

Equity Insights 2026:

Understanding student realities and
redesigning systems for success





Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success acknowledges Indigenous peoples across Australia as the Traditional Owners of the lands on which the nation's campuses are situated. With a history spanning more than 60,000 years as the original educators, Indigenous peoples hold a unique place in our nation. We recognise the importance of their knowledge and culture, and reflect the principles of participation, equity, and cultural respect in our work. We pay our respects to Elders past, present, and future, and consider it an honour to learn from our Indigenous colleagues, partners, and friends.



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Foreword

Our higher education system has serious aspirations for growth in graduates through greater inclusion of equity groups. However, there are some very challenging realities about how this is to be achieved.

The voices of university leaders, experts, regulators, and students represented in *Equity Insights 2026* speak of the multitudinous barriers that many students face in both entering and succeeding at university. The impacts of financial struggles, confronting levels of student debt, racism, ableism, loneliness, physical and mental health challenges, and being based in regional or remote Australia are very real for many students in our institutions.

If the aim of the Australian Universities Accord to move towards a society in which 80% of people aged 25–34 years old have a tertiary qualification by 2050 still holds for government—and includes a majority of these being higher education graduates—then the current settings are unlikely to achieve this outcome.

Needs-based Funding is a clear step in the right direction to support properly students from equity backgrounds and the additional financial burdens placed on our regional universities.

Yet, this volume makes the case that this is not enough. We cannot place all the blame on government. Universities need to change. We need to improve the student experience including by not assuming that every student is an academically well-prepared 18-year-old who lives in the family home. Our systems can be rigid, our cultures confronting, and our processes unresponsive to individual needs.

However, as Section 3, *The evolving institution*, shows: many universities are heeding the call to reconsider models for engaging students, including through Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing.

There are also quite practical and tangible responses from universities including providing food pantries, clothing libraries, bursaries, increased scholarships, and more flexible forms of learning. Any of us who operate such schemes will be painfully aware that there are always more deserving recipients of

scholarships and other forms of support than there are resources, but we have seen many universities rise to the challenges of the times.

Government also needs to consider its own role. The promised analysis of the Job-ready Graduates Package by the Australian Tertiary Education Commission looks like still taking considerable time, while generations of students load up on more debt or decide to abandon university altogether. Addressing student poverty more generally is also far more appropriately dealt with by government systems than it is by individual universities. If the Government is serious that educational success should not be dependent on your postcode, then there remains much work to be done.

The Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success is to be congratulated on the 2026 volume of *Equity Insights* and for the broader work it does to assist government and universities in ensuring the resources that are expended on improving equity are used in as effective a way as possible. The sector is grateful for this ongoing work as we all strive for a time when volumes such as this do not need to speak of student experiences of hunger, racism, or exclusion.



Professor Carolyn Evans FASSA
Chair
Universities Australia



Message from the Executive Director

This edition of *Equity Insights* contains an important set of articles with a common message: that the equity challenge for our universities is changing. Our contributors have written concisely and persuasively about a host of pressures facing increasing numbers of students—pressures such as financial and food insecurity, housing stress, racism, mental health challenges, caring responsibilities, and more. These are faced by many students, but they disproportionately affect students from equity cohorts and are becoming more widespread. Therefore, they are pressing matters for university leaders and equity practitioners to address for a much wider student cohort.

The good news is that the current higher education landscape offers unique opportunities for reform. Specifically, the current policy environment (centred on the implementation of the Australian Universities Accord, the establishment of the Australian Tertiary Education Commission, and Needs-based Funding coming on stream) offers the opportunity for genuine transformation in the sector.

The question is how prepared the sector is to redesign systems so that success is within reach for all students.

This depends on shifting the conversation from access to success, and this report is an important contribution to that shift. While we are successfully widening participation, how can we ensure that students succeed in, and benefit from, higher education?

The contributions to this report show that solutions exist already. The articles demonstrate a wide range of perspectives from key stakeholders around the sector. The respective authors don't just describe problems but highlight practical examples of what works. We have no excuse if we cannot learn from what others are already doing.

This year's *Equity Insights* articles collectively note an opportunity for system-wide changes—changes that would benefit all learners.



Professor Shamit Saggar CBE FAcSS
Executive Director
Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success



Introduction from the Editor

Equity Insights exists to bring together diverse voices, evidence, and lived experience so that we can better understand the realities facing university students today and use that understanding to inform meaningful change across the sector. Last year's inaugural edition, *Equity Insights 2025: Policy, Power, and Practice for a Fairer Australian Tertiary Education System*, set out the policy landscape confronting Australian higher education. This second edition turns to something more immediate: the everyday experience of being a student, and in particular, the pressures that sit outside the lecture theatre but shape everything that happens inside it.

University students, especially those from underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds, are navigating a widening set of demands beyond their studies. Cost-of-living pressures, family and caring responsibilities, food insecurity, and racial discrimination feature prominently in the contributions that follow. National survey evidence shows large proportions of students report financial stress, food or housing insecurity, and mental health or wellbeing difficulties. These are not marginal experiences confined to a small group of students; they are widespread and consequential. These experiences

shape academic outcomes, sense of belonging, and mental health, and increasingly determine whether a student stays enrolled at all.

In commissioning this edition, we asked contributors to consider two questions: what are the challenges beyond academia that university students face during their studies, and what can the higher education sector do, or is it already doing, to support students with these challenges so they can achieve successful outcomes at and beyond university? We were particularly interested in areas that were not traditionally seen as part of a university's role but are increasingly becoming so as the higher education landscape and student experience continue to evolve. The response from students, policymakers, university leaders, and practitioners has been generous, candid, and at times uncomfortable to read. It should be.

This edition also lands at a genuine moment of reform. The Australian Universities Accord, the establishment of the Australian Tertiary Education Commission, and the introduction of Needs-based Funding together offer the sector a rare opportunity to redesign how it supports students, rather than simply expanding access to a system built for a different kind of student. Several contributions make clear that this opportunity



will only be realised if universities, government, and regulators act in concert, and if the sector is honest about the extent to which its own systems, cultures, and assumptions contribute to the pressures students face.

Section 1, *The higher education landscape*, sets out the policy and structural context. Contributors **Karen Nelson, Claire Field, Luke Sheehy, Patrick Broman and Jesse Parmar**, and **Kerri-Lee Krause** examine the financial and structural barriers facing students, from food insecurity and student debt through to the mismatch between institutional design and the realities of contemporary student life, and the regulatory expectations placed on providers to respond.

Section 2, *Voices and experiences*, centres lived experience. **Jacinta King** writes from her own experience as a First Nations student navigating financial hardship and housing instability.

Giridharan Sivaraman draws on the *Racism at Uni Study* to set out the scale of racism experienced by students and staff, and what universities can do about it now. **Sarah Bendall**, drawing on complaints made to the National Student Ombudsman, makes the case for building fairness into policy and operational decisions by design.

Natalie Nelmes writes on the particular pressures facing regional students, **Brooke Szucs** on unequal access to the extracurricular opportunities that shape employability, and **Jonathan Bullen** on what decades of Indigenous student experience have already taught the sector about the limits of a system built for conditions many students no longer have.

Section 3, *The evolving institution*, looks at what universities are doing, and could do, in response. Contributions from **Braden Hill, Josh Mason, Michelle Trudgett, and Susan Page**, and **Lauren Tynan** set out what Indigenous-led approaches to student support and curriculum can teach the whole sector about genuine transformation. **Matt Brett** examines the progress, and the limits of that progress, in disability inclusion. **Alison Knapp** makes the case for treating student mental health as a matter of social determinants rather than individual resilience. **Tyrone Carlin** closes the section with a reflection on geography, distance, and what it takes to design a university around students for whom simply getting to campus is itself a barrier.

Read together, these contributions point to a single, uncomfortable conclusion. The pressures once treated as unique to equity cohorts—financial

precarity, caring responsibilities, racism, distance, and disability—are now widely distributed across the student population. What was once at the margins of student experience is moving toward its centre. Equity, in this sense, is not a niche concern. It is an early warning system for how well the whole system is working.

I am grateful to every contributor who gave their time, their evidence, and in several cases their own story, to this edition. I am also grateful to **Carolyn Evans** for her foreword, and **Barney Glover, Bree Glasbergen**, and **Paul Harris** for their respective section introductions. I would also like to acknowledge the efforts of colleagues **Anna Will** and **Adam Poulsen** for their work in copy-editing, and **Anna Will** for the overall coordination of this publication and review support. I hope *Equity Insights 2026* gives the sector, government, and the public a clearer and more honest picture of what it takes for a student to succeed at and beyond university today, and the confidence to act on it.



Professor Ian Li SFHEA
Editor and Research and Policy Program Director
Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success



SECTION 1:

The higher education landscape

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The higher education landscape

Introduction



**Professor
Barney Glover AO**
*Australian Tertiary
Education Commission*

The higher education landscape is continually evolving and shifting, and it is imperative that our universities and the sector can rise to meet the challenge head on.

This year, the Australian Government has formally established the Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC). The ATEC is an independent steward of the higher education system tasked to lead lasting reforms that will build a better and fairer tertiary education system for Australia, now and into the future.

The introduction of the *Universities Accord (Opening the Doors of Opportunity) Bill 2026* will overhaul sector funding and enshrine Needs-based Funding as a permanent feature of core Commonwealth funding for higher education.

Needs-based Funding redesigns how we support students, ensures funding is tied to need, and—for the first time—is a fully demand-driven system.

A system that responds to changes in student cohorts and helps universities to deliver tailored, targeted support to those students most in need.

I am looking forward to working with the sector as it continues to grow and deliver world-renowned education to students from across the country and, furthermore, across the world.

However, we can always do more.

