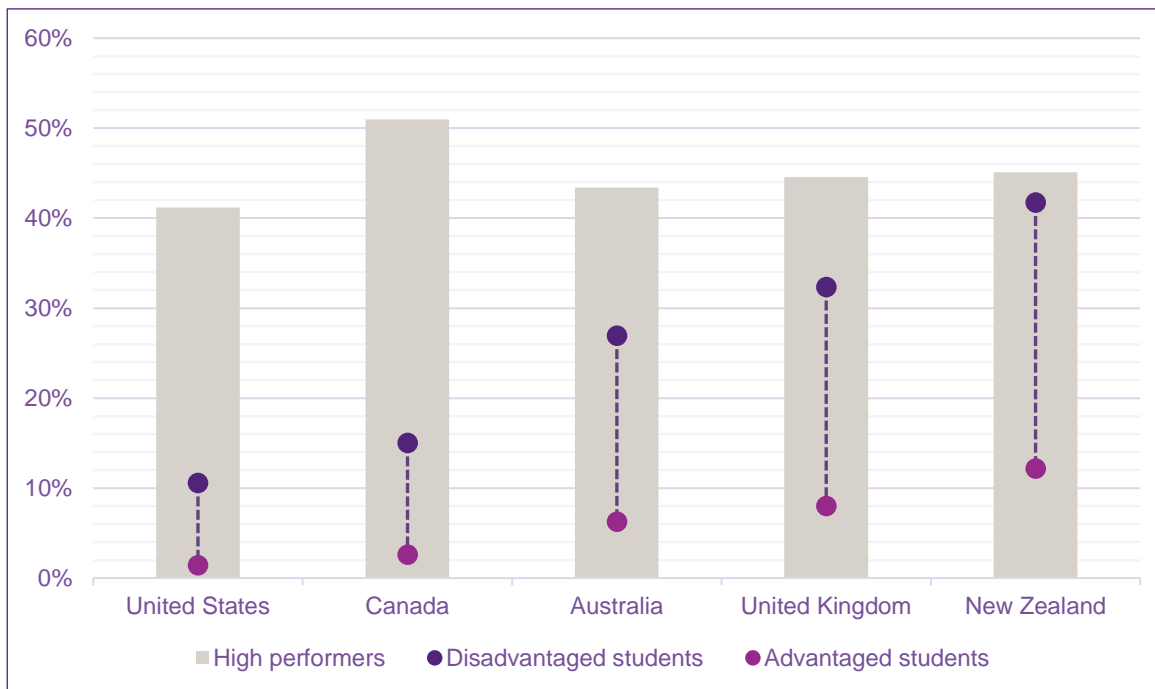
Source: OECD (2019) PISA 2018

Notes: Students from a disadvantaged background are those in the bottom quarter of the national distribution of the PISA ECSC index. Students from an advantaged background are those in the top quarter of the ECSC index. Data were collected by OECD for PISA.

2.2.1.2 First-in-family status

Students who are first-in-family are less likely to obtain tertiary or upper secondary education. Figure 13 presents a comparison of education attainment for students whose parents had not obtained upper secondary education versus those whose parents had obtained upper secondary education. According to OECD (2018a) data, a minority of adults aged (25-64 years) in Australia, New Zealand, and Canada who have parents who have not completed upper secondary education have also completed a tertiary qualification education as their highest level of educational attainment. Additionally, there is a smaller percentage of adults in Australia whose parents do not have upper secondary completion who have also completed a tertiary qualification compared to similar adults in New Zealand and Canada. For adults aged 25-64 years who have at least one tertiary-educated parent, a majority have also completed a tertiary qualification, with these rates being comparable across all three countries.

Figure 13. Educational attainment of 25-64 year olds in Australia (2012), Canada (2012), and New Zealand (2015), for those whose parents did not attain an upper secondary education and for those with at least one parent with tertiary education attainment.
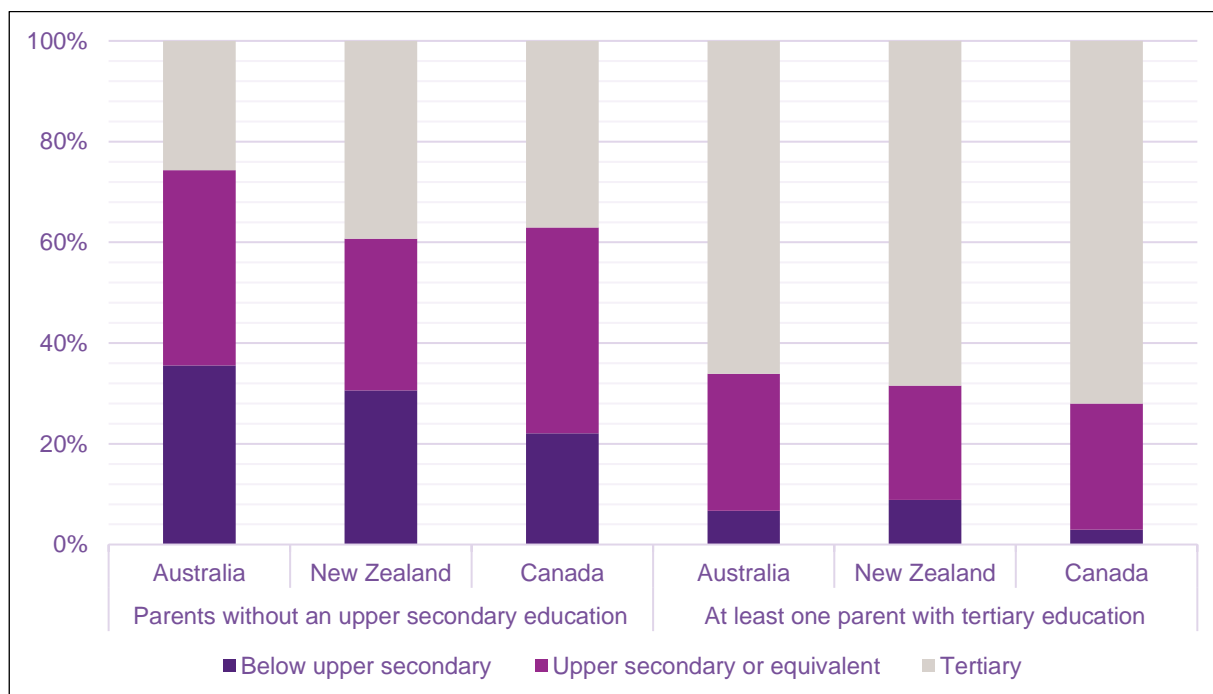
Source: OECD (2018a) Education at a Glance 2018.
Notes: Data from the PIAAC are based on ISCED-97. Below upper secondary ISCED-97 codes include 0, 1, 2, 3C short (ISCED-2011 equivalent codes are 0, 1, 2). Upper secondary or equivalent includes ISCED-97 codes include 3, 3C long, 4 (ISCED-2011 equivalent codes are 3, 4). Tertiary includes ISCED-97 codes 5A, 5B, 6 (ISCED-2011 equivalent codes are 5, 6, 7, 8).

2.2.2   Higher education

2.2.2.1   First-in-family status

We see similar divides by first-in-family status when focussing on the attainment of higher education qualifications. However, when compared to other focal countries, Australia has lower levels of bachelor's attainment for those whose parents have not completed tertiary education.

Specifically, a majority of 30-44 year olds who have at least one parent with tertiary educational attainment have attained at least a bachelor's degree or equivalent as their highest level of education, in comparison to those who do not have at least one parent with tertiary educational attainment (OECD, 2017a). As shown in Figure 14, less than 30% of 30-44 years olds whose parents do not have tertiary educational attainment also report completing at least a bachelor's degree or equivalent as their highest level of educational attainment. When we compare across countries, for those who have at least one tertiary-educated parent, rates of bachelor's degree attainment are similar. However, when it comes to higher education degree attainment for people whose parents have not completed tertiary education, Australia has lower levels of bachelor's attainment relative to New Zealand, Canada, and England (United Kingdom).

Figure 14. Percent of 30-44 year olds in New Zealand (2015), Canada (2012), England (2012), Australia (2012), Northern Ireland (2012), and the United States (2012) who completed a bachelor's or equivalent program, by parent's educational attainment.
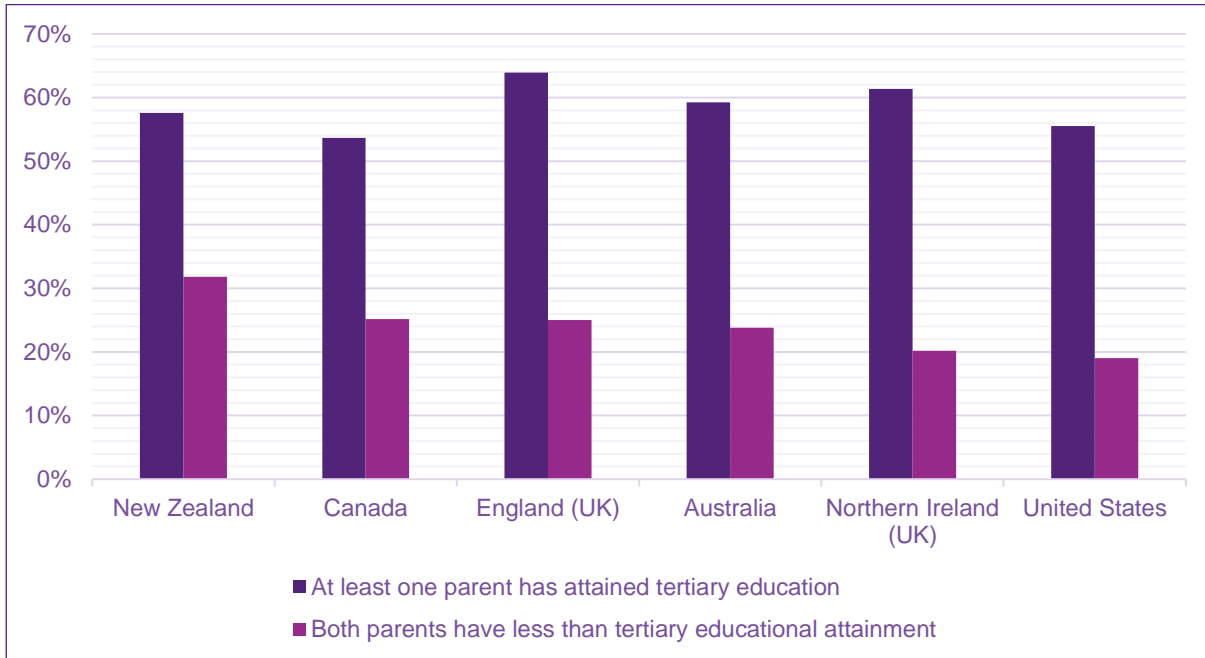
Source: OECD (2017a) Education at a Glance 2017.
Notes: Data are from the PIAAC and are based on ISCED-97. Tertiary includes ISCED-97 codes 5A, 5B, 6 (ISCED-2011 equivalent codes are 5, 6, 7, 8).

Similarly, parental tertiary qualification status is associated with entry into higher education. According to data from the OECD (2018a), educational attainment of a student's parents might be associated with delayed entrance into higher education, with these rates varying across countries. As shown in Figure 15, although, on average, the majority of students across several developed nations enter a bachelor's degree program for the first time before turning age 25, there is a consistent pattern where new entrants without tertiary-educated parents enter higher education at a lower rate than those who have at least one tertiary-educated parent. Cross-nationally, there is a smaller percentage of students under age 25 without tertiary educated parents entering into bachelor's degree programs relative to other similar nations, including the United Kingdom. The smaller percentage of younger new entrants without tertiary-educated parents into these programs might indicate delays in entering tertiary education as a whole, such as transitioning directly into the labour force (OECD, 2018a).

Figure 15. Percentage of new tertiary entrants entering a bachelor's or equivalent program before age 25 by those with no tertiary-educated parents and those with at least one tertiary-educated parent (2015).
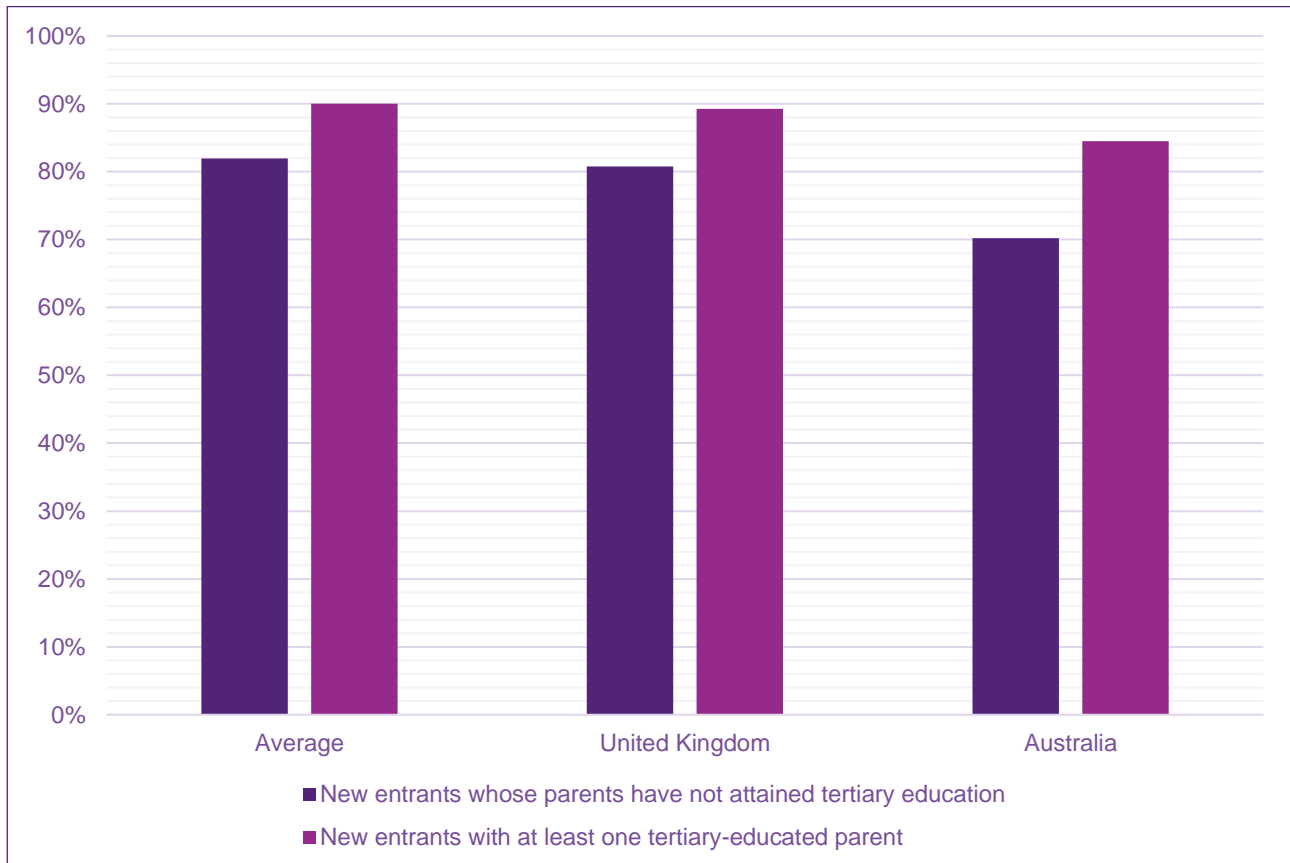
Source: OECD (2018) Education at a Glance 2018.

Notes: The share of new entrants below age 25 is calculated as the number of new entrants below age 25 divided by the total number of entrants of all ages. Data are from an ad-hoc survey conducted by OECD on equity in tertiary education.

Although much of the international data compares rates of entry and completion according to parents' tertiary qualification (or not), when looking at parental bachelor's or higher-level qualifications (or not), similar patterns emerge. As shown in Figure 16, data from the OECD demonstrates that young adults aged 18-24 years are less likely to enter a bachelor's or equivalent program if their parents had not attained a bachelor's degree level education, relative to other 18-24 year olds (OECD, 2019a). The decrease is around 49% in Australia. This suggests that despite wide expansion of adults attaining higher levels of education than in previous generations, they nonetheless experience lower rates of entering bachelor's programs if they are more socially disadvantaged.

Figure 16. Percentage change in the probability to enter a bachelor's or equivalent program for 18-24 year olds whose parents did not attain a bachelor's or higher education relative to other 18-24 year olds (2015).
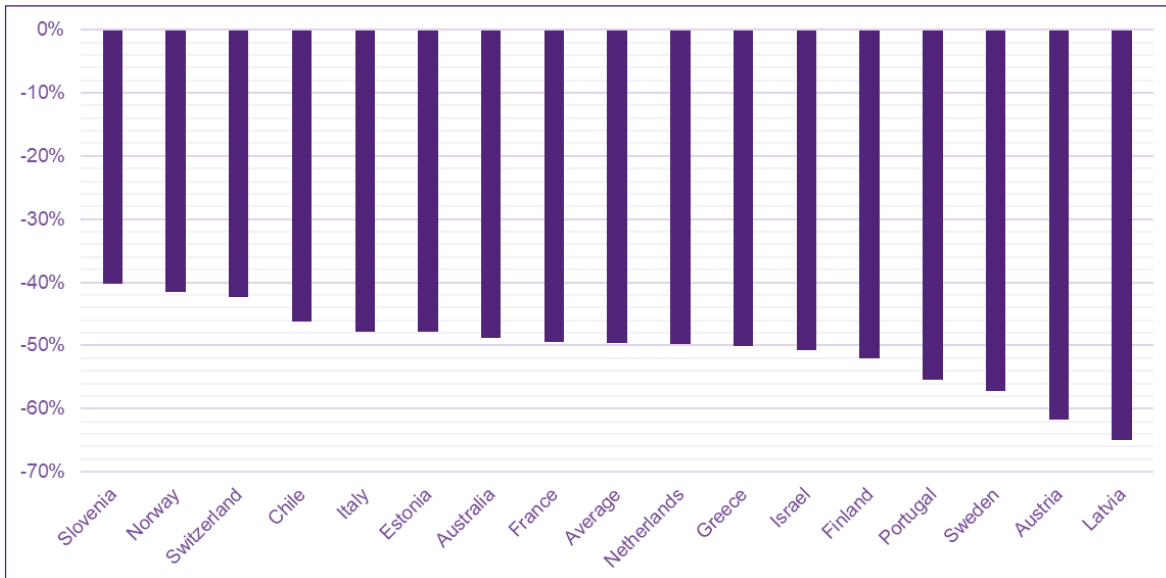
Source: OECD (2019b).
Note: Data from Indicators of Education Systems (INES) Survey on Equity in Tertiary Education.

Further, the completion rates of full-time students who entered a bachelor's or equivalent program are stratified by parental educational attainment. In Figure 17, we can see the completion rates of full-time students who entered a bachelor's or equivalent program in 2017 for Australia, United States, and the United Kingdom, disaggregated by the highest level of educational attainment of at least one parent (OECD, 2019). There are relatively high rates of completion from bachelor's degree programs for students who have at least one tertiary-educated parent across these countries. Although completion rates are lower for students in Australia whose parents attained lower levels of education (e.g., upper secondary, less than primary), these gaps are comparatively smaller compared to similar cohorts in the United States.

Figure 17. Completion rate of full-time students who entered a bachelor's or equivalent level program, by the highest level of education attainment of at least one parent, by the end of the theoretical duration of the program plus three years (2017).
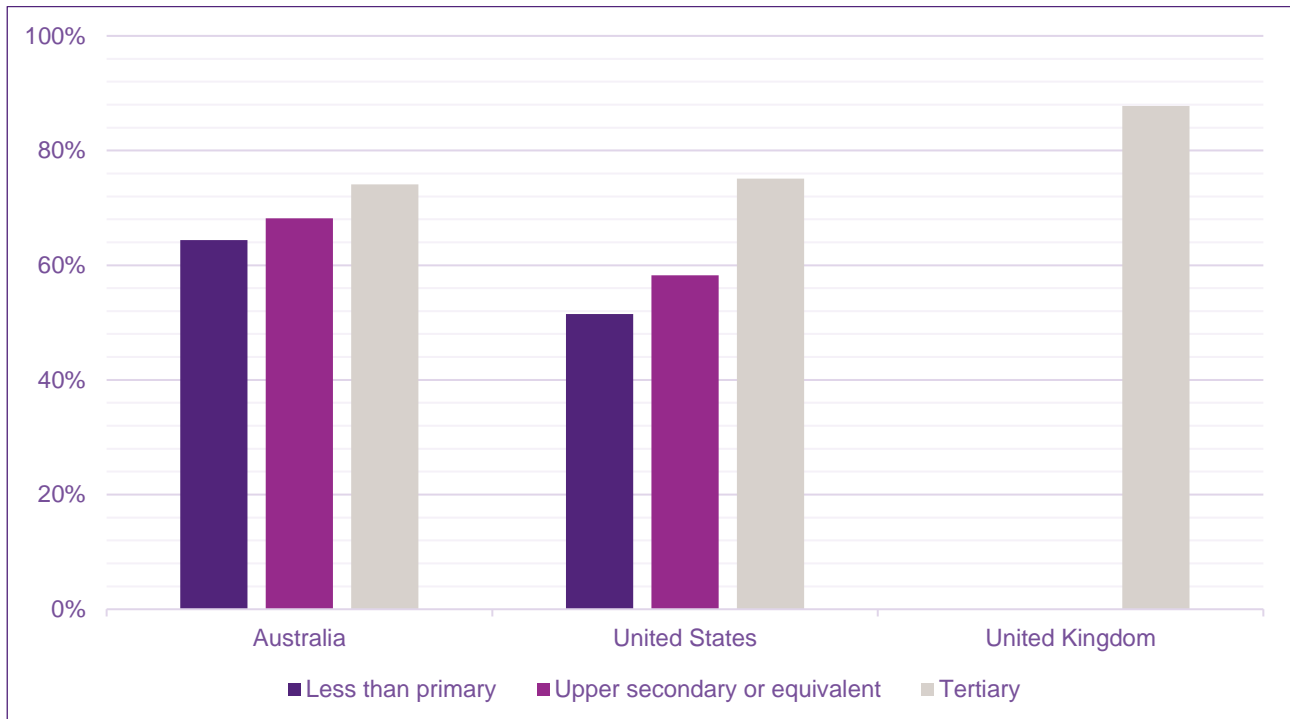
Source: OECD (2019) Education at a Glance 2019
Notes: Percentages are cohorts of students *within* parental education levels. Percentages do not account for part-time students. Data for Australia were from Australian Government Department of Education and Training, Higher Education Student Data Collection. Data for the United State are from the Beginning Secondary Students survey. Data for the United Kingdom are from the Higher Education Statistics Agency Student Record.

2.2.2.2   Students with disability

International data on disability status and higher education completion are limited. However, according to a report by the Washington Group on Disability Statistics (2018) using national Census data across countries, there are different rates of bachelor's degree attainment across countries, age groups, and disability status. In Australia, a higher percentage of men and women without disability have bachelor's degree attainment (as shown in Figure 18). A smaller percentage of men and women with disability, relative to those without disability have completed a bachelor's degree. This is a similar trend to Canada, New Zealand and the United States where a smaller percentage of men and women with disability have attained at least a bachelor's degree.

Figure 18. Percentage of adults aged 25-54 years and 55 years and above who have completed an undergraduate university degree, by gender and disability status.
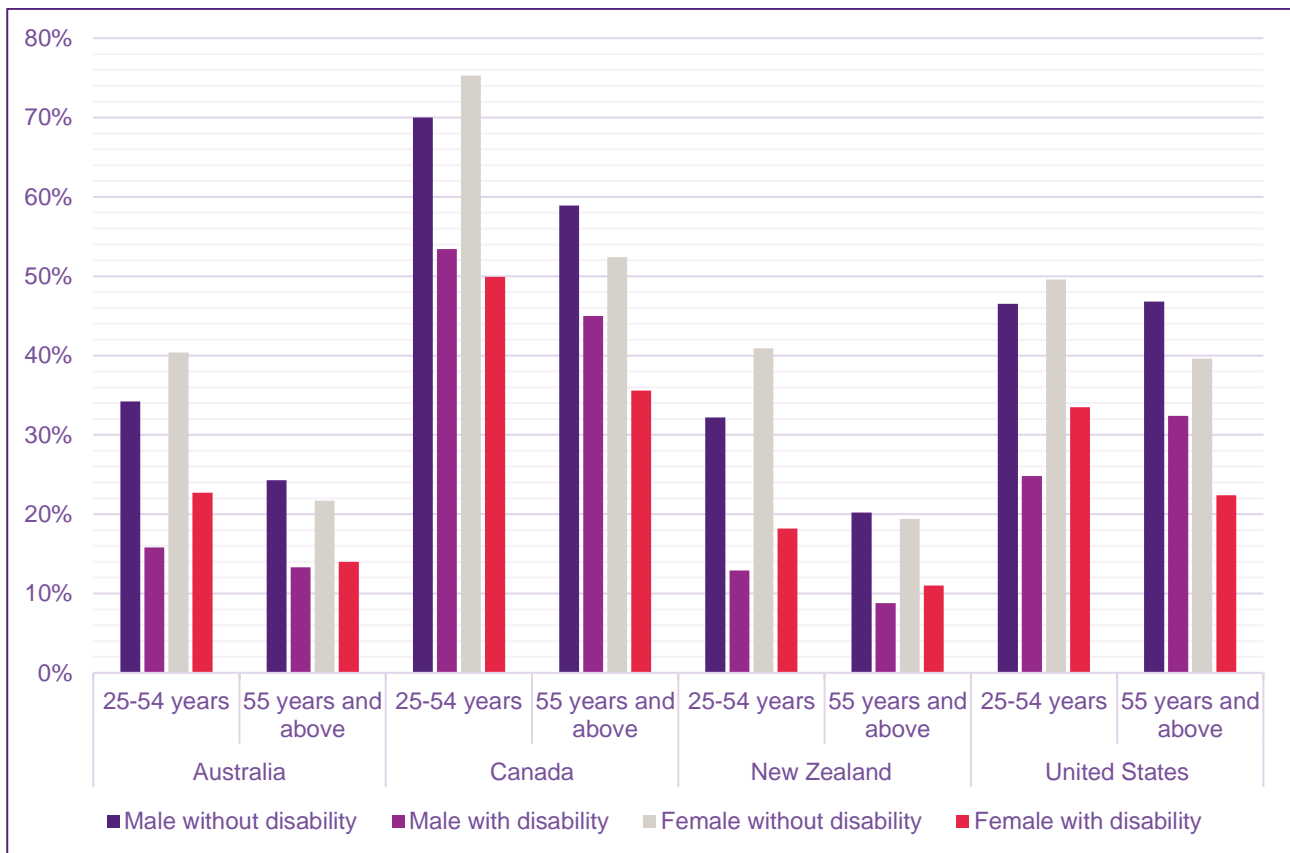
Source: Washington Group on Disability Statistics (2018)
Notes: Data are from 2014 to 2017, depending on Census years. Data are from national Census or related surveys.

3. International approaches to higher education equity

Globally, there has been a **massification** of higher education enrolments. However, there are also **sustained inequities**, particularly in the types of the institutions attended, and the types of degrees studied.

Many inequities stem from **prior early socioeconomic differences**, which then transpire into the type of institutions attended and the degree studied. In addition, the **increasing cost of tuition** put onto students and a lack of regulation around fees is argued to contribute to sustaining these inequities.

International approaches to higher education equity include:

- Strategies or Acts with varying emphasis on equity and how to address underlying drivers of disadvantage and institutional barriers, and variation in how big of a role Strategies/Acts play in the regulation of higher education institutions.
- Financial aid programs, including national level bursaries, grants for childcare fees, travel, cost of living.
- Affirmative action policies.
- Targeted outreach initiatives (variation as to who pays – institutions or government or both).
- Diversity and inclusion policies.
- National equity targets.

International approaches to higher education equity vary depending on the broader educational context, including:

- Whether higher education is governed at a state/jurisdictional level (e.g., Canada, United States) or federal level (England, Scotland, New Zealand) and whether there is a regulator (e.g., Scotland, England, New Zealand).
- The extent of financial contributions from students for fees (e.g., England has the highest fees for students and the United States where fees are not regulated) versus no tuition fees (e.g., Scotland).
- The existence of national higher education equity plans or strategies (e.g., Scotland).
- The existence of cross-education plans (with connections to the education system earlier in the student life course) (e.g., New Zealand; Scotland).

Examples of countries with **multi-layered, coordinated approaches** incorporating more strategies include:
- New Zealand, which has targeted equity funding, and nested within Strategies and Acts which focus on cross-education agency plans, barrier-free access to higher education, cultural collaboration.
- Scotland, with national targets, a national higher education approach to address earlier educational disadvantage, as well as extensive bursaries, no tuition fees, targeted outreach work (funded by both federal and institutions), frameworks and guidelines for effective outreach and support programs (including how to evaluate programs), alongside online information sharing, planned evaluation and monitoring.

The international review of higher education equity policies identifies Australia as having strengths in approaching higher education equity (including a national centre with data benchmarking, dedicated HEPPP funding for students from identified equity groups).

Comparatively, the case studies show that:

- New Zealand, similarly, has targeted funding for some students from identified equity groups. However, there is a multi-level approach with various Strategies and Acts that promote institutional change, removing barriers, as well as centring under-represented groups in decision-making and embedding culture in institutions.
- Although geographically close, England and Scotland have different approaches. England has introduced student loans, while Scotland has not. The latter has set equity targets, and federally supports a range of widening participation programs. England has institutional Access and Participation Plans but with no documented evidence of progress on achieving equity.
- The United States, Canada, and New Zealand aim to have representation and diversity in staffing.

3.1   Global massification and sustained inequities

This section presents the key findings identified from the international literature review. Consistent with the trends presented in Section 2, which demonstrate increases in enrolments and attainment of post-secondary education, including higher education, the academic and grey literature utilises the term 'massification' to describe the global increases in higher education enrolments over past decades. Massification is used to describe the process of expansion of the higher education systems from an elite to a mass system, which is driven by policies to increase enrolments and to include people who were previously excluded (Calderon, 2018; Marginson, 2016).

Massification is evidenced by large increases in the enrolments of people attending higher education institutions (Amaral, 2022), firstly evident in the United States (Calderon, 2018), but also observed in Europe (Sá, Tavares, & Sin, 2022), the United Kingdom (Giannakis & Bullivant, 2015), South America (Bertolin & McCowan, 2022) and Asia (Mok & Neubauer, 2016). There is some debate regarding the extent to which this massification has impacted the quality of service delivery and student learning (Giannakis & Bullivant, 2015) as well as debate about how it has impacted social mobility (Mok & Neubauer, 2016).

It was anticipated that a massification of higher education would reduce inequities in terms of who participates in higher education. Specifically, with increasing enrolments, it was expected enrolments from minority groups and those from more socially disadvantaged backgrounds would increase (Amaral, 2022). However, a massification of higher education has not resulted in an attenuation of gaps in access to, and completion of, higher education in relation to students' social backgrounds.

In addition, there is evidence that the nature of the gap has shifted, with inequities in the *quality of* higher education accessed within countries. This is evident from the differences in the institutions attended, with those from more socially disadvantaged backgrounds being less likely to attend more prestigious or elite institutions, as well as differences in the degrees undertaken, with those from more advantaged backgrounds undertaking degrees with higher earning potential, such as law and medicine (Aamodt, 2022; Bertolin & McCowan, 2022; Bolton & Lewis, 2023; Dill, 2022; Reay, 2022). The unequal completion of these degrees results in sustaining stratification trends in graduate outcomes, perpetuating existing inequities. These ongoing inequities are evident in many places, including the United States (Dill, 2022), the United Kingdom (Bolton & Lewis, 2023; Reay, 2022), Europe (Aamodt, 2022; Sá, Tavares, & Sin, 2022), South America (Bertolin & McCowan, 2022) and New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 2016; Theodore, Taumoepeau, et al., 2017).

As will be further discussed in the section on barriers (see Section 4), many inequities stem from prior early socioeconomic differences, which then transpire into the type of institutions that are attended (Sá, Tavares, & Sin, 2022). This was evident in the section on inequities in student outcomes (see Section 2) which found that, even amongst high-achieving students, those from socioeconomic disadvantage are less likely to expect to complete post-secondary education. Across many OECD countries, early socioeconomic inequities cut across later access, participation, and quality of higher education being attended (Amaral, 2022).

It could be that as higher education has expanded, degrees become worth less than previously, and the prestige of institutions become more important (Horowitz, 2018). Employers also try to make quality distinctions on the basis of prestige and social characteristics like a private school education. In the growing competition for higher prestige institutions, more privileged students have better finances, but also cultural capital, social networks, and access to network resources (e.g. other connections, information, influence), all of which give advantages over less privileged students.

A more common view is that this inequity is sustained by a combination of increases in the proportion of countries putting the cost of education onto students through student loan schemes, and the lack of regulation of institutional tuition fees (Callender, 2022; Dill, 2022; Reay, 2022). Research from the United States, which has the mortgage-type student loan schemes (Barr et al., 2019) in which are loans repaid over a set period of time, finds that the more elite institutions are charging higher rates, contributing to keeping

these institutions more 'elite' as these institutions direct funding into facilities that attract higher socioeconomic groups (Dill, 2022).

Unlike the United States, countries including England, Australia, and New Zealand have income-contingent student loan schemes which are repaid according to students' future income (Chapman & Dearden, 2017). These are considered superior to mortgage-style schemes because they avoid the stress of repayments and the creation of financial difficulties while they are students (Barr et al., 2019; Chapman & Dearden, 2017). Some argue, using enrolment data from England, that tuition fees do not result in a widening participation gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students with income-contingent loan systems, as they ensure no tuition fees are paid upfront (Murphy, Scott-Clayton, & Wyness, 2019). However, despite the different loan schemes, recent 2022 data from England, demonstrates clear socioeconomic stratification when looking at high tariff institutions. Stratification patterns of overall entry rates for high tariff institutions are more extreme with larger gaps between socioeconomic groups (Bolton & Lewis, 2023).

Being more debt averse is associated with reduced plans for higher education participation. There is evidence that low socioeconomic students are more risk averse, with increasing tuition fees and the possibility of never repaying an increasingly large student loan debt acting as a deterrent to accessing higher education (Callender, 2022). Specifically, research conducted in England using nationally representative samples of students studying toward their higher education entry-level qualifications, found that low socioeconomic status students are more likely to display debt-averse attitudes than high-socioeconomic status students (as indicated by the question, *"Borrowing money to pay for a university education is a good investment")* (Callender & Mason, 2017). This disparity was evident in 2015 and appears to have grown since 2002.

Conversely, New Zealand provides an example of higher education enrolment decision-making when student debt is alleviated. Following the introduction of their fees-free policy, which was intended to reduce overall student debt by removing first year fees, a sample of first year students at one institution said the policy was influential in their decision to attend university (Sotardi, Thompson, & Maguire, 2020). However, these same students needed additional support for adjustment into university.

There are some exceptions to these trends too, with some Nordic countries demonstrating improvements in equity based on patterns of access and participation in higher education (Aamodt, 2022). In particular, Finland and Norway have made more progress towards reduced inequity, compared to Denmark where the changes have been more modest and Sweden, where trends have remained stable. However, it is notable that the higher education model in the Nordic countries differs considerably to most other European countries and the United States, as they are free of student tuition fees and offer generous public student support. In addition, there is less of a difference in prestige between higher education institutions in the Nordic countries. Nonetheless, the most prestigious professional university programs, such as law and medicine, still favour socially privileged students, even if the social gap has been narrowed, for example, in Finland and Norway (Aamodt, 2022).

Comparisons of international data demonstrate that the average annual tuition fees for bachelor's degree programs for domestic students at public institutions in Australia is comparable to fees charged in Canada and New Zealand (see Figure 19). These fees are also considerably lower than tuition fees in England and the United States.

However, as can be seen in Figure 20—which looks at relative share of public, private, and international expenditure on tertiary education institutions (2019) for Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States—Australia contributes a relatively low share of public funds towards tertiary education, second to the United Kingdom.

Figure 19. *Average annual tuition charged by public institutions to national students for bachelors' programs (2019/20), in USD converted using PPPs for England, the United States, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand.*
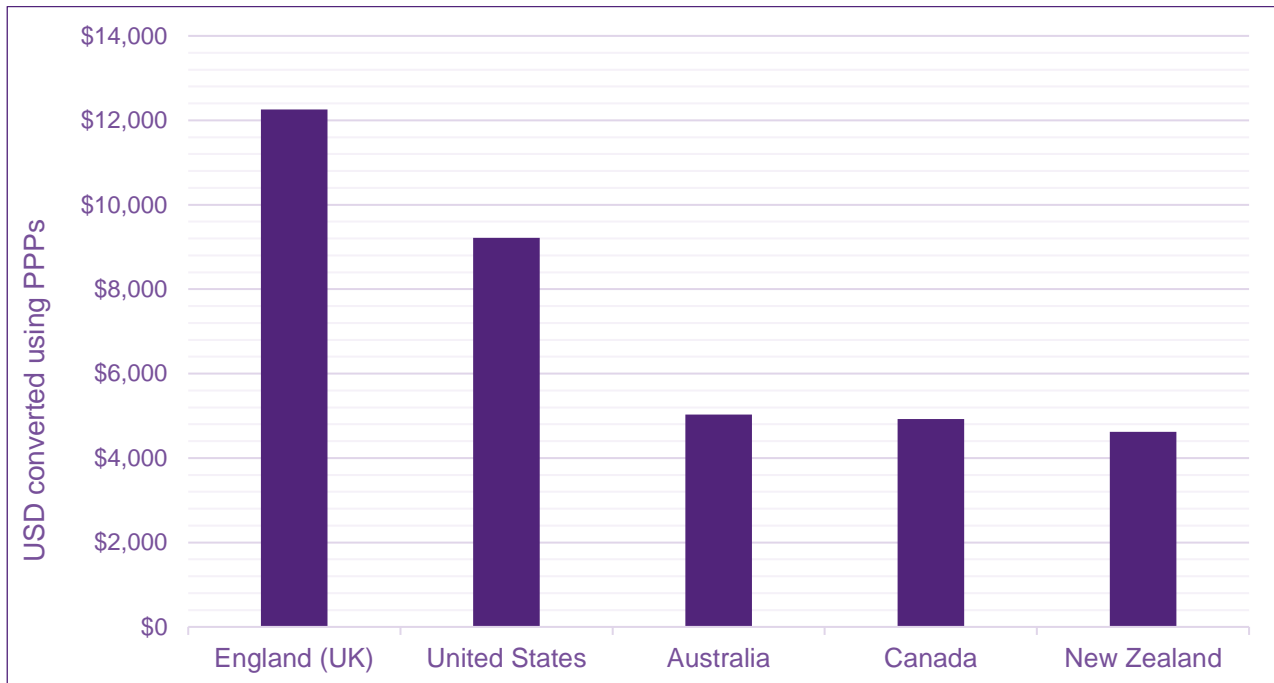
Source: OECD (2022) Education at a Glance 2022.
Notes: Data on tuition fees and public support are based on an ad hoc survey on tuition fees and financial support to students conducted by the OECD. Data on enrolment are based on the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UNESCO-UIS)/OECD/EUROSTAT enrolment questionnaire. USD is United States Dollar and PPP is purchasing power parity.

Figure 20. *Relative share of public, private, and international expenditure on tertiary education institutions (2019) for Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States.*
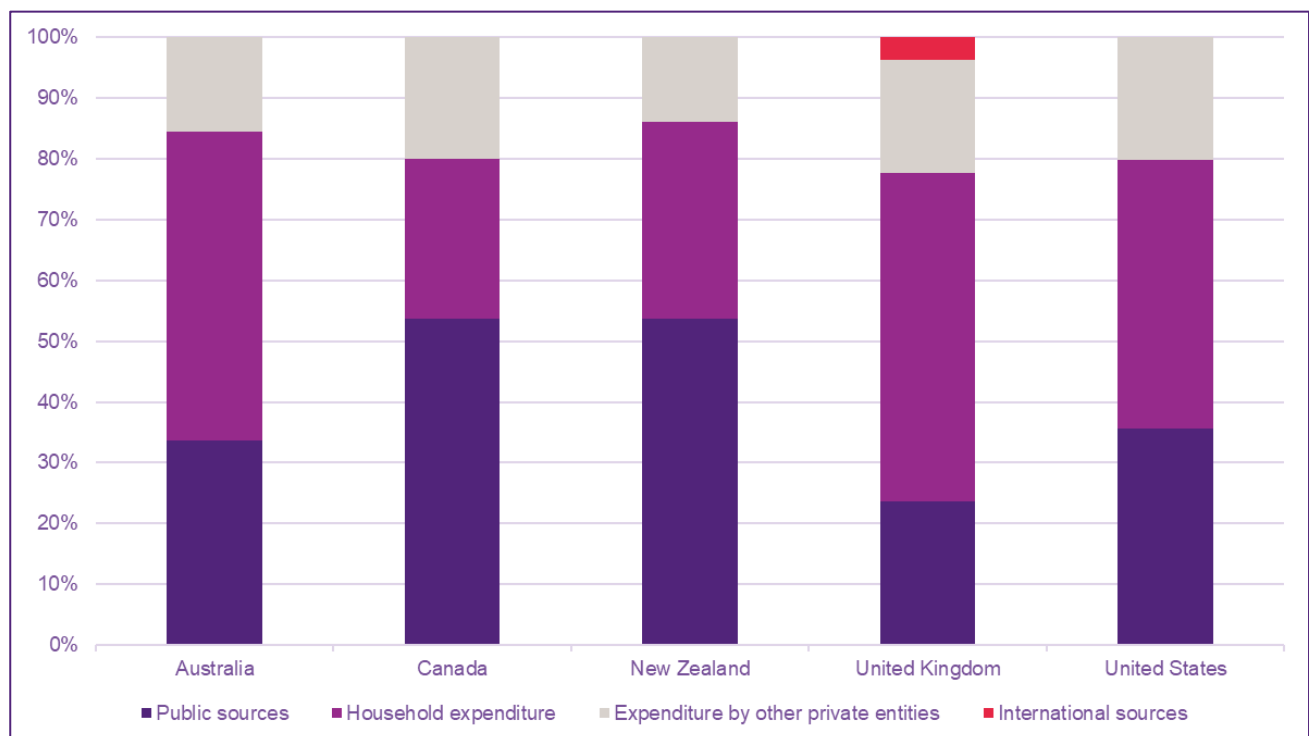
Source: OECD (2022) Education at a Glance

3.2　　Country approaches

This section presents the available evidence on reviews of higher education equity polices and programs. The first section presents the literature relating to of the review of policies and programs with an international comparator focus, and for which there is limited evidence. We then provide case studies of specific focal countries, detailing the available information on their current higher education equity strategies, and policies to provide a more in-depth account of what is being implemented in these countries.

3.2.1　　What is being done?

Regarding the prevalence of international higher education equity policies and programs, a 2018 survey conducted across 71 countries from all continents revealed that countries tend to use a mix of non-monetary programs and monetary programs (Salmi, 2018). The most frequently implemented non-monetary programs were affirmative action and reformed admission criteria (being implemented by 54% of surveyed countries), outreach and bridge programs (39%), retention programs (34%), establishing institutions in remote areas or distance learning (31%), specialised institutions (23%), and flexible pathways (23%). The most commonly reported monetary programs were grants and bursaries (reported by 85% of surveyed countries), student loans (63%), and no fees (45%), while 17% reported using their budget allocation funding formulae or earmarked grants to support equity promotion efforts at the institutional level. A few countries reported a funding formula with built-in equity indicators or incentives for universities themselves, as a way of pressuring institutions to take a more proactive role in improving access and success opportunities.

The same study attempted to compare equity policies internationally by their comprehensiveness and consistency. Of the 71 countries, only six were categorised as having an "advanced" strategy, being defined as having formulated and implemented a comprehensive equity promotion strategy that went beyond a general equity policy. In addition to having a comprehensive equity promotion strategy, these countries sometimes had a dedicated agency, implemented national and institutional actions and strategies, mobilised sufficient resources targeted to under-represented groups, took actions to help students with completing their degrees, and sometimes established concrete targets to enrol and support under-represented students. Among all the countries surveyed, Australia, Cuba, England, Ireland, New Zealand and Scotland stand out.

In another study (Nagarajan et al., 2021), again involving a survey of countries about their higher education equity commitments, similarly found the majority support non-monetary equitable access/success instruments (most commonly in the form of admission arrangements and outreach programs), and financial aid schemes, such as scholarships, while less than a third have equity targets. The survey was sent to national ministries with responsibility for higher education and experts in equitable access/success.

3.2.2　　What works?

Policy research, utilising a mixed-method approach of a literature review and case studies of selected countries from regions across the world, sought to explore which equity promotion interventions appear to be most effective at improving opportunities for access and success in higher education, and under what conditions do some policies work better than others (Salmi, 2019). The findings indicated that while there have been some studies conducted about the impact of equity interventions from a small number of countries, there is a dearth of comparative reviews of these studies from an international perspective.

The limited research that compares international programs and policies indicates that combining interventions has a stronger effect in promoting equity in higher education than individual interventions designed and implemented in isolation. Specifically, one meta-review of 71 (quasi-)experimental studies on outreach and financial aid interventions on access and completion rates of disadvantaged students in higher education, which examined the few studies examining the impact of several interventions implemented together, found that combining interventions made a more positive difference than individual interventions designed and implemented in isolation (Herbaut & Geven, 2020).

In the same meta-analysis, of the impact studies that were reviewed, there were twice as many evaluations of access to than success in higher education. Of these, the findings indicated that outreach-type programs can be effective for access rates when they include active guidance or simplify the university application process, and not effective when they just rely on providing general information.

Reviews of international financial aid schemes indicate needs-based grants can lead to improved enrolment rates and completion rates for disadvantaged students. The same meta-analysis showed that needs-based grants consistently appear to improve completion rates of disadvantaged students, and raise enrolment rates (provided they cover unmet costs and when there is an early commitment) (Herbaut & Geven, 2020). One evaluation of a needs-based financial aid scheme in England found that it had a limited impact upon student access to higher education without these conditions (Bowes et al., 2016). The implementation of the scheme was plagued with problems because demand outstripped supply, which translated into uncertainty for students, even after enrolment, about whether they would receive financial aid (i.e., low commitment). Institutions had to apply local eligibility criteria and there was a reduction in the amount of financial aid provided (i.e., not covering needs). In contrast, in another study conducted in Italy, a national review of the effects of financial support in higher education on student outcomes found that, even after accounting for selection processes occurring in secondary education, the provision of student grants reduced a student's probability of dropping out and raised the likelihood of them graduating on time (Facchini, Triventi, & Vergolini, 2020). They also found the effects were stronger for students who were from the south of Italy, who tend to be more likely than their counterparts to be from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, suggesting financial support systems may be more beneficial to more disadvantaged categories of students.

In addition to monetary measures, non-monetary measures are also needed to address the impacts that have manifested from earlier social disadvantage (Salmi & D'Addio, 2021). For instance, some of the impacts from earlier socioeconomic disadvantage which need non-monetary measures include: inadequate academic preparation and schooling, low educational expectations and aspirations, competing family or cultural interests, and low confidence (Eggins, 2010). Some of the non-monetary programs mentioned above are intended to address these, including bridging programs, flexible admissions processes, programs raising academic preparedness and aspirations (Salmi & Bassett, 2014). Although, as mentioned above, there is a lack of international comparative reviews on the effectiveness of these programs.

Further, the effectiveness of these measures does not always outperform broader social inequities and hierarchical higher education systems. In England, following the introduction of tuition fees, institutions are required to submit Access and Participation Plans (Access and Participation Plans are described further below in 3.2.5) which are institutional plans to implement a range of monetary and non-monetary initiatives to widen access and participation. The submission of these is now regulated.

Historically, in England, there has been a strong relationship between social background, school attainment, and university admissions. A review of longitudinal data on access and participation demonstrates that the new initiatives are producing only minor improvements for minority and socially disadvantaged groups, and are not equalising opportunities with clear stratification remaining in the more elite (high tariff) institutions (Millward, 2023). Although reviews of higher education equity policy acknowledge the role of tuition fees as a deterrent for students, there is also acknowledgement that not all countries have the resources to offer free high-quality higher education to all (Salmi & D'Addio, 2021). However, the authors also make the point that regulation of tuition fees is needed to avoid a hierarchy of institutions which will perpetuate existing stratifications.

The findings from the review of Equity Promotion Policies (involving a literature review and case study analysis translated the following policy recommendations to reduce disparities in higher education) (Salmi, 2019):

Equity policies must take a comprehensive approach, that has alignment with national values.

This approach needs to include both financial and non-monetary aspects into consideration, coordinating national-level and institutional level actions in a complementary manner, putting as much emphasis on

success as on access (with the former having previously had less focus). In addition, having alignment between equity values and a comprehensive set of strategies and resources is important. This conclusion is based on their findings from a survey with 71 countries and consultations with stakeholders (Salmi, 2018). It was found that it is important to have resources commensurate with the national equity agenda of particular importance: including alignment between vision of the goals with policy instruments and resources.

There is a need for evaluation, backed with strong datasets.

There is a need for more systematic and rigorous evaluation to measure which interventions, and combinations of interventions, are most effective. It was noted from this review that Australia—while seen as comparatively comprehensive with supporting a wide array of policies, instruments and measures with universal and targeted elements—has a dearth of impact studies. This requires strong databases to identify all equity groups, monitor disparities, measure progress in terms of access and graduation and effectiveness of interventions.

There needs to be greater priority to students with disability.

This includes defining their needs, providing sufficient resources, and empowering higher education institutions to place this dimension high on their equity agenda.

There need to be equitable and strong structural elements.

Finally, the review of case studies (which included five countries) drew the following conclusions regarding the importance of structural elements that have a strong influence on the scope and magnitude of disparities in higher education (Salmi, 2019). These system or structural level enablers included developing the secondary education system to enable streaming between general education and vocational training within secondary schools. It also includes paying attention to selectivity in the admission policies of universities as well as the degree of institutional differentiation of higher education systems. Finally, it includes the availability of financial aid for students from disadvantaged groups needs to be ensured.

3.2.3   A summary of national case studies

The next section provides case studies of international approaches to equity in higher education, with a focus on selected OECD countries (specifically New Zealand, Canada, England, Scotland, and the United States). Table 2 provides a mapping of these countries' approaches to higher education equity, indicating the inclusion or exclusion of targeted equity funding, attainment targets, national statements or approaches to higher education equity as well as the governance of higher education system and the national approach to equity more broadly. The intent of this table is to provide a reference point for which the specifics are discussed under the summary of each country below.

Approaches to higher education equity vary across these case studies depending on the broader educational context, including:

- Whether higher education is governed at a state/jurisdictional level (e.g., Canada, United States) or federal level (England, Scotland, New Zealand) and whether there is a regulator (e.g., Scotland, England, New Zealand).
- The extent of financial contributions from students for fees (e.g., England with the highest fees for students) versus no tuition fees (e.g., Scotland).
- The existence of national higher education equity plans or strategies (e.g., Scotland).
- Cross-education plans (with connections and overlaps with the education system earlier in the student life course) (e.g., New Zealand; Scotland).

International approaches to higher education equity include:

- National Higher Education Equity Strategy (e.g., Scotland has A Blueprint for Fairness which has extensive recommendations addressing early education and the schooling system, institutional architecture for better regulation and data monitoring, flexible transitions and bridging programmes, and funding.

- Higher Education Strategies or Acts with varying emphasis on equity and the role it plays in the regulation of institutions (e.g., New Zealand has a Tertiary Education Strategy that includes a pillar of equity encompassing barrier-free access to higher education. The Strategy is used as criteria for regulation and allocation of funding to institutions).

- Financial aid programs, including national level bursaries (e.g., notably, Scotland, as well as having tuition-free education, provides a range of bursaries and grants to help students cover cost of living including travel grants, grants for lone parents to cover childcare costs, bursaries and accommodation grants).

- Affirmative action policies (previously the United States).

- Targeted outreach initiatives (most countries, but variation as to who pays: institutions or government or both).

- National equity targets (e.g., Scotland, but this is backed by their comprehensive equity in higher education plan, A Blueprint for Fairness).

- The development and submission of institutional documentation regarding equity. This includes Diversity and Inclusion Plans (e.g., Canada, where research funding is dependent on these, covering representation in staffing and student numbers) and Access and Participation Plans (e.g., England, where institutions need to submit these to charge students tuition fees over £6,000).

As is already emerging from the above, there are some countries with multi-layered approaches. Notably:

- New Zealand has targeted equity funding programs (similar to Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program; HEPPP) for Māori, Pacific, and learners/students with disability, while also having national Higher Education Acts and Strategies with pillars dedicated to equity that focus on addressing institutional and other barriers. There are also other strategies and plans, including a cross-agency education strategy that cuts across early education, secondary schooling, and post-secondary education, with a focus on fair and barrier-free access to education. It embeds Indigenous language and culture throughout and implements broader policies in which consultation must be undertaken with Māori prior to Ministers issuing statements to education agencies. The fees-free policy introduced in 2017 may have some impact upon students' perception of attending university.

- Scotland is guided by A Blueprint for Fairness – a national plan to achieve equal access to higher education, which is nested within broader national equity policies. It is also nested within the broader Post-16 Education Act 2013, which sets out the current strategy regarding equity in higher education. Scotland also has attainment targets for students from the most socially disadvantaged backgrounds. These strategies and plans have translated into a range of bursaries and schemes to enable ease of access, as well as guidance on bridging programs, outreach, and other activities for universities and others to support access to higher education. Scotland does not charge Scottish students higher education fees. Although Scotland demonstrates some evidence of progress towards meeting attainment targets, there is minimal or an absence of evidence of effectiveness due to a lack of evaluation.

To summarise the key aspects for other countries:

- England has the highest tuition fees in the world, and for universities to charge higher fees, they need to submit Access and Participation Plans to the Office for Students detailing plans to support the access and participation of students who have experienced disadvantaged. There is no clear

evaluative criteria for how these are approved and no evidence of these achieving equitable outcomes.

- Canada and the United States lack national higher education equity policy and federal higher education equity units, with education being governed at state or jurisdictional levels. There is federal support for students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts, by way of scholarships. Further:

  - o In Canada, support depends upon equity status and circumstances, and region. In addition, for institutions to receive research funding through the Canada Research Chairs (CRC) program, all institutions with five or more CRC positions are required to develop and publish institutional Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) action plans (e.g., targeting recruitment of under-represented groups, flexible pathways, as well as university structures, including representation of minority groups in higher education).

  - o The United States continues to offer the Pell Grant, which with the rising cost of tuition fees, has diminished purchasing power alongside a complicated application. In the United States, there are some federal appropriations to minority servicing institutions, although again they are considered insufficient to compete with elite institutions.

Table 2. Mapping summary of higher education equity approaches of selected OECD countries.

Country	Govern-ance	Tuition fees for students	Regul-ator	Federal targeted equity funding (e.g., like HEPPP for outreach)	Institutional targeted equity funding, e.g., for outreach or other programs.	Federal scholarships/ bursaries	Institutional scholarships /bursaries	Other programs	Other equity governance	Higher education equity strategy	Higher Education Strategy, which incorporates Equity	Groups covered	National Equity Policy	Amount of federal funding on higher education equity	Targets	Other
England	Federal	Yes.	Yes - Office for Students.	The Office for Students funds: Uni Connect.	Yes, required. Higher education providers obliged to invest a proportion of their tuition fee income on scholarships/ bursaries and non-monetary policy instruments such as outreach and bridge programs.	No.	Yes, required. Higher education providers are obliged to invest a proportion of their tuition fee income on scholarships/bursaries and non-monetary policy instruments such as outreach and bridge programs.	The Office for Students also funds: The Addressing Barriers to Student Success program.	Submission of Access and Participation Plans for higher education providers who charge a fee above £6,000 or who wish to be registered via the Office for Students.	No.	**Higher Education and Research Act 2017** - (includes guidelines for Access and Participation Plans). **Inclusive teaching and learning in higher education as a route to excellence**. – government guidance note for higher education providers (on creating inclusive learning and teaching environments for students with disability).	Low-income students Gender groups Minority groups: based on ethnicity, religion, and students with disability.	**The United Kingdom 2010 Equality Act** (includes a section of the Act dedicated to the prohibition of governing body of a higher education institution discriminating against a person).	Unclear, but it is an expectation of institutions to use some of their tuition fees for this purpose.	No.	Very high fees, in comparison to world. The evaluative criteria for Access and Participation Plans is unclear - There seems to be broad variation across institutions on level of detail.
Scotland	Federal	No.	Yes - Scottish Funding Council.	Some funding towards outreach and widening access.	Yes, funding by institutions for outreach and widening access.	Yes, multiple: → Bursaries for people with low incomes → Lone Parents' Grant → Dependants Grant. → Disabled Students' Allowances → Travel expenses for health profession courses. → Bursary & accommodation grant for care-experienced students. → Funding for Nursing & Midwifery courses.	Yes, institutions offer bursaries/ scholarships as well.	**The Scottish Framework for Fair Access (2019** - guide to help practitioners plan and evaluate activities to widening access: → Framework for Fair Access toolkit website → Scotland's Community of Access and Participation Practitioners (SCAPP).	–	Yes - A Blueprint for Fairness (a system wide plan to achieve equal access to higher education).	**Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act 2013** - sets the current strategy regarding higher education equity. A focus of this Act is widening access for "socioeconomic groups" through policy, funding, and monitoring/ reporting on widening access.	Low-income students Gender groups Students with disability Students with care-experience.	Gender Action Plan (2016) - guidelines and support for higher education institutions to address gender imbalances.	Unclear.	Yes.	Some evidence of progress towards targets.
United States	State	Yes.	No.	No.	More at state or institutional level.	Pell Grant scheme, awarded to undergraduate students in financial need and who have not earned a bachelor or professional degree.	Institutional grants as well.	The federal government has appropriations to Minority Serving Institutions, (but these are less resourced than other institutions).	–	No.	Higher Education Act (but does not explicitly seek to address equity).	Low-income students First-generation students Racial/ethnic minority populations Students with disability.	Advancing Equity and Racial Justice Through the Federal Government.	Unclear.	No, not at federal level.	The value of the Pell Grant has diminished in the context of rising higher education costs. The Free Application for Federal Student Aid application is complex and a deterrent.

Country	Govern-ance	Tuition fees for students	Regul-ator	Federal targeted equity funding (e.g., like HEPPP for outreach)	Institutional targeted equity funding, e.g., for outreach or other programs.	Federal scholarships/ bursaries	Institutional scholarships /bursaries	Other programs	Other equity governance	Higher education equity strategy	Higher Education Strategy, which incorporates Equity	Groups covered	National Equity Policy	Amount of federal funding on higher education equity	Targets	Other
Canada	Jurisdictional	Yes.	No, not at federal level.	No. Not like HEPPP or other programs. But federal government provides funding to charitable organisations e.g., Indigenous Services Canada, and Pathways to Education to administer funds to programs and scholarships for students.	Yes. Jurisdiction governments often allocate funds to universities or organisations to administer programs. At the provincial level, examples of: → institutions set up in remote area → support from other universities to institutions in remote areas → distance education for remote students → specialised institutions targeting under-represented groups → outreach and bridge programs → guidance and counselling → flexible pathways and transfers → recognition of prior learning → retention programs.	Yes. Some needs-based scholarships: → **Indigenous Services Canada (ISC)** provides financial assistance to First Nations students (money allocated from government for distribution by ISC). → **The Canada Student Financial Assistance Program** - offers grants and loans to help students pay for education, dependent on region, number of dependents, disability status.	Yes.	**Institutional equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI action plans** - For institutions to receive research funding (via Canada Research Chairs program), for institutions with five or more CRC positions EDI action plans required targeting: → recruitment of under-represented groups → flexible pathways → university structures (including representation of minority groups).	–	No.	Unclear.	First Nations Gender groups Low-income students.	No. Each province defines its own equity objectives.	Unclear.	No.	Notably, Canada implemented a moratorium on inflation and repayments during parts of COVID.
New Zealand	Federal	Yes.	The Tertiary Education Commission (A Crown Agency).	Yes. Equity Funding is issued by Minister of Education and administered to tertiary education institutions for Māori, Pacific, and learners/students with disability.	Similar to HEPPP. For Māori and Pacific students and learners/students with disability.	Unclear.	Yes, offered by institutions.	–	–	Not called a 'higher education equity strategy', but various Acts and Strategies that offer a multi-layered approach to improving equity.	**Tertiary Education Strategy (TES)** - acts as criteria to determine allocation of funding to Tertiary Education Organisations. The five objectives: learners at the centre, *barrier-free access,* quality teaching and leadership, future of learning and work, and world-class inclusive public education. → **Ōritetanga – Learner Success Work Programme** – equity as a pillar and builds on the TES. → **The Statement of National Education and Learning Priorities** – aims for environments that are learner-centred.	Low-income students Gender groups Older/mature learners Māori and Pacific populations Students with disability Members of the LGBT community Refugees of all kinds (internally and externally displaced or deported) Recent migrants and ethnic communities.	Unclear.	Targeted equity funding programs: → Māori and Pacific students – NZQCF Levels 5 to 7 = $355.00 (rate per EFTS) → Māori and Pacific students – NZQCF Levels 8 and above = $494.00 (rate per EFTS) → Tertiary students with disabilities – NZQCF All Levels - $31.73.	No, not attainment targets.	In 2018, the New Zealand Government introduced the Fees-Free Policy. Notably, NZ has a multi-layered approach with various Strategies and Acts that can also act as a regulation framework for institutions, and are multi-dimensional: In particular, there is an emphasis on all places of learning to focus on: → ensuring that they are safe and

Country	Govern-ance	Tuition fees for students	Regul-ator	Federal targeted equity funding (e.g., like HEPPP for outreach)	Institutional targeted equity funding, e.g., for outreach or other programs.	Federal scholarships/ bursaries	Institutional scholarships /bursaries	Other programs	Other equity governance	Higher education equity strategy	Higher Education Strategy, which incorporates Equity	Groups covered	National Equity Policy	Amount of federal funding on higher education equity	Targets	Other
											→ **Ka Hikitia** – New Zealand's education strategy (it is a cross-agency strategy for the education sector). → **Tau Mai Te Reo** - supporting Māori language in education. → **Whakapūmautia, Papakōwhaitia, Tau ana** – a framework to strengthen relationships between Iwi (community) and the Government to improve Māori education outcomes. → **Action Plan for Pacific Education** – strategic direction (across whole education system) for improving education amongst Pacific students.					inclusive and free from racism, discrimination, and bullying → strengthening the quality of teaching for learners to receive the skills needed to succeed in education, work and life → collaborating more with whānau, employers, industry and communities → taking account of learners' needs, identities, languages and cultures in their practice, and → incorporating te reo Māori and tikanga Māori into everyday activities.

3.2.4 New Zealand

3.2.4.1 The Higher Education System

New Zealand has eight universities, which are governed at a federal level (Universities New Zealand, 2023b).

The Tertiary Education Commission monitors university performance and is accountable to the Minister for Tertiary Education, Skills, and Employment.

The key sector document is the Tertiary Education Strategy (Ministry of Education, 2020b), developed by the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (see Ministry of Education, 2023c for an overview). The broader New Zealand education system is regulated by the Education and Training Act 2020 (Ministry of Education, 2020a). It is notable that the Education and Training Act 2020 includes stipulation that consultation is undertaken with Māori by Ministers before issuing of any statements to education agencies.

New Zealand universities are funded by a mix of government tuition grants and performance-based research funding (via the Tertiary Education Commission), student fees, and through commercialisation (Universities New Zealand, 2023a). For example, in 2019, of university income: 42% was from Government/Tertiary Education Commission; 28% was from students through tuition fees, and 30% was from university research, commercialisation, and other revenue.

To support student tuition fees, the New Zealand higher education system includes a student loan system (an income-contingent loan). Fee estimates range from $5,000 per year to $15,000 per year for domestic students studying full-time for a bachelor's degree (Massey University, 2023; The University of Auckland, 2023).

3.2.4.1.1 Inequities

Despite some increases in higher education enrolments and completions by Māori and Pacific students over past years, significant inequities remain. Similar to international trends (as detailed in Section 2.2), in New Zealand, there are differences in the fields of study undertaken by ethnic groups, and later postgraduate outcomes (Ministry of Education, 2016). There are relatively high proportions of Māori and Pacific students/learners in Society and Culture[1] at a bachelor's or higher level. Māori students have higher representation in the fields of Education and Creative Arts, while Pacific students also had relatively high proportions in Management and Commerce. Asian student/learners had high representation in Management and Commerce, Natural and Physical Sciences, Information Technology and Engineering and related technologies. European students have high representation of students/learners in Society and Culture and Creative Arts. Other research using data from the Graduate Longitudinal Study New Zealand found that, while employment was comparable two years postgraduate, Māori and Pacific graduates had significantly higher student loan debt and financial burden compared with other graduates (Theodore, Taumoepeau, et al., 2017).

