

# Widening Participation in Australian Higher Education

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# Contents

<b>1  Introduction</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2  Education in Australia</b>	<b>8</b>
The education system	8
The Australian Government's role in education	8
System effects on progression to HE	10
<b>3  Higher education</b>	<b>12</b>
Sector configuration and funding	12
Institutional diversity	13
Student admission processes for undergraduate entry	14
Demand for and supply of university places	15
Student mobility/transfer between universities	16
<b>4  Widening participation data</b>	<b>18</b>
The database	18
Student access	19
Student participation	21
Student retention	22
Student success	24
Student completion	25
Institutional, disciplinary and programme differences between student groups	28
Rates of progression into graduate employment and postgraduate study	33
<b>5  Widening participation policy</b>	<b>35</b>
Participation and Attainment Targets	35
Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP)	37
Mission-Based Compacts and Performance Funding	38
<b>6  Target groups for WP</b>	<b>41</b>
Target group identification and definition	41

Measuring the SES of HE students	42
Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people: HE review	44
<b>7  Widening access</b>	<b>45</b>
Partnerships in widening access	45
The Queensland Consortium of universities	46
Designing and evaluating outreach programs	47
<b>8  Retention, completion and progression</b>	<b>49</b>
Policy levers	49
Student support strategies	49
Learning and teaching strategies	50
Progression to graduate employment and postgraduate study	52
<b>9  Financial support</b>	<b>53</b>
The Higher Education Contribution Scheme	53
Youth Allowance	54
Financial support for Indigenous students	55
Financial support for students with disabilities	56
Scholarships	56
Research papers, reports and evaluations of HECS and student finances	57
<b>10  Critical review</b>	<b>59</b>
Equity: in pursuit of the 20% target	59
Aspiration: in pursuit of the 40% target	61
Challenges for policy and practice	63
<b>11  Conclusions</b>	<b>65</b>
University outreach activities	65
Financial support systems	65
Similarities in low and high SES student retention rates	66
Mature-age/adult students	66
Inequalities at the postgraduate level	67
WP in Australia: concluding comments	68
<b>Appendix 1   References</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>Appendix 2   List of abbreviations</b>	<b>76</b>
<b>Appendix 3   Institutions, groupings and world rankings</b>	<b>79</b>

# 1| Introduction

- 1.1 This report documents the current approach to widening participation (WP) in Australian higher education (HE) (as at June 2013). The WP policy has a long history in Australian HE, arguably beginning with the establishment of the nation's first university (The University of Sydney) in the mid-1800s which enabled access to HE for those unable to make the long journey to England in order to take up a university place. Other milestones in the nation's WP journey include post-WWII nation rebuilding, the Whitlam expansions of the mid-1970s and the Dawkins reforms of the 1980s/1990s.<sup>1</sup> The current Rudd/Gillard targets are the latest in a long line of WP policy interventions. The main focus of these Australian Government interventions has been on increasing access to HE, particularly for people from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds – by definition, 25% of the nation's population<sup>2</sup> – but also for other target groups including Australia's Indigenous peoples (see Chapter 6).
- 1.2 Since 1990 this focus has been refined by the use of the term 'equity':<sup>3</sup> the notion that the representation of people from low SES backgrounds (and other target or 'equity groups') within the university student population should be the same as their representation within the broader population. 'Proportional representation' defines equity in Australian HE, although it does not necessarily define equity policy and practice. For example, the current target – that by 2020 20% of undergraduate students should be from low SES backgrounds – is aimed towards equity, while still falling short of it. There is also considerable variation in how equity is understood within university public statements. Australia's National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education provides clarity to the term, arguing that equity is predicated on the recognition that:
- '...social systems (including education systems) tend to produce unequal outcomes (advantage and disadvantage), and that in part this is because individuals' starting positions and the processes involved in the production of social and economic outcomes are unfair. In this context, a commitment to equity is a commitment to adjusting social systems for socially just means and ends. In short, **equity is a strategy**: (a) to achieve (more) socially just ends; and (b) is informed by a theory about why and how a particular social system is not just.' (NCSEHE 2011: v; emphasis added)
- 1.3 The approach of successive Australian governments to advance equity in HE has drawn from and contributed to a WP policy in other nations, particularly England. For example, Australia's Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) and its equity

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<sup>1</sup> See Gale & Tranter (2011; 2012) for a detailed historical and conceptual account of the growth of student participation in Australian HE.

<sup>2</sup> The lowest quartile of the population, based on Australian Bureau of Statistics Index of Education and Occupation.

<sup>3</sup> The recent *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* (Behrendt et al. 2012) uses the word 'parity' in place of 'equity,' but with similar meaning.

performance indicators (monitoring target group access, participation, retention and success) now inform the policy approaches of several nations around the world. Australia's HE system is very similar to the English system. The approach to WP has also been similar, albeit pursued in alternating periods of policy in/activity.

- 1.4 As far as possible, the following chapters use English terms to describe Australian agendas. They begin with broad accounts of the Australian education system as a backdrop to its HE sector before elaborating on the WP policy and practice. The report concludes with a brief critique of these and potential points of interest for the English context.

## 2| Education in Australia

### The education system

- 2.1 Formal education in Australia is the constitutional responsibility of the nation's six states and two territories. It is generally organized into four sectors:
- > *early childhood education* (approx. the under fives), including pre-school and kindergarten (the exceptions being in New South Wales (NSW) and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), where kindergarten is the first year of schooling). Child care is also often linked with early childhood education;
  - > *schooling*, spread over 13 years beginning with Reception or the Preparatory Year (Prep) or Kindergarten (Kinder), then Years 1 to 12. In some states schooling is spread over 12 years when Reception/Prep/Kinder is a non-compulsory year. Primary school ends with Year 6 (Year 7 in some states). The final school certificate (e.g. Victorian Certificate of Education: VCE) is usually studied in the last two years of secondary school (Years 11 and 12). Secondary schools are often referred to as high schools or secondary colleges;
  - > *vocational education and training* (VET), with some VET certificates (Cert I and Cert II) is also offered in secondary schools. Public (state government) VET institutions are known as Technical and Further Education institutes or colleges (TAFEs);
  - > *HE*, predominantly provided by universities, although some VET and private HEPs also offer bachelor and associate degrees in low student numbers compared with universities. There are some institutions that are both a university and a TAFE. All but one of these dual sector institutions (i.e. Charles Darwin University in the Northern Territory) are located in the state of Victoria.

### The Australian Government's role in education

- 2.2 A defining feature of education in Australia is the country's federal-state relationship and the increasing involvement of the Australian Federal Government. While education is a constitutional responsibility, retained by the nation's six states at the time of Australia's federation in 1901, the Australian Government has greater access to the financial resources needed to manage the states' education systems. This imbalance was created during WWII, when the states transferred their right to collect income tax to the Australian Government in order to fund Australia's war effort. Since that time the Australian Government's involvement in the nation's education systems and institutions has increased, justified as a nation-building exercise.
- 2.3 This increased involvement in education by the Australian Government began in 1942 with the establishment of the Universities Commission to assist the implementation of the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme which provided financial support for returned servicemen to undertake university studies alongside apprenticeships and



other forms of adult education. In 1951 the Australian Government also began contributing to university funding via the States Grants (Universities) Act, and in 1967 it established Colleges of Advanced Education (CAEs) as part of the overall expansion of HE at this time, including funding support for the establishment of the suite of multidisciplinary universities (most Innovative Research Universities (IRUs)). Then in 1974 the state and federal governments reached an agreement for the Australian Government to assume financial and managerial responsibility for the nation's universities and CAEs (including teachers colleges) under the auspices of the newly established Tertiary Education Commission. In the late 1980s/early 1990s the CAEs were amalgamated with and/or became universities in their own right as part of the Unified National System of HE.

- 2.4 Australian Government involvement in the states' (public and private) schooling sector has tended to involve targeted funding, sometimes through state and Catholic departments of education and sometimes directly to schools. This began in the 1960s with national funding for secondary school science laboratories and libraries, and became more systematic in the 1970s with the introduction of funding for the nation's disadvantaged schools. Nevertheless, in 1974, Australian Government funding per private school student was around five times the level for each public school student.<sup>4</sup> This disproportionate financial support by the Australian Government (Gonski et al. 2011) intensified during the mid-1990s to mid-2000s, favouring non-government schools (i.e. private or independent schools, including low and high fee Catholic schools) over government schools (i.e. public schools). The funding saved high fee independent schools and Catholic systemic schools (now 95% publically subsidised, although technically still independent of government) from closure.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, it enabled the expansion of the private school sector. Where once government schooling was the norm for the vast majority of Australians, it is in danger of becoming a residual system for students who cannot meet private school selection criteria, including having parents who are unable to afford private school tuition fees. A recent analysis of Australian census data shows that:

'Government schools have almost twice as many students from low income families as they have from high income families, while other (non-Catholic) nongovernment schools reverse this trend, having twice as many students from high income families as they have from low income families. Catholic schools have more students from high income families than from low income families, and the largest proportion of students in Catholic schools are from medium income families.' (Preston 2013: 5)

- 2.5 In some states, the government system has internally replicated these socioeconomic differences by establishing 'selective' secondary schools, which select students on academic merit in relation to the school's declared speciality (e.g. mathematics, music, etc.). These selective schools have contributed to retaining 65% of Australian students in government schools (Preston 2013).

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<sup>4</sup> NB: the bulk of funding for government schools was still provided by their respective state or territory government.

<sup>5</sup> Students enrolled in Catholic schools are generally from higher SES backgrounds than students enrolled in government schools (Preston 2013).

## System effects on progression to HE

- 2.6 The result of this Australian Government involvement has been the homogenisation of students within Australian schools. That is, students from low SES backgrounds (the lowest socioeconomic quartile of the Australian population) tend to be concentrated in government schools, while those from high SES backgrounds (the highest socioeconomic quartile) tend to be concentrated in non-government or selective high schools. Recent international comparative research attributes the poorer results attained by Australian secondary students on international tests (i.e. Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)) to this homogenisation (Perry & McConney 2010a; 2010b).
- 2.7 Within Australia, academic achievement is also highly correlated with SES background (Wilkinson & Pickett 2009). As a result, students from low SES backgrounds tend to receive lower Australian Tertiary Admission Ranks (ATARs) – the mechanism used to determine university entry – while students from high SES backgrounds tend to receive high ATARs (Teese & Polesel 2003). That is, ‘the ATAR is more indicative of socioeconomic status than it is of a student’s academic potential’ (Gale 2012: 246). One impact of this is that progression to HE is unequal across socioeconomic groups. For example, in Victoria 44.6% of 2011 final year secondary school students from low SES backgrounds enrolled in a bachelor degree in 2012. The comparable percentage for students from high SES backgrounds was 60.5% (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) 2012).
- 2.8 Similar percentages apply to government and non-government school students who progress to university (Teese et al. 2004). Government schooling (excluding selective high schools) is a proxy for low SES which is highly correlated with low student achievement, while non-government schooling (particularly high-fee independent schools) is a proxy for high SES, which is highly correlated with high achievement.
- 2.9 The following table documents students’ post-school destinations (in 2011) from a selection of Victorian secondary schools (in 2010) and illustrates the extremes of school differences in student progression rates to HE.

**Table 2.1: Students’ post-school destinations from select Victorian secondary schools**

<b>POST-SCHOOL DESTINATIONS (2011)</b>	<b>Presbyterian Ladies’ College (high-fee non-govt school)</b>	<b>Melbourne High School (selective govt high school)</b>	<b>Kilbreda College (low-fee Catholic secondary college)</b>	<b>Hoppers Crossing Secondary College (non-selective govt school)</b>
University	92%	92%	61%	26%
TAFE/vocational study	4%	1%	20%	42%
Employment	1%	1%	8%	19%
Other	3%	6%	11%	13%

Source: <http://www.myschool.edu.au/>

2.10 Therefore, in Australia the most significant indicators of potential progression from school to HE are a student's SES background and the secondary school attended. This is confirmed in a recent analysis of Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) data, which indicates that school attributes (i.e. school type and student diversity) are responsible for almost 20% of ATAR variation between students (Gemici et al. 2013).

## 3| Higher education

### Sector configuration and funding

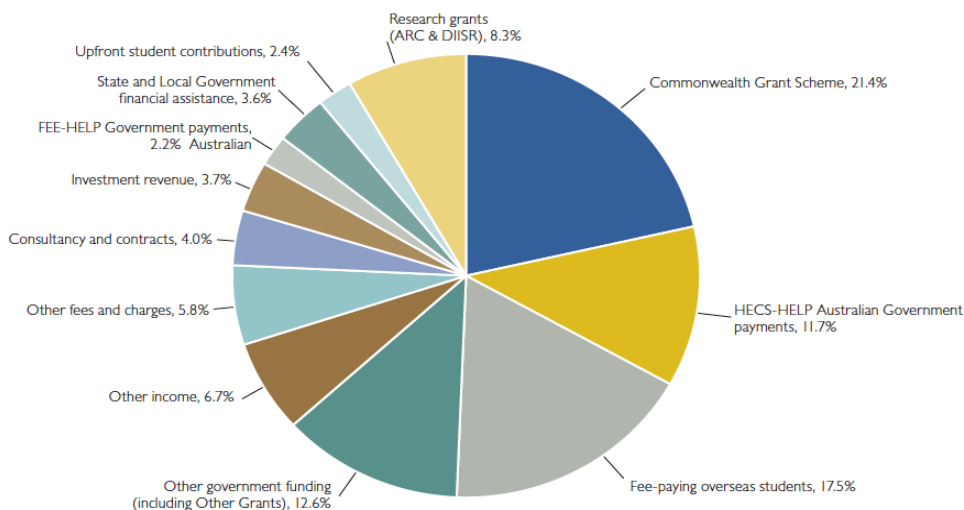
- 3.1 Australia has 37 public universities and two private universities established through government legislation as self-accrediting HEPs. Two other non-university tertiary education institutions – one public and one private – also have self-accrediting HEP status. By agreement with the states, the Australian Government funds and manages the sector, although only public institutions (37 universities and one tertiary education institute) – listed as Table A providers (see Appendix 2) in the Australian Government's *Higher Education Support Act 2003* – are federally funded and eligible to access certain Australian Government schemes (such as the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP)).<sup>6</sup>
- 3.2 In 2010, 33.1% of public university income was derived from Australian Government based funding (Commonwealth Grant Scheme and HECS-HELP payments). Fees paid by domestic students are deferred repayments to Government (through the taxation system; see Chapter 9). The Government pays an upfront amount to universities in lieu of these repayments, recorded below as HECS-HELP (Higher Education Contribution Scheme-Higher Education Loan Program) payments. The bulk of university income is derived from full fee-paying international students, competitive research grants, consultancies, property and investment income, and donations and bequests. Figure 3.1 overleaf provides a breakdown of university revenue by source.
- 3.3 Self-accrediting HEPs listed in the *Higher Education Support Act 2003* as Table B or Table C providers are treated as private providers in the Australian HE sector and are not financially supported by the Australian Government. The three Table B providers were established by government legislation. The two Table C providers were established by the legislation of a jurisdiction outside Australia and given approval by the Australian Government to operate as a private university within Australia.
- 3.4 Some Australian VET institutions (predominantly private but also a number of public, TAFE institutions) also offer associate and bachelor degrees accredited by the recently established Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) which is a federal and state government initiative introduced to regulate the quality of Australian higher education provision. VET degrees first appeared in the mid-to-late 1990s and their popularity has increased over time. Even so, student enrolments remain small compared with universities. NSW – the state with the greatest participation in these associate and bachelor degrees – had 9,135 student enrolments in 2011 (DIICSRTE 2013). Private institutions offer most of these degrees, although Technical and Further Education institutes (TAFEs) contribute a significant number. Even though they are public (state government) institutions, TAFEs are not Table A higher education

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<sup>6</sup> There some minor exceptions where private providers receive federal funding; e.g. Teacher Education at Tabor College, South Australia and at Notre Dame University, Western Australia.

providers (not part of the state-federal agreement on higher education reached in the 1970s) and are thus not eligible for Australian Government funding. They operate as ‘private’ providers – along with actual private providers – in the Australian higher education context, charging students full fees to undertake their associate and bachelor degrees. Students from low SES backgrounds are under-represented in these degree offerings.

**Figure 3.1: Australian university revenue by source, 2010**



Note: Other income includes scholarships and prizes, non-government grants, net gain on sales of assets, foreign exchange gains and other sources.

Source: Lomax-Smith et al. 2011: 5; Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) 2011.

### Institutional diversity

3.5 All 39 Australian universities – 37 public and two private – are members of Universities Australia: the peak body representing the nation’s university sector. There are also a number of bodies that represent smaller university groupings. The Group of Eight (Go8) universities represent the nation’s eight elite institutions: the Australian equivalent of the UK’s Russell Group or the USA’s Ivy League. All of these universities appear in the top 500 (most in the top 100) on world university rankings (see Appendix 2). The Innovative Research Universities IRU group are seven institutions, most of which were established in the 1960s/1970s as multi-disciplinary universities, although this multi-disciplinary distinction has not been maintained. Macquarie University, an original member of this group, is now a non-aligned institution. Most IRUs appear in the top 500 list of world universities (generally in the 301-400 range). Macquarie University also appears in the list (in the 201-300 range), towards the bottom end of the Go8s and the top end of the IRUs. A third group is the Australian Technology Network (ATN) of universities: a collection of five institutions that were originally institutes of technology (the Australian equivalent of the UK’s polytechnics) before gaining university status in the late 1980s/early 1990s. Only one or two of these universities appear in the top 500 list of world universities (generally in the 401-500 range). The Regional Universities Network (RUN), was established in 2011, is a further group of six universities located in and committed to Australia’s regional areas. No university from this group is ranked

in the top 500 of world universities. A further 11 public universities are not aligned with any of these groups and differ widely in their missions. About one-third of these universities are ranked in the top 500 world universities. The two private universities and the two tertiary education institutions are also non-aligned and do not appear in the top 500 world university rankings.