Future-proofing Australia's skills needs requires the sector to continue to grow and evolve, as well as integrating new tools such as artificial intelligence (AI) and working hard to understand the changing needs of all students. Supporting underrepresented students requires an understanding of who they are, where they come from, and the challenges they face.

The articles authored by **Karen Nelson, Claire Field, Luke Sheehy, Patrick Broman and Jesse Parmar**, and **Kerri-Lee Krause** challenge us to put students and their needs at the heart of policy and program design—to recognise the need for coordinated action and understand the diverse needs of our students outside the classroom. We are asked to consider the unique barriers underrepresented and disadvantaged students face—including financial pressures related to study and everyday life and the divide between student cohorts—to design effective support programs and to successfully move students through their higher education journey.

Realising the target, recommended by the Australian Universities Accord, of lifting tertiary education attainment to 80% of working-age people by 2050 is not just a matter for universities—it will require the entire sector and Government working together and developing new, robust approaches to support underrepresented and disadvantaged students to succeed and thrive.

Together with the ATEC, I am confident we will navigate this changing landscape and build a pipeline of people to meet Australia's growing skills needs, now and into the future.



**If we want students to succeed,
universities must stop pretending their
lives don't exist**



Professor Karen Nelson
Western Sydney University

In 2008, Denise Bradley had a vision for an Australian higher education system where a student's postcode or circumstances of birth did not predetermine their future. She was resolute about why: "Higher education can transform the lives of individuals and through them their communities and the nation..." (Bradley et al., 2008). Sixteen years on, the Australian Universities Accord amplified this ambition, setting an 80% tertiary participation target (Department of Education, 2024). It is ambitious, admirable—and utterly impossible to achieve if institutions continue to behave as though academic success happens in a vacuum.

Realising this target is not simply a matter of enrolling more students. It will only be met if we improve both the participation and success rates of students who have historically been excluded or underserved: students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds, Indigenous students, regional and remote students, students with disability, and students facing intersecting forms of disadvantage. Without transforming outcomes for these groups, the 80% target is little more than a mathematical impossibility dressed up as aspiration.

"We keep repeating the same comforting myth: that if students have access to the same curriculum, the same teachers, and the same support services, they will have the same chances of success."

For years I have argued that institutions must place students at the centre of their policy and practice. But institutions alone cannot deliver the scale of change required. Achieving meaningful growth in participation and completion for marginalised students demands coordinated action across the entire system—policymakers, regulators, funding bodies, and universities themselves. Only by understanding and reshaping the conditions that enable or constrain student success can we build a higher education system capable of meeting the Accord's ambition and Australia's needs.

We keep repeating the same comforting myth: that if students have access to the same curriculum, the same teachers, and the same support services, they will have the same chances of success. It has never been true. It is even less true now.

Today's students—especially those from low SES, Indigenous, regional, disabled, migrant, and otherwise marginalised backgrounds—are studying in conditions that were not the case for many of the policymakers designing our education systems. National surveys show rising food insecurity, housing precarity, and an inadequate Youth Allowance (Anglicare Australia & National Union of Students, 2017; Universities Australia, 2018). None of these have improved in the past decade, and all are compounded by concerning levels of poor mental health and wellbeing (Baik et al., 2026). Many students are working more than 20 hours a week just to survive. Others are caring for children, siblings, or elders. Many continue to face persistent racism on campus (Behrendt et al., 2012). And we have the audacity to ask why their outcomes differ.

The sector's favourite explanation has long been pre-entry qualifications. ATAR as destiny. Prior achievement as predictor. But these correlations are weak, and we know it. Research consistently shows that ATAR explains only a small proportion of variance in university performance (Pitman et al., 2017). Worse, ATAR is entangled with the very inequities we claim to be dismantling—socio-economic status, school resourcing, and other factors constituting structural disadvantage, as colleagues and I demonstrated earlier (Nelson et al., 2017).

The real question is not why some students fail. It is why we continue to design universities that make success harder than it needs to be.

Devlin (2013) argued more than a decade ago that students from low SES backgrounds and

university norms are socio-culturally incongruous. More recently, Fong-Emmerson and colleagues (2026), building on Raciti's work on Indigenous place (Raciti et al., 2017), made it painfully clear that Indigenous students are expected to thrive in environments that rarely reflect, respect, or respond to their identities. These are not new insights. What is new is the scale of the 80% participation challenge—and the sector's willingness to confront what it means.

Universities must expand their role beyond the academic. Not as a nice-to-have. Not as an add-on. As core business.

If we take these insights seriously, then the conclusion is unavoidable:

Universities must expand their role beyond the academic.

Not as a nice-to-have. Not as an add-on. As core business. I have called this "support for learning" for years, and this is why.

Students cannot learn when they are hungry.

They cannot focus when they are couch surfing.

They cannot belong when they experience racism on campus.

They cannot actively participate when they must work to pay for essentials.

They cannot complete assignments when they are already impoverished.

They cannot persist when caring responsibilities collide with inflexible timetables.

They cannot thrive when the institution's culture tells them—subtly or explicitly—that people like them do not belong.

We can no longer pretend these are "external" issues. These are factors that shape the conditions in which learning happens. They affect the precursors of learning—students' social, emotional, and cognitive engagement (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). They are the difference between retention and attrition. They are the difference

between a system that expands opportunity and one that perpetuates inequality.

This is where attention to the macro, meso, and micro conditions of our education system matters—not as abstract concepts, but as a blueprint for a sector that actually wants its students to succeed. Zepke and Leach (2010) argued that student engagement is shaped by forces at all three levels. Tinto (2012) reminds us that institutions—not students—create the conditions for persistence.

At the macro level, policymakers and regulators must stop treating support for learning as a discretionary cost. If the Accord's 80% target is serious, then so must be national investment in housing partnerships, transport subsidies, digital infrastructure for geographically remote areas, and income support that reflects the real costs of living while studying. Regulation must recognise belonging, wellbeing, and cultural safety as indicators of educational quality—not optional extras.

At the meso level, institutions must redesign themselves around the realities of contemporary student life. That means digital infrastructure that enables and empowers learning; food hubs that do not rely on charity; childcare that is affordable, available, and designed for students; culturally safe spaces led by Indigenous Elders and Traditional Owners; trauma-informed teaching; financial advice and counselling; flexible assessment and feedback; and proactive mental health triage. These are not fringe services. They are the infrastructure of equity.

At the micro level, educators must understand that engagement is relational. A single conversation can keep a student enrolled. A single act of flexibility can prevent a withdrawal. Every moment of recognition builds belonging. The relationships between students and educators are critical—as long as educators see the whole student.

For years, I have said we should "put students at the centre". But centring students means centring their lives—not just their learning. It means acknowledging that universities are social institutions embedded in communities, and that they, like the communities they serve, are facing profound economic, cultural, and structural pressures.

My advice to university leaders is straightforward but far from simple. Begin by developing a deep, evidence-based understanding of the students who attend your institution—their circumstances, needs, and patterns of participation. Know what

“It requires aligning the policy and practice environment—everything within institutional control—with student success. It will almost invariably involve identifying and removing administrative and academic practices that are barriers to success.”

works for each cohort, and just as importantly, what does not. What succeeds for one group in one context may fail entirely in another. Then, systematically build the learning conditions that enable those cohorts to thrive. For many institutions this will mean assuming hybrid delivery or compressed learning periods as the default; universal design for learning, adopting programmatic approaches to assessment, and meaningful formative feedback; proactively supporting individual students' learning; deliberately managing transitions between subjects and across the undergraduate years; and ensuring assessment is both valid and aligned with the capabilities of future-ready graduates. While the advice is simple, its execution is not. It requires aligning the policy and practice environment—everything within institutional control—with student success. It will almost invariably involve identifying and removing administrative and academic practices that are barriers to success. And it will require commitment to the professional development and support of all staff so that these success-enabling conditions become part of the institution's operating mindset.

If we want to honour Bradley and O'Kane—if we want an Australia where opportunity is not inherited—we must stop pretending that academic success is determined only by what happens inside or outside the classroom once students commence university. It is determined by history and circumstance, by what institutions do, and by the extent to which equity infrastructure becomes the institutional fabric.

The question is no longer whether universities should step into roles once considered beyond their remit. The question is whether Australia can afford for them not to.

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Food banks, fees, and falling participation: The new face of student inequality



Claire Field
Claire Field & Associates

Australia's higher education system has been an important driver of social mobility. Yet in the current cost-of-living crisis, the financial realities of going to university are undermining this promise for key cohorts of students.

While policy settings have historically expanded access to higher education through income-contingent loans and relatively modest student fees, “there is growing concern that student debt, particularly among women, affects borrowing capacity, reduces disposable income and imposes psychological costs” (Birch & Preston, 2025). And for some low socio-economic status (SES) students, it is turning them away from university study altogether (Innovative Research Universities, 2026).

One of the most visible indicators of financial stress is the emergence of university-run food banks. In 2025, Western Sydney University (WSU) had more than 8,000 student visits to its “Western Pantry”, and it provided almost 22,000 students free breakfasts and dinners (Williams, 2026). To contextualise this figure, WSU enrolled 47,300 students in 2024 (Department of Education, 2025).



A recent survey of students at the University of Tasmania found 52% reported experiencing food insecurity, and more than a quarter (27%) were skipping meals altogether (Kent, 2025).



A recent survey of students at the University of Tasmania found 52% reported experiencing food insecurity, and more than a quarter (27%) were skipping meals altogether (Kent, 2025).