Similar to other countries, these discrepancies in educational attainment commence much earlier in the student life course. In New Zealand, University Entrance is the minimum requirement to proceed directly from a New Zealand secondary school to a university. There is a large, ongoing gap in University Entrance attainment for Māori and Pacific students compared with Asian and European students, with Māori and Pacific students awarded university entrance at half the rate of other students (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2022).

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[1] Political science and policy studies, Studies in human society, Human welfare studies and services, Behavioural science, Law, Justice and law enforcement, Librarianship, information management and curatorial studies, Language and literature, Philosophy and religious studies, Economics and econometrics, Sport and recreation.

3.2.4.1 Fees-free Policy

Recently, in 2018, the New Zealand Government introduced the Fees-Free Policy, in which citizens without prior tertiary educational experience could be eligible for one year of tertiary education without paying any tuition fees (Tertiary Education Commission (Te Amorangi Mātauranga Matua), 2023a). The scheme was intended to expand participation in tertiary education and reduce student debt in New Zealand. Fees-Free covers up to $12,000 for one year's study or two years' training, paid directly to a student's tertiary education organisation.

Survey research with 955 first-year undergraduate students in early 2019 from one tertiary institution in New Zealand found that 60% reported that the Fees-Free policy was a contributing factor in their decision to enrol in university, while 26% said that they would not have enrolled had the policy not been implemented (Sotardi, Thompson, & Maguire, 2020).

3.2.4.2 Equity Programs and/or Funding

There is some evidence of New Zealand implementing equity programs that are similar to Australia's programs.

The funding mechanism for Equity Funding is issued by the Minister of Education and administered to tertiary education institutions to direct towards programs or support for Māori, Pacific, and learners/students with disability (Tertiary Education Commission/Te Amorangi Mātauranga Matua, 2023). An analysis of higher education policies related to widening participation in New Zealand have predominantly focussed on ethnicity, compared with other countries such as Australia and England which have incorporated a greater focus on disparities in socioeconomic status (Leach, 2016). However, it is noted there is a close relationship between socioeconomic status and ethnicity.

In New Zealand, equity funding includes:

- Equity Funding for Māori and Pacific learners to improve participation in, and achievement at, higher levels of the tertiary education system (Level 7 (degree) and above on the New Zealand Qualifications and Credentials Framework), and

- Equity Funding for learners/students with disability to improve participation in tertiary education and achievement of qualifications.

Equity funding is considered a 'top-up' to other funding payable to domestic students. Equity funding helps cover the costs of any additional support needed by some students and is not intended to be the sole or primary source of funding.

The funding rates for 2024 were (excluding GST) (Tertiary Education Commission (Te Amorangi Mātauranga Matua), 2023b):

- Māori and Pacific students – NZQCF Levels 5 to 7 = $355.00 (rate per EFTS)

- Māori and Pacific students – NZQCF Levels 8 and above = $494.00 (rate per EFTS)

- Tertiary students with disabilities – NZQCF All Levels - $31.73

The rates were the same as for 2023, with variation between the two programs and target population.

3.2.4.3 Higher Education Strategies or Acts

New Zealand has other broader schemes in the form of Strategies and Acts. Collectively, these provide a more multi-layered or holistic approach for post-secondary education. Some commonalities of the core components across the various acts and strategies are: towards changing the institutional environment to

create a supportive and inclusive learning environment for all, placing learners at the centre, removing barriers for students, as well as creating stronger connections with cultural groups.

Some of these strategies are also used as criteria for institutions which determines their allocation of funding to universities.

The Tertiary Education Strategy and the Statement of National Education and Learning Priorities

Notably, the Tertiary Education Strategy acts as criteria and is used as a basis for determining and allocating the amount of funding paid to Tertiary Education Organisations. The Tertiary Education Strategy comprises five objectives setting the context and priority areas for New Zealand's education work program. These are: learners at the centre, barrier free access, quality teaching and leadership, future of learning and work, and world-class inclusive public education (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2020).

Accompanying the Tertiary Education Strategy, is the National Education and Learning Priorities (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2020), a statutory document that sets out the government priorities for education. The aims of both strategies are centred on creating education environments that are learner-centred, and which aim to improve the outcomes for more learners, particularly for Māori and Pacific learners. There is a focus on removing barriers whilst also embedding culture and connections, having learners at the centre, and strengthening teaching and learning for students. As both documents are enabled out of the broader Education and Training Act 2020, the priorities extend into earlier schooling and education.

Ka Hikitia

Ka Hikitia (the Māori Education Strategy)*,* meaning to "to step up, to lift up, or to lengthen one's stride", is the name of New Zealand's education strategy launched in 2008 (Ministry of Education, 2023b). It is focussed on improving the performance of the education system to ensure Māori students enjoy and achieve education success as Māori. It is a cross-agency strategy for the education sector, detailing working with education services to achieve system shifts in education to support Māori learners and their whānau, hapū, and iwi to achieve excellent and equitable outcomes. It provides an organising framework for the actions agencies take to ensure equitable outcomes for Māori, with the key goal being to change how education performs to enable all Māori students to gain the skills, qualifications, and knowledge they need. Similar to the above Tertiary Education Strategy, the key objectives are: learners at the centre; barrier-free access; quality teaching and leadership; learning that is relevant to the lives of New Zealanders today and throughout their lives, and world-class inclusive public education.

The Ka Hikitia approach is implemented through the following principles:

- *Education provision responding to learners within the context of their whānau*, e.g., providing Māori learners and their whānau with timely, correct information through the right channels to enable them to make informed decisions about education. It also supports education services to develop their capabilities to engage with Māori learners;

- *Māori are free from racism, discrimination, and stigma in education*, e.g., by setting expectations for education services; providing leadership and professional development for education services to eliminate racism, and supporting the education sector to 'call out' racism.

- *Māori are diverse and need to be understood in the context of their diverse aspirations and lived experiences*, e.g., by setting and maintaining professional standards, providing professional development and support to the education workforce to work with Māori learners and their whānau as well as providing early and intense support for Māori learners.

- *Identity, language, and culture matter for Māori learners*, via the provision of high-quality Māori language education, incorporating Māori identity, language and culture into teaching and curriculum,

and supporting the incorporation of Māori identity, language and culture into the day-to-day practices of our education services.

- *Māori exercise their authority and agency in education*, by supporting whānau, hapū, iwi, and Māori to develop and lead pathways in education, participate in the governance and leadership of the education sector, increasing the capabilities of education agencies and services and being accountable to Māori learners and whānau.

Despite Ka Hikitia having a strong evidence base and rationale, being well received by the sector and supported by Māori, reviews have found that Ka Hikitia has had limited success due to a number of factors, including the lack of an implementation plan (Berryman & Eley, 2017; Berryman et al., 2015; World Access to Higher Education Network (WAHEN), 2021).

Tau Mai Te Reo

Tau Mai Te Reo is a companion strategy to Ka Hikitia that focusses on supporting Māori language in both Māori medium and English medium education. It sets three goals for the growth of Māori language, including:

- By 2040, 85% (or more) of New Zealanders will value the Māori language as a key part of national identity.

- By 2040, one million (or more) New Zealanders will have the ability and confidence to talk about at least basic things in the Māori language.

- By 2040, 150,000 Māori aged 15 years and over will use the Māori language at least as much as English.

Each goal and approach is underpinned by a theory of action that involves changing the conditions to ensure the language is valued, learned, spoken, and heard.

Whakapūmautia, Papakōwhaitia, Tau ana

Whakapūmautia, Papakōwhaitia, Tau ana – Grasp, Embrace, and Realise: Conducting Excellent Education Relationships (Ministry of Education, 2011), published in 2011, provides a framework to guide relationships between Crown and Iwi, with the shared goal of improving Māori education outcomes. Generated from an acknowledgement that Māori learners and whānau have been poorly served by the education system, the framework outlines relationship principles, methods for developing shared outcomes and decision-making processes for identifying and confirming priorities for investment.

Ōritetanga – Learner Success Work Programme

Ōritetanga – Learner Success Work Programme (Tertiary Education Commission (Te Amorangi Mātauranga Matua), 2022), was introduced at the end of 2018 and builds on the Tertiary Education Strategy. Equity is one of the key pillars of the strategy, which focusses on changing the system to be more responsive to learners. The programme involves a framework and tools for tertiary education providers to put learners at the centre and is designed to address biases and disparities.

Action Plan for Pacific Education

Action Plan for Pacific Education (Ministry of Education, 2023a) aims to provide strategic direction for improving educational outcomes for Pacific students specifically. Aligned with the objectives of the Tertiary Education Strategy, it concentrates on five key focus areas, which again provides an approach focussing on institutional and other barriers, cultural, and family connections and teaching and learning spanning the entire education system. It aims to:

1. Work reciprocally with diverse Pacific communities to respond to unmet needs, with an initial focus on needs arising from the COVID-19 pandemic;

2. Confront systemic racism and discrimination in education;

3. Enable every teacher, leader, and educational professional to take coordinated action to become culturally competent with diverse Pacific learners;

4. Partner with families to design education opportunities together with teachers, leaders, and educational professionals so aspirations for learning and employment can be met, and

5. Grow, retain, and value highly competent teachers, leaders, and educational professionals with diverse Pacific whakapapa.

The resulting government actions have spanned the entire education system, including: expanding free school lunch programs in schools; investing in trades and apprenticeships training; piloting initiatives to engage more children in early learning; distributing key education materials in Pacific languages; professional learning and development; funding to community organisations and groups (Ministry of Education, 2023d). The progress report provides baseline data of learner outcomes and preliminary findings on the implementation of the program.

3.2.5   England

3.2.5.1   The Higher Education System

The Department of Education through its higher education department, is the main governing body with responsibility for defining national policies in higher education. Previously, the Higher Education Funding Council for England distributed public money for teaching and universities and colleges. It closed in early 2018 and was replaced with the Office for Students which is the main regulator (World Access to Higher Education Network, 2018a).

In 2012, England introduced an income-contingent student loan scheme similar to that in Australia. Students pay fees and can apply for loan. Repayments start when they meet a certain income threshold. Before 2012, the majority of university income for universities in the United Kingdom came from a central public grant (Callender, 2022). In 2012, this grant closed and teaching funding shifted towards tuition fees instead. Thus, from 2012, annual tuition fees of £9,000 were introduced for all full-time undergraduates. The loans were repaid by repayments linked to graduates' ability to pay. Eligibility for student loans is for students in their first degree and for students studying a minimum number of hours per week.

Inequities

In England, inequity has been sustained in terms of access and completion, across socioeconomic groups, ethnic groups, and disability statuses (Bolton & Lewis, 2023; Thomas, 2022). For instance, although white students were the least aggregated ethnic group in the United Kingdom to go to university, they are more likely to attend high tariff universities compared to their peers (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021). In addition, once at university, students from minority ethnic backgrounds were more likely to drop out before completing their course, have lower levels of attainment, and lower earnings after graduating.

3.2.5.2   Equity Programs and/or Funding

England does not have an agency dedicated to equity promotion in higher education. The Office for Students has overall responsibility for monitoring the impact of equity promotion measures on behalf of the Department of Education. It is estimated that, via fee income, over £800 million per year is spent on financial support and activities, such as outreach work, to support widening access to higher education (World Access to Higher Education Network, 2018a). However, the majority of higher education costs are met through student fees.

The priorities for the Office for Students as set out by the Director for Fair Access and Participation in February 2022 (Bolton & Lewis, 2023). The priorities include:

- Higher education providers developing, enhancing, and expanding partnerships with schools and other local and national organisations, to help raise the pre-16 attainment of young people from under-represented groups across England;

- Providers developing more diverse pathways into and through higher education;

- Providers ensuring access to higher education for students from under-represented groups leads to successful participation in high quality courses and good graduate outcomes; and

- Equity program funding via institutions' Access and Participation Plans.

3.2.5.2.1   Access and Participation Plans

Access and Participation Plans form the main financial instrument used to promote equity in the income-contingent student loan scheme set up by the government. Higher education providers that want to charge high level tuition fees need to submit an Access and Participation Plan to the Office for Students, which set out the actions providers are taking to increase access to, success in, and progression from higher education by students from disadvantaged and under-represented groups (Bolton & Lewis, 2023).

As part of Access and Participation Plans (World Access to Higher Education Network, 2018a), higher education providers are obliged to invest a proportion of their tuition fee income on scholarships/bursaries and non-monetary policy instruments such as outreach and bridging programs; academic and career guidance and counselling; flexible pathways and transfers/recognition of prior learning; reformed admission procedures/affirmative action programs, and retention programs. Our own rapid review of a sample of Access and Participation Plans shows that the level of detail varies across institutions, with some institutions retaining very high fees and limited programs for outreach. Further, as discussed earlier, there is no indication of equalising opportunities (Millward, 2023).

3.2.5.2.2   Uni Connect and Addressing Barriers

The Office for Students also funds programs including Uni Connect and Addressing Barriers to Student Success (ABSS) (Office for Students, 2020, 2023) to address barriers that perpetuate inequities in higher education access and completion:

- The ABSS programme covers a broad range of areas across the student life cycle including: inclusive and active teaching and learning practices; well-being for students; progression to postgraduate study and graduate employability.

- Uni Connect involves a collaborative approach between universities and other higher education providers, with the aim of supporting young people from under-represented groups in four priority areas: targeted outreach (targeting young people from targeted local areas); strategic outreach (supporting strategic activities and engagement to address local outreach gaps); attainment raising (improving academic attainment of pupils to support progression into higher education), and signposting (offering a route for schools and colleges to engage with higher education outreach to engage with attainment raising activities).

3.2.5.3   Broader, University Strategies or Acts

More broadly, the England higher education system has the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 and The United Kingdom 2010 Equality Act.

Higher Education and Research Act 2017

Within the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (Higher Education and Reserach Act 2017, 2017), is a section dedicated to the guidelines regarding the Access and Participation Plans, including the governance, duration, content of plans, including the objective of equality of opportunity.

United Kingdom 2010 Equality Act

The United Kingdom 2010 Equality Act (United Kingdom Equality Act 2010, 2010) sets the parameters for expectations for equal treatment and equal opportunities across sectors. The implications for higher education institutions and colleges (Equality Challenge Unit, 2012) includes details of the prohibition of discrimination, harassment, and victimisation, with a section of the Act dedicated to the prohibition of a governing body of a higher education institution discriminating against a person in the admission or treatment of students, the conferral of awards, provision of goods and services, including premises and the recreation or training facilities.

Inclusive Teaching and Learning in Higher Education as a route to Excellence

In addition, in 2017, the Department of Education published a guidance note for higher education providers on creating inclusive learning and teaching environments for students with disabilities: Inclusive teaching and learning in higher education as a route to excellence (Disabled Student Sector Leadership Group, 2017).

3.2.6   Scotland

3.2.6.1   The Higher Education System

Higher education institutions in Scotland are governed by the Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Act 2016 and regulated by the Scottish Funding Council (Scottish Parliament, 2016; The Scottish Government, 2016). The Act is of the Scottish Parliament to make provisions about the composition of, and appointment to, the governing bodies and academic boards of higher education. Scotland has diverged from England in its approach and did not adopt a student loan scheme in 2012. Thus, there are no tuition fees for Scottish students.

Inequities

Scotland has shown some progress towards equity in higher education. For example, there is evidence of improved enrolment rates for students of the most socially deprived backgrounds. In 2021-22, 16.5% of all Scottish-domiciled full-time first-degree entrants at Scottish institutions (both universities and colleges) were from the 20% most deprived areas in Scotland (Scottish Funding Council, 2023). This was an increase from 13.7% in 2013-14. However, inequities do remain. For example, retention rates were lower for students from the 20% most deprived areas (88.6%) compared with an overall retention rate of 91.5% in 2021-22.

3.2.6.2   Higher Education Equity Strategies or Acts

Scotland has a Higher Education Equity Strategy, *A Blueprint for Fairness* (The Scottish Government, 2016). The Strategy outlines a system-wide plan, covering early years and school attainment, admissions processes, financial support, bridging programs, targets, and institutional regulation, with the aim of achieving equal access to higher education.

The Blueprint was prepared by the Commission on Widening Access, which was established following the Scottish government setting the goal that every child, irrespective of socioeconomic background, should have an equal chance of accessing higher education. The Commission on Widening Access was established to advise Ministers on the steps necessary to achieve this.

Scotland also has the Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act 2013 which set legislation relating to the regulation of higher education institutions. Regarding equity, a focus of this Act is widening access to higher education for "socioeconomic groups" through policy, funding, and monitoring/reporting on widening access. This has translated to a range of needs-based scholarships and grants, as detailed below.

The Scottish Funding Council developed the Gender Action Plan in 2016 (Scottish Funding Council, 2019), providing guidelines and support for higher education institutions to address gender imbalances. It set targets, including by 2030, no individual subject at a Scottish college or university shall have a gender imbalance greater than 75:25, and that the gap between overall male and female participation in undergraduate study to be reduced to 5%. However, since 2020, institutions are no longer required to submit institutional Gender Action Plans in order to reduce reporting burden.

Scottish Framework for Fair Access

To support widening access, the Scottish Framework for Fair Access (The Scottish Government, 2019), was developed in 2019. The framework aims to help practitioners plan and evaluate new ways of helping people from disadvantaged backgrounds access higher education. It has been designed for use by schools, colleges, universities, and the third sector, and provides evidence and advice, highlighting best practice by identifying activities that are making the most impact. There is a strong focus on transparency and information sharing across institutions to support the sector in delivering best practices programs.

There are two elements to the Framework:

- This first is the Framework for Fair Access toolkit website which provides evidence on activities that universities and others can undertake to support access into and through higher education.

- The second element of the framework is the establishment of Scotland's Community of Access and Participation Practitioners (SCAPP) - a forum to share and develop best practice in access support across Scotland. This is also funded through the Scottish Funding Council.

3.2.6.3   Equity Policies and Programs

Scotland has a range of monetary and non-monetary programs and activities targeting equity groups. This includes a range of needs-based scholarships and grants and allowances for selected equity groups, for low-income students, students with disability, and students with care-experience.[2] This latter group is defined as "include anyone who has been or is currently in care or from a looked after background at any stage in their life. It includes people who have been in foster care, kinship care, and those who are looked after at home with a supervision requirement" (The Scottish Government, 2020, p2).

Bursaries and grants include (Bushi, 2023):

- Bursaries for people with low incomes;

- Lone Parents' Grant;

- Dependants' Grant;

- Disabled Students' Allowances;

- Travel expenses for health profession courses;

- Bursary and accommodation grant for care-experienced students;

- Funding for nursing and midwifery courses.

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2 For details on bursaries and grants: see here: https://www.savethestudent.org/student-finance/finance-system-for-scottish-students.html#free

The Scottish Funding Council also supports and funds a range of outreach and bridge programs; flexible pathways and recognition of prior learning and retention programs/recruitment programs, as well as setting targets for individual universities.

3.2.6.4 Targets

In their Higher Education Equity Strategy, Scotland has set attainment targets. These include:

- By 2021, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent at least 16% of full-time first degree entrants to Scottish higher education institutions as a whole.

- By 2021, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent at least 10% of full-time first degree entrants to every individual Scottish university.

- By 2030, 20% of students entering university to be from Scotland's 20% most deprived background.

3.2.7 Canada

3.2.7.1 The Higher Education system

In Canada, there is no federal ministry or department responsible for education (World Access to Higher Education Network (WAHEN), 2018). Policy for higher education is managed at the provincial level (Council of Ministers of Education Canada, 2023). In the ten provinces and three territories, Departments or Ministries of Education are responsible for the organisation, delivery, and assessment of education at the elementary and secondary levels, for technical and vocational education, and for post-secondary education. Thus, there is no federal higher education strategy as such.

Similar to Australia, New Zealand, England, and the United States, Canadian higher education is funded through a mix of government funding, as well as student fees, and other funding (e.g., in 2018-19, 45.8% of post-secondary funding came from the government, 29.4% from student fees, and 24% from bequests, donations, nongovernmental grants, sales of products and services, and investments) (Council of Ministers of Education Canada, 2023)

3.2.7.2 Equity Programs and/or Funding

There is no clear set of 'equity programs or targeted equity funding' at a federal level, but for institutions to receive research funding through the Canada Research Chairs (CRC) program, all institutions with five or more CRC positions are now required to develop and publish institutional equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) action plans. These often target recruitment of under-represented groups (Tamtik & Guenter, 2019), as well as flexible pathways, but they also look at university structure, including representation of minority groups in higher education.

There are also needs-based grants and scholarships for First Nations, other low socioeconomic status groups, and students with disability or dependents (Government of Canada, 2023b). For instance, Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) provides financial assistance to First Nations students who are enrolled in eligible post-secondary programs. Funding for this program is provided to First Nations or First Nations-designated organisations as part of core funding agreements with Indigenous governments and organisations. First Nations are responsible for determining the selection criteria and funding allocations in accordance with the provisions of their funding agreement and national program guidelines. Eligible costs can include tuition fees, books, travel support, and living allowances. The maximum amount payable per full-time student cannot exceed $53,000 per year.

Further, the Canada Student Financial Assistance Program (Government of Canada, 2023a) offers grants and loans to full-time and part-time students to help pay for their post-secondary education. Eligibility and the

amount funded is determined by the province or territory in which students apply. It also depends upon family income, dependents, tuition fees, living expenses, and disability status.

Various initiatives are available at a provincial level (World Access to Higher Education Network (WAHEN), 2018)). These include: institutions being set up in remote areas or support from more advanced universities to institutions in remote areas, distance education available to equity groups living in remote areas, specialised institutions targeting under-represented groups, outreach and bridge programs, academic and career guidance and counselling, flexible pathways and transfers, recognition of prior learning, and retention programs. For example, the Ontario Government funds two programs: Pathways to Education (which is run by a charitable organisation across the country and funded by both federal and jurisdictional governments) and the Ontario Post-secondary Access and Inclusion Program (OPAIP), funded by the Ministry of Colleges and Universities (Ontario). These two programs focus on improving access for under-represented students in Ontario through various outreach programs (a limitation, as identified from the evaluation of these programs, is the lack of student identifiable information to track students and determine effectiveness) (Chatoor et al., 2022).

3.2.8 The United States

3.2.8.1 The Higher Education System

The United States has a large and decentralised education system, with the federal government having a limited role in administering or governing higher education (World Access to Higher Education Network, 2018b). The higher education system is also diverse. There are public and private institutions, which range in size from very large to very small, secular and religiously affiliated, urban, suburban, and rural.

The United States was the first country to demonstrate trends of moving towards a mass higher education system. It has persistent inequities in student outcomes (as detailed in this section), as well as inequities in the higher education system itself. A contributing factor is that degree titles in the United States are not governed by national laws, so institutions have exercised wide discretion in the terms they use for degrees and program requirements for graduation (U.S. Department of Education, 2005).

Inequities

There are persistent inequities in higher education student outcomes. Although there have been increases in national attainment and enrolment rates, there are sustained inequities by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic background (Cahalan et al., 2021). For example, in 2020, 35% of the United States population aged 25 years and older had attained a bachelor's degree or higher. However, these figures varied substantially by race/ethnicity (61% for the Asian population, 38% for the white population, and 28% for the Black population[3]). In regard to enrolment rates, in 2019, 78% of secondary school leavers between the ages of 18 and 24 years from the highest family income quartile had enrolled in college, compared with 48% of those in the lowest quartile. In addition, there is inequity in terms of graduate outcomes (e.g., 10% of African-American college graduates are under-employed compared to 5% of white graduates) (Carnevale & Smith, 2015). Further, there are higher percentages of ethnic minorities who are more likely to default on student loans (e.g., 32% of Black student borrowers, compared with 13% of white borrowers) (Miller, 2019). Other research shows similar ongoing inequities, with only 8% of institutions having equitable student representation and the rates of progress being so slow that projections indicate it would take about 70 years for all not-for-profit institutions to reflect under-represented students in their incoming student populations (Ellsworth et al., 2022).

There are also major inequities in the types of institutions attended (Dill, 2022) and inequities within the higher education system itself. For instance, as detailed in the Biden Administration 2022 Agency Equity

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[3] The term term Black is used by the authors in their reports to refer to people who identify as Black or African American. They state the use of single terms for different racial/ethnic groups—White, Black, Latino, and Asian—to alleviate ambiguity and enhance clarity.

Plan, various community colleges and state regional universities and institutions, which disproportionately serve low-income students and students of colour, receive less education revenue and fewer resources than other institutions (United States Department of Education Office of the Secretary, 2022). It is also documented that high tariff institutions redirect money into improving residential colleges, sporting, and other facilities to attract and retain their status as 'elite' or 'prestigious' (Dill, 2022), and attract students from socially advantaged backgrounds. As reported by Dill (2022), there is no evidence that the money from the high tariffs is being reinvested into higher education programs or courses.

3.2.8.2   Equity funding or programs

As indicated above, the United States does not have a standalone policy document dedicated to equity promotion in higher education at a federal level (World Access to Higher Education Network, 2018b).

However, the United States does provide federal financial aid. The Pell Grant does not require repayment. It is usually awarded only to undergraduate students who display exceptional financial need and have not earned a bachelor's, graduate, or professional degree (Congressional Research Service, 2023; U.S. Department of Education, 2023). While initially, the Pell Grant covered the bulk of the costs of post-secondary education, the long-term financial burden of higher education has increased for students and families to the point that the purchase power of the Pell Grant has diminished (e.g., the Pell Grant had a maximum amount of $6,895 for the 2022–23 award year) (Protopsaltis & Parrott, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Still, some recent research has demonstrated a small, positive effect on the probability of completing a degree for those enrolled in a course (approx. 2–3% for dependent students and about twice that for independent students with dependents), although quantifying the impact is muddied by interactions with the contributions of institutional and state-based schemes (Eng & Matsudaira, 2021). Further, the eligibility formula is complex and the application process (i.e., Free Application for Federal Student Aid) is complicated and a deterrent to those most in need (Baum, 2015).

More recently, the Biden administration (United States Department of Education Office of the Secretary, 2022) introduced the following to reduce higher education inequity:

- Investment in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), community colleges, and other under-resourced public institutions;
- Supporting institutions, systems, and states to raise completion rates for underserved students, by continuing to offer funding for those (evidenced with data) of completion;
- Promoting the message of the importance of colleges that are identified with increasing graduate rates and close closing graduation gaps.

Various authors have called for institutional changes that would dismantle barriers unevenly experienced by minority group students, and create a more inclusive and diverse environment.

Recent, affirmative action policy bans have seen the reversal of progress for under-represented minority groups' participation in higher education (Dill, 2022). However, individual state higher education agencies may have developed plans and agendas that incorporate equity promotion in higher education. Suggested institutional changes include eliminating advantages in admissions processes, such as legacy and donor admissions, more common in the United States, but which sustain inequities in the types of institutions students attend and promote wealth- and race-based advantages (Ellsworth et al., 2022).

There are recommendations to ensure representation in hiring academic staff across historically marginalised and minority groups. Other recommendations include regulation around institutions putting revenue back into the community to attempt to eliminate barriers associated with early disadvantage.

4. Gaps and barriers for equity groups

- This section of the review demonstrates that there are **long-standing** educational inequalities for a number of groups in Australia.

- These inequities manifest **early in the student life course**, while recent data also demonstrate under-representation in higher education studies is evident for most groups and the success and completion rates are below average for all groups. Further, Indigenous students have a relatively constant completion rate over the period, but this is at a comparatively low level, while graduates with disability have much lower chances of employment.

- There are also **clear stratification patterns** in the institutions attended and degrees studied, consistent with trends internationally.

- The literature conveys the impacts of **drivers of disadvantage manifest early in the life course** and **accumulate** across the life course.

- **Drivers of disadvantage** (including material/financial, sociocultural and spatial/geographic, and institutional barriers) are **multi-layered, intersect** and the **impacts accumulate** upon the achievement of the needed educational milestones and the development of the required academic, cognitive, social, and emotional skills to participate and succeed in higher education.

- **Institutional barriers at the higher education stage** are embedded in the structures of universities and their associated practices, which may exacerbate feelings of not belonging, students' confidence, and students' belief in their capabilities. Institutional barriers can include university requirements which may create bottlenecks at entry, inflexible courses, pedagogical practices, schedules, and modes of study. Rather than levelling the playing field, it may be assumed, **higher education institutions can maintain systems of inequality** (Threadgold, Burke, & Bunn, 2018).

4.1 Equity Groups

4.1.1.1 Bradley Review

In 2008 the Bradley review (see Bradley et al., 2008) examined the state of the higher education system in Australia and its ability to compete in an emerging global economy. Higher education is critical to the economy and wellbeing of a nation, however, it was identified that the number of those accessing higher education in Australia and graduating with degrees was declining. Of particular concern was a lack of access by groups identified as disadvantaged "by the circumstances of their birth" (Bradley et al., 2008 p. xi), these being largely:

- Indigenous peoples;

- People from low socio-economic backgrounds;

- People from regional and remote areas.

Bradley (2008) set a target to increase access and participation in higher education for disadvantaged groups to 20% by 2020, and introduced a range of measures which would bolster the number of people with a degree in Australia. Measures included specific funding packages aimed at both students and universities,

and a national framework underpinning accountability and consistency throughout this period of Higher Education expansion. Out of the Bradley review came various initiatives, such as:

- The Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP): which provides funding to universities listed in Table A of the Higher Education Support Act 2003 to implement strategies that improve access to undergraduate courses for people from regional and remote Australia, low socioeconomic backgrounds, and Indigenous persons. HEPPP helps to improve the retention and completion rates of those students.

- Vocational Education and Training (VET): a learning pathway available for young people in senior secondary. VET provides students with the opportunity to engage in education and training which may lead to employment and/or further study.

This review seeks to examine the literature that has been published since the Bradley review to identify, as per the research question, the gaps, barriers, and inequalities specific to students identified as disadvantaged, and what might be done to address them. The following literature review builds on two other reviews by the University of Queensland's Institute for Social Science Research (ISSR): 'The Review of Identified Equity Groups', and a report 'Investigating the Effects of Cumulative Factors of Disadvantage'.

4.1.1.2   The Review of Identified Equity Groups

The University of Queensland's 'Review of Identified Equity Groups' (see Tomaszewski et al., 2018) was commissioned by the Australian Department of Education and Training (DET) in 2018. The purpose was to review the six equity groups thought to be at greater risk of disadvantage when it comes to higher education, as identified by successive Australian governments since the 1990s. The six equity groups identified by Australian governments were:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Indigenous)

- People from low socioeconomic status backgrounds (Low SES)

- People from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB)

- People from regional and remote (formerly rural and isolated) areas (Regional/Remote)

- People with disability (Disability)

- Women, especially in non-traditional subject areas (WINTA)

The equity groups review utilised a survey of the literature and a quantitative analysis of national longitudinal data from a range of sources, for example government Census data, higher education institutions and systems, and studies such as the Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth. The findings suggested that the defined equity groups remained relevant, however improvements could be made to more accurately capture disadvantage in the context of higher education.

The equity groups review found, for example, that the NESB category as a whole was not systematically disadvantaged in higher education. Rather there were groups within the NESB category who were more disadvantaged because of language or immigration pathway, while others demonstrated greater success than other students from disadvantaged groups, including NESB students, or even the regular student cohort. Refugees were one such group that were found to more likely attend higher education, and to succeed at a high level. Analysis of the WINTA category found that while there are certainly gendered disadvantages in higher education, 'non-traditional subject area' was too broad to clearly identify disadvantages for women in higher education.

Key recommendations coming out of the Review of Identified Equity Groups were:

- "In the short term retain the broad (binary) dimensions of the current Equity Groups framework, while adjusting some group definitions;

- In the medium term introduce additional and more granular indicators to improve the monitoring of equity in higher education;

- In the long term develop a strategic longitudinal framework that considers key barriers to participation and success in higher education to improve equity monitoring and intervention" (Tomaszewski et al., 2018, pp. 3).

4.1.1.3   Cumulative disadvantage

The Investigating the Effects of Cumulative Disadvantage Report (Tomaszewski et al., 2020) built on the Review of Identified Equity Groups (Tomaszewski et al., 2018) to understand rates of disadvantage amongst current identified equity groups:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples;

- People from low socioeconomic status backgrounds;

- People from non-English speaking backgrounds;

- People from regional and remote areas;

- People with disability.

Referring to the accumulation of multiple forms of disadvantage, cumulative disadvantage is defined as "within-individual accumulation of relevant equity group statuses, such as students with disability who are also from a low SES background and from a regional or remote area of Australia" (Tomaszewski et al., 2020, p13). Using robust quantitative methods, the cumulative disadvantage study demonstrated that student disadvantage is relative to the accumulation of disadvantage factors. In addition to the accumulation of disadvantage over the life course, we also see students fall into multiple equity groups, or this is sometimes termed as having multiple disadvantage factors. As an example, a student from low SES background, with disability and from a rural or regional location, is seen as experiencing cumulative disadvantage from being a member of three equity groups. Concerningly, the rate of membership in multiple equity groups has increased over past years with negative implications of cumulative disadvantage across all stages of the student life course, including lower rates of:

- Completing secondary education;

- Accessing and participation in higher education; and

- Employment post graduation.

In addition, there are some combinations of equity group statuses that are associated with less successful achievements in education. These inequalities will be discussed below, followed by supporting figures.

4.1.1.4   Educational inequalities, by equity group

4.1.1.4.1   Secondary schooling

Recent national data on academic performance of equity groups in Australia, demonstrate poorer academic performance across all equity groups, in comparison to their peers. These trends are apparent before higher education, as demonstrated by Year 9 NAPLAN reading performance (See Figure 21 - Figure 23).[4] The figures indicate achievement of the minimum performance standards in reading.

The NAPLAN National Minimum Standard represents minimum performance standards in literacy and numeracy for a given year level. Students below this level will have difficulty progressing satisfactorily at school. We report the percent of enrolled students at or above the national minimum standards for Reading
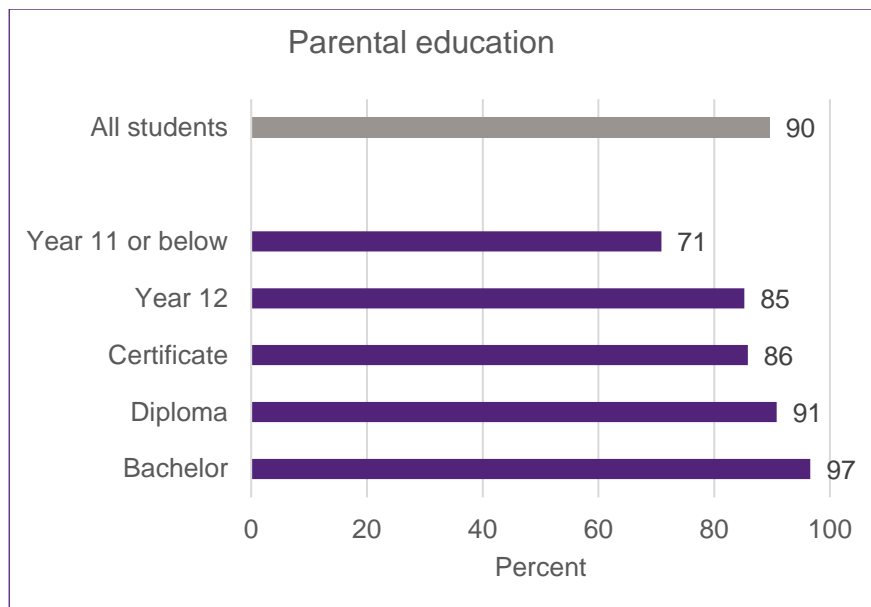
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[4] No information on disability and no information on SEIFA deciles for areas (for defining SES as in educational data collections)

in Year 9 results in 2022. However, it is noted that the same patterns were observed across NAPLAN results in Reading, Numeracy, Writing, Grammar and Punctuation, and Spelling.

The findings indicate that:

- The lower the parents' highest level of education (as an indicator of first-in-family status), the lower the percentage of Year 9 students that achieve the National Minimum Standard (see Figure 21);

- The more remote the students' residence, the lower the percentage of Year 9 students that achieved the National Minimum Standard (see Figure 22), and

- Indigenous students were less likely to achieve the National Minimum Standard in 2022 than non-Indigenous students (see Figure 23).

Figure 21. Percent of (first-in-family) students achieving National Minimum Standard in Reading in Year 9, NAPLAN 2022.

Notes: NAPLAN Data downloaded from: https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia-data-portal/naplan-national-report#dataset
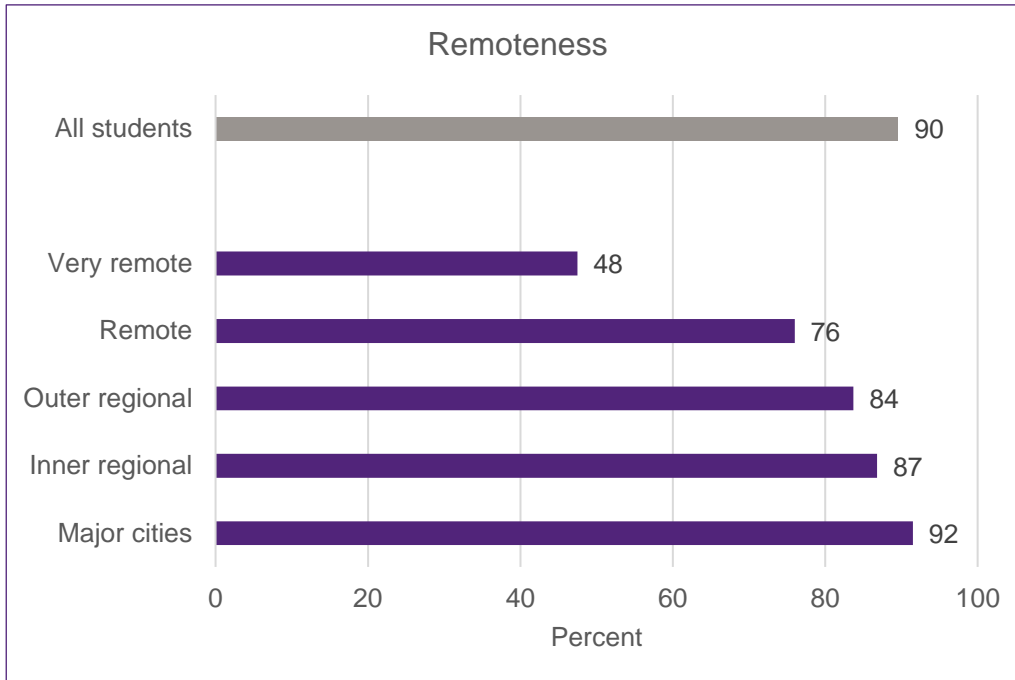The **National Minimum Standards** represent minimum performance standards in literacy and numeracy for a given year level, below which students will have difficulty progressing satisfactorily at school.
We report percent of enrolled students at or above the NMS for Year 9 results. NMS for Year 9 is band 6.
https://www.nap.edu.au/results-and-reports/how-to-interpret#:~:text=For%20NAPLAN%20results%2C%20a%20national,minimum%20standard%20for%20Year%209.

Figure 22. Percent of students achieving National Minimum Standard in Reading in Year 9, NAPLAN 2022, according to remote status.

Remoteness

Category	Percent
All students	90
Very remote	48
Remote	76
Outer regional	84
Inner regional	87
Major cities	92

Percent

Notes*:* NAPLAN Data downloaded from: https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia-data-portal/naplan-national-report#dataset
The national minimum standards represent minimum performance standards in literacy and numeracy for a given year level, below which students will have difficulty progressing satisfactorily at school.
We report percent of enrolled students at or above the NMS for Year 9 results. NMS for Year 9 is band 6.
https://www.nap.edu.au/results-and-reports/how-to-interpret#:~:text=For%20NAPLAN%20results%2C%20a%20national,minimum%20standard%20for%20Year%209.
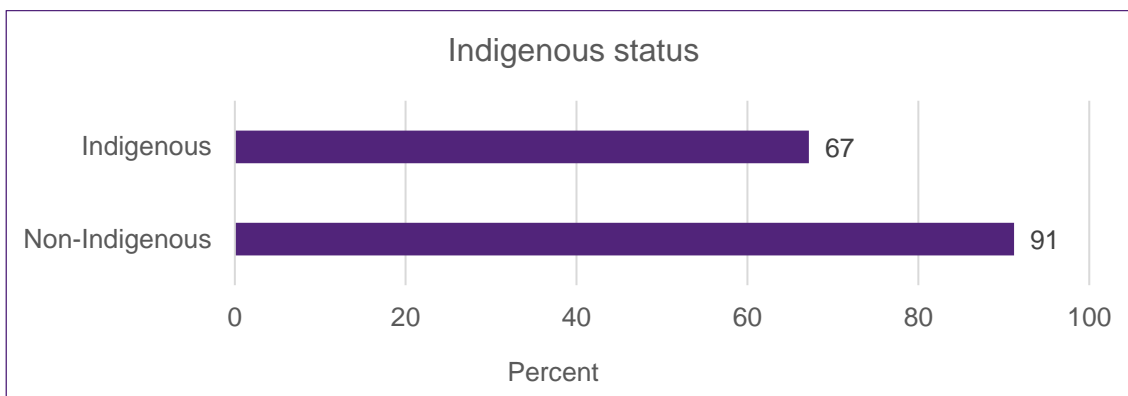
Figure 23. Percent of students achieving National Minimum Standard in Reading in Year 9, NAPLAN 2022, according to Indigenous status.

Indigenous status

Category	Percent
Indigenous	67
Non-Indigenous	91

Percent

Notes*:* NAPLAN Data downloaded from: https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia-data-portal/naplan-national-report#dataset
The national minimum standards represent minimum performance standards in literacy and numeracy for a given year level, below which students will have difficulty progressing satisfactorily at school.
We report percent of enrolled students at or above the NMS for Year 9 results. NMS for Year 9 is band 6.
https://www.nap.edu.au/results-and-reports/how-to-interpret#:~:text=For%20NAPLAN%20results%2C%20a%20national,minimum%20standard%20for%20Year%209.

4.1.1.4.2   Higher education

Turning to outcomes in higher education, Table 3 shows key metrics of educational success in higher education, including enrolment ratios, success rates as measured by proportion of units successfully passed, and university completion. When looking at enrolments, low SES, regional, remote, and Indigenous students are all under-represented in comparison to their peers who are not a member of that equity group. This is indicated by the ratio value being lower than 1. There were no data for first-in-family for the general population so an enrolment ratio could not be calculated for this group. The high enrolment ratio for students with disability needs to be viewed with a degree of caution as the definitions applied to determine the disability status in the student and general populations are not exactly the same.

Students from all five groups have notably lower chances of succeeding in higher education studies. This is indicated by their below average success rate (defined number of units passed out of units attempted), and below average completion rates.

Table 3. Enrolment ratios, success rates of units passed, and university completion, by equity groups (2021).

	Enrolment ratios	Success rate %	Completion rate %
	Under + Postgraduate		Undergraduate
Low SES	0.45	82.5	64.2
First-in-family	No data	84.4	68.6*
Regional	0.72	85.4	65.6
Remote	0.40	81.4	61.9
Indigenous	0.67	74.3	50.0
Disability	1.14**	80.7	No data
All students	N/A	87.1	71.7

Notes: **Higher education data. All data on domestic students at Table A and B**
Undergraduate and postgraduate students
Enrolment ratio (called Participation ratio by the Department) = Participation Rate of Equity Group/Proportion of Equity group in the State Population. Exception: Enrolment ratio of Low SES = Participation Rate of Low SES/Participation Rate of High SES. **Participation Rate** = Students in Equity group/All domestic onshore students. **Success Rate** = EFTSL passed / EFTSL certified (passed, failed, withdrawn),
For Socio-Economic Status measures and regional classification measures, breaks in time series occur due to the use of updated Australian Census data in 2011 (SEIFA 2011 and ASGS 2011) and 2016 (SEIFA 2016 and ASGS 2016).
Group definitions. *Regional/remote:* Student's postcode of permanent home residence is used to map students to a Remoteness Area classification under either the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS). Regional and Remote categories for the years 2011 to 2015 are derived from the ASGS 2021. Categories for the years 2016 to 2021 are derived from ASGS 2021. Classification is based on postcode. *Low SES:* For the years 2011 to 2015 the 2011 ABS Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) Index of Education and Occupation is used to identify SA1s nationally as low (bottom 25% of the population), medium (middle 50%) or high (top 25%) socioeconomic status (SES). An estimate of the number of low SES students is made by counting the number of domestic students whose reported SA1 of permanent home location is a low SES SA1. For the years 2016 to 2021 the 2016 ABS Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) Index of Education and Occupation is used. *Students with disability:* Students who have indicated that they have a disability, impairment, or long-term medical condition which may affect their studies. *Indigenous students:* A person who identifies themselves as being of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent. *First-in-family:* Student who indicated that neither parent/guardian had completed an undergraduate or postgraduate degree.
Source for enrolment and success data: *Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2021 Student data, Section 16 – Equity Performance Data, 2009 to 2021* https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/resources/2021-section-16-equity-performance-data

Undergraduate students only

9-year completion rate = number of students who completed a degree within 9 years as a proportion of all students who commenced a bachelor degree 9 years earlier. **6-year completion rate** = number of students who completed a degree within 6 years as a proportion of all students who commenced a bachelor degree 6 years earlier.

Group definitions. As above with the following exceptions: ***Regional/remote:*** Prior to 2011 the student's postcode or permanent home residence was mapped to regional/remote categories using the MCEETYA classifications, which were derived from the Australian Standards Geographical Classifications with some adjustments to cater for the Department's requirements. ***Low SES:*** Prior to 2011 low SES was based on postcode and the 2006 SEIFA IEO. For the years from 2011 (it is possible that) categories were (still) based on postcode of permanent home address (rather than SA1).

Source for completion data: *Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2021 Student data, Cohort analysis – completion rates (Sub-Bachelor, Bachelor and Postgraduate students)*

https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoiNTA4MTZjZmMtZjRjNS00NzcxLWEzZTktODZmNDZkNGEwM2Y4IiwidCI6ImRkMGNmZDE1LTQ1NTgtNGIxMi04YmFkLWVhMjY5ODRmYzQxNyJ9

Source of First-in-family data for enrolment, success, completion: *Data Request to Department of Education, 2023*

*Note that 6 and 9-year completion rates for the first-in-familys group include ***undergraduate and postgraduate students.***

** Note that the definition of disability in the higher education student population deviates from the definition applied for the general population.

4.1.1.4.3 Post-graduation outcomes

In addition, for post-graduation, we see an under-representation of students with disability and first-in-family students in full-time employment (see Table 4). Other groups have outcomes similar to graduates' average.

Table 4. Post-graduation outcomes (full-time employment and median salary), by equity group (2021).

	Full-time employment	Median Salary
	%	$
Low SES	67.6	65,000
First-in-family	65.9	64,200
Regional/remote	74.3	65,200
Indigenous	76.8	67,000
Disability	58.7	65,000
All students/graduates	**68.9**	**65,000**

Source: 2021 Graduate Outcomes Survey (*GOS*)*; Data Request to Department of Education 2023*
Notes: Graduate outcomes data includes undergraduate students 4 to 6 months after graduation. **Full-time employment rate:** Graduates employed full-time, as a proportion of those available for full-time work. **Median salary:** The median annual salary of graduates employed full-time.
Source of first-in-family data: *Data Request to Department of Education 2023*
Undergraduate graduates in the GOS data *include graduates from universities (Table A, B, and C) and Non-universities*
Group definitions: ***Regional/remote:*** Student's postcode of permanent home residence is used to map students to a Remoteness Area classification under either the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS). Regional and remote categories for the years 2011 to 2015 are derived from the ASGS 2021. Categories for the years 2016 to 2021 are derived from ASGS 2021. Classification is based on postcode. ***Low SES:*** For the years 2011 to 2015 the 2011 ABS Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) Index of Education and Occupation is used to identify SA1s nationally as low (bottom 25% of the population), medium (middle 50%) or high (top 25%) socioeconomic status (SES). An estimate of the number of low SES students is made by counting the number of domestic students whose reported SA1 of permanent home location is a low SES SA1. For the years 2016 to 2021 the 2016 ABS Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) Index of Education and Occupation is used. ***Students with disability:*** Students who have indicated that they have a disability, impairment, or long-term medical condition which may affect their studies. ***Indigenous students:*** A person who identifies themselves as being of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent. ***First-in-family:*** Student who indicated that neither parent/guardian had completed an undergraduate or postgraduate degree.

4.1.1.5 Stratification in higher education studies

Previous work, such as The Review of Identified Equity Groups (2018), identified stratification patterns for students from low socio-economci status, regional/remote, Indigenous background, and student with disability:

- Commencing students of all these groups were significantly less likely to study a postgraduate degree and to study at a Group of Eight university between 2011 and 2016.

- Low SES and regional/remote students were also significantly less likely to study Law and Medicine/Dentistry, the fields of study that offered the highest graduate earnings premiums regardless of gender at the time (Norton & Cakitaki, 2016)

This is similar to themes identified from the review of international programs and higher education globally, as discussed earlier, where inequities are observed in the type of institutions attended and the types of degrees that are studied.

4.1.1.6   Higher education equity group trends over time

When observing trends over time, we see some increases in enrolments for equity groups students. Figure 24 shows enrolment numbers for equity group students in Australia, between 2011 and 2021. The figure demonstrates increases in enrolments for students in all five equity groups between 2011 and 2021. The numbers of regional and remote students peaked in 2017. While there was a big increase in the number of students with disability in 2021, this was also when the definition expanded to include students with psychological or mental difficulties. The numbers for first-in-family also need to be interpreted carefully, particularly for the early years, as the data collection only started in 2010 and there is a large proportion of missing data.
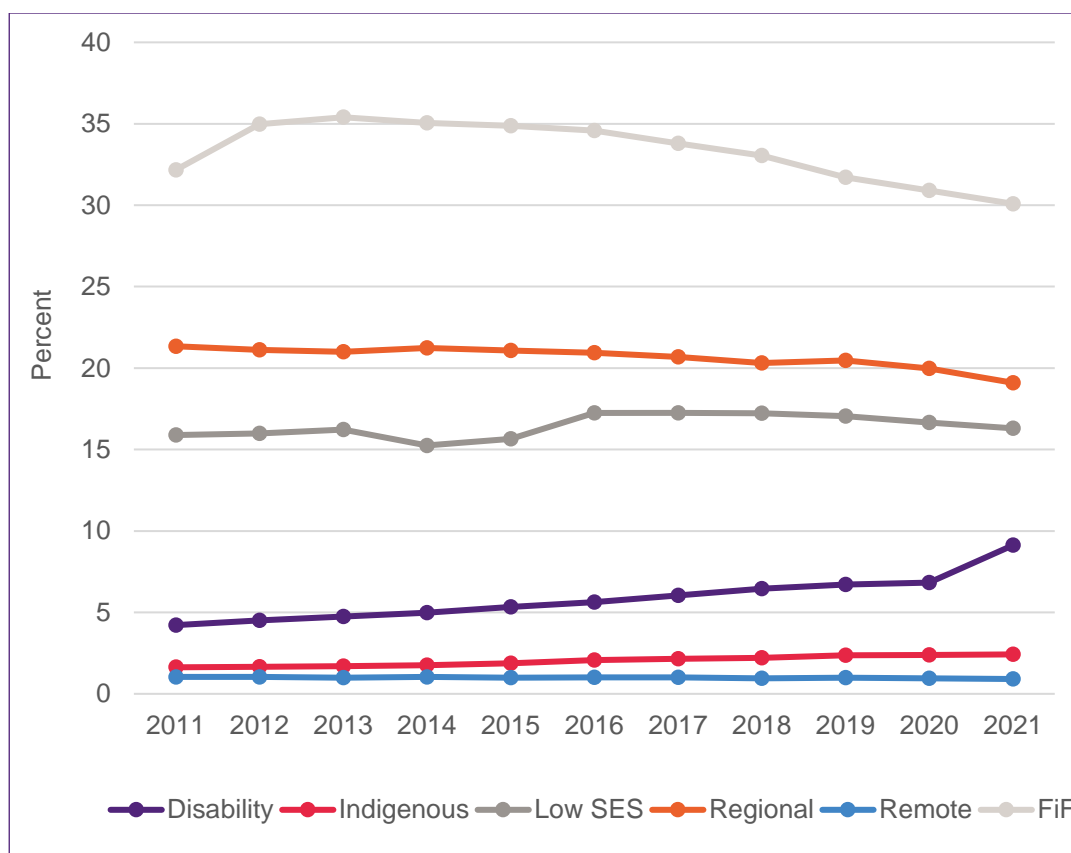
Figure 24. Enrolment numbers of equity group students from 2011 to 2021.
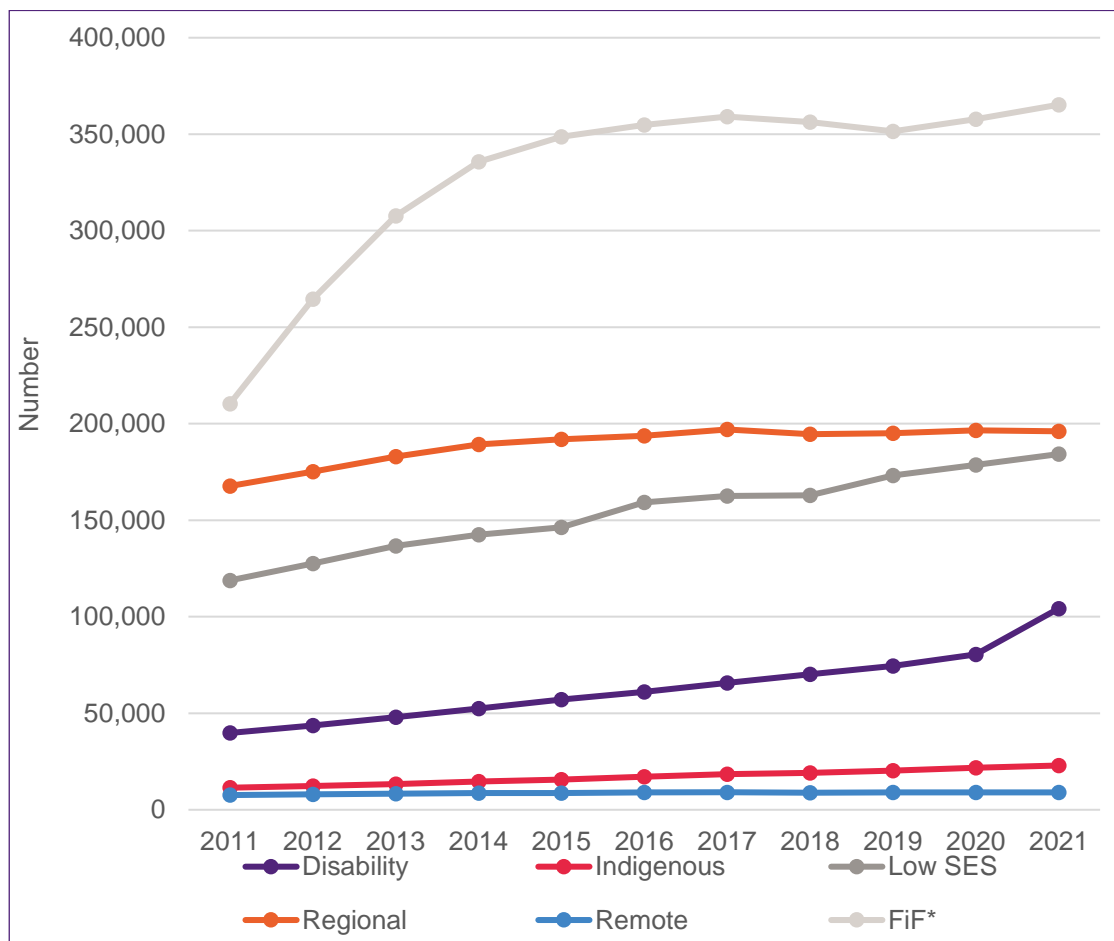
Notes: Source for enrolment and success data: Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2021 Student data, Section 16 – Equity Performance Data, 2009 to 2021 except first-in-family (FiF) data, which was provided by Department as part of a data request. Numbers for first-in-family need to be considered carefully, particularly for the early years as the data collection only started in 2010 (large proportion of missing data). The definition of disability broadened from 2020 onwards resulting in increased disability figures. In addition, 2020 disability figures are affected by a known data quality issue which resulted in the under-reporting of students with disability at a number of universities.

When looking at the share of equity groups of all commencing students (see Figure 25), there are several trends across equity groups. Overall, there are declining trends in the share for regional and remote students from 2011 to 2021. The share of low SES students fluctuates over time but with slight declines from 2017. There were upward trends in student shares for Indigenous students and students with disability. However, the definition of disability broadened from 2020 onwards, resulting in increased figures for students with disability. In addition, 2020 disability figures were affected by a known data quality issue which resulted in the under-reporting of students with disability at a number of universities. The share of first-in-family students of all students has also been declining since 2013, although as noted above, the figures for the early years may be less reliable.

Figure 25. Share of equity groups students in higher education, of all commencing students, from 2011 to 2021.

Notes: Source for enrolment and success data: Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2021 Student data, Section 16 – Equity Performance Data, 2009 to 2021 except first-in-family data, which was provided by Department as part of a data request.

Figure 26 presents the higher education completion rates of students between 2005 and 2016. All equity groups are below the average rates in all years. Overall, there were declining completion rates from the 2008 commencing cohort. Low SES and regional students demonstrate overall declining trends, as do first-in-family students (since observations started with the 2011 cohort). Remote students demonstrate some fluctuating trends, most likely caused by the relatively small number of students in this group. There is minimal change for Indigenous students and it is consistently below all other students. There is some increase in completion rates for low SES, regional and remote groups in the latest cohort that commenced in 2016.

Figure 26. Higher education completion rates for equity group students, from 2005 to 2016.
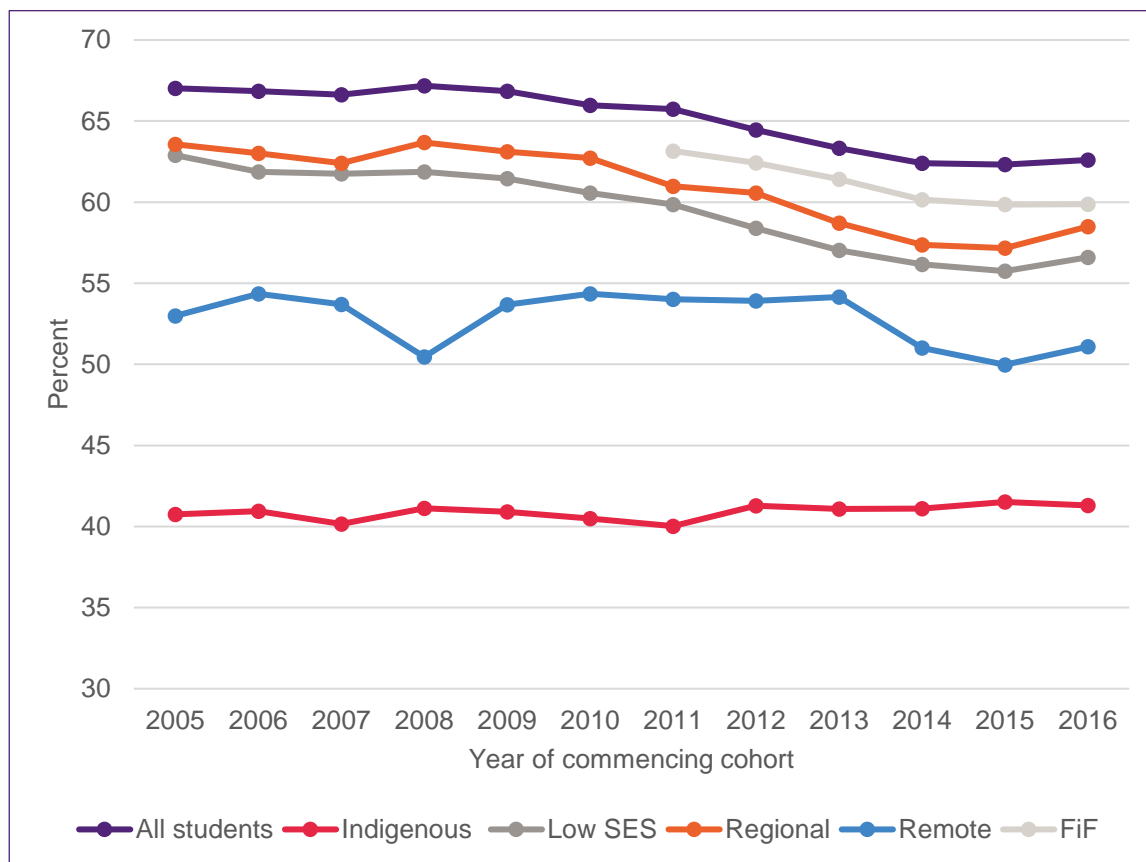
Notes: Source for completion data: Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2021 Student data, Cohort analysis – completion rates (Sub-bachelor, bachelor and postgraduate students), except first-in-family data, which was provided by Department as part of a data request.

These studies reviewing previously identified equity groups and identifying cumulative disadvantage have been key to understanding rates of disadvantage among identified populations in terms of access, participation, and completion in higher education. The trends demonstrate persistent inequities in educational outcomes across the student life course. However, as recommended by the authors of these studies, rates of disadvantage do not tell us why. The following literature builds on the Equity Groups Review and the Cumulative Disadvantage Study to begin to develop a more in-depth understanding of the rates of disadvantage among identified equity groups, and what might be done to address inequalities and barriers to their participation in higher education.

4.2   Barriers and inequities

Drivers, impacts, and outcomes

Figure 27 presents a conceptualisation of the key barriers and the mechanism through which they lead to inequitable student outcomes, as identified from the literature.

Underpinning inequitable educational outcomes across target groups, are the underlying drivers of inequity that manifest early in life, impact upon students over multiple years and result in an accumulation of disadvantage over the student life course. These include socioeconomic or financial barriers, geographic barriers, as well as institutional and socio-cultural barriers. They result in an accumulation of disadvantage over the student life course by impacting access to quality education, and underly the development of the needed academic, cognitive and non-cognitive skills and social capital that are required to successfully participate in and complete higher education.
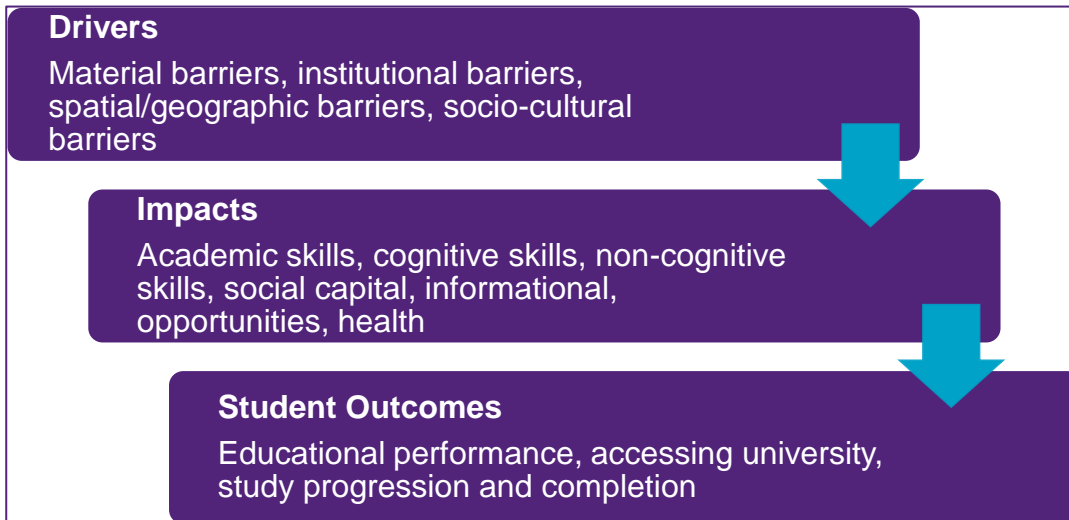
In line with theories of cumulative disadvantage as intersecting inequalities (Tomaszewski et al., 2020), this literature review finds that there are multiple barriers and inequalities that cut across, or a shared by, the five identified equity groups addressed here:

- Low socioeconomic status background;

- First-in-family;

- Indigenous/First Nations;

- Rural and regional;

- Students with disability.