## Student admission processes for undergraduate entry

- 3.6 Most students seeking entry to university in Australia do so directly from school. In 2012 this was the case for 54% of all applicants. Even those who do not seek entry directly from school usually make an application on the basis of their school qualifications. For example, of the 46% of 'non-school' applicants in 2012, 25.8% were students who had taken a period of absence from study after completing school. For many of these students, this absence is a 'gap year' and is often the prerogative of students from regional areas or high SES backgrounds. A further 51.6% of non-school applicants in 2012 were students with incomplete (37.7%) or completed (13.9%) HE qualifications (Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education (DIISRTE) 2012a: 13). Some applicants with incomplete qualifications are transfers between institutions (see Table 3.1 below). Only 16% of non-school applicants or 7% of all applicants made applications on the basis of incomplete or completed VET qualifications, which means that the VET-to-university pathway is quite narrow. Moreover, students with VET qualifications relevant for university entry are typically from SES backgrounds similar to those who enter university directly from school (Wheelahan 2009), i.e. predominantly from mid to high SES backgrounds. Very few people apply to university without any school or VET qualification as the basis for entry. In 2012 only 6.6% of non-school applicants or 3% of all applicants did not have relevant school or VET qualifications.
- 3.7 The Tertiary Admission Centre (TAC) in each state and territory manages most undergraduate applications for university entry. In 2012 this was the case for 78% of applications to Australian universities. The remaining applications (22%) were made directly to the university concerned (DIISRTE 2012). Some of these were applications via alternative entry pathways which were established in order to enable the participation of people from under-represented groups and with non-traditional and/or insufficient entry-level qualifications. The exact numbers are unknown, but they are likely to reflect the low percentage of applicants without entry-level school or VET qualifications.
- 3.8 TACs – established by universities and now including some VET courses – operate as clearing houses, matching eligible applicants with university and VET places according to applicant preferences (up to 12 each) and university quotas (regulated by ATAR cut offs). Eligible applicants typically have an ATAR (or equivalent) based on the aggregate of their results from approved subjects completed in the final two years of secondary school (Years 11 and 12). For example, an ATAR of 75 indicates that the student's aggregate score is higher than 75% of the state's total final-year school student cohort in that year. Student subject results that contribute to the aggregate score are 'scaled' or adjusted (up and down) according to levels of (i) within-subject *competition* (i.e. the number of students studying the subject) and (ii) between-subject

*importance* (e.g. English is given high weighting) and *difficulty* (e.g. Advanced Mathematics versus general Mathematics).

- 3.9 Most universities also adjust ATARs for certain students who apply to their courses as a way of acknowledging the correlation between low SES and low student achievement (see Chapter 2). Typically this involves adding 5-20% to the ATARs of students from low income families who live in low SES areas and/or who attended low SES schools (cf. almost 20% variation in student ATARs attributed to a student's school; see Chapter 2). The effect of this has been minimal in equity terms, as the persistent under-representation of students from these backgrounds indicates (see Chapter 4). Some schools whose students are not eligible for this adjustment on SES grounds petition universities to be included in the scheme, claiming inequitable treatment of their students (although not on grounds that acknowledge the under-representation of target groups). Some universities also add to students' ATARs based on preferred subjects (e.g. high level Mathematics or languages) when they apply to specific courses (e.g. Engineering) as a way of increasing applications to these courses, although this is not usually done with social inclusion intent. In fact, this practice tends to be in direct conflict with equity principles as the preferred subjects are those at the higher end of the curriculum hierarchy, which are mostly studied by high SES students. Adjustment to ATARs for multiple groups also tends to shift cut-off scores upwards, diluting the effect for target groups.

### Demand for and supply of university places

- 3.10 In 2009 the Australian Government announced the removal of the 'cap' or limit on the number of undergraduate students that universities could enrol in their courses. Previously, each university was allocated a student quota with guaranteed funding. Universities that enrolled students above this quota funded the over-enrolment themselves, although in some years the Australian Government funded a percentage of over-enrolments.
- 3.11 The cap produced a phenomenon known as 'unmet demand', where demand for university places by eligible students was greater than their supply. From 2010 to 2012, several universities (typically IRU, ATN and non-aligned universities) took advantage of this pent up demand and the staged removal of the cap to increase student enrolments, while others (typically Go8 universities) reduced their undergraduate intake in order to mirror the undergraduate/postgraduate enrolment configuration of elite universities overseas.<sup>7</sup> In removing the cap on student enrolments, the Australian Government sought to create a 'demand driven system' and ceased to record data on unmet student demand given its technical demise (DIISRTE 2012a).

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<sup>7</sup> For example, postgraduate enrolment at the University of Melbourne has increased to just under 50% of current total enrolments. The University of Western Australia has also decreased its proportion of undergraduate students. The Vice Chancellor of the University of Sydney has noted that, by world standards for elite universities, the University of Sydney has a large undergraduate student enrolment (Gilmore, 2009). Even so, the Universities of Sydney, Adelaide and the Australian National University are currently growing their undergraduate intakes to feed into their postgraduate courses, while Monash University and the University of New South Wales have very large undergraduate numbers.

- 3.12 As a consequence of this policy change, applications for university places from people from low SES backgrounds have increased, and at a greater rate than other SES groups. Between 2011 and 2012 the increase was 2.7% for low SES applicants compared with 2.4% for medium SES applicants and 1.7% for applicants from high SES backgrounds. Similarly, over the same period offers of university places to low SES applicants increased at a higher rate (5.2%) than offers to high SES applicants (4.7%), but slightly lower than offers to medium SES applicants (5.4%). This difference in growth by SES is accentuated when taken over the whole period since the new policy initiatives were announced in 2009. Between 2009 and 2012 offers to low SES applicants recorded the largest increase (19.5%) compared with medium SES (17.6%) and high SES applicants (12.8%) (DIISRTE 2012a).
- 3.13 Despite these increases, applications by people from low SES backgrounds were less likely to result in an offer than for their mid and high SES peers. The low SES student offer rate in 2012 was 79.4%. By contrast, it was 81.4% for medium SES applications and 83.6% for high SES applications (DIISRTE 2012a: 8). Together, the data also show that despite the demand driven system, in 2012 around 20% of eligible applicants were not offered a university place (DIISRTE 2012a). Universities still decide how many places they offer and in which disciplines, which suggests that the system remains supplier driven. In part, these decisions are based on available resources: e.g. staffing and facilities.

### Student mobility/transfer between universities

- 3.14 Each year, students transfer mid-course, from one university to another. In the past, such transfers were included in attrition rates as institutions had no mechanism for tracking students once they had left. However, with the introduction of the Commonwealth Higher Education Support Student Number (CHESSN) the sector can now track students who transfer between universities over the course of their studies, thereby distinguishing between institutional attrition and sectoral attrition. Student mobility or transfer can now be determined by calculating the difference between the 'normal' retention rate and the 'adjusted' retention rate (see Table 4.6), which is the attrition associated with student transfers.
- 3.15 Table 3.1 below shows the institutional extremes of student transfer for 2011.<sup>8</sup> They are expressed as the percentage point difference between the normal retention rate and the adjusted retention rate at each institution. The average difference was 5.99 percentage points. To illustrate, the adjusted retention rate for undergraduate students at the University of Tasmania in 2011 was 80.51%. Of this, 3.19 percentage points can be attributed to student transfers. Similarly, the adjusted retention rate for commencing students at Griffith University in 2011 was 83.72%, of which 9.28 percentage points can be attributed to student transfers. The larger the percentage point difference, the greater the proportion of students transferring from that university to another. There appears to be no clear pattern of student transfer by institutional type or geography.

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<sup>8</sup> Enrolled in first year in one university in 2010, enrolled in another university in 2011.



**Table 3.1: Lowest and highest undergraduate student transfers by institution, 2011**

<b>Ten lowest undergraduate student transfers, 2011</b>	<b>Percentage point difference (the extent of student transfer)</b>
University of Tasmania (non-aligned)	3.19
The University of Melbourne (Go8)	3.88
Charles Sturt University (RUN)	4.15
Monash University (Go8)	4.42
University of South Australia (ATN)	4.55
Central Queensland University (RUN)	4.66
The University of Newcastle (IRU)	4.74
James Cook University (IRU)	4.80
Curtin University of Technology (ATN)	4.89
Deakin University (non-aligned)	5.02
<b>Ten highest undergraduate student transfers, 2011</b>	
Murdoch University (IRU)	6.57
The University of Queensland (Go8)	6.63
Swinburne University of Technology (non-aligned)	6.90
La Trobe University (IRU)	7.16
University of the Sunshine Coast (RUN)	7.17
Southern Cross University (RUN)	7.65
Australian Catholic University (non-aligned)	8.19
University of Western Sydney (non-aligned)	8.81
Victoria University (non-aligned)	9.10
Griffith University (IRU)	9.28

Source: DIISRTE *Students: Selected Higher Education Statistics, Attrition, Progress and Retention*, 2011, Table 4.7.

## 4| Widening participation data

### The database

- 4.1 Since assuming financial and managerial responsibility for Australia's universities in the mid-1970s (Chapter 2), the Australian Government has maintained statistical data on the nation's HE sector, including (from 1995) student access, participation, retention and success data for target groups. DIISRTE<sup>9</sup> currently manages the database. Each year it publishes selected statistics on students in HE disaggregated by a number of variables,<sup>10</sup> including commencing students, domestic students, all students (including international students) and institutional type (e.g. Table A or B; see Chapter 3). Other data sets are available from DIIRSTE on request and at cost. The most recent publicly available full year data sets are for 2011. While half-year data for 2012 are available, this is both a smaller data set and not comparable with full year data.
- 4.2 Available data sets are not always consistent in terms of the groups and institutions reported. There are also variations between reporting years. One reason for these variations is the modification and expansion of the database with the changing policy interests of successive governments. An important inclusion to the database (from 1995) has been the collection and disaggregation of data according to five target groups (see Chapter 6): Indigenous Australians, people from low SES backgrounds, people from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB: born overseas and less than 10 years living in Australia), students with a disability, and people from regional and remote areas. Women in non-traditional fields of education such as engineering and related technologies and information technology<sup>11</sup> were also identified as a sixth target group in 1990. Limited data are available for this group, although data on field-of-education enrolments by gender are available. Data on the representation of university students from the target groups are frequently compared with their representation within the Australian population more broadly (see Chapter 1). Table 4.1 provides the 'reference values' or proportion of the Australian population for each target group. For comparative ease and where applicable, these reference values are also indicated in subsequent tables.

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<sup>9</sup> Prior to 2012, DIISRTE was known as the Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). In late March 2013, DIISRTE became the Department of Industry, Innovation, Climate Change, Science, Research and Tertiary Education (DIICSRTE). Reference to DIISRTE currently remains on relevant data sets.

<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.innovation.gov.au/HigherEducation/HigherEducationStatistics>

<sup>11</sup> Carrington, K and Pratt, A (2003) How far have we come? Gender Disparities in the Australian Higher Education System. Current Issues Brief No. 31 2002 -03. Published by Information and Research Services, Department of the Parliamentary Library at <http://www.aph.gov.au/binaries/library/pubs/cib/2002-03/03cib31.pdf>

**Table 4.1: Target groups reference values as a percentage of the Australian population**

Aged 15-64 in 2011	Low SES	NESB	Disability	Regional	Remote	Indigenous	Women
Reference values	25.0%	4.66%	8.0%	23.32%	0.6%	2.23%	40%*

Source: DIISRTE *Students: Selected Higher Education Statistics, Equity Groups and Equity Performance Data*, 2011, Table 5.14. \*Martin (1994) deemed women to be enrolled in non-traditional areas when female student enrolment was less than 40%.

4.3 Note that by definition 25% of the Australian population is from low SES backgrounds (the lowest quartile of socioeconomic distribution). The WP policy in Australian education has increasingly focused on the representation of this target group (see Chapters 1, 5 and 6), often ignoring or subsuming other groups under a low SES umbrella. Also note that performance data on women in non-traditional areas as a target group have not been publicly available for some time, at least since 2005. Data are available on the university student population as a whole and are disaggregated by gender, but this is not in access, participation, retention and success data sets for women in non-traditional areas. Such data can be produced by DIISRTE on request and at cost.

### Student access

4.4 Student access rates in Australian HE are expressed in terms of commencing students: that is, students who are enrolled in a given course of study for the first time. In 2011, commencing students totalled 489,959, while commencing domestic students totalled 344,895 (DIISRTE, 2012b). Table 4.2 shows the percentage of commencing under- and postgraduate students from each target group (except women in non-traditional areas). Comparing these with the reference values in Table 4.1 shows that all target groups have been persistently under-represented in HE since at least 2006.<sup>12</sup> Although there has been a slight improvement in access rates for some groups from 2006-2011, persistent under-representation remains. This is despite strong growth in the undergraduate intake since 2006 (of around 46,000 students).

<sup>12</sup> Other data shows that this under-representation continues back at least to the late 1980s when measurement began (Bradley et al. 2008)

**Table 4.2: Access rates for commencing domestic students, Table A providers**

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
<b>Low SES (25%)</b>	15.69%	15.92%	16.05%	16.17%	16.80%	17.01%
<b>NESB (4.66%)</b>	3.98%	4.30%	4.39%	4.27%	3.88%	3.92%
<b>Disability (8.0%)</b>	3.45%	3.50%	3.43%	3.67%	4.05%	4.23%
<b>Regional (23.32%)</b>	18.99%	19.07%	19.07%	19.03%	19.80%	19.44%
<b>Remote (0.6%)</b>	1.28%	1.30%	1.28%	1.26%	1.14%	1.15%
<b>Indigenous (2.23%)</b>	1.49%	1.51%	1.58%	1.63%	1.59%	1.64%

Source: DIISRTE *Students: Selected Higher Education Statistics, Equity Performance Data*, 2011, Table 5.2

Table 4.3 (below) illustrates the overall increase in the number of students commencing undergraduate study across all institutions. From 2006 to 2008 the annual increase was modest. Following the announcement to remove enrolment caps (Australian Government 2009) commencing undergraduates increased markedly – by nearly 15,000 in 2009 and just under 13,000 in 2010 (see Graph 5.1). The effects of the Global Financial Crisis (although relatively mild in Australia) also helped to encourage more students into HE at a time of employment uncertainty (Commonwealth of Australia 2010b). Yet the annual increase in commencing students dropped below 6,000 in 2011, thereby casting doubt on the likelihood of achieving the 40% attainment target (Hare 2013; Sellar et al. 2011; Birrell et al. 2011).

**Table 4.3: Commencing domestic undergraduate students, all institutions**

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
<b>Bachelor Degree</b>	174,143	179,203	180,542	195,263	208,098	214,122
<b>Associate Degree</b>	2,805	2,695	4,033	3,797	5,144	4,707
<b>Other Undergraduate</b>	3,442	4,793	4,941	5,819	6,862	8,008
<b>Total Undergraduate</b>	<b>180,390</b>	<b>186,691</b>	<b>189,516</b>	<b>204,879</b>	<b>220,104</b>	<b>226,837</b>

Source: DIISRTE *Students: Selected Higher Education Statistics, Commencing Students*, various years.

4.5 The total increase in commencing domestic undergraduates from 2006-2011 was around 26%. Some target groups increased at a greater rate: students with a disability (56.7%), Indigenous students (44.9%) and students from low SES backgrounds (33.9%). Below average increases were recorded for women in non-traditional areas (19.1%) and students from remote communities (8.7%). Students from regional areas increased at approximately the same rate as the average (26.2%), meaning that their proportion among commencing undergraduates remained more or less unchanged (DIISRTE *Students: Selected Higher Education Statistics, Equity Groups*, 2011). Notably, the increase among the entire undergraduate cohort is lower than for commencing students, although the general patterns of the increases are broadly similar.

## Student participation

- 4.6 Student participation in Australian HE is defined as students enrolled in a course of study. In 2011 there were 1,221,008 students enrolled in Australian universities, 888,431 of these were domestic students and 332,577 were international students. Participation data can be disaggregated in a variety of ways, including by course level (e.g. bachelor degree), field of study, target group (e.g. disability, low SES), institution or institutional type. Compared with access data, participation data includes students at all levels of their programs. Table 4.4 provides a similar account to Table 4.2, i.e. the under-representation of target groups, however the rates in Table 4.4 are noticeably lower, thereby suggesting that the under-representation of target groups increases with study duration.

**Table 4.4: Participation rates for domestic students, Table A providers**

%	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
<b>Low SES (25%)</b>	14.78	15.02	15.09	15.25	15.57	15.88
<b>NESB (4.66%)</b>	3.60	3.83	3.88	3.77	3.61	3.61
<b>Disability (8.0%)</b>	4.01	4.11	4.13	4.27	4.58	4.77
<b>Regional (23.32%)</b>	18.08	18.08	18.09	17.99	18.23	18.33
<b>Remote (0.6%)</b>	1.12	1.12	1.08	1.06	1.02	1.00
<b>Indigenous (2.23%)</b>	1.25	1.29	1.29	1.35	1.35	1.38

Source: DIISRTE *Students: Selected Higher Education Statistics, Equity Performance Data*, 2011, Table 5.4.

- 4.7 Table 4.5 below displays student participation as a ratio. Except for the low SES target group, participation ratios are calculated by dividing the participation rate of the target group by the proportion of the target group in the population. A ratio of one means that students in the target group are participating in HE in the same proportion as they are represented in the population. A ratio less than one indicates that the target group is participating in HE in proportions lower than they are represented in the population. For the low SES target group, the participation ratio is calculated by dividing the participation rate of low SES students by the participation rate of high SES students. A ratio of one indicates that students from both low and high SES backgrounds participate in HE at the same rate.
- 4.8 Table 4.5 shows that most groups have been under-represented in HE for a number of years. For example, low SES student participation in Australian HE is approximately two-fifths that of high SES participation, however NESB students participate at around the same rate as their representation within the population.

**Table 4.5: Participation ratios for domestic students, Table A providers**

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
<b>Low SES</b>	0.38	0.39	0.40	0.40	0.42	0.44
<b>NESB</b>	0.97	1.03	1.04	1.02	0.97	0.97
<b>Disability</b>	0.50	0.51	0.52	0.53	0.57	0.60
<b>Regional</b>	0.73	0.73	0.73	0.72	0.73	0.74

<b>Remote</b>	0.49	0.49	0.47	0.46	0.44	0.43
<b>Indigenous</b>	0.59	0.61	0.60	0.62	0.62	0.61

Source: DIISRTE *Students: Selected Higher Education Statistics, Equity Performance Data*, 2011, Table 5.5.