The growth in food banks is in part due to income support payments failing to keep pace with living costs. Even where students receive Youth Allowance, the maximum rate per fortnight¹ of \$677.20 (or \$48.37 per day) is insufficient to alleviate financial stress (Australian Council of Social Service, 2024; Cobb-Clark et al., 2026). Students also face steeply rising rental costs, according to the Grattan Institute (Coates, 2025), with rents in Australian capital cities rising by 20–80% since the pandemic. As a result, universities are stepping in to fill gaps that sit well beyond their traditional educational remit.

The longer-term financial burden of study has also intensified for large numbers of students. While the Job-ready Graduates (JRG) funding reforms introduced in 2021 lowered fees for some students, they raised them significantly for others. Today approximately 40% of university students are enrolled in degrees costing more than \$50,000 (Field, 2026a).

Evidence suggests that the impact of high student fees and cost-of-living pressures are not being felt evenly. Low SES students have reduced their participation in higher-cost degrees at disproportionately higher rates, with commencements in some disciplines declining by almost 20% (Innovative Research Universities, 2026).

There is now a widening divide between students who can rely on parental support and those who cannot. Students from more advantaged backgrounds are more likely to live at home (Ribar & Wong, 2022), while their less advantaged peers, even where eligible for Youth Allowance, still need to juggle the “double deficit” of part-time employment (Hordósy et al., 2018). This has obvious implications for both academic outcomes and completion rates. For regional, rural, and remote (RRR) students, the problems are exacerbated. Delahunty (2022) identified that many RRR students had to relocate for university study and that “a lack of access to adequate financial resources was by far the most commonly mentioned barrier to completing university” for RRR students.

¹ For students aged 18–24 years, no children, and living away from their parents’ home.

Perhaps most concerning is the evidence that some prospective students are opting out of higher education altogether. The combination of high fees, inadequate income support, and rising living costs appears to be deterring participation among low SES students (Innovative Research Universities, 2026).

Perhaps most concerning is the evidence that some prospective students are opting out of higher education altogether. The combination of high fees, inadequate income support, and rising living costs appears to be deterring participation among low SES students (Innovative Research Universities, 2026). This runs directly counter to national policy ambitions, including the Australian Universities Accord target of increasing participation among underrepresented groups (Department of Education, 2024).

Addressing these challenges will require coordinated action from both government and institutions (Kent, 2025). The most direct levers sit with government through income support and student fee settings. Increasing the rate of Youth Allowance would provide immediate relief to students facing financial hardship. Similarly, reducing fees for the 40% of students currently paying more than \$50,000 for their degrees would ease the long-term debt burden for these students, and may help reverse declines in participation among low SES students.

Universities also have an important role to play. One promising avenue is strengthening partnerships with vocational education and training providers. Structured credit transfer arrangements can reduce both the duration and cost of a degree, although they do come at a cost to universities (Field, 2026b).

Strengthening university partnerships with employers can assist students with securing paid work placements during their studies.

This addresses a particular challenge for low SES students (outside of those eligible for Commonwealth Prac Placement payments) who cannot afford to prioritise unpaid work placements over paid part-time work while they study.

Finally, improving the overall university experience is another strategy institutions need to deploy. The National Student Ombudsman has identified "cumbersome bureaucracies are getting in the way of wellbeing, safety and satisfaction" (Rawsthorne, 2026). Making better use of institutional complaints data to drive organisational improvements and streamline administrative processes will assist time-poor students juggling the double deficit. For these students, even small reductions in administrative "friction" are likely to have a meaningful impact on retention and success.

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Australia needs more graduates; students need more support



Luke Sheehy
Universities Australia

Australia cannot meet its equity ambitions in higher education if students are being priced out of participation. That is the uncomfortable truth at the heart of the student experience right now.

Across the country, students are making impossible choices between paying rent, buying groceries, taking on more paid work, or continuing their studies. For many, university is no longer just academically demanding—it's financially exhausting.

And while these pressures are affecting students from all walks of life, they are hitting hardest those who the system should be working hardest to support: students from low socio-economic status backgrounds, from regional and remote communities, First Nations students, students with disability, carers, and those who are the first in their family to attend university.

At the same time Australia is asking more people than ever to gain tertiary qualifications. The Australian Universities Accord set a national target of 80% tertiary attainment by 2050, which the Federal Government has adopted (Department of Education, 2024).

We know the jobs of the future will increasingly require post-school qualifications. We know

... we cannot seriously talk about expanding participation while ignoring the financial barriers keeping students out, or pushing them to breaking point once they are in.

university participation is critical to lifting productivity, strengthening industries, and improving living standards.

But we cannot seriously talk about expanding participation while ignoring the financial barriers keeping students out, or pushing them to breaking point once they are in.

That's why Universities Australia has consistently argued the Job-ready Graduates Package (JRG) needs to go and needs to go now.

JRG dramatically increased student contributions in a range of disciplines, particularly the humanities, communications, and society and culture fields, based on the assumption that price signals would steer students into areas of workforce need. But the evidence tells a different story.

Universities Admissions Centre data shows JRG has had virtually no impact on student choices. Just 1.5% of students have changed their preferred field because of fee changes. Even in disciplines with the steepest increases—such as communications and media—only 0.3% chose not to preference these courses.

Under JRG, students have not abandoned the disciplines they are passionate about because the price went up. Instead, many have simply taken on more debt.

In some cases, students undertaking three-year humanities degrees are now facing debts exceeding \$50,000. That is not equity—it's unfair.

It's hard to argue Australia is building a fairer higher education system when students from less advantaged backgrounds are being asked to carry significantly higher financial burdens simply to participate.

The other big issue with JRG is that at the same time it's saddling students with larger debts, it's also stripping universities of around a billion dollars a year in funding at a time the system is under great strain.

You cannot improve equity by stripping funding out of universities while simultaneously expecting them to provide more support to students with increasingly complex needs.

The broader cost-of-living crisis has only sharpened these pressures. Financial hardship is increasingly shaping whether students can fully participate in university life, or whether they can remain enrolled at all.



In light of this, Universities Australia is calling for government support for a new national student finances survey. The last survey was conducted before the pandemic, the rental crisis, surging inflation, and the introduction of JRG. We need up-to-date evidence to properly understand the financial pressures students are facing and the impact they are having on participation and success.

This is particularly evident in mandatory placements. Teaching, nursing, midwifery, and social work students, among many other cohorts, are often required to undertake hundreds of hours of unpaid practical training while still covering rent, transport, childcare, and basic living costs. For many students, particularly those without family financial support, this creates an almost impossible barrier.

The Commonwealth Prac Payment is an important recognition of this challenge, and Universities Australia strongly supports its expansion to cover more disciplines. Students undertaking essential placements should not be financially punished for training in professions Australia desperately needs.

Similarly, we need to do more to support Australia's research students. If Australia is serious about becoming a more innovative, productive, and research-driven economy, we must make research careers viable.

Current PhD stipend levels are simply too low given the realities of housing, inflation, and living costs. Many research students are experiencing significant financial stress while undertaking work that directly contributes to Australia's future capability, innovation, and economic growth.

Lifting the PhD stipend is not just a research policy issue. It's an equity issue. Talented people should not be locked out of research careers because they cannot afford to pursue them.

Universities are working hard to respond to these challenges. Across the country institutions are investing in student support services, food relief programs, mental health supports, scholarships, and accommodation initiatives designed to improve student outcomes and retention.

But universities cannot solve this challenge alone. If Australia wants a fairer tertiary education system—and if we are serious about meeting our national skills and productivity ambitions—then student affordability and participation must be treated as core policy issues, not secondary considerations.

That means confronting policies that are making university harder to afford, not easier. Equity is not just about getting students through the door. It's about whether they can afford to stay, succeed, and thrive once they are there. We need to be doing everything we can to make that happen.

Saddling students with larger debts through policies like JRG while asking more Australians than ever to pursue higher education pulls in exactly the wrong direction. If we want a bigger, fairer, and more productive tertiary education system, we need policies that reduce barriers to participation, not widen them.

Equity is not just about getting students through the door. It's about whether they can afford to stay, succeed, and thrive once they are there.

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Designing for reality: Why programs must reflect students' complex lives



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Australian universities are operating in an era where the lives of students are more complex, pressured, and fragmented than at any point in the sector's history. Yet the systems, programs, and services that shape higher education remain largely built on assumptions from a different era—assumptions of students who are full time, financially supported, unencumbered by caring responsibilities, and able to prioritise study above all else. The mismatch between institutional design and student reality is now so stark that it threatens both equity and educational quality.

The data already available paints a clear picture. The 2024 *Uni Student Wellbeing Survey* (Baik et al., 2025) found financial situations were a significant source of stress for 63.8% of students, and 32% often worried about food, housing, or safety. Mental health pressures were similarly widespread, with 42.8% of students reporting mental health or wellbeing difficulties. These are not marginal issues; they are structural conditions, and work is a further driver of complexity. The survey found 41.2% of students were working at least 20 hours per week in paid employment, which was intensified for many by caring responsibilities: 32.4% needed to care directly for a family member at least five hours per week. All this speaks to the difficulties students face in balancing study with other demands.

... administrative data captures only the surface of student behaviour (in this case, "disengagement"), while missing the underlying socio-economic pressures shaping that behaviour.

Despite this, at an institutional level our understanding of students is still overwhelmingly administrative: enrolment, progression, retention, grades, completions. These metrics reveal how students do within the university system, but almost nothing about the conditions under which they are studying. They do not capture the realities of work, commute time and travel barriers, caring responsibilities, health conditions and disabilities, and the cumulative impact of these pressures. In other words, universities know how students perform, but not how they live.