Although there are some inequalities or barriers that are unique to each equity group, identifying barriers by equity group is repetitive on the one hand, while on the other hand, a focus on equity groups as distinct categories risks losing the nuances that underpin inequalities affecting disadvantaged groups as a whole. There is a further argument that a focus on rigidly defined equity groups can overlook other marginalised groups within the defined groups, making invisible the unique needs of those most marginalised (Harvey, Burnheim, & Brett, 2016). An example is that of young people who have experienced care, a group whose experiences might cut across all of the equity groups, but particularly low socioeconomic background, Indigenous students, and students who are first-in-family (Colvin & Knight, 2021; Harvey et al., 2015). Rather than addressing inequalities and barriers by group, this literature review attempts to capture inequality and the needs of disadvantaged groups holistically, by conceptualising the drivers of disadvantage, the impacts these have upon the accumulation of academic, cognitive, and non-cognitive skills, and the resulting inequities in student academic outcomes.

Figure 27. A conceptualisation of the causal relationship between the drivers of educational disadvantage, their impact upon the accumulation of academic and non-academic skills, and the resulting student outcomes.

Drivers
Material barriers, institutional barriers, spatial/geographic barriers, socio-cultural barriers

Impacts
Academic skills, cognitive skills, non-cognitive skills, social capital, informational, opportunities, health

Student Outcomes
Educational performance, accessing university, study progression and completion

The literature consistently reports disadvantages relating to socioeconomic or financial differentials cutting across equity groups in Australia (James, 2017), acting as persistent drivers of inequity internationally (Amaral, 2022; Bertolin & McCowan, 2022; Sá, Tavares, & Sin, 2022).

There is a wealth of evidence that educational disparities according to socioeconomic divides, manifest early in life and accumulate over time. For instance, there is evidence that performance gaps by socioeconomic background manifest in the earliest years of children's lives (on indicators of developmental progress and literacy and numeracy) (Lamb et al., 2020). These gaps are sustained and even worsen in middle and senior school years, as evidenced by indicators on performance against minimum or international standards, as well as the attainment of secondary schooling certificates. Further, stratification trends by socioeconomic quartiles are observed across subjects such as science, reading and maths, with students in the highest socioeconomic quartiles achieving higher average scores (Thomson, Bortoli, & Underwood, 2016).

Internationally, educational disparities by socioeconomic differentials also manifest early in the student life course. For instance, in Canada and the United States, like in Australia (see Figure 28), individuals in the highest socioeconomic category have the highest percentage of upper secondary education school completion while those in the lower socioeconomic category have the lowest percentage of upper secondary education school completion. In Section 2 (see Figure 12), socioeconomic disparities predicted different expectations for further education, even amongst high-achieving students.

Notably, Figure 28 also shows the gaps in Australia are large, relative to other similar nations. In Australia, around 76% of the population aged 19-29 years in the lowest socioeconomic category completed upper secondary education compared to a 93% completion rate for the highest category. Contrastingly, in Canada, the difference between the lowest and highest socioeconomic categories were small, ranging from 92% from the lowest category to 98% to the highest category.

Figure 28. Percentage of adults aged 19-29 years who have completed upper secondary school, by socioeconomic status for Australia, the United States, and Canada.
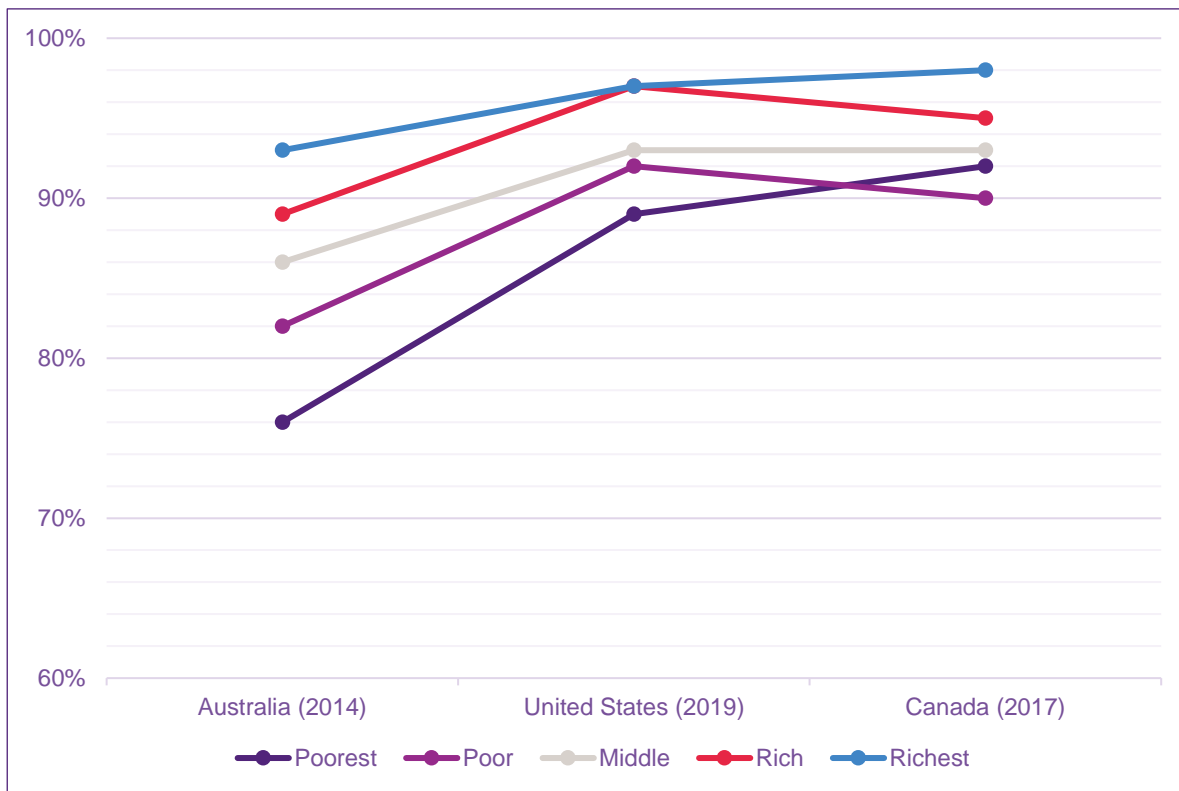

Source: UNESCO World Inequality Database on Education
Notes: Data for New Zealand and the United Kingdom not included. Data for the United States were from the Annual Social and Economic Supplement of the Current Population Survey. Data for Australia were from the Survey of Income and Housing. Data for Canada were from the Canadian Income Survey.

There are various and intersecting ways in which socioeconomic differentials can act as drivers of educational disparities. Socioeconomic status by itself is a simplified category that masks the multi-layered and nested issues contributing to students' experiences and practices (Threadgold, Burke, & Bunn, 2018). The financial aspect of socioeconomic disadvantage can impede access to quality early childhood care and quality schooling in primary and secondary schooling (such as through school resources and teaching). The literature identifies that socioeconomic differentials impact the type of school attended (government vs private) with unequal, educational, and professional outcomes. It also identifies the additional contributions made by parents to schools and school resources by socioeconomic differences (Dockery, 2018; Perry, Rowe, & Lubienski, 2022; Rowe & Perry, 2022; Thompson, Hogan, & Rahimi, 2019).

Similarly, international data illustrates how disadvantaged students are concentrated in disadvantaged schools (as opposed to average, or advantaged schools). Figure 29 presents PISA data from 2015, showing that, on average across the OECD, around 48% of disadvantaged students attend disadvantaged schools (OECD, 2018c). For Australia, in 2015, 51% of disadvantaged students were enrolled in disadvantaged schools, 44% were enrolled in socioeconomically average schools, and only 5% were enrolled in advantaged schools. These percentages were similar to the United States, although a slightly higher percentage of students were in advantaged schools (6%) than in Australia. New Zealand, Canada, and the United Kingdom all had between 45-46% of disadvantaged students in disadvantaged schools, slightly below the OECD average. The remaining students were equally spread around socioeconomically average schools (47-48%) and slightly higher percentages of students were in advantaged schools (7-8%). These patterns did not change from 2006 to 2015.

Figure 29. Percentage of disadvantaged students aged 15 years in socioeconomically disadvantaged, socioeconomically average, and socioeconomically advantaged schools (2015).
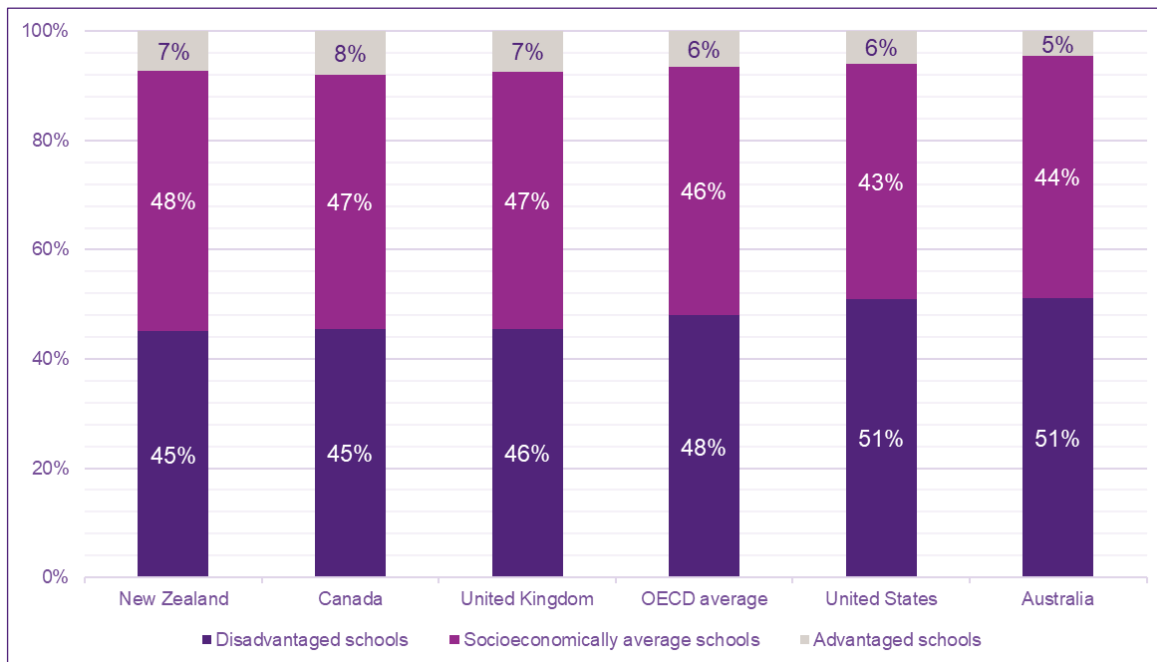
Source: OECD (2015) Database, OECD (2018) Equity in Education: Breaking Down Barriers to Social Mobility
Notes: Data are from PISA 2015. Disadvantaged schools are the schools in the bottom quarter of the national distribution of the school-level ESCS index, calculated as the average ESCS index among students in a school.

Without access to quality education early in life, the development of the necessary social and cognitive skills that are required for a successful school journey and attainment of educational qualifications are hindered (OECD, 2017b). Financial disadvantage can also manifest in terms of material resources provided in the home life such as books, the ability to afford additional tutoring or other support, or accessing specialist appointments and support for developmental delays.

Being in a disadvantaged school may also impact upon the guidance and support available for higher education and career planning. For instance, according to the report for the 2018 PISA report, some disadvantaged schools are less likely to have a career counsellor available to students (OECD, 2019b). As shown in Figure 30, on average across OECD countries, advantaged schools were more likely to have a dedicated career counsellor. However, not all countries had significantly different rates of career guidance counsellors availability. For example, there were no significant differences between advantaged and disadvantaged schools in the United States, New Zealand, and Canada in terms of the availability of a career counsellor at school. However, in Australia, there was a significantly lower rate of career counsellor availability in disadvantaged schools relative to advantaged schools.

Figure 30. Percentage of advantaged and disadvantaged schools with at least one dedicated career counsellor available (2018).

Source: OECD (2019) PISA 2018

Notes: Data are from PISA 2018. Differences between advantaged and disadvantaged schools are statistically significant for the United Kingdom and Australia as indicated by the darker markers. Disadvantaged schools are the schools in the bottom quarter of the national distribution of the school-level ESCS index, calculated as the average ESCS index among students in a school.

At the higher education stage, financial barriers can include the costs associated with travel to access campus, or relocating, in the case of rural and regional students (Cardak et al., 2017; Fleming & Grace, 2014; Wilks & Wilson, 2012), willingness to take on student debt, the need to work during study (O'Shea et al., 2018), supporting a family (Devlin, 2009) or carer responsibilities, including the costs of childcare (Theodore, Gollop, et al., 2017), and acknowledging the realities of the post-degree stage – a degree is not guaranteed to result in a well-paid career, or even employment (Andrewartha & Harvey; O'Shea et al., 2018). Being from a low socioeconomic background correlates strongly with being first-in-family (Bennett et al., 2015; O'Shea, 2016; O'Shea et al., 2018) and is relevant to many of the other identified equity groups, such as Indigenous students (Devlin, 2009).

As well as financial barriers, socio-cultural barriers were particularly stark in the literature. Family values were said to heavily impact on a student's aspirations to go to university, and carry through all phases of access, participation, and completion (O'Shea et al., 2018). O'Shea (2020) explains that boundaries of educational pursuit are enacted through embedded assumptions about perceived personal capacity to participate in higher education and imagined futures if education is not a priority when growing up. Students whose families place a high value on education and not only encourage but also sacrifice—for example materially or financially—achieve greater success (Gofen, 2009; Webber, 2017). Again, this is seen in international data where expectations of even high-achieving students are lower for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (see Figure 12).

Other studies show that coming from families that are not supportive might impact on student aspirations to go to university (Fleming & Grace, 2014), and also on student retention and completion of studies (Naylor &

James, 2016). Factors include coming from families that do not value student experiences and achievements; demands placed on students to align with a family culture that might prioritise more 'hands on work'; or expectations that students will physically or financially care for family and extended family before pursuing their own immediate goals (Devlin, 2009; Theodore, Gollop, et al., 2017; Wilks & Wilson, 2012). These factors might also contribute to students not wanting to relocate and financial barriers such as taking on student debt.

Geographic barriers, which are more consistently discussed in Australian literature, relate strongly to rural, remote and regional students, although often impact upon Indigenous people as well (Xiang et al., 2021). The barriers related to regional and remote students were more closely aligned with the above causal drivers, e.g. financial barriers, rather than spatial/geographic. include class and type of schooling, for example boarding or private versus public schools (Wilks & Wilson, 2012). Cardak et al. (2017) found that access and participation by students from lower socioeconomic/regional backgrounds was actually much higher than previous statistics have indicated, and that these students were more likely to complete their studies, to a higher standard, than students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds from the same regions. They found that aspirations and secondary school achievement were more influential than regional status.

However, other research demonstrates that geographic distance acts as a barrier to accessing higher education (Chesters & Cuervo, 2022). It is associated with economic and social costs in terms of accessing universities, and can create cultural distance to universities, which also translates into lower aspirations for higher education (Fray et al., 2020). The financial and social costs associated with relocating can also act as barriers to successful higher education participation when students do relocate to distant places, with financial factors being a leading influence on consideration of dropping out of university (Li & Carroll, 2020).

Institutional barriers refer to the barriers embedded in the structures of universities and their associated practices, which may exacerbate feelings of not belonging and students' feelings of confidence and capability (Burke et al., 2016). Institutional barriers can include university requirements that may create bottlenecks at entry as well as inflexible courses, pedagogical practices, schedules, and modes of study. Rather than levelling the playing field as may be expected, higher education institutions maintain systems of inequality that reflect broader society, with enmeshed structures of class, privileging those who have been socialised into knowing the ways and expectations of the systems (Threadgold, Burke, & Bunn, 2018). Students from disadvantaged groups are expected to conform to an 'invisible' institutional culture that plays by rigid rules and favours students who benefit from, not only inherited class/wealth, but also knowledge passed on from parents and/or earlier generations (Devlin & McKay, 2014; O'Shea, 2016; Sellar & Gale, 2011). The literature emphasised that the 'gaps' that persist in addressing inequality in higher education, cannot be addressed without examining institutional processes that uphold inequalities and discriminatory practices.

In addition, there are additional impacts at the higher education stage, in terms of knowledge around university systems and processes. For low socioeconomic background, first-in-family, and Indigenous students, many sources discuss a lack of knowledge and understanding of university systems and processes, as previously indicated, that favour students who benefit from inherited wealth and knowledge passed on from parents (O'Shea et al., 2018). Student experiences might include feelings of not belonging, not understanding the importance of networking, relationship-building with staff to further academic and career opportunities, or not being aware of processes related to accessing help (e.g., extensions for assignments).

For Indigenous students, the gap in knowledge (cultural capital) is prominent (Devlin, 2009; Theodore, Gollop, et al., 2017). Stakeholders in the cumulative disadvantage project cautioned against using Indigenous status as a distinct disadvantage and expressed the need to unpack the nuances as to why disadvantage among Indigenous students is so prominent. The literature provides some understanding of these nuances, going beyond low socioeconomic backgrounds, a lack of generational knowledge, or relationship building between communities and within the university, to gaps across different cultural contexts (Bennett et al., 2015; O'Shea, 2016).

The impacts upon students with disability were also expressed in terms of a mismatch between university policies advocating inclusion and students' lived experience. Students report resistance from staff—for example lecturers not willing to grant extensions—and a general fear of disclosing their disability because of stigma or prior experiences with combative responses (Fossey et al., 2017).

Although access might have increased for targeted cohorts, there are higher rates of dropping classes or withdrawing from courses completely for students from identified equity groups. However, with the exception of Indigenous students, Bennett et al. (2015) found students from equity backgrounds were not "substantially less likely to complete their degrees" than the regular student cohort. Though, as noted above in Section 4.1.1.6, there are consistent patterns of below average success and completion.

Employment following graduation is also a consideration (Andrewartha & Harvey; O'Shea et al., 2018). Students with disability, for example, were found to have lower employment outcomes following completion of a degree than the regular student cohort.

To summarise, Figure 31 presents a conceptualisation of the milestones and outcomes for successful higher education participation, completion, and post-university life, according to student life stage, and the underlying drivers of disadvantage. This conceptualisation of the student life course stages summarises the core aspects from existing literature, covering a period of early childhood, primary, and secondary school, university, and post-university life. There is also a period in between schooling and university life, sometimes called transition or access, when students may take alternative routes into tertiary education, or may be preparing or gaining further qualifications to do so.

Across the student life course, there are various milestones or outcomes at each stage, that need to be achieved for a successful transition into and through higher education. These include developmental milestones such as communication and social skills and language in early childhood, through to developing the required literacy and numeracy skills, and through to student achievement, and the development of the required cognitive and non-cognitive skills to enable access into higher education. What is conveyed in the literature, is that the impacts of the drivers for disadvantage for certain students accumulate across the life course, impacting upon the achievement of the needed educational milestones and the development of the required academic, cognitive, social, and emotional skills to participate and succeed in higher education.

Figure 31. Conceptualisation of milestones/outcomes for successful higher education participation, completion, and post-university, according to student life stage and the underlying drivers of disadvantage, up to higher education.

Stage	Early childhood	Primary school	Secondary School	Access/Transition	University
Milestones/outcomes for successful higher education participation, completion, and post-university	• Development in a number of domains (physical, social, emotional, language and cognitive skills, communication).	• School attendance, development of literacy and numeracy skills, as well as socio-emotional skills.	• School attendance, further development of technical skills, knowledge, and personal skills and attributes. • Subject selection for Year 11 and Year 12 that facilitates relevant post-school options. • Senior Education and Training Plan (Queensland). • Subject achievements (particularly in subjects that count towards OP/ATAR or are relevant as pre-requisites for later study options). • ATAR/OP rank. • Decision-making regarding post-school options.	• Gaining lacking/alternative credentials to access higher education. • Successful application for higher education studies. • Preparation for tertiary education (e.g. organisation, learning, living, understanding expectations; after realising access).	• Timely and effective enrolment (that achieves required credits). • Adjustment to a new life and learning environment. • Social and cultural integration. • Development of academic literacies. • Motivation, engagement, sense of belonging. • Learning, development of competencies and performance, particularly in relevant disciplinary area. • Re-enrolment/retention. • Similar to above with added emphasis on choosing specialisations/majors and gaining employability

Stage	Early childhood	Primary school	Secondary School	Access/Transition	University
					related experiences and skills. • Degree completion.
Socioeconomic and financial barriers	A lack of, or limited: • Access to quality early childhood education. • Books and resources in the home. • Opportunities for stimulating learning experiences. • Access to quality education (with school resources and teaching quality). • Affordability for additional support and learning resources. • Access to quality health care (with higher rates of illness and disease, associated with lower attendance).				• Relocation costs. • Travel costs. • Need to engage in paid work. • Student loan debt a deterrent. • Study costs (e.g., computers, books, internet connections).
Socio-cultural barriers	A lack of, or limited: • Family or community support and positivity towards learning and education. • Attitudes or beliefs where education is prioritised and expected. • Role models in the community.				• Societal expectations. • Feelings of isolation. • Feelings of 'not fitting in' or not belonging.
Geographic barriers	Distance to quality education: • Access to quality schooling and teaching, access to resource.s				• Distance to higher education and need for relocation.

Stage	Early childhood	Primary school	Secondary School	Access/Transition	University
	• Access to quality health care (with higher rates of illness and disease, associated with lower school attendance).				
Institutional barriers	• Discrimination and racism. • Low expectations of students. • Lack of adequate school funding, staffing, and knowledge to support students.				• Rigid admission processes, assessment requirements, attendance modes, and timelines. • Discrimination and racism. • Lack of institutional funding, staffing, and understanding to support students.

Adapted from: Kubler et al. (2020).

In some ways, students with disability present as a stand-alone group in the literature (Fossey et al., 2017; Hartley, 2015; Kilpatrick et al., 2017). Although there are established disadvantage factors relevant to students with disability (see Tomaszewski et al., 2020), disability was not often considered in literature citing other disadvantaged groups. Likewise, in literature on students with disability, other factors of disadvantage were not considered, such as race, regional and remote status, or being first-in-family. Unique to the other identified groups, inclusion in higher education for students with disability centres on human rights and anti-discrimination legislation. Whereas the literature discussing the other identified equity groups are concerned with the stages of access and participation, the literature on disability tends to focus more on equity in participation and completion, noting ongoing inequalities in the university as an institution, which are considerations that are relevant to addressing disadvantages for all equity groups.

It is noted that much has been done to address the needs of students with physical or mobility difficulties, however the needs of students with 'hidden' disabilities, such as Autism or poorer mental health, remain an area requiring significant improvements (Kilpatrick et al., 2017; KPMG, 2015). Studies show that although universities have implemented equity strategies—such as policies, specific support, or departments—there can be a lack of resources to implement such policies and practices, alongside a lack of clarity regarding who is responsible (e.g., whether it is the student, inclusion officer, or lecturer and so forth), and a lack of knowledge by staff or by students, on what is available and how to access help (Brett, 2016; Hartley, 2015). An evaluation of the Higher Education Disability Support Program found that the demand for supporting students with 'hidden disabilities' had increased significantly, however there had not been any funding to match the additional support requirements for students, nor to support the training and capacity building of staff (KPMG, 2015).

An example of a group overlooked within definitions of equity groups in higher education, Colvin and Knight (2021) talk about young people who have experienced care. Young people who have experienced care face unique challenges in higher education, in addition to those who might also be first-in-family, Indigenous (who make up the majority of young people in care), and/or are from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Unique challenges requiring tailored responses by schools and universities include: trauma resulting from child maltreatment, a lack of support through the transition from school to university, and a lack of informal and institutional support in the university. Young people who have experienced care are also at greater risk of homelessness, which can impact upon their studies. However, as young people who have experienced care are not identified as part of a defined equity group, these unique challenges are often overlooked which can also have additional impacts to other equity groups who have not experienced care (Harvey et al., 2015; Tomaszewski et al., 2018).

Addressing barriers, gaps and inequities

As indicated above, the drivers of disadvantage manifest early in life and have ongoing impacts on the accumulation of the relevant academic, cognitive skills (including attention, problem solving skills), non-cognitive skills (including confidence in skills and abilities as well as interpersonal skills) for a successful educational transition pathway. The international literature (Salmi & D'Addio, 2021) similarly points to barriers encompassing inadequate academic preparation and schooling, absence of higher education knowledge or awareness, a lack of support or guidance for higher education planning, competing family or cultural commitments, and personal uncertainties that prevent students from marginalised communities successfully participating in higher education.

Consequently, the accumulation and impact of these barriers hinder the academic success, participation, and successful completion of higher education (Kubler et al., 2020). Attending university is said to create pathways out of disadvantage. However, the barriers discussed here, including institutional barriers and practices within the university, and the financial, socio-cultural, and geographic barriers which manifest early in the student life course, limit the accumulation of the relevant academic and non-academic skills that

enable a smooth transition into and through university. This further hinders the participation and completion rates of disadvantaged students.

Overall, the causal drivers and barriers to accessing higher education continue to affect students throughout the participation and completion stages. Early intervention and systemic change in the school years is highlighted as important (Cardak et al., 2017; Fleming & Grace, 2014; Naylor & James, 2016; Wilks & Wilson, 2012) .

Rather than targeting specific equity groups, there is greater reach through addressing structural disadvantage or the causal drivers of disadvantage, that manifest as barriers to achieving positive educational outcomes (Tomaszewski et al., 2018). This is because targeting barriers:

- Can positively impact multiple equity groups simultaneously, as multiple equity groups can be facing the same barriers;

- Will also apply to students not explicitly defined as an equity group students;

- Can be done early in the student life course to avoid the accumulation of disadvantage over time; and;

- Avoids stigmatisation, labelling, or defining students, all of which can be associated with unintended poorer outcomes.

While all barriers are relevant, recommendations in the literature underscore targeting material barriers, which are consistent drivers of inequity and cut across multiple equity groups.

Recommendations in the literature suggest the importance of earlier institutional changes, to make primary and secondary schools even playing fields.

- The importance of a student's educational achievement and aspirations between grades 7-10 in Australia are highlighted (Fleming & Grace, 2014), noting that aspirations to not change the circumstances which disadvantage students in the first place.

- A greater focus on transition planning from secondary school to higher education for disadvantaged groups is also recommended, noting that many students who do not have the support of family, such as first in family, do not have access to informal supports that often play a significant role in transition planning (Harvey et al., 2015)

- As recommended by the Equity review, longitudinal studies starting earlier in life would "improve the accuracy of identifying people who are disadvantaged in higher education as well as add the capability of monitoring the how (barriers to education) and when (disadvantage occurs along the life course) to the equity framework" (Tomaszewski, 2018, pp. 7).

- Capturing disadvantage regarding Regional and Remote students provides one example where changes could be made. Previously regional and remote status had been established once a student's permanent home address had a postcode. Cardak et al. (2017) suggest using a student's commencing permanent address might be more effective at charting the student life cycle and measuring disadvantage and differences between groups, such as SES and/or the quality of primary/secondary school education.

In addition, there are additional impacts at the higher education stage in terms of knowledge around university systems and processes.

Providing greater institutional support while at university is a prominent solution in the literature (Bennett et al., 2015; Fossey et al., 2017; Hartley, 2015; Naylor & James, 2016). Moving away from a model which forces students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts to 'change to fit in' entails shifts away from rigid institutional systems and culture which favour socially advantaged students (O'Shea et al., 2018; Sellar & Gale, 2011). Improving support can be facilitated by:

- Understanding the unique needs of students.

- Being flexible and adapting curriculums to suit the student/cohort.

- Establishing additional supports is necessary to ensure student outcomes beyond accessing higher education.

- Funding might be better spent on scholarships and bursaries for students to assist throughout the participation and completion stages, rather than spending on marketing and aspiration building, or even institutional reforms (Zacharias, 2017).

- Investing in mentorship programs is another example of funding support for students. An evaluation of the Higher Education Disability Support Program by KPMG (2015) found a number of universities paying mentors to support students with Autism to become more independent (see also Bennett et al., 2015). Our literature review notes that the KPMG report was conducted when the NDIS was emerging, and there will be significant changes to the disability sector and responses in higher education that have not yet been captured in existing research. The KPMG evaluation cautioned, for example, that funding students directly might inadvertently create a band-aid type solution responding to student demand, and take away from more systemic reforms, a consideration that might be applied across all equity groups.

- Raising awareness across the higher education sector about the relationship between deficit discourses, assumptions and judgments about students' capability and level of confidence, and paying closer attention to the ways that assumptions and judgements about capability perpetuate inequities and supporting lecturers to develop more inclusive pedagogical practices (Burke et al., 2016).

While recognising the need to consider barriers to access and participation for equity groups, significant literature recommends combining the identification of barriers with a focus on 'success', or 'what works', aligning it with recommendations to move away from deficit discourses. Acknowledging a dearth of evidence supporting the effectiveness of previous and current strategies, a focus on success might involve research with students from equity groups who have completed their degrees.

- Gofen (2009) has applied a success model to examine the positive influence of family for first-in-family students in Israel, a concept which has been replicated in studies elsewhere, such as the United States (see Webber, 2017).

- A focus on 'success' is particularly prominent in the literature on Indigenous students. Devlin (2009), for example, theorises a qualitative research approach that would aim to "uncover aspects of Indigenous graduates' experiences when they were students that helped them choose to attend university, stay there, succeed in their study and graduate. Documenting their stories, advice and strategies for overcoming obstacles and thematic analyses of the data may provide a blueprint for success for future Indigenous higher education students." (pp. 4). The literature review failed to identify evidence of such a study being implemented for Indigenous students in Australia, however a large-scale qualitative study with 626 Māori graduates was completed in New Zealand (see below) (Theodore, Gollop, et al., 2017).

Indigenous students require reforms to the curriculum that go beyond improving existing systems. Rather, universities need to allow for Western or Eurocentric models to make space for new knowledges and 'ways of knowing'. A finding of the Bradley review (2008) was that Indigenous knowledges should be recognised and embedded in the curriculum. However, as this review of the literature in 2023 shows, this goal is yet to be realised, and Australia is falling behind its international counterparts in its responsiveness to Indigenous students.

Understanding difference through the lens of Cultural Context Models is prominent in the literature on Indigenous students (see Devlin & McKay, 2014) and students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (see Núñez et al., 2016). Cultural Context Models (Almeida & Lockard, 2005) examine the

interplay between different values, beliefs and practices; under Western or Eurocentric institutions, groups defined as marginalised are described as deficient or lacking where the goal is to bring cultural 'others' to the standard set by the dominant group to "where we think they should be".

Whereas cultural context models are often applied to matters concerning race, O'Shea applies Yasso's Cultural Wealth Framework to first-in-family students. Yasso's Cultural Wealth Framework transforms Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital to foreground experiential knowledge, in order to displace the dominant norms and knowledge that set the standards to which others should be "brought into line". O'Shea's qualitative study repositions first-in-family students as away from notions of 'lacking', or simply 'coping', to examine the aspirations, strengths and resilience of those students. Similar to a study of Māori graduates (Theodore, Gollop, et al., 2017), O'Shea's study provides novel insights into areas of improvement within the institution that could support the success of equity groups in higher education.

In reference to the gaps across different cultural contexts, or more specifically, the gap between the university as an institution and Indigenous students and communities, is the importance of Indigenous representation across university staff, such as lecturers, and tutors (Theodore, Gollop, et al., 2017).

4.3   The Student Pathway Map

As discussed above, when considering the barriers and their impacts on educational attainment, there are various stages of the student life course where they manifest.

Figure 32 presents a conceptualisation of the influences and barriers that impact upon equity group students across the student life course. The Student Pathway Model depicts students' educational trajectories, which can be observed along different stages of the life course, starting with early childhood, and progressing through primary and secondary school, into tertiary education, and out to postgraduate destinations including the labour market.

These pathways are not always linear, particularly when there is a significant group of university students who do not attend university immediately after secondary school. These individuals may be taking enabling pathways, transitioning from VET courses, or arriving at university later in their lives as mature age students. These non-linear pathways are marked by the ribbon-shaped arrow between secondary school and university.

In this context, it is also worth pointing out that the Accord picks up on the notion of lifelong learning, including education and training beyond the post-university stage. Re-entry opportunities and second chance opportunities for first entry are also a design feature of higher education equity systems. Many students use VET as a pathway to universities, taking the opportunity to enrol in bridging or enabling programs, or even moving back and forth between vocational and higher education. Although we recognise these complexities, the diagram aims to present a succinct representation of pathways, and hence this ribbon-shaped arrow is meant to capture all of the complex and non-linear trajectories.

Further, we recognise that factors operating at different levels can impact the trajectories and outcomes across the student life course. This is represented by the ovals in this figure. These factors include family and community characteristics, the characteristics of educational institutions that the students go through, as well as factors at a system level, including national policies, but also broader contextual factors. For example, trends in the labour market, economic shocks, or health pandemics, can all influence student outcomes through their life course.

As previously discussed, there are various educational milestones that capture key outcomes along the student life course. This includes developmental outcomes in early age, milestones associated with school achievement and attainment, and also includes milestones such as selecting ATAR pathways in upper secondary school. Later in the student life course, this includes post-secondary credentials and qualifications obtained at VET institutions or universities, and finally labour market outcomes.

Crucially, achieving or failing to achieve these key milestones at earlier stages, influences the chances of achieving the milestones at a later stage. Thus, we observe an accumulation of advantage or disadvantage over time.

The review of literature identifies that equity groups, like the groups that we focus on in this project, are on average less likely to achieve these various milestones along the student life course.

We also know from the literature that the students from identified equity groups are less likely to achieve these milestones because of the various barriers they face. These barriers impact on students' skills, resources and opportunities and consequently affect their chances of achieving successful educational outcomes. This is why second-chance, re-entry and flexible pathways are an important feature of the system.

This project focusses on the factors operating at the Institutional and National Policy levels. These are represented by the outer ovals in the diagram. This project also focusses on the impact of these on the outcomes of students from identified equity groups, along their educational life courses. As we move towards the next phase of the project, we are interested in understanding how the equity programs and the broader policy levers in scope of the project—and the ways they are implemented by universities—address the barriers that students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts face as they try to achieve the key educational milestones and outcomes. Work Package 2 of this project will extend on this work.

Throughout this project, we use this model as a guiding conceptual framework, which will focus on the impacts of equity programs and policy levers, and their institutional implementation.

Figure 32. The Student Pathway Model.
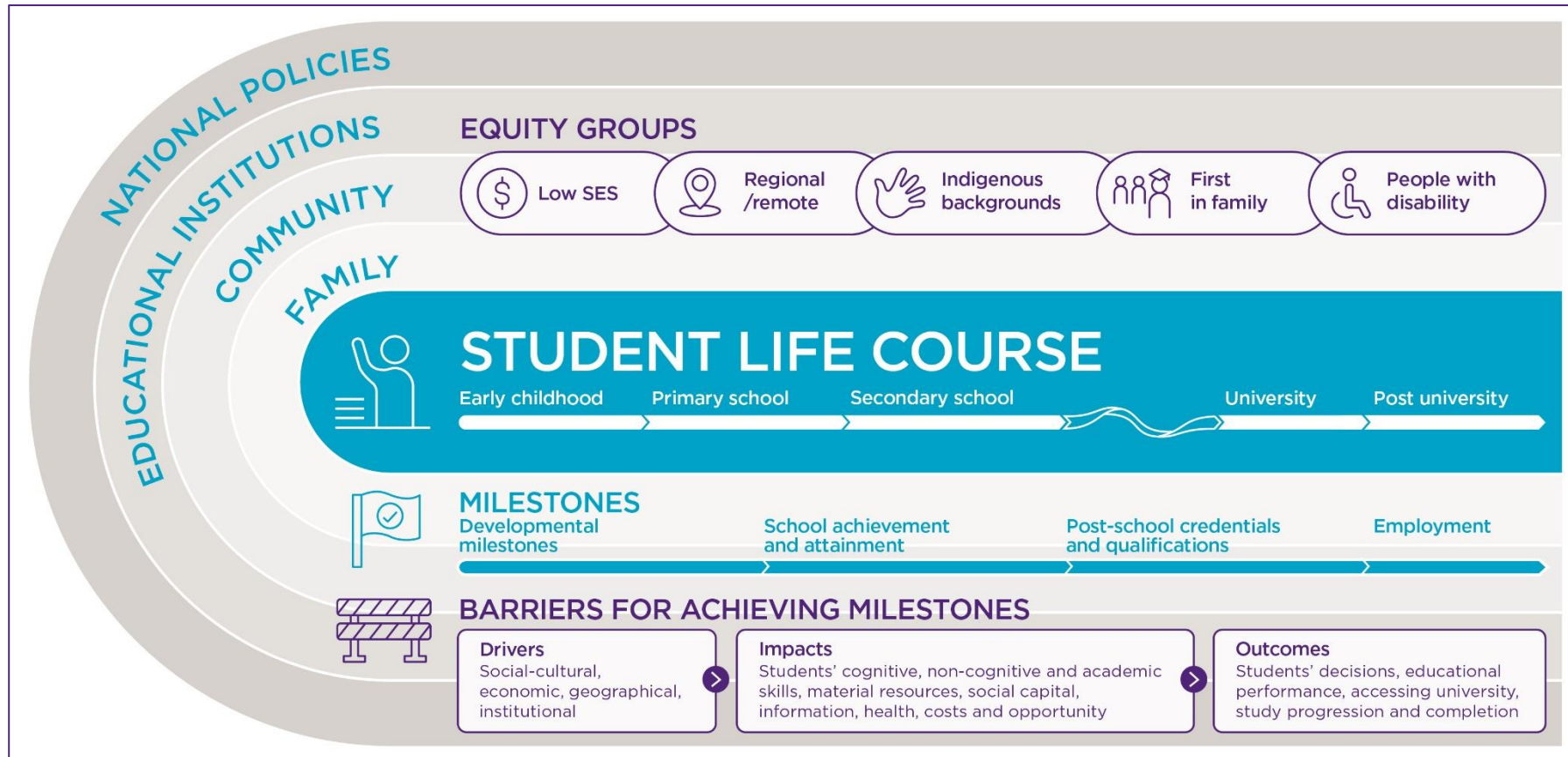
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Targeted Review of Student Equity in Higher Education Programs and System Level Policy Levers Appendix: Work Package 2A - Program Structure and Implementation

Title:	Targeted Review of Student Equity in Higher Education Programs and System Level Policy Levers Appendix: Work Package 2A – Program Structure and Implementation
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Date:	30 October 2023
Revision:	Version 1.1

The Institute for Social Science Research at the University of Queensland (UQ) acknowledges the Traditional Owners and their custodianship of the lands on which UQ operates. We pay our respects to their Ancestors and their descendants, who continue cultural and spiritual connections to Country.

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1. Introduction and Approach

1.1 Introduction

The aim of Work Package 2A was to explore the structure and implementation of the pre-defined 'in-scope equity programs', and to identify whether they are meeting their stated purposes and objectives, and delivering their intended outcomes and benefits. In doing so, WP2A was primarily aligned with the following review questions:

- Are current equity programs structured in the right way and is a more holistic approach required?

- Are existing Commonwealth student equity in higher education programs meeting their stated purpose and objectives and delivering intended outcomes and benefits?

1.2 Approach

A data extraction template was co-designed with the Department of Education to capture key descriptive information on program characteristics (Table 1). The template was populated by Department staff with responsibility for, or extensive knowledge of, the specified programs. If provided, links to further information were explored.

In addition, a systematic, but pragmatic and rapid, search strategy was undertaken to identify additional information relevant to the programs, particularly in relation to program implementation and effectiveness. First, program-specific websites or webpages (if available) were reviewed. Second, the 2021 publication "*A guide to Australian Government funding for higher education learning and teaching*" (Ferguson, 2021) was reviewed. Third, Google Advanced was used to search the following domains and websites: gov.au; aph.gov.au; ncsehe.edu.au; universitiesaustralia.edu.au; research.acer.edu.au; newcastle.edu.au/research/centre/ceehe. The program name was included in the "*This exact word or phrase*" field, while the following terms were included in the "*Any of these words*" field: evaluation, effect review, assessment. Reviewers screened no more than the first 10 pages or 100 search results for relevant records. Relevant web pages/reports were captured in Zotero. Finally, the following databases were searched to identify any program evaluations or reviews published in the academic literature: ProQuest Education Collection; Informit A+; and Scopus. The key terms used in the database searches were the same as for the Google Advanced Searches. For each database search, identified articles were imported into Zotero for further screening and review.

All identified articles were reviewed and relevant program information was extracted. A second data extraction template was created to capture information specifically concerning the implementation and effectiveness of the programs (Table 2).

Table 1. Program characteristics captured by the data extraction template

Field	Description
Program summary	A brief description of the program.
Program objectives	A list of the main objectives of the program.
Year commenced	The year the program commenced.
Funding type	Formula-based funding, project-based funding, direct student payment or other/multiple.
Legislative basis	The legislation that provides the basis of the program and any associated guidelines or legislative instruments.
Program funding	The total amount of funding allocated to the program since its inception, by year.
Funding formula	If applicable, a description of the funding formula used to allocate the funding to higher education institutions or students.
Eligibility criteria	A description of any eligibility criteria for universities and/or students receiving the funding.
Institutional funding	The amount of funding received by individual higher education institutions.
Equity group	The equity group(s) that the program is **primarily** designed to support: Low SES; Indigenous; Regional and Remote; and Disability.
Student life stage	The student life stage that the program **primarily** targets: Pre-access; Access; Participation and attainment; or All.
Equity barrier addressed	The type of equity barrier **primarily** addressed by the program according to the typology of: - *Individual* (barriers related to individual attributes or skills that are driven by institutional, geographic or material/economic barriers); - *Institutional* (barriers related to the processes, structures, cultures, values, and professional practices of higher education institutions); - *Geographic* (barriers related to the accessibility of higher education, particularly for those living in regional and remote areas); - *Material* (barriers related to the resources required by students to access and participate in higher education study).
Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)	A list of any KPIs that are used to measure the performance of the program.
Reporting requirements	A description of any reporting requirements for institutions funded through the program.
Program reach	Data on the number of students supported by the program, where possible broken down by equity group (from administrative data).
Program evaluation	An indication of whether the program has been subject to a formal evaluation or review and, if so, further details on these.

Table 2. Data extracted in relation to program review and/or evaluation evidence

Field	Description
Bibliographic information	Document details including: Document Type; Author; Author Affiliation; Year; Title; and URL.
Population	The population considered in the review/evaluation e.g. all higher education students, all higher education institutions, specific institution(s), specific student groups, etc..
Program reach	Data on the number of students supported by the program, where possible broken down by equity group.
Evidence of effectiveness	A description of any evidence of the effectiveness of the program on observed outcomes, including the methods used and estimated effects.
Mechanism	A description of the features of the intervention that may explain any observed outcomes.
Moderators / context	A description of any factors that may moderate or change effects, whether intended or unintended (e.g., different program effects by gender).
Implementation enablers and barriers	A description of any identified factors that helped or hindered implementation and observed outcomes.
Other comments	Any additional data or comments of potential relevance.

2.   Key Findings

2.1   Program-specific summaries

This section provides an overview of each of the in-scope programs, drawing on the data extracted from the review process. The next section then provides a commentary on the programs when considered collectively, and the extent to which the review questions can be answered with the available information.

2.1.1   Enabling Loading Program

Overview

The Enabling Loading Program (ELP) commenced in 2005 and provides funding to eligible higher education institutions (Table A universities) to offset the cost of student contributions for students in Commonwealth supported enabling courses. Enabling courses are non-award courses that aim to prepare prospective students with the required skills and knowledge for undergraduate study. The overarching objective of the ELP is to promote equality of opportunity in higher education.

Student life stage

The ELP is targeted at the Access stage.

Equity group(s) targeted

While the ELP does not target a specific student equity group, the program is focused on students with educational disadvantage. As such, students from the recognised equity groups are overrepresented in enabling courses when compared with students undertaking undergraduate courses (see Reach subsection for further information).

Equity barriers addressed

The ELP may help to address two equity barriers. As enabling courses are specifically designed to build students' confidence and the academic skills, knowledge, and attributes needed for successful transition to higher education, the ELP is primarily aimed at addressing barriers at the individual level, including individual capabilities. The ELP also addresses material barriers as it provides funding to eligible universities to provide Commonwealth supported places (CSPs) to students on enabling courses at no cost to the student.

Eligibility and funding

ELP funding is only available to Table A universities. The allocation of funding across universities is historically based; there is no specific funding formula. Previously, the number of enabling courses that could be delivered was set in funding agreements. However, while the 2021-23 funding agreements set out the amount of loading funding provided by the ELP, universities may now offer more enabling courses than provided for in its ELP allocation by using its maximum basic grant amount (MBGA), i.e. the funding it receives from the Commonwealth to enrol students in any combination of 'higher education courses'. Unlike CSPs for award courses, higher education providers cannot charge a student contribution for an enabling course.

In 2023, $34.9m of funding was made available through the ELP. This represents an increase from $12.2m in 2005, though there was a slight reduction in funding between 2017 and 2018 (Figure 1). Enabling courses also featured prominently in the Universities Accord Interim report, which may have consequences for the funding allocated to the ELP in future years.

Figure 1. Funding allocated for the Enabling Loading Program, 2005-2023
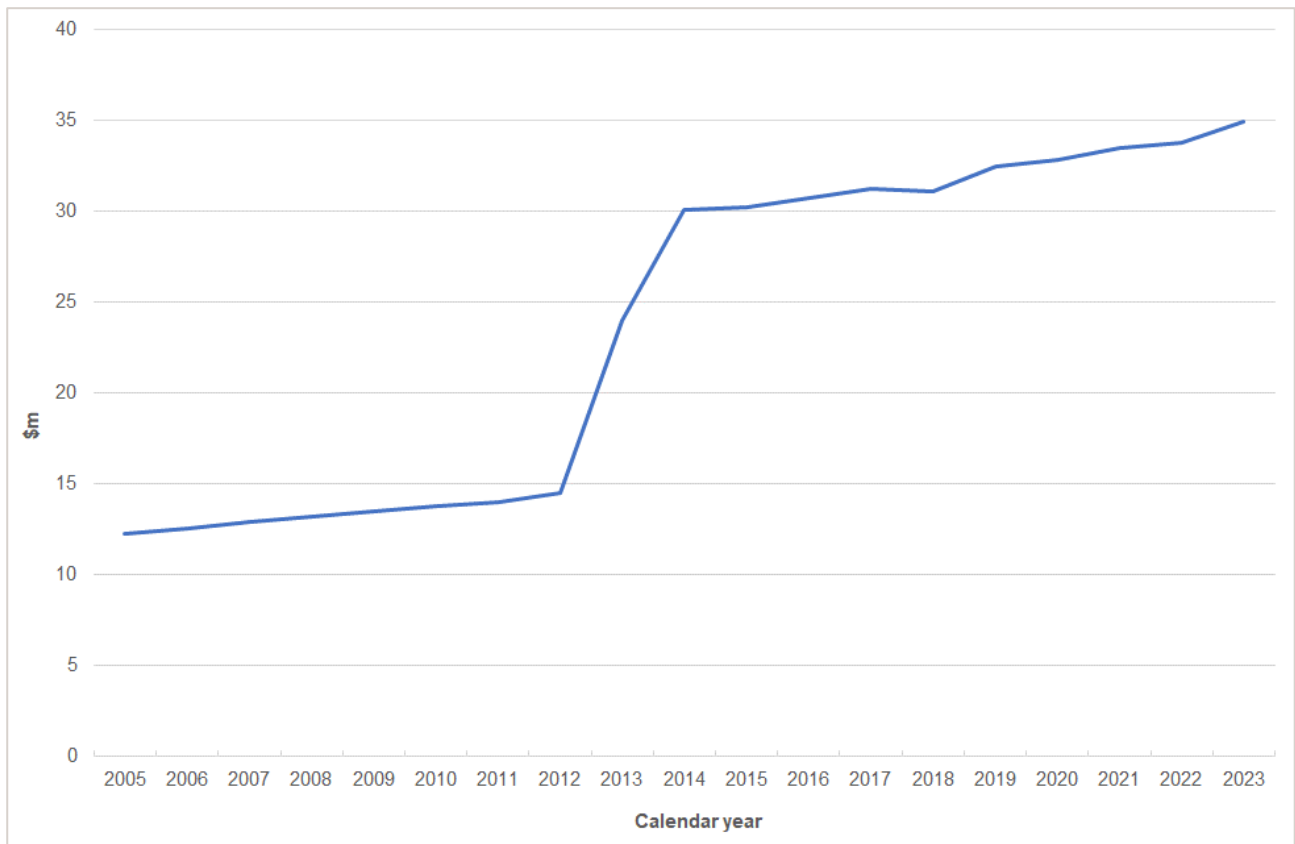
Source: Department of Education Delegate Approval of Determination – Enabling Loading 2005-2023

Program reach

In 2021, there were 9,292 enabling course commencements in Table A universities in Australia, which equates to 3.3% of total undergraduate commencements (EFTSL). The number of students commencing enabling courses increased from 3,081 in 2005 to a peak of 12,820 in 2016 (Figure 2). Commencements then remained broadly stable until 2020, before decreasing by 28% to 9,292 in 2021.

Figure 2. Number of students (EFTSL) commencing enabling courses, 2005-2021
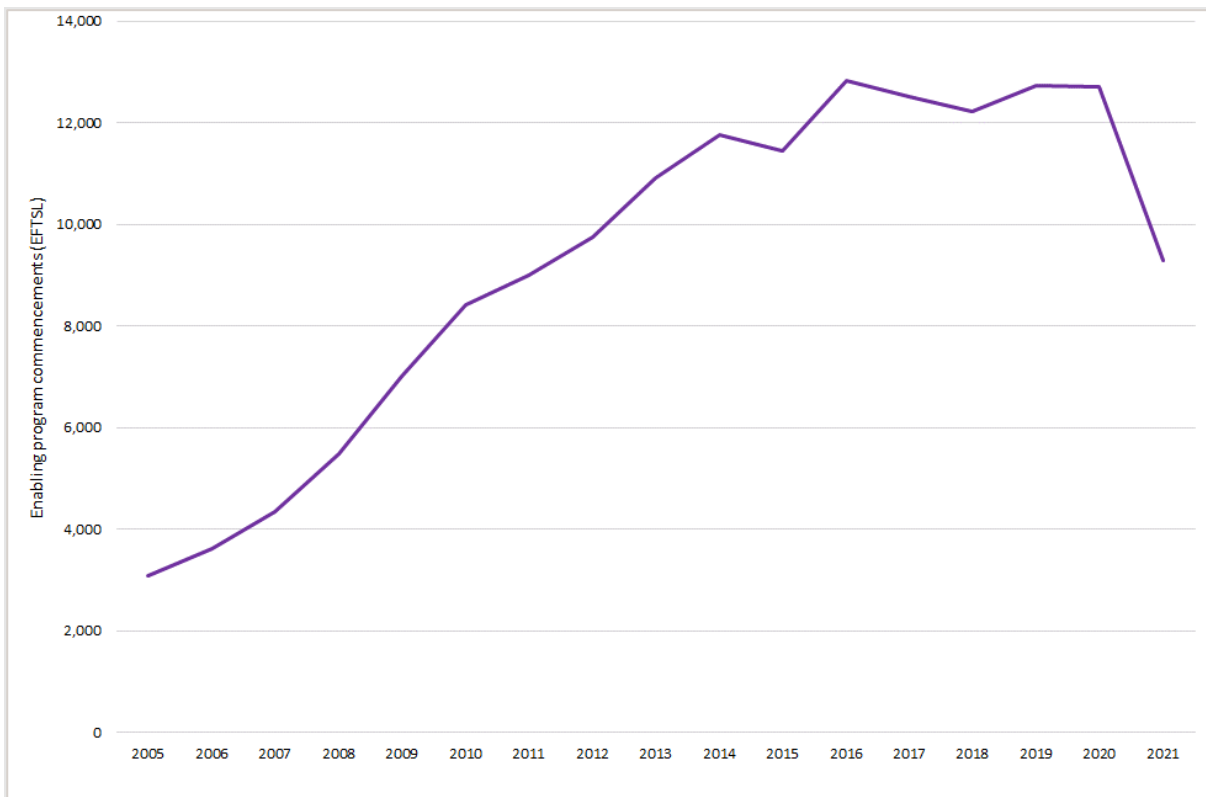
Source: Department of Education Higher Education Statistics, Student Data

Figure 3 shows that more than half of all enabling commencements were through 7 institutions, all located in regional areas: The University of Newcastle (14%); Curtin University (10%); University of Southern Queensland (7%); Edith Cowan University (6%); Central Queensland University (6%); Charles Sturt University (6%); and the University of the Sunshine Coast (5%).

According to Pitman et al. (2016), 85% of students undertaking enabling courses were from at least one equity group, compared with 47% of all domestic undergraduate enrolments. Regional and remote students, and students from low SES backgrounds, were the largest represented equity group among enabling course students. All equity groups were found to have higher rates of participation in enabling courses than in undergraduate courses. For example, the percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students was 4 times higher in enabling courses than undergraduate courses in 2014, representing 6% of enabling students, but only 1.5% of undergraduate students. Furthermore, students with refugee backgrounds, mature age students, and those from foster care backgrounds were more likely to enrol in free enabling courses than other sub-bachelor entry pathways (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2014).

Figure 3. Number of students (EFTSL) commencing enabling courses, by institution, 2021
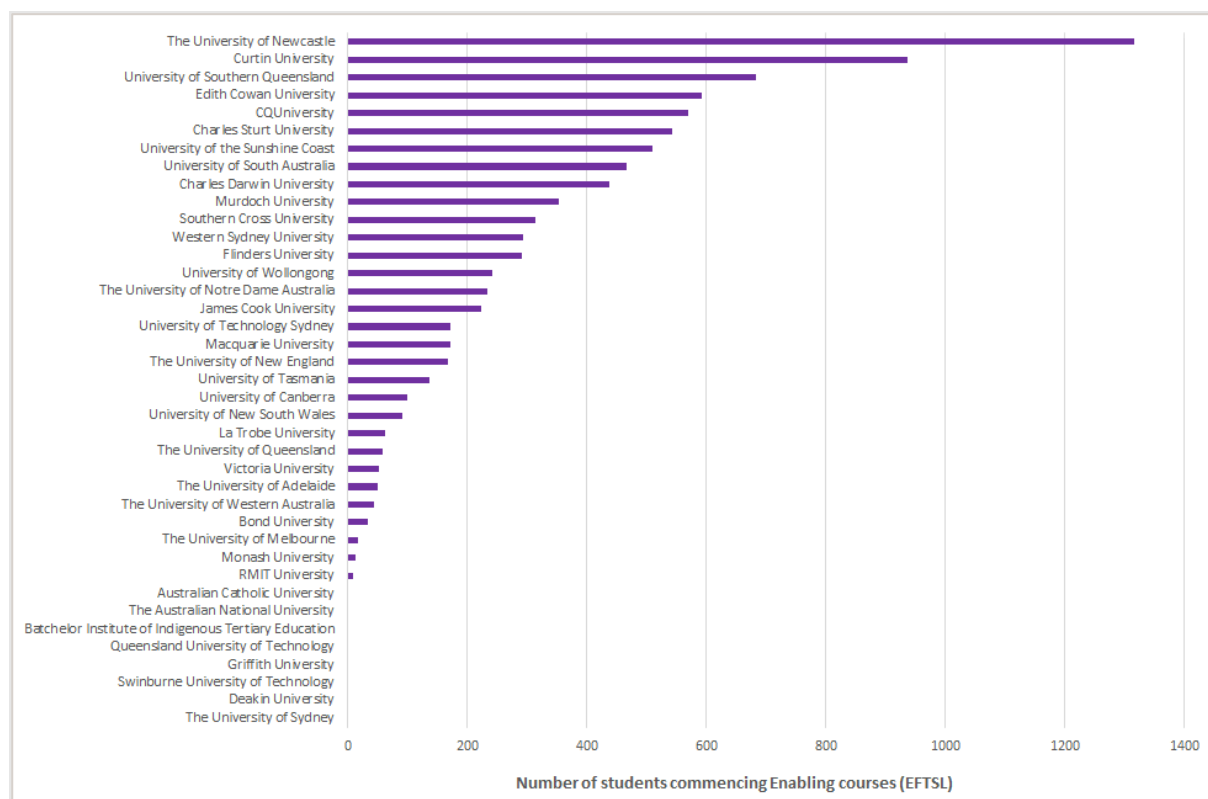
Source: Department of Education Higher Education Statistics, Student Data

Program monitoring and evaluation

The ELP does not have any key performance indicators attached and there are no reporting requirements beyond the number of students enrolling and commencing.

A 2016 study by the National Centre of Student Equity in Higher Education used a mixed-methods design to investigate the extent to which enabling courses were an effective means of increasing access to, participation, and success in undergraduate courses for domestic students from disadvantaged groups[1] (Pitman et al 2016). In addition to analysis of higher education administrative data, the authors designed and administered a national survey of students undertaking undergraduate courses to which they had been admitted on the basis of prior enabling or Vocational Education and Training courses. Key findings from this detailed evaluation included:

- Enabling students from equity groups had better first-year undergraduate retention rates than those who did not enter via an enabling pathway, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students;
- Enabling students reported higher levels of satisfaction with their entry pathway compared with students entering via VET pathways;
- Enabling students appreciated the low-risk opportunity to decide whether to pursue higher education.

It should be noted, however, that the first year success rate of students from enabling courses remained lower than those for students transitioning via the Associate Degree, Advanced Diploma and Diploma

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[1] Defined as low socioeconomic status (low SES) students; Students from regional and remote areas; Indigenous students; Students with disability; Students from a non-English speaking background; and women in non-traditional areas of study).

pathways. In addition, the study had important limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. For example, the analysis of administrative data was not able to account for differences in sociodemographic and educational characteristics between students who accessed university via different pathways. In addition, there were small sample sizes in some sub-bachelor cohorts meaning that the results were uncertain. In spite of this, the findings from this report feature heavily in Accord submissions that support the continuation and expansion of funding for enabling programs in Australia.

Some of the findings from the NCSEHE study were supported by Relf et al (2017) who found that students who had previously undertaken an enabling course reported improvements in discipline-specific content knowledge for their undergraduate degree, but also confidence, cultural capital, and knowledge of how to be successful at university.

Implementation considerations and barriers

Although enabling courses are supported by the Commonwealth, there are additional costs associated with undertaking study that may affect the program's reach and success including materials, consumables, and living and travel expenses (Pitman et al., 2016). For those students undertaking an enabling course, it has been argued that the pass requirement of the Job Ready Graduates Scheme (>50%) should not apply. This was a strong theme in submissions to the Universities Accord submission and will be addressed through the decision to remove the 50% pass rate requirement in response to the recommendations in the Accord interim report.

In relation to ELP funding, it has been reported that some universities are cross-subsidising enabling course places from other areas (Harvey, 2017). As highlighted in Figure 3, places are distributed unevenly across Table A universities in Australia. Although universities may offer more enabling courses by using their maximum basic grant amounts (MBGA), it may be that some institutions would benefit from an expansion of their ELP allocations to meet demand. Relatedly, there has been a growth across the sector in alternative pathway programs, but it is not always clear whether these are wholly or partially funded through the ELP. Finally, it has been suggested that more clarity is needed over the implications of institutions not achieving the fixed target in their budget allocation. As enabling numbers may fluctuate for multiple reasons, there have been calls for more certainty that enabling loading funding caps are not reduced following a period(s) of low demand (National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia, 2023).

Another important consideration is the diverse nature of enabling programs, which can vary widely in terms of course length, content, and mode of delivery. A lack of transparency, transferability, and information about program offerings has also been identified as potentially hindering student uptake and mobility. It has been suggested more consistent program design across the sector would help to increase opportunities for institutions to recognise enabling programs other than their own for the purposes of admission to further undergraduate studies (Pitman et al., 2016). A recent report by the National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia (NAEEA) provides a comprehensive benchmarking of nine enabling courses across Australia, aiming to contribute to better program standardisation, quality assurance, and portability of qualifications (Davis et al., 2023).

2.1.2   Tertiary Access Payment

Overview

The Tertiary Access Payment commenced in 2021 as a program that provides financial assistance to support all eligible regional students who incur costs associated with relocating to access tertiary study. The key objective of the TAP is to improve access and participation rates among regional and remote students. More specifically, the TAP aims to contribute to:

- Increasing the educational attainment for inner regional, outer regional, remote, and very remote students;
- Reducing the number of students taking a gap year;
- Achieving Closing the Gap targets, by improving participation rates of Indigenous Australian students from outer regional and remote areas.

Student life stage

The TAP is primarily aimed at the Access stage, although an additional payment in the first year of study aims to support continued participation.

Equity group(s) targeted

The TAP is targeted at Year 12 (or equivalent) school-leavers living in regional and remote areas.

Equity barriers addressed

The TAP will help to address two equity barriers. The geographical barrier of accessing university is addressed because the TAP provides a payment to assist with the costs of relocation for study. As the payment is made directly to students, the financial support the TAP provides also addresses material barriers.

Eligibility and funding

When first introduced, the TAP was available to eligible outer regional, remote and very remote students. On 17 December 2021, the Australian Government announced changes to extend the TAP eligibility criteria to include inner regional students from the 2022 calendar year onwards as they face similar challenges as outer regional students. The initial allocation of TAP funding was based on historical enrolment data.

In addition to the eligibility around student's residence, students must meet the following criteria to be eligible for TAP funding:

- Meet Australian citizenship or residency requirements;
- Are undertaking a Certificate IV or above, at least 75 per cent of fulltime study load with a minimum duration of a year, in the year following completion of Year 12 or equivalent;
- Are studying face to face or in dual delivery method for at least part of the course;
- Are 22 years of age or under at the time they commence their course;
- Relocate to study at an education provider or Regional University Study Hubs at least 90 minutes by public transport from their family home;
- Parent(s) or guardian(s) have a combined income of $250,000 or below (or be exempt from meeting this requirement).

Applications open 1 January and close 31 December each calendar year for students who meet the eligibility criteria within the corresponding year. Successful applicants from outer regional and remote areas are paid up to $5,000 in their first year of study, with two payments, $3,000 after confirmation of enrolment (i.e. following the first census date, to assist with upfront costs), and $2,000 after confirmation of ongoing enrolment (i.e. following the second census date). Successful applicants from inner regional areas are paid a single payment of $3,000 after confirmation of enrolment in the first year of study. The TAP is a payment made in a student's first year of eligible study and students are eligible for the TAP only once.

In 2023/24, $50.9m of demand driven funding was made available through the TAP, an increase from $26.6m in 2021/22. The funding allocation for TAP is forecast to fall slightly between 2024/25 to 2026/27.

Administration of the TAP changed from being the responsibility of individual universities to that of Services Australia in 2022. Using data from 2021, Figure 4 shows that 40 universities administered the TAP to eligible students with more than half of all TAP funding allocated through eight institutions: James Cook University (11%); University of Tasmania (8%); Central Queensland University (8%); Charles Darwin University (6%); Charles Sturt University (6%); The University of New England (4%); University of South Australia (4%); and Griffith University (4%). However, it should be noted that institutions do not necessarily spend all of their TAP allocation.