## Student retention

4.9 Student retention in Australian HE is generally measured in terms of the number of students enrolled in a course in one year in relation to the number enrolled in the following year.<sup>13</sup> However, there are some variations to this general rule, e.g. to account for students transferring from one provider to another (see Chapter 3).<sup>14</sup> Table 4.6 provides the rates of students commencing their first year of study who are retained into their second year. The column on the left indicates fairly stable rates across the time period. In the column on the right, these rates are adjusted to account for students who transfer from one institution to another. These figures indicate a slightly higher retention rate than previously understood and suggest a slight increase in student transfers over time.

**Table 4.6: Retention rates for domestic commencing bachelor students**

Year	Retention rate %	Retention rate (adjusted) %
2005	80.69	84.60
2006	81.09	85.04
2007	80.70	84.93
2008	81.87	86.96
2009	81.53	87.18
2010	80.58	86.57

Source: DIISRTE *Students: Selected Higher Education Statistics, Attrition, Progress and Retention*, 2011, Table 4.7.

Table 4.7 (below) provides retention rate data for target groups across all years of study (including postgraduate study), not just from the first year to the second as in Table 4.6. In this case, the retention rate is the number of continuing students divided by the number of all students, minus the number of completed students. The table shows that students from low SES backgrounds and students from regional areas are retained at similar rates, just below the sector average, while NESB students are retained at rates at or above the sector

<sup>13</sup> DIISRTE defines this retention rate as: 'Retention rate for year(x) = the number of students who commenced an undergraduate course in year(x) and continue in year (x+1) as a proportion of students who commenced an undergraduate course in year(x) and did not complete the course in year(x).' (DIISRTE *Students: Selected Higher Education Statistics, Attrition, Progress and Retention*, 2011, Table 4.7.)

<sup>14</sup> The official account of the calculation of retention rates is that it 'is based on a match process using both the StudentID and CHESSN. This gives a more accurate retention rate calculation as it identifies students at either the same or a different HEP. In other words, if a student moves from one provider to another in the following year he or she would be counted as retained in the adjusted calculation, but attributed in the normal retention rate calculation. Please note that the CHESSN is only required for Commonwealth Assisted students, which means that the Adjusted Retention Rate calculation using CHESSN will not be available for some students (namely non-Fee-HELP fee-paying students) although these students can still be matched using their Student ID if they studied the following year at the same provider.' (DIISRTE *Students: Selected Higher Education Statistics, Attrition, Progress and Retention*, 2011, Table 4.7.)

average. However, Indigenous students and students from remote areas (up to a third of whom overlap) are retained at rates considerably below the sector average.

**Table 4.7: Retention rates, target groups, Table A providers (2011 data not available)**

%	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
<b>Low SES</b>	78.06	77.25	78.13	77.19	76.63
<b>NESB</b>	81.27	81.08	80.94	81.29	81.48
<b>Disability</b>	76.89	76.56	77.14	77.17	76.21
<b>Regional</b>	77.45	77.19	77.68	76.96	76.37
<b>Remote</b>	69.84	67.68	69.12	68.00	69.74
<b>Indigenous</b>	65.50	62.83	66.27	63.42	65.50
<b>All students</b>	<b>79.37</b>	<b>79.11</b>	<b>79.85</b>	<b>79.58</b>	<b>78.79</b>

Source: DIISRTE *Students: Selected Higher Education Statistics, Equity Performance Data, 2011*, Table 5.7

4.10 As with student participation, retention data is also published in ratios.<sup>15</sup> These are calculated by dividing the retention rate of the target group by the retention rate of all students. The exception is the low SES retention ratios, which are calculated by dividing low SES retention rates by high SES retention rates. Trends evident in target group retention rates in Table 4.7 above are broadly similar to those in Table 4.8 below.

4.11 While NESB students are under-represented at university (see Table 4.2), they are retained at a higher ratio than average, thereby indicating their strong commitment to study despite language difficulties. Students with a disability and students from regional areas are also under-represented in HE (Table 4.2) but are retained in ratios broadly commensurate with their representation within the population. This suggests that the main issue they face is access. Students from regional areas who leave home to attend university and students with a disability tend to be highly motivated. The low retention rate of Indigenous students reflects the significant cultural disjuncture they experience in Australian universities, although unpublished data from the University of South Australia suggest that Indigenous students direct from school are retained at rates similar to their non-Indigenous peers. This suggests that it is mature-age and special entry Indigenous students who tend to be retained at lower levels.<sup>16</sup>

4.12 Low SES students are retained at a slightly lower ratio than their high SES peers, the reasons for which are not readily apparent (see Chapter 5). In-house data from some universities suggest that students from low SES backgrounds access support services (e.g. counselling, academic skills development, etc.) at only marginally higher rates

<sup>15</sup> DIISRTE definition: Retention Ratio = Retention Rate of Equity Group/Retention Rate of Other Students. Exception: Low SES group. Retention Ratio of Low SES = Retention Rate of Low SES/Retention Rate of High SES.

<sup>16</sup> Most universities have Indigenous special entry schemes in place as part of their commitment to increase the participation of this target group.

than their mid and high SES peers. International students and students from NESB backgrounds access institutional support services at much higher rates than low SES students, however data from the Queensland University of Technology (replicated at other institutions) indicate that additional financial support for low SES students (in the form of institutional 'equity' scholarships) greatly assists their retention.

**Table 4.8: Retention ratios, target groups, Table A providers (2011 data not available)**

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
<b>Low SES</b>	0.98	0.97	0.97	0.96	0.97
<b>NESB</b>	1.02	1.03	1.01	1.02	1.04
<b>Disability</b>	0.97	0.97	0.96	0.97	0.97
<b>Regional</b>	0.97	0.97	0.97	0.96	0.96
<b>Remote</b>	0.88	0.85	0.86	0.85	0.88
<b>Indigenous</b>	0.82	0.79	0.83	0.79	0.83

Source: DIISRTE *Students: Selected Higher Education Statistics, Equity Performance Data*, 2011, Table 5.8.

## Student success

4.13 Student success in HE is expressed in terms of the number of units of study successfully completed by a student as a percentage of the number of units attempted.<sup>17</sup> Table 4.9 shows that students enrolled in Table A universities have maintained an 88% success rate since 2006. Several target groups have success rates comparable with the general student cohort (albeit slightly lower). The success rate of students from regional areas is the most comparable to the average, with NESB and low SES students slightly lower. The similarity between NESB and low SES success rates may reflect the overlap of NESB and low SES students in the outer suburbs of the nation's cities. Of particular concern is that the success rate of Indigenous students is considerably lower than most students, even though it is trending up over the 2006-2011 period. As noted above, this may reflect the lower success rate of particular kinds of Indigenous students, namely students who have gained access to university through special entry arrangements. The recent upward trend in Indigenous student success rates may reflect a greater proportion of Indigenous students entering university who have completed secondary education. The recent *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* (Behrendt et al. 2012) provides recommendations and targets for Government and the sector aimed at increasing the success of Indigenous students (see Chapter 6).

**Table 4.9: Success rates, all students, Table A providers**

%	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
<b>Low SES</b>	85.98	85.47	85.68	85.32	84.98	84.84

<sup>17</sup> DIISRTE definition: Success Rate = student load passed/student load certified (passed, failed, withdrawn) Success Rate measures academic performance by comparing the effective full-time student load (EFTSL) of units passed to the EFTSL of units attempted.



<b>NESB</b>	85.65	85.82	85.91	86.21	85.82	85.07
<b>Disability</b>	83.32	83.08	83.28	83.44	82.98	82.95
<b>Regional</b>	87.72	87.38	87.80	87.54	87.08	86.87
<b>Remote</b>	80.57	81.59	81.42	81.55	82.70	82.94
<b>Indigenous</b>	68.55	69.26	70.14	69.58	71.72	71.69
<b>All students</b>	<b>88.36</b>	<b>87.95</b>	<b>88.24</b>	<b>88.20</b>	<b>87.87</b>	<b>87.74</b>

Source: DIISRTE *Students: Selected Higher Education Statistics, Equity Performance Data*, 2011, Table 5.10.

4.14 The calculation of success ratios in Table 4.10 follows the same formula as the ratios described above.<sup>18</sup> With the exception of Indigenous students, each target group has success ratios slightly lower than their reference groups (the student cohort as a whole; high SES students). Indigenous students succeed at 75-80% the rate of others, with a slight upwards trend since 2010.

**Table 4.10: Success ratios, all students, Table A providers**

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
<b>Low SES</b>	0.97	0.97	0.97	0.96	0.96	0.96
<b>NESB</b>	0.97	0.97	0.97	0.98	0.98	0.97
<b>Disability</b>	0.94	0.94	0.94	0.94	0.94	0.94
<b>Regional</b>	0.99	0.99	0.99	0.99	0.99	0.99
<b>Remote</b>	0.91	0.93	0.92	0.92	0.94	0.94
<b>Indigenous</b>	0.77	0.79	0.79	0.79	0.81	0.82

Source: DIISRTE *Students: Selected Higher Education Statistics, Equity Performance Data*, 2011, Table 5.11.

## Student completion

4.15 Student completion data in Australian HE is usually described in absolute terms rather than in terms of completion times. Table 4.11 reports the number of award courses completed by domestic students in 2011. There is no publicly available data on the timeliness of these completions.

<sup>18</sup> Success Ratio = Success Rate of Equity Students/Success Rate of Other Students. Exception: Low SES group. Success Ratio of Low SES = Success Rate of Low SES/Success Rate of High SES.

**Table 4.11: Award Course Completions, domestic students by level of course**

Level of Course	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Higher Doctorate	38	26	19	28	26	23
Doctorate by Research	4,326	4,405	4,498	4,421	4,456	4,554
Doctorate by Coursework	146	138	159	151	206	198
Masters by Research	1,240	1,101	1,058	961	1,004	1,049
Masters by Coursework	21,125	21,642	23,207	24,093	26,928	28,605
Postgrad. Qual/Prelim.	20	18	17	36	50	54
Grad.(Post) Dip. - new area	11,261	11,150	10,649	10,913	11,137	10,992
Grad.(Post) Dip. - ext area	4,782	4,911	6,010	6,540	5,445	7,942
Graduate Certificate	10,375	11,069	11,720	12,581	13,424	14,212
Bachelor Graduate Entry	3,780	3,470	2,789	2,742	2,637	2,836
Bachelor Honours	9,254	9,116	8,790	8,967	10,954	10,406
Bachelor Pass	94,672	94,257	95,669	98,732	98,503	103,233
Associate Degree	877	1689	1,467	1,695	1,657	1,393
Advanced Diploma (AQF)	882	878	895	983	1,209	1,371
Diploma (AQF)	1,092	1,675	1,876	2,015	2,256	2,526
Other undergraduate award courses	470	385	205	212	146	101
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>164,340</b>	<b>165,930</b>	<b>169,028</b>	<b>175,070</b>	<b>180,038</b>	<b>189,495</b>

Source: DIISRTE *Students: Selected Higher Education Statistics, Award Course Completions*, various years, Table 7

4.16 Table 4.12 also reports on the absolute number of student completions, but this time by field of education. Again, the timeliness of these completions is not known.

**Table 4.12: Award course completions, all students and broad field of education**

Broad Field of Education	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Natural and Physical Sciences	13,906	13,851	13,936	13,638	14,448	15,452
Information Technology	6,240	5,606	4,876	4,435	4,293	4,497
Engineering and Related Technologies	8,001	7,941	8,164	8,367	8,935	9,352
Architecture and Building	3,523	3,520	3,932	4,351	4,721	4,801
Agriculture, Environmental and Related Studies	np*	2,938	2,861	2,968	3,009	3,224
Health	23,681	25,493	27,329	29,185	31,296	33,430
Education	24,444	23,803	23,438	24,466	24,842	24,702
Management and Commerce	36,505	36,612	36,553	37,430	38,370	38,689
Society and Culture	40,105	40,973	41,889	43,518	43,499	48,057
Creative Arts	11,889	12,353	13,127	14,021	14,897	15,691
Food, Hospitality and Personal Services	np*	27	25	37	18	35
Mixed Field Programs	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>164,340</b>	<b>165,930</b>	<b>169,028</b>	<b>175,070</b>	<b>180,038</b>	<b>189,495</b>

Source: DIISRTE *Students: Selected Higher Education Statistics, Award Course Completions*, various years, Table 3. \*np = Not Published

4.17 Student completion rates for target groups are calculated by dividing the number of award course completions for that group by the total domestic student award course completions.<sup>19</sup> The results of these calculations are evident in Table 4.13 below and can be compared with the target group reference values in Table 4.1. The completion rates for most groups are lower than their proportion in both the university population and the general population. Only students from remote areas fare better, however caution should be exercised in making these comparisons as the definition of remote students has changed over the time period.<sup>20</sup>

**Table 4.13: Award course completion rates by target group, Table A providers**

%	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
<b>Low SES (25%)</b>	13.56	14.02	13.79	13.69	13.84	14.06
<b>NESB (4.66%)</b>	3.47	3.65	3.75	3.56	3.37	3.36
<b>Disability (8.0%)</b>	3.63	3.51	3.66	3.68	3.9	4.01
<b>Regional (23.32%)</b>	17.11	16.99	16.89	16.73	16.53	16.44
<b>Remote (0.6%)</b>	0.91	0.92	0.89	0.8	0.84	0.83
<b>Indigenous (2.23%)</b>	0.82	0.80	0.82	0.83	0.80	0.84

Source: DIISRTE *Students: Selected Higher Education Statistics, Equity Performance Data*, 2011, Table 5.12.

<sup>19</sup> DIISRTE's official definition is: Attainment Rate = Award Course Completions of Equity Students/All Domestic Award Course Completions.

<sup>20</sup> Rural and isolated changed to regional and remote, with some students formerly identified as isolated now under regional.

## Institutional, disciplinary and programme differences between student groups

4.18 There is a wide diversity in the disciplines that can be studied at Australian universities. Rather than reporting on each field of study, publicly available data aggregates student numbers into 11 broad fields of education. The Health field, for example, includes courses in Nursing, Dental and Medical Studies. Similarly, Society and Culture includes Behavioural Science, Law, Language and Literature, Economics and Econometrics.

**Table 4.14: Commencing Bachelor Pass Level students, all students by level of course and broad field of education, all institutions**

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
<b>Natural and Physical Sciences</b>	19,166	19,366	19,221	21,563	24,245	25,720
<b>Information Technology</b>	11,035	10,259	10,770	11,103	11,339	12,024
<b>Engineering and Related Technologies</b>	14,123	15,323	15,744	17,331	18,000	18,563
<b>Architecture and Building</b>	5,387	5,904	6,343	6,653	6,865	7,288
<b>Agriculture, Environmental and Related Studies</b>	3,273	3,215	3,679	3,955	4,125	4,081
<b>Health</b>	31,079	34,065	35,365	37,914	40,882	41,930
<b>Education</b>	19,998	19,638	18,491	20,119	21,214	21,694
<b>Management and Commerce</b>	61,673	64,442	68,478	73,943	74,595	75,422
<b>Society and Culture</b>	48,416	49,825	49,813	55,611	59,720	61,730
<b>Creative Arts</b>	19,479	20,715	21,173	24,579	24,809	24,667
<b>Food, Hospitality and Personal Services</b>	22	28	48	78	103	99
<b>Total</b>	<b>217,394</b>	<b>225,396</b>	<b>233,878</b>	<b>256,497</b>	<b>268,891</b>	<b>275,362</b>

Source: DIISRTE *Students: Selected Higher Education Statistics, Commencing Students*, various years.

4.19 As shown in Table 4.14 (above), fields with the most new students are Management and Commerce, the broad cluster of Society and Culture, then Health. There is no equivalent publicly available data for target group students. Hence, meaningful implications for WP are difficult to determine. However, research (Bradley et al. 2008) suggests that students from low SES backgrounds tend to participate in Humanities and Social Science courses in greater numbers than they do in the Sciences, Medicine and in Law.

**Table 4.15: Proportion of highest preference applications by SES and field of education**

Field of Education 2012	Low SES %	High SES %
Natural and Physical Sciences	7.8	9.0
Information Technology	2.8	2.2
Engineering	6.8	5.9
Architecture and Building	2.7	4.0
Health	26.6	22.6
Medical Studies	2.6	6.0
Dental Studies	1.2	1.7
Veterinary Studies	0.8	0.9
Nursing	11.1	4.8
Education	12.0	5.0
Management and Commerce	11.7	14.7
Society and Culture	19.6	22.1
Creative Arts	7.7	11.5

Source: DIISTRE 2012: 33

4.20 Data on students' applications to different degrees (Table 4.15 above) provides some indication of the potential enrolment variation of students from low and high SES backgrounds. As Table 4.15 shows, in 2012 low SES applicants were more likely to apply for courses in Education and Nursing than their high SES counterparts (approximately two to three times more likely). However, they are significantly less likely to apply for Medical Studies (at less than half the rate of high SES applicants). Applicants from low SES backgrounds are also less likely than high SES applicants to apply for courses in Management and Commerce, Society and Culture, Creative Arts and Natural and Physical Sciences (DIISTRE 2012: 33). Notably, low SES applicants who apply for Medical Studies are slightly more likely to be offered a place than their mid or high SES peers. Conversely, when applying for Education or Nursing low SES applicants are less likely to be offered a place than those from mid and high SES backgrounds (DIISRTE 2012a, Appendix data, Table A5).

4.21 As noted above and in Chapter 6, 'women in non-traditional areas' was identified as a target or 'equity group' in 1994 in the *Equity and General Performance Indicators* report (Martin 1994). Their identification as a target group was directly related to disciplinary and program differences from their male peers, where female enrolment was less than 40% of the enrolment in the field. However, equity performance data (access, participation, retention and success data) for the group has not been published since 2005.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, while data are publicly available on field-of-education enrolments (see Table 4.14 above) this is not disaggregated by gender. However, the Australian Government does produce data (listed in Table 4.16) on the access and participation rates of women in non-traditional areas. Typically these areas are Engineering and Information Technologies. The rates in Table 4.16 suggest that, when

<sup>21</sup> See

<http://www.innovation.gov.au/HigherEducation/HigherEducationStatistics/StatisticsPublications/Pages/Students2008FullYear.aspx>

compared with a reference value of 40%, women’s access to and participation in these non-traditional areas is relatively low and deteriorating over time, although this can vary from university to university.