For example, one ACSES-funded trial reported instances where students, disengaged from their studies, were unenrolled by their university (Pelliccione et al., 2025). Students were subsequently contacting the Student Engagement team citing their enrolment as critical to their Centrelink Youth Allowance payments. This is an example of how administrative data captures only the surface of student behaviour (in this case, "disengagement"), while missing the underlying socio-economic pressures shaping



that behaviour. Without understanding the financial dependencies students are navigating, universities risk misinterpreting disengagement as a purely academic issue.

All this suggests that for program design to be genuinely student-centred, universities must expand the scope of the data they collect and the insights they draw upon. This does not mean intrusive surveillance or burdensome reporting. It means working to understand the lives of our student bodies, and a willingness to use this information to inform the design and evolution of our programs and services to ensure maximum accessibility, flexibility, and equity. The Australian Universities Accord reinforced this need for transformation, explicitly calling for universities to adopt innovative models of delivery that expand access and better reflect the diversity of contemporary learners (Department of Education, 2024).

International examples show what is possible when institutions design around real student lives. Birkbeck, University of London, has specialised in evening education for more than two centuries, structuring its entire model around students who work during the day (Birkbeck, n.d.). Most classes run from 6pm to 9pm, services remain open late, and hybrid participation is built into the learning environment. While not necessarily a template to be copied wholesale, Birkbeck demonstrates what can happen when a university begins with the premise that students' time is constrained.

Australian city universities serving some of the most diverse and financially pressured student populations in the country are well positioned to explore similarly innovative models. Recent calls (Clare, 2026) for universities to specialise in research domains could extend to approaches to timetabling, assessment scheduling, placement structures, attendance expectations, and the availability of hybrid or asynchronous learning options that better reflect the rhythms of modern life. But these innovations must be grounded in a robust understanding of students' lived realities.

“A student-centred university is one that recognises complexity not as an exception but as the norm.”

The case for change is not merely pedagogical. When nearly two thirds of students experience financial stress, when almost half report mental health challenges, and when the vast majority are working substantial hours, universities have a responsibility to design programs that do not exacerbate these pressures. A student-centred university is one that recognises complexity not as an exception but as the norm.

Australian higher education stands at a crossroads. Institutions can continue to design programs around outdated assumptions, or they can build systems informed by the real, complex, and diverse lives of their students. The latter requires better data, regular evaluation, and a willingness to rethink longstanding structures that service an imaginary student who is increasingly rare. But it is the only path that leads to a genuinely equitable and future-ready Australian university sector.

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Students at the heart: Regulatory perspectives on equity and diversity



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In a challenging economic and geopolitical landscape, characterised by digital disruption and labour market uncertainty, the purpose and value of higher education is under increasing scrutiny. Trust, accountability, and social licence, particularly for publicly funded universities, are in sharp focus. Proportionate, risk-based regulation plays a critical role in assuring quality, maintaining public confidence, and protecting the interests of all students.

The regulatory approach of Australia's independent higher education regulator—the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA)—is grounded by the *TEQSA Act 2011* and the *Threshold Standards* that comprise the *Higher Education Standards Framework (HESF) 2021*. The HESF centres on the quality and integrity of student outcomes, underpinned by principles of diversity and equity. TEQSA works closely with other regulators such as the Australian Skills Quality Authority, and agencies including the National Student Ombudsman and the Australian Tertiary Education Commission, to ensure all higher education students are supported to succeed, regardless of background, location, or study mode.

“For students from under-represented, marginalised, and disadvantaged communities, the compounded barriers to equitable higher education participation, persistence, and success may be particularly acute.”

Practical steps to address diverse needs

Higher education providers operate in complex environments, and students' academic experiences and outcomes are shaped by a diverse array of personal and external factors. For students from underrepresented, marginalised, and disadvantaged communities, the compounded barriers to equitable higher education participation, persistence, and success may be particularly acute. Such barriers may include: lack of financial support; low levels of social and cultural capital; or structural disadvantage arising from geographic location, limited experience of role models, or poor access to learning and technology resources and support structures designed to raise aspirations, promote confidence, and enhance wellbeing.

Some of these systemic and structural barriers, such as cost-of-living pressures or exponential technological change, may sit beyond an institution's direct sphere of influence. Nevertheless, providers are expected to understand the educational and support needs of their students and to take appropriate, proportionate steps to address their safety, wellbeing, and learning needs (TEQSA, 2017). For instance, to tackle the risks of food insecurity and assist students confronting financial hardship, providers may implement a range of practical initiatives such as providing financial aid, food banks (or similar), emergency accommodation assistance, or referrals to community services aligned to the needs of their students and institutional context. Providers are also expected to be proactive in advising students about the full range of learning support and wellbeing services available. These services should be targeted to the needs of diverse cohorts and responsive to learning needs. Examples include a combination of personalised 24-7 online support resources and in-person advising, according to identified student needs. A variety of approaches may be used to communicate with students, including social media platforms designed to encourage them to access learning support services or, where necessary, to make use of specialised counselling services. Using peer mentors is another effective way to provide positive role models for diverse student cohorts, drawing on student expertise to share study tips and foster a sense of connectedness and belonging in the learning community. Safe and supportive learning environments are most effective when academic and professional staff teams collaborate across functional teams, identifying and mitigating risks to student wellbeing in evidence-based ways.

Safe and supportive learning environments are most effective when academic and professional staff teams collaborate across functional teams, identifying and mitigating risks to student wellbeing in evidence-based ways.

The HESF recognises the diversity of the Australian higher education sector. It encompasses principles of diversity and equity that apply across provider operations. Demonstrating an organisation-wide approach to embedding these principles across the student lifecycle enables providers to show how they identify and respond to the learning and support needs of diverse student cohorts. Codesign of culturally appropriate services, learning, and campus environments, in partnership with First Peoples, is a foundational step towards celebrating diversity and eliminating all forms of racism (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2026). Similarly robust, sustained action is paramount to promote social cohesion,

eliminate all incidences of racism including antisemitism and Islamophobia, and safeguard student and staff wellbeing and safety on campus, including in classrooms, research spaces, and online learning environments while also assuring freedom of speech and academic freedom (TEQSA, 2026). TEQSA's (2025) *Statement of Regulatory Expectations: Student grievance and complaint mechanisms* articulates expectations of all higher education providers in relation to student support, policies, staffing, monitoring, and governance to ensure that, when required, students have access to person-centred, trauma-informed complaints handling approaches.

Governance, policies, and practices

Inclusive, responsive, and trustworthy governance is a cornerstone to demonstrate accountability with respect to equity and diversity (Expert Council on University Governance, 2025). An evidence-based understanding of student cohort characteristics informs governing bodies, alongside a strategic approach to monitoring institutional data on access, participation, and academic success. This includes consideration of outcomes for students who identify as First Nations Australians together with those for students from all other higher education equity groups (Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success, 2024). Governing bodies play a key role in assuring themselves that appropriate systems, risk frameworks, and monitoring processes are in place to support equitable access and student academic success, consistent with relevant legislative and regulatory requirements. This includes oversight of how organisational strategy, culture, and resourcing align with sustained attention to equity and diversity.

Day-to-day operations of higher education institutions are a litmus test demonstrating culture in action. TEQSA considers how providers represent their approaches through self-assurance statements and how these are reflected in policies and practices across the organisation. For example, a provider website is a useful barometer for indicating how information is presented for students with diverse learning needs. Similarly, accessible and current information about tailored orientation and learning support resources may provide evidence of how institutions support successful student transitions, progression, and success across diverse student cohorts.





Students at the heart

Students are the bedrock of the HESF and core to TEQSA's regulatory priorities and posture. The *Australian Universities Accord Final Report* (Department of Education, 2024) shines a spotlight on the quality of student experiences in higher education, emphasising the priorities of accessibility, affordability, and sustainability. These imperatives sharpen the focus on how every higher education provider is embedding the principles of equity and excellence, diversity by design (Brett, 2025), and intersectionality with strategic intent (Harpur, Szucs, & Willox, 2023).

From a regulatory perspective, institutions may demonstrate how these principles are reflected across the organisation in governance, culture, policies, and practices. Resourcing, supporting, and celebrating diverse and intersecting student characteristics through bespoke learning support, evidence-based curriculum, tailored learning experiences, and inclusive assessment design brings integrity to the priorities of diversity and equity with students at the heart.

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SECTION 2: Voices and experiences



SECTION 2

Voices and experiences

Introduction



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Contemporary Australian neoliberal universities are not composed of homogenous student bodies, but rather diverse student identities with compounding pressures impacting their ability to access and succeed in their education. If, as the Australian Universities Accord envisions, 80% of working-age Australians are to be university educated by 2050, institutions must plan and design for *all* students (as **Sarah Bendall** argues), not merely those defined as disadvantaged within rigid parameters.

Section 2, *Voices and experiences*, centres on lived experience insights from across the sector with an undercurrent of financial, structural, and technological barriers to equitable access to education.

Jacinta King reflects on her lived student experience and the adversity she and many others face, making astute recommendations to improve accessibility of crisis payments and craft university-led supports that work. Further, this edition includes key insights from the *Respect at Uni Study* and **Giridharan Sivaraman's** recommendations for structural change. **Sarah Bendall** provides varied examples of modern student challenges to propose a "fairmaxxing" approach. This is an approach which is not just policy-compliant but also fair, encouraging genuine partnerships between students and education providers.

We hear insights about the unique challenges rural student cohorts face from **Natalie Nelmes**, including the unnecessary complexity that can lead to these students believing higher education is "not for them". She provides simple solutions, including accessible language and systems.

Brooke Szucs questions who is able to optimise the extracurricular experiences higher education offers—and the resultant employability benefits.

Professor Jonathan Bullen offers a compelling alternative for providers—to treat insights from equity groups, including Indigenous students, as *central*, not exceptional. He argues "equity [...] isn't peripheral; it is predictive", shifting our perception from how to support an equity group, to what gaps they reveal about the system more broadly.

