

Student Equity Data Guide

Defining Equity Groups

Equity Groups in Australian Higher Education

Within Australian higher education, there are four key equity groups:

- Students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds
- First Nations Australian students
- Students from regional or remote areas
- Students with disability

Additional equity groups often reported include Women in Non-Traditional Areas (WINTA) and students from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds (NESB). This guide focuses on the four key equity groups.

Identifying Equity Groups and Key Considerations

Data used to identify these equity groups are taken from the mandatory Tertiary Collection of Student Information (TCSI) Higher Education Student collection, which is reported to the Department of Education by all higher education institutions. The definitions of equity groups are as follows:

Students from low SES backgrounds

Identification: A student's socio-economic status (SES) is defined by their residential address, using either postcode or Statistical Area 1 (SA1)¹. Both methods are reported by the Department of Education, but SA1 is more accurate as it covers a smaller region, with population counts ranging from 200 to 800 people. Low SES areas are identified using the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Socio-Economic Index for Areas (SEIFA) — *Index of Education and Occupation* (IEO)², derived from ABS Census data. All areas are assigned a score based on the IEO and ranked from the highest to lowest score. Areas are then classified into low (bottom 25% of the 15-64 population), medium (middle 50% of the 15-64 population), or high (top 25% of the 15-64 population) SES. Rankings are updated after each ABS Census. For Departmental reporting, the period 2016 to 2021 used SEIFA data from the 2016 Census and 2022 onwards uses the 2021 Census.

Considerations: This is based on the student's residential address, which can be their address at time of application, at enrolment, or during their studies. Using a student's address at the time of application ('first address') is more likely to reflect the student's background. The Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP)³ refers to 'residential address',

This guide is part of the **Student Equity Data Guide Series** produced by the **Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success (ACSES)**. This series aims to describe key data areas for student equity in higher education.

Student Equity Data Guides are available on the [ACSES website - aces.edu.au/data](https://aces.edu.au/data).

Please contact aces@curtin.edu.au with any feedback or queries.

1 <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/standards/australian-statistical-geography-standard-asgs-edition-3/jul2021-jun2026/main-structure-and-greater-capital-city-statistical-areas/statistical-area-level-1>

2 <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/socio-economic-indexes-areas-seifa-australia/latest-release>

3 <https://www.legislation.gov.au/F2022L00347/latest/text>

implying the use of the most up to date address and not 'first' residential address. The use of the bottom 25% as an indicator of low SES is simplified, with the potential to use more nuanced data. Ongoing discussions aim to refine this measure to better reflect a student's family background, considering factors such as parents' education or income support⁴. It is important to note that not all people living within low SES areas face disadvantage, while some in higher SES areas may face disadvantage. In addition, changes in census data (e.g. 2016 to 2021 censuses) may result in students who live in a low SES area in 2021 no longer being classified as such in 2022. This may affect a student's eligibility for scholarships or access to support programs.

First Nations Australian students (Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students)

Identification: Students who identify as First Nations Australians (Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander) to their higher education provider, either at the time of application, enrolment, or during their studies.

Considerations: The identification process relies on self-reporting, which may lead to under- or over-reporting. Reporting categories and the questions posed to students may vary across institutions, leading to inconsistencies in data collection.

Students from regional and remote areas

Identification: Students from regional and remote areas are identified based on the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) Remoteness Structure classification⁵. Students in the 'regional' and 'remote' categories have a residential address in a postcode classified as 'regional' and 'remote' based on this classification. From 2016 to 2021, the 2016 ASGS was used, and from 2022 onwards the 2021 ASGS is used. Although presented as one group within this guide, regional and remote groups are often reported as distinct equity groups, as their experiences and access to higher education and related services will likely differ.

Considerations: Identification of regional and remote status relies on the type of address used. The address at the time of application, prior to the commencement of study ('first address') is more likely to accurately reflect the student's background. HEPPP refers to the residential address 'at the time the person first enrolls in a course of study with the relevant provider', implying the use of 'first address'. It is important to acknowledge that postcodes cover large areas including both regional and remote areas, therefore complicating classification⁶. A more accurate method would be to use SA1s instead of postcodes, as SA1s are classified as either metropolitan, regional, or remote. However, this method is not currently implemented in Departmental reporting.

Students with disability

Identification: Students who identify themselves as having either a 'disability, impairment or long-term medical condition which may affect their studies' during enrolment or any time during their studies. As of 2024, categories⁷ students can specify are: Hard of Hearing/deaf/Deaf, Physical disability, Intellectual disability, Specific Learning Disability (SLD), Mental health conditions, Acquired brain injury (ABI), Low Vision/Blind, Medical condition, Neurological condition, or Other disability.

Considerations: The identification process relies on self-reporting, which may result in under- or over-reporting. Differences in questions posed to students across institutions may lead to inconsistent comparisons. Furthermore, changing definitions and categories of disability over time also pose challenges for consistent data interpretation. For instance, 'mental health conditions' was added to the list in 2020; prior to this, students would report under 'Other disability', or not report it at all.

4 <https://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:bd8a044>

5 <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/standards/australian-statistical-geography-standard-asgs-edition-3/jul2021-jun2026/remoteness-structure>

6 <https://www.tcsisupport.gov.au/node/7962>

7 <https://www.tcsisupport.gov.au/node/7816>