Figure 4. Funding allocated via the Tertiary Access Payment, by institution, 2021
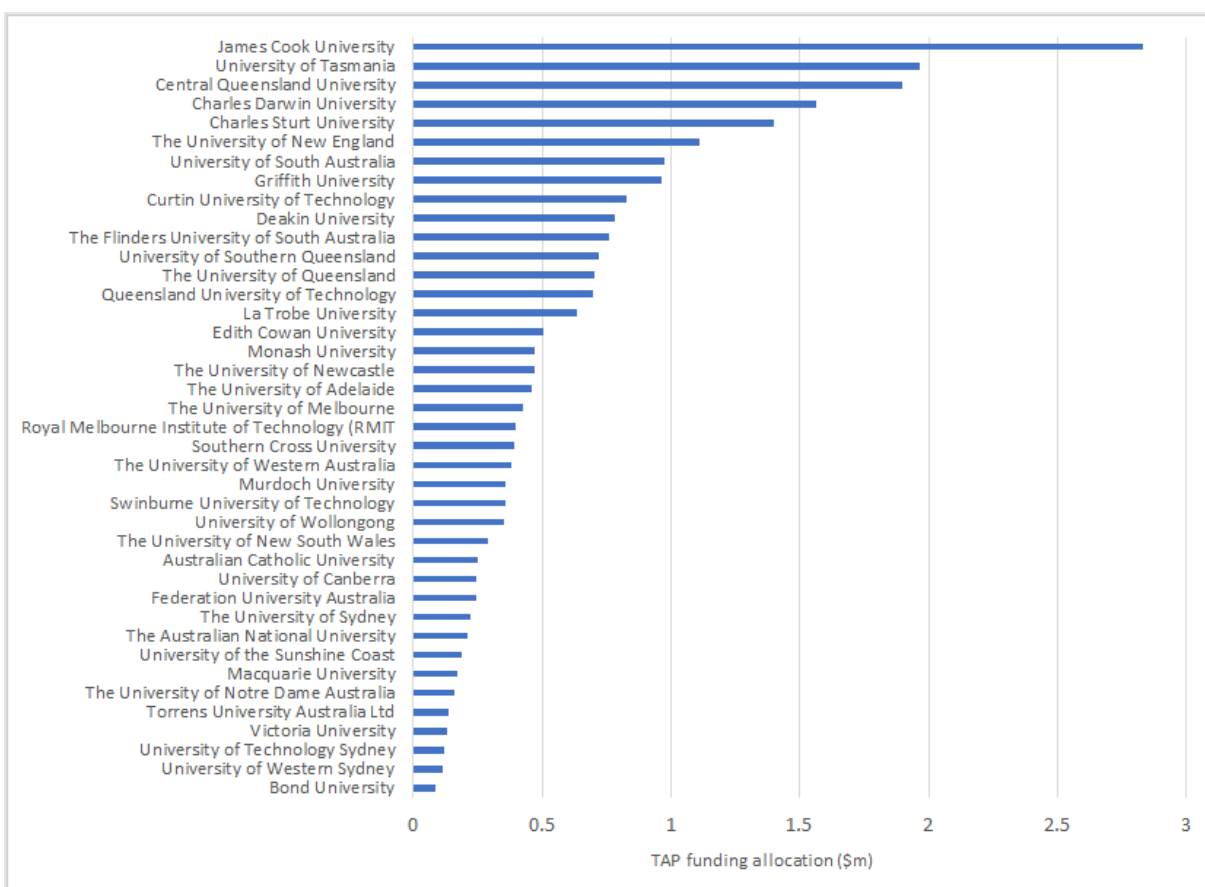
Source: Department of Education Delegate Approval of Determination No. 4945

Program reach

In 2022, 3,896 payments were granted. This represents an increase from 2,125 payments in 2021, which reflects the expansion of the eligibility criteria to include students from inner regional areas. The number of rejected claims in 2022 was 2,867, 42% of the total. It is part of the eligibility criteria that students must be from a regional or remote area. Data on the Indigenous status of TAP claimants and recipients are also collected by Services Australia.

Program monitoring and evaluation

Service Australia is required to report monthly on the following KPIs as part of the Service Agreement with the Department of Education of the administration of the TAP:

- Processing timelines;
- The number of claims 'processed' and 'in progress', by claim status and demographic characteristics (including age, gender, Indigenous status, and regionality).

An independent evaluation of the TAP was conducted during its first year of operation in 2021 involving interviews with stakeholders from 32 universities, written input from four universities, interviews with two peak bodies, and a survey of students who applied for TAP (n= 452). The evaluation found that the administration of the TAP by both universities and Services Australia was deemed to be inefficient, administration of payments was typically longer than the intended 14 days after eligibility had been verified, and 48% of applications were rejected on the grounds of ineligibility (mostly due to not meeting the regionality test). In addition, students reported difficulty in demonstrating the parental income requirement due its sensitivity and the challenge of acquiring the necessary documentation, particularly if the student was from a single parent or separated family. The evaluation also highlighted the following eligibility criteria as limiting the reach of the program to those who could benefit from it:

- Excluding inner regional students;

- Excluding students who may have chosen not to study directly after school in order to support their families or to earn money towards their future education;

- The exclusion of enabling courses.

As a result of the findings of this evaluation, significant changes were made to the implementation of the program. This included program administration moving solely to Services Australia with payments made directly to students, and the expansion of the eligibility criteria to include inner regional students.

In terms of the effectiveness of the TAP, the university interviews indicated that the payment was largely made to students who already intended to relocate for university, suggesting that the incentive may not be attracting those students who are unable to relocate on cost grounds. Students receiving the TAP reported using it in a variety of ways, with the majority using it to assist with accommodation costs. Some students indicated that without the TAP, relocation would not have been possible.

Implementation considerations and barriers

Although expanded to include students from inner regional areas, the eligibility criteria still excludes those who may have chosen not to study directly after school. This might include those with families they wish to support (for whom relocation costs are higher) or who wish to save towards their future education. This criterion contrasts with some other income support programs which provide relocation assistance and encourage students to take a gap year (e.g. Youth Allowance). The eligibility criteria also enables students with a household income below $250k per year to apply for the TAP, which means that students from high-income households are eligible for the payment. The distribution of TAP claimants and recipients by household income is unknown, but it may be benefitting those with already sufficient resources to support relocation.

More generally, the financial assistance provided by the TAP provides only a partial and short-term contribution to the larger ongoing expense of relocating for study. This is particularly the case for those from remote areas as travelling home to these areas is significantly more expensive than to regional areas. Furthermore, research suggests that even when a university is located regionally and may be a relatively short distance away from a community, the lack of public transport and the high cost of fuel, can make it prohibitive for young people from low-income backgrounds to attend (Outpost Consulting, 2021). Indeed, it has been suggested that TAP could be expanded/increased for students from metropolitan areas enrolling at a regional or remote university as it may otherwise incentivise students to study at metropolitan universities

where costs to live, travel and study are lower (Charles Darwin University, 2023). Peak bodies contributing to the 2021 TAP evaluation also indicated that there may be some overlap in the purpose and objectives of the TAP with other regional/remote scholarships, including the Rural and Regional Enterprise Scholarship and the Relocation Scholarship, and suggested a review of all scholarships to ensure there is no duplication and a more streamlined scholarship process for students.

2.1.3   Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program

Overview

The Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) commenced in 2010 with the key objective of providing equality of opportunity in higher education. The HEPPP provides funding to Table A universities so they can implement strategies to improve access, retention, and completion of undergraduate courses for people from low SES backgrounds, from regional and remote areas, and for Indigenous people. Strategies funded by the HEPPP seek to improve outreach to widen aspiration for higher education among people from the target equity groups, and better the extent to which they can access, participate, remain, and succeed in HE, and obtain higher education awards.

Student life stage

The HEPPP is targeted at all student life stages including Pre-Access, Access, and Participation and Attainment.

Equity group(s) targeted

The HEPPP initially was focussed on people from low SES backgrounds who were underrepresented in higher education. In 2021, as part of the Job-Ready Graduates package, the HEPPP became part of the Indigenous, Regional and Low-SES Attainment Fund (IRLSAF) expanding the focus to people from a low SES background, people from regional areas and remote areas, and Indigenous people.

Equity barriers addressed

The HEPPP may help to address four equity barriers. It addresses institutional barriers by allocating funding to providers to establish clearly defined project objectives and programs that target cohorts rather than individuals or the student population en masse. The HEPPP also addresses barriers related to individual capabilities through programs designed to enhance skills, confidence, career aspirations, sense of achievement, and belonging. Geographical barriers are addressed through the funding of outreach activities to promote aspirations for higher education in regional and remote areas. Material barriers such as costs associated with relocating and application fees are also addressed through programs and activities funded by the HEPPP (Robinson et al, 2022).

Eligibility and funding

Figure 5 shows funding allocated for the HEPPP between 2010 and 2023. HEPPP funding is only available to Table A universities with domestic students from the target equity groups. Funding is allocated every calendar year and is based on the university's share of domestic undergraduate students from the targeted equity groups (Australian Government, 2023c).

Funding for the HEPPP moved to the IRLSAF in 2021. In 2023, $145.2m of funding was made available through the HEPPP to 38 higher education institutions (Australian Government, 2023a)

Figure 5. Funding allocated for the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program, 2010-2023
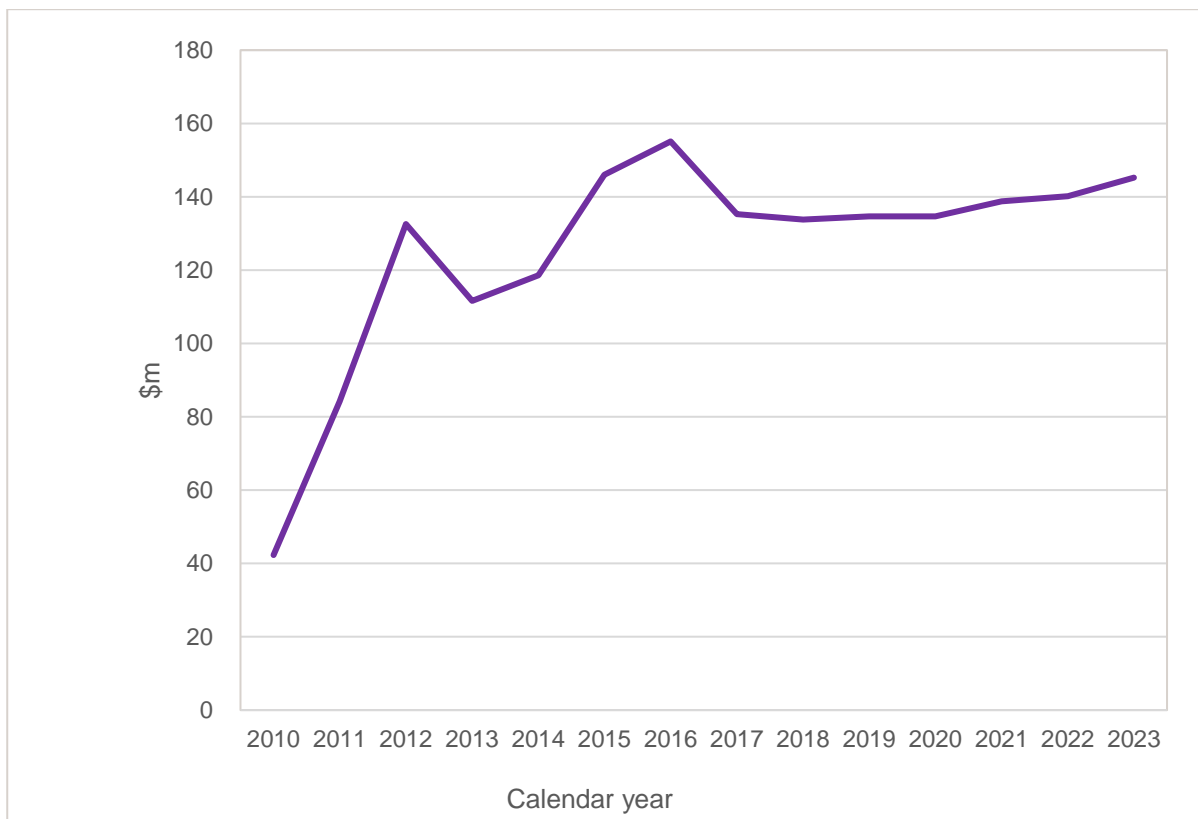
Source: Data provided by the Department of Education

Figure 6 shows the allocation of HEPPP funding across 38 Table A universities in 2023. University of Tasmania was allocated the highest amount of HEPPP funding of $9.4 million. Western Sydney University and Charles Sturt University were allocated $7.9 million and $7.6 million, respectively (Australian Government, 2023a) . The Australian National University was allocated the least HEPPP funding for 2023 of $0.7million.

Figure 6. Allocations of Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program funding by institution, 2023
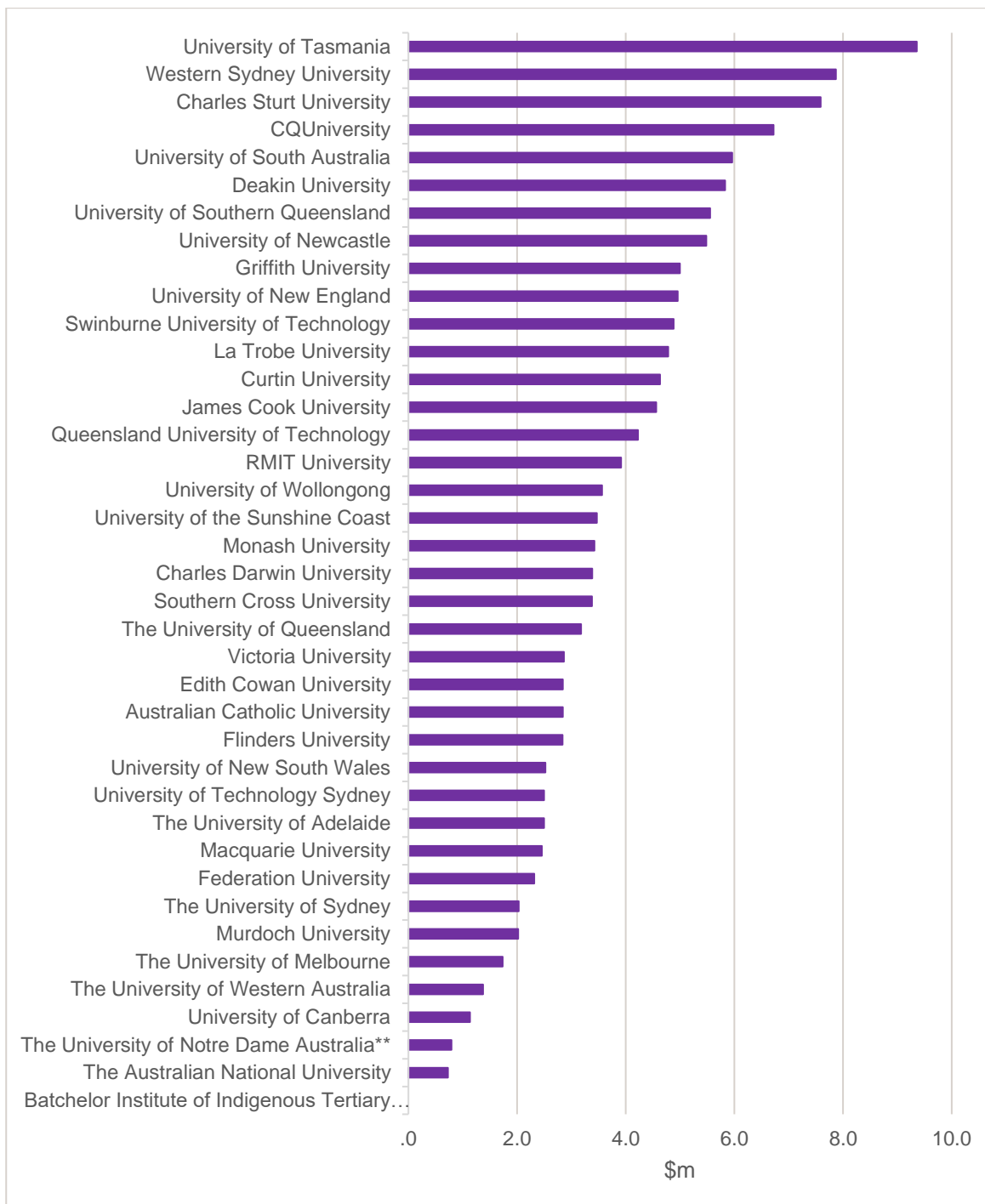
* Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education (BIITE) and Charles Darwin University (CDU) entered into a partnership where BIITE's higher education students were enrolled at CDU from 2012
** University of Notre Dame Australia became a Table A University in 2021and therefore was eligible for the HEPPP.
Source: (Australian Government, 2023a)

Data on reported HEPPP expenditure in 2021 for 37 HEPPP-funded higher education institutions was provided by the Department of Education and provides an indication of the distribution of HEPPP funding across student life stages. These data should be considered exploratory on the basis that it was the first year in which such data were requested from higher education institutions. In addition, the student life stages are

not mutually exclusive (i.e. HEPPP activities can target more than one stage). With that caveat in mind, reported expenditure was highest at the Participation stage of the student lifecycle, with nearly $52 million reported for a total of 311 activities (see Figure 7) (Department of Education, 2023). Over $33 million was reported as being spent on 307 activities at the Pre-Access stage, and nearly $21 million at the Access stage for 107 activities. The Attainment and Transition Out stage had the least expenditure of just over $8 million for 54 activities. A further $16 million was spent on 105 non-lifecycle activities.

Figure 7. 2021 student lifecycle Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program funding distribution
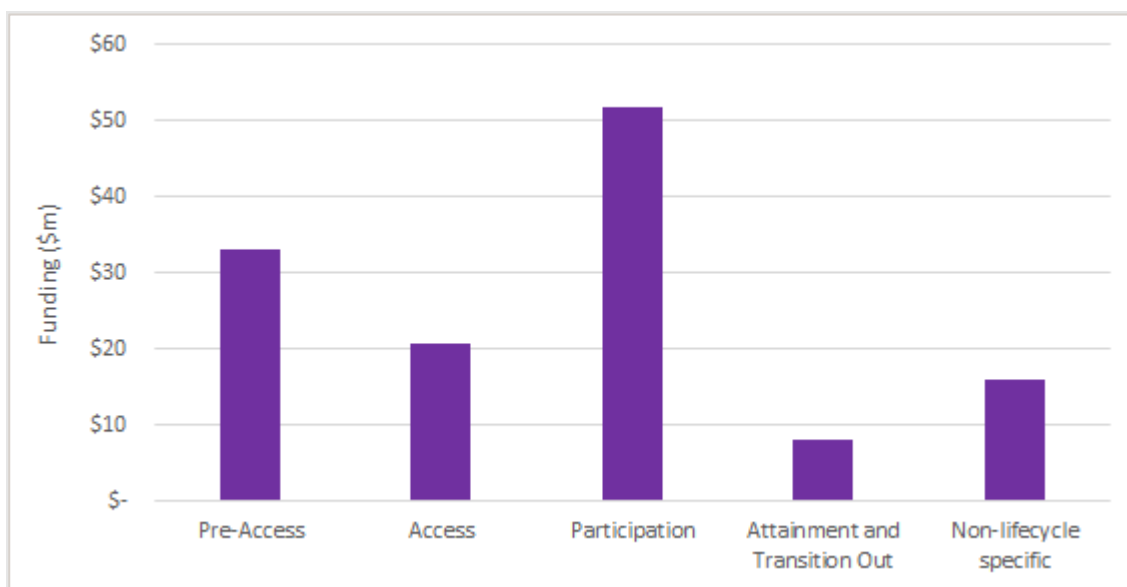
Source: Data provided by the Department of Education

Program reach

In 2021, there was a reported total of 884 HEPPP-funded activities across 37 funded higher education institutions (Department of Education, 2023). Based on the reported expenditure data provided by the Department, HEPPP activities mostly targeted low SES student cohorts (721 activities), with fewer targeted at rural and remote students (562 activities) and Indigenous students (510 activities), again noting that some activities targeted more than one equity group (see Figure 8).

The number of students reached through HEPPP funded activities is unknown. However, it was estimated that 310,000 students participated in HEPPP projects between 2010 and 2015 (Australian Government, 2023c).

Figure 8. 2021 Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program activities for target equity groups
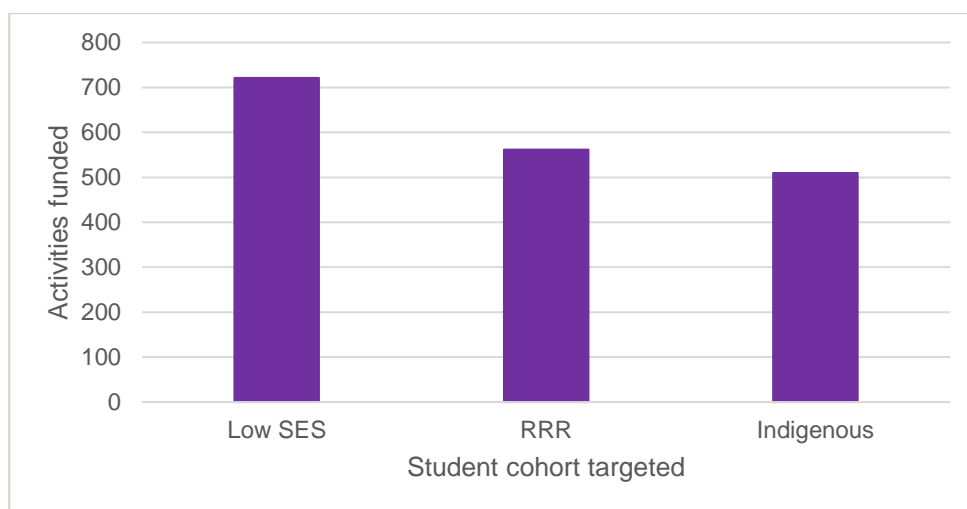
Source: Data provided by the Department of Education

Program monitoring and evaluation

Universities that receive funding for the HEPPP are required to provide a Final Report each year, which has recently been redesigned to align with the recommendations in the Student Equity in Higher Education Evaluation Framework (SEHEEF) (Robinson et al., 2022). The template includes fields concerning the types of activities delivered with HEPPP funding, the student life stage(s) targeted, and whether or not the program and its activities have been (or will be) exposed to continuous quality improvement and evaluation. No information is currently requested on the reach of activities or the outcomes they are achieving for participants. Prior to 2022, universities were also required to provide an annual Activity Plan to outline the institution's suite of strategies for increasing access, participation and success for people from low socioeconomic status backgrounds (Australian Government, 2023c); however, this requirement was recently discontinued. Testing and refinement of the reporting template will continue as the SEHEEF progresses through its implementation phase.

A comprehensive evaluation of the HEPPP was undertaken by Acil Allen in 2016, consisting of a detailed review of program documentation, university reporting and evaluations, and international higher education equity programs; quantitative data analysis and economic modelling of available implementation and outcomes data; and consultations, including interviews, surveys and a written submission process (ACIL Allen Consulting, 2017). The report concluded that at a whole-of-program level, the HEPPP is likely contributing to improved student outcomes, but the extent of this contribution was not quantifiable. At the university level, the evaluation found that HEPPP funding was enabling a variety of activities to support students from identified equity groups at different life stages and the robust evaluations that had been delivered at the university program level, showed positive effects. This was consistent with the qualitative feedback obtained through the various stakeholder consultations.

Similarly, a review by Zacharias (2017) investigated how different Australian universities designed and implemented HEPPP programs between 2010-2015 and how these had contributed to student outcomes and organisational change. The methods included: an analysis of HEPPP annual progress reports; HEIMS equity performance data; interviews with policy makers; case studies; and student workshops. It was concluded that while HEPPP had enabled universities to develop bespoke equity initiatives that target low SES students, there was an inability to enable a systematic evaluation of HEPPP funded initiatives on broadly defined student outcomes across the student life cycle. Nonetheless, Zacharias (2017) highlighted key characteristics of HEPPP-funded projects that are likely to enhance effectiveness, which included:

- Clearly defined project objectives;

- Collaboration across education sectors;

- Continuity of efforts over several years;

- A tailored approach that recognises differing needs of students, schools, and communities.

The new SEHEEF, released in 2021, supports and guides evaluation of the HEPPP at both the national and university level. Evaluation at the university level is segmented into delineated activities including Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) and Impact Evaluation activities (Robinson et al., 2022). At the national level, there is routine reporting of equity data, analysis and reporting of sector-level data on HEPPP-funded projects, and synthesis of university level impact evaluations (Robinson et al., 2022).

Implementation considerations and barriers

In the comprehensive analysis of the HEPPP, Zacharias (2017) provided a list of informed recommendations for improved policy and practice in student equity regarding the HEPPP. These recommendations were designed to support successful implementation of the HEPPP and included: strong commitments to equity in university mission statements; sophisticated understanding of the barriers to higher education faced by students from identified equity groups and the specific issues in university communities; and establishing partnerships based on mutual benefits and respect. The recommendations included further institutional changes such as universities appointing an equity director to directly report to a member of a university's executive team, embedding widening participation staff in existing equity or student support teams, and universities having an equity team with central control over the total HEPPP allocation to apply clear processes for administrating the HEPPP funding (Zacharias, 2017).

Barriers to the success of the HEPPP that have been identified have mostly concerned the funding mechanisms and processes. These include how and when the HEPPP funding is allocated, including the requirement that funding must be spent within a calendar year (Zacharias, 2017). It has also been suggested that HEPPP funding is not stable and consistent thus prohibiting effective program planning and HR management (Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training, 2023). Dollinger and colleagues (2022) suggest that despite widening participation in higher education through programs like the HEPPP for equity groups such as regional and remote students, outcomes have not improved, particularly when students represent multiple equity groups (e.g. from low SES backgrounds, regional or remote areas, and Indigenous backgrounds) (Dollinger et al, 2022). The lack of easily accessible data on the trajectories of such students potentially obscures findings regarding program success.

2.1.4 Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program

Overview

The Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program (RPPPP) provides funding to eligible institutions to support multi-year collaborative projects designed to empower students from underrepresented backgrounds in regional and remote areas to aspire to higher education. The RPPPP funds collaborative outreach projects, led by universities and Regional University Study Hubs, to work with regional communities.

The RPPPP aims to also support the development of sustainable partnerships with communities currently underserviced by existing outreach initiatives and where cumulative barriers to higher education exist.

The RPPPP is being delivered in two phases. In Phase 1 of the RPPPP, higher education institutions and local communities in regional and remote areas partnered as consortia to co-design tailored outreach projects targeting aspirations for higher education. For Phase 2 of the RPPPP, further funding has been awarded to successful consortia for delivery of the outreach projects co-designed under Phase 1 (Australian Government, 2023).

Student life stage

The RPPPP is targeted at the Pre-access student life stage.

Equity group(s) targeted

The RPPPP is focused on students in regional areas and remote areas of Australia, including those who may be experiencing cumulative disadvantage.

Equity barriers addressed

The RPPPP may help to address two main equity barriers to higher education. Through funding consortia to deliver tailored outreach and community engagement initiatives that encourage students from rural and remote areas to consider higher education opportunities, the RPPPP may address geographic equity barriers. Individual barriers might also be addressed through the RPPPP by empowering students from under-represented backgrounds in regional and remote areas to realise their aspirations for higher education.

Eligibility and funding

The RPPPP is part of the IRLSAF established in 2021. Those eligible for RPPPP funding include Table A universities and Regional University Study Hubs. Partnerships can be inclusive of other higher education providers including Table B universities, non-university higher education providers, schools, vocational education and training providers, and community organisations (Australian Government, 2022b).

In 2023, $2.65m of funding was made available through the RPPPP. Between 2022 and 2024, it is expected $7.2 million will be awarded to consortia led by Table A universities and Regional University Study Hubs in a two-phased process (Australian Government, 2023). At Phase 1, six projects were funded to develop concept proposals, totalling $704,628. In Phase 2, $6.5 million had been allocated for two projects to deliver multi-year projects (see Figure 9).

Figure 9. Funding awarded through the Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program 2022-2024
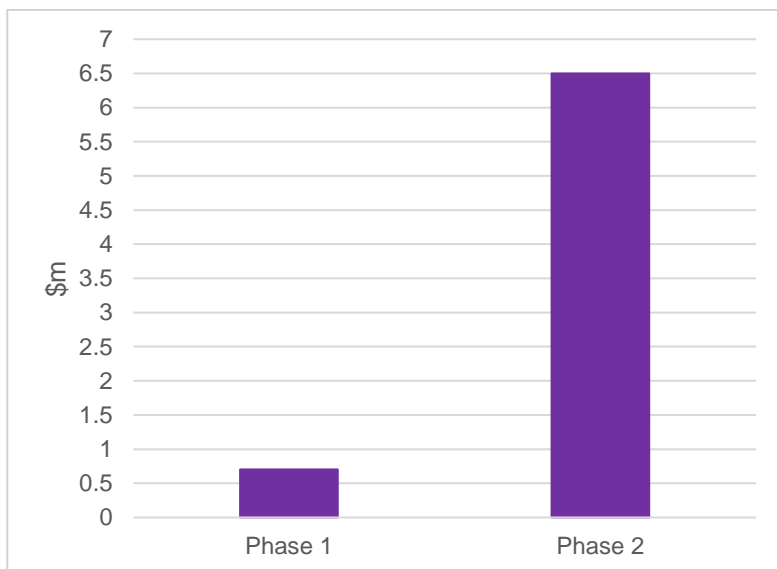
Source: Australian Government, 2023

Program reach

Phase 1 activities involved co-design and did not entail student engagement. Phase 2 projects encompass more than 30 universities and Regional University Study Hubs targeting rural and remote students across Eastern Australia and the Northern Territory (Australian Government, 2023; University of Technology Sydney, 2022). There are no data on student reach yet available.

Program monitoring and evaluation

No formal evaluation or review of the RPPPP has yet occurred. However, recipients must provide a progress report and Final Report at the end of Phase 1, as part of Phase 2 applications. Phase 2 reporting requirements include development of evaluation plans (including program logics) which align with the Student Equity in Higher Education Evaluation Framework (SEHEEF) designed around the HEPPP (Australian Government, 2022a; Robinson et al, 2022).

Implementation considerations and barriers

Some initial barriers have delayed the RPPPP initiative. Commencement of the program was delayed because of the COVID-19 pandemic and sector concerns about travel and capacity for regional and remote communities.

Phase 2 will fund the delivery of two innovative, evidence-based and community supported multi-year initiatives in regional and remote Australia. These projects include the Eastern Australia Regional University Centre Partnership project, encompassing more than 30 Regional University Study Hubs and universities across Queensland, NSW, ACT, and Victoria (Australian Government, 2023; University of Technology Sydney, 2022). The Northern Territory Youth Engagement in Allied Health (YEAH)! Project will be a place-based initiative to inspire regional and remote First Nations youth in the Northern Territory to consider an allied health higher education pathway (Australian Government, 2023; Ministers' Media Centre, 2023). The project is being led by Flinders University in collaboration with Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education and Indigenous Allied Health Australia (Australian Government, 2023; Ministers' Media Centre, 2023).

2.1.5   Regional University Study Hubs

Overview

The Regional University Study Hubs program (formerly Regional University Centres (RUCs)) provides funding to community-owned organisations to provide regional and remote students with relevant facilities, infrastructure, and supports to assist them in undertaking their tertiary studies by distance, within their local communities.

There are currently 32 Regional University Study Hubs in operation across states and territories, with two more currently being established. The hubs offer resources and supports in the form of study spaces, video conferencing equipment, computer facilities, and high-speed internet access. Regional University Study Hubs also provide administrative, academic skills, and wellbeing support for students studying via distance at any Australian university or vocational education and training provider. Regional University Study Hubs have a role in supporting the aspirations of local regional and remote students and typically form a range of partnerships with education providers, local business, and industry in support of student learning and regional development.

Student life stage

The Regional University Study Hubs program is primarily targeted at the Participation and Attainment student life stage. This includes playing an important role in supporting retention.

Equity group(s) targeted

The Regional University Study Hubs program is focused on students in regional and remote areas of Australia. However, relative to all higher education students, a higher proportion of Regional University Study Hub students are female, aged over 26 years, and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (Cox Inall Ridgeway and Urbis, 2021).

Equity barriers addressed

The Regional University Study Hubs program may help to address geographic and material equity barriers to higher education. Through enabling students in remote and regional areas to access facilities, general support, and peer networks in accessible locations, Regional University Study Hubs may assist in addressing geographic inequities that negatively impact an individual's ability to access, participate and succeed in higher education. Material inequities may also be addressed by Regional University Study Hubs through offering regional and remote students' access to contemporary technologies, training, and technical support when challenges arise.

Eligibility and funding

The Regional University Study Hubs program was established in 2018 through an initial piloting phase, which has grown to attract over $100m in funding since inception. Funding is provided through competitive funding rounds.

On 18 July 2023, $66.9m of additional funding was announced to establish up to 20 additional Regional University Study Hubs and to expand the concept to metropolitan Australia by establishing up to 14 Suburban University Study Hubs. This builds on the existing funding growth since 2018 and projected through to 2027 (see Figure 10).

Through the funding application process, Regional University Study Hubs are required to demonstrate they reflect the communities they intend to serve. Each Regional University Study Hub is established with consideration of the geographical location relative to the community, the population size, demographic and cultural needs, existing higher education external (online) study and other tertiary level study being undertaken and the level of community interest in this, the skills required by local industry and businesses in the area, and the location of other education providers including local TAFE and VET providers relative to the proposed Regional University Study Hub.

Figure 10. Budget Allocation for the Regional University Study Hubs Program 2018-2027
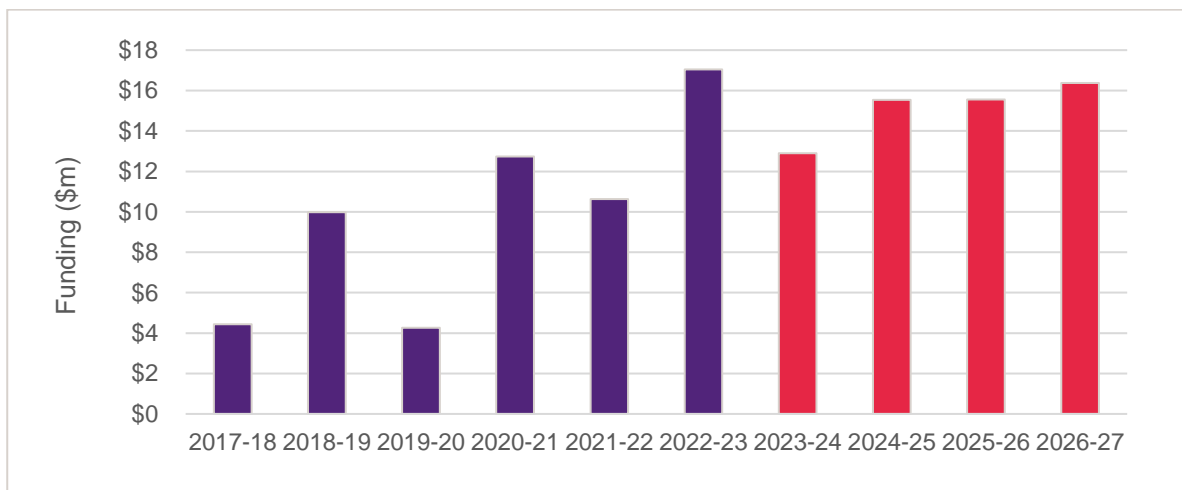
Source: Department of Education Portfolio Budget Statements

Program reach

In April 2023, the Regional University Study Hubs program was supporting 3409 students, of whom 97% (3301) were students living in regional and remote Australia, 11% (369) identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and 6% (218) of students identified as living with disability. Indeed, the proportion of Regional University Study Hubs students from an identified equity group is higher than when compared to all higher education students (Cox Inall Ridgeway and Urbis, 2021). Data from a student experience evaluation at Country Universities Centres (CUC) (an affiliated group of Regional University Study Hubs) comparing internal CUC student demographic data against national domestic higher education student data from 2019, indicates a disproportionately high number of students at CUCs were from low SES (67% vs. 17.6%, respectively) and Indigenous backgrounds (7.1% vs. 2%, respectively). Stone et al (2022) argue that CUC student demography data reflects the success of CUCs in attracting the priority student equity groups.

Program monitoring and evaluation

Regional University Study Hubs are required to provide 6-monthly progress reports to the Department, which must include the following information: student data including Tertiary Provider, Field of Study, and sociodemographic characteristics (age, gender, first in family, disability, First Nations status). Student outcomes information is also requested where available (including course completion, further study, and employment).[2]

A formative evaluation of the first stage of the program led by Cox Inall Ridgeway and Urbis was completed in 2020-21. The evaluation involved the analysis of existing documentation and data, as well as the collection and analysis of primary survey and interview data collected from a range of stakeholders including Hub staff, students, and university and local industry stakeholders. The key findings from the evaluation were that:

- The Program appears to be addressing the gap in access for which it was established, as indicated by a 68% increase in program registrations at Regional University Study Hubs between September 2019 and April 2021.

- Regional University Study Hubs are successfully supporting students to study in their communities. The report cited examples of students reporting that they would not be studying but for the hub, and there was some evidence that this is translating into better student retention (i.e. lower 'drop out' rates).

- Student survey results and university partner and hub manager feedback suggested that Regional University Study Hubs have helped to improve academic success through increased motivation and support.

- A very high proportion of Regional University Study Hub students (93%) reported a 'good' or 'excellent' education experience when asked to rate the quality of their entire educational experience over the past year. Furthermore, students reported that interacting with other students at Regional University Study Hubs made them feel less isolated.

These evaluation findings were further supported by a research study that reviewed CUCs, which also found that self-reported academic progress, as well as motivation, confidence, and study completion had improved as a result of the Hubs (Stone et al., 2022).

A longitudinal evaluation of the effectiveness of the Regional University Study Hubs against the program outcomes and objectives is due to be undertaken in 2023-24, which will enable a more definitive assessment of effectiveness on primary higher education outcomes, including enrolments, retention, completion and success.

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[2] Due to the nature of Regional University Study Hubs being supporters of study rather than providers, students access them in different ways and for a range of purposes. This means that, currently, it is not always possible to track information on student outcomes.

Implementation considerations and barriers

As part of the initial 2021 evaluation conducted during the early stages of the Regional University Study Hubs program, a range of challenges and opportunities emerged. Key issues that were identified pertained to data collection and reporting, future sustainability, and partnerships. Consequently, the program underwent adjustments, particularly concerning Commonwealth supported places (CSPs) and partnerships.

For instance, the program had previously featured a limited number of CSPs allocated to partner universities within the Regional University Study Hubs initiative, aiming to enhance future financial sustainability for the Hubs. In 2021, the Department embarked on a research project focused on Regional University Study Hub partnerships, with a particular emphasis on hub-university partnerships and the role of CSPs. This project unveiled complexities and challenges linked to CSP allocation in the program, proposing alternative methods to support partnerships. Consequently, new hubs are no longer able to direct CSPs to partner universities as part of the Regional University Study Hubs program. Instead, a direct source of funding for partnerships will be available to facilitate the development of suitable collaborations encompassing community, industry, and educational providers.

Furthermore, additional funding has been allocated to support the continuous operations of the first two cohorts of Regional University Study Hubs.

2.1.6   Regional Loading Program

Overview

The key objective of the Regional Loading Program (RLP) is to promote equality of opportunity in higher education. The RLP commenced in 2005 and provides additional funding to eligible higher education providers to assist with offsetting the higher operating costs of regional campuses in comparison with major city campuses. Higher costs could be associated with the institution's regional location, size, and history.

Student life stage

The RLP is primarily aimed at supporting students during the Participation student life stage.

Equity group(s) targeted

The RLP targets students from regional, rural, and remote locations. However, the regional loading payment is not paid directly to students, but to providers to assist with the higher costs of operation in regional areas.

Equity barriers addressed

The RLP is primarily aimed at addressing equity barriers at an institutional level. Through the additional funding to regional institutions to offset the disparity in costs and revenue compared to major city campuses, the RLP is intended to contribute to enhancing regional students access to current technologies, training, and technical support. Technological disadvantage has been identified as a barrier to participation in higher education in some regional and remote locations (Outpost Consulting, 2021).

Eligibility and funding

Figure 11 shows the funding allocated for the RLP between 2005 and 2023. RLP funding is determined by the location of higher education campuses and where the primary campus is located, as well as the equivalent full time student load (EFTSL) provided at regional campuses. In 2007, the RLP was indexed according to the higher education provider's allocation of funding in 2006 instead of being recalculated each year, providing greater funding certainty for providers (Australian Government, 2011). In 2010, the value of regional loading was $31.8 million distributed across 85 campuses (Australian Government, 2011). In 2012, a new funding formula was introduced revising the measure of remoteness and increasing the loading to almost double its previous rate to $64 million (see Figure 11) (Burnheim & Harvey, 2016), although this remained lower than the $80 million recommendation made in the 2008 Bradley Review (Bradley et al.,

2008; Coombe, 2015). Funding for the RLP moved to the IRLSAF in 2021. In 2023, $79.8m of funding was made available through the RLP.

Figure 12 shows the 23 higher education institutions that received RLP funding in 2022.

Figure 11. Funding allocated for the Regional Loading Program, 2005-2023
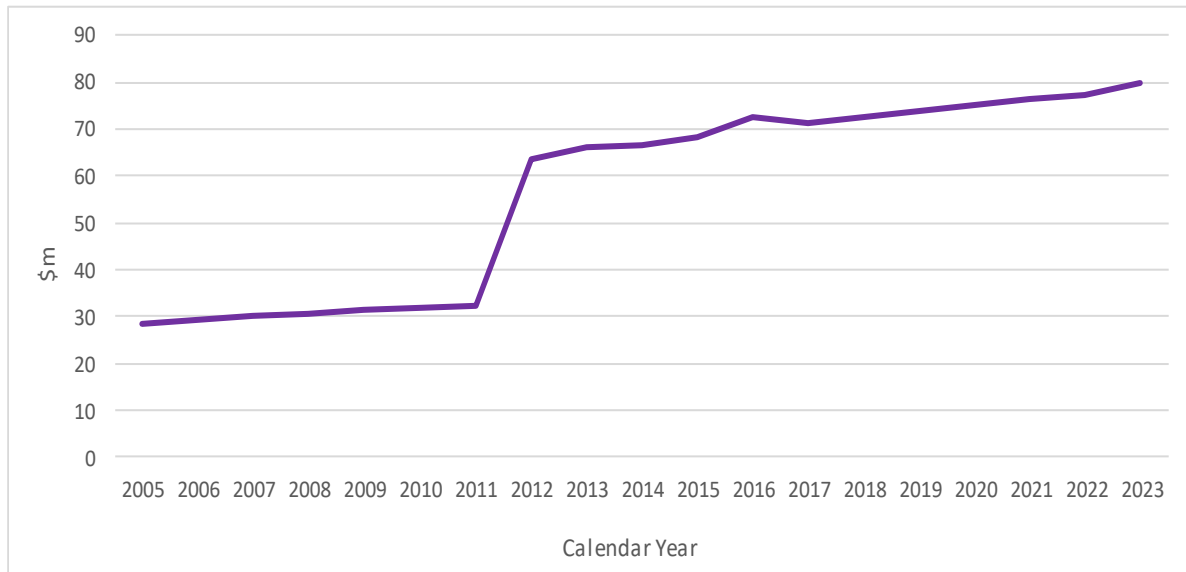
Source: Data provided by the Department of Education

Figure 12. Funding allocated for the Regional Loading Program, by institution, 2022
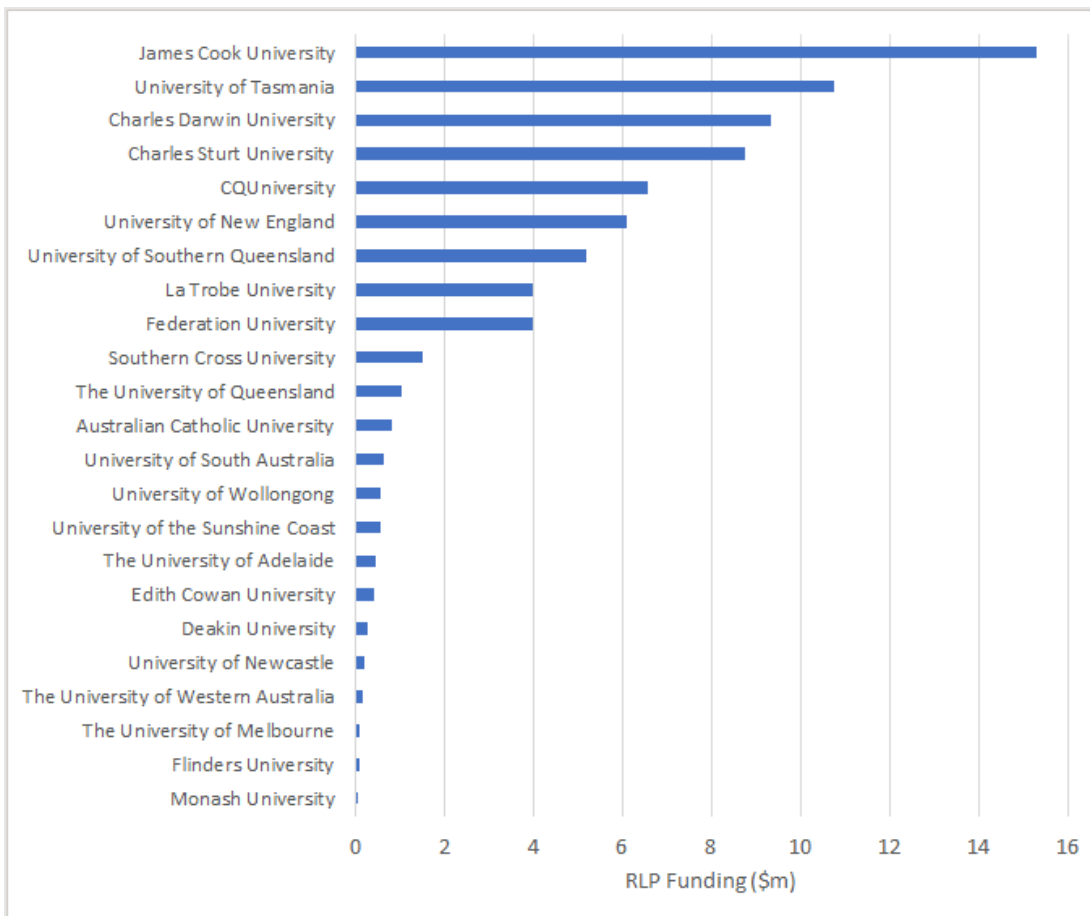
Source: Department of Education Delegate Approval of Determination No. 5190, 2022

Program reach

In theory, the reach of the RLP is indicated by the number of students attending universities in regional and remote locations. However, data on student participation for metropolitan universities with regional campuses are not readily available.

Program monitoring and evaluation

The purpose and level of regional loading was last reviewed by the Department of Education in 2011 (Australian Government, 2011). While the review found that the level of funding was not substantial enough to offset the differences in revenue and costs borne by regional campuses compared to metropolitan campuses, it also stated: " *…it is not possible to identify the precise disparity in costs on a campus by campus basis as well managed universities keep their costs within their budget*" (Australian Government, 2011, p.vii).

Implementation considerations and barriers

While regional participation in higher education has been increasing, increased availability of places in metropolitan institutions has also resulted in more regional students moving to metropolitan locations (Cardak et al., 2017). Higher education institutions based in larger regional locations are net attractors of regional students, who are more willing to relocate from one regional location to another (Cardak et al., 2017). Universities and campuses based in smaller regional locations were found to be unable to compete with metropolitan or larger regional institutions, which is a new competitive challenge (Cardak et al., 2017).

Furthermore, metropolitan universities can attract more additional revenue from international students than regional universities (Australian Technology Network of Universities, 2023).

2.1.7 Disability Support Program

Overview

The Disability Support Program commenced in 2004, aiming to increase participation of students with disability in higher education. The program provides funding to eligible Higher Education providers to assist with supporting students with disability to access, participate, and succeed in higher education. The funding may be used by providers to better support students with disability, such as staff training or modifications to course contents and delivery methods to meet the needs of students with disability.

The Disability Support Program currently consists of two components: Disability Support Fund (DSF) and Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training (ADCET). The funding between 2004 and 2021 consisted of three components: Additional Support for Students with Disabilities (ASSD); ADCET; and Performance Based Disability Support Funding.

Student life stage

The Disability Support Program funding targets the Participation stage.

Equity group(s) targeted

Students with disability.

Equity barriers addressed

The Disability Support Program may help to address three main equity barriers that intersect. The funding assists eligible universities with the high costs incurred in providing educational support or equipment for students with disability, thereby addressing institutional barriers. The funding can be used on activities aimed at attracting and supporting students with disability to participate in higher education, staff training and educational support, and equipment for students with disability. The supports therefore reduce barriers that may be experienced by students with disability, while also reducing material barriers by reducing the additional costs associated with accessing and participating in Higher Education.

Eligibility and funding

The Disability Support Program is available to Table A universities. Program funding is payable to universities in two components. The majority of funding is directed to the Disability Support Fund, 55% of which is allocated to universities based on enrolment numbers of students with disability. Universities may use this funding for staff training, to better support students with disability, and for modifications to course content, teaching materials, and delivery methods. Forty five percent of the allocation provides partial reimbursement to universities for the costs of education and equipment support for students with disability with high-cost needs.

The Disability Support Program also provides annual funding of $150,000 (indexed) to the ADCET, a website hosted by the University of Tasmania that provides information, advice, and online resources to disability practitioners, teachers, and students with disability on inclusive teaching and learning practices.

The total budget for Disability Support Program funding in 2023 was $10.4m, increasing to $13.2m in 2024. Funding has increased steadily since its introduction in 2014. However, as noted by Pitman et al. (2022), higher education participation for people with disability rose by 21.8% between 2016 and 2019 while funding rose by 4.5% over the same time period. Therefore, in real terms, Commonwealth funding for students with disability has been steadily declining.

Figure 13. Funding allocated for the Disability Support Program, 2014-2022
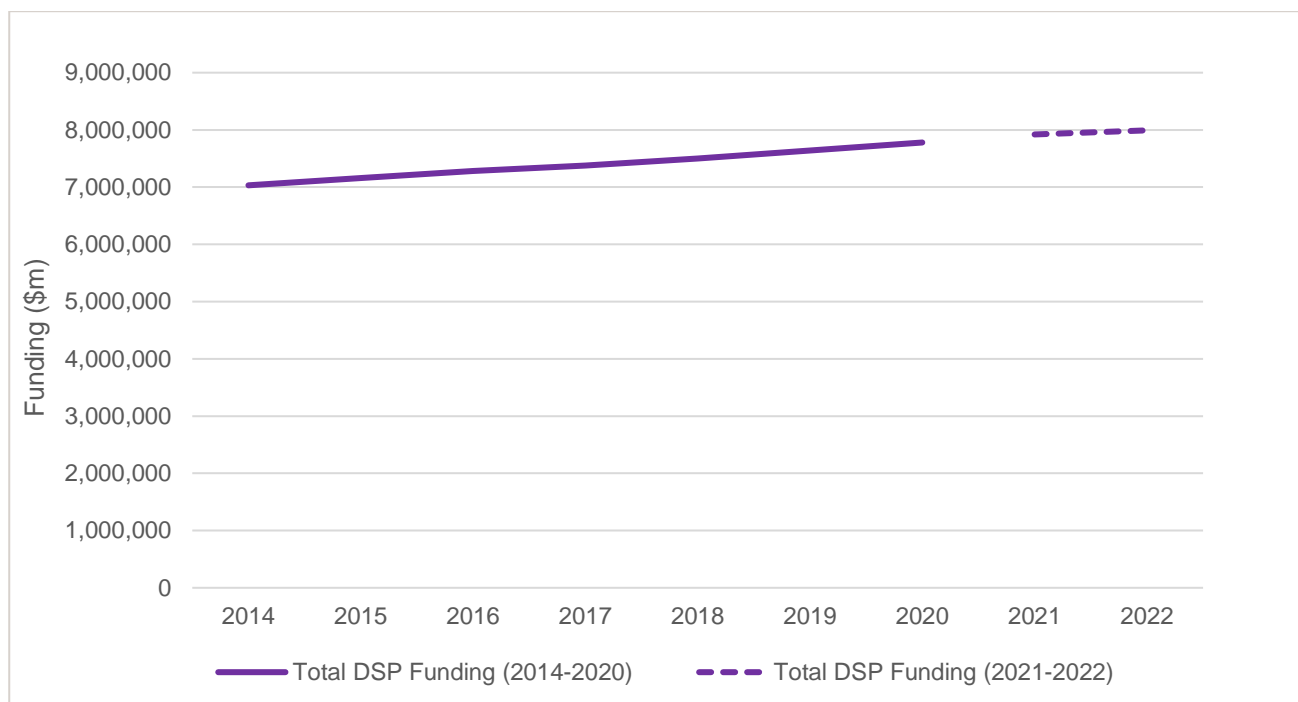
Source: Data obtained from HEIMS Online: Institution Payment Information

Program reach

Assessment of the program reach before the program amendments in 2021 were reported by Pitman and colleagues (2022) in a report titled *Calculating the costs of supporting people with disability in Australian higher education.* The pre-2020 Disability Support Program model was being delivered under three components: ASSD; ADCET; and Performance Based Disability Support Funding. The key points of considerations raised by the report include (Pitman *et al*, 2022, p. 19):

- *Each year the number of students receiving educational support has risen at a faster rate than the ASSD funding provided, meaning that the amount provided per student is falling in both actual and real terms.*
- *As participation for people with disability has increased, the amount of funding claimed by higher education providers is rising faster than the amount of ASSD funding available. In 2019, only 57% of funding claimed was reimbursed, compared to 61% in 2014.*
- *There are significant differences in per-student (with disability) support at the institutional level (using the 2018 enrolment numbers but the 2019 ASSD funding amount).*
- *One variable that may explain higher or lower Disability Support Program revenue per EFTSL is mode of delivery, both in terms of the strategic orientation of the university and extent to which students with disability undertake face to face or online education.*

In 2021, universities submitted 283 high-cost claims. A single claim represents support for a student with disability with support costs exceeding a $10,000 (indexed) threshold.[3] Figure 14 illustrates the DSF component for the year 2022.

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[3] Data provided by the Department; not publicly available.

Figure 14. Disability Support Fund, by institution, 2022
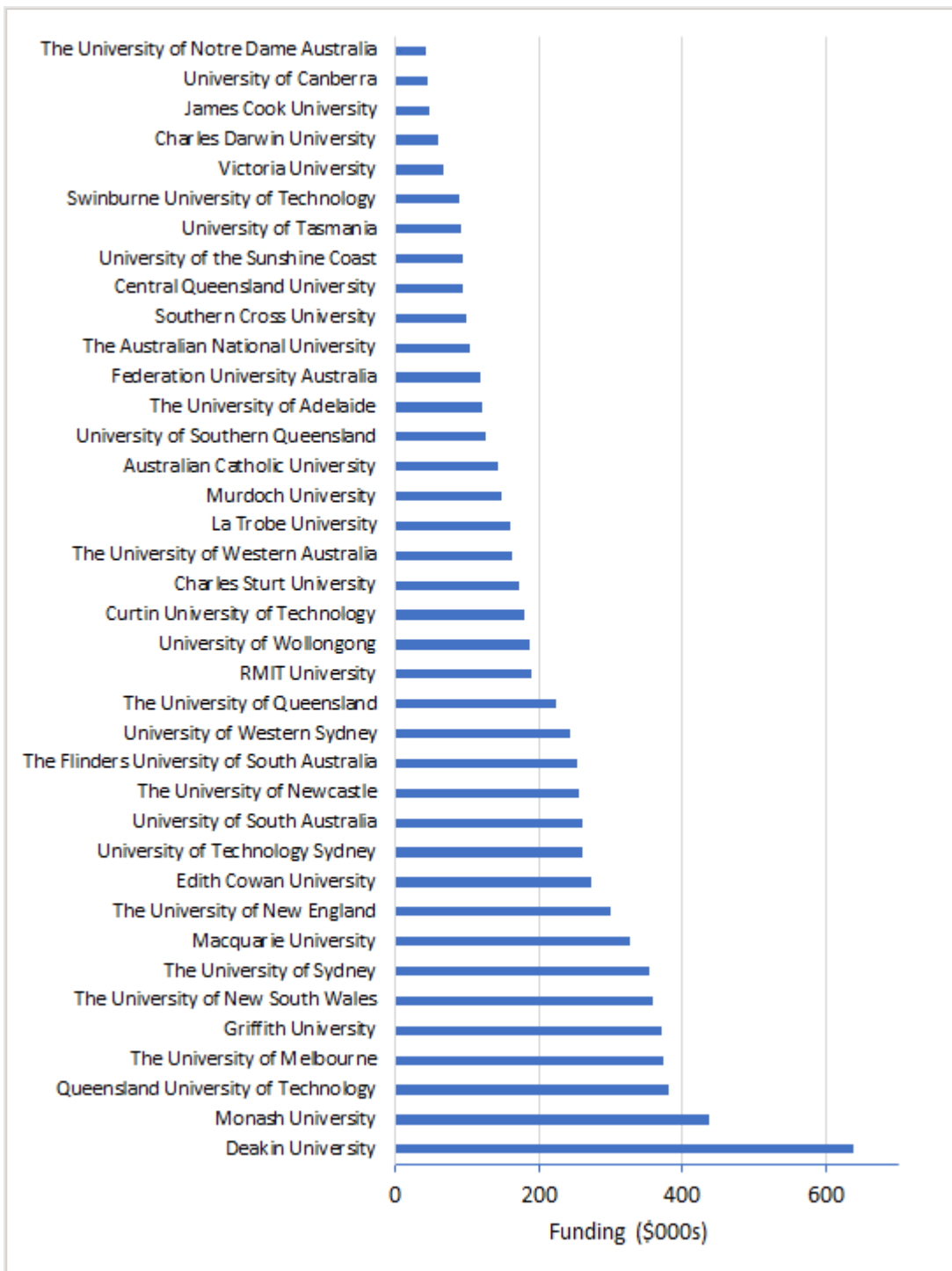
Source: Data obtained from HEIMS Online: Institution Payment Information

Program monitoring and evaluation

Universities in receipt of Disability Support Program funding are required to submit an annual report, but Disability Support Program reports are not publicly available and university consent would be required to share. Universities are also required to submit high-cost claims as part of the allocation of funding; data on such claims are not publicly available.

The Department provides a template for providers to complete in relation to expenditure against activities under the Disability Support Fund, but it is not a claim form. The purpose of reporting is to ensure providers are meeting their obligations under the Higher Education Support (Other Grants) Guidelines 2022.

The University of Tasmania provides annual progress reporting on the ADCET. Consent would be required to share these reports.

In 2014, KPMG evaluated the Disability Support Program to verify the program was meeting its objectives and to identify options to improve the ongoing operation of the program (KPMG, 2015). The evaluation found the Disability Support Program is successful in supporting providers to meet their obligations to students. Key findings of the evaluation included:

- More students with mental health issues and learning disorders are accessing university disability services, however, the bulk of funding is supporting students with physical disabilities;

- The funding could be better utilised to improve the providers' capacity to attract and retain students;

- There is a range of opportunities to reduce the administrative burden on higher education providers.

In response to the evaluation, the Guidelines were amended to reform the Disability Support Program from calendar year 2020. Changes include:

- Former ASSD and Performance Based Support Funding were merged to create the DSF;

- Eligible activities have been expanded to provide greater flexibility for the nature of support costs that can be claimed;

- ADCET to receive $150,000 funding, up from previous funding level of $79,900;

- Under the DSF, providers are able to claim reimbursement for students whose needs exceed $10,000 in a calendar year.

2.1.8   Additional Growth for Regional University Campuses Program

Overview

The Additional Growth for Regional University Campuses program ('Regional Campus Growth') was established in 2021 and provides a percentage increase on Commonwealth Grant Scheme non-medical bachelor funding, based on the proportion of students enrolled at campuses in regional, high-growth metropolitan, and low-growth metropolitan areas. Funding increases are by 3.5 per cent a year for regional campuses; 2.5 per cent a year for campuses located in high-growth metropolitan areas; and 1 per cent per year for campuses located in low-growth metropolitan areas.

Student life stage

The Regional Campus Growth program is primarily targeted at the Access student life stage by funding additional CSPs for prospective students.

Equity group(s) targeted

The Regional Campus Growth program is primarily targeted at students in regional and remote areas of Australia.

Equity barriers addressed

The program may help to address Institutional equity barriers to Higher Education.

Eligibility and funding

Funding is formula-based and designed such that universities in regional and high- and low-growth metropolitan areas can match the needs of their communities.

Program monitoring and evaluation

There are no agreed KPIs or reporting requirements for the Regional Campus Growth program. In addition, no evaluation has been undertaken on the effectiveness of the additional funding.

2.1.9   Destination Australia

Overview

Destination Australia commenced in 2020 and funds eligible tertiary education providers to offer scholarships to domestic and international students to study and live in regional Australia. The objectives of the Destination Australia are to:

- Support higher education and VET providers in regional Australia to provide scholarships to domestic and international students to study in regional Australia;

- Facilitate domestic and international students completing an Australian qualification at a higher education or VET provider in regional Australia;

- Help fix areas of skills shortages and fill future skills needs by prioritising domestic and international students studying courses that are aligned with the Australian Government's National Skills Priority List;

- Provide scholarships for domestic students from underrepresented groups to enable them to access tertiary education in regional Australia.

Destination Australia aims to contribute to the sustainability and growth of tertiary education providers and communities in regional Australia by enabling them to share in the social, cultural, and economic benefits of Australia's international education sector.

Student Life Stages

Destination Australia is primarily targeted at the Access and Participation student life stages.

Equity Group Targeted

Under Rounds 4 and 5 of the Destination Australia Program, scholarships are prioritised for domestic students from underrepresented groups to enable them to access tertiary education in regional Australia.

Barriers Addressed

Destination Australia is most aligned with material barriers as it provides funding to support students while studying. Under Rounds 4 and 5 of the program, domestic students awarded a scholarship under the program should be from an underrepresented group such as low SES, those who are first in family to tertiary study, those living with disability, and First Nations people.

Eligibility and funding

There have been four rounds of funding since the commencement of the Destination Australia program: 2020 (Round 1), 2021 (Round 2), 2022 (Round 3), 2023 (Round 4). The total funding over the four rounds was $95.865m. Each round of the program offers scholarship funding of up to $15,000 per student, per year

The 2024 (Round 5) grants application process was underway at the time of writing this report. However, it is anticipated approximately 550 domestic and international scholarships will be funded for students commencing their studies in 2024 (Australian Government, 2023b).

Program reach

Over the first four funding rounds of Destination Australia, 46 providers across 145 campuses have been allocated 2,307 scholarships. In 2023, 480 Destination Australia scholarship applications were successful. At

a state-level, the 2023 Destination Australia scholarships were awarded as follows: 107 scholarships based in New South Whales; 98 scholarships based in Victoria; 97 scholarships based in Queensland; 38 scholarships based in South Australia; 64 scholarships based in Western Australia; 38 scholarships based in Tasmania; and 38 scholarships based in the Northern Territory. Figure 15 details the total number of scholarships awarded to successful tertiary providers.

Figure 15. DA scholarships awarded to successful providers in 2023.
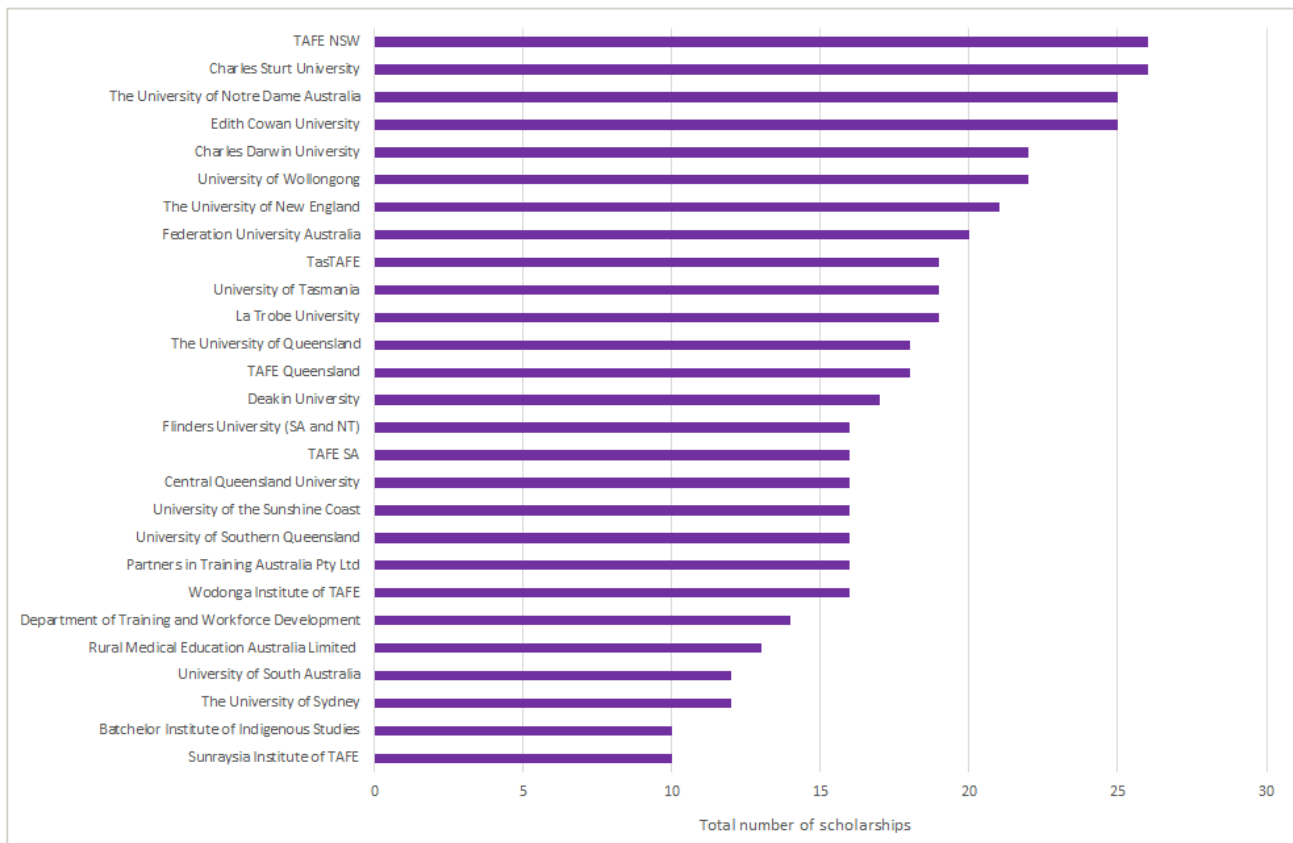
Source: Department of Education, Destination Australia 2023 - List of successful providers (2023b)

Program monitoring and evaluation

There are no specific, agreed key performance indicators for Destination Australia. Successful providers must submit progress reports every six months and financial acquittals as per their grant agreement.