There are commonalities among the submissions: that students are unaware of services available and find some systems challenging to navigate; that these systems do not consider students' compounding financial pressures; and that lived insights from equity groups can benefit all students.

As a former guild president and studying parent, I have witnessed how not all student experiences are considered in institutional design and service. Students outside of protected categories (such as caregivers and cultural minorities) also face educational barriers, including reduced inclusion and diminished capacity to properly focus on their studies. Together, these submissions demonstrate that a system designed to support equity groups benefits all students. Amidst a backdrop of gender-based violence and systemic racism, support and belonging, now more than ever, can make or break a student's experience—and in turn, their *retention*.

These works provide generous and vulnerable insights into lived experiences at university and challenge the privilege and unconscious bias formed by outdated policies and systems. Underpinning the tensions of the contemporary Australian student are assumptions that must be challenged. *They* (politicians, policymakers, university administrators) navigated the system, studied postgrad while working, completed a prac without payment, therefore we can too. But we are not navigating the same economic or housing circumstances as prior generations, and this section seeks to disrupt and shift perceptions by providing actionable insights and simple, evidenced solutions.

An unequal starting point: Lived experiences of navigating higher education



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For many students, university is experienced alongside financial insecurity, housing instability, burnout, relocation, cultural disconnection, and difficulty accessing meaningful support. These pressures extend beyond the classroom and shape wellbeing, belonging, and the capacity to succeed. From my own experience, financial hardship is a prominent barrier to pursuing and succeeding in higher education. Financial support is essential, though it's often insufficient to meet the realities of the rising cost of living. Even with government assistance, maintaining financial stability while studying is an ongoing challenge, often contributing to heightened periods of stress. Working alongside study can ease financial pressure; however, the need to prioritise employment for financial security often competes with academic commitments, and work can become a central focus driven more by necessity than choice.

As a student living away from home without family support, I'm responsible for managing my own finances, employment, and daily living needs alongside my studies. Balancing these responsibilities leaves limited time and energy for

"Burnout for me is relatively normal, and over time, it changes how you see yourself. When you're constantly struggling to keep up, it's hard not to feel like you're the problem."

"As an Indigenous student, my social and emotional wellbeing is deeply grounded in connection to Country, culture, family, and community. The process of relocation has disrupted these foundational relationships, resulting in a sense of cultural disconnection."

academic work, which can place additional strain on study performance. As financial pressures build, securing safe, affordable accommodation while relying on ABSTUDY payments becomes difficult, and the process is exhausting. Trying to balance university obligations with housing instability has often contributed to academic strain. Experiencing homelessness and housing instability while studying is difficult, because university isn't just about learning, it's about navigating a system that was never built with those experiences in mind. Experiencing these difficulties before commencing university can disrupt the pathways into higher education and contribute to longer-term burnout, affecting focus, wellbeing, and academic performance. Burnout for me is relatively normal, and over time, it changes how you see yourself. When you're constantly struggling to keep up, it's hard not to feel like you're the problem. That pressure builds into a quiet sense of not being "good enough", especially when comparing oneself to others, and can leave one feeling too embarrassed or ashamed to ask for support.

Furthermore, relocating to pursue higher education in another state has contributed to a diminished sense of connection with family, friends, and cultural networks. As an Indigenous student, my social and emotional wellbeing is deeply grounded in connection to Country, culture, family, and community. The process of relocation has disrupted these foundational relationships, resulting in a sense of cultural disconnection. In addition to this, maintaining friendships has become difficult, with limited time and capacity to form and sustain meaningful social connections. This separation has contributed to increased strain



on my mental health and an overall decline in my sense of wellbeing. This is particularly important when trying to maintain academic success while balancing other demands outside of university.

While the higher education sector does offer financial hardship scholarships and support, these measures frequently fall short of meeting the realities of rising living costs. Many scholarships are too low in value to create genuine stability, particularly for students like myself who are already experiencing disadvantage and living independently away from home. Crisis payments are also available, but are often limited in value or too slow to access, making them ineffective for responding to urgent financial situations. There is a clear need for higher-value, rapidly accessible crisis payments that can respond immediately to challenges such as housing instability, unexpected expenses, or sudden loss of income. Providing timely and adequate support in these moments can prevent short-term hardship from escalating into long-term disruption to a student's education.

Equally important is the need for consistent, ongoing support. Too often, the responsibility has fallen on me to repeatedly seek help, navigating appointments and systems that are time-consuming and can be difficult to access, especially during periods of crisis. Who do I talk to? How do I access them? These are questions I've often asked in times of crisis. This can create

a sense that support is not truly there when it's most needed, reinforcing feelings of isolation and making it harder to reach out. Strengthening proactive, continuous support systems would help ensure students are not left to manage these challenges alone.

Dedicated Indigenous Student Success units at universities are strong examples of what effective support can look like. The staff create a sense of community that students can rely on in times of distress, without the added burden of scheduling formal appointments. This kind of accessible, relationship-based support allows students to speak openly about a range of challenges while receiving cultural, emotional, and practical guidance. Dedicated Indigenous Student Success units demonstrate the value of accessible, relationship-based support that responds to the realities students face beyond their academic responsibilities. Expanding elements of this model across the university sector would help ensure students from other diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds receive similarly consistent and meaningful support, particularly those experiencing financial hardship, housing instability, social isolation, or other barriers to participation. In doing so, universities can create environments where students are better supported to succeed both academically and personally.

A “systemic” problem: Why universities must act against racism now



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More than 70% of students and staff are experiencing racism in some form while studying and working at Australian universities.

This stark reality was laid bare in a landmark 2025 survey of more than 76,000 students and staff at 42 institutions—part of the first ever national study into racism at Australian universities.

The *Respect at Uni Study* (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2026) confirmed beyond any doubt that racism remains a “systemic” issue in Australian higher education—one that institutions still have a long way to go in addressing.

Racism was reported at similar rates at nearly every university in the country and affected all groups that responded, including First Peoples, African, Asian, Jewish, Māori, Middle Eastern, Muslim, Palestinian, and Pasifika students.

These findings, while deeply disappointing, are not surprising.

They echo the lived experiences and calls to action shared by many students during extensive consultation undertaken as part of the Australian Universities Accord Review (Department of Education, 2024).

Indeed, the *Respect at Uni Study* was initiated and funded by the Australian Government Department

“... racism remains a “systemic” issue in Australian higher education—one that institutions still have a long way to go in addressing.”

“At a time when students are navigating an increasingly complex set of challenges on top of their academic pursuits, the *Respect at Uni Study* confirmed widespread racism is yet another obstacle for many.”

of Education in direct response to one of the Accord’s 47 sweeping recommendations.

In both the review and the survey, students spoke of how racism had profoundly impacted their wellbeing, sense of connection, and trust in universities.

Their personal insights have added to a growing evidence base, well discussed in the academic literature, for the destructive impacts of racism on wellbeing and health (Demant et al., 2024).

Compounding challenges beyond academia

At a time when students are navigating an increasingly complex set of challenges on top of their academic pursuits, the *Respect at Uni Study* confirmed widespread racism is yet another obstacle for many.

Microaggressions were widely reported on campus alongside instances of overt racism and explicit abuse, while students who faced racism and other intersecting forms of discrimination reported experiencing compounded harms.

One in five students who experienced racism at university said they did not feel safe, and while religious identity was a source of strength, safety, and belonging for many, it was also a target of discrimination and exclusion.

These intersectional experiences of racism and discrimination echo the findings of important research examining, for example, the impacts of islamophobia on Australian Muslim women (Krayem & Carland, 2022; Carland, 2023).

Racism in learning spaces can manifest in various forms, including linguistic racism (Tobinson & Mercieca, 2020; Dovchin, 2020). Nearly 47%



of students with lived experience reported encountering racism in smaller physical learning environments such as tutorials and seminars.

Despite its prevalence and severity, fewer than 13% of domestic students and 11% of international students who experienced direct racism reported making a formal complaint to their university, with many citing fears of repercussions and lack of anonymity.

The *Respect at Uni Study* further highlighted extremely low trust in university complaints systems, with nearly 69% of domestic students and more than 62% of international students who experienced racism reporting dissatisfaction with the complaints-handling process.

These troubling findings reflect those of other recent academic and policy research examining racism complaints-handling and reporting barriers in Australia (Peucker et al., 2024).

Within the higher education sector and beyond, a prevalent perception of reporting mechanisms is that they are tokenistic, time consuming, ineffective, protective of the institution, and sometimes re-traumatising (Matteo et al., 2020).

For too long this perception has contributed to a broader sense of mistrust in institutional responses to racism—which is precisely why universities must act now.

Recommendations for structural change

As institutions that nurture future generations, shape minds, and pave ways to a better society, universities are profoundly influential, and therefore accountable, to the students, staff members, and society they interact with.

While structural change requires both government and university commitment, the *Respect at Uni Study* generated many recommendations that institutions can, and should, implement regardless of government support. Among these, the most urgently needed include:

- > providing trauma-informed and culturally safe support services to students
- > providing comprehensive anti-racism and cultural competency training for leadership, staff, and students
- > conducting regular campus safety audits with a cultural safety/racism prevention lens that cover physical, digital, and cultural environments
- > reviewing complaint policies to ensure explicit reference to racism and protection against victimisation
- > providing training to complaint handling staff to ensure responses are culturally capable, trauma-informed, and informed by anti-racism
- > integrating anti-racism and diverse knowledges across programs, and introducing courses on cultural, racial, and religious knowledge, literacy, and perspectives into the curriculum.

If implemented, these recommendations would provide a long overdue starting point to addressing racism holistically in Australia's higher education sector.

