

**Submission by the Centre for Research in Educational and Social Inclusion, University of South Australia, in response to the Interim Report of the Australian Universities Accord**

We make this submission on behalf of the [Centre for Research in Educational and Social Inclusion](#) (CRESI), University of South Australia (UniSA). CRESI is one of the largest research concentrations in the world focused on contributing to new knowledge about issues related to educational and social inclusion. Our mission is to generate research to inform inclusive policy and practices across the lifespan.

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We welcome the directions of the Interim Report and the opportunity to provide comments. The major concern of this submission is to draw attention to some relevant innovations in equity in “newer” and regional universities, including our own, and to the necessity of a system in which all universities and courses are premised on equity in access and experience. We highlight three key areas identified in the Interim Report in which we can share positive experiences: the essential role played by enabling programs and pathways; placing First Nations at the heart of Higher Education (HE); and broader considerations on the indissociability of excellence and equity.

**Enabling programs**

We welcome the call for funding stability for the university sector for 2024 and 2025 and for increased support for students in enabling courses. Enabling programs play an essential role in ensuring equal and fairer access to HE for all and evidence shows they are an effective way to improve access for equity groups (NCSEHE, 2017; Bennett et al., 2016). UniSA College was established in 2011 and offers 27 courses, including academic literacy courses and discipline specific preparatory courses. Appendix 1 shows student equity data at UniSA and UniSA college for the period 2018-2020 (Hattam et al., 2023, p.9-12). Sixty-four percent of students that enrol in enabling programs at UniSA belong to a defined equity group, with 56.5 percent in 2019 coming from low socio-economic status groups (SES) (ibid, p.7).

Ensuring uncapped places for Indigenous students in universities and extending uncapped places to enabling students (a growing proportion of whom are of First Nations background and the majority of

**Recommendations**

1. Enabling programs should remain free of tuition fees and additional and flexible financial support provided to students in need, for instance, by adding an internet allowance to student payments.
2. To ensure that quality is maintained, enabling programs should remain under the supervision of universities. This also ensures a smooth transition to university and appropriate support for students. Support should not just be financial in nature, but also focused towards a smooth transition into university life for students coming from equity groups, including a better use of Aboriginal centres and tailored mental health support. It is important that enabling units undergo university quality assurance, while maintaining flexibility based on the different needs of each state and region.
3. Enabling programs should be included in the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) to ensure formal recognition for access to different institutions and to accommodate diversity across enabling programs in AQF.

whom are from low SES backgrounds) would be a practical step towards more equitable participation in higher education.

### **First Nations at the heart of Higher Education**

We support the panel's effort to move beyond inclusion, through its "commitment to empowerment of First Nations people with a self-determined approach developed in relation to funding and policy settings at both a national and institutional level." We welcome in particular the recommendations for: creating a First Nations Higher Education Council; moving towards a self-determined approach to national funding and policy settings in relation to First Nations students, employment, teaching, research and engagement; enhancing research capability for First Nations knowledges and for collaboration and partnerships between First Nations communities, governments, universities and industry.

#### **Additional recommendation**

1. Ensure that engagement with Indigenous languages and knowledge systems is provided to ALL university students, regardless of their chosen course and not just to those undertaking Indigenous studies, as a step towards recognising the contribution of First Nations' knowledge systems can play to build a better future for Australian society as a whole.

In 2017, UniSA established the Aboriginal Pathway Program, a tailored, culturally responsive block-delivery enabling program offered to Aboriginal students across South Australia through on-campus lectures and tutorials in four regional locations, grounded on the inclusion of Aboriginal knowledge systems and co-designed with Aboriginal elders and scholars (Hattam et al., p.11). In 2021, UniSA had the highest reported number of Aboriginal students in South Australia (591 students). We welcome the panel's recommendation of ensuring that all First Nations students are guaranteed funded places at university.

### **Making equity and social inclusivity indissociable dimensions of excellence**

Increasing participation in the system and changes to student funding alone may not alter existing hierarchies and exclusions *within* the HE system. For this to change, the definition of excellence in all domains of HE must be indissociable from democratic access and involvement from all segments of society. The danger in system expansion is that teaching, research and industry programs that are socially exclusive may remain so while "new" and regional universities and courses carry the work of equity and equity-focused innovation even as they remain in the most precarious regions of a hierarchical national system. Proof of the current dissociation of excellence from equity is that the Group of Eight Universities, considered to embody excellence in ranking exercises, are the most socially exclusive (see Interim Report, p. 70). The institutions that rank lower and attract fewer resources are those where equity innovations are currently concentrated, as evidenced by the Interim Report's examples.