To date, no evaluations have been conducted for the Destination Australia program. While a discussion paper by Universities Australia (2022) reported that the program has increased the appeal of regional campus study to particular international student cohorts, there is a need for a formal evaluation of the program to assess its impact on encouraging international students to study and work in regional Australia.

Implementation considerations and barriers

Brown and colleagues (2020) identified implementation barriers associated with the delivery of the Destination Australia program. Eligibility is determined by the definition of regional and remote Australia used in the 2011 Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS). However, current definitions of 'regional' Australia are contested and not customised to an international education context. As a consequence, a student wishing to study in any of the traditionally 'regional' areas of Wollongong, Geelong, Newcastle or the

Sunshine Coast, is not eligible for a Destination Australia scholarship as these cities are classified as 'Major Cities of Australia' in the ASGS Remoteness Structure (Brown et al., 2020).

2.1.10 Demand driven access to Commonwealth Supported places for First Nations regional students

Overview

The 'demand-driven access program' provides funding to guarantee a Commonwealth supported place to First Nations students from regional and remote Australia at a university of their choice when accepted into their chosen course of study. An eligible university place is a non-designated, bachelor level course at an Australian public university (except in Medicine). The program responds to Recommendation 5 of the Napthine review and aims to remove barriers to higher education access for First Nations peoples from regional and remote communities. It is expected that the program will provide flow-on benefits for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities including in remote locations, by increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university graduates in the workforce.

Student life stage

The demand-driven access program primarily supports the Access stage, providing more opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from regional and remote communities to access higher education.

Equity group(s) targeted

The demand-driven access program is targeted at supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in regional and remote communities.

Barriers addressed

This program is primarily aimed at addressing equity barriers at an institutional level. Through the provision of funding to guarantee additional CSPs, the program aims to remove the availability of places as a supply side constraint for those First Nations regional and remote students who meet the entry requirement of their chosen course.

Eligibility and funding

In 2023, $46.3m of funding was made available for demand driven access to CSPs for First Nations regional and remote students. The initial funding advance is based on estimated student load and subsequently reconciled to the number of Commonwealth supported bachelor level places an institution delivers in each funding cluster. Figure 16 shows the amount of funding awarded by institution in 2023.

Figure 16. Funding advanced for the Demand Driven Access for First Nations Regional Students program, by institution, 2023
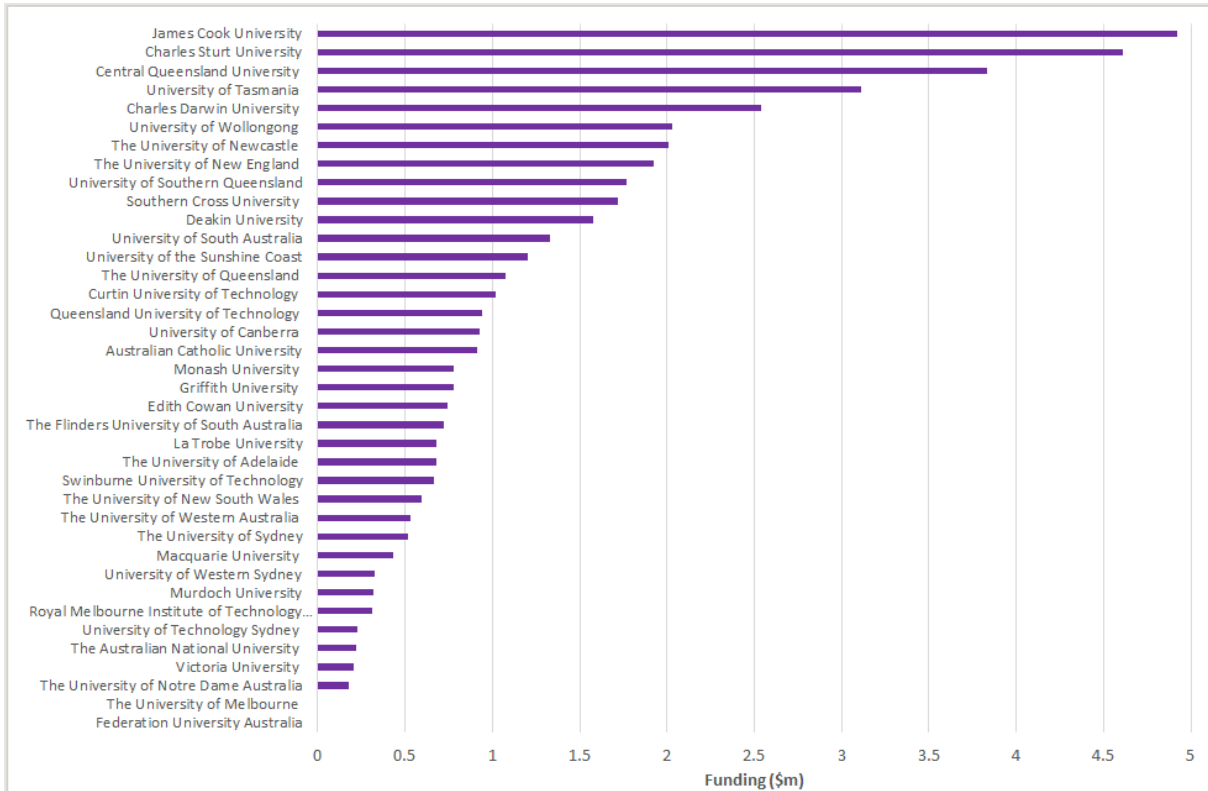
Source: Department of Education Delegate Approval of Determination No. 5271

Program reach

The reach of the demand driven access program is unknown based on the documentation available for this review.

Program monitoring and evaluation

There are no specified key performance indicators for the Demand Driven Access for First Nations Students program. Institutions are required to report on the number of CSPs provided to First Nations regional students.

A collective perspective on the equity programs

The purpose of this section is to compare the equity programs against the key characteristics that were the focus of the review. Figure 17 provides a timeline showing the introduction of each of the programs and includes any notable program milestones, such as changes in eligibility or design, and program reviews or evaluations.

Figure 17. Timeline of in-scope equity programs in Australian universities
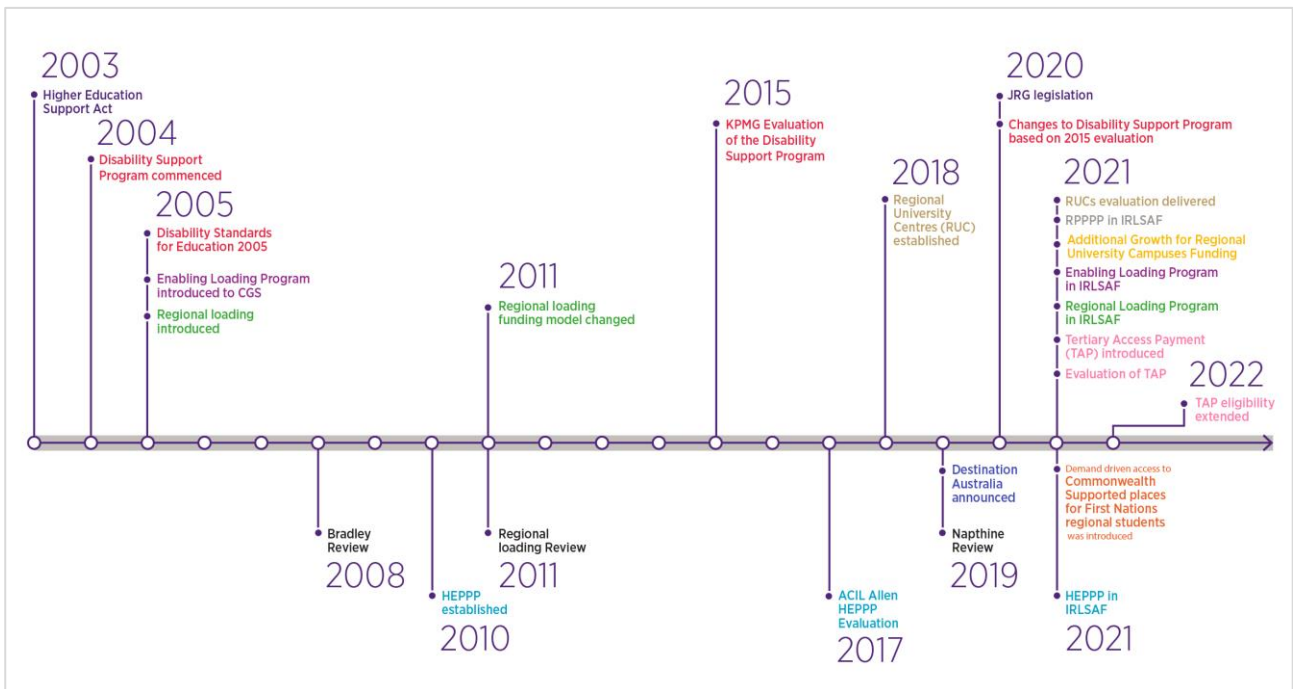
Funding

There is wide variation in the levels of funding allocated to the equity programs considered in this review. The HEPPP is the single largest program by dollar value ($145.2m), accounting for 40% of the total program funding allocation for which funding data were available (Figure 18). This was followed by the Regional Loading Program ($79.8m, 22%) and the Tertiary Access Payment ($50.9m, 14%).

Figure 18. Funding allocated to the in-scope equity programs
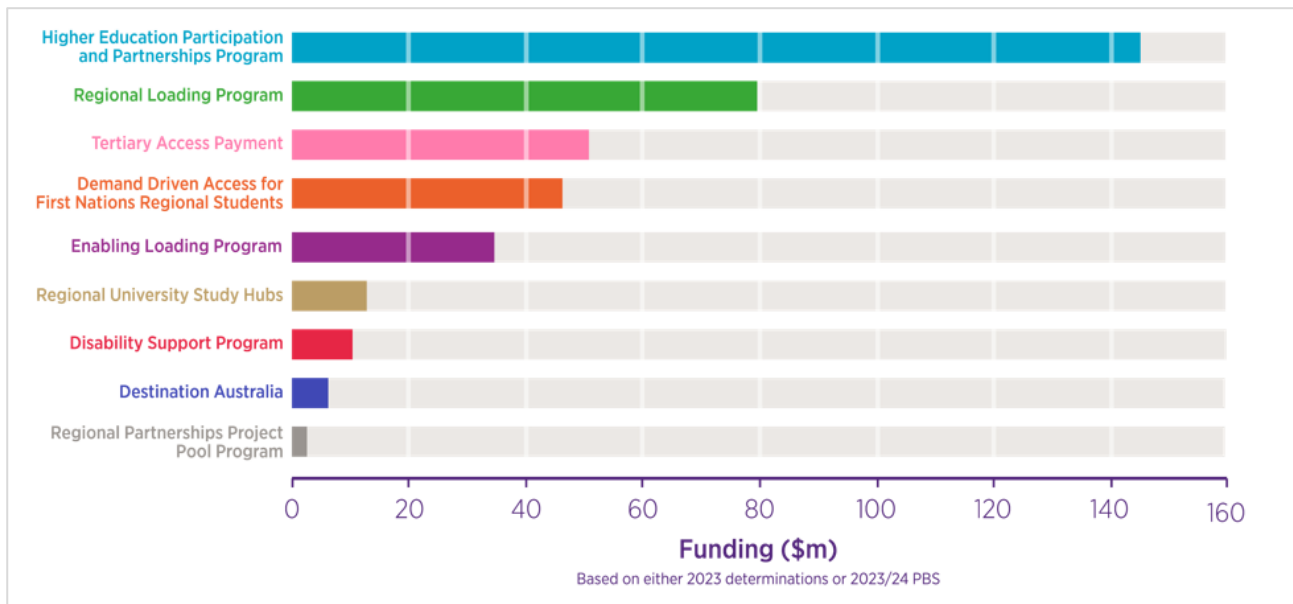
It is worth noting that these funding amounts are comparatively small when considered against the broader context of university funding by the Commonwealth Government. Figure 19 shows that funding for the Commonwealth Grant Scheme and the Higher Education Loan Program dwarf the funding for HEPPP, the largest equity program.

Visualising the funding allocation according to the equity group targeted shows that of the seven programs that explicitly target a specific equity group, six of those are either fully or partially targeted at supporting students living or studying in regional and remote areas (Figure 20). One program – HEPPP – is targeted specifically at low SES students and two programs specifically aim to improve opportunities for Indigenous students. Only one program – the Disability Support Program – is aimed at attracting and supporting students with disability. Furthermore, the Disability Support Program is comparatively small in budgetary terms in spite of disability being an equity group with a sizable number of students (over 100,000 participating students in 2021).

Figure 19. Representation of Australian Higher Education funding
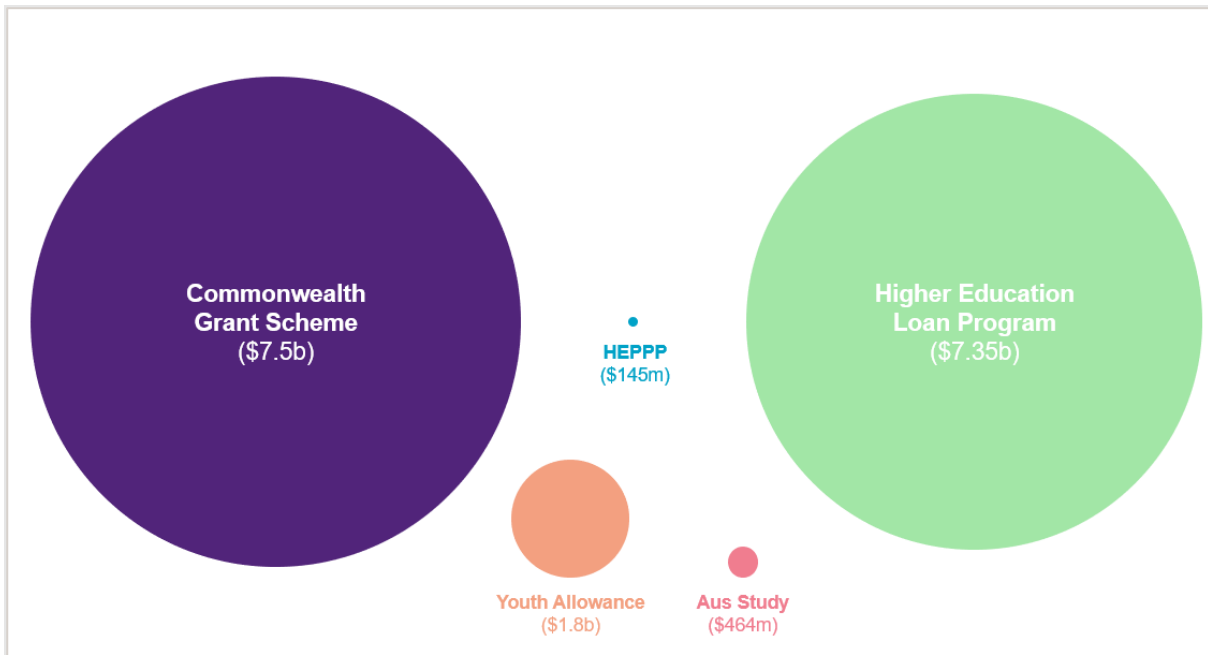
Figure 20. Funding allocated to the in-scope equity programs, linked to the student equity group(s) the program explicitly targets
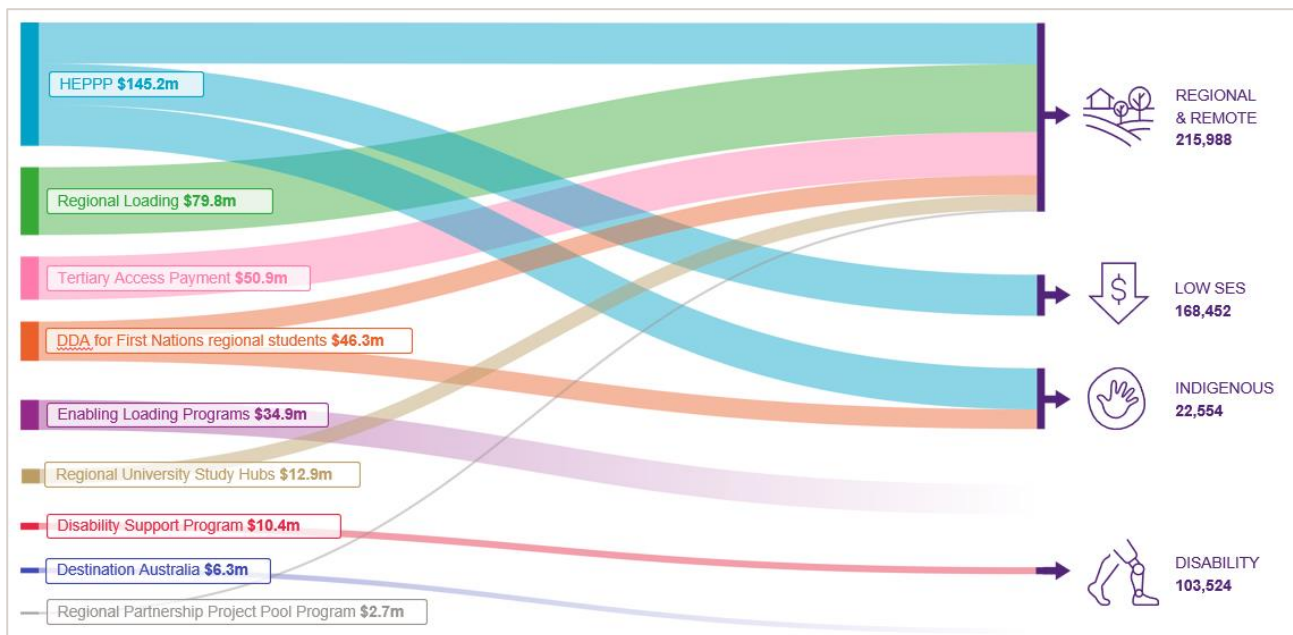
Note: Funding based on either 2023 determinations or 2023/24 PBS. Student numbers based on 2021 Table A participation; regional/remote based on First Address measure.

The allocation of funding across the equity programs is primarily delivered to institutions and is either formula based, or project based (see Table 3). Notable exceptions include the ELP, which is historically based, and

Destination Australia, which involves a targeted competitive grant. The Tertiary Access Payment is the only program for which funding is paid directly to students (contingent on meeting eligibility criteria).

Table 3. Eligibility for funding through in-scope equity programs

Program	Funding eligibility
ELP	Formula based. Domestic undergraduate students, First Nations students, regional and remote students, low SES students, First in Family students, and students with disability.
DDA for First Nations regional students	Formula based. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living in regional and remote communities.
Additional growth funding for regional universities	Formula based. No further criteria.
Destination Australia	Targeted competitive grant.
Disability Support Program	Formula and claims-based. Students with disability.
HEPPP	Formula based (45% RR, 45% Low SES, 10% Indigenous). Table A universities.
Regional University Study Hubs	Project based. Assessed against specified criteria
Regional Loading Program	Formula based.
RPPPP	Project based. Site location. Competitive based process.
Tertiary Access Payment	School leavers who: 1. Meet Australian citizenship or residency requirements; 2. Are from an inner regional, outer-regional, remote or very remote area (defined using the Australian Statistical Geography Standard - Remoteness Area classification); 3. Are undertaking a Certificate IV or above, at least 75 per cent of fulltime study load with a minimum duration of a year, commencing in the year following completion of Year 12 or equivalent; 4. Are studying face to face or in dual delivery method for at least part of the course; 5. Are 22 years of age or under at the time they commence; 6. Relocate to study at an education provider or Regional University Centre at least 90 minutes by public transport from their family home; parent(s) or guardian(s) have a combined income of $250,000 or below (or be exempt from meeting this requirement).

Student life stage

Figure 21 compares the student life stage(s) that each equity program primarily target(s); in other words, the student life stage at which students are most likely to be affected by the funding provided for the program. As shown, most programs are aligned with the Access and Participation (including attainment) stages; that is, the stages of applying to and preparing for university, and studying at university. Fewer programs are primarily focused on outreach to schools and the community. The HEPPP is the only program that explicitly targets each of the student life stages.

Equity barriers addressed

The underlying logic of the programs is indicated by the types of barriers they are trying to address. These barriers are distributed relatively evenly across the programs. The HEPPP is the only program that is designed to support activities to address all four of the barriers in this particular typology (i.e. individual, institutional, geographic, and material).

Figure 21. Student life stage(s) and equity barrier(s) primarily addressed by the equity programs

PROGRAMS	STUDENT LIFE STAGE			EQUITY BARRIERS ADDRESSED			
	PRE-ACCESS	ACCESS	PARTICIPATION	INDIVIDUAL	INSTITUTIONAL	GEOGRAPHIC	MATERIAL
HEPPP	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Regional Loading Program	○	○	●	○	●	○	○
Tertiary Access Payment	○	●	○	○	○	●	●
DDA for First Nations regional students	○	●	○	○	●	○	○
Enabling Loading Program	○	●	○	●	○	○	●
Regional University Study Hubs	○	○	●	○	○	●	●
Disability Support Program	○	○	●	●	●	○	●
Destination Australia	○	●	●	○	○	○	●
Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program	●	○	○	●	○	●	○
Regional Campus Growth	○	●	○	○	●	○	○

Note: Equity barriers characterised according to the typology of: **Individual** (barriers related to individual attributes or skills that are driven by institutional, geographic and material barriers); **Institutional** (barriers related to the processes, structures, cultures, values, and professional practices of higher education institutions); **Geographic** (barriers related to the accessibility of higher education, particularly for those living in regional and remote areas); **Material** (barriers related to the resources required by students to access and participate in higher education study).

Monitoring and evaluation

As shown in table 4, several of the equity programs do not have clearly specified KPIs and there is variation across reporting requirements. The specification of KPIs is required only for those programs that are project based, and the KPIs are specific to the nature of the project being delivered by the funded institution. This includes the HEPPP, although the recently published SEHEEF aims to introduce more standardisation across the sector despite the diverse range of activities that the HEPPP funds.

This lack of consistent monitoring might explain the challenge of obtaining accurate and up-to-date figures on the student reach of the different equity programs. Such data were available for the Tertiary Access Payment, ELP, Regional University Study Hubs, and Destination Australia, but not for the other programs. In addition, with the exception of Regional University Student Hubs, there is a lack of data on the equity characteristics of those students being reached by the programs.

Table 4. Key Performance Indicators and reporting requirements of the in-scope equity programs

Program	Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)	Reporting Requirements
HEPPP	Project specific	Annual report (template provided by DoE).
Regional Loading Program	None	Providers report annually through TCSI (Tertiary Collection of Student Information) on student load.
Tertiary Access Payment	• ≥80% of claims processed within 42 calendar days of claim lodgment • Number of TAP claims 'processed' and 'in progress' from 1 January 2022; broken down by: number of TAP claims progressed by claims status, 'granted', 'pending' and 'rejected'; and number of TAP claims rejected, by reason	Monthly and annual progress reports
DDA for First Nations regional students	None	Number of students supported (per year).
ELP	None	Providers report annually through TCSI (Tertiary Collection of Student Information) on student ELP commencements.
Regional University Study Hubs	Project specific	Progress report every six months; student data including Tertiary Provider, Field of Study, sociodemographic characteristics (age, gender, first in family, disability, First Nations status), and student outcomes (including course
Disability Support Program	Project specific	Annual report
Destination Australia	None	Progress report every 6 months .
Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program	Project specific	Progress reports with program logic and evaluation plans aligned to SEHEEF.
Regional Campus Growth	None	Student load data reported via TCSI is used to determine whether universities have used the growth funding. Enrolment, completion and attrition data available via TCSI

Note: The information presented in this table is based on feedback and documentation provided by the Department.

Six of the ten in-scope equity programs have been subject to a formal review or evaluation since their inception (Figure 22) and, as noted in the earlier section of this report, this has resulted in some substantive changes to the program's design, implementation, and eligibility criteria. However, only three evaluations have been conducted in the past five years, though several programs are younger than 5 years old.

A pragmatic approach was taken to categorise the evidence of effectiveness available from the evaluation and review reports based on whether the evaluation assessed the program's impact on primary outcomes, as well as the methods used to determine attribution or contribution of effect. For those programs that had been evaluated, the evidence of effectiveness tended to be weak, relying on surveys or interviews at a single point of time, or focusing on immediate outcomes rather than longer term outcomes (Figure 22). It is suggested that this is interpreted as an absence of evidence (i.e. a limited evidence base) rather than evidence of absence (i.e. evidence of no effect). Indeed, the primary purpose of some program evaluations was not necessarily to assess program effectiveness, but rather to provide formative evidence to improve program design and implementation.

Figure 22. Evaluation status of equity programs and strength of evidence of program effectiveness

PROGRAMS	EVALUATION CONDUCTED	LAST 5 YEARS	EVIDENCE OF (POSITIVE) EFFECT			
			STRONG	MODERATE	WEAK	UNCLEAR
HEPPP	●	○	○	●	○	○
Regional Loading Program	●	○	○	○	○	●
Tertiary Access Payment*	●	●	○	○	●	○
DDA for First Nations regional students*	○	○	○	○	○	●
Enabling Loading Program	●	○	○	●	○	○
Regional University Study Hubs	●	●	○	○	●	○
Disability Support Program	●	●	○	○	●	○
Destination Australia*	○	○	○	○	○	●
Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program*	○	○	○	○	○	●
Regional Campus Growth*	○	○	○	○	○	●

*Program is less than 5 years old

Note: A pragmatic approach was taken to categorise the evidence of effectiveness available from the evaluation and review reports. It was based on whether the evaluation assessed the program's impact on primary outcomes, as well as the methods used to determine attribution or contribution of effect. **Strong**: Independent evaluation has been undertaken using mixed methods including quantitative analysis of primary outcomes (as defined in the SEHEEF); robust methods used to determine attribution/contribution (e.g. pre-post with control group; natural experimental approach). **Moderate**: Independent evaluation has been undertaken; may include primary outcomes and/or supporting outcomes; moderately robust methods used to determine attribution/contribution (e.g. pre-post but no control group). **Weak**: Independent or in-house evaluation has been undertaken; methods include data collected at a single time point only.

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Final Report: Targeted Review of Student Equity in Higher Education

Programs and System Level Policy Levers Appendix

Work Package 2A: Program Structure and Implementation

Supporting Slide Deck

In-scope programs

HEPPP
Funding for **equity programs** and activities designed by universities

Regional Loading
Additional funding for **regional unis**

Tertiary Access Payment
Funding for students in **RRR to cover relocation costs**

Disability Support Program
Funding for unis to support students with **disability**

Enabling Loading Program
Funding for unis to cover costs of **free enabling programs**

DDA for First Nations regional students
Funding for unis to guarantee a place for **First Nations** students

Regional Partnership Pools Program
Funding for outreach projects to **enable aspirations in regional areas**

Regional University Study Hubs
Funding for community owned facilities in **regional and remote** locations

Regional Campus Growth
Additional Commonwealth Grant Scheme funding for **uni places**

Destination Australia
Funding for **scholarships at regional unis**
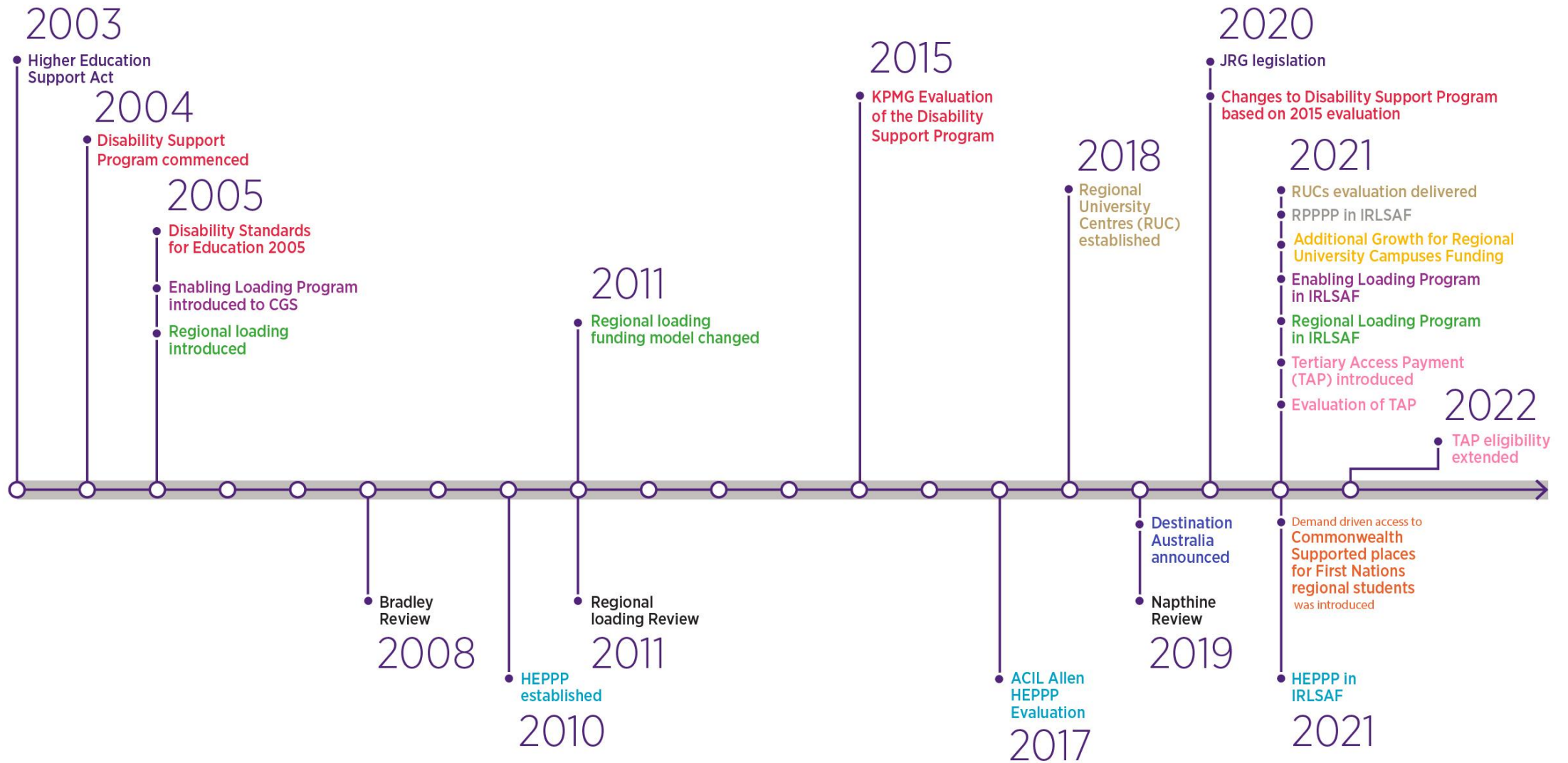
Higher Education Equity Programs timeline
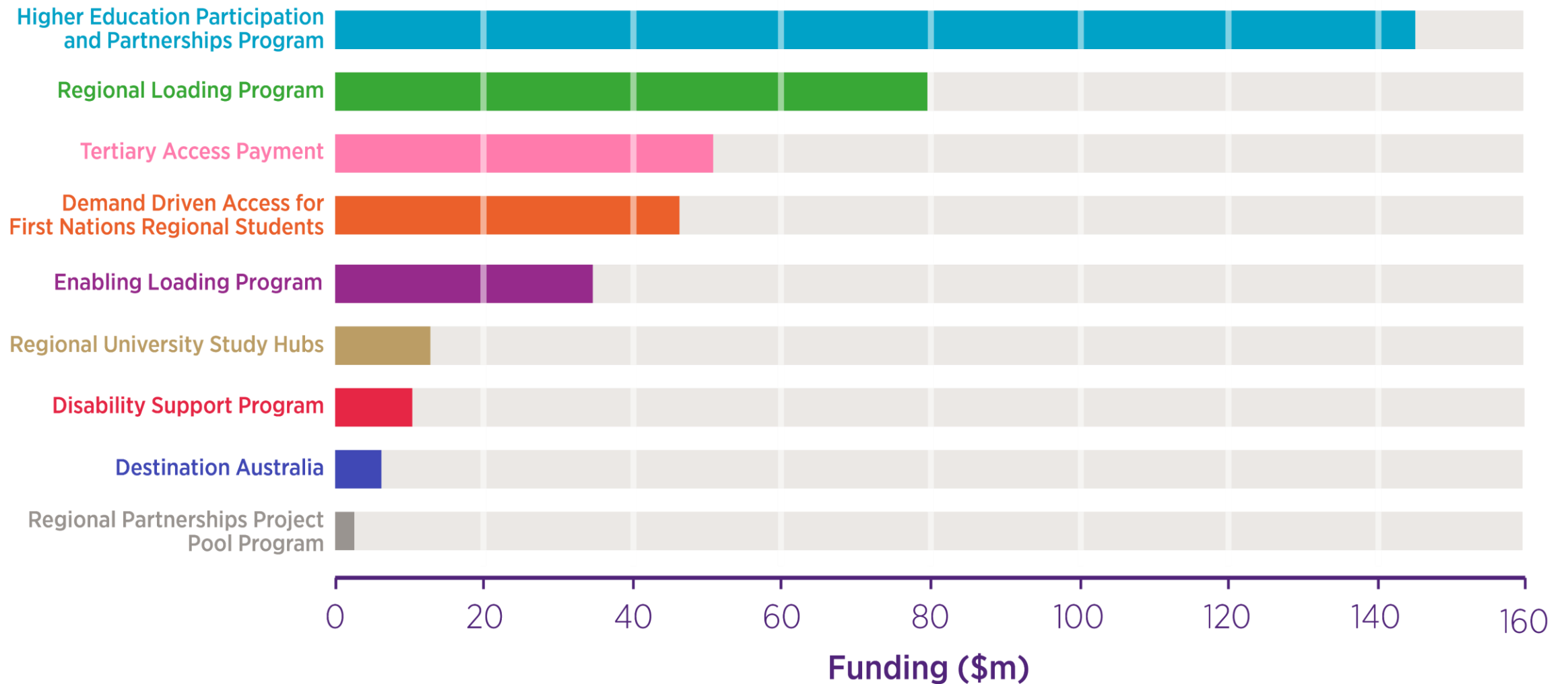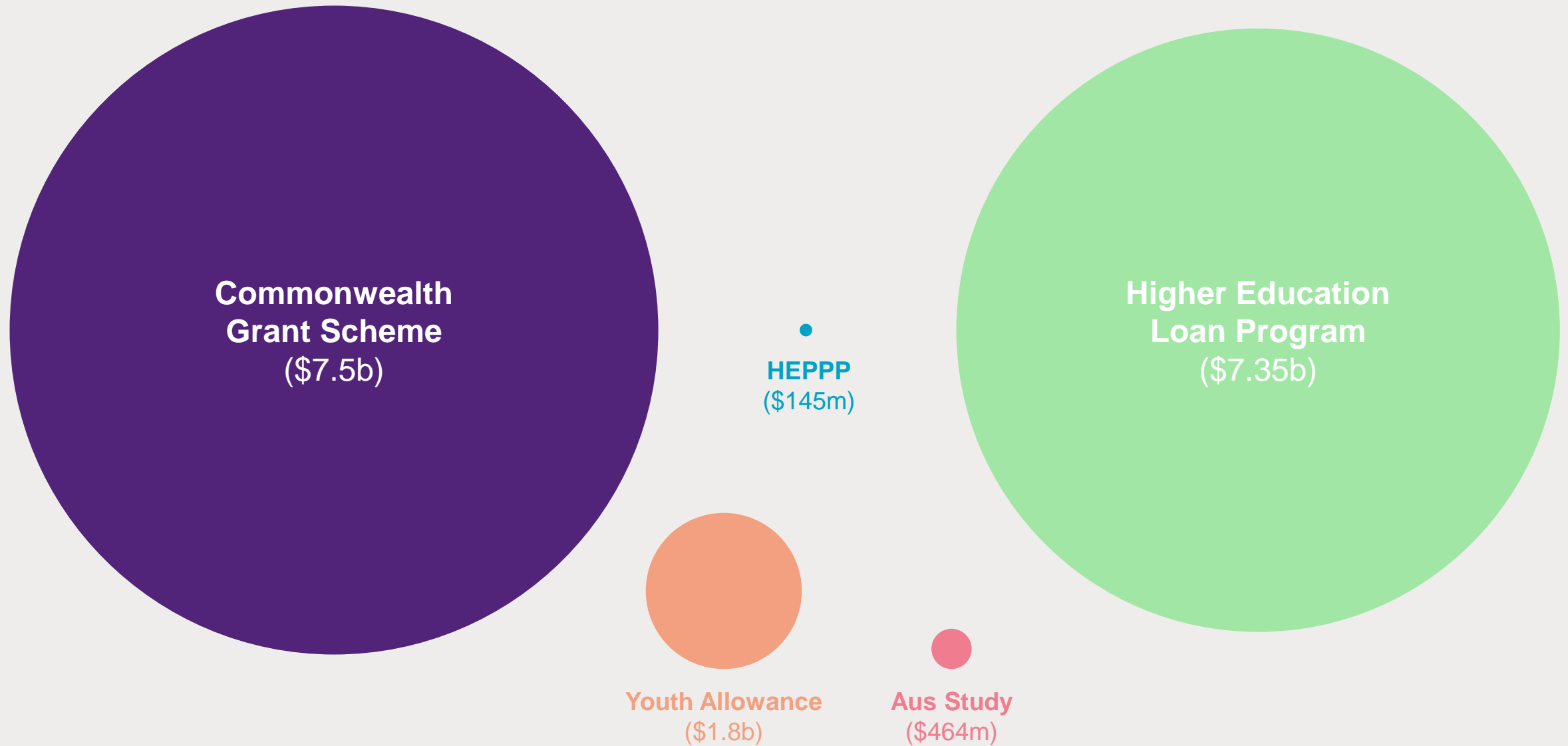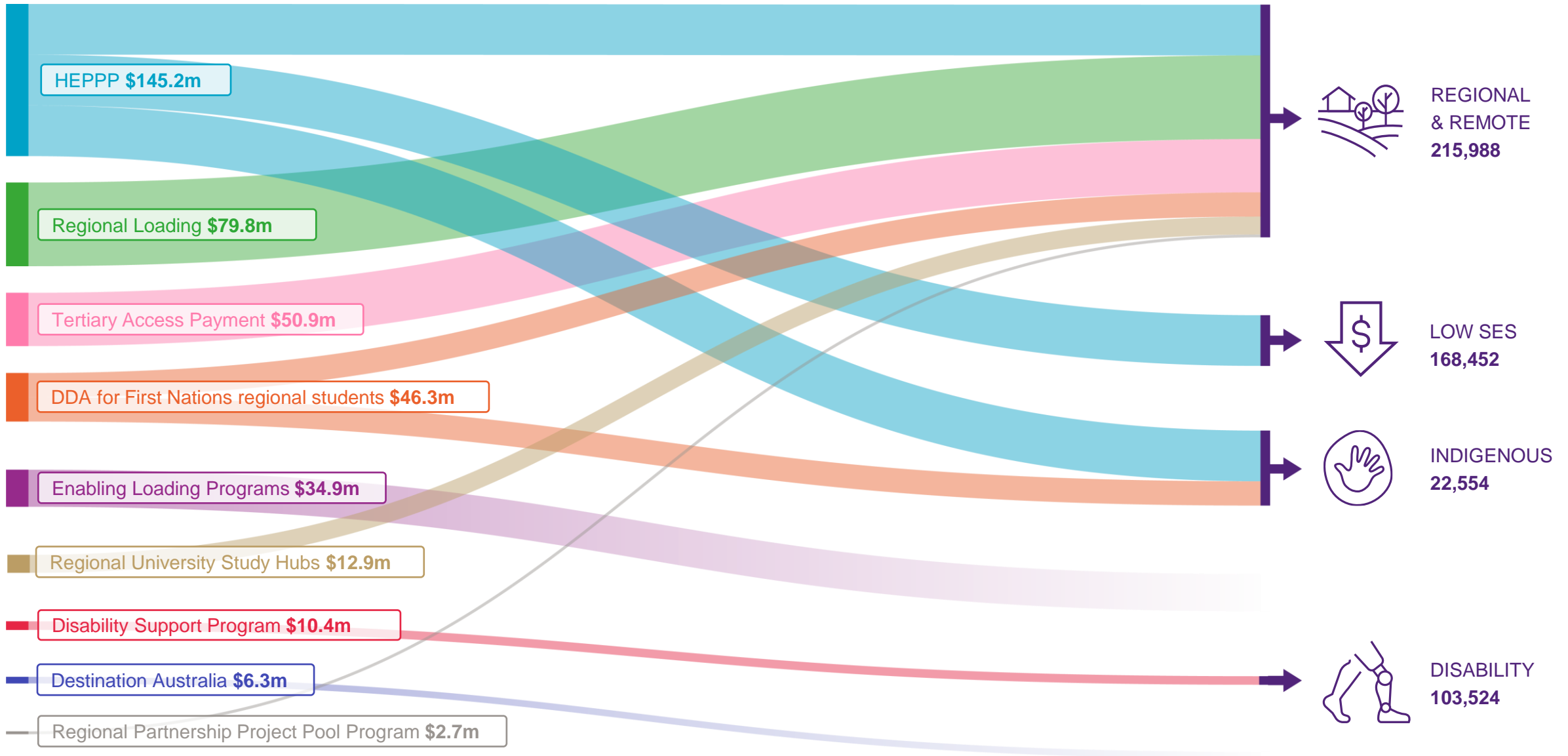
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THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND AUSTRALIA

HEPPP **$145.2m**

Regional Loading **$79.8m**

Tertiary Access Payment **$50.9m**

DDA for First Nations regional students **$46.3m**

Enabling Loading Programs **$34.9m**

Regional University Study Hubs **$12.9m**

Disability Support Program **$10.4m**

Destination Australia **$6.3m**

Regional Partnership Project Pool Program **$2.7m**

REGIONAL & REMOTE
215,988

LOW SES
168,452

INDIGENOUS
22,554

DISABILITY
103,524

Funding based on either 2023 determinations or 2023/24 PBS.

2021 Table A participation numbers.
Regional/remote based on First Address measure.

PROGRAMS	STUDENT LIFE STAGE			EQUITY BARRIERS ADDRESSED			
	PRE-ACCESS	ACCESS	PARTICIPATION	INDIVIDUAL	INSTITUTIONAL	GEOGRAPHIC	MATERIAL
HEPPP	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Regional Loading Program			●		●		
Tertiary Access Payment		●				●	●
DDA for First Nations regional students		●			●		
Enabling Loading Program		●		●			●
Regional University Study Hubs			●			●	●
Disability Support Program			●	●	●		●
Destination Australia		●	●				●
Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program	●			●		●	
Regional Campus Growth		●			●		

Most programs have a primary focus on the participation/ attainment student life stage

Programs aim to address multiple equity barriers, but mostly institutional and material

PROGRAMS	EVALUATION CONDUCTED	LAST 5 YEARS	EVIDENCE OF (POSITIVE) EFFECT			
			STRONG	MODERATE	WEAK	UNCLEAR
HEPPP	●	○	○	●	○	○
Regional Loading Program	●	○	○	○	○	●
Tertiary Access Payment*	●	●	○	○	●	○
DDA for First Nations regional students*	○	○	○	○	○	●
Enabling Loading Program	●	○	○	●	○	○
Regional University Study Hubs	●	●	○	○	●	○
Disability Support Program	●	●	○	○	●	○
Destination Australia*	○	○	○	○	○	●
Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program*	○	○	○	○	○	●
Regional Campus Growth*	○	○	○	○	○	●

*Program is less than 5 years old

Limited robust evidence on primary outcomes at the whole-of-program level

Some evidence of effectiveness on supporting outcomes with examples of benefits for individual students

Challenge of consistent data collection, reporting and evaluation – 'absence of evidence' rather than 'evidence of absence'

Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program

The Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) provides funding to Table A universities to implement strategies that **improve access to undergraduate courses for people from the target equity groups**.

The key objective is to promote equality of opportunity in higher education by improving:

- outreach to widen aspiration and promote higher education among equity groups.
- the extent to which persons from equity groups access, participate, remain and succeed in higher education, and obtain higher education awards.

FUNDING

$145.2m

was made available through the HEPPP in 2023

- **Funding is based on the university's share of students from the equity groups.**
- **Funding moved to IRLSAF in 2021.**

STUDENT LIFE STAGE

PRE-ACCESS ACCESS PARTICIPATION/ATTAINMENT

EQUITY GROUPS TARGETED

REGIONAL & REMOTE LOW SES INDIGENOUS DISABILITY NON-SPECIFIC

EQUITY BARRIERS ADDRESSED

GEOGRAPHIC SOCIO-CULTURAL INSTITUTIONAL MATERIAL INDIVIDUAL CAPABILITIES

REACH

HEPPP funded activities for equity groups

Bar chart — Activities (y-axis: 0, 200, 400, 600, 800) by Student cohort: Low SES, Indigenous, RRR

Between 2010–2015 it was estimated that **310,000 students participated** in HEPPP projects (based on data provided by 28 universities)

Year started
2010

Funding eligibility
Table A universities

Primary outcome
HE access, HE performance, progression & attainment

Effectiveness
Moderate

Sector sentiment
Positive

Regional Loading Program

Regional loading helps higher education providers meet the higher costs associated with their regional location, size and history.

The Regional Loading Program provides additional funding to eligible higher education providers to assist those providers to **offset higher operating costs of regional campuses** in comparison with major city campuses.

The key objective of the Regional Loading Program is to promote equality of opportunity in higher education.

FUNDING

$79.8m

was made available through the Regional Loading program in 2023

- **In 2012, a new funding formula was introduced revising the measure of remoteness.**
- **Funding moved to IRLSAF in 2021.**

STUDENT LIFE STAGE

PRE-ACCESS   ACCESS   **PARTICIPATION/ ATTAINMENT**

EQUITY GROUPS TARGETED

REGIONAL & REMOTE   LOW SES   INDIGENOUS   DISABILITY   NON-SPECIFIC

EQUITY BARRIERS ADDRESSED

GEOGRAPHIC   SOCIO-CULTURAL   **INSTITUTIONAL**   MATERIAL   INDIVIDUAL CAPABILITIES

REACH

In 2022

23 **universities received funding** from the Regional Loading Program

Year started
2005

Funding eligibility
Table A Universities

Primary outcome
Performance & progression

Effectiveness
Unclear

Sector sentiment
Mixed, new approaches called for

Tertiary Access Payment

The Tertiary Access Payment (TAP) provides financial assistance to support eligible regional students who incur **costs associated with relocating** to access tertiary study.

The key objective of the TAP is to improve access and participation rates among **regional and remote** students.

FUNDING

$50.9m

- **In 2023/24, $50.9m of capped demand driven funding was made available through the TAP.**
- **Students from outer regional and remote areas are paid a total of $5,000.**
- **Students from inner regional areas are paid $3,000.**
- **Funds are paid directly to students in their first year of study.**

STUDENT LIFE STAGE

PRE-ACCESS   ACCESS   PARTICIPATION/ ATTAINMENT

EQUITY GROUPS TARGETED

REGIONAL & REMOTE   LOW SES   INDIGENOUS   DISABILITY   NON-SPECIFIC

EQUITY BARRIERS ADDRESSED

GEOGRAPHIC   SOCIO-CULTURAL   INSTITUTIONAL   MATERIAL   INDIVIDUAL CAPABILITIES

REACH

3,889
TAP payments were **granted** in 2022

2,869
TAP claims were **rejected**

40
Universities administered TAP in 2021.
>50% of TAP funding was allocated through **8 institutions**

Year started
2021

Funding eligibility
Regional & remote students ≤22y

Primary outcome
HE access

Effectiveness
Weak

Sector sentiment
Positive

Demand driven access for First Nations regional students

Demand-driven funding will support all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from regional and remote communities to **study a bachelor level course** at university.

From 2021, all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who live in regional and remote Australia will be guaranteed a Commonwealth supported place at a university of their choice, when accepted into their chosen course of study. An eligible university place is a non-designated, bachelor level course at an Australian public university (except in Medicine).

FUNDING

$46.3m

In 2023, $46.3m of funding was made available for demand driven access to Commonwealth Supported places for First Nations regional and remote students

STUDENT LIFE STAGE

PRE-ACCESS   **ACCESS**   PARTICIPATION/ ATTAINMENT

EQUITY GROUPS TARGETED

REGIONAL & REMOTE   LOW SES   **INDIGENOUS**   DISABILITY   NON-SPECIFIC

EQUITY BARRIERS ADDRESSED
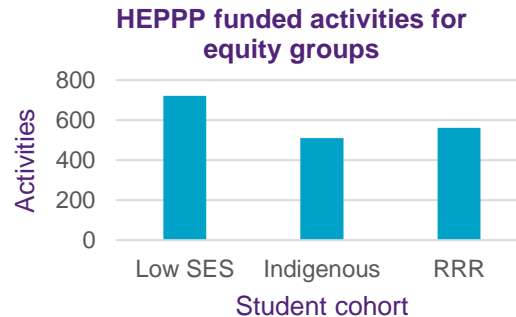
GEOGRAPHIC   SOCIO-CULTURAL   **INSTITUTIONAL**   MATERIAL   INDIVIDUAL CAPABILITIES

REACH
Unclear

Year started
2021

Funding eligibility
Regional & remote students ≤22y

Primary outcome
HE access

Effectiveness
Unclear

Sector sentiment
Positive

Enabling Loading Program

Enabling programs are non-award courses offered by universities and private providers to **prepare students with the required skills and knowledge for undergraduate study**.

The Enabling Loading Program provides funding to eligible higher education institutions (Table A universities) to offset the cost of student contributions for students in Commonwealth supported enabling courses.

The key objective of the Enabling Loading Program is to promote equality of opportunity in higher education.

FUNDING

$34.9m

- **In 2023, $34.9m of funding was made available through the Enabling Loading Program**
- **$3,484 per CSP in 2022**
- **Funding moved to IRLSAF in 2021**

STUDENT LIFE STAGE

PRE-ACCESS   ACCESS   PARTICIPATION/ ATTAINMENT

EQUITY GROUPS TARGETED

REGIONAL & REMOTE   LOW SES   INDIGENOUS   DISABILITY   NON-SPECIFIC

EQUITY BARRIERS ADDRESSED

GEOGRAPHIC   SOCIO-CULTURAL   INSTITUTIONAL   MATERIAL   INDIVIDUAL CAPABILITIES

REACH

9,292

Enabling course commencements in 2021, 3.3% of the total undergraduate commencements (EFTSL). This represented a drop from 12,718 in 2020 (4.5% of undergraduate commencements).

50%

of students on Enabling courses are from **equity groups**

Year started
2005

Funding eligibility
Table A universities

Primary outcome
HE access

Effectiveness
Moderate

Sector sentiment
Positive

Regional University Study Hubs

Regional University Study Hubs aim to **support the tertiary education experiences of regional and remote students**. There are currently 34 hubs in operation across the states and territories.

Regional University Study Hubs operate from community owned facilities in regional and remote locations and provide study spaces, video conferencing, computer facilities and internet access. They also provide administrative, academic and wellbeing support for students studying via distance at any Australian university or vocational education and training provider.

Regional University Study Hubs are not owned by any single University.

FUNDING

$12.9m

was made available to fund Regional University Study Hubs in 2023

- **A total of $72.4m in funding has been provided to RUCs since 2018.**
- **On 18 July 2023, $66.9m additional funding was announced to establish up to 20 new Regional University Study Hubs and up to 14 Suburban University Study Hubs.**

STUDENT LIFE STAGE

PRE-ACCESS   ACCESS   **PARTICIPATION/ ATTAINMENT**

EQUITY GROUPS TARGETED

REGIONAL & REMOTE   LOW SES   INDIGENOUS   DISABILITY   NON-SPECIFIC

EQUITY BARRIERS ADDRESSED

GEOGRAPHIC   SOCIO-CULTURAL   INSTITUTIONAL   **MATERIAL**   INDIVIDUAL CAPABILITIES

REACH

In late 2022, the program had supported:

- Students in **regional and remote areas** (98%: 3243)
- **Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander** students (11%: 353)
- Students with a **disability** (5%: 162)

Year started
2018

Funding eligibility
Project based

Primary outcome
HE performance & progression

Effectiveness
Weak

Sector sentiment
Positive

Disability Support Program

- The Higher Education Disability Support Program (DSP) provides funding to eligible higher education providers (Table A universities) to assist with **supporting students with disability to access, participate and succeed** in higher education

- The DSP consists of two components: Disability Support Fund (DSF) and Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training (ADCET).

FUNDING

$10.4m

total budget for DSP in 2023

This will increase to $13.2m in 2024.

For the DSF:

- 55% is allocated to universities based on enrolment numbers of students with disability.

- 45% of the allocation provides partial-reimbursement to universities for the costs of education and equipment support for students with disability with high-cost needs.

STUDENT LIFE STAGE

PRE-ACCESS   ACCESS   **PARTICIPATION/ ATTAINMENT**

EQUITY GROUPS TARGETED

REGIONAL & REMOTE   LOW SES   INDIGENOUS   **DISABILITY**   NON-SPECIFIC

EQUITY BARRIERS ADDRESSED

GEOGRAPHIC   SOCIO-CULTURAL   **INSTITUTIONAL**   **MATERIAL**   **INDIVIDUAL CAPABILITIES**

REACH

2015–2019 (prior to implementation changes): DSP was narrowly targeted to a small cohort students, averaging **5.7% of students** disclosing disability at enrolment.

2021 (after implementation changes): Universities submitted **283 high-cost claims**. One claim equals support for a student with disability with support costs exceeding a $10,000 (indexed) threshold. Note: this information is not publicly available.

Year started
2004

Funding eligibility
Table A universities

Primary outcome
HE participation

Effectiveness
Weak

Sector sentiment
Positive

Destination Australia

Destination Australia (DA) funds eligible tertiary education providers to offer **scholarships** to domestic and international students to **study and live in regional Australia**.

The DA Program was announced as part of the Planning for Australia's Future Population on 20 March 2019. The program aligns with the National Strategy for International Education 2025.

The Community Grants Hub administers the program according to the Commonwealth Grants Rules and Guidelines 2017 (CGRGs)

FUNDING

$6.3m
was made **available for the DA program in 2023**

- **The total funding available for the DA Program 2022 (Round 3) is $25.32m over four years (An average of $6.3m per year), equating to approximately 380 scholarships.**

- **Funding for 2023 (Round 4) will support 480 scholarships.**

STUDENT LIFE STAGE

PRE-ACCESS · ACCESS · PARTICIPATION/ ATTAINMENT

EQUITY GROUPS TARGETED

REGIONAL & REMOTE · LOW SES · INDIGENOUS · DISABILITY · NON-SPECIFIC

EQUITY BARRIERS ADDRESSED

GEOGRAPHIC · SOCIO-CULTURAL · INSTITUTIONAL · MATERIAL · INDIVIDUAL CAPABILITIES

REACH

Over **four** rounds, DA funded:

46 providers
145 campuses
2,307 scholarships allocated
$95,865,000 of value

In 2023, **480 DA scholarship applications** were successful

Year started
2020

Funding eligibility
Eligible regional campuses

Primary outcome
HE access

Effectiveness
Unclear

Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program

The Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program (RPPPP) funds collaborative outreach projects that support the higher education (HE) aspirations of regional and remote students.

RPPPP provides funding to eligible HE institutions to support multi-year collaborative projects designed to empower students from underrepresented backgrounds in regional and remote areas to aspire to HE.

RPPPP aims to also support the development of sustainable partnerships with communities currently underserviced by existing outreach initiatives and where cumulative barriers to higher education exist.

FUNDING

$2.65m was made available through the RPPPP in 2023

Throughout 2022–24, $7.2 million has been awarded to consortia led by Table A universities and RUCs in two-phases:

- **Phase 1 ($704,628) - HE institutions and local communities in regional and remote areas partnered as consortia to co-design 6 tailored outreach projects targeting HE aspiration.**

- **Phase 2 ($6.5 million) - delivery of 2 multi-year projects designed under Phase 1.**

RPPPP is part of the IRLSAF

STUDENT LIFE STAGE

PRE-ACCESS   ACCESS   PARTICIPATION/ATTAINMENT

EQUITY GROUPS TARGETED

REGIONAL & REMOTE   LOW SES   INDIGENOUS   DISABILITY   NON-SPECIFIC

EQUITY BARRIERS ADDRESSED

GEOGRAPHIC   SOCIO-CULTURAL   **INSTITUTIONAL**   MATERIAL   **INDIVIDUAL CAPABILITIES**

REACH

Phase 2 projects encompass more than

30 universities and Regional University Study Hubs
spanning Eastern Australia and Northern Territory targeting rural and remote students

Year started
2021

Funding eligibility
Table A universities & Regional University Study Hubs

Primary outcome
HE access

Effectiveness
Unclear

Sector sentiment
Positive

Additional growth for Regional University campuses

This program provides a **percentage increase in CGS non-medical bachelor funding**, based on the proportion of students at campuses in regional, high-growth metropolitan, and low-growth metropolitan areas. Funding increases by:

- 3.5 per cent a year for **regional campuses**

- 2.5 per cent a year for campuses located in **high-growth metropolitan areas**

- 1 per cent per year for campuses located in **low-growth metropolitan areas**

Funding is formula-based and designed such that universities in regional and high-growth metropolitan areas can match the needs of their communities.

FUNDING

Funding provided under this program is incorporated into CGS funding, so not available as a stand-alone fiscal measure.

No application process is required for Universities; this funding is automatically calculated.

Year started
2021

Effectiveness
Unclear

STUDENT LIFE STAGE

PRE-ACCESS | **ACCESS** | PARTICIPATION/ ATTAINMENT

EQUITY GROUPS TARGETED

REGIONAL & REMOTE | LOW SES | INDIGENOUS | DISABILITY | NON-SPECIFIC

EQUITY BARRIERS ADDRESSED

GEOGRAPHIC | SOCIO-CULTURAL | **INSTITUTIONAL** | MATERIAL | INDIVIDUAL CAPABILITIES

No evaluation of the CGS or this additional formula-based funding has been undertaken to date.

Targeted Review of Student Equity in Higher Education Programs and System Level Policy Levers Appendix: Work Package 2B – Institutional Operation

Title:	Targeted Review of Student Equity in Higher Education Programs and System Level Policy Levers Appendix: Work Package 2B - Institutional Operation
Prepared for:	Department of Education
Prepared by:	Matthew Curry, Yanshu Huang
Date:	30 October 2023
Revision:	Version 1.1

The Institute for Social Science Research at the University of Queensland (UQ) acknowledges the Traditional Owners and their custodianship of the lands on which UQ operates. We pay our respects to their Ancestors and their descendants, who continue cultural and spiritual connections to Country.

Contents

Figures

1.   Work Package 2B: Institutional operation

1.1   Introduction

Work Package 2B was focused on issues related to the institutional implementation and operation of the in-scope equity programs:

- Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP)

- Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program (RPPPP)

- Regional Loading Program (RLP)

- Enabling Loading Program (ELP)

- Disability Support Program (DSP)

- Regional University Centres / Regional University Study Hubs

- Tertiary Access Payment (TAP)

- Destination Australia

- Demand Driven Access for First Nations Regional Students

- Additional growth for regional university campuses

- Commonwealth Grant Scheme (CGS)

- Higher Education Loan Program: HECS (HECS-HELP)

For the purposes of the work package, some of the programs featured much more heavily than others. In part, this was due to the universal nature of some programs (e.g., CGS and HECS-HELP not being focussed explicitly on 'equity,' although they have had large effects on increasing access to university places) and that some programs were targeted at regional campuses, but not necessarily individuals originating from regional areas (e.g., Additional growth for regional campuses, Destination Australia, RLP). Furthermore, because Regional University Centres / Regional University Study Hubs are not operated by universities, there was little consideration of them in Work Package 2B.

Because of the specificity of funding criteria and reporting requirements, HEPPP, and to a lesser extent, DSP, featured heavily in the analysis of data and in consultations with a sample of university staff who oversee equity initiatives and funding.

1.2   Review Questions

There were three review questions most relevant for Work Package 2B. For the purposes of this appendix, Question 1 regarding institutional operation and systemic gaps is further split into two questions:

1.   (a) How do current Commonwealth funded equity programs operate at an institutional level, and (b) are there systemic gaps resulting from this approach?

2.   Is there evidence of effectiveness of current equity programs at either an institution or program level? What might this evidence look like? What would enable measurement and evaluation in the future?

3.   To what extent do institutions direct other funding beyond targeted equity programs to supporting under-represented students?

1.3   Approach

The methodology used to investigate institutional operation of the in-scope equity programs relied on consultations with a sample of universities and on data related to the equity programs, primarily HEPPP. These data include anonymised HEPPP expenditure data at the institutional level provided by the Department of Education on all universities, HEPPP reporting from participating universities in the sample, and publicly available data. Internal documentation provided by participants of the consultations relating to various topics was also included, including internal strategic documents, submissions to state and federal government and university groups, internal evaluations of proposed and completed initiatives, and documentation of funding allocation decisions.

Consultations consisted of semi-structured interviews with nominated individuals from a sample of universities who had oversight of equity initiatives and programs. The sample consisted of eight universities from a range of university groups, state and urban/rural location, and with varying student populations. There were sample members from the Group of Eight (Go8), Innovative Research Universities (IRU), Australian Technological Network (ATN), Regional Universities Network (RUN), and unaligned universities. Five states and territories were represented among consultation participants, who came from a mix of urban and regional locations.

Eleven consultations with 27 participants for approximately one hour each were conducted with individuals or small groups. Participants were questioned about how the in-scope equity programs operated at their universities, the challenges associated with trying to increase equity in access, participation, and student success from an operational perspective, the evidence they used to support decisions and the extent to which their institutions supplemented the in-scope equity funding with other university funding and initiatives. The consultations were recorded with the consent of the participants, and emergent themes relevant for the review questions were generated inductively.

The program data came from several sources, including publicly available data, data identified in Work Package 2A, anonymised HEPPP reporting data from 37 universities provided by the Department of Education, internal documentation related to equity programs or initiatives and more detailed HEPPP reporting packs from sample institutions. Examples of the publicly available data include institutional allocations of in-scope equity programs and publicly-released financial statements from universities which report various income sources, including equity programs such as HEPPP, DSP, and others.

In relation to the internal documentation, during consultations, participants were invited to provide more detailed HEPPP reporting packs and other documentation that could provide insight into institutional operation of equity programs or provide examples of the types of evidence and information used to inform equity-related operational decisions. These included strategy documents, internal statistics and data, and evaluations of varying levels of details, internal evaluation and funding criteria for projects, decision matrices showing proposals for funding that had been accepted or rejected as well as how they had been evaluated, and submissions to state or federal government bodies.

2. Findings

2.1 RQ 1(a): Institutional operation of equity programs

2.1.1 Equity program revenue and expenditures across institutions

Across institutions, there was substantial variation in funding amounts from the in-scope equity programs and in how universities implemented that funding to support goals of increased access, participation, and student success among identified equity cohorts.

Figure 1 below shows funding from some of the in-scope equity programs across each institution: HEPPP, Regional Loading Program (RLP), Demand-driven access for First Nations regional students (DDA First Nations Reg.), Enabling Loading Program (ELP), and Disability Support Program (DSP). The institutions that received the most from these combined funding streams received over 20 times more than the institution that received the lowest amount. The seven highest-receiving institutions all had substantial receipts from the RLP, reflecting their regional campuses. While some of this funding is earmarked for very specific uses, such as that being allocated from DSP, others, including RLP and DDA for First Nations regional students, are treated as part of central university budgets and used to cover general operating costs.