In addition, university leadership must adapt to reflect the diversity of institutional policies, practices, and norms already visible in classrooms throughout Australia (Hill, 2023).

“Addressing racism is a long-term commitment and an evolving journey, with meaningful change demanding systemic action that genuinely embeds anti-racism into governance, curriculum, policies, services, and practices.”

The disconnect between leadership representation and the communities that universities serve was cited by one in two staff surveyed as an example of the lack of cultural understanding needed for real change, as well as a broader systemic barrier to building inclusive leadership pipelines.

Addressing racism is a long-term commitment and an evolving journey, with meaningful change demanding systemic action that genuinely embeds anti-racism into governance, curriculum, policies, services, and practices.

It is high time Australian universities commit to action and learning, and to building trusting environments where all students can thrive and feel safe from racism and discrimination.

The author would like to thank Rachel Law for her contributions to this piece.

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Learning from student complaints: Time to fairmaxx



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Office of the
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Ombudsman

When I was 19 and in my second year of uni, I came home to my box-sized apartment to find the electricity had been cut off. I knew this was coming. I'd been struggling to pay my bills and had received several payment reminders—each one with larger and more urgent red font. It was just before the Easter long weekend, and I really needed that time to study rather than work. I recall the sense of panic, fear, exhaustion, shame, but also determination to get through. I remember sitting on the floor, overwhelmed, for a long time. Eventually it got dark. I lit some candles, ate a muesli bar for dinner, grabbed an exercise book and pen, and studied as best I could.

I don't think my student experience was the norm more than 20 years ago when I was studying. But today, with more people than ever participating in Australian higher education, it is. It means that many students are trying to make higher education fit within busy and sometimes challenging life circumstances. If we are to meet our Australian Universities Accord objective of more students accessing and successfully completing tertiary qualifications, we need to better support all students.

“Complaints are a valuable source of information for higher education providers. They can signal where academic systems or administrative processes need improvement to better support all students to succeed.”



Complaints are a valuable source of information for higher education providers. They can signal where academic systems or administrative processes need improvement to better support all students to succeed.

After 12 months of service, the National Student Ombudsman (NSO) has heard from more than 6,000 students across the country. We've learnt about the adversity students face while trying to meet academic requirements. For example, a student who missed a deadline while grieving a family member, a student whose disability support plan existed on paper but not in the classroom, a mature-aged student navigating food insecurity and caring responsibilities on a challenging placement, an international student facing extreme financial pressures and possible exclusion with just one subject left to complete, and a First Nations student studying 1,000km from home, struggling in an unfamiliar environment while facing constant and casual racism. While every student's complaint is different, most involve a combination of provider actions or decisions and a student's life circumstances. It's arbitrary to separate them when you're trying to resolve a complaint, let alone design an equitable academic system.

Students who come to the NSO are motivated to complete their studies and are looking for genuine partnership from their provider to make this possible. What we hear most from students is that they want their provider to listen and treat them fairly. So, if I was to distil a key lesson from NSO complaints for the sector on how to better support students to access and successfully complete their studies, it would be to focus more

“*At the heart of many student complaints are unfairly designed policies—often not reviewed for years or reflective of the contemporary academic environment.*”

on “fairness by design”. Or, as I like to call it, “fairmaxxing”. By this I mean building fairness into policy and operational decisions. Here’s a few examples from student complaints.

Policy design: At the heart of many student complaints are unfairly designed policies—often not reviewed for years or reflective of the contemporary academic environment. For example, complaints about financial hardship policies often involve students, who despite stressful life circumstances, are deeply committed to continuing their studies. In this context, we’ve seen providers prioritise fair individual complaint outcomes and take more systemic action by updating their financial hardship policies. This is encouraging, especially amid current cost-of-living pressures and given tertiary education’s power to transform lives.

Exercise of discretion: A key area for improving fairness is within policies and processes involving the *use of discretionary decisions*, such as the *application of special consideration*. Students tell us that providers aren’t making fair decisions under special consideration. They call out inconsistent decisions that don’t genuinely consider relevant life circumstances, or processes that require excessive and sometimes expensive forms of evidence, such as multiple medical certificates. Casting a fairness lens over the use of discretion, even just starting with special consideration, could make a big difference to a student struggling to accommodate life and study.

Complaints handling: Prioritising what is fair in complaints handling is central to any fairmaxxing culture. We want to see providers listen to students’ unique circumstances to achieve fair, individual outcomes, and use complaints to drive systemic improvements. We’ve seen the difference in students’ lives when providers make not just policy-compliant, but fair decisions in their

complaints handling. Here’s what some students said after receiving a fair decision:

The school approved my application. It is the best news I have ever heard in my life ... I burst into tears when I saw the email on my phone. I could not believe this is actually happening.

This is life-changing news for me and my family. The updated result on my transcript would provide me with great advantage while I apply for my future job, and the amount of tuition refunded would make a significant change to my family. I don’t know how to express my gratitude towards everything that has just happened.

What you did resulted in me being able to return to my studies.

I feel like I can finally breathe again.

Looking back at my experience of higher education, there isn’t much I’d change. By the time I finished uni, I felt I could handle most things thrown my way. This is partly due to some world-class teachers but also due to the challenges I overcame. Adversity does build resilience, but that doesn’t mean higher education providers shouldn’t do everything within their power to make each student’s academic journey successful. Embracing and leading a fairmaxxing culture—making it a provider’s default lens—will go a long way to demonstrate to all students a commitment to their success.



Local support through the pressure



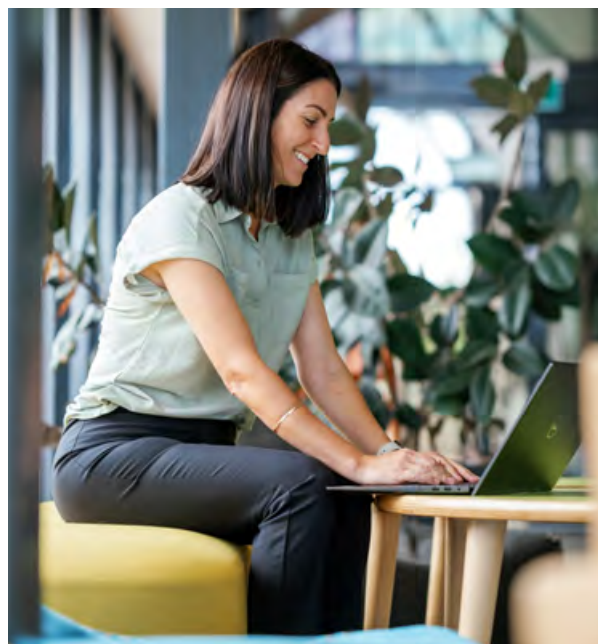
Natalie Nelmes
Geraldton Universities
Centre

Pressure. It's ubiquitous in modern life. University students, especially in recognised equity groups, can and do experience pressure in all facets of their lives additional to that which a study load brings. Add the tyranny of distance into the mix and pressures mount up. If studying online is your only option, you are at the mercy of a range of technological systems and processes, on top of learning your course content. And that's if you have the luxury of actually choosing the course you most want and are most motivated to study without relocating.

At Geraldton Universities Centre (GUC) in WA's Mid West, all our students are equity students, providing a microcosm from which to consider the types of pressures regional students are facing and how this manifests in their study life.



Regional students often increase work hours to afford rent, travel, and living costs, which in turn may reduce the time they spend on study, compromising assessment quality and increasing attrition risk.



Working in partnership with three universities, and supporting online students from many others, also gives us a direct perspective on how university systems, from the administrative to the academic, impact positively and negatively on student lives.

Regional students are certainly not a homogenous group. They are every bit as diverse as any metropolitan society, and many succeed with little calls on support. However, very often we see regional students fitting into multiple equity categories. By necessity, many balance considerable hours of paid employment, caregiving responsibilities, and community obligations alongside their study. At GUC, up to 45% of our students are from low socio-economic backgrounds. The Australian Government Department of Education's latest Regional University Study Hubs (RUSH) program demographics reveal 42% of registered students are first-in-family to attend university, 10% of a First Nations background, and with 57% of students over the age of 25, one in five have parent or carer responsibilities (Department of Education, n.d.).

Financial pressure is therefore a persistent constraint: regional students often increase work hours to afford rent, travel, and living costs, which in turn may reduce the time they spend on study, compromising assessment quality and increasing attrition risk. They become "spread too thin", and invariably it's the study that's compromised. Impacts on mental health from stress, anxiety, and burnout can, and do, result.

“When equity students are often already facing imposter syndrome, even small bureaucratic hurdles can reinforce feelings that perhaps university is ‘not for them’.”

With such pressure comes the need to respond in very personalised ways. But that’s difficult for a remote or regional student living far from their university campus. That’s a gap regional study hubs work hard to bridge. When you’ve developed rapport, you can quickly direct them to access the excellent range of supports universities have created for students. It’s the bit that’s often missing. Students just don’t realise what services are available and how to access them when they really need them. How to book a counselling session? How to ask for an extension or to get a learning access plan—what even is it?

The 2025 RUSH Student Experience Survey backs up this observation: 20% of students had contemplated ceasing study during the year because of study workload, paid work responsibilities, health issues, and caring responsibilities. Importantly though, for almost half of them, having access to the hub influenced their decision to stay, utilising dedicated quiet space and just knowing that the staff support was available.

With limited time, pressures on students are compounded when trying to cope with often complex university systems. Central systems, from admissions and enrolment to placement compliance and academic platforms, as well as a seemingly endless plethora of communication, can and do overwhelm students. RUSH staff spend a large part of their time helping students navigate them. When equity students are often already facing imposter syndrome, even small bureaucratic hurdles can reinforce feelings that perhaps university is ‘not for them’. It’s even worse when not uploading a document correctly could cost them their scarce regional prac placement and impact course progression. Let’s simplify our language and review the digital paperwork required (it’s still paperwork!) with accrediting

bodies, schools, hospitals, agencies, and the university itself to see if we can rationalise the load back.