*In relation to funding*, linking university funding and evaluation to increased equity intake in all courses and campuses will have flow-on benefits to the school system, by reducing the signals to parents that access to high-status courses can only be guaranteed via socially segregated secondary schools (Windle, 2015). The historical dominance of a small group of socially elite schools and universities means that best practice in teaching, learning and research has been defined by the needs and experiences of a socially narrow base. This needs to change in both established sites that have led historical models, and expanding sites that provide access to a broader social spectrum of students. At present, deficit views of students from equity groups are part of the disassociation of institutional excellence from institutional capacity to promote social inclusion. Such deficit views blame individuals for their lack of success at university instead of considering the social, political and economic location

of the individual. All universities have responsibility for addressing the educational alienation experienced by non-traditional students once enrolled in their programs (Burke, 2013).

*In relation to student support*, as mentioned for enabling programs, income support is essential and should be connected to other goals, e.g., linked to activities that contribute to community engagement, research and industry connections. Scholarships for participation in research and community engagement projects contributing to equity agendas are offered to secondary and HE students in other systems (e.g., Brazil) as part of wider affirmative action policy frameworks.

*In relation to models of teaching and learning*, as acknowledged by the panel, if Australia wants to increase the percentages of students going into HE, particularly from equity groups, it must ensure that the increasing diversity of student cohorts is taken into account. Curriculum design must be collaborative and responsive to students' needs. CRESI researchers have addressed this need through engagement with the theory of 'enabling pedagogies' (Stokes 2014; Bennett et al 2016). Enabling pedagogies have a strong focus on valuing cultural diversity and support teaching *for* diversity, while ensuring achieving student excellence and addressing inequalities (Hattam et al., 2023). They are designed to support the transition of diverse learners between educational settings that encompass critical pedagogies through challenging tasks; scaffolding; connecting to life-worlds and valuing diverse knowledges and learner's emotions (Hattam et al 2023a; Hattam et al 2023b; Hattam 2023). Institutional adoption of critical enabling pedagogies across HE would ensure that students who are first-in-family or belong to a recognised equity group are engaged and supported in their learning.

CRESI researchers have also led research on the benefits of culturally responsive pedagogies in schools and how these can benefit students' sense of belonging and, in turn, improve attendance, learning, and reaching their highest potential (Rigney, 2023). Rigney defines culturally responsive pedagogies as "pedagogies that value students' cultural assets and require teachers who are capable of engaging students from diverse backgrounds in rigorous learning" (p.4). The learnings from culturally responsive pedagogies can be applied to HE contexts where educators must strive to deliver quality education to diverse student cohorts and "improve the 'educational outcomes of marginalised youth' by using their 'cultural characteristics, experiences and perspectives as conduits for teaching them more effectively'" (ibid, quoting Gay, 2002, p.106). These findings are in line with enabling and culturally responsive pedagogies.

## Recommendations

1. Universities should only be considered centres of excellence if they cater to the full social breadth of the population and contribute to redressing inequalities in access and participation. Courses and universities should be evaluated and funded by a measure of social inclusivity of enrolments and other affirmative action targets (such as those on p.51 of the Interim Report).
2. Universities should be legislatively required to have a socially inclusive student body (including international students) in all courses through the establishment of affirmative action procedures for access and retention of students. This could include a target of at least 50% of enrolments from non-selective public-school students in all higher education courses.
3. Establish a role for universities in contributing to equity in school-level education to further strengthen equity in HE, including awareness raising on the consequences of deficit discourses. Universities should be funded to engage with underrepresented schools and communities through research and community development projects as part of their core mission, as suggested in the Interim Report (p. 73, p. 103). This work should involve paid roles for university students from underrepresented groups in the form of scholarships or employment.
4. University lecturers must be appropriately supported by their institutions to develop pedagogical practices that create an environment of trust, belonging and inclusion.
5. Universities should include the delivery of professional learning in pedagogical approaches that support students' engagement and transition into university.

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## Appendix 1

*Table 1: student equity data at UniSA and UniSA college for the period 2018-2020 (Hattam et al., 2023)*

<b>UniSA Equity Data Comparisons</b>	<b>All UniSA</b>	<b>UniSA College</b>
Low SES	23.11%	53.25%
NESB	4.72%	10.70%
Disability	8.47%	16.35%
ATSI	1.28%	8.56%