Figure 1. Allocations of selected equity programs by institution, 2021 ($M).
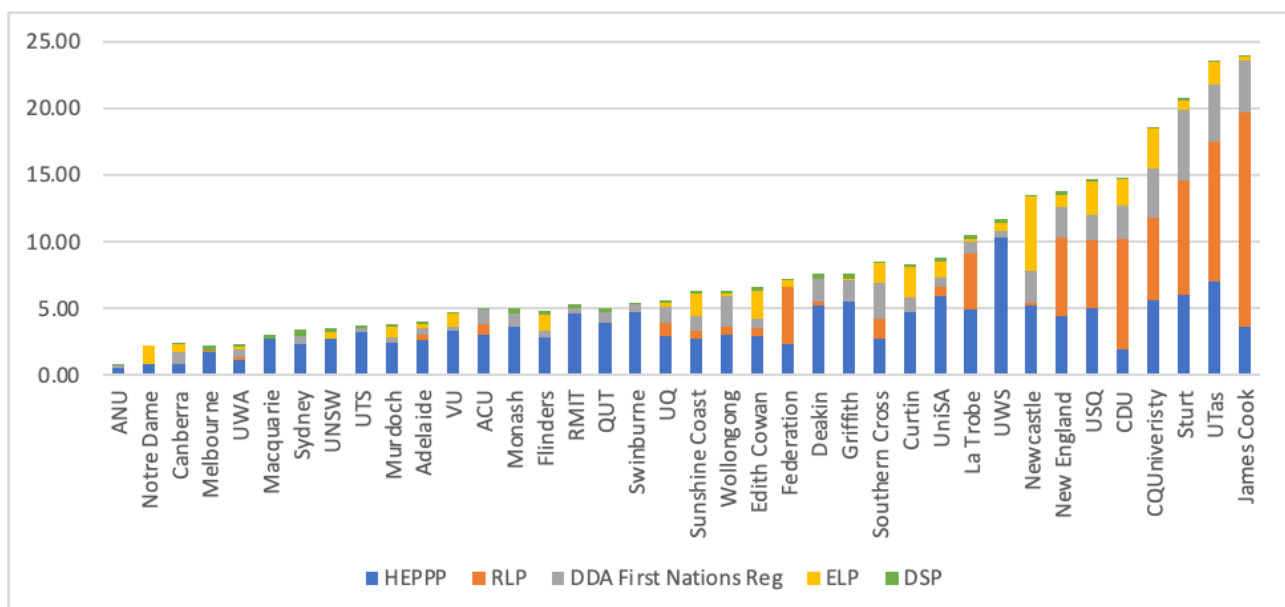
Among these programs, consultation participants perceived HEPPP and their enabling pathway programs (funded by ELP, although many times supplemented by central budgets) as most relevant to their prior conceptions of 'equity programs.' Figure 1 also shows wide variation in HEPPP and ELP receipts by institution, with the university receiving the highest HEPPP receiving over $10 million, while the lowest received less than $0.5 million. Similarly, institutions varied in the size of their enabling programs, with some receiving no funds through ELP, and those at the highest end receiving $2.5 million or more in 2021.

In addition to receiving different total amounts from the in-scope equity programs, anonymised HEPPP reporting figures provided by the Department of Education from each of the institutions suggests that there is also wide variation in how that money is spent (see Figure 2 for the primary life-cycle stage of HEPPP expenditures). There are however, some caveats with this conclusion. First, activities in Figure 2 only relate to how institutions report they spend their HEPPP funding. Two universities with identical activities could choose to fund those activities (and therefore report them) differently. Given that we are unable to observe all activities related to equity that universities undertake, the HEPPP reporting provides only a partial view.

There may also be inconsistencies in how different universities report primary life-cycle stages, activity types, or the target populations of their HEPPP-funded initiatives.

Figure 2. Primary life-cycle stage of HEPPP expenditures by institution (2021)[1]
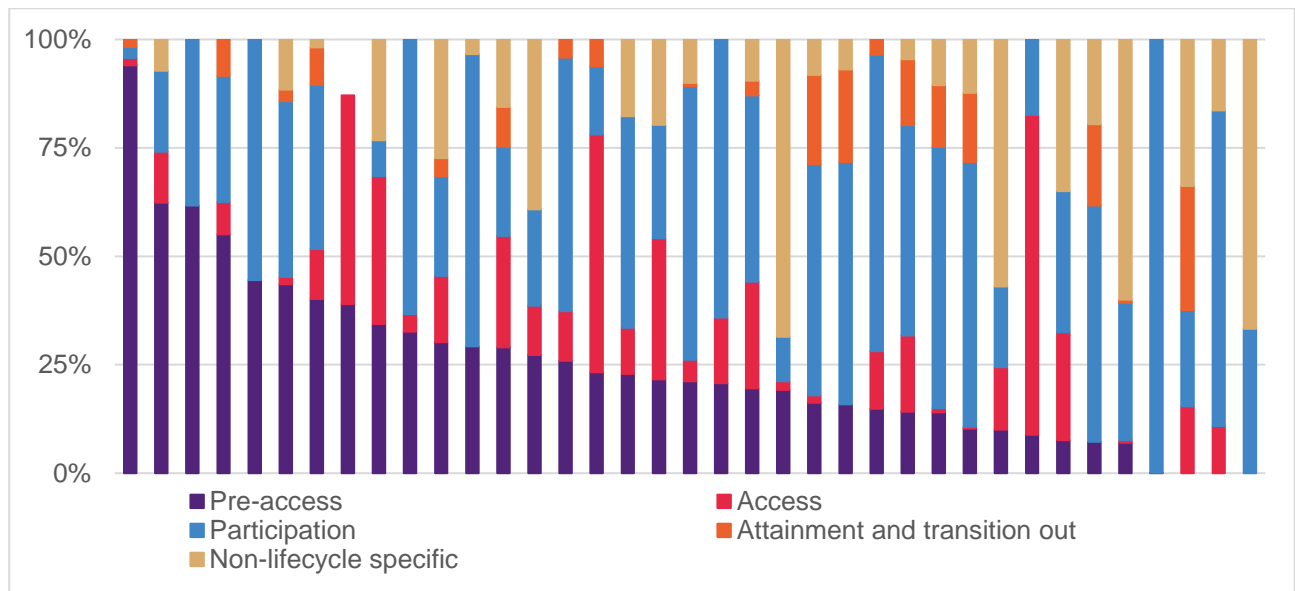
Still, Figure 2 appears to show that institutions respond to HEPPP funding in diverse ways. Some focus the majority of their efforts at the pre-access stage, while several others did not allocate any of their HEPPP funding toward that stage. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that institutions in the latter group do not conduct any pre-access equity activities, as they may be funded via non-HEPPP revenue streams.

A similar story of diversity between institutions in HEPPP expenditures arises in Figure 3, which shows primary activity types across institutions. Similar data caveats apply as in Figure 2. Again, however, we see wide variation in the primary activity type, with two universities allocating nearly all of their HEPPP funding toward Information and Experience, while several others apportioned none of their funding toward that purpose.

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[1] Data come from anonymised HEPPP reporting provided by the Department of Education. Categorisation represents the identified primary target of funded activities, and data do not capture where activities have multiple targets. Incomplete data in the eighth column reflects how expenditures were reported for that institution, which did not total to 100% of reported expenditures.

Figure 3. Primary activity type of HEPPP expenditures by institution (2021)
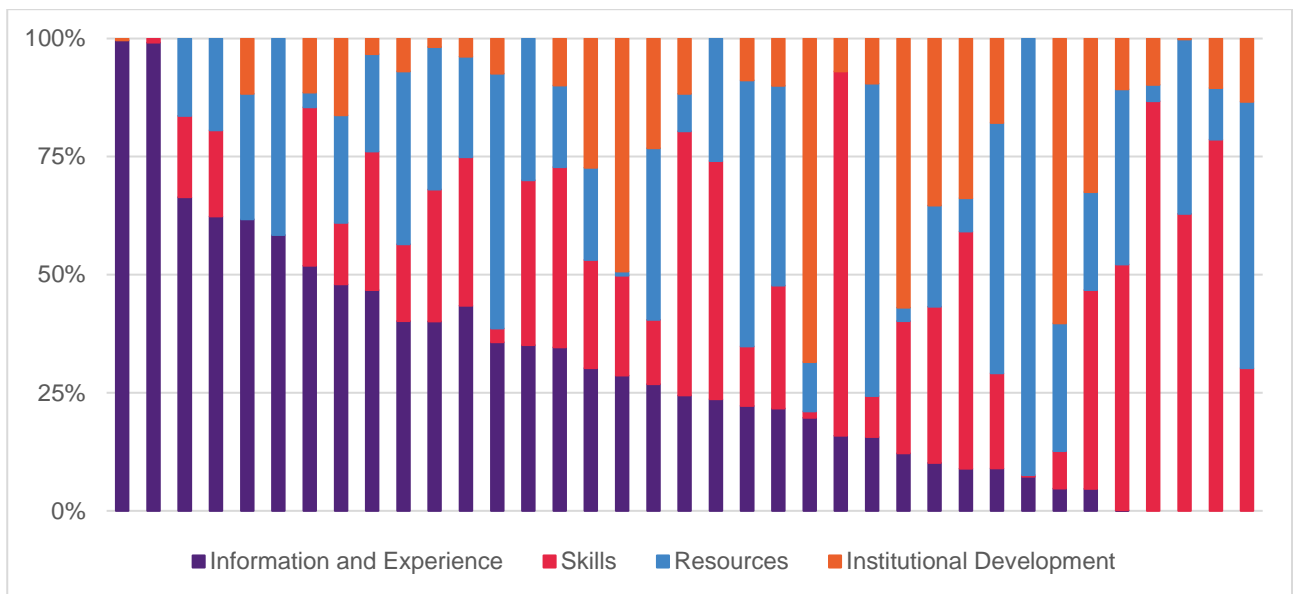
Due to the difficulty of tracking how students in various (and sometimes multiple) equity groups participate in HEPPP-funded activities, there is less clarity in the reported data about which groups access HEPPP-funded services or receive HEPPP dollars. Different institutions chose to report this targeting differently; some universities have totalled the relevant cohorts to 100%, while others have combined groups such that a program that was targeted at Indigenous and regional students would be counted for both cohorts (see Figure 4 for target cohort breakdown of funding by institution). Due to the intersectional nature of identities and differences in how institutions interpret the reporting criteria, a given participant in a HEPPP-funded initiative who might be from a low-SES area while also potentially being from a remote area and identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander may be treated differently by different institutions in their HEPPP reporting. Therefore, drawing any firm conclusions about which of the three HEPPP target groups are over- or underrepresented in HEPPP expenditures is not possible given the current reporting data.

Figure 4. Targeted cohorts of HEPPP funding by institution (2021)
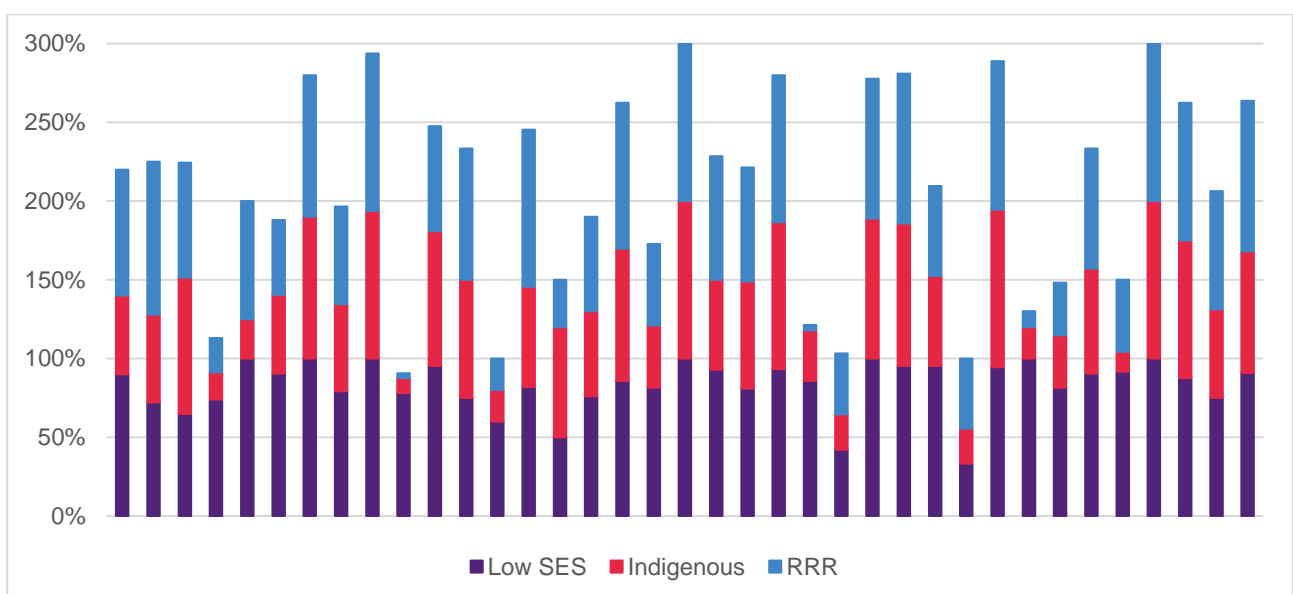
In addition to observing overall distributions of reported HEPPP spending, institutions were also divided into quartiles of overall HEPPP funding as a proxy for student disadvantage and compared spending patterns across quartile. There were no meaningful trends in the HEPPP reporting data, suggesting that how institutions allocate their HEPPP funding—or at least how they report it—is not markedly different according to how much funding they receive. Instead, HEPPP allocations across categories of the student life-cycle stage, activity type, and targeted populations appear to be more idiosyncratic or random, without a strong pattern by overall amount received. Thus, prioritisation and funding decisions seem to depend much more on local context and institution-specific priorities, which was confirmed by participants in consultations from sample institutions.

2.1.2   Institutional operations and implementation

Section 2.1.1 showed diversity across institutions in terms of the outcomes of funding via the in-scope equity programs. Universities differ in how much they receive, the sources of those funds, and how they allocate those funds. How institutions choose to allocate funding designed to increase equity differs and depends on local contextual factors, such as the specific challenges of their student populations or particular pockets of expertise that exist at the university, as well as how leaders and decision-makers understand the locally relevant gaps in the system. These allocations are also often a function of legacy programs that may be long-established, priorities coming from senior university leadership, and the overall financial resources of the university's central budget relative to the needs of students.

Several participants in the consultations suggested that part of their HEPPP funds were used on long-standing outreach programs with the goal of increasing participation among HEPPP's target populations. These programs were generally perceived to be effective, were often administered by relatively long-standing staff, and had the backing of members of senior leadership.

There was also a range in how universities went about making internal funding and allocation decisions related to equity. Some processes at universities in the sample were quite formal, with committees who assess proposals for HEPPP or other funding after a formal expression of interest process. In these cases, the panel would generally assess proposals against internally published funding criteria to ensure feasibility, adherence to eligibility and reporting requirements, and anticipated effects. These panels would also evaluate proposed projects in the context of other initiatives to ensure that a given equity cohort was not being left out, or that the initiatives aligned with institutional strategies or theories of change.

On the other end of the spectrum, some universities tended to use much more informal processes. One form of this was universities that continued long-standing programs while also funding student support services for equity cohorts as defined by HEPPP or other programs with strict eligibility and reporting requirements. For example, they might fund one counsellor's salary out of a team of five because they knew that more than one-fifth of students who access counselling support on campus would come from a low-SES, regional, and/or Indigenous background. These institutions used HEPPP funding or other 'equity' funding to support students from the designated backgrounds or to increase access and participation, but did so largely through pre-existing pathways.

Other universities that used more informal processes tended to rely on the networks and expertise within the university to start new equity initiatives. In these cases, there might be an office or key staff member with authority over equity funding streams, such as HEPPP. This "equity person" within the university might be approached with ideas to fund or to seek out staff members with relevant expertise to implement an initiative or idea. Priorities or new initiatives could also be relayed from senior leadership, with the VC or a DVC pushing for a given initiative that they believed in without a formal evaluation process being undertaken by a disinterested committee.

Several universities reported being in the process of or having recently transitioned to a more formal process of allocating HEPPP funds. While this may not have necessarily meant a formal EOI process had been conducted, it often included assessing current or potential projects and initiatives against an equity strategy

or university strategic plan and trying to assess whether a program was meeting its goals in terms of impact. As part of the internal rethinking or evaluation of equity initiatives, there was also attention paid to ensuring that reporting requirements were being met and that activities were falling within the bounds of program requirements (e.g., HEPPP or DSP eligibility). For example, one university provided an internal report from years past which recommended shifting their HEPPP spending to ensure that students who were not from the specified eligible groups were being exposed to HEPPP-funded activities. As a result, this university fundamentally changed the nature of the majority of its HEPPP expenditures. While internal allocation processes for HEPPP funding and decision-making processes for other equity or student support programs ranged in levels of formality and the staff included in the consultations seemed to favour more proscribed processes, it is unclear whether a given approach produces better outcomes for students or which types of processes may best fit a given institution.

How universities spent funds from the in-scope equity programs was influenced by the level of overall financial resources at the university and the resources available for equity purposes. For example, some universities were able to prioritise guaranteeing salaries for equity-related staff from their operational budgets. Others, while still paying for some salaries from insecure funds like HEPPP, had guaranteed for contingent funding such that the university would guarantee funding as long as HEPPP existed in its current form, providing slightly more security than relying purely on the year-to-year HEPPP funding. Still, such temporary arrangements, with short-term contracts reliant on HEPPP allocations remained commonplace for many staff members working on initiatives funded via HEPPP or other government funding streams. Among consultation participants, those universities with greater resources available from their central budgets tended to allocate more of their HEPPP funding to scholarships because it was easy to verify student eligibility; all they needed to ensure was that the recipient was from an eligible cohort.

Meanwhile, the various other activities and initiatives, for which figuring out reporting was more time-consuming, could be funded from central budgets or philanthropy that had no formal reporting requirements, and thus no requirement to categorise all those who received a given service.

On the other hand, universities with fewer resources and more disadvantaged student populations were often in the position of relying on equity program funding to keep core functions operating and keep up with the costs of delivery. These universities in particular reported that a key issue they faced was the short-term and uncertain nature of funding, which they reported caused difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff and building expertise in equity.

2.2   RQ 1(b): Systemic gaps

Section 2.1 found there was variation in how much universities received from the equity programs, the process by which spending decisions were made, and ultimately, how they spent the equity funding they received. While these processes and outcomes may have been dissimilar in some ways, a common theme reported by the participants was that they were often cognisant of systemic gaps in the equity system. Some of these gaps were related to pre-existing structural or systemic inequities that the higher education system was unable to fully address. Others were problems created or exacerbated by the structure of the programs themselves. In many cases, the with saw their jobs as attempting to respond to these gaps and systemic inequities to reduce their negative effects on students.

2.2.1   Eligibility requirements

A common theme in discussing shortfalls of the in-scope equity programs and policies was that some of the eligibility requirements limited the programs' effectiveness or left students who could have benefitted from them unsupported. For example, some eligibility requirements, like those for TAP, were only available to recent school leavers. That meant that mature age students, who often face more difficulties in moving for university and may be more rooted in their regional communities, were not eligible for the assistance.

Similarly, the recently-implemented 50% pass rule, which was part of the Job Ready Graduates legislation, meant that government funding via HECS-HELP and CSPs would be disproportionately withdrawn from members of traditionally-underrepresented groups.[2]. There were also participants who raised issues with eligibility requirements for income support payments. While these payments are not included in the equity programs listed in the project, many universities felt the need to respond to these eligibility gaps with their equity funding because many members of the in-scope equity cohorts were most affected. For example, working students—often from low-SES backgrounds or those with significant financial and care responsibilities—were often above minimum income and asset thresholds to receive financial assistance from income support payments. However, if these students were required to undertake placements as part of a nursing or teaching course, it would often mean having to resign from their outside jobs without receiving income support. Universities that have recognised this issue reported that one way they were trying to reduce inequities was to provide scholarships, where possible, to support these students specifically because of the gaps left by the current system. Multiple participants also flagged what they saw as a gap for Indigenous students from urban areas, suggesting that demand driven access be expanded to all Indigenous students, as has since been proposed by the Universities Accord Interim Report.

Some universities also reported that the equity cohorts specified in programs like HEPPP left many disadvantaged groups of students out of scope. Thus, institutions were often aware of and particularly sensitive to additional groups of students who experienced disadvantages but were often not explicitly included in Commonwealth-funded equity programs. These specific groups differed by university, but most frequently included mature-age students, students with family, financial and care responsibilities, lower-middle class students who may have not qualified as low-SES but were nevertheless feeling challenged by cost of living increases, and some international students who were not eligible for much financial assistance but may not have been coming from wealthy backgrounds.

Some interview participants also raised the caps on Enabling Loading Program funding as an example of overly strict eligibility requirements, particularly during past periods of high enrolment. This meant that universities either had to turn away students who wanted to enter a pathway program or allocate additional funds from their central budget to provide access to more students, who often come from the equity groups considered in this project. While this issue is less salient in the current context of reduced enrolments, ambitious sector-wide enrolment goals in the future may lead to greater pressure on enabling programs.

2.2.2   EFTSL-based funding

Another issue that was particularly relevant for universities with high proportions of part-time students was the EFTSL-based funding for the in-scope equity programs, where overall funding levels are linked with EFTSL rather than a head count of unique students. Practitioners and those familiar with their student data suggested that providing adequate support to students was often more resource-intensive for part-time or marginally-attached students than full-time students, yet students who were not enrolled full-time brought less funding with them as part of HEPPP, RLP, or similar programs.

Participants often recognised the inherent logic of EFTSL-based funding for the costs of delivering courses, but also said that their experiences suggested that the university had to support the whole person to enable success whether that person was enrolled full-time or part-time. Therefore, student support services were often much more expensive to provide to students who were not enrolled in full-time coursework. For example, if a student required counselling, the workload for the counsellor was not directly proportional to (and may have been more likely to be negatively correlated with) the student's enrolment load. This worked to disadvantage universities with large numbers of part-time students, a population that is overrepresented among the equity groups considered for this project. For instance, one university in the sample estimated that the average EFTSL of their student population, which had high proportions of low-SES and regional

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[2] The Universities Accord Interim Report suggested removal of the 50% pass rule.

students, was about 0.6, meaning that their student support budget was correspondingly 40% lower than what they would have received in a headcount-based funding system.

2.2.3 Funding continuity and security

One systemic gap that nearly all of the consultations surfaced was around long-term funding continuity and security. They saw funding provided through programs like HEPPP as essential to widening participation and access to low-SES, Indigenous, and regional, rural, and remote students. However, the year-to-year nature of the funding amounts and general insecurity of funding meant that universities often had to resort to less than ideal organisational practices.

For some universities, this meant that outreach programs or other initiatives funded through HEPPP operated as 12-month programs, pending the next year's funding. This resulted in staff being on insecure, fixed-term contracts each year, which provided lower staff wellbeing, greater uncertainty, a reduced ability to adequately plan, and difficulty in retaining existing staff and recruiting new staff.

Other universities relied on central budgets to supplement or ensure staffing for programs that might have otherwise been completely funded by HEPPP. This often allowed for slightly longer fixed-term contracts— although not necessarily continuing appointments—but was dependent on the overall level of university resources and prioritisation of those equity initiatives by university senior leadership. Even participants from universities where staff for these types of roles tended to be employed on longer contracts funded through operational budgets realised that the long-term funding for these roles and activities was not secure and subject to changes in equity programs, university budgets, and changes to senior leadership. Overall, this meant that there was a lower ability to retain the institutional knowledge and expertise of experienced staff, as retention of those on insecure contracts remained a key concern from consultation participants.

The lack of long-term and secure funding also meant that time horizons for projects were shortened. This had two primary effects. First, it meant that the scale of many projects had to be relatively small. The short time frames of guaranteed funding create a disincentive for large-scale projects that might have the most scalable effects in favour of funding smaller, shorter-term projects which could conceivably end within a one-year period. Some participants reported that this limits the scale and potential effectiveness of their initiatives, especially as they have increasingly sought solutions to structural inequalities with complex causes and multifaceted effects. Second, the year-to-year funding meant that with recruiting lags, by the time the appropriate staff were hired, they were often left with very little time to execute or implement a given project or activity prior to that year's funding ending. Thus, even a plan for a one-year project was often seen as too ambitious. By the time that a given project and amount of funding could be approved for the following year, the time it took to advertise, recruit, hire, and train people for short-term roles to administer an initiative or program often meant that the time to implement the project was substantially less than one year.

While universities who relied on HEPPP and other year-to-year funding for these types of roles reported that the longer lead times for HEPPP funding estimates coming from the Department of Education had made things better in recent years, they still suggested that the lack of long-term funding certainty was leading to inefficiencies and an inability to adequately tackle systemic sources of inequity.

2.2.4 Cumulative disadvantage and intersectionality

Another gap in the equity programs, taken as a whole, was a lack of recognition of intersectional identities and multiple, overlapping, and often cumulative forms of disadvantage. Interview participants often flagged students who experienced multiple disadvantages as their most challenging groups to support because the multiple disadvantages they had compounded on one another. In a similar vein as the discussion in the previous sub-section, participants suggested that a more equitable system would be one that considered the 'whole person' and that recognised the multiplicative rather than additive effects of multiple forms of disadvantage.

2.2.4.1 Disability

Participants perceived that students with disability were particularly underserved by the in-scope equity programs. Due in part to definitional changes, such as the inclusion of mental health issues , the number of self-identified students with disability has increased in recent years. Still, consultation participants suggested that the current figures were likely underestimates, because disabilities needed to be self-reported by students. They also suggested that mental health issues, stress, and other disabilities were often correlated with membership in other equity cohorts or with other disadvantages not explicitly captured by the indentified equity groups, such as experiencing financial stress or experiencing domestic abuse or sexual violence. Those with oversight over DSP funding reported that it was essential to buffer some of the increased costs associated with providing a quality educational experience to students with disability, as the current DSP funding does. The supplemental learning supports and services (e.g., accessible technology for sight-impaired students, etc.) funded by DSP were critical for supporting students to overcome particular burdens associated with their disabilities. At the same time, DSP funding was not able (or indeed designed) to support students with disability beyond this limited scope.

The targeted nature of DSP funding was at times seen as a double-edged sword. On one hand, the specific purposes of the funding protected it, at least in theory, from other potential uses, ensuring that students with disability benefited from those funds. On the other hand, many participants suggested that rather than thinking of students with disability as needing assistance to "fit in" to the university—something they often characterised as a deficit perspective—incorporating principles of universal design and other types of systemic change that affect the institution would more effectively include students with disability. Ensuring accessibility through universal design or universal programs, however, must currently be funded out of discretionary university budgets, without additional support from Commonwealth-funded equity programs like HEPPP. This point about building accessibility and equity into the structure of the university is also covered below (see Section 2.2.5).

2.2.4.2 Scale of overall funding

Many consultation participants, particularly those from universities with high proportions of students from the in-scope equity cohorts, suggested that the overall scale of funding was well below an adequate standard, particularly given the future goals of increasing the proportion of Australians with tertiary qualifications. While further exploration of this topic is also presented in Section 2.4.2, some perceptions of the lack of funding came from the inability of current equity funding to account for the cumulative disadvantage that many students face. Participants suggested that the needs (and budget required to meet those needs) of students who experience multiple disadvantages (often members of multiple equity cohorts) were often multiplicative rather than additive. Again, linking with Section 2.2.2, university staff reported that the lack of an intersectional lens was similar to EFTSL-based funding in that both disregarded the entire person, focusing instead on abstract characteristics. On the ground, however, university staff and student support programs had to meet students where they were, as full people. This meant that a part-time student might require more support than a full-time student even if there were fewer dollars attached to their enrolment. It might also mean that the complex barriers and disadvantages faced by people experiencing cumulative disadvantages might require exponentially more resources than most advantaged students. They reported, that in their opinions, current funding models were simply insufficient to adequately support many of these students.

Consultation participants were reticent to provide even approximate 'ideal' figures for the scale of overall funding, although they all suggested that the overall scale of funding was not close to where it needed to be to adequately support all students. This was particularly true in the context of future goals for the sector to expand access by presumably including more students who were likely to need more supports on average than current students. Participants suggested that estimating the true cost of providing adequate supports and educational services to ensure high success rates of students experiencing multiple and complex forms of disadvantage (and then providing that funding) was the first step in providing a more equitable higher education system.

2.2.5   Building solutions into the core of the university

Related to both the short-term nature of funding amounts and the recognition of intersectional identities and cumulative disadvantage, one of the most commonly-identified gaps was that the structure of equity funding—particularly programs like DSP and HEPPP with specific reporting requirements—meant that it was difficult to use them to make structural or systemic changes to the university that might be most effective at building equity into the core functions of the university rather than only having equity efforts exist outside of the mainstream.

Participants did not necessarily want to completely replace the more explicitly-targeted programs like HEPPP and DSP because some expressed worry that having no targeting requirements could have adverse consequences for equity cohorts. However, they also suggested that efforts to make more structural changes, such as increasing accessibility for students with disability by incorporating universal design principles, could not be funded by these types of programs. For example, participants explained how DSP incentivised individual-level rather than institution-wide solutions. If several individual students with a hearing impairment received support for their disabilities by receiving notes, that expense could be paid for with DSP funding. However, if those students' disabilities were addressed by a systemic solution, such as closed captioning services that were offered to all students, that expense would need to be borne by the university's central budget. According to the consultations, these funding rules reinforced the idea that inequities were properties of individuals rather than characteristics of systems or institutions. The implicit assumption, then, is that there were problems or deficiencies within individuals that needed fixing. This understanding of educational inequity was at odds with systemic, scalable solutions; it provided an incentive for individual-level solutions rather than building an equity lens into the core functioning of the university, which participants suggested would ultimately work at scale and provide efficiency while avoiding stigmatising people with disability or those experiencing various other forms of disadvantage.

Nevertheless, several participants reported that their units or institutions were seeking more systemic, wide-reaching, and long-lasting ways of increasing equity. There were a few different broad ideas for achieving this, some of which had been at least partially implemented. Furthermore, these ideas varied in how compatible they were with current programs for explicitly funding equity solutions—that is, primarily HEPPP and DSP, but also ELP, TAP, and other funding streams.

One broad strategy was to try to use HEPPP to fund pilot projects targeted at increasing access, participation, retention, or success. In pilot form, these projects could be limited in scope and explicitly serve low-SES, regional, or Indigenous students, thereby fulfilling reporting requirements. While proposing these pilots, however, the idea would be to understand from the outset how the program could potentially scale to be incorporated into core university functions if proven effective in its pilot stage. This would allow HEPPP-funded initiatives to achieve their statutory requirements while also contributing to systemic change in the long term. The consultations did not reveal specific examples of where this process had taken place successfully (participants were not specifically asked for instances of this occurring), although this line of thinking was mentioned by multiple different institutions as avenues for the future, including some who were attempting to rethink how they allocated their HEPPP funds to include more of a research component after having chosen previously not to fund research projects.

Another strategy that universities used was to shift spending for these initiatives away from targeted programs like HEPPP, DSP, or (the out-of-scope) ISSP and instead either fund more universal efforts out of central budgets or to rely on staff to carry out best practices in designing course materials and other learning resources. Some of the participants worried, however, that these efforts were largely going unfunded and created a burden for staff who in many cases were already overworked and time poor. On one hand, central budgets were largely being allocated to the university's existing operation, teaching, research, and student support. On the other hand, Commonwealth-funded equity programs tended to target students at the individual level. Thus, the systemic changes needed to increase equity at scale, which the participants realised are massive efforts, were generally seen as having fallen through cracks in the system.

Alternatively, there were some universities that served students from equity cohorts almost exclusively. Some participants, for example, estimated that the vast majority of their students were members of one or more of the identified equity cohorts. As such, it was hard for them to separate efforts to increase equity from student success more broadly, as increasing measures of student wellbeing, retention, completion, or graduate outcomes would almost certainly increase equity as well.

2.2.6   Fragmentation and inconsistencies

A final systemic gap that was identified via consultations was the theme of fragmentation and inconsistencies which led to inefficiency. This fragmentation occurred in two primary ways as identified by the participants. First, the equity funding streams considered in this review were seen to lack coherence. As a result, there were often separate reporting requirements and reports that needed to be prepared for different departments, which adds to the administrative burden on university staff. There are also similar or sometimes overlapping programs administered by different government departments. For example, both ISSP and HEPPP are used to support Indigenous students but they are administered by different government departments with different reporting requirements, and are often handled by different units within universities due to ISSP's sole Indigenous focus and HEPPP's multi-pronged focus. This could sometimes cause confusion or problems with coordinating tasks within the university to ensure proper accounting and reporting and to ensure that 'double-dipping' was not occurring between the two programs.

The second form of fragmentation cited by participants was fragmentation across the university sector. This point was particularly clear with respect to expanding access via recruitment of students from identified equity groups. Several participants suggested a duplication of effort across universities in outreach to low-SES, regional, or Indigenous students. They also suggested that pooling resources and collectivising targets would allow for more effective and efficient outreach since the goal should be greater participation in university, not solely competition between universities for a limited number of students from identified equity groups.

Lastly, there is also fragmentation within universities. This point arose particularly around outreach in the pre-access phase, where some people said that we need to think more as a sector and that cooperation at the state level or a national level would make more sense and provide better value for money.

2.3   RQ2: Evidence of effectiveness

Overall, consultation participants suggested that relevant departments within the university used the administrative data they collected about student enrolments, success, and participation in program activities or initiatives, as well as their own consultations with staff and students, to help make decisions and monitor the effectiveness of efforts to reduce inequities. They also relied on staff expertise to suggest which activities were effective and where funding might be used more efficiently. However, they also tended to report—with some important exceptions—a lack of evidence of effectiveness on 'primary' effects of equity programs or activities, such as student retention or completion. On the other hand, many reported attempting to build better data collection, monitoring, and evaluation systems into the structure of new initiatives to provide better information for decision-makers in the future. Whether these efforts are effective remains to be seen, as consultation participants described these efforts as ongoing.

2.3.1   Empirical evidence on primary outcomes

There are some examples of universities using data in quasi-experimental ways to generate conclusions about effectiveness. For example, one university reported that providing modest scholarships based on demonstrated financial need led to gains in retention. They provided these scholarships to the lowest-income students, and compared retention rates to those with slightly higher incomes who had not received scholarships . The growth in retention rates among those eligible for the scholarships suggests that direct

financial assistance produced increased retention. However, a potential limitation of their analysis was that some of those who had not received scholarships could have been ineligible due to having pass rates under the eligibility cut-off. Therefore, while comparisons of retention rates for these small scholarships are potentially compelling, a more rigorous evaluation effort might provide better quality evidence on which to base a potential expansion of scholarships. For example, randomly assigning scholarships, conducting a more thorough evaluation of potential covariates, or conducting qualitative or mixed-methods research on treated and control groups would provide more robust and insightful evidence of effectiveness. However, as various consultation participants have noted, there are also ethical issues with funding that research and potentially reducing or manipulating whether students receive a potentially valuable resource that might help them to eventually obtain a degree. Thus, even with a relatively straightforward treatment, strong evidence of effects on primary outcomes remains difficult to capture.

For most other programs or activities that universities undertake to reduce inequities, there is even less rigorous and quantifiable evidence about effects on primary outcomes. Instead, universities often rely on consultations with program participants or on outcomes such as program participation. They are generally unable, however, to link these outcomes to student success. While both of these forms of evidence are valuable, they do not necessarily enable universities to adequately understand how best to use their limited resources or how to anticipate the effects of expanding a particular program on student equity.

There is also an overall lack of high-quality evidence about how to optimise a given intervention. Many programs or activities that are evaluated are considered against untreated cases. A university might, for instance, compare enrolment rates from schools that were exposed to an outreach program against those that were not. However, there is generally no evidence that might suggest the best way to run that outreach program, or whether the outreach program provides better value for money than an alternative program or set of marketing activities. Similarly, while the effects of scholarships might compare those who received scholarships to those who applied but did not receive one, there is a lack of knowledge about the appropriate amount of financial assistance that provides the greatest gains in student retention and success while also being available to as many students as possible.

2.3.2   Evaluation against university strategies

Some universities (a minority of those included in the consultations) explicitly evaluated proposed equity-related initiatives and activities against university strategies or theories of change. Sometimes, these documents comprised equity-specific strategies that provided a framework for increasing equity throughout the entire university. In other cases, these documents might relate to overall university strategies where equity is a consideration. Participants suggested that this form of evaluation was useful for organising and structuring their efforts to remain consistent and aligned with university strategy; they also reported that this was a way to help ensure that programs or projects being funded by HEPPP or other equity-related funding streams would be more likely to lead to the types of outcomes that were ultimately being sought. However, due to the difficulty of establishing causal effects in complex systems, decision makers at universities often relied on incomplete evidence when deciding which initiatives to fund or where to focus their equity efforts.

For example, one university provided evidence of effectiveness for a bridging pathway into their institution. Its goals and practices had been evaluated against the university-wide Theory of Change, and the university reported on outcomes such as student enrolment and conversion into regular enrolment. They also surveyed students. They received positive feedback from students who participated in the survey and reported increased enrolment in the program and conversion into Baccalaureate programs at the university. While this is encouraging and may provide enough evidence to continue funding the program, this sort of evaluation is unable to speak to the causal effects of the enabling program, per se. Thus, despite a well-conducted evaluation for its purposes, the empirical question of what the causal effect of expanding an enabling program would be or whether return on investment would be greater there than in another area, remains unanswered.

Consultation participants also suggested a lack of information sharing between institutions regarding established best practices related to student equity, in part because empirical evidence of effectiveness is rare. Still, they thought that greater collaboration across institutions could help to spread successes and improve student outcomes overall. However, they noted that such an effort would take time and resources that they did not have. Some participants suggested a greater role for the Department of Education or the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) in collating and disseminating recommendations for best practices or successful programs related to student equity to foster greater collaboration across universities and to improve the evidence base.

2.4 RQ3: Supplemental funding

2.4.1 Inability to track funding

When asked about directing supplemental funding toward equity purposes that universities had committed beyond the in-scope equity programs, consultation participants responded that calculating exact or even approximate amounts was a largely futile task because separating various inflows and outflows in central budgets was impossible. Similarly, with a purpose as broad as reducing inequities, understanding exactly how much money was going towards funding students from one or more equity cohorts, or which student service expenditures were increasing equity, was not possible. Therefore, consultation participants were unable to point to internal or external university documentation to shed light on how much supplemental funding was directed towards equity purposes beyond the specified programs. For example, if a new building is constructed with universal design principles to make it physically more accessible to students with disability, it is unclear how to apportion that expenditure in a way that recognises its potential effect on equity. Thus, the most important conclusion from the consultations relating to this research question was that it remains unclear how much supplemental funding is contributed from university central budgets toward equity purposes and that it is not immediately clear how that information could potentially be collected in the future, as most participants expressed that they would not know how to begin to get an accurate accounting of all of the relevant inflows and outflows.

2.4.2 University central budget supplements

Despite the difficulties in tracking specific amounts, all of the individuals included in the consultations suggested that the central budgets of universities were supplementing so-called equity funding by large amounts. Participants recognised that these claims were difficult to independently verify and that providing even ballpark estimates was difficult. However, they pointed to several areas where universities tended to supplement equity funding.

First, some universities specifically mentioned supplementing the funding of their enabling programs beyond the inflows from CGS and ELP. However, even some of the offices and staff who provide services to students in enabling programs also provide support functions to other university students as well, meaning that exact expenditure figures on enabling programs, let alone enabling students from one or more equity cohorts exclusively, are hard to estimate.

Universities—particularly those with high proportions of students from non-traditional paths or with significant financial needs—also suggested that the additional student support costs for students from identified equity groups were not accounted for by the various loadings or funding they received. For example, one university suggested that the student support costs for an average student from a low-SES SA1 was about 3-4 times the average cost of supporting a typical school leaver, but that the amount received from Commonwealth-funded equity programs was insufficient to account for this disparity. Thus, universities with high student support needs had to meet those needs with funding that might otherwise have been spent on research, physical infrastructure, or other core functions.

Another cost centre that universities recognised was the various staff who administered the equity programs and fulfilled reporting requirements. These units, which often included or reported directly to senior

administrators, are funded out of central university budgets. The time and resources needed to report back to government on how universities are meeting program requirements are costs borne by the university. Thus, as new programs are added or reporting requirements become more time consuming, universities must provide additional supplements in the form of staff work hours.

Some universities also supplemented equity-specific funding by attempting to consider equity as part of their core functioning. For example, some universities have equity or social justice strategies or frameworks that provide guidance on how to embed equity-focused practice into everything that the university does. The development of these frameworks and accountability to them comes about from or with the blessing of senior leadership, but it is not something that is necessarily explicitly incentivised by the in-scope equity programs. Participants in the sample often reported that some combination of institutional history and mission, current and past senior leadership, staff expertise and buy-in, and student and community advocacy were responsible for pushing equity concerns, and that without these factors universities, "as naturally conservative institutions" would not prioritise them."

Overall, most of the sample respondents suggested that the amount of funding required to properly support the existing students from the identified equity groups was not being met by Commonwealth-funded equity programs. Crucially, although out of scope for this project, several institutions mentioned that an important gap they were trying to fill was the cost-of-living increases with which students were unable to keep up. This means that income support programs and housing were insufficient to meet student needs. As a result, many institutions have used money from both specific equity programs (e.g., HEPPP) and their central budgets to provide financial assistance in the form of scholarships or bursaries to students experiencing financial hardships. While most participants could not give specific estimates, they tended to suggest that large increases in overall funding amounts were needed, and that funding outside of the Department of Education-identified programs may be more important, particularly in the current economic climate of rising prices due to post-COVID inflation and particularly of rising housing costs.

3. Conclusions

The equity programs considered in this project provide funding streams to universities depending on their enrolment of specific equity cohorts, the institution's regional location, or its enabling programs. These programs have various goals, including seeking to defray additional costs associated with delivering education to disadvantaged cohorts (e.g., DSP) or operating in higher-cost regions (e.g., RLP, Additional growth for regional campuses), expanding access and participation (HEPPP, ELP), or reducing financial barriers to attendance (e.g., TAP, HECS-HELP). However, taken together, they are not perceived to be a coherent suite of programs designed to reduce inequities, and many students who benefit from some of the programs, such as TAP, HECS-HELP and CGS, Destination Australia,[3] or even ELP, may come from advantaged backgrounds.

Universities use both dedicated equity funding streams which require explicit reporting, such as HEPPP and DSP, as well as funds from their operational budgets (which are in part fed by some of the equity programs here, such as RLP, HECS-HELP, CGS, etc.) on various institutional initiatives aimed at reducing inequities and improving student outcomes for those in identified equity cohorts. Institutional differences and local contextual factors lead to variation both in how much universities receive from these various income streams and how they choose to allocate that funding internally. Examples of important local factors include prior institutional practice and priorities coming from senior university leadership, the specific types of disadvantages faced by the local student population, and the overall level of resources relative to student need. Institutions often saw themselves as responding to a number of systemic gaps, including funding

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[3] Recent changes to eligibility requirements stipulate that domestic students come from an underrepresented group, though all international students at regional institutions remain eligible for Destination Australia scholarships.

shortfalls, students facing financial difficulties due to eligibility constraints around income support or other funding, a lack of recognition of cumulative disadvantages and intersectional identities, and short-term funding cycles which disincentivise long-term efforts to embed systemic change into the structure of the university and higher education sector. They did so through varying institutional processes, with a range of levels of formality for making internal allocation decisions. Institutions also varied in terms of how central equity considerations were to their overall operation, in some cases dictated by the overrepresentation of traditional equity cohorts. Institutions were clear that the current equity funding provided by the Commonwealth government was essential to blunting some of the structural inequalities facing students from equity cohorts, but also suggested a need for additional funding commensurate with the difficult task of creating systemic change necessary for a more equitable higher education system.

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The University of Queensland
AUSTRALIA
CREATE CHANGE

Targeted Review of Student Equity in Higher Education Programs and System Level Policy Levers Appendix: Work Package 3 - Review of Universities Accord Submissions

Title:	Targeted Review of Student Equity in Higher Education Programs and System Level Policy Levers Appendix: Work Package 3 - Review of Universities Accord Submissions
Prepared for:	The Department of Education
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Date:	30 October 2023
Revision:	Version 1.1

The Institute for Social Science Research at the University of Queensland (UQ) acknowledges the Traditional Owners and their custodianship of the lands on which UQ operates. We pay our respects to their Ancestors and their descendants, who continue cultural and spiritual connections to Country.

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1.   Introduction and methods

1.1   Background and project

This project, the Targeted Review of Student Equity in Higher Education Programs and System Level Policy Levers, was conducted by the Institute for Social Sciences Research (ISSR) for the Department of Education (the Department). The purpose of the project was to support the Universities Accord Panel in their review and long-term plan for Australia's higher education system. Within this broader context, the aim of this project was to:

- Compile evidence for the Department and the Universities Accord Panel to inform the answers to questions on the systemic drivers for inequity, and barriers for equity groups across the student life cycle, and

- To contribute to the evidence base to support effective and efficient development and implementation of equity programs and policy.

Within this project, the equity programs and funding schemes in the higher education sector, and broader policy levers that were in scope included: Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP); Regional Partnerships Pool Program (RPPPP); Regional Loading Program; Enabling Loading Program; Disability Support Program; Regional University Centres; Tertiary Access Payment; Destination Australia; Demand driven access to Commonwealth Supported places for First Nations regional students; Additional growth for regional university campuses; The Commonwealth Grant Scheme (CGS), and The Higher Education Loan Program (HECS-HELP).

The target groups within scope of this project included: People from low SES background; people with disability; people from regional and remote areas; First Nations Australians, and people who are the first in their family to attend university

The work on this project has been conducted across three Work Packages.

- **Work Package 1** includes a review of recent evidence and trends on equity policies, systems and student outcomes and barriers, through a review of academic and grey literature and synthesis of available international and national data.

- **Work Package 2** includes a review of national equity programs, including their structure, implementation and effectiveness.

- **Work Package 3** synthesises findings from the first two work packages, as well as findings from the review of a sample of submissions to the Universities Accord and findings from a stakeholder consultation survey.

This Summary Report contains the approach and findings from the review of Accords Submissions.

1.2   Methods

In consultation with the Department, we undertook a targeted sampling approach to review and undertake a qualitative analysis of a sample of submissions to the Universities Accord. These submissions were in response to the Universities Accord Discussion Paper and published in April 2023. We aimed to review a spread of submissions with representation of regional and metropolitan universities, higher education peak bodies, professional associations, not-for-profit and other advocacy groups, particularly those with a connection to the target groups of focus in this project (e.g., if they included 'disability', 'indigenous' or 'equity' in their titles).

We reviewed a total of 86 submissions and focussed on content related to equity. A summary of the grouping of Accord Submissions is provided in Table 1 . Each submission was read in its entirety to ensure

content related to equity was captured and then coded into themes. The themes were reviewed amongst the three researchers working on this component and finalised once agreement was reached.

Table 1. Summary of the type of submission body

SUBMITTER TYPE	NO.
Advocacy grp or body - Disability	2
Advocacy grp or body - Indigenous	2
Higher education peak body	10
Individual	9
Not for profit/ charity	2
Other higher education	14
Professional association	9
Regional networks and support	3
Student representative grp	5
University (metro)	14
University (regional)	12
University school/centre/ faculty/college	4

2.   Key themes and subthemes

Figure 1 presents a conceptualisation of the main themes from our review and analysis of Universities Accord submissions. We identified three clusters of main themes: Cost of living as a barrier to study; students from identified equity groups being disproportionately impacted by funding and policies, and access and participation in higher education through educational systems.

Figure 1. Conceptualisation of the key themes and subthemes from our review of submissions to the Universities Accord Discussion Paper.
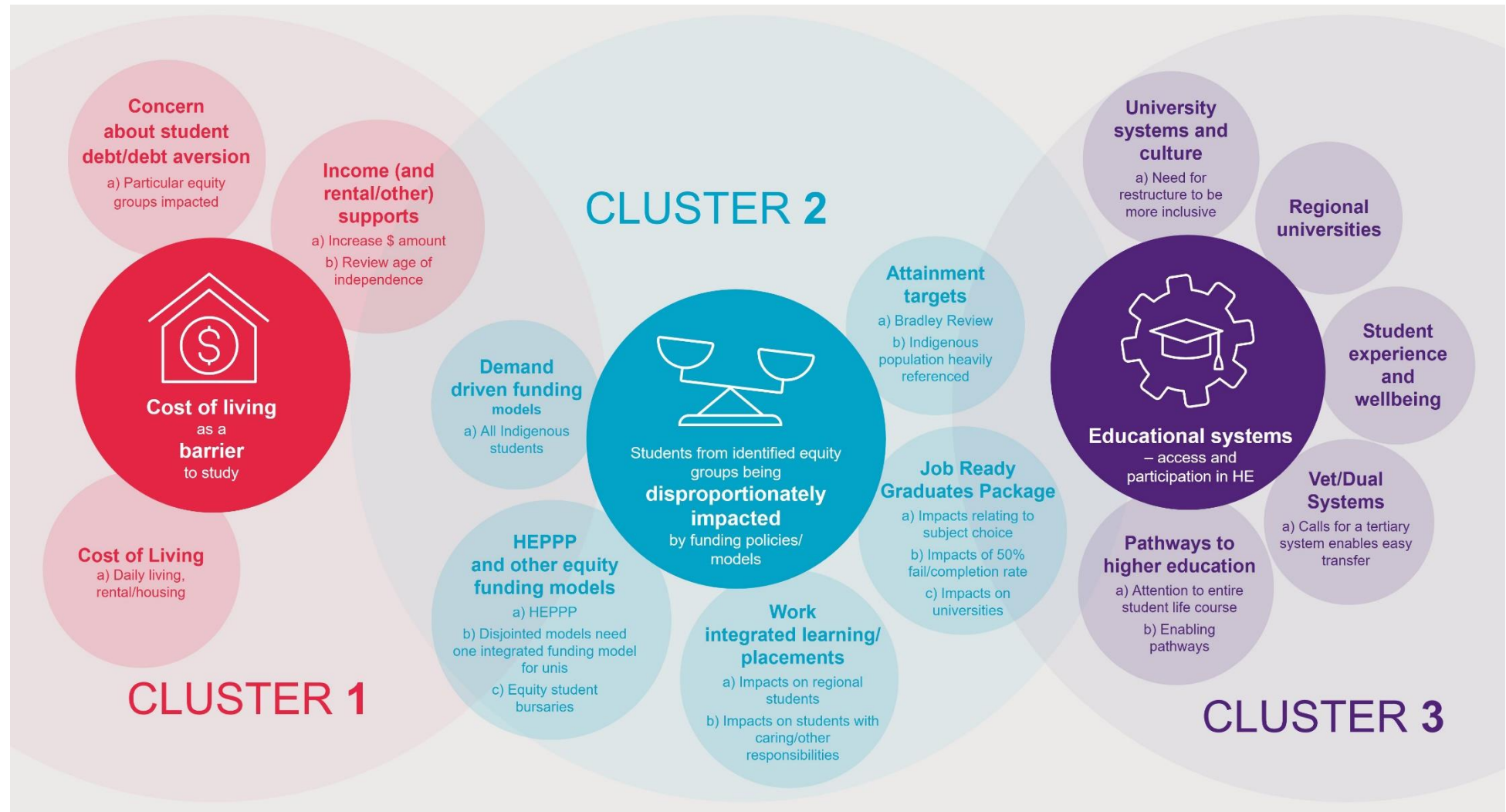
2.1　Cluster 1: Cost of living acting as a barrier to successful study

The *cost of living acting as a barrier to successful study*, particularly for student from identified equity groups, reflected a cluster of main themes. However, the financial pressures experienced by students from identified equity groups underpinned some of the discussion in other themes, such as the impacts upon students in work-integrated learning programs. This is discussed in later sections.

2.1.1　Cost of Living

The rising cost of living and the negative impacts it has on students' capacity to study, particularly for students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts, was discussed across a number of submissions.

> *A real factor in attrition rates is affordability. Many students need to work to survive, and many reach the point where something has to give.*

> *Cost-of-living pressures are hurting all students, but Indigenous Australians and equity groups are disproportionately affected. This is not only due to the cost of their degree, but also because they are struggling to make ends meet while they study.*

This theme covered discussion around the rising cost of daily expenses as a result of inflation, the cost of rental/housing, and how these made study more difficult through the creation of barriers in purchasing and accessing relevant study materials and software, transportation to university, as well as the need for many students to engage in paid work, impacting the time that students could then realistically dedicate to study. There was concern that the situation would only worsen based on the current economic climate and that students from identified equity groups, particularly low SES students who had less financial resources to draw upon, were more likely to be impacted in terms of accessing higher education and their study performance.

The key messages were:

- Cost of living pressures were a major barrier to study, and this had greater impacts upon those students who did not have resources to draw upon. For instance, students, particularly some students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts, were seen as needing to undertake substantial hours of work simply to afford basic necessities, transport, textbooks and other study materials, having a detrimental effect on academic performance.

- The current inflationary pressures were adding to cost of living pressures and reduced the affordability of education for students. This was perceived as likely to continue in the current economic climate.

- Economic disadvantage and financial strains were seen to remain central concerns for economically disadvantaged students despite the availability of student loans and fee assistance. Financial stress was perceived as having a significant impact on the academic performance of low SES and first-in-family students.

> *Cost of living pressures are impacting our lower SES students across our programs. Even though some of our students may be less than an hour's drive from a campus, a lack of public transport and the high cost of fuel can make the costs prohibitive for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to participate in face-to-face classes.*

Embedded throughout the discussion in the submissions around the impacts of cost of living on student access and participation, was the greater impact this had upon under-represented students. Through the feedback provided above, it is apparent that authors of submissions saw how low SES students would feel these impacts more so than other students. Some authors referred to research showing that Indigenous students were also highly impacted (evidenced by going without basic supplies, engaging in more hours of

paid work than other students impacting the time they could dedicate to study). As highlighted by respondents (and corroborated with a commissioned study of student finances reported in 2006):

Indigenous students worried about their financial situation more than their non-Indigenous peers, were twice as likely to go without food and other necessities, worked on average three hours more in paid employment than others, regularly missed classes because of their work commitment, were more reliant on the student association's subsidised services, had taken out loans at rates higher than other students, and many who were studying part time indicated they would much prefer to study full-time if their finances circumstances permitted it.

It was discussed in some submissions that the cost of living pressures on students further impacted access and participation in higher education when the costs of study were outweighed by potential earnings from employment, which created a disincentive to study.

A significant barrier to participation in higher education is the opportunity cost of not working while studying. For a four-year degree, this could amount to more than $200,000 in wages not earned, with an added cost of a FEE-HELP debt of more than $20,000. For some this may be offset by taking a part-time job, however not everyone can support themselves with part-time work while studying.

2.1.2 Income (and rental/other supports)

Alongside the first theme was discussion around how to address the increasing financial pressures being experienced by students. This included discussion around increasing income support to an amount that was liveable, rental or housing support, and reviewing the age of independence.

The maximum daily rate of Youth Allowance was considered insufficient, even with rental assistance, with students living below the poverty line:

The current maximum daily rate of Youth Allowance if you're declared independent and are single with no children is $13,790 per annum, with an additional rate of $3,790.80 per annum for rent assistance if you're eligible, totalling $17,580.80 per annum income. The official Henderson poverty line amount for a single person with housing costs is $31,786.04 per year, meaning that even at the independent rate of payment with rent assistance students receive income less than 60% of the poverty line.

The maximum income support places them below the poverty line. Australia's student income support was last reviewed in 2011. To lift access to tertiary education, the Commonwealth should commit an independent review of student income support that considers a range of factors driven by actual and evolving costs of living in different parts of Australia.

Further, there were views that the income support systems did not adequately capture the students it needed to capture due to ill-fitting eligibility criteria. It was frequently mentioned that the age of independence needed to be lowered to 18 years, and this would enable much-needed financial assistance for many.

The Curtin Student Guild firmly believes that lowering the age of independence to 18 years will open up a much-needed avenue of financial assistance for many, boosting participation from under-represented groups and helping alleviate the cost of participation. As noted in the ECU report on retaining under-represented students; for low SES students, balancing study commitments along with work commitments to stay afloat financially is a significant barrier to entry and a major contributor to university withdrawals.

Eligibility criteria of Youth Allowance means a lot of students in tertiary education are not eligible and those who access it are paid below the poverty line. The age threshold leads to deferral of study (a popular option for RR students and high deferral rates) but then they are unlikely to take up university after earning an income, opportunity cost becomes too high, particularly if they are low SES.

It was acknowledged in some submissions that the basis of income support payments was on a stereotype that did not represent the reality for students – i.e., that students are young, have few financial responsibilities, live cheaply with the support of their parents until they graduate and then enter the workplace. Rather it was noted that financial hardship was a significant hurdle for many students and is often felt most keenly by those cohorts that are under-represented. There were many recommendations to:

Increase parental means threshold and include more generous allowances for those who live out of home: to expand access for low-income families and allow more students to access Centrelink support and reduce the need for them to work long hours which interfere or deter them from study.

Reduce Centrelink deductions and increase the rate of Youth Allowance to above the poverty line.

Increase rental assistance in line with average market rates: The current rental assistance rates for students are not keeping up with the market rates for rent. This is especially needed for regional students and those who need to live away from home.

Tailor Government policy to reduce the need for increased working hours: Students who work more than 20 hours per week are at risk of lower grades and higher drop-out rates.

Ensure placements/ internships are paid either by the employer or a new government welfare program. This is so that students who have to give up work to undertake these programs for their course can still afford to live.

Further discussion around paid placements is provided in Section 2.2.4.

Some noted that the most significant way the government could promote equal access would be to provide assistance with living costs and assistance with tuition costs.

a) assistance with living costs during periods of higher education study, primarily the system of allowances for students within the income support system; and b) assistance to meet tuition costs, primarily the system of government subsidies and student loans used to fund higher education student places.

2.1.3 Debt aversion/concerns around student debt

A subtheme that emerged related to concerns around student debt. This was discussed in terms of how this impacted particular subgroups, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women being frequently mentioned.

Higher education tuition fees were covered by the Commonwealth for all eligible students from the 1970s to 1989 when HECS was introduced at a flat rate of $1,800 per year. Today, many students will graduate from undergraduate degrees with debts of $40,000-$75,000. With female and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students strongly represented in the fields that now have higher student fees, they are affected disproportionately, with flow-on implications for life choices following graduation.

The increased fees and HECS debts that came with the Job Ready Graduates Package (JRG) shift debt and risk, and the concomitant anxiety, away from the Government and towards the individual student.

Comments related to debt-imposed funding models, with the current models being seen as imposing debt on graduates that may have no relation to their final occupations or earnings. Specific mentions were made in relation to the Jobs-ready Graduates Package which was seen as disproportionately impacting students from identified equity groups by imposing higher student debt onto humanities subjects that students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts have been more like to undertake (see Section 2.2.1.1).

There were also cautions around inequitable student debts, such as through study-assisted income contingent student loan schemes, creating further inequities between students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts and other students.

We also recommend careful consideration of income contingent student living loans, which may be an additional avenue for students to access funds for living expenses without incurring immediate costs. These approaches have seen some success in the UK. Such a scheme would impact more significantly students of limited financial means. So, any consideration of this policy would need to be balanced against the considerable risk of increasing the gap between students from low SES backgrounds and students with parental and other means of support. Were such a loan system created, protections against entrenched debt would be required, including considering debt forgiveness in lower paid service professions after a period of employment, and making repayments tax deductible.

It was also seen that debt aversion could deter students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts, from higher education studies.

An aversion to accruing debt, despite income-contingent loans, is also known to act as a deterrent within these cohorts, and financial pressures are much more likely to have a negative impact on university life for Indigenous students than for non-Indigenous students

It was discussed within various submissions that Australian students already pay significant contributions for their undergraduate studies, and there were warnings against charging students more. In addition to the perceived unfairness upon students, it was seen that this could move towards a more hierarchical higher education system.

Shifting further from the universal provision of education supported in part by public contributions, to a more stratified set of economically segregated pathways will not obviously improve outcomes for low SES and disadvantaged student groups. Privatising educational debt in this way risks greater socio-economic stratification, not less. Australia's progressive tax system provides a proven way of recouping public expenditure on education.

2.2 Cluster 2: Students from identified equity groups being disproportionately impacted by policies/funding models

The second cluster of themes related to the students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts being disproportionately impacted by funding policies and models. While some respondents identified strengths in aspects of some funding models (e.g., HEPPP), there were generally suggestions as to how things could be improved.

2.2.1 Jobs-ready Graduates Package

Across many submissions were expressed concerns about different aspects of the Jobs-ready Graduates Package (Department of Education, 2022). The Job-ready Graduates Program was a package of reforms to higher education introduced in 2020. It promised, to improve higher education for students, with better university funding arrangements and improve accountability and information for providers, and more opportunities for regional Australia. The Jobs-ready Graduate Package changed student contributions whereby disciplines deemed to be most important for producing job-ready graduates in industries prioritised for the national economy had student contributions reduced while those deemed less important had contributions increased; for example, STEM and health related student contributions were reduced while humanities fees were increased.

It was clear from the messaging in the submissions to the Australian Universities Accord Panel, with much of the feedback on this topic from universities, that the Jobs-ready Graduate Package was seen as having unintended, negative consequences for students from identified equity groups. The concerns were largely in relation to the negative impacts that were felt by students from under-represented or educationally

disadvantaged cohorts in relation to: subject choices, the 50% pass rule and institutional capacity to support students.

2.2.1.1   Subject choices/Humanities disciplines

Across many submissions it was argued that these changes unfairly discriminated against students enrolled in courses in which fees had increased and did not reflect the comparative costs of teaching. It was seen that the high fees placed on humanities subjects in particular, which are subjects that students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts have been more likely to enrol, were unfairly disadvantaging these students.

It was acknowledged that the changes in student contributions had not changed students' course choices. Instead, they were seen to have imposed greater financial burdens on students who study non-priority disciplines.

> *They disproportionately impacted indigenous students, women, students from low SES backgrounds, those from the regions, students with disabilities, LGBTQI+ students and older students with other commitments to aspire to and succeed at university in subjects of social, economic, cultural and community value and made the study of Indigenous culture and history more expensive than medicine.*

It was seen that this measure would impact students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts by loading them with a higher student debt, which would not be compensated with a high-earning occupation as a result.

> *Is it reasonable for some students, who are doing less costly courses and will likely have lower future incomes than some other students, to have a higher contribution rate than those other students? For example, is it reasonable that future librarians and social workers have a higher contribute rate than future doctors?*

2.2.1.2   50 per cent pass rule

It was also seen that the 50 per cent failure exclusion operated punitively for many students from identified equity groups, and/or those students who are less well prepared for study, and who require additional time and support to transition effectively.

> *Universities are reporting that the students most likely to fall afoul of the 50 per cent pass rule are first year students from low socio-economic status backgrounds. Universities have a wide range of measures in place to support students at risk of failure. The 50 per cent pass rule is, therefore, not only ineffectual, but also at odds with the equity goals shared by government and universities.*

> *The students most likely to fail courses are students with disabilities, those with carer responsibilities and/or work commitments; students who have chronic health issues including mental illness; students who are 'first in family'; migrant students or with CALD backgrounds; Indigenous students; and students from regional areas. This is counterintuitive to the Government's vision of increasing university participation from underrepresented student groups, as these students are more likely to be disproportionately impacted by such funding measures.*

Overall, there were calls to abandon Low Completion Rate measures which withdraw Commonwealth support for students with a fail rate of more than 50 per cent of the units they have attempted after eight or more units have been undertaken. Rather, it was recommended that universities must instead be encouraged to adopt proactive early intervention mechanisms which identify students at risk and counsel them and provided scaffolded equity support.

> *The 50% pass-rate eligibility requirement for CSP places should be removed and replaced by existing robust institutional progression management practices including current students-at-risk processes.*

This rule is impacting low SES students disproportionately across the sector and proving onerous for universities to manage.

It is noted that this subtheme has already been addressed in the Universities Accord Interim Report.

2.2.1.3 Effect on universities' ability to support students from identified equity groups

There was also discussion around how changes in government funding and student contributions impacted upon universities' delivery of courses and capacity to support students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts. The changes in student contributions meant that some universities receive less funding:

The distribution and allocation of the additional places across the sector through the JRG package was too simplistic and did not align with actual demand. The approach used to allocate places in the JRG package has therefore resulted in some universities receiving more places than they can fill while other universities are teaching unfunded students.

Budget cuts were seen to affect capacity of regional universities.

Despite prioritising growing regional/remote attainment, the JRG has not made any provision to increase funding to support this growth rate. Additionally, while the package claimed to provide 39,000 extra places across the sector, the redesign of funding clusters means that universities are not expected to provide additional funding for these places but rather to provide additional student places within the existing funding envelope.