Online platforms have provided an unparalleled opportunity for regional students to access many more courses locally. However, these platforms can easily become overfilled with too much content. New journal articles for instance might be added (as they should) but older ones not necessarily taken away. GUC tutors are spending an increasing amount of time helping students “separate the wheat from the chaff”. Technology-based assignments, too, can risk testing an ability to apply an unfamiliar piece of software as opposed to the relevant content.

But better an option for a student to have an overfull online program than no course option at all. Living regionally should be no barrier to fulfilling aspiration. Let’s use the opportunity in this new Needs-based Funding environment to explore more course options with innovative, supportive delivery options for our regional students. Genuine codesign with RUSHs contributing local student support, regionally-based industry and agencies providing input on their needs and potentially local academic staff, and university faculty redesigning courses so that content can be both accessible and integrate this local support, would lead to a lasting legacy of opportunity for regional students and communities.

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When employability is everything: Unequal access to opportunity in higher education



Brooke Szucs
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Many “hallmark” university experiences assume students have stable housing, financial flexibility, transport access, family support, energy, and spare time. Universities increasingly encourage students to participate in exchange programs, internships, volunteering, networking events, and leadership opportunities as part of graduate employability and student success. Yet these opportunities remain part of the hidden curriculum of university life: highly valuable, but unevenly accessible (Harvey et al., 2017; Thompson et al., 2013).

There is often an assumption that once a student is accepted into university, high-value extracurricular opportunities become equally accessible to everyone (Stuart et al., 2011). In reality, many students from diverse backgrounds face barriers that remain largely invisible within university systems and policies, despite previous reports calling for action and inclusive access (Harvey et al., 2017).

While equity conversations often focus on getting students into classrooms and onto graduation stages, far less attention is paid to who can realistically participate in the parts of university life that build confidence, belonging, professional networks, and career opportunities outside the classroom. Research has consistently shown that

“Many students from diverse backgrounds face barriers that remain largely invisible within university systems and policies.”

extracurricular involvement also contributes to employability, mentoring, confidence, and long-term success (King et al., 2021).

For those who have not experienced disability, homelessness, chronic illness, caring responsibilities, or financial hardship, these barriers can be easy to overlook. How do you go on exchange during a housing crisis when you are worried about whether you will have somewhere to return to? How do you volunteer when disability or chronic illness means you have fewer hours of energy left in a day? How do you attend a leadership program when a convener tells you that you “won’t fit in” or they do not want to “set you up for failure”?

Participation outside the classroom is often treated as optional, yet it profoundly shapes who becomes competitive in the workforce after graduation. Despite this, we still know very little about how unequal access to extracurricular opportunities specifically impacts diverse student populations. What barriers exist for disabled students participating in overseas programs or internships? How do caring responsibilities or financial insecurity shape access to networking and leadership opportunities?

These questions remain underexplored because there are still very few pathways for researchers, particularly research students who live these experiences, to investigate them with meaningful institutional support. Research around classroom access and learning supports is growing, and transition-to-work research receives somewhat more attention, but participation outside the classroom remains a major gap in research and policy agendas (Szucs & Harpur, 2023). Without research, universities lack the evidence needed to build genuinely inclusive approaches to employability and student enrichment that create real change.

This gap is also visible in university practice. Diversity and inclusion strategies rarely address barriers for employability programs in meaningful ways (Harvey et al., 2017). From experience in advocacy spaces, it is clear that staff running these programs are often not expected to understand the realities diverse students face. Comments like, “There’s no bus there, so just catch an Uber,” immediately communicate that some students were never expected as participants in these opportunities to begin with, and they are not considered in the design.

“My research aims to build a future where diverse students do not have to exhaust themselves to access the same opportunities as everyone else or fail because participation was never realistically accessible to begin with.”

I care deeply about this because extracurricular involvement was the thing that transformed me into a success story for inclusive education. I was first-in-family to attend university, disabled, poor, and often caring for my mother with very little support. I pushed myself constantly: eating rice and kimchi for most meals so I could afford exchange in Japan, and pet sitting in strangers' houses so I could continue studying while homeless and serving as a club president. However, many of my peers and community members continue to navigate university and graduate without access to these forms of enrichment, often with significant impacts on their opportunities and outcomes.

Much of my personal and professional growth came from extracurricular opportunities. But I never should have had to push that hard simply to participate, and my research aims to build a future where diverse students do not have to exhaust themselves to access the same opportunities as everyone else or fail because participation was never realistically accessible to begin with. However, starting this journey has made me realise how difficult it is to gain support in this area considered “extra”, especially financially.

Our university sector needs to recognise that employability and participation outside the classroom are equally, if not more, important for diverse student populations, and our research agendas and institutional policies need to reflect that reality. Universities should treat this as a strategic priority by funding inclusion training for careers and enrichment staff, ensuring scholarships and equity models account for the hidden costs attached to participation, and supporting lived-experience researchers to investigate these issues in meaningful depth.

When employability is everything, excluding diverse students from this part of university life is failing them. The question is no longer simply who gets into university, but who is actually able to optimise the opportunities it offers.

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From cohort to system: What the Indigenous space has taught us



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University students today are navigating increasing pressures beyond the classroom—rising living costs, insecure work, housing instability, caring responsibilities, and experiences of racism and exclusion. These pressures are often treated as external to learning, but in practice they shape the conditions under which study occurs: how consistently students can engage, how much time they have, and how much capacity they can bring to learning.

While these pressures are now widely recognised, they are not new. For decades, Indigenous students have participated in higher education under conditions of constraint, balancing study with cultural obligations, financial pressures, community expectations, and the ongoing effects of exclusion. What Indigenous student experience has made visible is not simply the presence of disadvantage, but the limits of institutional models that assume stable time, predictable capacity, and uncomplicated belonging.

Over time, a range of approaches have emerged: targeted support programs, more culturally responsive practices, and greater attention to the student experience. Where these responses have been well designed and sustained, outcomes have improved, particularly where support aligns to conditions shaping participation across financial, academic, and cultural domains (for example, Fredericks *et al.*, 2022; Nakata *et al.*, 2025). In this sense, Indigenous student experience is not only a cohort-specific equity concern; it is an early diagnostic of how the system performs when its assumptions about participation do not hold.

This points to a broader lesson. Fixed timetables, compressed assessment, and assumptions of sustained attention can amplify financial strain, fragmented time, fatigue, and questions of belonging. Much of the load is not generated

by learning, but by the conditions surrounding it. The distinction is between challenge that is educationally purposeful and load that is structurally incidental.

Despite this, much of what has been learned in the Indigenous space has been treated as cohort specific. Effective approaches are often implemented as targeted programs or services, operating alongside the broader system rather than reshaping it. This has contained the insight as much as the intervention: lessons are held within specialist portfolios, framed as exceptional responses, or limited by funding, policy, and governance settings that position equity work as supplementary to core academic design. While these interventions remain essential, their containment has meant that system-level knowledge has too often been left at the margins of system-level reform.

That containment is becoming harder to sustain. The conditions long experienced by Indigenous and equity cohorts are now more widely distributed across the student population. Students respond by adjusting participation—reducing load, deferring, or withdrawing. What was once concentrated at the margins is moving toward the centre. Equity, in this sense, is not peripheral; it is predictive.

This shift reframes the role of equity in higher education. It is no longer a question of how to support specific groups, but of what those groups have already revealed about the system itself. The experience of Indigenous students demonstrates what happens when participation is structured around assumptions that do not match lived conditions, and what becomes possible when those assumptions are adjusted.

This shift reframes the role of equity in higher education. It is no longer a question of how to support specific groups, but of what those groups have already revealed about the system itself.



For the sector, the implication is direct. If the principal response remains the expansion of services and targeted supports, students will continue to be assisted to navigate a model built for conditions many no longer have. Support remains necessary, but it is not sufficient. What is required is a stronger focus on the design of participation itself: how time is structured, how workload is distributed, how assessment is paced, and what forms of engagement are assumed. This is not about lowering academic standards, rather ensuring academic challenge comes from learning, and not avoidable structural friction.

Recent policy developments create a more enabling context for this shift. In Australia, reforms emerging from the Australian Universities Accord are reorienting the system through the establishment of the Australian Tertiary Education Commission as a system steward of long-term reform, the introduction of Needs-based Funding from 2026, and a shift from enrolment growth toward student success.

Together, these changes signal a move from treating access as the primary policy objective to recognising participation and success as core system responsibilities.

In effect, these policy shifts begin to institutionalise insights long visible in the Indigenous student experience: that participation is shaped by conditions, not simply by access. This creates a policy environment in which equity becomes core to system definition, performance, and measurement. The next step is not simply to expand support. Universities must build shared,

system-level capability in socially inclusive teaching and learning, embedding what has often remained localised or programmatic into mainstream academic design.

The sector is not starting from scratch. It already has a body of practice showing how students succeed under constraint. What has been developed in the Indigenous space should now be recognised as system-level knowledge—not a niche response to a particular cohort. The question is no longer whether we know enough to respond. It is whether we are prepared to treat this knowledge as central rather than exceptional, and to redesign the conditions of study accordingly. If we do not, universities will continue scaling a model built on outdated assumptions while student conditions continue to diverge from them.

“What has been developed in the Indigenous space should now be recognised as system-level knowledge—not a niche response to a particular cohort.”

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SECTION 3: The evolving institution



SECTION 3

The evolving institution

Introduction



Paul Harris
2050 Alliance

Times change. Community and government expectations of universities change. And the needs of students also change.