**Table 4.16: Access and participation rates for women in non-traditional areas**

Year	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Commencing Domestic Undergraduate Students (% access rate)	18.45	18.29	18.15	17.81	17.26	17.44
All Domestic Undergraduate Students (% participation rate)	19.45	19.08	18.73	18.40	18.05	17.80

Source: DIISRTE *Students: Selected Higher Education Statistics, Equity Groups*, 2011, Table 2.2

4.22 Table 4.17 below sets out the distribution of target groups (except for women) across institutional groupings (identified in Appendix 2) in the years 2006 to 2011. This is a period with an enrolment growth of around 40,000 commencing HE students (see Graph 5.1). The proportion of target group students in each institutional grouping has shifted marginally over time, with less than a 1% change in most cases. Decreased participation has been extremely minimal for NESB students (Go8 universities), remote students (across all university groupings), and Indigenous students (ATN and non-aligned universities). There has also been some increased participation (greater than 1% for some groups), specifically students from low SES backgrounds (IRU and RUN universities), students with disabilities (non-aligned universities) and Indigenous students (RUN universities). Despite the fall in the participation of remote students (a subset of regional and remote) over the period, they remain over-represented across all university groupings (see Table 4.1), although they are marginally under-represented at Go8 universities. Based on this data, remote students could no longer be technically regarded to be a target sub-group given that their proportional representation within the university student population is at or above their representation within the broader Australian population.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Recent debates have questioned whether other target groups should be introduced such as low SES and/or Indigenous males, prisoners, mature-age learners, etc.

**Table 4.17: Participation rates (all commencing domestic students) for target groups across university groupings\***

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
<b>Group of Eight (Go8) universities</b>						
Low SES	8.91%	9.13%	9.03%	8.97%	9.18%	9.56%
NESB	5.03%	5.14%	5.05%	4.74%	4.38%	4.30%
Disability	3.32%	3.37%	3.41%	3.61%	3.98%	4.18%
Regional	10.39%	10.53%	10.52%	10.16%	10.45%	10.64%
Remote	0.53%	0.54%	0.52%	0.54%	0.54%	0.52%
Indigenous	0.64%	0.64%	0.66%	0.68%	0.72%	0.73%
<b>Innovative Research Universities (IRU)</b>						
Low SES	18.22%	18.47%	18.56%	18.59%	18.90%	19.36%
NESB	2.23%	2.45%	2.63%	2.58%	2.65%	2.75%
Disability	4.98%	5.15%	5.02%	4.64%	5.26%	5.44%
Regional	19.97%	19.85%	19.64%	19.30%	19.46%	19.94%
Remote	1.89%	1.89%	1.88%	1.80%	1.83%	1.82%
Indigenous	1.60%	1.63%	1.82%	1.93%	2.00%	2.03%
<b>Australian Technology Network (ATN) of universities</b>						
Low SES	13.11%	13.30%	13.48%	13.52%	13.98%	14.08%
NESB	4.12%	4.22%	4.25%	4.35%	4.43%	4.55%
Disability	4.18%	4.19%	4.21%	4.30%	4.54%	4.52%
Regional	10.07%	10.07%	10.28%	10.34%	10.58%	10.30%
Remote	1.14%	1.06%	1.03%	0.98%	1.00%	0.91%
Indigenous	1.29%	1.27%	1.22%	1.18%	1.15%	1.18%
<b>Regional Universities Network (RUN)**</b>						
Low SES	27.07%	27.46%	27.64%	28.31%	28.81%	28.74%
NESB	1.19%	1.18%	1.21%	1.13%	1.17%	1.53%
Disability	4.57%	4.60%	4.83%	5.02%	5.10%	5.36%
Regional	54.24%	53.49%	52.77%	52.53%	52.53%	51.79%
Remote	2.31%	2.38%	2.38%	2.29%	2.11%	2.09%
Indigenous	1.64%	1.87%	1.88%	2.19%	2.30%	2.37%
<b>Non-aligned universities</b>						
Low SES	16.17%	16.36%	16.45%	16.64%	16.82%	17.10%
NESB	3.30%	3.82%	3.99%	3.96%	3.65%	3.52%
Disability	3.88%	4.10%	4.09%	4.46%	4.65%	4.92%
Regional	18.71%	18.71%	18.91%	18.86%	19.01%	19.07%
Remote	0.90%	0.91%	0.83%	0.83%	0.73%	0.72%
Indigenous	1.53%	1.61%	1.49%	1.52%	1.43%	1.46%

Source: DIISRTE *Students: Selected Higher Education Statistics, Equity Performance Data*, 2010, 2011, Table 5.3.

\*See Appendix 2 for university groupings \*\*RUN only in 2011, but its constituent universities date back prior to that.

4.23 All target groups are under-represented at Go8 universities. Students from low SES backgrounds are particularly under-represented. The proportion of low SES students at

non-aligned universities – the next lowest representation of low SES students – is almost twice that of Go8 universities. In 2008 the Go8 (Group of Eight 2008) produced a report showing that while the representation of target groups at Go8 universities was comparatively lower than at other universities, their target group retention and success rates were comparatively higher. This means that institutions with smaller target group numbers and with greater access to resources are able to achieve better results for these target groups. Elite institutions also tend to attract high ATAR target group students who are more like the mainstream university population with more cultural capital and requiring less support.

4.24 By comparison, almost all target groups are over-represented at RUN universities. NESB students (who are concentrated in cities) are the exception, with their representation at about one-third of their population reference value. RUN universities have very high rates of regional student participation, although this rate has dropped marginally over time, as has the participation of remote students. This has happened at the same time as the participation rate of low SES and Indigenous students has increased. This too is to be expected given that SES is defined in geographical terms (see Chapter 6), with most regional areas classified as low SES areas. Variation in target group participation rates can occur within university groupings. Table 4.18 shows the university extremes of target-group participation rates in 2011.

**Table 4.18: Highest/lowest target group participation rates by university (domestic undergraduate students)**

2011	Highest participation rates	Lowest participation rates
<b>Low SES (25%)</b>	<b>45.96%</b> Central Queensland University (RUN) <b>34.31%</b> University of Southern Queensland (RUN)	<b>6.24%</b> University of Western Australia (Go8) <b>4.35%</b> Australian National University (Go8)
<b>NESB (4.66%)</b>	<b>6.54%</b> Macquarie University (non-aligned) <b>6.46%</b> University of Western Sydney (non-aligned)	<b>0.47%</b> University of New England (RUN) <b>0.46%</b> Southern Cross University (RUN)
<b>Disability (8.0%)</b>	<b>11.03%</b> University of Wollongong (non-aligned) <b>9.14%</b> University of Tasmania (non-aligned)	<b>2.74%</b> Curtin University of Technology (ATN) <b>2.65%</b> University of Queensland (Go8)
<b>Regional (23.32%)</b>	<b>73.91%</b> University of Ballarat (RUN) <b>64.70%</b> Central Queensland University (RUN)	<b>4.30%</b> University of Western Sydney (non-aligned) <b>4.12%</b> University of Technology, Sydney (ATN)
<b>Remote (0.6%)</b>	<b>10.53%</b> Charles Darwin University (IRU) <b>4.48%</b> Central Queensland University (RUN)	<b>0.06%</b> Victoria University (non-aligned) <b>0.05%</b> Swinburne University of Technology (non-aligned)
<b>Indigenous (2.23%)</b>	<b>4.84%</b> Charles Darwin University (IRU) <b>4.05%</b> James Cook University (IRU)	<b>0.31%</b> Victoria University (non-aligned) <b>0.24%</b> Swinburne University of Technology (non-aligned)
<b>Women in non trad. areas (40%)</b>	<b>27.37%</b> University of Western Australia (Go8) <b>26.23%</b> University of Technology, Sydney (ATN)	<b>8.66%</b> University of Ballarat (RUN) <b>6.52%</b> Australian Catholic University (non-aligned)



Source: DIISRTE *Students: Selected Higher Education Statistics, Equity Groups*, 2011, Table 2.6

- 4.25 RUN and IRU universities feature prominently among the highest participation rates of low SES students, students from regional and remote areas, and Indigenous students – the three target groups mentioned in current Australian Government policy. Three universities (the Universities of Western Australia, Western Sydney and Ballarat) feature at the extremes of participation rates for different target groups. There is no Australian university at which the participation of women in non-traditional areas (e.g. Engineering and Information Technologies) is at or above the reference value of 40% (see Chapter 6).

### Rates of progression into graduate employment and postgraduate study

- 4.26 Each year university graduates complete an exit survey on their employment status, approximately four months after course completion. The data do not identify all target groups. Table 4.19 shows the employment status of 2010 target-group graduates in 2011 compared with all graduates. Graduates with a disability have the highest rates of unemployment and part-time and casual employment, followed by NESB students. Compared with other target groups, Indigenous graduates have the highest rate of full-time employment, much higher than the average graduate. This is in stark contrast to their under-representation in HE and their lower than average rates of retention, success and completion.

**Table 4.19: Bachelor degree graduates available for full-time employment, 2011**

	% in full-time employment	% seeking full-time employment (not working)	% seeking full-time employment (working part-time or casual)	Total number
<b>All graduates</b>	76.3	8.7	14.9	44,176
<b>Disability</b>	66.2	16.7	17.1	1,127
<b>Indigenous</b>	86.8	6.5	6.7	403
<b>NESB</b>	67.0	15.8	17.2	7,275
<b>Regional</b>	78.8	7.4	13.7	10,610
<b>Metropolitan</b>	75.4	9.2	15.4	32,143

Source: Graduate Careers Australia, 2012a: 15

- 4.27 *Beyond Graduation 2011: The Report of the Beyond Graduation Survey* (Graduate Careers Australia 2012b) provides some data on the progression of graduate students into postgraduate study. Graduate student participation rates in further study have remained relatively stable from 2006 to 2011. In 2008 around 26% of students (males 25.7%; females 26.5%) who graduated in 2007 were enrolled in further (predominantly full time) study. In 2011, the same cohort was participating in further (predominantly part time) study at slightly higher rates (males 30.2%; females 32.1%). The vast majority (approximately 80%) of this further study was at postgraduate level (Graduate Careers Australia 2012b: 10), however publicly available postgraduate data do not distinguish between coursework and research degrees (see Point 4.1 above on data availability).

4.28 Data on the progression of target groups into postgraduate study is also not publicly available. A specific data request by the authors to DEEWR in 2009 revealed that in 2008 10.5% of postgraduate students were from low SES backgrounds (Table 5.1), which is well below their 16.05% representation within all commencing university students (Table 4.2), and 15.09% within all university students (Table 4.4). Other studies reveal more nuanced data for low SES and Indigenous students by postgraduate course type (see Table 4.20 below).

**Table 4.20: Participation rates, low SES and Indigenous domestic postgraduate students**

Postgraduate course types	Low SES (25%)		Indigenous (2.23%)	
	2007	2008	2007	2008
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)	8.17%	8.22%	0.80%	0.89%
Masters by research	8.59%	9.01%	1.62%	1.70%
Masters by coursework	9.36%	9.85%	0.64%	0.68%
Other Postgraduate courses	12.42%	12.72%	0.86%	0.96%

Source: Heagney 2010

4.29 Table 4.20 shows that students from low SES backgrounds are under-represented at all levels of postgraduate study, but they are more highly represented in coursework postgraduate degrees than in higher degrees by research (HDR) – i.e. PhDs and masters by research. Indigenous students are similarly more likely to be enrolled in masters by research than in PhDs, although they are more likely to be engaged in HDR than postgraduate coursework. Nevertheless, Indigenous student HDR enrolment is still below parity (2.23%). The *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* (Behrendt et al. 2012) reports that in 2010 1.1% of HDR students were Indigenous, well below their 1.59% representation within commencing university students (Table 4.2) and their 1.35% representation within all university students (Table 4.4).

4.30 The recent introduction of the CHESN should produce more accessible data on the progression of target-group graduates into various forms of postgraduate study in the future.

## 5| Widening participation policy

### Participation and Attainment Targets

- 5.1 In 2008 the Australian Government-commissioned the latest review of the nation's HE sector. The Bradley Review – led by retired Vice Chancellor, Professor Denise Bradley – argued that Australians' participation in HE should be widened to increase the proportion of people from under-represented groups participating in HE and to increase the proportion of all Australians with a bachelor degree. In 2009 the Australian Government's policy response (*Transforming Australia's Higher Education System*) announced two targets for the HE sector, namely that 20% of undergraduate university students should be from low SES backgrounds by 2020, and that 40% of 25-34 year olds should hold a bachelor degree by 2025. The Australian Government named the second target as dependent on the first, and both as 'integral to achieving the Government's vision of a stronger and fairer Australia' (Australian Government, 2009: 5). It explained *stronger* to mean 'a highly educated workforce ... to advance the growth of a dynamic knowledge economy' (Australian Government, 2009: 12), and it explained *fairer* to mean 'ensuring that Australians of all backgrounds who have the ability to study at university get the opportunity to do so' (Australian Government, 2009: 12).
- 5.2 At the time, 16.1% of undergraduates were from low SES backgrounds (see Table 5.1 below), less than their 25% representation in the broader Australian population. In announcing the targets the Government drew attention to the static participation rate in all university courses of students from low SES backgrounds, which was hovering at around 15% over the previous two decades. Yet the policy statement was silent on the more inequitable 10.5% participation rate for students from low SES backgrounds in postgraduate courses and their skewed participation at this level in coursework rather than research degrees (see Chapter 4). Table 5.1 below shows the participation rates of students from low SES backgrounds in 2008, by course level.

**Table 5.1: Participation of low SES students in undergraduate and postgraduate study**

Australian university students from low SES backgrounds, 2008	Number	Percentage of university student population
Postgraduate courses	18,824	10.5%
Undergraduate courses	90,467	16.1%
Enabling and non-award courses	4,151	23.1%
All courses	113,442	15%

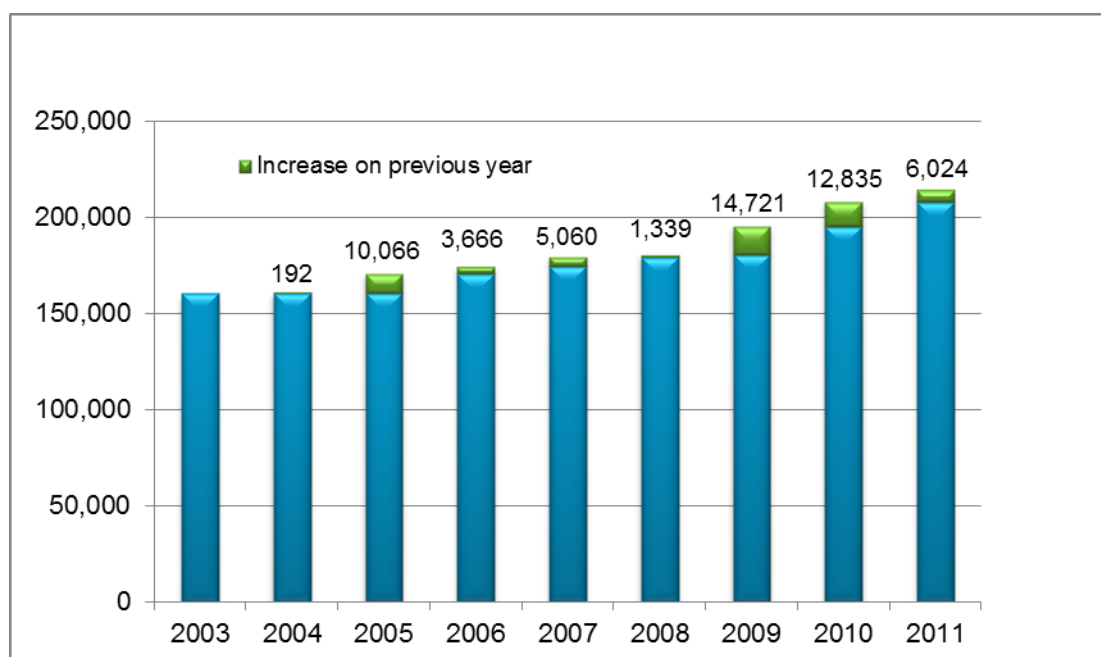
Source: DEEWR data request, 2009

5.3 When the Australian Government announced its WP policy for HE in 2009, 32% of 25-34 year old Australians held a bachelor degree, less than most OECD nations. At the time, the Government (2009: 12) noted that:

‘... under current policy settings this is likely to rise only slightly, to around 34 per cent by 2025. However this is unlikely to be enough to meet our future economic needs.’

5.4 In its policy announcement the Government calculated that achieving its 40% target would produce an additional 217,000 graduates by 2025. Accounting for current retention rates, it has since been estimated that at least 25,000 additional university students are needed each year from 2009 to 2021 in order to reach this target (Birrell et al. 2011; Sellar et al. 2011). Graph 5.1 below shows that since 2009 when the Australian Government’s policy was first implemented there has never been a year in which this additional 25,000 bachelor student intake has been achieved. It also shows that the rate of increase is slowing.

**Graph 5.1: Number of commencing domestic bachelor students**



Source: DIISRTE *Students: Selected Higher Education Statistics, Commencing Students, 2004-2012*.

5.5 The sector’s account for the shortfall between progression towards the 40% target and recent enrolments is that some secondary school students (particularly those from low SES backgrounds) lack aspiration for HE (see Chapter 7). This is despite the fact that around 20% of eligible applicants in 2012 were not offered a university place (see Chapter 3). Reasons given by universities for limiting offers include inadequate staffing and infrastructure (Gale 2011). To meet the Government’s planned increase in student participation targets academics will need to expand in number over the next decade. This may be challenging to achieve in a context of low take-up in academia among graduate students and high levels of attrition from the current academic workforce to

retirement, overseas destinations, and other sectors of employment. It has also been estimated that universities' surplus operating cash flows are insufficient to fund anywhere near the required infrastructure spend and that they will need to cultivate a greater willingness to use debt to finance capital works. Universities also seek to enrol students in accordance with their increasingly differentiated missions. For example, market forces drive elite universities in particular to downsize their undergraduate intakes in order to maintain and enhance their image of quality in the market place: status is equated with scarcity (Marginson 2011a).

## Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP)

- 5.6 In 2009, the same year in which it made its *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System* policy statement, the Australian Government introduced the HEPPP, which was aimed at supporting the policy to increase access to and retention in HE for students from low SES backgrounds.
- 5.7 As its name suggests, the program has two components. The 'Partnership' component, aimed at increasing the aspirations of low SES students for HE, is discussed in Chapter 7. The 'Participation' component offers universities a financial incentive to enrol and retain students from low SES backgrounds.<sup>23</sup> Each year the program provides universities with a low SES student loading (in 2013, approximately \$1,500 per low SES student),<sup>24</sup> in addition to the funding they receive from the annual block grant (see Chapter 2). The funding is not competitive and does not require application. The total received by individual institutions is considerable for those with large enrolments of students from these backgrounds. For example, in 2012 the University of Western Sydney received a payment of just over \$9 million due to its low SES student enrolment. The number of commencing students from low SES backgrounds entering university has risen from 34,402 in 2009 to 40,158 in 2011, taking their representation to 16.8% of the entire domestic undergraduate population at an additional cost to the Australian Government of just over \$259 million.<sup>25</sup>
- 5.8 In foregrounding the 'Participation' incentive, the Australian Government (2009) acknowledged that university students from low SES backgrounds are retained and complete their undergraduate qualification at similar rates to their peers (see Chapters 4 and 8; also Dobson & Skuja 2007; Win & Miller 2005; Marks 2007; Tranter et al. 2007). However, it also claimed that these students:

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<sup>23</sup> If they choose, universities can also use these funds for 'partnership' or outreach activities.

<sup>24</sup> Dollars quoted in this report refer to Australian Dollars.

<sup>25</sup> A full list of low SES student participation funding for each institution (2010-2012) can be found at: [www.innovation.gov.au/HigherEducation/Equity/HigherEducationParticipationAndPartnershipsProgram/Pages/default.aspx#6](http://www.innovation.gov.au/HigherEducation/Equity/HigherEducationParticipationAndPartnershipsProgram/Pages/default.aspx#6)

‘... require higher levels of support to succeed, including financial assistance and greater academic support, mentoring and counselling services. The Government has therefore allocated a further \$325 million over four years to be provided to universities as a financial incentive to expand their enrolment of low SES students and to fund the intensive support needed to improve their completion and retention rates.’ (p. 14)

- 5.9 The Government provided no evidence to support the claim that low SES students require greater support. Evidence from some institutions suggests that students from low SES backgrounds access academic support, mentoring and counselling services in marginally higher rates than their mid and high SES peers (see Chapter 4). However, the main distinguishing feature between the respective performances of low and high SES university students is that low SES students tend to perform better in the social sciences than in the sciences (Bradley et al. 2008). This may suggest that science is under-resourced in their originating secondary schools. There is also a tendency for low SES schools not to offer specialist science subjects, so their students are less prepared for university study in these fields.

## Mission-Based Compacts and Performance Funding

- 5.10 As part of its new HE policy statement, in 2009 the Australian Government also announced its intention to establish a new relationship with Australia's universities. Consummating this relationship are institution-specific compacts or agreements between each university and the Australian Government. The first compacts took effect in the three-year period 2011-2013. Officially, compacts provide a framework for universities to pursue their distinctive missions and strategic goals while contributing to national objectives for HE, research, research training and innovation.<sup>26</sup> However, the compacts do not provide a forum for the development of national objectives, but only for how each institution will contribute to these. Each institution's targets are framed by institutional target group data mediated by its mission and context. The Government also assumes responsibility for ensuring that the 'sum of the parts' (each institution's compact) adds up to a sector commitment to national objectives.
- 5.11 Among other things, each compact sets out the university's goals and strategies with respect to its teaching and learning mission. It also establishes quantitative 'improvement' and 'excellence' targets related to these goals and strategies, which are assessed by various performance indicator instruments within three teaching and learning performance categories.<sup>27</sup> The performance categories and their indicators are listed below:

### Performance Category 1: Participation and Social Inclusion

- > Performance indicator 1A: Proportion of domestic undergraduates who are from a low SES background.

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<sup>26</sup> Current compacts for each university can be found at <http://www.innovation.gov.au/research/missionbasedcompacts/Pages/default.aspx>

<sup>27</sup> Professor Gale was an expert member of the Australian Government's Indicator Development Group which determined these performance categories and indicators.

- > Performance indicator 1B: Proportion of domestic undergraduates who are from another under-represented group (provided data on the group are available from the Higher Education Student Data Collection)<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Each institution nominates its second under-represented group to target. Several have nominated Indigenous students, others have nominated students with disabilities, etc. The University of Melbourne has stretched the parameters of the policy by nominating postgraduate low SES students, which is in variance with the Government's WP policy focus on undergraduate students. The second round of compacts is mooted to require universities to include targets for Indigenous students alongside targets for low SES student participation.

## **Performance Category 2: Student Experience**

- > Performance indicator 2A: Domestic undergraduate satisfaction with teaching
- > Performance indicator 2B: Domestic undergraduate experience

## **Performance Category 3: Quality of Learning Outcomes**

- > Performance indicator 3A: Domestic undergraduate satisfaction with generic skills
- > Performance indicator 3B: Domestic undergraduate value-added generic skills

5.12 Based on these compacts, participating universities receive performance funding (in addition to their block grant) in two ways:

- > Facilitation funding is given to universities when there is agreement with the Australian Government on the university's teaching and learning strategies and on targets under each performance category. The agreement (and associated facilitation funding) includes participation in developing and establishing a performance baseline for Performance Categories 2 and 3. The amount of funding received is based on the institution's proportional share of the Commonwealth Grant Scheme Basic Grant Amount (see Chapter 2). (NB: This funding source was discontinued after the first year.);
- > Reward funding is given to institutions in the second and third compact year for meeting their improvement targets for 1A and 1B, with an additional amount for meeting their 1A excellence target. The amount of funding received is based on the institution's proportional share of the Commonwealth Grant Scheme Basic Grant Amount.

5.13 Compared with HEPPP funding (above and Chapter 7), performance funding has been relatively trivial: e.g. Queensland University of Technology received \$500,000 for meeting its 1A/1B improvement targets, although such funding is welcomed by some universities who receive very little from the HEPPP low SES student loading. Still, for most institutions effort is rewarded more than performance. Incentive to widen participation comes more from an expanded base grant and HEPPP guidelines.



## 6| Target groups for WP

### Target group identification and definition

6.1 In 1990 the Australian Government released the HE policy statement, *A Fair Chance for All* (Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) 1990), which built on the 1988 white paper *Higher Education: A policy statement* by identifying six target or 'equity groups' for WP in Australia. The rationale for creating a policy specifically for these under-represented groups was:

'... to ensure that Australians from all groups in society have the opportunity to participate successfully in higher education. This will be achieved by changing the balance of the [university] student population to reflect more closely the composition of society as a whole.' (p. 8)

6.2 In particular, the policy aimed:

'To improve participation in higher education of people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds so that the mix of commencing students more closely resembles the mix of the general population.' (p. 14)

6.3 The six groups are listed in Table 6.1 below. The table also lists the operational definitions for these groups as developed within the report *Equity and General Performance Indicators in Higher Education* (Martin 1994). Their quantitative definition enables comparison of each target group's representation within the university population against its representation within the Australian population (reference values). The report also identified performance indicators for target group access, participation, success and retention, which have formed the basis of Australian Government reports on the sector for the past two decades (see Chapter 4).

**Table 6.1: Target groups for WP and their operational definitions**

<b>Target (equity) groups</b> <i>A Fair Chance For All</i> (1990)	<b>Operational definitions</b> <i>Equity and General Performance Indicators in HE</i> (1994)
People from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds [now referred to as 'low SES backgrounds']	Students whose home postcode recorded on their student enrolment form falls within the lowest quartile of the population of a given catchment region (typically a state or the nation) determined by the value of the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Index of Education and Occupation.
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people [now more commonly referred to as 'Indigenous Australians']	Students who indicate Y to the student enrolment form question: 'Are you an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?'
Women (in non-traditional areas)	Students who indicate F on the student enrolment gender question and who enrol in fields of study or course types with less than 40% female enrolment.
People with disabilities	Students who indicate Y to the student enrolment questions: (i) 'Do you have a disability, impairment or long-term medical condition, which may affect your studies?' (ii) 'Would you like to receive advice on support services, equipment and facilities which may assist you?'
People from NESB	Students whose responses to student enrolment questions indicate they were (i) born overseas, (ii) arrived in Australia less than 10 years ago, and/or (iii) speak a language other than English at home.
People from rural and isolated areas [now referred to as 'regional and remote areas']	Students whose home postcode recorded on their student enrolment form is classified as 'rural' or 'isolated', as defined by the Department of Primary Industry and Energy.

Source: *A Fair Chance for All* (DEET 1990); *Equity and General Performance Indicators in Higher Education* (Martin 1994).

## Measuring the SES of HE students

- 6.4 The Australian Government's 2009 policy statement on *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System* declared its intention to develop a new measure of the SES of Australian university students. In part, this was in response the Government's more specific targeted approach. It also reflected the historical and central place that SES has held in WP policy in Australian HE. (In particular, the 2009 policy statement stated that steps taken to improve low SES student participation would impact positively on Indigenous and regional/rural peoples.)<sup>29</sup>
- 6.5 Universities were also interested in the development of a new measure given the substantial institutional funding received from the Government for each low SES student enrolled (in 2013, approx. \$1,500 per low SES student) and the requirements of the compacts to commit to achieving specific low SES targets. Universities with few

<sup>29</sup> The Australian Government 2009 policy statement did not set a policy agenda for women in non-traditional areas, people with disabilities, or NESB people.

low SES student enrolments (e.g. University of Canberra) welcomed the prospect of a more refined measure, arguing that the 'postcode' methodology overlooked pockets of low SES areas within larger mid to high SES areas.

- 6.6 National debate on the measure culminated in a national Australian Government sponsored symposium on the issues, with presentations from leading experts in the field. The symposium found that (i) individualised measures ignore the social aspects of SES (hence a sense of group needs to be retained in order to capture this social aspect) and (ii) of the three indicators of SES – income (as a proxy for wealth), occupational status, and educational level – all three should be used, but occupational status is the single most reliable measure given that it is highly dependent on education and productive of income/wealth. In the case of university students under the age of 25, the occupational status of their parents/guardians is the relevant reference value.
- 6.7 In 2009 the Australian Government's Indicator Development Group established a sub-committee to develop a more 'individualised' measure of the SES of university students.<sup>30</sup> It settled on an interim measure of assigning students with the SES of their ABS home collection district (CD). Determined by the ABS, each CD comprises 100 households.<sup>31</sup> The average postcode area contains a number of CDs. The Australian Government determined to continue the use of the ABS Socioeconomic Index for Areas (SEIFA) Index of Education and Occupation (IEO), applied to each CD and moderated by the inclusion of student Centrelink data on students' individual financial circumstances. (See Chapter 9 for information on Centrelink, including Youth Allowance).<sup>32</sup>
- 6.8 Prior to and after development of the interim measure, there have been proposals to include the students' parents' educational attainment (PEAs) as a further form of moderation – despite occupational status being the more appropriate measure to include. (From 2010, universities have been required to collect information on PEA from students on enrolment forms.) However, in settling on its final measure DIISRTE recently signalled its intention to discontinue the use of Centrelink data and exclude the use of PEAs. It also signalled its intention to disband the use of CDs, which are to be replaced by Statistical Areas Level 1 (SA1s) as the geographical area which will be used to apply the SEIFA IEO. SA1s generally have a population of between 200 and 800 persons, with an average of 400 persons. They have been designed by the ABS to contain or aggregate to whole gazetted suburbs and rural localities,<sup>33</sup> including enabling the identification of discrete Indigenous communities and small rural towns.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Professor Gale was an expert member of this sub-committee.

<sup>31</sup> Rather than a cluster of statistical significance, 100 households is simply the number of households a single census data collector can reasonably visit in a two-week period.

<sup>32</sup> In this report, the 'postcode' methodology for measuring SES is used so that comparisons can be made with previous years. Since the introduction of the use of CDs, DIISRTE sometimes reports low SES data by CD only. On average reporting by CDs shows slightly lower rates of low SES student participation in HE.

<sup>33</sup> Gazetted Localities are the officially recognised boundaries of suburbs (in cities and larger towns) and localities (outside cities and larger towns). Since 1996 these boundaries have been formalised for most areas of Australia through a program coordinated by the Committee for Geographical Names in Australasia (CGNA), under the umbrella of the Intergovernmental Committee on Surveying and Mapping (ICSM).

<sup>34</sup> For further information on the delimitations of SA1s, see:

<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/7CAFD05E79EB6F81CA257801000C64CD?opendocument>

## Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people: HE review

- 6.9 In 2012 an Australian Government-commissioned report was released on Indigenous students and Australian HE: *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* (Behrendt et al. 2012). The review took place amidst concern among Australia's Indigenous peoples that they were often positioned as a sub-set of people from low SES backgrounds or as another black and minority ethnic (BME) group. In contrast, Bradley et al's review of Australian HE (2008) and the Australian Government's policy response (*Transforming Australia's Higher Education System*, 2009) argued that Indigenous Australians hold a specific and distinct place in Australia as its first peoples which warrants their treatment as more than just another target group and a specific review of their HE participation.
- 6.10 The review made 35 recommendations, with 'parity' targets as the cornerstone of these. By this it meant that the participation rate of Indigenous students in HE should be the same as the representation of 15-64 year old Indigenous peoples in the Australian population (2.23% in 2011) – re-asserting the Australian Government's definition of equity in its 1990 policy statement, *A Fair Chance For All*. It also asserted that Indigenous Australians should be represented among university staff in the same proportions. The review also argued that the retention and completion rates for Indigenous HE students should be the same as for average university student retention and completion rates.

## 7| Widening access

### Partnerships in widening access

- 7.1 Widening access to university for target groups is supported by the 'Partnerships' component of the Australian Government's HEPPP. (See Chapter 5.) Each institution receives a baseline flat rate of \$250,000 (previously \$330,000) – a total of \$9.5 million across the sector – for 'raising' student aspirations for HE and working in partnership with other education institutions (including schools) to do this. While the funding can be used for any identified target group, the main focus of the program is on students from low SES backgrounds. In a recent statement the Australian Government announced that after 2013 this flat rate distribution to universities is to be discontinued. In its place, from 2014 and in subsequent years \$36.5 million will be allocated to universities and will be proportionally distributed on the basis of their share of students from low SES backgrounds.
- 7.2 Contestable funding is also available for partnerships that exhibit: (a) collaboration; (b) early intervention and continuing engagement; (c) awareness; (d) integration and multi-layering; (e) a participation focus, and are (f) evidence based (Commonwealth of Australia 2010a: 15-16). Under this scheme, in 2011 approximately \$67.1 million was committed by the Australian Government for 11 projects<sup>35</sup> spanning 2012-2014, with project funding ranging from \$173,000 to \$21 million. The projects are currently in progress, and as a result reports and evaluations are not yet available. The Australian Government has recently announced that contestable funding for the next period (2013-2015) will be reduced to \$50 million. Preference will be given to projects that deliver more intensive support to disadvantaged students, especially Indigenous students. There is an expectation that this extra support will reach students who have missed out on equity support to date.
- 7.3 'Partnership' is an important concept for working with schools and VET institutions as a way of rising above the paternalism and deficit accounts associated with 'interventions'. Research by Australia's National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education suggests that effective institutional partnerships aimed at widening access to HE involve four key principles: commitment, coordination, interdependence and trust. The findings suggest a higher regard by partners for coordination and interdependence, although commitment and trust may simply be taken as given. The research suggests that while partnerships of this kind may be formed out of mutual commitment and trust (with undermining of these providing a catalyst for disbanding partnerships), coordination and interdependence may be indicators of structural (e.g. governance, policy, funding) arrangements which are necessary for partnership operations and maintenance.

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<sup>35</sup> For a full list and description of these HEPPP competitive grant projects, see: <http://www.innovation.gov.au/HigherEducation/Equity/HigherEducationParticipationAndPartnershipsProgram/Pages/default.aspx>

- 7.4 Given the small amount of non-contestable Partnership funding distributed to all universities (see above), many use their 'Participation' (i.e. low SES student loading) funds to support their partnership/outreach programs.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the bulk of the nation's university outreach activity is funded from Participation funds. This is often managed through institutional grant schemes that invite academics to bid for funds to establish outreach programs in partnership with schools and other groups and institutions; programs aimed at improving access for low SES students and also one other target group of an institution's choosing (see Chapter 5: Performance Indicator 1B).<sup>37</sup> In announcing the replacement of the \$250,000 per institution baseline Partnership funds with a proportional distribution of a considerably larger funding pool (\$36.5 million) from 2014, the Government has provided universities with more flexibility in how they support students with more financially sustainable smaller scale innovations.
- 7.5 While universities are required to report on how these funds are expended and to provide an evaluation of their effect, the Government is yet to provide guidance on how such evaluations should be undertaken. Evaluations undertaken by each institution therefore vary widely in scope and quality, making comparisons across the sector difficult if not impossible. In most cases these evaluations are not made publicly available.