Others saw that the additional regulatory burden placed on universities, particularly universities that have widening access as a key part of their mission, in addition to the reductions in funding could impact upon support for students.

The student protection measures for genuine students and eligibility for CSP places have imposed significant additional regulatory burden on all universities – and disproportionally on universities that have widening participation as a key part of their mission. These measures were imposed along with the reductions in overall funding. These measures add to the stress and uncertainty of applying for and starting university for those students who are currently under-represented in higher education.

2.2.2 HEPPP and other equity-funding models

2.2.2.1 HEPPP

Largely, HEPPP (Department of Education, 2023) was supported in terms of what it set out to achieve, but there were views it could be strengthened through further funding and/or had failed to fulfil its potential due to cuts in funding or other challenges.

HEPPP designed to provide funding to assist universities listed in Table A of the Higher Education Support Act 2003 to undertake activities and implement strategies that improve access to undergraduate courses for people from low socio-economic backgrounds. It never reached the amount recommended in the Bradley Review, which was originally proposed as 4% of the Teaching and Learning Base Funding Grant. HEPPP funding was cut in the 2011–12 Budget and 2016–17 Budget and now sits at approximately 1.8 per cent of CGS (including enabling and regional loadings). These cuts have undermined the vision and targets aspired for in Bradley Review. This is despite increases in equity student participation.

The current formula based HEPPP funding model which ties allocations to the number of enrolled Indigenous, regional, remote and low SES students is disconnected from the actual costs of providing outreach and engagement to prospective students which is dependent on the scale, complexity and geographic dispersal of outreach activity. There is currently little incentive for universities to undertake

outreach with dispersed regional and remote communities when the high cost of doing so comes at the expense of supporting enrolled students.

There was further mention around the perceived insufficiency of resources, to support the administrative load and reporting requirements.

HEPPP is successful in improving student success but limited by inadequate resources towards these programs that are narrow in scope held down by administrative load to manage multiple schemes with different reporting requirements, hindering effectiveness.

Others urged for the continuation of HEPPP with increases in funding as well as expansion to enable partnerships between institutions. This was to enable long-term engagement with cohorts under-represented in higher education and improve outreach work.

Maintain HEPPP or similar program with funding by formula to support participation and success of higher education students from priority groups at a level sufficient to adequately support successful participation, completion and graduate outcomes. Establish a separate dedicated Partnership fund for outreach and engagement with prospective domestic undergraduate students and their communities. Partnership funding should be adequate to enable long-term ongoing engagement cohorts most under-represented in accessing higher education, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people from low SES backgrounds and regional and remote residents who face barriers to higher education participation such as low SES background and/or distance from a university campus. Such funding will need to recognize the additional costs needed for partnership delivery in more isolated regional and remote areas.

It was perceived that HEPPP delivery and administration needs review and improved governance to achieve standardisation and consistency across the sector.

The HEPPP was introduced in 2010 to help grow numbers of domestic undergraduate students from low-SES backgrounds and retain them. Bursaries and scholarships form part of the HEPPP program among other activities. The outputs of the HEPPP are varied. A random survey of equity scholarships funded through the HEPPP highlight major variances in eligibility and value. The way funds are used and distributed is at the discretion of each university with no uniformity across the sector. Students have no access to standardised support and scholarships are tied to institutions. This needs to change if cost of living relief is to genuinely drive-up participation.

Others were less supportive of HEPPP, with a perception that it was not making an impact in widening participation for regional students and other students due to other underlying systemic barriers not addressed through HEPPP.

HEPPP assumed that regional people lacked aspiration for higher education and needed universities to engage with communities to nurture these aspirations, yet research has consistently found that regional people have high aspirations for university study (King et al., 2022; Gore et. al., 2019). HEPPP has made no impact in widening regional student participation due to other systemic barriers restricting access and many regional communities have seen HEPPP outreach by universities used as a recruitment tool (Stone, King, and Ronan, 2022).

2.2.2.2 Disjointed model/need for more integrated model

Some indicated that they saw the programs as disjointed, and pushed for a revised, more 'holistic' model that had equity centralised. It was also seen that this could simplify the funding model which was seen as unnecessarily complex. A revised model could work towards more long-term national outcomes.

The current system is more complex than necessary, with multiple schemes targeted at different student cohorts, apply different rules, and are administered by different parts of government. They have lost effectiveness due to the impact of inconsistent policy treatment over continual policy changes and the lack of evidence-based reviews.

As part of a holistic approach to higher education, funding needs to be simplified. A funding model that minimises reliance on contingent and at-risk funding schemes such as NPILF and HEPPP should be considered. It can also lead to a focus on short-term outcomes rather than longer-term national outcomes, institutional sustainability and impact. (This is not to reject the idea of accountability and performance funding – but appropriate balance should be considered and a distinction observed between funding for core commitments, including equity and industry-engagement, and performance funding.)

Similarly, Universities Australia suggested replacing the current funding model, including equity programs funding, with a new financial infrastructure. They describe a partnership agreement between universities and governments, based on the locations and specific institutional visions of each university, with a flexible funding envelope that includes a minimum basic grant amount for university operational activities based on an appropriate funding measure (such as student load combined with other factors). They recommended it align to a five-year cycle to ensure program implementation, completion and evaluation, alongside other regulatory requirements.

When discussing the need for an integrated system, respondents spoke about the central role of financial pressures experienced by students. They saw it as critical to address the financial barriers for students particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds and support them with targeted programs that sit within a coherent, consistent and long-term framework. They also saw an opportunity to establish a more whole-of-sector initiatives that would attempt to support students more holistically and address underlying barriers to higher education.

The Accord presents an opportunity to develop a whole-of-sector initiative to accelerate and increase equity of access. This extends beyond Higher Education, to access to services essential to learner success, including accommodation, career advice and industry engagement opportunities, and health and wellbeing services.

Others argue for an approach that offered greater flexibility, but within an agreed funding envelope, and if targets were included as part of this agreement, they should be based on institution-specific agreements.

Where national equity targets are set, these should be implemented through institution- specific mission-based agreements rather than through a national formula. Within these agreements, funding from multiple existing programs (eg. HEPPP, IRLSAF, NPILF, short courses and additional places) should be consolidated and increased where required to meet need. Universities should also have greater flexibility within an agreed envelope to allocate places and resourcing to meet demonstrated need – for example, greater flexibility with the use of Commonwealth-supported places for enabling programs.

There were frequent mentions of the role of University missions, particularly how these vary between regional and metropolitan universities and how funding could be based upon or guided by these distinct missions.

Each university has a distinct mission, but one-size fits all funding arrangements do not always support these missions. For example, universities whose mission is to serve rural and regional areas have more expensive cost structure than large metropolitan universities. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds require extra support for success, and these students are not evenly distributed across universities, and their support could be funded via this mechanism, where accountability for outcomes could be incorporated.

A focus on equity highlights the existing diversity across the Australian higher education system, with different institutions making different contributions – for example, fifteen universities educate almost 60% of all students from low-SES backgrounds and eleven universities educate almost 60% of students from regional and rural backgrounds. It also highlights the inter-connectedness of the system, with what one institution does having implications for others.

Encouraging and recognising diversity of mission is fundamental to the long-term success of the higher education sector in Australia. A homogeneous university sector policy approach poses significant challenges: discourages participation by non-traditional students, perpetuating inequitable access and outcomes for disadvantaged student groups as it does not provide adequate support and recognition of difference.

It was noted that, with what were seen as disjointed models, students with disability were not being adequately supported.

Significantly increase the Disability Support Fund which at $7,841,730 (net of ADCET allocation) represents a per head amount of $93.70 per student with disability across the sector (2019 data).

Despite huge increases in enrolments the funding available via the Disability Support Fund has not increased to reflect the change. This national fund remains under $8 million in 2022 which is allocated across all institutions (compared to over $140 Million of HEPP funding, which cannot be allocated to students with Disability as an equity group). Therefore, institutions may not adequately support students with Disability once a student is enrolled.

2.2.2.3   Equity student bursaries

Some suggested providing national scholarships for students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts. This was seen as supporting students from identified equity groups by alleviating the financial pressures that were discussed in Section 2.1, and also offering a standardised initiative across the sector, rather than variable amounts and offerings across institutions.

A wholesale shift in approach is necessary and we believe the best way to achieve this is through a nationalised bursary scheme.

By standardising financial support measures that are universal, available at any institution, in any state and means tested to target those most likely to miss out on a tertiary education the government will capture a cohort that is currently slipping through the cracks.

2.2.3   Attainment Targets

Attainment targets were mentioned within some reviewed submissions, with varying views and without much discussion about what they should be if there was support for them.

2.2.3.1   Bradley Review, and underlying barriers

As part of the discussion on attainment targets, there were repeated references across submissions to the Bradley Review. Generally, it was seen that while overall, higher education participation targets had exceeded the set targets, the rates were not equitable. It was expressed that rates of participation amongst students from identified equity groups remained low. It was seen that selected initiatives, particularly the Jobs-ready Graduates Package, would actually exacerbate these inequities.

HE participation has exceeded Bradley target of 40% but overall participation rates are not equitable with equity groups participating at lower rates than non-equity and metro students. If they continue, the JRG student protection measures will militate against significant efforts to increase participation of Indigenous, equity group, first-in-family students and these students will continue to be under-represented.

As indicated above, when discussing attainment targets, there was some reference to them needing to be based on institutional-specific mission statements, rather than using a national funding formula. However, generally, there was minimal discussion as to what attainment targets should look like. Rather, it was expressed that as a nation, we should strive to have higher attainment rates for students from identified equity groups than what we do currently (with adequate measurement and monitoring in place).

% low SES targets not met, Accords process must address this with new targets. After new targets, selecting and monitoring indicators are needed to measure SES disadvantage.

Our nation's attainment rate of 41.5 per cent for people aged 24-35 – above the Bradley Review target, above the OECD average, and 11th in the world, nestled between Norway and Switzerland – should be a point of pride. However, inner regional Australia's attainment rate (26.9 per cent) ranks closer to Mexico. For a third of our population, attainment rates are akin to those of the developing world, and this is cause for significant concern.

Of those that articulated an approach or strategy, it was recognised that setting any targets needed to be implemented in conjunction with other strategies and supporting approaches with sufficient resources and planning to address underlying barriers.

With attainment targets, there needs to be a simultaneous focus on considering the local institutional and community factors such demographics, socio-economic and historical factors that have previously contributed to poor outcomes, and removing these barriers.

Some were clearly against the setting of attainment targets for students, again emphasising the priority to address the underlying barriers that impact upon access and participation.

There should be no long-term target for attainment. An entitlement for a place in tertiary education should be in place for all Australians. This aspiration is included in a recent Higher Education Standards Panel Discussion Paper. Not everyone will take up this entitlement, and under current labour market conditions many institutions are operating below their theoretical maximum basic grant amount. People are choosing work over study. The Accord could monitor should demand and supply for skills and capabilities, and moving to underwrite particular activities where appropriate.

2.2.3.2 Indigenous students

Generally, respondents did not articulate what attainment targets should be, although there was an exception when discussing Indigenous students where there were calls for 'parity' to be achieved. However, this was also noted as problematic based on current benchmarks.

Targets for Indigenous outcomes in higher education commonly use population parity as the benchmark. Those figures, derived from the national census, are generally two to three years out of date, based on the census collection and publication cycle. This means that annual parity targets will be lower than the actual Indigenous population.

2.2.4 Work-integrated learning/placements

Completing work-integrated learning or placements, in which students apply the theoretical knowledge gained from coursework, is a compulsory component for many disciplines, providing students with on-the-job practical experience in their chosen field. Some disciplines require students complete more than one placement during their programs and some disciplines require that at least one placement must be in a remote or regional location. The submissions that addressed work-integrated learning regard it as a valuable part of any program.

There is evidence that work-integrated learning equips students with skills and competencies that are in demand by employers.

Placements are an important opportunity for students to be exposed to rural and regional life and build skills and knowledge that are critical for success later in professional life.

However, work-integrated learning was seen as imposing financial and time burdens on students who are in paid employment and/or have caring responsibilities. Students may have to take time off work, arrange for paid childcare and pay for transport and accommodation.

Undertaking extended periods of mandatory work-based work-integrated learning that is unpaid is forcing students into poverty and increasing attrition.

The ability of students to participate in higher education – and in related programs such as internships, work-integrated-learning and compulsory work placements (for qualifications such as nursing and teaching) depends on a range of factors, including time, income, accommodation and caring responsibilities.

The financial burdens of work-integrated learning and placements can be a barrier to individuals. The opportunities for low-SES students to undertake workplace-based work-integrated learning in their discipline area may be severely constrained by their need to undertake paid work.

One of the major hurdles to student completions in critical areas such as nursing, allied health and teaching is the successful completion of student placements. Too often this represents a key attrition trigger for students, particularly low SES students, who need to pause or give up paid work and sometimes relocate in order to complete the required hours.

Submissions conjectured about how best to fund placements so that students could complete them without financial distress. Potential solutions sourced funding from government programs.

Governments, as employers, should have a direct interest in placements of teachers and nurses in the public system. We also incur a sunk cost for any placements not taken up for whatever reason, as we are forced to pay upfront; and what we pay for nursing placements is not what goes into the system for nurse training as some of it is directed to doctor training and other costs. Ten per cent of our budget for health training is going towards placements that could otherwise be directed to student support if placements were more equitably funded.

An urgent revision to the current student funding model is needed to support placement activity, prioritising the completion of placements ahead of other nice-to-have options, for example study abroad (supported by OS-HELP).

A new funding model for students undertaking placement should be introduced as a matter of urgency, for all placements required to complete an undergraduate or qualifying postgraduate course.

Others saw an opportunity for government to work with industry to revise the model.

Organisations renumerate students for completing projects/activities with 'matched' funding for SMEs and not-for-profits (e.g. 50% of student salary paid by organisation and 50% by government).

Students being paid for their time would increase accountability among industry partners and students. This could be achieved through wage subsidies for organisations funding work-based work-integrated learning relevant Departments supporting funded places for students undertaken mandatory work-based work-integrated learning (e.g. Health, Education), subsidy payments and stipends or grants paid directly to students.

2.2.5   Demand-driven funding

Demand-driven funding models and uncapped places were discussed as needing reconsideration as it was seen as both supporting students from identified equity groups and ensuring adequate resourcing distributions.

Demand-driven funding must be reconsidered to ensure adequate resource distribution between fields of education, and between regional and metropolitan universities.

Demand driven system pushed up low SES enrolments relative to others and low SES dropped more when it ended. Low SES enrolment continues to drop in the years after it ended

We echo calls for a resumption of demand-driven funding which had the effect of improving participation of students in regional areas. If we take into account the financial impost of supporting

non-traditional students to succeed (such as additional allowances not only for First Nations pathways education but also for regional, rural and remote and first in family students, and those with disability and from low SES backgrounds), then it stands to reason that a differential funding model related to institutional missions and place is required to optimise the success rates of those students. Such a funding model should include differential thresholds for both student fees and repayments that not only reduces disadvantage but, further, incentivises students from those equity cohorts.

Others discussed the importance of demand-driven funding for regional universities more specifically:

CQUniversity is of the firm view that Commonwealth funding to grow places to support equity enrolments should fall under a demand-driven places policy and, given the nature of regional universities' student profile, this demand-driven policy should be restricted to regionally headquartered universities to ensure it does not unintentionally create a policy setting whereby metropolitan universities are incentivised to draw students out of the regions to study in the major centres, thereby exacerbating the regional skills shortage currently inhibiting our national prosperity.

2.2.5.1   Indigenous students

Demand-driven funding was referenced particularly in relation to Indigenous students, with calls to widen the provision for all Indigenous students.

The JRG included demand-driven places for regional and remote Indigenous students, a move that was welcomed across the sector. There is, however, a strong case to be made that this provision be extended to all Indigenous students, given the data indicates lower participation rates for Indigenous students, regardless of where they live.

In 2020, the government set a Closing the Gap target to increase the proportion of Indigenous people aged 25-34 years who have completed a tertiary qualification (Certificate III and above) to 70 per cent by 2031. Subsequently, the government uncapped places for Indigenous students living in regional and remote areas (omitting those living in major cities) with the expectation that more than 1,700 Indigenous students would attend university by 2024. The Australian Government should provide uncapped Commonwealth Supported Places for all Indigenous Australians regardless of where they live.

The JRG also included demand-driven places for regional and remote Indigenous students, a move that was welcomed across the sector. There is, however, a strong case to be made that this provision be extended to all Indigenous students, given the data indicates lower participation rates for Indigenous students, regardless of where they live.

University of Melbourne recommends demand-driven funding for all Indigenous students (as opposed to the JRG limits imposed which limited it to Indigenous students in RRR areas and not metro areas)

It is noted that this subtheme has already been addressed in the Universities Accord Interim Report.

2.3   Cluster 3: Educational systems – access and participation in higher education

Finally, our third cluster is summarised around the educational system, including access and participation in higher education. As illustrated throughout some comments above, there were references to the need to address underlying systemic drivers of disadvantage. Some of the subthemes in this section pick up on this in more detail.

2.3.1 Pathways into higher education

Discussion around pathways into higher education emerged as a strong theme. The two main subthemes that emerged were that attention should be paid much earlier in the student life course and attention needs to be paid to things such as addressing unequal schooling systems (with again paying attention to underlying barriers that manifest early in the student life course). There was also a focus on needing to pay attention to pathways into higher education, such as enabling or alternative pathways as these were seen as supporting students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts.

2.3.1.1 Schooling

Although the Australian Universities Accord is focussed on developing a better coordinated and more efficient higher education system, some submissions argued that unless inequities in school education are resolved, the higher education system cannot provide equal access to all Australian students. Access to and equity in primary and secondary education are essential in helping students prepare for university success.

> *Over the last decade or so, universities have introduced a range of mechanisms to widen participation from under-represented groups. These include alternative admissions pathways and selection criteria adjustment factors and outreach activities. However these mechanisms can never fully compensate for the underlying issue of educational disadvantage in the schooling system. Achieving equitable expectations and academic achievement at the secondary school level is a necessary precursor to achieving equitable access and success in higher education. UQ recommends that policies and strategies aimed at widening participation in higher education be broadened to focus on preuniversity disadvantage with clear goals to improve achievement at the senior secondary level.*

> *Data shows that NT school students have the lowest or near-lowest levels of literacy and numeracy in Australia, compounded by remoteness. CDU supports the NT's Government's approach to review and improve school education through a two-step process: first at Primary School, and then Secondary School. These reviews will be critical to any considerations for future bilateral agreements with the Commonwealth in the National School Reform Agreement from 2025. If the Accord is to make a difference to the lives of First Nations peoples in the NT, there must be an improvement in school education outcomes. This is a critical challenge that is multifaceted and complex. For example, First Nations peoples are the most disadvantaged group in Australia, and this stems from historical marginalisation and racism toward them. Unfortunately, the result is multi-generational where low levels of literacy and numeracy are prevalent, as are high unemployment, incarceration rates, and low transition rates into tertiary education study.*

Similarly, arguments within the submissions to the Universities Accord Panel recognised the impacts these underlying barriers had upon students in the preparation for post-secondary education, which manifested in the secondary schooling period in particular. They referenced insufficient academic preparation, as well as a lack of career guidance and information on pathways.

> *The high school system is failing to provide a learning environment that supports Indigenous students to academically thrive. The Productivity Commission found in its review of the demand driven system that proficiency in literacy and numeracy at age 15 years is the strongest predictor of whether an individual will attend university.*

It was seen that some students lacked access to information on post-secondary pathways, and that post-school education and careers guidance were more constrained at low SES and regional and remote area schools, with teachers having less time to invest in advising students. Others further elaborated on students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts being steered away from ATAR tracks and university pathways.

Some low SES and underperforming students are steered away from ATAR subjects and towards a vocational track, even if they express an interest in university

Low SES students are less likely to access information about careers and university courses, and more likely to access information about apprenticeships and TAFE courses

There is a lack of role models amongst family, friends and community of people who have been to university in regional/remote locations.

For Indigenous regional and remote, low-SES and CALD students, there is much less opportunity at High School to study ATAR and other courses that typically lead to university entry.

It was seen that, overall, to address the lower access and participation rates amongst students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts, Australia needs broader systemic initiatives starting much earlier in the student life course, and which involved collaboration across the different education sectors.

More investment at the school level; improved social welfare for parents and young people; targeted education support in geographic areas with very poor school outcomes; methods for allocating places at university that are not skewed by social class (remove and replace ATAR).

Strengthening collaboration between universities, secondary schools, VE providers and adult education will be integral to supporting disadvantaged students and building aspiration; through pathways, joined-up communication with prospective students and families, innovative delivery and support mechanisms.

2.3.1.2   Enabling programs and alternative pathways to university

Building upon the earlier discussion across submissions to the Australian Universities Accord Panel as to how inequities in student outcomes begin much earlier in the student life course, were recommendations for alternative pathways and enabling programs, to help redress some of these earlier gaps.

Preparation for University commences with early childhood education through to the whole range of pathways and enabling programs. It is not sufficient just to concentrate on student success at the University level. Successful learning pathways are diverse and non-linear. Learning entitlements that span across VET, higher education and short courses would allow learners to make better choices at any point in their learning journey.

It was acknowledged that the traditional pathway to university (do well at secondary school, sit the HSC or relevant assessment, get a good ATAR, do a degree at the university of your choice funded by HECS) does not favour people from diverse backgrounds. Supporting alternative entry pathways into higher education was considered a key lever to further raise participation rates, particularly among the growing mature age student cohort and equity groups.

There is a need to continue to invest in pathways for student cohorts who do not hold entry level qualifications into higher education as an increasing proportion of students are accessing university via non-ATAR pathways.

The continued provision of alternative pathways to higher education for under-represented groups - including bridging courses, foundation programs, or vocational education and training (VET) pathways provide opportunities for students who may not have followed the traditional academic route to enter higher education.

The number of available pathways to university, and short courses has grown considerably in recent years, and there are opportunities to evolve the enabling program again through the Accord, particularly given the cost of living pressures.

Future students should not have to factor in the impact of intersectional disadvantage when choosing to apply. This means that access to education must be equitable, with students knowing they will be supported to apply through various pathways to entry, as well as supported economically while they undertake their degrees.

A few submissions discussed how best to inform students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts about alternative university entrance pathways and identified a lack of outreach programs for the non-school leaver cohort.

To achieve significant growth in participation of equity group students, the sector needs to reach out more effectively to non-school leavers to enable aspirations for further education and training post a Certificate III qualification.

VTAC operates the Special Entry Access Scheme (SEAS). While take-up of SEAS within the current year 12 cohort is high, non-year 12 (mature age) applicants are much less likely to apply for special consideration, with this cohort comprising just 12% of all SEAS applications. The non-year 12 cohort is generally navigating the application process outside the school support environment, and generally less exposed to information about the application process.

Other submissions identified the need for different pathways for different groups.

There is a place in medical training for attracting remote and regional & Indigenous students through alternative pathways.

Indigenous aspiration building requires a far deeper level of engagement not only with the individual student but with the family and community more broadly. This may include a more collaborative approach with VET that maps out a tailored pathway.

Policies and strategies aimed at widening participation in higher education need to be broadened to focus on preuniversity disadvantage with clear goals to improve achievement at the senior secondary level. Initiatives to widen university participation: alternative admissions pathways and selection criteria; adjustment factors (ATAR of a student facing disadvantage not reflective of true academic potential), and outreach activities (HEPPP funded initiatives).

Enabling programs were perceived to provide students entering higher education via alternative pathways (other than the ATAR) with academic knowledge in selected subjects and skills in how to study effectively, including how to write in an academic setting, research, use university systems and applying these skills to learning in preparation for commencing an undergraduate course. There was often support for these in the submissions to the Australian Universities Accord .

Enabling programs have been demonstrated to improve student participation, retention and success, providing a crucial platform for becoming meaningfully prepared for higher education study.

A streamlined system would recognise the critical role of enabling pathways in the Australian education landscape by enshrining enabling pathways in legislation. As many equity students enter University through non-traditional pathways, it is important that we ensure that the critical role of enabling pathways is formally recognised through legislation and resourced appropriately.

While often supported, these were also seen as institution-specific, with calls for a national-recognised enabling program or standards to create consistency.

Because TEP (Tertiary Enabling Program) and enabling programs sit outside the AQF, they are not well understood and can vary greatly from one institution to another, making recognition of enabling studies difficult across institutions.

Enabling courses are institution-specific. There is a need to develop a nationally recognised Enabling course - University Certificate in Higher education - so that those students can gain access to courses from all universities & higher education providers.

However, there is an argument for discipline-specific enabling programs.

CDU has had a greater level of success for First Nations students implementing its four-week intensive pre-programs that are closely aligned with specific disciplines; for example the health pre-program builds students' foundational skills in a way that is connected to health content. Students are therefore building foundational skills that are relevant to the discipline they wish to study, whilst also stimulating interest in their chosen field.

Some recognised that enabling programs came at high tuition cost for students, who are largely debt averse. Some commented that the universities with free enabling programs outperform others. General recommendations around enabling programs include:

- Increase funding for enabling places.

- Remove the attrition point arising from student uncertainty about whether they will be offered a degree place after completing an enabling program.

- Develop national standards for enabling programs to enable greater portability and recognition of enabling program completion, assisting students to remain engaged with higher education as their circumstances and locations change.

- Remove enabling programs and/or programs less than 8 courses in duration from the 50% fail clause of the JRG package.

2.3.2   Dual vs single system (VET and Higher Education)

Multiple submissions urged federal and state education departments to work towards creating a streamlined higher education sector, from school to VET and university in which students can access tertiary education via different pathways, move between the VET and university systems and have access to the same funding arrangements across all higher education sectors. A new cohesive system would particularly benefit students from identified equity groups who may not be eligible for university enrolment under the current ATAR admission scheme and may require additional enabling programs to ensure they meet academic criteria.

Currently there are two distinct sectors – higher education and VET that sit side by side. Existing policy, funding and governance architecture cement differences between the two sectors instead of creating the single system that would help Australia meet its many challenges. There are too many regulatory barriers and disincentives to combining vocational and higher education.

Streamlining must be accompanied by a commitment to true regulatory and funding reform. Bringing all tertiary education under Federal control will enable inter-operability between the VET and University systems.

In addition, there was specific mention of the benefits of having a single regulatory body and overarching policy across both systems.

Future regulation could see the amalgamation of ASQA and TESQA so that there is one regulator. A national network of partnerships between schools, vocational and higher education providers would be able to level up educational opportunity for all students.

Under the current system, unhelpful policy, regulatory, and reputational distinction between VET and higher education, means VET becomes the "poor cousin" despite it being – for many students – the most appropriate starting point or study pathway.

The Accord should consider the establishment of a National Higher Education Commission or the Australian Tertiary Education Accord Commission to provide a whole of government approach to higher education to support reform, boost access and reduce red tape. It would be a key tool for

developing and delivering agreed reform of Australia's tertiary education system over the next 20 years.

As part of an interlinked system and to promote lifelong learning, other submissions included discussion about increasing ease of access and fostering connection between educators and employers, introducing a nationally recognised credential/skills 'Passport' supported by a National Framework aligned to critical skills, which would enable a learner to effectively balance the necessity of continued employment with continual education.

The Passport could act as a system for tracking progress, pathways and credit and be supported by a skills/employment taxonomy. It could increase accessibility and effectively break down silos between Universities and Vocational Education and Training (VET) providers to create a more interlinked and complementary education sector. The pipeline of students would be two-way between universities and VET.

Different funding schemes delivering different amounts of funding and difficulties negotiating the VET funding process presents barriers for streamlining the higher education sector. With a higher proportion of students from identified equity groups choosing VET courses rather than university courses, complex funding schemes delivering less funding means that some students may not proceed with enrolments.

The structure of current funding for VET Student Loans, has the unintended consequence of dissuading students from undertaking VET-level studies, even if this is the most appropriate course for them. VET Student Loans apply to a limited range of courses, are cumbersome and demanding for providers to maintain, and have so many restrictions that they become practically unattractive as an option for students and providers.

The absence of upfront financial barriers for domestic bachelor's students — but not for all domestic VET students— may have resulted in students choosing a university degree, even if they are more suited for VET, because they are unable to meet the upfront VET fees.

A number of submissions focussed on how the VET and university systems could be integrated. The tertiary system was described as hierarchical rather than one in which both the higher education and VET sectors are equally valued despite their different purposes.

The tertiary higher education and vocational training systems should be redesigned to form an integrated training and higher education sector oriented to lifelong learning, incorporating flexible pathways between vocational training and higher education in both directions and at various qualification levels – including research training. This new integrated sector would be supported by a redesigned upper-secondary education and appropriately supported academic and vocational pathways.

It would allow a vocational minor (e.g. Cert III in welding) to be undertaken concurrently or sequentially for credit with a higher education qualification (e.g. engineering degree).

It would redistribute resources between and across programs, break down internal barriers within degree structures, and encourage cross-sector and cross-disciplinary innovation and collaboration.

The perceived benefits of a streamlined higher education system include enabling students to combine VET and university courses and move between them. Currently, the two systems are managed independently with little opportunity for students to integrate elements from both.

A key recommendation of the AQF Review relevant to this area was for VET and higher education to have clear and flexible entry and exit points, as well as pathways within and between, to allow students to mix and match the subjects they study to meet their education requirements

This sector should incorporate flexible pathways between vocational training and higher education in both directions and at various qualification levels – including research training. This new integrated sector would be supported by a redesigned upper-secondary education and appropriately supported

academic and vocational pathways. Within this re-imagined sector, the Go8 recommends that we set a target of 75 per cent for the proportion of the Australian resident population aged 25–39 years who have attained or who are attaining a post-Year 12 or equivalent qualification by 2040.

It would seem sensible to allow students to transfer between TAFE and university, although university courses are often not based on skills, but rather research-informed education, so this would have to be carefully managed. For example, a first year TAFE programming course would not generally prepare a student for a second year university subject on the theory of databases. In NSW we have recently taken a step which will allow all HSC courses (vocational and academic) to count towards the ATAR, so the gate is open to use the ATAR for entry into TAFE.

It was seen that breaking down barriers between vocational education and higher education and promoting collaboration could improve education opportunities for students, especially those from identified equity groups.

2.3.3   Regional universities

Regional universities provide educational opportunities for regional students who cannot or do not wish to relocate to metropolitan universities for economic, family or social reasons. A major argument throughout the regional universities' submissions, is the importance of keeping regional students studying in regional universities. They cite research showing that regional graduates from regional universities are more likely to stay in the region after graduation. In contrast, regional students who relocate to metropolitan universities are less likely to return to the regions after graduation. This argument contrasts a call by UWA that regional and remote students should be encouraged to study at Group of Eight universities.

The sector can do more to ensure that rural students can stay and study locally. It is no surprise that research indicates that students who study at universities located in urban areas are less willing to undertake rural placements than their regional-university based counterparts.

JCU graduates fill the professional ranks across northern Queensland with 76% of recent graduates working in outer regional and remote locations, and 86% of students who were from remote locations staying to work in in outer regional and remote areas. Conversely, regional students who move south are more likely to establish careers in metro areas than return to where they come from.

A future thriving regional Australia must provide local higher education study options rather than incentivising people to leave

Regional universities are very well placed to offer students opportunities for higher education in their local communities. This enhances the support available from family and friends which is important for student well-being and success. Graduates of regional universities are also more likely to remain in region and contribute to the economic development of regional areas which in turn improves the opportunities available for people who live in regional Australia.

The key issue is that Northern, Outback and Central Queensland has very low population densities, and retention of students in the regions is a key priority. When domestic student load is fully contestable through competition, as it is now, experience shows that metro universities seek additional load from the regions either by drawing the youngest, most capable, and most mobile candidates to the city or through online offerings. This has negative economic impacts on regional areas with, for example, low success/completion rates from fully online offerings adding to regional private debt, often amongst those least able to sustain this debt. The loss of outstanding young talent to metro universities is detrimental to the growth and sustainability of a region and regional universities face diminishing capability in key disciplinary areas as a result.

Regional institutions are the lifeblood of their local communities. Without them, some communities will die.

Regional universities contend that their student cohorts comprise a larger proportion of students from identified equity groups, than metropolitan universities. They have greater numbers and proportions of part-time, mature age, low SES background, first-in-family, First Nations, and students with disability, with many belonging to multiple equity cohorts. These students often have carer and/or career responsibilities that impact their studies. In too many cases they have come from under-resourced schools lacking qualified teachers in maths and sciences.

> *In spite of only enrolling 12.10% of Australia's domestic students, regional universities enrol 23.30% of indigenous enrolments, 20% of Low SES, 28.10% of regional and remote and 13.5% of disability enrolments.*

Regional universities draw students from larger catchments than metropolitan universities and hold important positions in their communities. This underpinned comments around the perceived need to support and invest in regional learner systems or centres.

> *The Bradley Review contemplated a consolidation of regional and outer metropolitan campuses that was not supported or adopted by successive governments. CDU suggests this is because universities have strong connections to their place and their value in supporting regional economic growth is widely evidenced. Specifically, it does not make sense to further disadvantage regional communities by withdrawing educational opportunities for students; diminishing the economic and workforce opportunities offered by place-based universities, or marginalising research capacity and capability built to address the needs of regional stakeholders.*

JCU discussed the importance of place-based Regional learning systems and the ways in which government could support them to increase attainment levels.

> *A restructure of the education system based on a Regional Learning System and place-based approach, identifying geographical regions that can, or do, operate as a system. Northern Queensland can be understood as a Regional Learning System. Within that system are anchor educational providers who are headquartered there (schools, TAFE NQ & FNQ, JCU, RTOs) providing opportunities across a lifetime learning trajectory. It is absolutely needed if we are to meet the previously established target of 70% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples aged 25-34 years having completed a tertiary qualification (Certificate III and above) by 2031 from the earlier National Agreement on Closing the Gap*

> *JCU suggests that Regional Learning Systems enable place-based ways for Government to support coordination between educational providers, industry, governments and community to meet the educational attainment needs of local populations in highly accountable ways. (Noting that such an approach also supports place-based coordination to other ends, for example research priorities.)*

The regional university submissions argued that current funding arrangements are creating budget shortfalls for regional universities in supporting students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts.

> *The era of uncapped, demand-driven undergraduate places was a mixed blessing. It enabled some universities not under the same obligations as regional ones to recruit from wider catchments. For reasons both of student equity and Australia's economic development, the UCC argues that this is the moment to ensure the sustainability of Australia's regional universities through extra funding on a predictable and stable basis.*

> *Securing funding which is not available to their metropolitan universities continues to be a critical for regional universities, and that this funding goes to the regions, not just to students from the regions.*

> *Current programs designed to increase equity enrolments are failing many remote and regional students, including Indigenous students. While these programs meant to increase remote & regional students, much of the funding ends up with metropolitan universities. This either discourages remote and regional students from enrolling or attracts them away from the regions, sometimes permanently.*

Moreover, funding for equity places is not done per capita and is capped, leaving regional universities to draw on their other funding sources or not offer the courses and outcomes desired.

Funding purely on the basis of Equivalent Full-time Student Load (EFTSL) effectively incentivises large universities to simply become larger, fails to recognise the additional per student cost of service and delivery in non-metropolitan areas and fundamental differences in the cohort characteristics.

A base funding level that recognises this disparity between metropolitan and regional Australia in the form of a Universal Higher Education Service Guarantee (UHESG) would acknowledge the different cost structures regional universities face. This could be reviewed every five years to assess its efficacy in improving outcomes.

Regional University Study Hubs (formerly Regional University Centres – referred to as RUCs and CUCs) are facilities regional students can use to study tertiary courses locally delivered by distance from any Australian institution. They enable students in rural, regional and remote Australia to access and complete higher education without having to leave their community. They provide infrastructure including: study spaces; (break out areas, video conferencing, computer facilities, high-speed internet access); administrative and academic support services (e.g., developing writing and research skills, managing administrative processes); and student support services (e.g., study advice; help accessing student services). Most submissions referring to students in regional and remote areas regard them as critical for enabling remote students to complete university and VET courses.

This community-led approach to widening participation was initially community driven and funded, but due to its success has been scaled through the Commonwealth Government's Regional Partnership Project Pool Program (RPPPP) and will now reach 99 schools across 21 communities. It is a sustainable and cost-effective model.

The CUC has developed community-led outreach and widening participation activities in partnership with 19 universities and 15 Regional University Centres (RUCs). This is in response to failings of existing university HEPPP outreach and widening participation programs.

Rather than universities travelling out to regional areas, the CUC develops local programs that are delivered by CUC staff while partnering with consortia of universities.

CUCs and RUCs are providing face-to- face academic support for equity students, and widening participation activities yet are not eligible for access to HEPPP funds.

2.3.4   University systems and culture

Systems and structures around universities were seen as needing to be more inclusive for students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts. There was emphasis placed on the role that universities had in changing these.

It places the onus on universities to view equity beyond enrolments, towards the success of the students and excellence of their support systems and practices. The mistakes of demand must not be repeated, where too many students ill-prepared for university were enrolled to fill courses, fees charged, debt leveraged and no support given resulting in increases drop-out, churn and debt.

Genuine transformation of universities is needed to deliver high quality educational opportunity by shifting entrenched cultures and structures that continue to stratify Australian higher education and exclude those from underrepresented communities. This will require securing, stabilising, and growing public equity funding and expertise to identify and challenge the multiple dimensions of inequality historical underrepresentation. Funding the development of equity expertise will help to challenge deficit models and imaginaries which are deeply embedded and directly disrupt sector goals. It is funding equity expertise that makes change possible, including developing research-informed, community based and relationship-driven avenues of new educational opportunities to counter decades of institutionally entrenched inequities.

It also involves promoting diversity and inclusion in campus culture, curriculum, and policies, and addressing any barriers or biases that may hinder access and participation for under-represented groups.

Need a wide range of education and training options that are more interconnected and flexible to cater for a broader range of learners and adaptable to their needs, e.g. greater use of recognition of prior learning, nested qualifications, quality online, blended and face-to face learning options and more integrated delivery and support for students through traditional campus models and through decentralised community provision (such as the Regional University Centre model).

Many saw that to successfully achieve equity across the sector, a level of national governance and coordination was needed.

Through the Higher Education Standards, all universities should be required to have plans for improving equity (which would include access, progression, completion and outcomes).

The National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) should lead work across the system, in partnership with universities, to improve data and evidence on equity and to share best practice from the evaluation of student support programs.

In terms of changing institutional processes to be more inclusive, there were frequent references to being more inclusive of Indigenous knowledge and perspectives.

Prioritise funding for university programs that value Indigenous knowledge systems in universities, support and elevate Indigenous research and Indigenous academics, and promote Indigenous agency and autonomy….Indigenous knowledge and value systems is an area where Australian universities can grow their understanding and better reflect the history and nature of our country. However, it is critical that universities work carefully with Indigenous knowledge holders to do this appropriately. Knowing what knowledges can be shared and by whom is essential to protecting Indigenous knowledges and customary practices.

In addition, there was specific mention of the role of Indigenous leadership and governance.

The Discussion Paper largely situates Indigenous Australians in terms of deficits that need to be remedied, pigeon-holed in the equity and diversity sections of the paper. There are multiple generalised references to Indigenous students alongside other marginalised groups. The Accord Discussion Paper also encourages respondents to consider system-wide approaches to increasing access and equity in the teaching and learning space and the cultural-safety initiatives highlighted here were useful, emphasising the value of First Nations learning centres "to create and extend culturally safe learning opportunities and environments". However, this reliance on the First Nations learning centres, who have arguably been doing the heavy lifting in Indigenous Higher Education for almost three decades, is hardly aspirational. We believe it is time to move from these inclusion approaches to self-determination, and educational sovereignty through Indigenous leadership and governance.

Universities are working to build their respective pipelines of Indigenous academics. In 2021, only 1.11 per cent of total staff employed in teaching or research roles in Australian universities were Indigenous. To at least reach population parity of 3.1 per cent, an additional 1,071 Indigenous academic staff are needed.

To boost Indigenous employment numbers, universities need to build and support a pipeline of high performing Indigenous undergraduate, postgraduate and HDR students who can be encouraged to pursue academic careers.

Universities have mechanisms in place, but support is needed from governments to ensure these mechanisms are appropriately and sustainably funded to meet government and university targets in

this area. Funding through the Indigenous Student Success Program alone is not sufficient to support Indigenous research and researchers.

There were also a number of recommendations to cater more inclusively to learners with disability, such as having dedicated infrastructure and in-class assistance for full participation, as well as adequate funding and monitoring.

Develop an appropriate evaluation and performance framework for tracking the access, participation, retention and success of people with disability in and between education sectors in order to better understand and support their success in education.

Provide centrally coordinated funding to address disability inclusion across key elements of digital, physical, cultural and learning inclusion including building workforce capacity to support people with disability across the student lifecycle.

Review higher education policy settings to review cost implications of study through a disability inclusive lens including addressing study costs, barriers to participation and retention.

Discussion within submissions also included the role of universities in supporting transitions into employment, in which learners with disability are particularly under-represented.

Review and increase funding to support initiatives specifically aimed at the transition of students from the schooling to tertiary education sector to increase the awareness of post-secondary school options for people with disability.

Build capacity within the sector and engage relevant stakeholders to improve graduate employment outcomes for students with disability.

2.3.5   Student experience and wellbeing

Finally, there was discussion around providing ongoing support for all students in terms of wellbeing. This was discussed in relation to all students, but particularly students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts.

Recommendations included attention to physical health such as via engagement in sports and clubs, as well as support for emotional wellbeing.

Support should not stop at the level of access schemes, as students should also be able to receive different forms of social and psychological support during their time in university.

Consistent with observations made about the lack of meaningful consequences for equity performance, the Higher Education Standards Panel and Productivity Commission have recommended that every university had a mental health strategy. About half of Australian universities have publicly available mental health strategy, less than half have a publicly accessible and current mental health strategy. The Accord might consider what might be required to ensure physical and cultural safety when the sector has been so resistant to respond to advice from the Standards Panel. A pathway to fee flexibility combined with meaningful quality, experience and equity performance thresholds provides a more realistic catalyst for inclusion than un-enforced policy expectations.

3.   Mapping to Review Questions

After conceptualising the themes, we then mapped the themes and subthemes onto the review questions with which we were tasked for this project. It is arguable that some of these themes relate to more than one question and sometimes they have been mapped to two research questions. See Table 2 for an overview. This initial mapping was the first step in synthesising key findings from this project as part of Work Package 3.

Table 2. Summary of mapping of key themes/subthemes to project review questions.

How should gaps, barriers, and inequalities specific to identified under-represented cohorts, be addressed?	Are there gaps, inequalities or unintended consequences at a structural or system level?	How could larger Higher Education funding levers be leveraged?	In what ways could adoption of equity targets be linked to broader Higher Education policy levers?	What are the system drivers leading to below parity outcomes for under-represented and educationally disadvantaged groups across the student lifecycle?
• Cost of Living to be addressed • Consideration to debt aversion /debt concerns. • Attention to income and other supports (eg, rental), including age of independence. • Pathways into Higher Education: Take a student life course approach. • National equity student bursaries. • Demand Driven Funding/ uncapped places (for Indigenous students). • Centralise and/or increase equity funding. • Create inclusive university systems, removing barriers in higher education systems. • Prioritise student experience & wellbeing.	Attention to JRG: • Subject selection / Humanities. • Calls to remove the 50% Pass rule. • JRG funding impacts on universities' ability to support students from identified equity groups. • Consideration to debt aversion / debt concerns. • Demand Driven Funding/uncapped places (for Indigenous students).	• Enabling programs. • VET/Dual System: Call for a Single System to ease pathways for students from identified equity groups. • Pathways into Higher education: Take a student life course approach. • University systems and culture: Move towards more inclusive system, removing barriers in higher education systems. • Prioritise student experience & wellbeing. • Centralise and/or increase equity funding.	• Attainment Targets	Attention to JRG: • Subject selection / Humanities. • Calls to remove the 50% Pass rule. • JRG funding impacts on universities' ability to support students from identified equity groups. • Pathways into Higher Education: Take a student life course approach.

3.1.1 Review Question: What are the gaps, barriers, and inequalities specific to identified under-represented cohorts that need to be addressed?

A commonality is the *financial barriers or financial disincentives* for study, or impacts of these upon under-represented cohorts of students and the need to address them. This relates strongly to the research question around gaps, barriers, and inequalities specific to identified under-represented cohorts. The themes/subthemes that were mapped to this question included:

- Cost of Living

- Debt aversion/debt concerns.

- Income and other supports (eg, rental), including age of independence.

- National equity student bursaries.

The remaining themes had some commonality in term of ensuring that *educational systems are equitable* and students are given a fair chances in terms of accessing higher education. The themes/subthemes that were mapped to this questions included:

- Pathways into Higher Education: Take a student life course approach.

- Demand Driven Funding/uncapped places (for Indigenous students).

- Centralise and/or increase equity funding.

- Inclusive university systems, removing barriers in higher education systems.

The remaining subtheme mapped to this question was around prioritising student experience and wellbeing.

3.1.2 Review Question: Are there gaps, inequalities or unintended consequences at a structural or system level?

The Jobs Ready Graduate Package, which has been picked up in the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report, was a strong focus in the submissions, as it was a widely held view that it negatively impacted upon students from identified equity groups. It is mapped to this question on inequalities and unintended consequences at a structural or system level, but is also linked to the related question about the system drivers leading to below parity for under-represented students.

Concerns around student debt, the inequities in the earlier part of the student life course, also relate strongly to unintended consequences at a system level.

To summarise, the themes mapped to this question were:

- JRG: Subject selection/Humanities.

- JRG: Calls to remove the 50% Pass rule.

- JRG: Funding impacts on universities' ability to support students from identified equity groups.

In addition, high student debt and debt inequities, and the lack of funding for places as disproportionately impacting students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts, was seen as unintended consequences.

- Debt aversion / debt concerns.

- Demand Driven Funding/uncapped places (for Indigenous students).

3.1.3 Review Question: What are the system drivers leading to below parity outcomes for under-represented and educationally disadvantaged groups across the student lifecycle?

The themes mapped to the question around system drivers leading to below parity were again related to the JRG, as well as the inequities early in the student life course:

- JRG: Subject selection/Humanities.
- JRG: Calls to remove the 50% Pass rule.
- JRG: Funding impacts on universities' ability to support students from identified equity groups.
- Pathways into Higher Education: Take a student life course approach.

3.1.4 Review Question: How could larger Higher Education funding levers be leveraged?

Larger funding levers included enabling programs and pathways into university, and examining the connection between VET and higher education. Even more broadly, was the wider schooling system and how it could be set up to ease pathways into and participation in higher education. These themes included:

- Enabling programs.
- VET/Dual System: Call for a Single System to ease pathways for students from identified equity groups.
- Pathways into higher education: Take a student life course approach.
- University systems and culture: Move towards more inclusive system, removing barriers in higher education systems.
- Prioritise student experience & wellbeing.

Finally, the theme that captured discussion around the various equity programs, and potentially either the need to increase equity funding and/or possibility centralise it within a broader university funding envelope as a more holistic approach emerged as a theme that relates to how *larger Higher Education funding levers be leveraged?*

- Centralise and/or increase equity funding.

3.1.5 Review Question: In what ways could adoption of equity targets be linked to broader Higher Education policy levers?

The only theme on attainment targets had alignment with this question. However, as noted earlier, there was minimal discussion as to how targets could work, although recognition these needed to be implemented simultaneously with initiatives that worked to addressing underlying barriers of disadvantage.

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THE UNIVERSITY
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AUSTRALIA

CREATE CHANGE

Targeted Review of Student Equity in Higher Education Programs and System Level Policy Levers Appendix: Work Package 3 - Consultation Survey

Title:	**Targeted Review of Student Equity in Higher Education Programs and System Level Policy Levers Appendix: Work Package 3 - Consultation Survey**
Prepared for:	Department of Education
Prepared by:	Matthias Kubler and Wojtek Tomaszewski
Date:	17 November 2023
Revision:	Version 1.2

The Institute for Social Science Research at the University of Queensland (UQ) acknowledges the Traditional Owners and their custodianship of the lands on which UQ operates. We pay our respects to their Ancestors and their descendants, who continue cultural and spiritual connections to Country.

Contents

Tables

1. Aim and structure of consultation survey

The aim of the stakeholder survey was to confirm, evaluate, and extend on the issues identified through the other project components in WP1 and WP2 in the context of some of the project questions. These questions related to the functioning of the current equity programs and to ways of improving representation including possible system levers that could be adjusted to this end. As part of the latter questions on system levers, the Consultation Survey was also used to test some of the suggestions in the Interim Report of the University Accord Panel's Review of Australia's Higher Education System.

The Targeted Equity Review project specifies 5 groups of interest:

- People from low socio-economic backgrounds,
- First in Family,
- People from regional, rural and remote backgrounds,
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, and
- People with disability.

While there can be overlaps between all those groups, each is also associated with unique issues. This especially applies to the latter two groups: educational disadvantages of Indigenous people and people with disability could be perceived to be related to drivers, issues and solutions that are unique and do not apply to the larger low SES and RRR groups. Such 'separateness' is reflected in the structure of representative and professional bodies, as well as structures of service administrations and professional roles. Many universities have Indigenous units and/or specialised services roles or support units for people with disability that are separately run from the general equity or student services units.

To reflect the specific situations of the different groups, the Consultation Survey was structured into three components with one each targeting a specialised group of stakeholders. This specialised structure and targeting also reduced complexity and respondent burden for participants.

Component A – Underrepresentation of Low SES, First in Family and RRR

This component of the survey was concerned with underrepresentation of these three in-scope groups. Stakeholders that were targeted in the recruitment to this component of the consultation were high-level university managers with strategic oversight over equity or student experience/retention portfolios, managers and professionals working in equity-specific and student services units at urban and regional universities, as well as academics with publication records in socio-economic, FiF and/or RRR (educational) disadvantage.

Component B – Underrepresentation of Indigenous people

Stakeholders that were targeted in the recruitment to this component of the consultation were high-level university managers with strategic oversight of Indigenous student portfolios and strategies, managers of, and professionals in, Indigenous university support units or centres, professionals working in Indigenous bodies that are concerned with educational disadvantage, as well as Indigenous academics with publication records in Indigenous (educational) disadvantage.

Component C – Underrepresentation of people with disability

Stakeholders that were targeted in the recruitment to this component of the consultation were professionals who work in bodies advocating for people with disability, managers and professionals working in Disability units at universities, as well as academics with publication records in disability and (educational) disadvantage.

2.   Recruitment

The identification of relevant stakeholders occurred in July 2023. Stakeholders were identified for the different components as per desired stakeholder characteristics on the previous page, which were determined by information on their current positions, their (historical) work profiles and/or their academic publication records.

Before screening individual staff profiles on websites, possible suitable candidates for the three stakeholder pools were initially compiled from ISSR's networks after having undertaken various collaborations and consultations with higher education stakeholders in the equity space over previous years. Candidates, particularly for components B and C, were further identified from google searches and consecutive searches of university websites involving search terms such as 'Disability services', 'Student adjustments' or 'Indigenous units'. These searches often led to websites about services available to students with disability and specialised Indigenous units, which were then further interrogated to identify individual managers or professionals working there. The Department of Education provided contact details for some additional stakeholders.

While there were no strict formal representational criteria including quotas that influenced the compilation of the three stakeholder pools, these criteria were applied in the compilation process:

- An aim of approximately 50 stakeholders for component A, and 25 stakeholders for components B and C (anticipating drop out and non-response) to achieve approximately 16 respondents for component A and 8 respondents for components B and C;
- A 'good' representation of universities in each of the pools with 'good' translating into representation of universities from different university groupings as well as different representation of relevant equity groups in their student populations;
- A 'good' mix of individual stakeholder roles within each pool to capture perspectives from different angles – practitioner, service manager, strategic manager and researcher (although individual stakeholders do often not neatly fall into such categories).

We sent an email (see Attachment F) to 114 identified stakeholders on 2 August 2023 informing them of the upcoming consultations and providing them with an opt-out option. The email informed stakeholders when the consultations would be conducted, what kind of information they would be seeking for which purpose, and that it would be conducted online with the option of alternative formats of data collection if so desired by stakeholders. The email was accompanied by a Participant Information Sheet that further informed about the data storage and reporting of collected information and non-participation and withdrawal rights of stakeholders.

Some emails bounced or generated out of office messages. Three stakeholders opted out of the survey. These and those stakeholders associated with 'no longer working here' bounced emails and those for whom it was indicated that they would be long-term absent, were all excluded from further communications. Two more stakeholders were added after being suggested by those included on the initial contact list.

3.   Process of consultations

The consultation form included an Introduction section, which stated the objectives of the consultations and informed about the different components of the survey and their timeframes. This was followed by a Your Feedback section, which informed about the rationale for selecting the participating stakeholder, that we were interested in their individual responses (vs institutional responses) and that we would appreciate any response they would provide.

The form then contained 12 open-ended questions to capture perceptions surrounding the current equity programs (in scope of the component's equity group[s]) and perceptions on raising higher education representation of the relevant groups in the future.

At the end of the form stakeholders were asked whether they would agree to be listed as a participant in the consultation in the reporting, and those that responded in the affirmative were provided with two open text fields to enter their name and organisation.

The consultation questions were largely identical across the three components, except that they were phrased explicitly in relation to the respective group, which also entailed differences in the referenced equity programs and income support payments where these were used for framing questions. The three consultation forms are included in Attachments A, B and C.

The Consultation Survey was set up online anonymously in Qualtrics. There was one questionnaire per component and each of the three questionnaires had its own URL.

An email with the survey link (see Attachment E) to the respective component of the survey was sent to 50 stakeholders for component A, 29 stakeholders for component B and 23 stakeholders for component C on 10 August 2023. Attached to the email was the Participant Information Sheet (see Attachment D) as well as the consultation form for the relevant component in a Word document (see Attachments A, B and C). The latter was meant to allow stakeholders to peruse the questions prior to online participation.

Stakeholders were sent a reminder email with relevant survey links and the same attachments two weeks after the invitation email on 24 August, except for those stakeholders who had responded and recorded their name on the form for the purpose of being listed in the reporting. The consultations were initially intended to be closed on 1 September 2023.

Due to a low response for components B and C, the deadline for the consultations was extended to 7 September for these two components and stakeholders of the two components who had not responded were informed of that on 1 September. The survey for component C was then left open until 12 September after a stakeholder informed us they wanted to participate after the deadline.

All but one participating stakeholder used the online survey to respond to the questions. That stakeholder returned responses in a PDF document via email.

4. Stakeholder participation

Altogether 30 stakeholders participated in the consultation survey. A list of participating stakeholders who identified in the survey and agreed to be listed in this report is provided in Appendix G. About two thirds of the 30 participants (n=21) participated in the Low SES/FiF/RRR component, four stakeholders in the Indigenous and five stakeholders in the Disability components of the survey. Table 1 shows the associated participation rate based on the number of stakeholders who were sent emails with the survey link.

The consultation period overlapped with submission processes to the Australian Universities Accord and this could have reduced the engagement of stakeholders who were also involved in those submission processes. Participation was notably lower in components B and C compared with component A, and this could be a reflection that these two components are associated with less stakeholder resourcing than in component A, and/or that there was more perceived distance of some sort between the invited Indigenous and disability stakeholders and this review project and its Consultation Survey.

Table 1: Stakeholder participation

Consultation rounds	Participants	Participation rate
Component A – Low SES, FiF, RRR	21	42%
Component B – Indigenous	4	14%
Component C – Disability	5	22%
Total	**30**	**29%**

5.   Reporting of stakeholder views

To retain the richness and variety of perspectives, stakeholders' feedback is presented in some detail with a degree of paraphrasing and shortening to facilitate easier reading. The exception to this is feedback that was deemed to not be directly relevant for any of the questions and which is not reported. To maximise transparency, the feedback is initially presented for each of the three components of the survey and for each question separately before it is summarised across the three rounds in the last section. In the process of presenting the feedback for each question, some of stakeholders' feedback was on occasion moved to the question under which it better fitted. The reporting of feedback in component A enabled attempts to thematically combine feedback from individual stakeholders, which was facilitated by the larger number of responses compared to components B and C.

The following section presents perceptions as they were conveyed by stakeholders without qualifying them about their professional or other value.

6.   Key messages from stakeholders - Low SES, FiF & RRR

6.1   Current equity programs

Respondents were asked five questions about the current equity programs. To this end they were presented with examples of equity programs relevant to the low SES, FiF and RRR groups. These examples were: Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP), Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program (RPPPP), Enabling Loading Program (ELP), Tertiary Access Payment (TAP) and Regional University Centres /Regional University Study Hubs. Respondents were encouraged to also consider unintended consequences when perusing the questions.

6.1.1   Structure of current equity programs

The first question asked to what extent these programs were structured in the right way to effectively improve higher participation and attainment for low SES, FiF and RRR people.

There were a variety of responses ranging from 'yes, they are structured in the right way' to 'no, they are not structured in the right way' with the latter responses comprising the majority. Many of the responses centred around HEPPP, but respondents also commented on, other programs including those not listed in the examples, such as Disability Support Program (DSP) and Indigenous Student Success Program (ISSP).

Some stakeholders appreciated that the equity programs and HEPPP in particular have created a focus on equity in the sector by making funding available for equity-specific activities and requiring associated reporting.

Many of the responses were concerned with matters associated with funding mechanisms, and eligibility and spending rules of the programs:

- Many of the participating stakeholders reported aspects of the current funding and allowed or actual uses thereof to be problematic.

- Many referred to the previous one-year funding cycles that prevented staff continuity and longer-term planning, relationship-building with communities and monitoring and evaluation processes. Short-term funding cycles could affect the quality of program design and the preparedness of communities to invest their resources into processes.

- Some welcomed recently introduced three-year funding cycles, although it was also noted that these still make it tricky to employ staff on equity programs when they also have other roles and responsibilities.

- Some made the point that the current funding is competitive (distributions of funds from a finite pool) and disincentivises universities to collaborate with each other, which weakens the national impact of the programs.

- Some stakeholders emphasised that effectively increasing participation requires collaboration between universities and communities, and that funding should incentivise collaboration. Others also pointed out that universities themselves are not always good with designing and implementing outreach programs and they should collaborate with communities in the design and implementation processes.

- Some noted that funding models based on previous student enrolments may not be responsive to sudden changes in the market/enrolment. Others argued that such models maintain the divide between universities with high and those with low numbers of students from identified equity groups as there is no money/incentive for the latter to attract more students from identified equity groups.

- In a similar vein, there was a perception that equity programs did not take into consideration universities' geographical locations and the associated costs of providing outreach programs in states with 'larger geographies/low populations'. Some claimed that funding favoured regional universities.

- In contrast, some respondents argued that funding to high equity student universities should be increased because of the higher costs of delivery of providing services and delivering teaching.

- Some stakeholders explained that funding based on enrolment numbers did little to improve success and completion rates. Relatedly, there was a perception that in some universities the HEPPP funding was primarily focussed on pre-access activities.

- There was some bemoaning that universities and HEPPP funding have changed in such a way in recent years (tied funding for the partnerships component was seen as having changed in 2014) that universities could spend money from the partnership component on other things, such as on marketing and core service functions, which was accompanied by suggestions to clearly separate the partnerships component and quarantine it from cannibalisation.

- Some stakeholders pointed out that there was no funding available to compensate students for lost income when they had to participate in mandatory work-integrated-leaning programs to pass their courses.

- Stakeholders identified problems with the Tertiary Access Payment (TAP). It is administratively time consuming. It does not take the costs associated with relocating from different locations into account. Its eligibility criteria - that students are only eligible if they enrol the year following high school completion - conflicts with those of Youth Allowance - students must prove they are financially independent of their families. It is not available for students enrolling in enabling programs (it was suggested that TAP should be paid to such students once they start Bachelor studies).

- Regional University Centres were viewed by some as effective, but they should not have allegiances to individual universities.

- Enabling Programs were seen to be effective. However, their effectiveness was dependent upon higher education institutions as the funding was not targeted to equity groups and the way these funds were spent depended on internal university processes.

- RPPPP was described by one stakeholder as "complex, cluttered with admin and a drop in the ocean". Requirements that only new programs could be funded by RPPPP means that programs successfully implemented in metropolitan universities could not receive RPPPP funding to be rolled out in regional universities or campuses. The Eastern Australia Regional University Centre Partnership (EARUCP) was commended as a positive example in the context of RPPPP.

- One stakeholder pointed out that 3-year undergraduate degrees are unpopular in some regional/remote areas, which was linked to local economic and occupational opportunities. They argued that outreach programs should be able to advocate for shorter and lower-level qualifications.

- One stakeholder noted that some universities are unable to benefit from the Regional Loading Program because student thresholds exclude online enrolments.

- It was pointed out that ISSP and DSP do not fund outreach activities.

- It was noted that disability was excluded from HEPPP and HEPPP funding does not extend to mature aged or postgraduate students.

- The First in Family (FiF) category is not defined as an equity group, so it is not consistently captured and not explicitly targeted with equity funding.

- Stakeholders observed that the funding structure across the different programs was too complex and that without cross-reporting, overall funding and impact could not be ascertained.

- Funding does not consider intersectionality.

Other, broader points that stakeholders made about the structure of equity programs, some of which were hinted at above, are that:

- The lack of a national strategy or strategic intent and an inconsistency across universities means there is no set of clear objectives and targets.

- The impact of equity programs is unknown because programs are not evidence based and there is a lack of evaluation conducted.

- Equity programs are add-ons. Barriers are not addressed systematically.

- Programs are siloed for individual equity groups "make reporting easy but outcomes challenging". Programs that require extra-curricular activities are also not ideal for disadvantaged students.

- A connection to VET is important; however it is missing in the current equity programs.

- Ther (likely) unintended consequences of HEPPP is that it stimulates 'marketisation', re-enforces deficit assumptions/approaches and does not address structural sources of underrepresentation including at higher education institutions.

- Concerns were expressed about the way geographical area was used to identify SES and regional/remote equity groups.

- Defining distinct equity groups was seen as problematic because it meant that some people are excluded.

- Key policy areas that were seen as pain points for equity groups are WIL, academic concession and leave of absence.

6.1.2   Level of funding/scale

Stakeholders were then asked to what extent they thought the programs were scaled or funded adequately to effectively improve higher education participation and attainment for low SES, FiF and RRR people.

Many stakeholders said funding was insufficient. It had never reached the suggested Bradley levels (for HEPPP and DSP). It was insufficient to cover both partnership and participation components. Both TAP and ISSP were mentioned in the context of insufficient funding.

Some comments reflected responses to the first question. Funding processes did not consider universities' contexts and needs, for example intersectionality. Short-term funding was problematic for program quality, long-term impacts, and program evaluation. The complexity of funding requirements and processes and the lack of relevant reporting of financial spending, resulted in a lack of evaluation and little information being made available about program outcomes or efficiency.

Consistent with the above assessments, stakeholders suggested that equity funding needed to increase significantly (federal income support was also mentioned in this context) and needed to be long-term. One stakeholder suggested that changing the funding basis from FTE to student headcount would provide better support for part-time students.

One stakeholder said that the funding was adequate.

6.1.3   Do Equity Programs work in harness?

Stakeholders were then asked to what extent the existing equity programs work in harness to effectively improve higher education participation and attainment for low SES, FiF and RRR people.

Stakeholders did not have a uniform view, even about how to answer the question. One respondent said the programs were mostly aligned but that a more integrated funding allocation would help. Many stakeholders claimed equity programs do not work well in harness. There is no overarching set of goals or strategies, no common performance measures, no data collection and reporting across institutions and no national guide for implementation of funds. Because the programs were not designed in harness, they were leaving gaps in services, as identified in the first question, for example in relation to outreach services not being covered for students with disability or the lack of funding extended to mature age students. It was further noted that individual universities applied their institutional lenses to spend their equity funding, which increases the likelihood of sector-wide gaps as well as duplication in coverage, as was noted between the partnership component of HEPPP and the RPPPP.

A national approach and coordination are needed. It would balance local and community needs, engage with local industry, education providers and community organisations and take regional responsibility for the post-school and post-university outcomes of people in their communities.

Another made the point that, in theory, the programs could work well together in individual universities and that there was scope for universities to create more integration. However, some stakeholders perceived this not to be the case as universities tend to have no strategy for accommodating their different equity activities.

6.1.4 Do Equity Programs work in harness with federal income support programs?

Then respondents were asked to what extent these programs worked in harness with federal income support programs (e.g. Youth Allowance and Austudy).

Some stakeholders saw the equity and federal income support programs as largely disconnected. They pointed out that eligibility for income support was separately defined differently to equity group definitions. This was problematic when equity programs at university assume that some students receive income support, which is not always the case. Sometimes equity scholarships are needed to work in tandem with income support because neither by itself is sufficient to support a student. However, it was pointed out that federal income support programs are complex and change frequently, making it difficult to design something that works with other programs.

One respondent reported that at one university, HEPPP-funded scholarships must be designed to ensure they do not impact federal income support programs.

Another touchpoint between equity and income support programs are outreach programs, which will often raise awareness of available federal and university-specific income support. Perhaps in that context, one respondent commented that connecting information about different equity programs and income support programs can, in praxis, depend on individual university staff.

As was expressed earlier when asked about the effectiveness of the structure of the equity programs, stakeholders pointed to the conflict between TAP and Youth Allowance with TAP requiring immediate university access after school while the independence condition of Youth Allowance incentivises students to take a gap year to qualify for that condition to qualify for the independence payment.

"Students are in a virtual Catch 22 situation where they are required to study full time to receive AUSTUDY, yet they run the risk of failing their units of study due to the study load. If they do not receive assistance, they typically are required to work extra hours which again disadvantages their chances of success with their studies." (stakeholder).

While this was not directly asked, some respondents also commented on the effectiveness of the federal income support programs with two aspects of income support programs seen as particularly unhelpful for students from identified equity groups:

- The independence condition and/or the means test threshold for parental income; and
- The full-time study requirement.

6.1.5 What changes to existing suite of programs could be made?

The next question the survey respondents were asked was what changes to the existing suite of equity-specific programs including their regulation could be made to increase higher education participation and attainment of low SES, FiF and RRR people.

There were many suggestions, some of which went beyond the scope of the current equity programs in higher education. Many of the suggestions picked up on perceived current shortcomings in structure, eligibility, and funding amounts and expressed the logical opposite to those shortcomings. Many were related to HEPPP.

High-level suggestions

Concerns were expressed about broader aspects of equity programs and equity policy. There is a need to define 'equity' in the sector. Equity programs should have a whole-of-tertiary sector view to work across sectors and facilitate movements/pathways between sectors. program logic should be designed to align funds and programs across the student life cycle.

There were calls for higher-level integration of higher education equity policy with other areas of federal and state government portfolios (e.g. health, DSS) and for a national approach/strategy to be developed on social mobility.

Another common suggestions were for larger funding allocations and longer-term funding cycles (or at least funding predictions) to achieve staff retention, planning security and to generate the space for evidence/evaluation-informed program design. Survey respondents suggested addressing perceived gaps in coverage by including all equity groups (including disability) in HEPPP or asked to incentivise, through funding rules or programs, collaboration between universities and other organisations, and to discourage spending on marketing and recruitment.

A higher-level recommendation was for the Department of Education to assign greater responsibility and accountability to high schools and to provide resources to enable them to collaborate with universities.

The notion of tangible targets was also expressed.

Some stakeholders recommended that equity should be strategically positioned within universities to reflect its importance (e.g. in strategic plans, organisational structures, dedicated equity units/specialised staff). Equity programs need to be aligned with general university operations so that for example, enabling programs are tailored towards the university's undergraduate curricula.

Funding-specific suggestions

Some of the funding-specific suggestions directly related to technicalities of funding and some related to the structure of equity programs.

Funding should take account of state context, of demographic and structural issues (thin markets, distance) of institutions and gaps in key performance metrics. It should be by headcount rather than EFTSL, as expressed earlier.

Enabling loading should be quarantined for students from identified equity groups. Regional loading should also apply to online students in regional areas. Equity-specific and other funding should be integrated to achieve equity outcomes, which was seen to promote piloting, and ensuring sustainability and programs of scale.

The equity funding structure should be simplified – a single equity bucket or a set of equity loadings, perhaps specific to stages or purposes (e.g. pre-access work placements). A clear separation between funding (and accounting for it) for access and participation was expressed as was a focus on successful completion studies. HEPPP funding should also go to Regional University Study Hubs, state governments or other organisations.

One respondent stated that an assessment of needed funding to groups or all groups combined in different stages was needed.

Monitoring, evaluation and accountability

Another set of comments centred around monitoring, evaluation and institutional accountability in the context of the identified shortcomings in these areas. These entailed defining key performance criteria at institutional level, to collect better and more consistent data on the groups across the different life course stages, to better track success across institutions, and to increase accountability by more detailed financial reporting, the introduction of targets and/or ongoing evaluation requirements of programs (so that evaluations would be built into program designs).

Another stakeholder called for participatory evaluation with learning from feedback loops.

Equity-specific vs general measures

There were some differences in approaches to increasing representation between views that saw this happening as a result of equity-specific programs – programs targeted to the different equity groups – and non-equity specific approaches. Among the latter were views that equity programs should be centred in universities and mainstreamed to benefit all students or that redesigning broader (student) services functions and then advertising those in areas (disciplines, faculties, programs) especially where a higher prevalence of disadvantaged students can be found would be a more productive approach.

Others emphasised the equity-specific targeting and spending of funds. One wanted to make it mandatory for spending equity funds to define the relevant equity group. Another suggested quarantining equity funding for equity purposes.

It is not certain to which degree views are complementary and contradictory. For example, embedding equity programs in curriculum and its delivery at schools and university does not necessarily deny programs with equity-specific targeting.

Income support

A number of stakeholders commented on income support measures. One suggested that there should be a single income support mechanism that links fees, scholarships and income support on the basis of individual tertiary learning entitlements, associated with more clarity for students, lesser bureaucracy, more integration of support. Streamlining financial support applications with Centrelink to reduce the required effort was echoed by other respondents. One stakeholder said that that income support programs needed to allow for multi-sector enrolments, micro credentials, and needs of students on placements, another called for more Government funded scholarships.

There were general statements such as that the students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts should be sufficiently supported to cover living and study costs whether that be achieved by equity funding and/or changing Youth Allowance/Austudy as well as more specific recommendations that students living away from home for the purposes of study should be assessed as independent at 18 or over.

Other

Other suggestions were:

- To form a Regional/Remote consortium;
- To revisit the concept of Open university in the context of serving learners from identified equity groups, especially those from regional and remote areas;
- Targeted and culturally inclusive community-led widening participation;
- Drawing on community strengths in collaborative outreach;
- To offer more free enabling programs;
- To see the EPHEA submission to the Accord;
- That there should be a national coordination of widening participation activities to ensure that every school student gets career advice and has exposure to different tertiary environments while at school; and
- To design collaborative interstate and interuniversity non-ATAR pathways; national schemes to address financial support; strong linkages to industry, such as national job brokers program to increase access to WIL.

6.2   Accord and suggestions

After the questions on the current equity programs, respondents were presented with a number of questions that sought their views on some of the suggestions in the Interim report of the Accord. Again, stakeholders were prompted to also consider unintended consequences when perusing all the questions.

6.2.1   Targets

The first set of questions was about targets, in which way they could play a role in increasing underrepresentation, and what effective targets could look like.

Equity targets are supported by some of the survey respondents. The reasons given for targets to be potentially helpful is that they are seen to set incentives and can be used to hold universities to account. They are seen to be able to drive focus and activities within universities across leadership and organisational units without an equity focus. These perceptions make clear that when stakeholders think of targets they automatically think of incentives and or penalties (usually of a financial kind) associated with attaining or not attaining targets, incentives that are effective in influencing higher education institutions.

There is no agreement though what these incentives should look like, or what they are trying to achieve: some would like reward for good equity performance, others would like to see incentives for changing institutional behaviours (the different perspectives appear to correlate with differently positioned institutions – high equity universities want to see themselves rewarded but also better financed to service the higher equity student load, low equity unis want to get more money (first) to find motivation to change focus).

Some stakeholders clearly articulated that targets can only be successful if they come with considerable additional funding – there seems to be little confidence in higher education institutions shifting resourcing without receiving such additional funding. Some stakeholders argue that targets need to be set and reviewed by an independent agency, especially those that are set for individual institutions. Others think targets need to be defined in consultation with universities and communities.

Favouring targets came with various other qualifications or additional notes such as, targets:

- Must be integral to the regulatory framework of the higher education sector including a clear mechanism for approving providers' equity action plans and the setting of suitably contextualised targets for each institution.
- Should start with better defining groups of interest, why these groups and how they need to be supported; need for more drivers and inclusive descriptors of equity groups; indicator of multiple disadvantage; targets for intersectionality; groups need to be readily identifiable.
- Targets need to be clear, current and communicated early and often.
- Should be for tertiary education participation and attainment.
- Should reward good practice that contributes to achieving targets.
- Should reward achieving targets.
- Should be short- and longer-term.
- Need to avoid setting perverse incentives or setting students up to fail.
- Need to consider local/institutional/regional contexts, including regional industry structures and job requirements (if discipline/skills-specific targets are set).
- Should be set for different matters across the student life course including post-university pathways.
- Should also be set for other things, such as targets for using support services, minimising debt accumulation, time to completion and institutional change.
- Should allow 'justified flexibility'.

- Should set incentives also for inner city universities to lift their game – targets should change distributions in the system, not reflect status quo in equity distributions.

- Should also acknowledge that job outcomes for men with low/no ATAR are better through VET.

- Should be set to incentivise universities to work together not to compete against one another.

- Could be set as relative targets rather than absolute – defined as reducing a gap.

There was also a view that the tracking of cohorts/targets should be done transparently and consistently "and thus external to universities". One stakeholder pointed out that considering various things and coming up with flexibilities and tailored (institutional) targets undermines the appeal of broad scale, easily understood targets.

There were also a few voices that were unsure about using equity targets or declined a role for such targets:

"Targets shift the focus to numbers, and who decides what the targets will be? Should rather focus on changing the system to be more inclusive". (stakeholder)

6.2.2   Income support

Respondents were then asked in which ways income support payments and their eligibility criteria could be changed to increase higher education participation and attainment of low SES, FiF and RRR people.

There was a view, which was also already indicated in responses to earlier questions, that the current system is designed for students from less-secure financial backgrounds to fail – independence conditions and underlying assumptions about parental support, unpaid placements, low payments, full-time study conditions, maximum study periods - all shape decisions/behaviours and chances of higher education participation and attainment.

Consistent with this view and some earlier suggestions there were suggestions:

- To undertake a Review into Student Financial Assistance.

- To increase Youth Allowance/Austudy to a liveable amount.

- That all RRR students who need to relocate should be eligible (regardless of parental income tests).

- That, more generally, the lower age of independence and/or 18-month requirement for students to be classified as independent should be removed.

- That the maximum duration of award condition should be removed.

- To make Centrelink more user friendly (current application processes are deterrent).

- To pay for (compulsory) placements.

- That income support should be consistent, predictable and appropriate to the student level of need and available to full and part-time students (remove FT requirement) – estimate student living costs and income gaps.

- That parental and single parental status and older ages of students should be considered.

- That any scholarships should be excluded from Youth Allowance income tests.

- That accommodation allowance should be provided to RRR students (presumably those who study away from home) or that accommodation support should be provided to students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts more generally.

- That loans should be turned to scholarships/income support (e.g. Study Support Scholarship).

- That TAP is available for all equity groups and to review that the timing and response times align with university offer rounds to influence student decision making, and

- That TAP takes account of distance/travel costs.

Further shortcomings of current income support programs were also identified:

- Rules about entitlements can lack transparency and clarity leading to confusion and additional burden for students to navigate the system.
- There is lacking flexibility when student income changes (e.g. through casual employment) complicating matters.
- Couple assessments can limit financial independence of women in abusive relationships and people with disability.

One stakeholder noted that there was no public transport discount in WA for part-time and online students. Another would be in favour of redirecting all HEPPP money to income support as a more effective use of HEPPP money than presently.

6.2.3   Demand-driven funding

Respondents were then asked whether a demand-driven allocation of funding of study places for all low SES/FiF and RRR students was a promising way forward and why, or why not, that would be the case.

There was support for equity demand-driven funding as it was sometimes seen as being effective in widening participation previously (2012-2017), and as it was seen to increase access of students from identified equity groups without giving up on other students via incentivising universities to recruit students from under-reprsented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts. However, this came with various qualifications:

- Low SES, remote areas, Indigenous students, students with disability, CALMMR, students from care leaver backgrounds should be in scope of such funding.
- It would need a definition of FiF.
- It would (still) also require changes in admissions/access policies to be successful.
- Students would (still) need to be (better) supported (including financially) so they can succeed at university and post-university, and this would require additional resourcing.
- It would also (still) require institutional changes to become more inclusive (e.g. changes to policy, pedagogy, curriculum delivery models and structure).
- It would be effective with well-funded enabling education.

Other stakeholders thought that demand-driven funding should be for all domestic students, with one saying that this could be accompanied by equity funding attached to equity targets to incentivise universities to provide greater access to students from identified equity groups.

There were also two respondents who denied a positive role for equity-specific demand-driven funding: "No, we need to fund the whole system, not add more complexity around funding for underrepresented groups."

6.2.4   Needs-based funding

The next question asked whether needs-based funding that assumes higher needs of underrepresented students could make a difference for low SES, FiF and RRR people.

Many respondents were affirmative, some with some enthusiasm. It was at least seen as having face validity by some stakeholders. However, also here positive responses were accompanied by notes, warnings and qualifications, most of them were about making sure/how to make sure that needs-based funding goes to those in need to an adequate degree:

- Who defines need when it is very individual in its nature?
- Such funding needs to ensure that it goes to students in need, so would need clear guidelines about uses of funding.
- Funding should consider multiple disadvantage when defining need.
- Would necessitate considerable additional funds.

- Should consider costs of addressing need (e.g. outreach to regional/remote areas, support for mature age students etc).
- Modelling of costs has to come first.

Other comments and suggestion made were:

- Teaching and support staff need to be better skilled.
- In Victoria, there is state funding for good programs in areas such as career education, jobs and skills. Topping up such state funding/collaborating with the federal government may be a promising avenue.
- There is a risk that it could re-enforce deficit perspectives and detract from approaches to change institutions to be more inclusive (by changing curriculum, pedagogies etc). In this context, the policy should not be framed as 'needs-based'.
- This may not work with RRR students as these often do not have aspirations towards 3-4-year degrees as jobs in the local economy are not seen to require such.
- Increase the CSP rate to better reflect the full cost of teaching for all students including support services.
- Making higher education participation free for underrepresented groups would even be better.

There was also scepticism with one (group) respondent noting that needs-based funding had not worked for Australian schools and that there was a widening gap between advantaged and disadvantaged schools. They suggested performance-based funding (which they saw to be proven to be effective globally and in relation to improving equity outcomes) based on indicators of student progress and differently weighted depending on student demographics and type of institution.

6.2.5   Expansion of pathway and preparatory programs

Respondents were then asked in which ways an expansion of available pathway and preparatory programs into higher education studies could increase representation in higher education participation and attainment of low SES, FiF and RRR people.

As was expressed earlier in the survey, multiple stakeholders perceived that there was evidence for enabling programs to be successful pathways into higher education studies that should be expanded. There was also a view that some of these programs are working better than others and that there are also bad examples out there so that an expansion of such programs should be based on empirical evidence on what works before expansion occurs.

Others agreed that changes to enabling/prep programs could make them more effective, by:

- Better aligning course content, structures and processes with those at the institutions' undergraduate level, so as to help acculturate students with their post-enabling experience (which may somewhat contradict with the idea of the transferable credential as listed further below).
- By ensuring that the enabling program provides the students with both generic and specific knowledge.
- By enhancing the academic skills development aspects of the enabling courses.

Some made the point that these programs (and other pathways) should be freely available to all students from identified equity groups or to all who want to take this pathway (currently, there are also paid-by student programs and these attract fewer students from identified equity groups) – e.g., by paying enabling loading on all enabling enrolments and uncapping loading. Others said to continue the flexibility with CSP to allow institutional choice about how it is consumed (incl. for enabling programs).

One stakeholder raised the question about whether there needed to be national standards for preparatory programs. Perhaps relatedly, two other stakeholders suggested to map enabling programs to the Australian Qualifications Framework so that they ensure admission to all universities/a transferrable credential. One

suggested that this be based on current benchmarking of core enabling learning outcomes by the National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia.

An expansion of such programs would also need to be accompanied by a communications strategy that informs communities and families of the value of such programs and how to navigate different pathways. People needed a better understanding of VET to higher education and HECS-HELP. Expansion and communication would also require coordination with schools and state education departments as all would need to be on the same page with their messaging.

Other comments and suggestions related to enabling programs were:

- Expansion could be done in phases.

- Enabling programs are currently limited by CGS funding.

- More enabling courses for regional/remote students with flexibility/online options and option of local tutorials would be great; could be run through National Open University (central online content) and smaller education providers in RR areas to host tutorials in local education centres or libraries.

- Credit and enabling load needed for enabling programs to improve participation rates for regional students.

- Build in respect in pathways to accommodate Indigenous and people with disability's motivation.

Some stakeholders remarked that VET and work experience should not be forgotten, and that there needed to be better VET partnerships in the context of alternative entry. However, as other-than-through enabling programs pathways were seen to be associated with worse outcomes, universities needed to address this, one respondent proposed.

There was also a reference to better non-ATAR recognition of prior learning and skills via improving ways of identifying talent and potential (e.g. capacity for collaboration, creative problem-solving in team environments, volunteer work and leadership capacity). Finally, a stakeholder expressed that there also needed to be more exit pathways.

6.2.6   What could universities do?

The next question asked what higher education providers could do to most effectively improve higher education participation and attainment of low SES, FiF and RRR people in the future (e.g., in areas such as outreach, admissions processes, enrolment conditions, scholarships, curriculum and assessment design, pedagogies, support services).

One stakeholder responded with "A lot!" and there were many suggestions, many reflecting sentiments in the equity literature and some also reflecting or repeating sentiments expressed earlier in the consultation survey. Not all suggestions appeared to be bound by what higher education providers could do.

As before, there were suggestions and comments at different levels, such as:

- To collaborate with other universities to achieve systemic change.

- To take a systems approach and ensure that change is connected and holistic.

- That universities needed to take an equity/inclusion lens to everything they do, reflected in governance (e.g. vice chancellors actively engaged), policy design and strategic planning and operations (e.g. annual KPIs and planning docs), central positioning of equity work areas – develop culture of enquiry, review policies, accountability and goal alignment.

- That higher education providers should build their workforce capacity around equity for professionals, academics and senior executives, and also increase the diversity of their workforces in that context.

- To challenge notions that link ATAR with excellence in wider society (including school principals, parents, university staff including senior managers)

- To promote lifelong learning and to engage with the implications for university operations.

- That there should be institutional targets across all stages of the student life course.

- That there should be more interactions with VET outside dual sector unis.

- That there should be unified funding that covers all groups (incl disability).

- That there should be a concurrent focus on institutional change, widening participation and enabling pathways.

- That Centres for University pathways should be created at state level to provide a cohesive approach to pathways and associated research, information etc, and working strategically between state and federal governments in the process.

- That there should be better diagnosis and recognition of student needs prior to enrolment.

- That there should be resourcing to deal with enrolment and admissions queries fast.

- That there should be whole-of-student cycle support that is well connected, and where holistic support services are linked to academic support services.

- That there should be peer to peer engagement at all levels.

- That there should be more online courses that are easy to find, support models for online delivery involving Regional University Study Hubs and online support models without involving Regional University Study Hubs.

- That there should be embedded qualifications where possible (e.g. education/nursing).

- That there should be shorter, stackable qualifications, which better integrate with work in life (together with flexible study modes).

- That there should be a key focus on financial and student support.

- That accommodation costs should be covered (at least partially).

- That there should be more low value scholarships and bursaries.

- That there should be dedicated 24hr support services.

Other respondents further commented that there should be:

- Inclusiveness marketing/messaging, admissions processes (remove 'ATAR barriers', recognition of Special Recognition Access Scheme).

- More effective outreach (to RRR/low SES schools, but not just young students and disengaged youth/adults), outreach to raise awareness/aspiration but also develop academic skills to all RRR communities.

- More flexible enrolment processes.

- Scholarships easily accessible and integrated with government income support.

- "Academic concession policies for our time".

- Paid work opportunities and stepping-stone programs, paid WIL for all students.

- Pedagogies that work for equity groups, also transition pedagogies for first year students, course and assessment designs that is engaging, scaffolded, interactive including flexible (online) options and universal design, with strong teacher presence.

- Mentoring programs, easily accessible support services, also scaffolded, and embedded in curriculum where possible.

- Flexible approaches to all aspects of university life.

- Teamwork across academic and professional staff at universities to deliver student-centric and consistently high-quality teaching and support.

It should also be made easy for students to return after leave of absence, and all systems for students should be simplified.

Some stakeholders also mentioned the secondary school years, to support students in their studies in Years 10 to 12, to "look at Year 12 curriculum" and to provide quality career advice covering all schools.

It was also noted that there is (already) lots of advice out there, particularly on the NCSEHE website.

6.2.7   Anything else

At the end of the Consultation Survey respondents were prompted to share anything else that is related to underrepresentation of low SES, FiF or RRR people in higher education participation and attainment.

One theme that notably emerged was school education. All schools needed to be sufficiently funded and resourced, and underrepresentation needed to be addressed earlier rather than later (in students' lives). Investment into high schools needed to better prepare students for university studies.

Other themes and sentiments were similar to those that had emerged under earlier questions and/or would have fitted under previous questions. Some of those concerned some higher-level orientation or governance arrangements:

- Need a national student equity strategy.

- More monitoring and evaluation and investment into data collections, supporting evaluations etc.

- Central body that is responsible for data tracking etc and sharing best practice.

- Review HEPPP.

- Diverse higher education systems with different access and exit points and pathways.

- Whole of education system transformation across Australia needed, challenge deficit assumptions and who is capable of HE, see policies in Scotland, address economic disadvantage, reflect of higher education system is part of the problem.

- Strength based systemic approach that removes barriers for underrepresented groups.

- HE studies should not be the desired single outcome that drives efforts.

- Outreach to all schools also targeting teachers, career advisors and parents.

- Elevate teaching and learning – return to OLT model with focus on diversity and inclusion.

- Celebrate FiF status.

- "The factors are complex but the solution is relatively simple - it comes down to adequate funding for students and institutions and a national coordinated (rather than competitive) approach."

Some of the responses at this stage of the survey concerned equity funding:

- Deliver on the Bradley Review's recommendation in relation to equity funding.

- Increase the proportion of the Teaching and Learning Base Grant allocated to the Higher Education Participation and Partnership fund to 4%.

- Establish HEPPP as a legislated equity block grant that Universities can rely upon and shift away from short term funding.

- Establish a dedicated national Partnership Fund that provides funding to all Universities to ensure shared responsibility for widening participation and to work collaboratively and in a nationally coordinated way to deliver outreach and widening participation activities to school and non-school leavers.

- Fund universities on the basis of how well they support students from underrepresented backgrounds to progress and complete their degrees and subsequently, gain employment.

- HEPPP is too small to account for the additional support needs of students from under-represented or educationally disadvantaged cohorts at university. Institutions should be given more funding depending on their enrolment of these students.

Some stakeholders used the prompt to outline problems they perceived:

- Federal financial support schemes (Youth Allowance, Ausstudy, Abstudy, TAP) are complex and will leave gaps in coverage. The fulltime condition in income support programs excludes part-time and hits students from identified equity cohorts and mature students.

- FiF is problematic as it is based on self-reports, and as it cannot be targeted at school level. Low SES has several definitions. Government tracking/benchmarking is out of date (2-3 years behind). Everyone is working with different datasets and definitions. Students are also blind as to available opportunities.

7. Key messages from stakeholders - Indigenous

7.1 Current equity programs

Respondents were asked five questions about the current equity programs. They were presented with examples of equity programs relevant to Indigenous students. These examples were: Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP), Indigenous Student Success Program (ISSP) and Demand-driven access for Indigenous people in regional, rural and remote areas. Respondents were encouraged to also consider unintended consequences when perusing the questions.

7.1.1 Structure of current equity programs

The first question asked to what extent these programs were structured in the right way to effectively improve higher participation and attainment for Indigenous people.

Respondents expressed a variety of thoughts:

- ISSP funding allows flexibility in spending but also constraints uses of funds.
- Indigenous as indicator separate from low SES was welcome as the latter (area) measure was not reliably identifying Indigenous people (nor low SES people).
- Precarious employment contracts for Indigenous staff in student support centres affects delivery of programs (one-year cycles).
- The increase to 3-year funding cycle was welcome.
- Regional universities carry the load of demand-driven access with many intersectional students.
- Programs are not aligned.

7.1.2 Level of funding/scale

Stakeholders were then asked to what extent they thought the programs were scaled or funded adequately to effectively improve higher education participation and attainment for Indigenous people.

Stakeholders reflected that the funding was not sufficient while also pointing out that the use of the funding is part of the equation:

- Funding has been inadequate, particularly for intersectional students (e.g. Indigenous and RRR) although universities also have surplus funds they could use.
- Funding is inadequate for achieving targets from Interim accord report (attainment rate of 55% by 2050) – student and attainment growth should be delivered on the grounds of self-determination.
- It is also a question of how universities use funding.
- There should be specific funding for HDR students.
- Funding is based on historical enrolment, which may not respond to changes in needs/markets in a timely fashion.

7.1.3 Do Equity Programs work in harness?

Stakeholders were then asked to which extent the existing equity programs work in harness to effectively improve higher education participation and attainment for Indigenous people.

Stakeholders responded to this question in these ways:

- The programs are siloed.
- They work effectively if universities have proper governance around them to ensure they complement another.

- There is a need for evidence-based approaches and evaluation.

- Funding is spent in different ways – there is no standardised support across higher education institutions.

7.1.4 Do Equity Programs work in harness with federal income support programs?

Respondents were then asked to which extent these programs worked in harness with federal income support programs (e.g. Youth Allowance, Abstudy).

Respondents said that:

- They do not work in harness, they are built in isolation (there is also no integration with Away From Base Program(s)).

- The programs are administered through different bodies, which does not ensure alignment (Department of Education, NIAA, Human Services). There are no linked outcomes and priorities.

- Income support is too low and compliance elements too strong.

- The full-time study condition for RCO (accommodation support Abstudy) is not beneficial when students can only realistically manage two subjects. Should allow part-time studies in the first year of study.

7.1.5 What changes to existing suite of programs could be made?

The next question for survey respondents asked what changes to the existing suite of equity-specific programs including their regulation could be made to increase higher education participation and attainment of Indigenous people. Respondents made these points:

- There should be a better integration of programs over the student life course (or scrap programs and restart).

- Improve higher education institutional cultures (discrimination, cultural competency).

- There should be an extensive and external review of all programs including Regional University Study Hubs.

- Improve school students' knowledge of pathways.

- Increase investment.

- More funding for school-university connections.

- More funding with greater weighting for intersectional students.

- Targeted resourcing for male Indigenous students who are particularly unlikely to go to university.

- Better targeted outreach programs.

- Outreach programs that also need to prepare students for success at university.

- Indigenous children need to see value of higher education to their communities.

- Pathways that include VET to university paths.

- Make support available to part-time students.

- More support for universities with larger cohorts that take longer to complete (Indigenous students often take 10+ years to complete a degree).

- Universities need to receive additional funding to ensure culturally safe environments, particularly in regional and remote areas.

- Scholarships for students from identified equity groups who take part in University Developed Board Endorsed courses and such courses could provide course credit for undergrad degree.

7.2 Accord and suggestions

After the questions on the current equity programs, respondents were presented with a number of questions that sought their views on some of the suggestions in the Interim report of the Accord. Again, stakeholders were prompted to also consider unintended consequences when perusing all the questions.

7.2.1 Targets

The first set of questions was about targets, in which way they could play a role in increasing underrepresentation, and what effective targets could look like.

There were mixed views. One respondent thought that targets could play a role if they were linked to funding that takes account of student demographics including intersectionality and geography and institutional matters. Another thought that having multiple targets for different aspects along the life course could increase focus and have merit.

Two of the four respondents pointed out that the school system is the larger issue, and one respondent denied a role for targets.

7.2.2 Income support

Respondents were then asked in which ways income support payments and their eligibility criteria could be changed to increase higher education participation and attainment of Indigenous people.

Suggestions here related to relaxing the conditions to widen eligibility and increasing payments:

- Remove means (parental) test or change the definition of independence.
- Increase the independent rate.
- Allow part-time study/relax study rules (e.g. related to Abstudy/RCO payments) especially for first-year students.
- Pay money for unpaid placements.
- Ensure that scholarships do not impede Abstudy eligibility.

7.2.3 Demand-driven funding

Respondents were then asked whether a demand-driven allocation of funding of study places for all Indigenous students was a promising way forward and why, or why not, that would be the case.

'Yes' responses came with these conditions:

- Yes, but more support is needed to get people in and through university.
- Yes, if demand is based on real cost of place-based delivery.
- Yes, but funding needs to be transparent (include allocations above capped places in CSP contracts) and committed by universities into further advancing outcomes for Indigenous students (topping up HEPPP and ISSP funding).

7.2.4 Needs-based funding

The next question asked whether needs-based funding that assumes higher needs of underrepresented students could make a difference for Indigenous people.

Stakeholders who responded to this question thought that it could, but it would need funding algorithms that reflect levels of disadvantage and that it would also need to be investigated from an Indigenous-led viewpoint.

7.2.5 Expansion of pathway and preparatory programs

Respondents were then asked in which ways an expansion of available pathway and preparatory programs into higher education studies could increase representation in higher education participation and attainment of Indigenous people.

Stakeholders responded in these ways:

- Yes, expand pathway programs that are culturally sensitive.

- Multiple entry (and exit) points are important, also for mature people.

- There is a need to better prepare Indigenous students for university experience (academically, culturally, financially, emotionally), employability opportunities, and opportunities for relationships and networks.

7.2.6 What could universities do?

The next question asked what higher education providers could do to most effectively improve higher education participation and attainment of Indigenous people in the future (e.g. in areas such as outreach, admissions processes, enrolment conditions, scholarships, curriculum and assessment design, pedagogies, support services).

Stakeholders made these suggestions:

- A lot could be done – all aspects of student, community engagement, education/curriculum, workforce and research to put First Nations peoples at the heart of universities.

- More effort in outreach programs to establish school to university pathways and connections, programs that show the value of higher education to Indigenous communities.

- Admissions criteria that take account of disadvantage.

- Improve pathways.

- Make higher education institutions culturally safe.

- Fund ongoing Indigenous positions for Indigenous centres that also ensure the role of Indigenous knowledges and pedagogies.

- Increase Indigenous staff numbers at higher education institutions.

7.2.7 Anything else

At the end of the Consultation Survey respondents were prompted to share anything else that is related to underrepresentation of Indigenous people in higher education participation and attainment.

Some of the responses at this point reflected some of the responses given under earlier questions, and some responses expressed new matters:

- Evaluate existing programs.

- Review the implementation of past recommendations, such as from the Behrendt Review.

- More funding (for solutions that do already exist).

- Invest in an Indigenous-focused higher education monitoring and evaluation framework (as called for in literature).

- Revisit the definition of 'success' for Indigenous students (not defined by completion).

- Provide more family (vs individual) focused programs.

- The schooling system is failing Indigenous people.

8. Key messages from stakeholders - Disability

8.1 Current equity programs

Respondents were asked five questions about the current equity programs. To this end they were presented with examples of equity programs relevant to students with disability. These examples were: Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP), Disability Support Program (DSP). Respondents were encouraged to also consider unintended consequences when perusing the questions.

8.1.1 Structure of current equity programs

The first question asked to what extent these programs were structured in the right way to effectively improve higher participation and attainment for people with disability.

Stakeholders expressed that there is little regard for disability in higher education policies and institutions, which was reflected in existing equity programs, funding and institutional foci. "DSP as the poor cousin of HEPPP".

It was pointed out by multiple stakeholders that students with disability are not directly targeted and included in HEPPP, and they cannot find, or at a minimum struggle to, find and maintain paid employment. As part of the exclusion from HEPPP, there is a lack of targeting/outreach to people with disability at school. There was no funding for pathways.

The program gap in targeting people with disability was seen as being exacerbated by the cancellation of the National Disability Coordination Officer Program, which had a remit covering access, participation and success from Certificate I to PHD education. The uncertainty to funding of the Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training (ADCET) further jeopardises equity objectives for people with disability.

Also linked to the above developments, one stakeholder saw the need for disability-led sector-wide steering group.

One stakeholder saw that there were problems with counting people/students with disability, and variations in doing so across the higher education sector, so that there was no basis for monitoring and assessment. Another thought there needed to be acknowledgement that the prevalence of students with disability is higher than reported.

One respondent observed that DSP does not fund staff, which differed from HEPPP and ISSP funding.

One commented that the revamped DSP with its focus on enrolment-based funding and broadening of spending categories was good and spreads responsibility beyond equity-specific units.

Another stakeholder saw the DSP setting incentives that push higher education institutions' systems towards a reasonable adjustment model rather than an inclusive design and practice model (support to individual students vs inclusive design).

One respondent also commented on the HEPPP program, that has known design flaws including the duplication of activity, the lack of shared or network-based learnings, the difficulties in measuring direct outcomes and a lack of clear evaluations including demonstrations of how the expenditure directly impacts students from equity groups.

8.1.2 Level of funding/scale

Stakeholders were then asked to what extent they thought the programs were scaled or funded adequately to effectively improve higher education participation and attainment for people with disability.

Stakeholders reflected that the DSP funding was not sufficient to account for the increased enrolments of students with disability nor the educational needs of the cohort when in the higher education participation phase. One stakeholder stated that funds were eaten up by individual supports and left no room for inclusive designs. A Bradley recommendation of $20 million for the DSP has never come to fruition.

As expressed earlier, the disability-specific funding was perceived as a low investment compared to HEPPP and ISSP funding, keeping disability at the periphery of the equity agenda. One stakeholder saw the DSP significantly behind other western nations in relation to expenditure on students with disability in Higher Education (e.g. compared with the UK). ADCET funding was also low given its national function and envisaged impact.

Funding needed to be rebased on current numbers and based on assessments of associated needs.

Stakeholders also remarked that there were other drivers for higher education underrepresentation of people with disability (e.g. related to NDIS, transport standards, relationships between age and disability, and the propensity of identifying mental illness). One respondent also made the point that there are poor employment prospects for people with disability in universities as well as the wider labour market. This would affect access (aspiration building), and success when studying at university due to low representation of staff with disability, which was associated with institutional cultures that are neither literate about, nor sensitive towards, people with disability.

8.1.3   Do Equity Programs work in harness?

Stakeholders were then asked to which extent the existing equity programs work in harness to effectively improve higher education participation and attainment for people with disability.

Stakeholders thought they did not work in harness. DSP as "primarily grounded in reimbursement of funding expended on a narrowly defined set of reasonable adjustments" was not working with HEPPP or ISSP. Collectively, the programs left significant service gaps, one of which was funding for disability-specific outreach. Success rates of students with disability were also declining indicating unmet support needs while in higher education studies.

"To improve the 'working in harness' of disability focused programs a significant investment in systemic supports should be made to support institutions to meet their legal obligations and also design systems and structures which are built with disability in mind." (stakeholder)

8.1.4   Do Equity Programs work in harness with federal income support programs?

Respondents were asked next to which extent these programs worked in harness with federal income support programs (e.g. Youth Allowance, Disability Support Pension).

Only two respondents responded to this question. They expressed that income support (e.g. Disability Support Pension, Youth allowance) was neither financially sufficient nor allowed for flexibilities, notably in terms of part-time study, to effectively support students with disability. These sentiments were expressed in the context of students' perceived study needs and their difficulties finding and retaining part-time work.

8.1.5   What changes to existing suite of programs could be made?

The next question asked survey respondents what changes to the existing suite of equity-specific programs including their regulation could be made to increase higher education participation and attainment of people with disability.

Responses here reflected earlier perceived problems with the structure, governance and funding:

- There should be a disability-led sector-wide disability steering group to coordinate nationally.
- Increase funding to ADCT. It's work in areas of coordination, skill development and advocacy is effective.
- Increase funding to DSP and restructure it so it better incentivises inclusive practice.
- Bring the notification of DSP spending in line with HEPPP and ISSP.
- Include disability (group) explicitly in HEPPP/IRLSAF funding. This should also include the University Specialist Employment Support program funding.
- Provide more scholarships for learning support equipment.

- Provide the Disability Support Pension for all students with disability regardless of study and work status.

The last suggestion was shared by most of the responding stakeholders.

The systemic aspect of needed change was reflected in this response: "What really matters though in Australia is investment in systemic reform, systemic advocacy, whole of sector professional development and training and coordination of activity, ideas, skills and knowledge for the better experiences of students with disability." (stakeholder)

8.2   Accord and suggestions

After the questions on the current equity programs, respondents were presented with a number of questions that sought their views on some of the suggestions in the Interim report of the Accord. Again, stakeholders were prompted to also consider unintended consequences when perusing all the questions.

8.2.1   Targets

The first set of questions was about targets, in which way they could play a role in increasing underrepresentation, and what effective targets could look like.

There were mixed views. Targets could play a role if it comes with appropriate funding for supporting students, and they would need to account for underreporting of disability in HE. One stakeholder warned that targets could only be installed after disability indicators have been aligned, which they thought may not be achieved in a while. Another stakeholder stated that the focus should shift to success in studies and post-university as this was more urgent than increasing numbers of disability students.

8.2.2   Income support

Respondents were then asked in which ways income support payments and their eligibility criteria could be changed to increase higher education participation and attainment of people with disability.

Some stakeholders repeated earlier suggestions to provide the Disability Support Pension to all students with disability, or at least to widen eligibility for part-time students with certain health conditions.

8.2.3   Demand-driven funding

Respondents were then asked whether a demand-driven allocation of funding of study places for all students with disability was a promising way forward and why, or why not, that would be the case.

Responses here did not clearly favour such an option:

- Potentially yes, but it may not be sustainable.
- It would need to ensure appropriate supports and balance between providing supports to such students and the overall quality and sustainability of the higher education system.
- Demand-driven funding for all – yes, demand-driven funding for people with disability will generate problems with defining eligible disability criteria.

8.2.4   Needs-based funding

The next question asked whether needs-based funding that assumes higher needs of underrepresented students could make a difference for people with disability.

Stakeholders who responded to this question thought that it could, if it was accompanied by careful planning, collaboration and holistic support for students, and informed by accurate evaluation mechanisms to assess individual needs, and if the funding would go where it was needed.

8.2.5   Expansion of pathway and preparatory programs

Respondents were then asked in which ways an expansion of available pathway and preparatory programs into higher education studies could increase representation in higher education participation and attainment of people with disability.

Such an expansion of pathways was not seen as a priority by two of the five respondents who thought that fixing student success in the participation phase and fixing employment was more urgent. This is illustrated by a stakeholder's question "Why would you ever do a PhD if you are not seeing professors with disabilities?" that could also be more generally asked in terms of graduate employment for people with disability.

Others thought pathways would be useful for building capabilities, guidance and mentorship, for students to learn to articulate their needs, and as an opportunity to capture data about student needs that is then used to inform universities. It was stressed that preparatory programs would need inputs from people with disability and relevant others in their design, with flexibility, inclusiveness and ongoing evaluation key elements.

8.2.6   What could universities do?

The next question asked what higher education providers could do to most effectively improve higher education participation and attainment of people with disability in the future (e.g. in areas such as outreach, admissions processes, enrolment conditions, scholarships, curriculum and assessment design, pedagogies, support services).

Responses reflected some of the earlier statements with some added content:

- Provide leadership and resources for an institutional reform agenda, an inclusion research strategy.

- Enshrine respect and inclusivity as fundamental principle, accept that disability is part of higher education institutions.

- Design and implement a meaningful disability action plan with monitoring.

- People with disability need to be (heavily) involved when designing and implementing policies and programs. Their involvement in such processes should be adequately remunerated and valued/recognised in promotion processes (such as for academic or professional staff).

- Increase numbers of staff with disability in higher education institutions, including staff in leadership roles with disability.

- Better count students with disability – without aligned measures there is no basis for monitoring and assessment, and targets.

- Universities should move from fixed reference points that define individual adjustments for students with disability to flexible systems and course structures and curriculum.

- Consider needs of students with disability at a whole-of institution level and across the whole student life cycle.

- More disability-specific outreach, better information about pathways, more accessible campuses, changes to admissions (focus on potential for success), flexibility in enrolment, easy navigation of enrolment processes, inclusive teaching, flexible assessment, fully supported disability support services that are professionally recognised, inclusive campuses, adequate numbers of, and caseloads for, disability advisers, disability awareness for all staff.

9.   Summary

9.1.1   Commonalities across the three components

There was a wide range of commonalities in stakeholder responses across the three components of the Consultation Survey. Equity programs were largely perceived to be designed and to work in isolation, which left gaps in covering equity populations. They were also not perceived to be working well together with federal income support programs although equity programs, especially scholarships schemes were sometimes making assumptions about students also receiving federal income support and one stakeholder reported their university attempts to design equity scholarships in line with federal income support programs. This comes with challenges though as was pointed out by others given the frequent changes to federal income support programs, which are not always documented clearly and in a timely fashion.

The structure of equity programs was also seen by some to incentivise individual support measures at the cost of institutional changes across the three survey components.

The level of funding for equity programs was also largely seen as too low across the three components although there were also a few stakeholders who thought the funding was sufficient and/or pointed to the role of universities in spending the funds.

There were also similarities in stakeholder responses when presented with some ideas from the Interim accord report. Ideas of equity-specific targets and equity-specific demand-driven funding were cautiously welcomed but conditional on various things, which mainly related to adequate funding going to those who need it. The same applied to the idea of needs-based funding. Critical for some stakeholders seems to be that there is a proper evidential basis for assessing the funding needs for the different groups at different points. In this context there were references to intersectional students who were seen as needing more support, also across the three consultation components.

An expansion of pathways and preparatory programs had support by some stakeholders across the three survey components, although this too was usually accompanied by qualifications to ensure that preparatory programs were effective for the particular group, or that pathways were relevant (including VET to university pathways).

There were also commonalities in stakeholders' suggestions for improving the equity system in higher education: a national steering of a better integrated equity agenda that is linked to communities, states and higher education providers, demonstrating the value of higher education to communities as part of improved outreach, improved income support (with revised independence/parental/partner income and asset testing clauses and clauses relating to part-time conditions) that is better integrated with equity support measures, a reduction of institutional barriers across the student life course, an emphasis on collaboration, better data collections, longer funding cycles that promote employment stability, planning, monitoring, evaluation and evidenced-informed program-design at local levels and other things were similarly expressed in all three components of the survey.

Another commonality across the three survey components was that there were always comments that declined, or cautioned from, introducing targets, equity-specific demand-driven funding, needs-based funding or an expansion of pathways and preparatory programs.

9.1.2   Nuances across the three components

There were also some nuances in stakeholder feedback captured in the three survey components. Cultural safety was a particular theme in the component concerned with Indigenous underrepresentation. A particular emphasis on an orientation towards family/community vs the individual student when designing and delivering programs at local levels, such as outreach programs, also seemed specific to this group.

Funding and shortcomings with the structure of equity programs were most severely perceived for people with disability. The suggestion to arm students with disability with self-advocacy capabilities before they enter university was unique for this group. The emphasis on inclusiveness also seemed stronger in the disability-

specific component of the survey including references to universal designs in curriculum, assessment and campus spaces. And references to employment outcomes and difficulties of obtaining work also during higher education studies were also more salient for people with disability.

Stakeholders in both, the Indigenous and disability components of the survey also emphasised, the involvement of Indigenous people and people with disability in processes of design and implementation including views that posited that such process need to be led by representatives of these groups.

These and other nuances in stakeholder feedback partially reflect unique situations for the different groups – the long-term consequences of western colonialism for Indigenous people, the well-documented poor employment prospectives for people with disability, including those with a degree, and common experiences of harassment, bullying and discrimination along the life course for both groups, whether rooted in racism or ableism.

Yet, these nuances also point to chances for general change: cultural safety is important for all and may also be a prominent issue among groups not considered as part of this Review, such as LGBTIQ+ people and people from other ethnic or cultural backgrounds. Similarly, universal design in courses and assessment can benefit many students that may not be explicitly included in the groups in scope of this project.

9.1.3 Perspectives and interests

Stakeholders who participated in the Consultation Survey have different perspectives and these can be linked to different interests. The survey then naturally captured different sentiments, some of which are potentially in conflict. Potentially contrasting sentiments related to funding, with some stakeholders wanting more funding for universities with high proportions of students from identified equity groups to more adequately fund the support needs of their student populations or to reward them for their equity performance, while others wanted more funding that incentivises universities with low proportions of students from identified equity groups to target such students more.

There were some differences in preferred approaches to increasing representation with views that saw this happening because of equity-specific programs (programs that specifically targeted the different equity groups) and others favouring non-equity specific approaches. Among the latter were views that equity programs should be centred in universities and mainstreamed to benefit all students or that redesigning broader (student) service functions and then advertising those in areas (disciplines, faculties, programs) especially where a higher prevalence of disadvantaged students can be found would be a more productive approach. Part of the rationale for the former approach is that without such explicit focus on specific equity groups, these groups will just not be sufficiently catered for by higher education institutions because such catering is seen to be more costly and/or to generate less institutional benefits.

Differences of the kind outlined in the above two paragraphs are likely linked to the university that stakeholders belong to and their positioning in the organisational/occupational structure of such universities (e.g. whether one oversees a generic student services unit or an equity-specific unit).

Such views are not necessarily contradictory, however, it is not certain to which degree views are complementary and to which they are contradictory. For example, embedding equity programs in curriculum and its delivery at schools and universities does not necessarily deny programs with equity-specific targeting. It be pointed out though that stakeholder perspectives are, as always, shaped by their positions in the world including their professional positioning in the sector and that the sentiments reported here are influenced by the positions that participating stakeholders occupy in the higher education system. Because of this, the reporting attempted to focus on bringing out the different stakeholder responses while putting less emphasis on associated quantities in the reporting of sentiments.

It is also pointed out that some of the feedback captured in the Consultation Survey was similarly expressed in submissions to the Australian Universities Accord, and some of the participating stakeholders were also involved in submissions to the Accord.

Finally, there is value in capturing some broader sentiments in the higher education sector, especially before and during the design and implementation of significant reform. There is potentially also value in some of the

more detailed suggestions that individual stakeholders make during consultations. The more detailed stakeholder feedback presented in Sections 6, 7 and 8 in this appendix offer opportunities to be further scrutinised in that context.

Attachment A – Expert Consultation Form (A)

Introduction

The *Targeted Review of Student Equity in Higher Education Programs and System Level Policy Levers* is a high-level national review of student equity in higher education, which is being undertaken by the Institute for Social Science Research (ISSR) at the University of Queensland. The project is commissioned by the Department of Education. It supports the equity component of the University Accord Panel's Review of Australia's Higher Education System.

The ISSR project team has reviewed literature, trends and national equity programs. We are now consulting with a wide variety of stakeholders in the Australian higher education sector to explore their views. The data from these consultations will be synthesised with the findings from the preceding steps, inform the final report to the Department of Education, and feed into the University Accord Panel's Review of Australia's Higher Education System.

This component (A) of the consultation focuses on underrepresentation of people from low socio-economic (SES), first in family (FiF), and regional, rural or remote backgrounds (RRR). To put this component of the consultations into context, there are two other components of the consultation, which are concerned with:

- Underrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (B); and
- Underrepresentation of People with disability (C).

All consultations close on **Thursday, 31 August 2023**.

Your feedback

You have been invited as an expert with relevant knowledge and experiences in relation to the underrepresentation of people from low SES, FiF and/or RRR backgrounds in higher education studies. We are seeking your views on the existing equity programs, on suggestions made in the Interim Report of the University Accord Panel's Review of Australia's Higher Education System, and on what else could be done to increase representation of people from low SES, FiF and/or RRR backgrounds in higher education studies.

Please note that we are interested in your individual views; we are <u>not</u> seeking an institutional response/submission. It is completely up to you which questions you respond to and how extensive your responses to questions are. Any response is appreciated!

Current equity-specific programs

1. Australian governments have been funding equity-specific programs to increase higher education participation and attainment for low SES, FiF, RRR and other groups (e.g. Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program, Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program, Enabling Loading Program, Tertiary Access Payment and Regional University Centres) for many years. In responding to the following questions on these programs, please also consider potential unintended consequences in their design or implementation.

In your view:

a) To what extent are these programs <u>structured in the right way</u> to effectively improve higher education participation and attainment for low SES, FiF and RRR people?

b) To what extent are these programs <u>scaled/funded adequately</u> to effectively improve higher education participation and attainment for low SES, FiF and RRR people?

c) To what extent do these programs <u>work in harness</u> to effectively improve higher education participation and attainment for low SES, FiF and RRR people? (e.g., do they interact positively/negatively with another when addressing underrepresentation; what are the gaps in the ways they work together?)

d) To what extent do these programs <u>work in harness with federal income support programs</u> (e.g. Youth Allowance, Austudy)?

e) What <u>changes to the existing suite of equity-specific programs</u> including their regulation could be made to increase higher education participation and attainment of low SES, FiF and RRR people?

Suggestions from the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report

2. The recently released Australian Universities Accord Interim Report hinted at some possible directions for increasing higher education participation and attainment of underrepresented groups in the context of an expanding higher education system. The following questions seek your views on some of those suggested possible directions. In responding to these questions please also consider potential unintended consequences the Accord suggestions could have.

In your view:

a) Could <u>setting targets</u> for underrepresented groups play a role in increasing higher education participation and attainment of low SES, FiF and RRR people? If so, in which ways? What could effective targets look like?

b) In which ways could <u>income support payments</u> and their eligibility criteria (e.g., in relation to 'independence' [Youth Allowance], part-time study and unpaid work placements) be changed to increase higher education participation and attainment of low SES, FiF and RRR people?

c) Is a <u>demand-driven allocation of funding</u> of study places for all low SES, FiF and RRR students a promising way forward? Why/why not?

d) Could a <u>needs-based funding model</u> that assumes higher needs of underrepresented students increase higher education attainment of low SES, FiF and RRR people?

e) In which ways could an <u>expansion of available pathway and preparatory programs</u> into higher education studies increase representation in higher education participation and attainment of low SES, FiF and RRR people?

What could Higher Education providers do (differently)

3. What could higher education providers do to most effectively improve higher education participation and attainment of low SES, FiF and RRR people in the future? (e.g., in areas such as outreach, admissions processes, enrolment conditions, scholarships, curriculum and assessment design, pedagogies, support services)

Anything else

4. Is there anything else that you would like to share that is related to underrepresentation of low SES, FiF or RRR people in higher education participation and attainment?

Acknowledgement of participants

We would like to list the names of participants and their current institutional affiliations in the reporting from this consultation. Do you give your permission to be listed in this way?

Yes ☐   No ☐

If 'Yes', please provide your name and organisational affiliation as you would like to have them listed.

Name	Organisation

Thank you very much for your participation!

Attachment B – Expert Consultation Form (B)

Introduction

The *Targeted Review of Student Equity in Higher Education Programs and System Level Policy Levers* is a high-level national review of student equity in higher education, which is being undertaken by the Institute for Social Science Research (ISSR) at the University of Queensland. The project is commissioned by the Department of Education. It supports the equity component of the University Accord Panel's Review of Australia's Higher Education System.

The ISSR project team has reviewed literature, trends and national equity programs. We are now consulting with a wide variety of stakeholders in the Australian higher education sector to explore their views. The data from these consultations will be synthesised with the findings from the preceding steps, inform the final report to the Department of Education, and feed into the University Accord Panel's Review of Australia's Higher Education System.

This component (B) of the consultation focuses on underrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. To put this component of the consultations into context, there are two other components of the consultation, which are concerned with:

- Underrepresentation of people from low socio-economic status, first in family and regional, rural and remote backgrounds (A); and
- Underrepresentation of People with disability (C).

All consultations close on **Thursday, 31 August 2023**.

Your feedback

You have been invited as an expert with relevant knowledge and experiences in relation to the underrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in higher education studies. We are seeking your views on the existing equity programs, on suggestions made in the Interim Report of the University Accord Panel's Review of Australia's Higher Education System, and on what else could be done to increase representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in higher education studies.

Please note that we are interested in your individual views; we are not seeking an institutional response/submission. It is completely up to you which questions you respond to and how extensive your responses to questions are. Any response is appreciated!

Current equity-specific programs

1. Australian governments have been funding equity-specific programs to increase higher education participation and attainment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other groups (e.g. Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program, Indigenous Student Success Program and Demand-driven access for Indigenous people in regional, rural and remote areas) for many years. In responding to the following questions on these programs, please also consider potential unintended consequences in their design or implementation.

In your view:

a) To what extent are these programs structured in the right way to effectively improve higher education participation and attainment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?

b) To what extent are these programs <u>scaled/funded adequately</u> to effectively improve higher education participation and attainment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?

c) To what extent do these programs <u>work in harness</u> to effectively improve higher education participation and attainment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people? (e.g., do they interact positively/negatively with another when addressing underrepresentation; what are the gaps in the ways they work together?)

d) To what extent do these programs <u>work in harness with federal income support programs</u> (e.g. Youth Allowance, Abstudy)?

e) What <u>changes to the existing suite of equity-specific programs</u> including their regulation could be made to increase higher education participation and attainment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?

Suggestions from the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report

2. The recently released Australian Universities Accord Interim Report hinted at some possible directions for increasing higher education participation and attainment of underrepresented groups in the context of an expanding higher education system. The following questions seek your views on some of those suggested possible directions. In responding to these questions please also consider potential unintended consequences the Accord suggestions could have.

In your view:

a) Could <u>setting targets</u> for underrepresented groups play a role in increasing higher education participation and attainment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people? If so, in which ways? What could effective targets look like?

b) In which ways could <u>income support payments</u> and their eligibility criteria (e.g., in relation to 'independence' [Youth Allowance], part-time study and unpaid work placements) be changed to increase higher education participation and attainment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?

c) Is a <u>demand-driven allocation of funding</u> of study places for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students a promising way forward? Why/why not?

d) Could a <u>needs-based funding model</u> that assumes higher needs of underrepresented students increase higher education attainment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?

e) In which ways could an <u>expansion of available pathway and preparatory programs</u> into higher education studies increase representation in higher education participation and attainment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?

What could Higher Education providers do (differently)

3. What could higher education providers do to most effectively improve higher education participation and attainment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the future? (e.g., in areas such as outreach, admissions processes, enrolment conditions, scholarships, curriculum and assessment design, pedagogies, support services)

Anything else

4. Is there anything else that you would like to share that is related to underrepresentation Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in higher education participation and attainment?

Acknowledgement of participants

We would like to list the names of participants and their current institutional affiliations in the reporting from this consultation. Do you give your permission to be listed in this way?

Yes ☐   No ☐

If 'Yes', please provide your name and organisational affiliation as you would like to have them listed.

Name	Organisation

Thank you very much for your participation!

Attachment C – Expert Consultation Form (C)

Introduction

The *Targeted Review of Student Equity in Higher Education Programs and System Level Policy Levers* is a high-level national review of student equity in higher education, which is being undertaken by the Institute for Social Science Research (ISSR) at the University of Queensland. The project is commissioned by the Department of Education. It supports the equity component of the University Accord Panel's Review of Australia's Higher Education System.

The ISSR project team has reviewed literature, trends and national equity programs. We are now consulting with a wide variety of stakeholders in the Australian higher education sector to explore their views. The data from these consultations will be synthesised with the findings from the preceding steps, inform the final report to the Department of Education, and feed into the University Accord Panel's Review of Australia's Higher Education System.

This component (C) of the consultation focuses on underrepresentation of people with disability. To put this component of the consultations into context, there are two other components of the consultation, which are concerned with:

- Underrepresentation of people from low socio-economic status, first in family and regional, rural and remote backgrounds (A); and
- Underrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (B).

All consultations close on **Thursday, 31 August 2023**.

Your feedback

You have been invited as an expert with relevant knowledge and experiences in relation to the underrepresentation of people with disability in higher education studies. We are seeking your views on the existing equity programs, on suggestions made in the Interim Report of the University Accord Panel's Review of Australia's Higher Education System, and on what else could be done to increase representation of people with disability in higher education studies.

Please note that we are interested in your individual views; we are <u>not</u> seeking an institutional response/submission. It is completely up to you which questions you respond to and how extensive your responses to questions are. Any response is appreciated!

Current equity-specific programs

5. Australian governments have been funding equity-specific programs to increase higher education participation and attainment for people with disability and other groups (e.g. Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program, Disability Support Program) for many years. In responding to the following questions on these programs, please also consider potential unintended consequences in their design or implementation.

In your view:

f) To what extent are these programs <u>structured in the right way</u> to effectively improve higher education participation and attainment for people with disability?

g) To what extent are these programs <u>scaled/funded adequately</u> to effectively improve higher education participation and attainment for people with disability?

h) To what extent do these programs <u>work in harness</u> to effectively improve higher education participation and attainment for people with disability? (e.g., do they interact positively/negatively with another when addressing underrepresentation; what are the gaps in the ways they work together?)

i) To what extent do these programs <u>work in harness with federal income support programs</u> (e.g. Youth Allowance, Disability Support Pension)?

j) What <u>changes to the existing suite of equity-specific programs</u> including their regulation could be made to increase higher education participation and attainment of people with disability?

Suggestions from the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report

6. The recently released Australian Universities Accord Interim Report hinted at some possible directions for increasing higher education participation and attainment of underrepresented groups in the context of an expanding higher education system. The following questions seek your views on some of those suggested possible directions. In responding to these questions please also consider potential unintended consequences the Accord suggestions could have.

In your view:

f) Could <u>setting targets</u> for underrepresented groups play a role in increasing higher education participation and attainment of people with disability? If so, in which ways? What could effective targets look like?

g) In which ways could <u>income support payments</u> and their eligibility criteria (e.g., in relation to 'independence' [Youth Allowance], part-time study and unpaid work placements) be changed to increase higher education participation and attainment of people with disability?

h) Is a <u>demand-driven allocation of funding</u> of study places for all students with disability a promising way forward? Why/why not?

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i) Could <u>a needs-based funding model</u> that assumes higher needs of underrepresented students increase higher education attainment of people with disability?

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j) In which ways could an <u>expansion of available pathway and preparatory programs</u> into higher education studies increase representation in higher education participation and attainment of people with disability?

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What could Higher Education providers do (differently)

7. What could higher education providers do to most effectively improve higher education participation and attainment of people with disability in the future? (e.g., in areas such as outreach, admissions processes, enrolment conditions, scholarships, curriculum and assessment design, pedagogies, support services)

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Anything else

8. Is there anything else that you would like to share that is related to underrepresentation people with disability in higher education participation and attainment?

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Acknowledgement of participants

We would like to list the names of participants and their current institutional affiliations in the reporting from this consultation. Do you give your permission to be listed in this way?

Yes ☐   No ☐

If 'Yes', please provide your name and organisational affiliation as you would like to have them listed.

Name	Organisation

Thank you very much for your participation!

Attachment D – Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Project title

Targeted Review of Student Equity in Higher Education Programs and System Level Policy Levers

Project leads

- A/Prof Wojtek Tomaszewski, Principal Research Fellow, ISSR, w.tomaszewski@uq.edu.au

- Dr Melissa Johnstone, Senior Research Fellow, ISSR, m.johnstone@uq.edu.au

- Dr Mark Robinson, Senior Research Fellow, ISSR, mark.robinson@uq.edu.au

- Dr Matthew Curry, Research Fellow, ISSR, matthew.curry@uq.edu.au

Voluntary participation

Your participation is completely voluntary, and you have full discretion over your input and participation. This includes being able to withdraw your participation whenever you desire and providing as much or as little input as you consider feasible and appropriate.

Storage of information

All information collected through the stakeholder process will be stored on the University of Queensland's Research Data Manager (UQRDM) system and will only be accessible to selected members of the project team who will code and analyse the collected feedback. Identifying information of stakeholders will be stored separately from stakeholder feedback. In time, this information will be archived with other project documentation based on the University of Queensland's standard archiving procedures.

The originally captured data in the on-line survey tool will be deleted upon completion of the data collection and the transferral of the data to UQRDM.

Use of information

Information collected through the consultation survey will be coded to themes, analysed and reported to the Department of Education, and will influence the findings from our Review. The reporting of feedback will ensure confidentiality of participants. In reporting stakeholder feedback we may select some quotes from the feedback and may make reference to stakeholder types (e.g., 'Practitioner', 'Service manager', 'Researcher') where this can enhance the reporting and where this does not jeopardise the identity of a participant.

Acknowledgement

Participating experts will be acknowledged and listed in the reporting that emanates from this project (unless this is not desired by participants).

Ethics Approval

The project was reviewed by the UQ Ethics Committee and has been granted an exemption from Human Research Ethics Review (project number 2023/HE001063).

Attachment E – Invitation email to survey

Dear [insert name]

We are now commencing the consultations of the *Targeted Review of Student Equity in Higher Education Programs and System Level Policy Levers*.

Please share with us your professional views on existing and potential future ways of improving underrepresentation in higher education studies.

Your feedback is important and will be synthesised with the findings from other components of the project to inform the derivation of conclusions in the final report to the Department of Education, which will also inform the Universities Accord Panel.

Click here to start the online form [insert hyperlink to survey].

I have attached a Word version of the online form so that you can peruse the information and questions prior to filling in the online form. The Participant Information Sheet is also attached. **Please note that by participating in these consultations you consent to the conditions specified in the Participant Information Sheet.**

Please provide your feedback by **Thursday 31 August**.

We thank you for your time and we look forward to your feedback.

Regards

Wojtek

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Attachment F – Email with information about upcoming consultation

Subject: Targeted Equity Review Project – Expert Consultations

Dear «First_name»

We are reaching out to you to invite you to participate in a consultation survey. The consultations are part of the *Targeted Review of Student Equity in Higher Education Programs and System Level Policy Levers* project being undertaken by the University of Queensland's Institute for Social Science Research. The project has been commissioned by the Department of Education.

What this is about?

The Targeted Review of Student Equity in Higher Education Programs and System Level Policy Levers is a high-level national review of student equity in higher education, including examination of the student equity ecosystem, current student outcomes, higher education equity funding, and broader policy levers. The Review is intended to provide advice as to how system settings may be optimised to widen access and participation, and increase retention, success, completion and transition to employment or further study for under-represented and educationally disadvantaged cohorts, and to identifying the targeted changes needed to improve student outcomes. The project supports the equity component of the University Accord Panel's Review of Australia's Higher Education System.

To this end, we are approaching professionals in relevant settings in the higher education sector, professionals with expertise related to the underrepresentation of one or several of the following groups in scope of the Review:

- people from low socio-economic background;
- people whose parents have to university education;
- people from regional and remote areas;
- First Nation Australians; and
- people with disability.

What are we asking from you?

We would very much welcome your participation in the consultations. The consultation will be conducted in August/September and facilitated by an online form with a small number of open-ended questions, which will cover two areas: (i) perceived assessments of current equity programs, and (ii) thoughts on raising higher education representation of relevant groups in the future.

You will receive an email with a link to the online form on Thursday, 10 August. The survey format will allow participation in your own time within a specified period (approximately three weeks). Alternatively, we could organise to undertake this consultation in a different format (e.g., phone or zoom) at a time that is convenient for you. Your participation in this consultation would be completely voluntary and your input at your discretion. More information is provided in the attached information sheet.

If you do not want to receive an email with a link to the consultation survey, please let us know by return email **by 9 August**.

Thank you for your consideration.

Regards

Wojtek

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Attachment G – Participating stakeholders who identified in the survey

Twenty six of the 30 participating stakeholders self-identified and agreed to be listed in this report.

Table 2: Participating stakeholders who agreed to be listed in this report

Name	Organisation
Cate Rooney	Central Queensland University
Catherine Burnheim and Caitlin Ryan	University of Melbourne
Cathy Easte	Griffith University
Cathy Stone	The University of Newcastle
Daniel Edwards	The Australian Council for Educational Research
Darlene McLennan	Australian Disability Clearing House on Education and Training
Denise Wood AM	University of Sunshine Coast
Ewan Evans	University of Melbourne
James Smith	Flinders University
Karen Nelson	University of Southern Queensland
Kylie Austin	Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia
Lara Rafferty	Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology
Leanne Holt	Macquarie University
Lexi Rollins	The University of Notre Dame Australia
Linda Adnyana	Curtin University
Matt Brett	Deakin University
Nicola Cull	Australian Catholic University
Peter Oslewski	Deakin University
Peter Torjul	Flinders University
Ryan Naylor	The University of Sydney
Sarah O'Shea	Charles Sturt University
Shamit Saggar, Paul Koshy, Ian Lee, Lien Pham, Gemma Cadby and John Phillimore	National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education
Sharlene Leroy-Dyer	University of Queensland
Sonal Singh	University of Technology Sydney
Stuart Upton	Macquarie University
Sue Kilpatrick	University of Tasmania