## The Queensland Consortium of universities

- 7.6 Of the 11 Partnership projects funded directly by the HEPPP, four of them have been awarded to consortiums: the Victorian Universities Consortium (led by Monash University), the Sydney Basin Consortium (led by the University of Western Sydney) and the Queensland Consortium (led by Queensland University of Technology) with two funded projects.
- 7.7 The Queensland Consortium in particular shows how universities are able to collaborate on a widening access agenda in a competitive market environment. All eight universities in Queensland are partners in the Consortium along with the Queensland Government and its two projects ('Schools Outreach' and 'Indigenous Engagement'), which are focused on the Australian Government's priority groups: students from low SES backgrounds and Indigenous Australians. Both projects, and particularly the first, are focused on building 'tertiary awareness' in school students (Years 6-12) and assisting in their 'tertiary preparation' in order to enable students to make informed choices about 'tertiary options and possibilities'. The Consortium is overtly 'focused on widening participation, not recruitment, with implicit and explicit messages about post-school study in general rather than the benefits of a single institution'.
- 7.8 Project activities are aimed at de-mystifying the university experience for under-represented groups, including activities that add value to students' current learning experiences through disciplinary-specific connections, role models, awards/prizes and

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<sup>36</sup> Universities are free to use HEPPP funds however they choose, irrespective of their specific nomenclature.

<sup>37</sup> Examples of the kinds of outreach programs run by universities are illustrated in the seven case studies in the *Interventions Early in School* study (Gale et al. 2010). See Component C: <http://www.innovation.gov.au/HigherEducation/ResourcesAndPublications/HigherEducationPublications/OtherPublications/Pages/InterventionsEarlyInSchoolForDisadvantagedStudents.aspx>

advice about alternative pathways to (and financial support for) university. Specific activities are locally developed but informed by research on their effective design, guided by the Australian Government-commissioned study, *Interventions Early in School* (Gale et al. 2010; see 7.10). Each university engages in these activities in relative isolation within its designated school cluster: an agreed geographical area of low SES schools, with university campus proximity as the main allocating factor. The Consortium sees partnerships developed with these schools as creating ‘obligations’ for the university partner, ‘not rights or territory.’. That is, all universities remain free to undertake recruitment activities in all school clusters.

- 7.9 The second project, ‘Indigenous Engagement’, builds on the first through specific engagement and activities with local Indigenous communities, ‘building on the strengths and leadership with those communities’. As a result, while engaging with Indigenous school students, project activities (which are culturally sensitive) specifically target the involvement of students’ parents, elders, Indigenous school staff and community representatives. There is an explicit emphasis on relationship building and capacity building in/with Indigenous communities.

## Designing and evaluating outreach programs

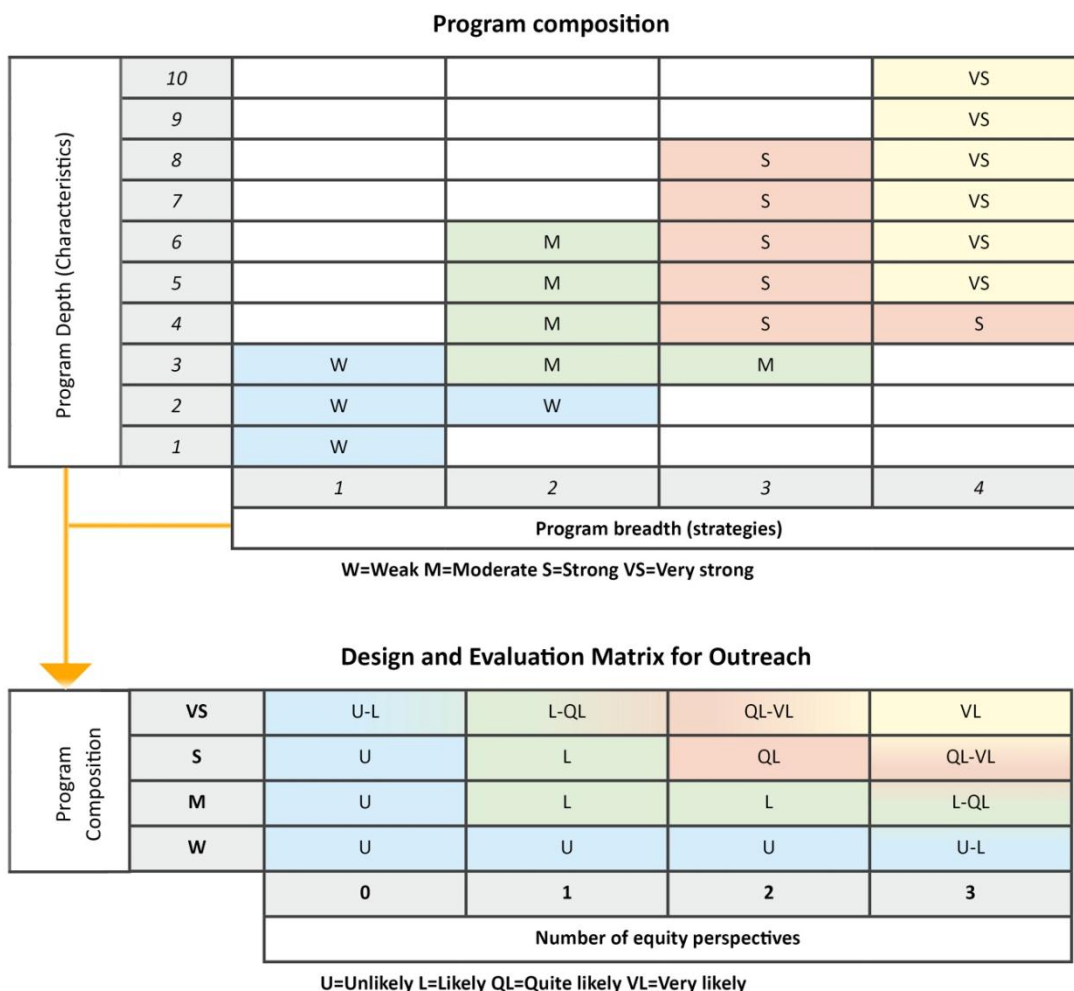
- 7.10 In 2010 Australia’s National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education produced research for the Australian Government on what makes outreach programs effective in encouraging and enabling under-represented students (particularly those from low SES backgrounds) to access HE. The report, *Interventions Early in School* (Gale et al. 2010), was informed by (i) an extensive review of the international research literature, (ii) a survey of all Australian university outreach programs, and (iii) in-depth case studies of seven university outreach programs. Findings from the research contributed to the development of a principled approach to the design and evaluation of outreach programs, entitled the Design and Evaluation Matrix for Outreach (DEMO). The project findings also contributed to the development of the HEPPP guidelines.
- 7.11 DEMO draws attention to the composition of programs – rather than to isolated program features – and also to their equity orientation. The research found that well composed outreach programs have both depth (at least four of 10 identified effective program characteristics) and breadth (at least two of four identified effective program strategies) (see Figure 7.1 below). That is, the strength of a program is in its combination and number of characteristics and strategies. The research also found that program effectiveness depends on its particular perspective (one of three) on equity; that is, its equity orientation.
- 7.12 The combination of characteristics and strategies with the program’s orientation provides a better abstract indicator of likely effectiveness than specifications of required program structures or checklists of required features. In Figure 7.1 below, the first table combines characteristics and strategies. The outcome of their combination (the y axis on the first table) is combined with the program’s equity orientation (the x axis on the second table). ‘Weak’, ‘moderate’, ‘strong’ and ‘very strong’ program compositions are mapped onto equity perspectives in order to reveal programs that are ‘unlikely’ through to ‘very likely’ to be effective in enabling and encouraging students to access HE in the future.

7.13 The 10 characteristics, four strategies and three perspectives identified by the research as contributing to effective programs are:

- > programs that are *characteristically*: people-rich, financially supportive and/or offer incentives, early, long-term and sustained, enable recognition of difference, offer enhanced academic curricula, involve collaboration, are cohort-based, rich in communication and information, offer familiarisation/site experiences, and are research-driven
- > programs that are *strategic* in: assembling resources, engaging learners, working together, and building confidence
- > programs *with a perspective* that: unsettles deficit views, researches 'local knowledge' and negotiates local interventions, and builds capacity in communities, schools and universities.

7.14 DEMO has been used to evaluate existing outreach programs (e.g. by the Universities of South Australia, Wollongong, James Cook and Queensland University of Technology) and used as criteria to determine which proposed outreach programs should receive financial support from internal grant schemes (e.g. at La Trobe University).

**Figure 7.1: Program composition and design/evaluation matrix for outreach**



Source: Gale et al. 2010



## 8| Retention, completion and progression

### Policy levers

- 8.1 While the Australian Government has explicit targets for student participation and attainment there are no equivalent targets for retention and completion, although arguably the 20% participation target is also concerned with student retention (maintaining participation) and the 40% attainment target is also concerned with student completions (milestones leading to attainment). Irrespective of this, the lack of explicit retention and completion targets does not mean that universities are not actively engaged in implementing student retention and completion strategies. In fact, support programs to assist students from target groups are often underpinned by government funding programs with expectations that student retention and completions will improve. Despite the dominance of a low SES focus in policy discourse, universities have continued to work with other target groups – e.g. Indigenous students and students with disabilities – to improve their retention and completion.
- 8.2 Compacts between the Australian Government and universities (see Chapter 5) provide a forum for formalising and/or reasserting the importance of targeting student retention and completion rates. In the context of these compacts, facilitation funding is provided to universities that assist in establishing baseline data on the student experience and student outcomes (Performance Indicators 2 and 3). While these are not explicitly directed at student retention and completions, they are indicative of them.
- 8.3 Under the terms of the compacts, institutions have some latitude in how they pursue their performance and excellence targets. The freedom available to each university can often result in quite different programs across the sector, which makes tracking at a system level difficult, as is the case with access and outreach programs. The variety of programs can be characterised in terms of two main strategies to address retention and completion: student support strategies, and broader learning and teaching strategies.

### Student support strategies

- 8.4 There are two broad approaches by institutions to improving student retention and success. The first involves the provision of targeted services that are largely outside university teaching and learning activities, e.g. counselling services, health services, child minding services, and employment and housing services. These are seen to contribute to student retention by addressing issues that are not strictly within the confines of a student's study load but influence it nonetheless. Australian Government university block grants are the primary source of funding, although in some cases these services have been expanded through HEPPP funds, while most universities now use the Student Services and Amenities Fees (SSAF) to further resource their student support services.

- 8.5 A second strategy for improving student retention and success is more directly focused on study skill development. Almost all universities provide students with access to Academic Language and Learning (ALL) staff who teach both within and in support of subject curricula, assisting academics in the development of curricula with appropriate learning opportunities for student development and assisting students to develop appropriate academic skills. Students themselves are also involved in programs aimed at assisting other students to develop their academic skills. These often take the form of supplemental instruction courses run by student mentors and are course specific. Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) or Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) activities are present in many Australian universities. For example, Deakin University's PASS program<sup>38</sup> focuses on assisting students with 'difficult' subjects taught by students who have recently completed the course. PASS also aims to provide generic study skills that are transferable across subject areas. Such programs predate HEPPP and the compacts and tend to be funded either through an institution's general base grants, although many institutions now used HEPPP to support them.
- 8.6 Information and knowledge about successful student support strategies have been accumulating for some years among equity units and practitioners, often facilitated by professional conferences and publications. There is a sense within the sector about 'what works' in improving retention, although this can remain the knowledge of those engaged in running the program. This reliance on institutional/professional memory can be problematic in a space where short-term funding means there is often a high turnover of staff who might otherwise be able to share the wisdom of their experience with colleagues. Evaluation of student support strategies is also problematic to some degree, and is usually conducted in-house by equity units or teaching and learning sections. Much of this evaluative work is not peer reviewed and is not made widely available to the public or to researchers without special access to equity and teaching and learning units. This can make it difficult to ascertain what constitutes an effective strategy or appropriate evaluation.

## Learning and teaching strategies

- 8.7 A second approach aimed at improving student retention and success focuses on learning and teaching. Typically this is facilitated by projects funded by bodies such as the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC; now the Office for Learning and Teaching, OLT).<sup>39</sup> The focus of these projects is often, but not exclusively, linked to a First Year in Higher Education (FYHE) and First Year Experience (FYE) agenda, informed by similar trends in the USA and the UK (building on the work of Tinto 1975; 2006/2007 and Yorke & Thomas 2003). Learning and Teaching projects are devised by teams of researchers in receipt of an ALTC/OLT grant in order to develop new strategies to improve student retention. Three prominent and interrelated examples of recent ALTC/OLT projects related to HE's equity agenda are set out below.
- 8.8 *Transition Pedagogy* is a concept devised within a collection of ALTC projects (e.g. Kift 2009; Kift, Nelson & Clarke 2010), as a learning and teaching strategy focused on

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<sup>38</sup> See <http://www.deakin.edu.au/current-students/study-support/study-skills/pass/index.php>

<sup>39</sup> See <http://www.olt.gov.au/> The OLT sits within the Australian Government's DIISRTE.

assisting first year students, particularly in their first few weeks at university, to make the necessary changes to adapt to life as a university student. It involves both curricular and co-curricular activities embedded within university structures and seeks to be:

- > *coherent* (institution-wide policy, practice and governance structures);
- > *integrated* (embedded across an entire institution and all of its disciplines, programs and services);
- > *co-ordinated* (a seamless FYE that is institution-wide rather than separate, 'siloes' initiatives);
- > *intentional* (an awareness that curriculum is what students have in common and using curriculum to influence the experience of all students);
- > *cumulative* (a long-term approach to learning and a gradual withdrawal of 'scaffolding');
- > *interconnected* (curriculum principles that stand out in the research as supportive of first year learning engagement, success, and retention);
- > *explicit* (with links between what is taught, why, and its assessment). (See Gale & Parker 2012)

8.9 A second learning and teaching project is focused on the *Effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds: Resources for Australian higher education*.<sup>40</sup> The project, which is an extension of the transition pedagogy approach (and includes its key architect, Sally Kift), emphasises the joint responsibility of institutions and students to bridge what it calls 'socio-cultural incongruity' (Devlin et al. 2012). It focuses on making the implicit rules of HE explicit to students, and generally making the university classroom a more open, accepting and desirable space for students from low SES backgrounds. It provides practical guidance for university tutors, lecturers and course designers and invites them to offer flexible assessment options to students, 'scaffold' student learning, make academic concepts clear and accessible, and reflect on their teaching practice.

8.10 A third learning and teaching project is aimed at *Safeguarding Student Learning Engagement* (Nelson & Creagh 2013a/b).<sup>41</sup> The project's stated rationale specifically emphasises its relevance to improving retention:

'There is pressure on the higher education sector for wider participation and improved retention of students from social groups currently under-represented in the Australasian higher education sector. To be consistent with these national imperatives requires constructive alignment between, on the one hand, policy and practice aimed at widening participation and, on the other hand, efforts aimed at increasing the retention of these same students.' (Nelson & Creagh 2013b: 5)

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<sup>40</sup> See <http://www.lowses.edu.au/>

<sup>41</sup> See <https://safeguardingstudentlearning.net/>

- 8.11 The project addresses student retention through a focus on engagement, providing examples of good practice that prevent disengagement. Outputs from the research include critical success factors, reported outcomes (e.g. improved retention and persistence) from case studies, and the alignment of good practice with principles of social justice.
- 8.12 There is considerable overlap across these three projects within their research teams and the ideas mobilised within the projects themselves. A further commonality is their disconnection from the broader field of educational research and from related fields such as cultural studies, philosophy and social theory. Even so, they are the stand out projects in Australian HE learning and teaching studies. Other learning and teaching projects tend to have less well articulated or recognised conceptual frameworks. As a result, policies, research and practice in learning and teaching in Australian HE tend to be predicated on taken-for-granted concepts and normative assumptions regarding preferred and ideal student experiences and trajectories (Gale & Parker 2012). Similarly, their approach to student retention and completion tends to adopt an institution and system-serving stance rather than an equity stance, thus upholding the interests of HE (embedded in pedagogy and curriculum and the implicit epistemological assumptions of academic knowledge) by placing the onus on students to adapt or conform to institutional expectations.

### Progression to graduate employment and postgraduate study

- 8.13 While the policy focus on student retention and completion is small compared with the emphasis on participation and attainment, there is even less concern from a policy-standpoint about students' progression to employment and to further study beyond undergraduate education.
- 8.14 Chapter 4 outlines the graduate destinations of university students. One thing that is notable in that data is the low progression to full-time employment of students with a disability (66.2% compared with the average of 76.3%). The chapter also notes that there are issues with the measurement of low SES students at postgraduate levels, but the data indicate their low participation rates, particularly in masters by research and PhD degrees.
- 8.15 Graduate Careers Australia has been surveying students after graduation for some years, and much published data is available. However, this does not include disaggregation by target group beyond what is outlined in Chapter 4. The lack of data on progression beyond undergraduate study limits claims that can be made about the effectiveness of programs offered by universities that seek to improve progression into further education or employment for target groups.

## 9| Financial support

### The Higher Education Contribution Scheme

- 9.1 The main financial support for Australian university students is the Higher Education Loan Program (HELP).<sup>42</sup> HELP has a number of subsidiary programs, the most common of which is HECS-HELP, previously known as HECS. First introduced in the late 1980s,<sup>43</sup> HECS-HELP is available to all undergraduate students enrolled in a federally funded Commonwealth Supported Place (CSP) offered by Table A HEPs. Fee repayment is deferred and income-contingent, so that no repayments are required until a minimum income threshold is reached. Payment is collected through the taxation system. Services and Amenities-Higher Education Loan Program (SA-HELP) is a second subsidiary program aimed at assisting students with their services and amenities fees, providing up to \$263 pa<sup>44</sup> which is added to their HELP loan. FEE-HELP is a third subsidiary program that provides loans to cover the tuition costs associated with fee-paying courses (including some postgraduate coursework degrees, bridging courses and other non-CSPs).<sup>45</sup>
- 9.2 In the 2012-13 financial year, the HECS-HELP loan repayment threshold was \$49,095 pa.<sup>46</sup> Debts incurred by students vary depending upon the field of study. Prior to 1996, all degrees accrued the same debt. From 1996 the Australian Government introduced three Student Contribution Bands, with degrees incurring higher debt that usually result in higher lifetime incomes for graduates. The justification for this is that courses that yield higher personal benefit ought to attract a higher contribution from graduates.<sup>47</sup> The repayment threshold was dramatically lowered in 1996. Since 2008 it has gradually increased, although it is not yet back to its original levels. In 2013 the bands and associated fees are:
- > *Band 1* (includes Humanities, Behavioural Science, Social Studies, Visual and Performing Arts, Education, Nursing) up to \$5,868 pa per student for a full-time load;
  - > *Band 2* (Mathematics, Statistics, Science, Computing, Built Environment, Health, Engineering, Surveying, Agriculture) up to \$8,363 pa;
  - > *Band 3* (Law, Dentistry, Medicine, Veterinary Science, Accounting, Administration, Economics, Commerce) up \$9,792 pa.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> HELP is jointly administered by DIIRSTE and the Australian Taxation Office.

<sup>43</sup> Prior to the introduction of HECS, HE had been free from student fees from the mid-1970s.

<sup>44</sup> <http://studyassist.gov.au/sites/studyassist/helppayingmyfees/sa-help/pages/sa-help>;  
<http://www.innovation.gov.au/HigherEducation/ResourcesAndPublications/Resources/Pages/DemandDrivenFundingForUndergraduateStudentPlaces.aspx>

<sup>45</sup> See: <http://studyassist.gov.au/sites/studyassist/helppayingmyfees/fee-help/>

<sup>46</sup> <http://studyassist.gov.au/sites/studyassist/payingbackmyloan/loan-repayment/pages/loan-repayment>

<sup>47</sup> Further details and an historical overview of HECS from 1990-2003 can be found here:

[http://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_Departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/Publications\\_Archive/archive/hecs](http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/Publications_Archive/archive/hecs)

<sup>48</sup> <http://studyassist.gov.au/sites/studyassist/helppayingmyfees/csps/pages/student-contribution-amounts#2013>

- 9.3 The gradual increase in student contributions and the aggregate lowering of the repayment threshold has led to concern among the public and scholars that HECS-HELP is a deterrent to study for those from low SES backgrounds. Several studies (e.g. Andrews 1999; Aungles, Buchanan, Karmel & MacLachlan 2002; Chapman & Ryan 2005; Rasmussen 2002) have investigated the role of increased but deferred costs on demand for HE (see below). Other than some immediate short-term effect on demand from mature-age students in the mid-1990s when changes to HECS were first introduced, the evidence suggests that HECS and 'its variants ... have not discouraged overall participation in higher education among persons from a low-SES background' (Aungles et al., 2002: 3). On the contrary, the research suggests that HECS has 'played a major role in facilitating greater access to higher education' (p. 30) and 'it is the income-contingent repayment characteristic of HECS that protects the access of the relatively poor' (Chapman & Ryan 2005: 507). HELP (including HECS-HELP) cannot be used to fund living costs and relocation expenses. To address these issues the Australian Government provides a number of income support arrangements for university students such as Youth Allowance and, since 2004, scholarships.
- 9.4 Additionally, students have had the option to repay portions of or their entire HECS debt up-front before their income reaches the repayment threshold. These arrangements have tended to advantage those with the financial resources to pay their debt in advance. Initially students who paid in this manner received a 25% discount off their debt. This has since been reduced to 20%, then 10% in January 2012.<sup>49</sup> In a recent pre-budget announcement (April 2013) the Australian Government signalled its intention to remove this discount altogether.

## Youth Allowance

- 9.5 The Australian Government provides means-tested financial support for students to attend university. Youth Allowance (previously known as Austudy (1987-1998)<sup>50</sup> and prior to that (1974-1986) the Tertiary Education Assistance Scheme (TEAS)), is the primary and most enduring form of income support for university students aged 16-24, although students are not the only Australians in receipt of Youth Allowance (Bradley et al. 2008: 48).<sup>51</sup> Austudy now only provides financial support (means-tested on income) for full time university students (and apprentices) who are 25 years old and over.<sup>52</sup>
- 9.6 Student eligibility for Youth Allowance hinges on the student's study load (students studying at less than three-quarters of a full time load are not eligible for Youth Allowance) and the level of their financial in/dependence. There are two main categories:

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<sup>49</sup> See <http://studyassist.gov.au/sites/studyassist/help-paying-my-fees/hecs-help/pages/hecs-help-welcome>

<sup>50</sup> From 1998, Austudy payments were confined to university students 25 years and over. Youth Allowance was introduced for students 24 years and under.

<sup>51</sup> From 1998, financial assistance for university students (Youth Allowance) became part of the nation's social security system, administered through the Australian Government agency, Centrelink. Centrelink also administers other income support services such as unemployment benefits (known as Newstart), the aged pension, and carers' allowances. See <http://www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/services/centrelink/youth-allowance>

<sup>52</sup> See <http://www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/services/centrelink/austudy>

- > Financial dependence on one's parents, in which case a means test is applied to the parents' income and assets.
- > Financial independence from one's parents, which is automatic for students 22 years and over (recently reduced from 25 years). Students can also be deemed financially independent (irrespective of age) by virtue of being engaged in full time paid employment for a period of 18 months (recently increased from 12 months) prior to taking up university study. In this case a means test is applied to the student's own income.

9.7 The recent changes to age limits has benefited large numbers of students aged 22 years and over, particularly those from regional and rural areas, low SES backgrounds and Indigenous students for whom full time university study would have been outside their financial reach. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the living allowance made possible by Youth Allowance has a greater impact on retention for these target groups than deferred debt when given the potential for reducing students' reliance on considerable hours of part time employment, for example.<sup>53</sup> Changes to the required period in full time paid employment to demonstrate financial independence has made qualifying for Youth Allowance more difficult for school leavers of wealthy parents who previously took a 'gap-year' or working holiday before entering university (Bradley et al. 2008: 48).

## Financial support for Indigenous students

9.8 In addition to Youth Allowance, there is a special income support scheme (i.e. Abstudy) specifically tailored for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (collectively referred to as Indigenous Australians). Abstudy is available to Indigenous people studying an approved course at secondary school, TAFE, a university, or other approved tertiary institution, or apprentices.<sup>54</sup> The scheme is means-tested and can be used to contribute to the costs of education, accommodation, travel to and from a place of study and other costs.

9.9 Other support programs specifically for Indigenous HE students include:<sup>55</sup> the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme for Tertiary Tuition that provides additional tuition support for Indigenous students and Commonwealth Scholarships that support Indigenous students from low SES or regional backgrounds with the costs associated with attending HE (as well as senior secondary school and TAFE).<sup>56</sup> The Indigenous Support Program is also an Australian Government program that makes direct payments to universities to fund support specifically for Indigenous students.

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<sup>53</sup> See the Australian University Student Finances Survey <http://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/page/submissions--reports/commissioned-studies/student-finances-survey/>

<sup>54</sup> See: <http://www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/services/centrelink/abstudy>

<sup>55</sup> For a full list, see:

<http://www.innovation.gov.au/HIGHEREDUCATION/INDIGENOUSHIGHEREDUCATION/Pages/default.aspx>

<sup>56</sup> See

<http://www.innovation.gov.au/HigherEducation/StudentSupport/CommonwealthScholarships/Pages/default.aspx>

## Financial support for students with disabilities

9.10 Apart from access to Youth Allowance, Austudy and scholarships noted above (and disability pensioner subsidies in some cases), financial support for university students with disabilities is provided directly to institutions rather than to students themselves under the umbrella of the Higher Education Disability Support Program (DSP).<sup>57</sup> On application to the Additional Support for Students with Disabilities (ASSD), universities are able to access funds to help defray costs associated with disability-specific support and equipment in order to assist the participation of students with disabilities. On meeting agreed targets related to outreach and support, universities are also able to access Performance-based Disability Support Funding. The Australian Government also sponsors the National Disability Coordination Officer Program (NDCO) which funds a national network of coordination officers who provide information, coordination and referral services for people with a disability who are interested or enrolled in post-school education and training.

## Scholarships

9.11 In 2004, as a supplement to Youth Allowance, the Australian Government introduced equity scholarships (allocated by universities) for undergraduate students in financial need. These Commonwealth Learning Scholarships (targeting education costs and accommodation costs for those who needed to relocate to attend university) were allocated by universities to students once a year according to individual financial need (Gale & Tranter 2011). In part they were introduced to compensate financially disadvantaged students for the increased financial cost of HE imposed by the Government's (up to) 25% increase in HECS fees (see contribution bands above).<sup>58</sup> In 2009 the separate allocation to universities for Commonwealth Learning Scholarships was replaced by Start-up and Relocation Scholarships,<sup>59</sup> which are administered by Centrelink and paid automatically to students based on their eligibility for Youth Allowance, Austudy or Abstudy. A range of other income support services and payments are also available to university students,<sup>60</sup> including a \$208 education entry payment for recipients of some allowances (including Newstart Allowance and the Disability Support Pension).<sup>61</sup>

9.12 In a recent pre-budget statement (April 2013) the Australian Government announced that Start-up Scholarships will be reconfigured into HECS-style, repayable, income-contingent loans rather than scholarships. If implemented, it will be a major shift in public policy, without any clear rationale for why it has been applied to this form of income support for university students and not to other forms (e.g. Youth Allowance) or to income support more generally (e.g. unemployment benefits, age pensions, etc.).

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<sup>57</sup> See

<http://www.innovation.gov.au/HigherEducation/Equity/HigherEducationDisabilitySupportProgram/Pages/default.aspx>

<sup>58</sup> In 2004, the Australian Government also introduced full-fee undergraduate places for domestic students who could afford to pay and who qualified for entry on academic merit. This full-fee option for domestic students was later withdrawn in 2008 with the election of a new Australian Government.

<sup>59</sup> <http://www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/services/centrelink/relocation-scholarship>

<sup>60</sup> For a summary of these, see: <http://studyassist.gov.au/sites/StudyAssist/StudentIncomeSupport> LINK DID NOT

WORK

<sup>61</sup> <http://www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/services/centrelink/education-entry-payment>



## Research papers, reports and evaluations of HECS and student finances

- 9.13 HECS was developed in Australia in the late 1980s by Bruce Chapman and has since been adopted by HE systems in several other countries, including England. The scheme has undergone a number of adjustments since it was first introduced in Australia and has been the subject of a number of research papers, reports and evaluations. The following are a small sample of these:
- 9.14 **Beer, G., & Chapman, B. (2004). HECS System Changes: Impact on Students. Australian National University Centre for Economic Policy Research: Canberra:** Co-authored by the chief architect of HECS (Chapman), this report considers proposed changes to the HECS-HELP system in 2005 that increased student contributions by 25%. The report found that the long-term effects of the increase were more marked for high income earners than for low income earners. It also considered the effects of the higher debt accumulated through FEE-HELP.
- 9.15 **Birch, E. R., & Miller, P. W. (2006). HECS and HECS-HELP: Equity issues. Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 28(2), 97-119:** This article focuses on the equity implications of HECS. It concludes that students from low SES backgrounds are no more likely to defer their HECS debt than others, but that other adverse side-effects such as ongoing debt after graduation are more acute for them than for those with greater economic resources.
- 9.16 **Harman, G. (2002). Evaluation of the Australian Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS). Perspectives, 6(1), 16-22:** This paper presents a brief historical account of the current Australian HE funding model (HECS) and evaluates the model on the basis of five criteria: public acceptance, administrative efficiency, impact on student participation (especially from disadvantaged groups), impact on university teaching, and financial contribution. The findings show that HECS has wider public acceptance, but that its impact on student participation is minimal.
- 9.17 **James, R., Bexley, E., Devlin, M., & Marginson, S. (2007). Australian university student finances 2006: final report of a national survey of students in public universities. Canberra: Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee:** This report investigated the financial situations of students at all public Australian universities. It found that most students were concerned about 'making ends meet' on a day to day basis given the costs of living. They were also anxious about the extent of long-term debt accrued as a result of their studies. Other findings of the report include that 14.6% of full-time undergraduate students surveyed were employed for more than 20 hours a week (38.2% for full-time postgraduate coursework students) in order to cover the basic costs of living and study; 4.5% of full-time undergraduate students reported being in full-time employment.
- 9.18 **Marks, G. N. (2009). The Social Effects of the Australian Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS). Higher Education, 57(1), 71-84:** Authored by former Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) researcher Gary Marks, this article explores the long-term effects of HECS. It finds that HECS has not been a deterrent to HE entry, but it has had some effects on students' decisions on fertility and other life issues after graduation from HE.

- 9.19 **Rasmussen, C. J. (2006). Effective cost-sharing models in higher education: Insights from low-income students in Australian Universities. Higher Education, 51(1), 1–25:** This study primarily seeks to understand how the Australian HECS model of funding influences the cost assessment of prospective university students and identify key lessons others can learn from this model of HE funding. The findings show that prospective students have a ‘reasonably accurate understanding’ about the HECS debt repayment procedure and are not worried about future indebtedness. The study concludes that the HECS model poses little or no impediment to the participation of low-income students, and that the availability of information on the option to defer HECS has positive impact on students’ decisions to enrol in HE.
- 9.20 **Stokes, A., & Wright, S. (2010). Are University Students Paying Too Much for Their Education in Australia? Journal of Australian Political Economy, (65), 5-27:** This article focuses on income-contingent loans as a funding model and its impact on HE in Australia. It argues that the current funding model (i.e. HECS) is insufficient in terms of promoting participation in HE. The authors argue that lower representation of equity target groups (e.g. Indigenous Australians and low SES students) in the sector is linked with increases in HECS charges over time. To address this shortcoming they propose a new structure of funding in which both the private and public benefits of HE should be used to determine the level of student contribution in HECS.

## 10| Critical review

10.1 Two key concepts inform the current WP policy in Australian HE, and they are equity and aspiration. Equity is evoked in relation to the Australian Government's target to increase the participation of students from low SES backgrounds to 20% of the undergraduate student population by 2020. Aspiration is evoked in relation to the Australian Government's target to increase the bachelor degree attainment of 25-34 year olds to 40% by 2025. The two targets (and concepts) are related, with the first named by Government policy as contributing to the second.<sup>62</sup> These are strengths within Australia's policy approach, but they also come with limitations.

### Equity: in pursuit of the 20% target

10.2 Equity has informed WP policy in Australian HE for at least the last two decades. Yet there are questions emerging about its usefulness in pursuing social justice in HE into the future. The concerns are with both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of equity.

10.3 By definition, equity denotes proportional representation. As a concept it shifts WP debates from 'inclusion' (equality) to 'fairness' (equity) (Fraser 2008; Marginson 2011b). For people from low socioeconomic backgrounds, this requires their representation within university student populations in the same proportion as in the population at large. This is very different to suggesting that their inclusion should be equal to that of everyone else. The sense of this is seen in considering the inclusion of Indigenous Australians within university student populations. For example, it would be impossible for Indigenous undergraduate students to be represented in the same numbers as non-Indigenous domestic undergraduate students (639,626 in 2011). There are not that many Indigenous people in the nation (only 517,200, i.e. 2.5% of Australia's 23 million people). And it would be unviable to restrict the number of non-Indigenous domestic undergraduate students to match the number of participating Indigenous undergraduate students (8,857 in 2011). In short, equity renders equality possible and viable.

10.4 In the current Australian context there is an *explicit* equity target for the participation of low SES students in HE, even if this target is pitched below what is technically equitable (at 20% rather than 25% which is the proportion of people from low SES backgrounds within the Australian population). There are also *implicit* equity targets with respect to their retention, success and completion. This is the implied reasoning behind maintaining comparative performance data over the last two decades. The same could be argued for all target groups. The recent *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* (Behrendt et al.

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<sup>62</sup> The Australian Government has determined that both targets are restricted to domestic students and both are to be achieved by Australia's universities, not by VET providers and not through immigration.

2012) made these implicit targets explicit, thereby recommending parity (i.e. equity) targets for Indigenous student retention and completions. Because the pursuit of equity generates a numerical accounting it is an attractive concept for informing HE policy in the current 'policy by numbers' approach to governance (Lingard 2011). Expressed as a proportion it is relatively easy to determine whether equity is being achieved, and it is useful in driving practice towards these ends. It is also useful for challenging policy and practice to expand the application of equity to other parts of the HE system e.g. applied to target-group retention and completion ratios, but also to fields of education, undergraduate and postgraduate study, and university types (see Appendix 2). For example, Chapter 4 highlights the inequities in the concentration of low SES students in Education, Nursing and Engineering in undergraduate study and in low status institutions, quite apart from their under-representation across the system as a whole.

- 10.5 However, it is important to recognize that equity denotes proportional representation *within a bounded system*; in this case, within Australia and its HE system or parts of that system (e.g. undergraduate study). These system boundaries are becoming increasingly porous. Australian universities now operate in a global HE field (Marginson 2008), as do most of the world's universities, which is evident in their participation in global competition and their location within world rankings (see Appendix 2). It is Australia's more elite universities, those in which target groups are most under-represented (see Table 4.17), that participate most fully and successfully in the global HE field. Similarly, it is students from high SES backgrounds who are most likely to seek HE beyond the nation. The following illustrates the emerging strategy of the world's elite in the face of rising HE participation, from mass to universal (Trow 1974; 2006). The comments are those of a high SES student from England pursuing an undergraduate degree in the U.S.A.:

'There is so much talk in the newspaper of the devaluing of degrees, so I think that this is a way of making your CV stand out a little more. You didn't just get a degree, you went half way round the world to get a degree. ... I suppose I looked at the Ivy League universities in the US. If I was going to make the trek over here and give up Cambridge, it needed to be something that was equally enjoyable and taxing and look(ed) good on my CV.'

(Student in Findlay & King 2010: 28, cited in Sellar & Gale 2011)

- 10.6 The number of Australians pursuing university degrees outside the Australian HE system – at Yale, Harvard, Cambridge, Oxford, etc. – is unknown. However, they are most likely to be from high SES backgrounds. As Bauman (1998) suggests, geographical mobility has now become the most significant marker of social distinction. Irrespective of the numbers involved, the fact that high SES Australians are increasingly seeking to maintain their status by undertaking degrees elsewhere starts to undermine the strength of equity as a strategy for pursuing social justice in Australian HE. The system is no longer bounded by the nation state. At some point in the future equity may be achieved for target groups within Australian HE, but it may not be achieved in relation to the HE of Australians as a whole.
- 10.7 Apart from these emerging problems undermining equity as a strategy, there are also issues with its quantification. Social justice in HE is not simply about access, participation and completion, a 'bums on seats' approach (Gale 2012), but is also

about access to, participation in and completion of particular forms of HE. In pursuit of this more qualitative version of equity, researchers have recently argued the need for 'epistemological equity' (Dei 2010) or a 'southern theory' (Connell 2007) of HE. These call into question the nature of HE itself. They challenge the exclusionary practices of disciplines and disciplinary fields in the production and legitimization of certain knowledge forms and ways of knowing, to the exclusion of or superiority to others (which are often the under-represented groups). A southern theory of HE (Gale 2012) also suggests that it needs to be refashioned to serve the interests of those who access it; interests informed by their own aspirations for their futures rather than the aspirations of governments. This is important if the shift towards universal participation is to redress the 'false hope' (Bourdieu 1984) or 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2011) of HE that increasingly fails to offer students from target groups the same social and financial outcomes afforded previous graduates (Bourdieu 1984; Brown et al. 2011).

### Aspiration: in pursuit of the 40% target

- 10.8 Aspiration, a second key concept in the Australian WP policy, is a relatively recent inclusion in Australian HE. While recognized in the late 1970s (Anderson et al. 1980) as an important condition for university entry, it was considered to be outside the purview of HE policy until the Bradley Review (2008) and the Australian Government's policy response (2009). However, research is emerging that suggests aspiration might not be the problem for students from low SES backgrounds (and other target groups) that the Australian Government and Australian universities imagine it to be.
- 10.9 In government policy discourse, aspiration is a relatively simple and individualized concept. People from under-represented groups, particularly those from low SES backgrounds, are seen to lack or have low aspirations if they do not aspire to go to university. This is particularly problematic in circumstances in which the Australian Government wants to increase the proportion of Australians (particularly 25-34 year olds) with a bachelor degree as a way of improving the nation's capacity to compete in a global knowledge economy. By comparison with other OECD nations, the proportion of Australians with bachelor degrees is quite low (Bradley et al. 2008). The policy solution is to raise, increase or build the aspirations of low SES people for university study. For example, two of the current competitive HEPPP grants, both named 'Aspire' and borrowed from the UK context, seek to '*motivate* students from low SES backgrounds', '*challenging the traditional attitudes* of people from low SES backgrounds towards higher education' (emphasis added).<sup>63</sup>
- 10.10 A major problem with this account is that the most recent research suggests a large proportion of students from low SES schools, whether they are in a city or regional/remote areas, do aspire to HE. For example, a recent survey of over 2000 students from secondary schools in Melbourne's low SES western suburbs found that around 75% of students from these schools already aspire to go to university (Bowden & Doughney 2010; Prosser et al. 2008). Data from The Australian Survey of Student Aspirations (TASSA) – implemented in 2012-13 in Central Queensland secondary

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<sup>63</sup> See <http://www.innovation.gov.au/HigherEducation/Equity/HigherEducationParticipationAndPartnershipsProgram/Pages/default.aspx>

schools with 200 students in Years 9 and 10 show similar results, with over 67% recording aspirations to attend university in the future (Gale et al. 2013).<sup>64</sup> Although the data are preliminary, regional/remote areas appear to contract students' aspirations for HE. Even so these remain much higher than the policy rhetoric and access and participation data (Chapter 4) suggest.

10.11 These high levels of aspiration for HE by low SES students combined with their below parity participation in HE suggest that the problem is something other than a lack of aspiration for university study. Considerable international research on student aspiration is now in progress (e.g. in the UK, see Archer et al. 2007; Burke 2012; Watts & Bridges 2006), to which several Australian researchers have contributed (e.g. Bok 2010; Sellar & Gale 2011; Smith 2011; Sellar, Gale & Parker 2011; Sellar 2013; Zipin, Sellar, Brennan & Gale in press). One line of inquiry suggests that aspiration is a 'navigational capacity' (Appadurai 2004; Sellar & Gale 2011). Students from low SES backgrounds typically have diminished navigational capacities as a result of their limited archives of experience with which to negotiate their way towards their aspirations. They are informed by a 'tour' knowledge of HE pathways which is reliant on the 'hot' (Ball & Vincent 1998) and sometimes errant knowledge and direction of others rather than the 'map' knowledge of their high SES peers (de Certeau 1984; Gale et al. 2013) who are 'in the know' and know the right people. Appadurai (2004) similarly describes the poor as having more brittle aspirations and sparse aspirational nodes which are subject to long distance journeys between where they are now and where they want to go, and with 'extremely weak resources where the terms of recognition are concerned' (p. 66). This different understanding of aspiration has implications for the objectives and activities of university outreach programs to resource students' navigational capacities and to recognise the value of the socio-cultural resources for inspiring the students they have at hand.

10.12 A second problem with how aspiration is conceived within Australian policy and much practice is that it tends to confine students to populist and ideological conceptions of 'the good life'. These are the out-workings of beliefs and assumptions of the dominant that circulate as natural and commonsense. They are the aspirations with which students often respond when asked 'What do you want to be when you grow up?' They are the responses that students know they should give to such an inquiry, the responses deemed to carry the most value. Drawing on the work of Bourdieu, Zipin et al. (in press) refer to these as *doxic* aspirations. In the context of HE, less legitimate aspirations by people from low SES backgrounds are derived from their biological and historical conditions. These are informed by and re-assert individuals' social-structural positions in society, particularly their assumed deficits in relation to and by the dominant. Zipin et al. (in press) refer to these as 'habituated' aspirations. University outreach programs that reinforce doxic aspirations and demonize habituated aspirations fail to recognise the value and legitimacy of other aspirations for 'the good life,' and the fact that HE itself contributes to the aspirational 'problem' by assuming that it offers the best possible route or destination.

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<sup>64</sup> Central Queensland is one of the most concentrated low SES areas in the nation. More students from this area are due to complete the survey in the near future. Students in a large low SES Victorian secondary school have also completed the survey.

## Challenges for policy and practice

10.13 The above limitations to how 'equity' and 'aspirations' are conceived and enacted within the WP policy in Australian HE provide considerable challenges to achieving social justice. Addressing them will require their re-conception along lines outlined above along with new policy and practice commitments to expand the application of equity to other parts of the HE system, including and central to the nature of HE itself, and to recognize and resource the aspirations of low SES students (and other target groups) for HE without these aspirations being confined to or by HE.





## 11| Conclusions

11.1 A number of conclusions can be drawn from this Australian case of WP policy in HE, both for Australia and for similar HE systems in nations such as England.

### University outreach activities

11.2 The Australian case suggests that the best forms of university outreach display:

- > a design that is research-informed (e.g. by DEMO or similar; see Chapter 7);
- > efforts that are coordinated across institutions (e.g. the Queensland Consortium; see Chapter 7) so that each institution is not operating in isolation and/or acting out of self-interest;
- > rigorous and consistent evaluation that is commensurate with the task (i.e. acknowledgment that program effectiveness can be difficult to establish given non-clinical contexts and uncontrollable variables which render absolute cause and effect claims problematic).

11.3 The evidence in the Australian context is that these activities can be incentivized by government funding (e.g. HEPPP; see Chapters 5 and 7) and by guidelines that encourage them. In particular, the sheer amount of Australian Government funding available through HEPPP, together with a strong policy imperative to form partnerships have spawned a range of efforts which are unprecedented in both scale and interconnectedness (e.g. the Queensland Consortium).

### Financial support systems

11.4 Australian students from target groups (particularly low SES students) appear to benefit from three forms of financial support:

- > support to repay tuition fees, such as a deferred and income-contingent loan repayment scheme (e.g. HECS-HELP; see Chapter 9);
- > income support while studying at university, which is means-tested and sufficient to reduce or eliminate the need to engage in paid work while studying (e.g. Youth Allowance, scholarships; see Chapter 9); and
- > funding schemes, which are accessible by institutions and targeting the specific needs of target groups (e.g. Indigenous Support Program, DSP, etc.).

11.5 The research indicates that HECS-HELP does not appear to deter low SES students from accessing and participating in HE (Chapter 9), but neither does it encourage them (Stokes & Wright 2010). In contrast, anecdotal and some institutional evidence suggests that Youth Allowance (particularly since the lowering of age limits which

determine students' independent financial status) and scholarships provide this encouragement and contribute to higher rates of retention and success.

## Similarities in low and high SES student retention rates

- 11.6 Reasons for the similarities between low and high SES student retention rates in Australia (see Chapter 4) are difficult to discern. There is no definitive research in the field that provides clear guidance on this issue, however three tentative explanations seem plausible:
1. The ATARs (university entry scores) of low SES students are a better indicator of their SES than their ability (see Chapter 2). Students from low SES backgrounds are more academically able than their entry qualifications might suggest, evidenced in their retention and success rates. Therefore assumptions that the expansion of the sector fuelled by low SES students will lead to reduced standards have no basis in fact. Claims that raising the aspirations of low SES students needs to be balanced against their likely success stem from unfounded deficit views of low SES students.
  2. There is good income support for low SES students, which has improved in recent years. This has acted as an incentive for students from low SES backgrounds to access and participate in HE as more places have become available. It has also enabled some students to reduce their heavy employment workloads while studying, thereby contributing to improved retention and success rates.
  3. The sociocultural differences between low SES students and mid and high SES students is not as great as might otherwise be assumed and perhaps exists in England. It would appear that low SES students have access to cultural capital in sufficient quantity and quality to support their successful participation in HE. The increasing prevalence of information technologies and social media within university courses may also be contributing to increased student engagement and decreased cultural capital differences.
- 11.7 While these explanations are based on the available evidence, they need to be tested rather than accepted as a definitive explanation. The last is particularly untested. What is known is that low SES students do not access student support services in numbers very much greater than the average student. In fact, international and NESB students access these services in higher numbers than students from low SES backgrounds.

## Mature-age/adult students

- 11.8 The Australian Government's target to increase the proportion of 25-34 year olds with a bachelor degree to 40% by 2025 means that much WP activity is directed at students in secondary schools, where most of this 2025 cohort is currently located. Nevertheless, many universities have bridging, enabling, foundation and preparatory programs along with diploma and associate degree programs and flexible entry pathways (e.g. transfer arrangements with TAFE institutions) to promote the participation of mature-age students (25 years and over) in HE. Some of these preparatory student places are not part of the institution's funded student load and so do not appear in Australian Government statistics (Chapter 4). As one example, Queensland University of Technology and Griffith University collaborate on an Adult

Learner Program, which is a partnership established with neighbouring TAFEs that offer tertiary preparation courses with a guaranteed pathway into a university course.<sup>65</sup> Across the entire sector, 21% of bachelor degree students were mature-age in 2011.<sup>66</sup> Regional universities (in the RUN grouping) in particular have higher proportions of mature-age students than other universities. However, Australia does not do as much as other countries in relation to facilitating access to HE for employed adults (e.g. negotiating with employers to release whole cohorts of workers for university study). Where this occurs it tends to be at the postgraduate level (e.g. Masters of Education coursework degrees offered by Monash University).

## Inequalities at the postgraduate level

- 11.9 There has been little focus on inequalities among Australia's postgraduate students, although at least one university has named postgraduate low SES students as its other target group in its institutional compact (see Chapter 5). One problem is the reliability of area and qualification definitions of target groups (i.e. low SES, regional and remote) given that postgraduate students may have moved in order to undertake their undergraduate studies, thereby skewing the data. Yet there is still sufficient reliable data to suggest that the inequalities for target groups are more severe at the postgraduate level, and particularly in research degrees (see Chapter 4).
- 11.10 In the absence of specific Australian research, what can be done to redress this situation mirrors what is known to be important for redressing inequalities at the undergraduate level. That is:
- > postgraduate students from target groups (particularly low SES students) require financial support. In 2013 the maximum FEE-HELP limit was \$93,204 (\$116,507 for students undertaking Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Science). The coursework fees at several institutions, particularly for courses such as Law or Medicine at Go8 institutions, currently exceed the FEE-HELP limit. This presents considerable participation limitations for students from target groups if they cannot afford the fees or do not have the resources to fund the gap between the FEE-HELP limits and what universities charge;
  - > decisions about participating in postgraduate study are likely to be made much earlier in life than at the point between finalizing undergraduate study and beginning postgraduate study (see Gale et al. 2010). Postgraduate-focused outreach-type programs may need to be implemented in order to encourage and enable students from target groups to participate in postgraduate studies.

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<sup>65</sup> See <http://www.bridgetostudy.com.au/>

<sup>66</sup> See <http://www.innovation.gov.au/HigherEducation/HigherEducationStatistics/StatisticsPublications/Pages/2011StudentFullYear.aspx>

## WP in Australia: concluding comments

11.11 There is a wealth of activity dedicated to improving student access to and participation in Australian HE. At the policy level there has been strong interest in widening and increasing participation, resulting in unprecedented levels of funding (primarily through HEPPP). Universities themselves have taken up the challenge and expanded existing access and outreach programs and formed new collaborative partnerships (e.g. the Queensland Consortium). This latest iteration of WP in Australian HE is relatively new (beginning in 2009) compared with the much longer standing WP platform in the UK. The long-term effects are yet to be established, being partially hampered by the lack of a coherent national evaluation framework as well as limitations on publicly available data. The policy focus has been primarily on access and participation for students from low SES backgrounds, although other target groups and phases of study are also addressed. Equity in postgraduate study in particular still needs to be fully considered by policy makers.

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## Appendix 2 | List of abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACER	Australian Council for Educational Research
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
ALL	Academic Language and Learning
ALTC	Australian Learning and Teaching Council
ASSD	Additional Support for Students with Disabilities
ATAR	Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank
ATN	Australian Technology Network of universities
BME	Black and Minority Ethnic
CAE	College of Advanced Education
CD	Collection District
CHESSN	Commonwealth Higher Education Student Support Number
CSP	Commonwealth Supported Place
DEECD	Department of Education and Early Childhood Development
DEET	Department of Employment, Education and Training
DEEWR	Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (Under Machinery of Government changes, the former Department of Education Science and Training (DEST) transferred to DEEWR in 2009)
DEMO	Design and Evaluation Matrix for Outreach
DIISRTE	Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education
DIICCSRTE	Department of Industry, Climate Change, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education
DSP	Disability Support Program
EFTSL	Effective Full Time Student Load

FEE-HELP	Fee- Higher Education Loan Program
FYHE	First Year in Higher Education
FYE	First Year Experience
Go8	Group of Eight
HDR	Higher Degree by Research
HE	Higher Education
HECS	Higher Education Contribution Scheme
HECS-HELP	Higher Education Contribution Scheme-Higher Education Loan Program
HELP	Higher Education Loan Program
HEP	Higher Education Provider
HEPPP	Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program
IEO	Index of Education and Occupation
IRU	Innovative Research Universities
LSAY	Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth
NDCO	National Disability Coordination Officer program
NESB	Non-English-Speaking Background
NSW	New South Wales
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
OLT	Office for Learning and Teaching
PAL	Peer Assisted Learning
PASS	Peer Assisted Study Sessions
PEA	Parental Education Attainment
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
RUN	Regional Universities Network
SA-HELP	Services and Amenities-Higher Education Loan Program
SA1	Statistical Area Level 1
SEIFA	Socioeconomic Index for Areas

SES	Socioeconomic Status
SSAF	Student Services and Amenities Fees
TAC	Tertiary Admission Centre
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
TASSA	The Australian Survey of Student Aspirations
TEAS	Tertiary Education Assistance Scheme
TEQSA	Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WP	Widening participation

## Appendix 3 | Institutions, groupings and world rankings

Institution (establishment order)	Established as university	University group	Shanghai Jiao Tong top 500 ranking, 2012		Times Higher Education top 500 ranking, 2012-13	
			World	Aust.	World	Oceania
<i>'Table A'</i>						
University of Sydney	1850	Go8	93	4	62	3
University of Melbourne	1853	Go8	57	1	28	1
University of Adelaide	1874	Go8	201-300	8-9	176	8
University of Tasmania	1890	Non-aligned	301-400	10-16	351-400	20-25
University of Queensland	1909	Go8	90	3	65	4
University of Western Australia	1911	Go8	96	5	190	9
Australian National University	1946	Go8	64	2	37	2
University of New South Wales	1949	Go8	101-150	6-7	85	5
University of New England	1954	RUN	-	-	-	-
Monash University	1958	Go8	101-150	6-7	99	6
Macquarie University	1964	Non-aligned	201-300	8-9	251-275	11-13
La Trobe University	1965	IRU	401-500	17-19	-	-
University of Newcastle	1965	IRU	301-400	10-16	276-300	14
Flinders University	1966	IRU	301-400	10-16	351-400	20-25
James Cook University	1970	IRU	301-400	10-16	-	-
Griffith University	1971	IRU	301-400	10-16	-	-
Murdoch University	1973	IRU	-	-	301-350	15-19
Deakin University	1974	Non-aligned	-	-	351-400	20-25
University of Wollongong	1975	Non-aligned	301-400	10-16	301-350	15-19
Curtin University of Technology	1987	ATN	401-500	17-19	-	-
Queensland University of Technology	1988	ATN	-	-	251-275	11-13
University of Technology Sydney	1988	ATN	401-500	17-19	351-400	20-25
University of Western Sydney	1989	Non-aligned	-	-	-	-
Charles Sturt University	1990	Non-aligned	-	-	-	-
University of Canberra	1990	Non-aligned	-	-	-	-
Australian Catholic University	1991	Non-aligned	-	-	-	-
Edith Cowen University	1991	Non-aligned	-	-	-	-
University of South Australia	1991	ATN	-	-	301-350	15-19
Central Queensland University	1992	RUN	-	-	-	-
RMIT University	1992	ATN	-	-	-	-
Swinburne University of Technology	1992	Non-aligned	301-400	10-16	-	-
University of Southern Queensland	1992	RUN	-	-	-	-
Victoria University	1992	Non-aligned	-	-	-	-
Southern Cross University	1994	RUN	-	-	-	-
University of Ballarat	1994	RUN	-	-	-	-
University of the Sunshine Coast	1999	RUN	-	-	-	-
<b>Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education</b>	1999	Non-aligned	-	-	-	-
Charles Darwin University	2004	IRU	-	-	351-400	20-25
<i>'Table B'</i>						
Melbourne College of Divinity	1910	Non-aligned	-	-	-	-
Bond University	1989	Non-aligned	-	-	-	-
University of Notre Dame	1990	Non-aligned	-	-	-	-