Much of this change comes from outside universities. But it also comes from within, as universities create and share new knowledge that leads to new ways of understanding the world.

The advent of artificial intelligence (AI) highlights the ways in which universities must respond—often quickly—to changes in technology to ensure teaching and assessment remain relevant, and that students are prepared for a changing world when they graduate. But universities also have a responsibility to create space for their students and staff to experiment, to think critically, and to ask deeper questions about AI and its impacts.

This combination is one of the things that makes universities special, with a unique and important role in preparing Australia for the future.

The Australian Universities Accord—the biggest review of our university system in over 15 years—recommended major changes to higher education policy and funding to ensure all Australians have the opportunity to obtain the knowledge and skills they will need for the future. In adopting the Accord's goals for increased tertiary participation and equity by 2050, the Government has committed to a bigger and fairer education system, with additional support for the students and communities underrepresented in higher education.

The Accord has also led to the establishment this year of the Australian Tertiary Education Commission, which is charged with stewardship of the university system and monitoring progress towards the 2050 goals.

But stewardship for the future does not only come from government; it also arises from university staff and students themselves, as they shape evolving institutions, new knowledge, and new approaches.

The contributions in this section—from **Braden Hill, Josh Mason, Michelle Trudgett, and Susan Page, Lauren Tynan, Matt Brett, Alison Knapp, and Tyrone Carlin**—highlight key areas in which expectations and needs are evolving, and the important role of universities in responding.

With their focus on Indigenous students and pedagogies, students with a disability, student mental health, and the needs of regional students and communities, they pose vital questions about how universities must change to ensure a more inclusive future.

Each of these articles demands a reckoning—with history, with geography, with cost-of-living and other pressures, and with the needs of students, staff, and communities. And they clearly show that genuinely addressing these questions will benefit everyone, not just students from underrepresented or equity groups.

In times of change, universities can't afford to stand still. But nor should they. By focusing on the changing needs of students and communities, redesigning curriculum, and prioritising inclusion, universities can show how they are delivering on their public mission and helping Australia to achieve its 2050 goals.

The measure by which we are judged: Why centring First Nations students reveals what real transformation demands of universities



Professor Braden Hill
Edith Cowan University

There is a fact about Australian higher education that is both simple and, in its implications, profound. For more than a century, universities on this continent were places from which First Nations people were excluded. While Australia's first university began teaching in 1852, the first Indigenous student did not enter until the mid-1950s, a gap of more than four generations.

Over that time, universities have done more than educate individuals, they have helped build professions, networks, and forms of accumulated advantage passed from one generation to the next. For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, those inheritances were not available in the same way.

If we are to think seriously about equity, we must reckon with what this history means in the present. The contemporary First Nations student experience is shaped not only by this legacy of exclusion, but also by the conditions that have transformed student life across many communities. Those historically shut out of university did not experience the period of relative affordability that some of today's academic leaders

recall, when students could spend long days on campus with fewer competing pressures. For many First Nations students, there is no nostalgia for that world, because it was not theirs to know.

Today, Indigenous university students are often balancing study with paid work, family and community responsibilities, and significant financial precarity. These pressures are structural, not incidental, and they shape retention and success. While the sector has become better at inviting First Nations students in, it has been less successful at ensuring they can stay and complete their studies. For Indigenous students, it remains close to a 50-50 proposition (Fredericks et al., 2024; Universities Australia, 2023) whether university will yield a degree even after nine years, despite the debt, labour, time, and hope invested.

The reasons for this lie not only in financial precarity, but in the broader historical, epistemological, and institutional conditions that shape belonging, persistence, and success. Racism remains one of them, as evidenced by findings from the *Respect at Uni Study* (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2026). Often quiet and cumulative, yet present across the full educational landscape, racism shapes whether students can imagine a future for themselves within an institution, a profession, and the society they are being asked to enter.

For First Nations students, success is not simply a matter of academic support, it is deeply tied to relationships, the absence of settler-colonial harms, and strong sense of belonging.

At Edith Cowan University (ECU), some of the most meaningful responses to student hardship have been Indigenous-led. Since 2019, the Best Start Scholarship, a proactive financial support intervention, has coincided with a substantial narrowing of the success gap for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Student success has risen 14 percentage points over six years and now sits just four percentage points below the ECU domestic average. This is tangible evidence that success gaps can, in fact, be closed through targeted support.

More than that, this Indigenous-led innovation through Kurungkurl Katitjin is now shaping support for more than 1,500 domestic low socio-economic status (SES) and First Nations students through ECU's StudyBoost initiative. StudyBoost is an evolution of the Best Start Scholarship. It adopts the same proactive model of offering eligible

“For First Nations students, success is not simply a matter of academic support, it is deeply tied to relationships, the absence of settler-colonial harms, and strong sense of belonging.”



The task ahead, in this moment of change and disruption, is to reimagine universities as spaces where the students we enrol find a place that was imagined with them in mind, beginning with Indigenous students, not as a subset of equity, but as those most excluded and best placed to show us what genuine transformation demands of universities. »»

students up-front, no-strings-attached financial support prior to census, with grants ranging from \$1,500 to \$5,000 based on financial need and study load. Its impact has been immediate and measurable, with Semester 1 2026 recipients retained to census at 93%, above the 90% domestic student average, and particularly strong outcomes for regionally-based and low SES students.

This wider influence matters, because Indigenous leadership and practice is too often framed as relevant only to First Nations communities. Yet some of the most powerful institutional change occurs when solutions are designed from the standpoint of those who know exclusion most intimately. What is created with First Nations students in mind can reshape the university itself, making it more responsive, more relational, and more human-centred for everyone.

Our learning shows that when support arrives early, is targeted, and reflects the realities students are living, all students are more likely to stay, more likely to succeed, and less likely to disappear from the system. Too many outcomes we describe as inevitable are, in fact, the result of choices about who gets supported, when, how, and by whom.

Artificial intelligence (AI) adds another layer of complexity, but also a moment of opportunity. By unsettling longstanding practices in assessment, teaching, and learning, AI forces universities to ask what we value, how we define learning, and who is in mind when we design our curriculum

and shape our pedagogy. With higher education requiring a redesign, Indigenous students should be at the centre of that work as a justice-centred starting point to ensure any redesign does not simply modernise old inequities. It asks us to build academic communities that are relational, contextual, and attentive to the realities students actually live.

Designing with Indigenous students in mind makes those intersections harder to ignore and gives universities a stronger basis for transformation that benefits all students.

What is required, then, is not only reform, but honesty. Honesty about history, honesty about the conditions students now live under, and honesty about the limits of a system that has expanded access without fully transforming itself.

So, the task ahead, in this moment of change and disruption, is to reimagine universities as spaces where the students we enrol find a place that was imagined with them in mind, beginning with Indigenous students, not as a subset of equity, but as those most excluded and best placed to show us what genuine transformation demands of universities. And that should be the measure by which we are judged.

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Beyond participation: Creating universities where Indigenous students thrive



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For many Indigenous students, success at university is shaped not only by academic demands, but also by a range of broader social, cultural, and structural factors that sit outside the classroom. These include financial pressures, cultural responsibilities, and the experience of navigating institutions that were not originally designed with Indigenous students in mind (Page et al., 2017), which in many cases compound those challenges experienced by their peers. As a result, the university journey can involve additional layers of complexity that require students to continually adapt and manage competing priorities. Indigenous student success staff who work in university Indigenous centres are often the institutional interface where such challenges are navigated.

The higher education sector has invested sustained effort in improving outcomes for Indigenous students, yet persistent structural barriers remain. Financial pressure continues to be

one of the most significant challenges, extending well beyond tuition fees, and can have a direct impact on a student's ability to remain enrolled, engage fully in their studies, and ultimately complete their degree. This is particularly significant for Indigenous students who may not have generational access to higher education or the same level of financial support networks as other students. While scholarships play an essential role in mitigating financial hardship, greater sector-wide investment is required to expand both access and impact.

Alongside financial constraints, many students juggle competing responsibilities between university and community life. Balancing study with cultural obligations, family commitments, and community expectations can create ongoing tension, particularly when university structures and timelines do not always align with these lived realities. In addition, Indigenous students often carry emotional and cultural responsibilities throughout their studies. These expectations to represent community, respond to cultural obligations, or support peers, all add an additional layer of invisible labour. While these responsibilities are not formally recognised within academic requirements, they can significantly shape the overall student experience and contribute to workload pressures that are not always visible to institutions, and are sometimes exacerbated by institutional practices.

Equally critical is the sustained work required to confront racism within and beyond the classroom (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2026; Fredericks et al., 2022). Creating culturally safe learning environments is fundamental to

“Indigenous students often carry emotional and cultural responsibilities throughout their studies. These expectations to represent community, respond to cultural obligations, or support peers, all add an additional layer of invisible labour.”

Indigenous student success and must extend into curriculum design, teaching practice, and institutional culture (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2024). Findings from the *Respect at Uni Study* (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2026) report reinforces the urgency of this work, revealing that Indigenous students experience particularly high levels of racism at Australian universities, with many reporting ongoing impacts on their sense of safety, belonging, and wellbeing. Addressing racism is therefore not ancillary to student success—it is central to ensuring Indigenous students can thrive at university and beyond.

Visibility also matters. For many Indigenous students—particularly those who are first in their family to attend university—seeing Indigenous leadership at the highest levels sends a powerful message about belonging, opportunity, and institutional commitment. For example, senior Indigenous staff make time to consult with students, participate in student functions, attend graduations to share student success, and support students at events like the Indigenous Nationals student games. Growing the presence of Indigenous leaders, alongside increasing Indigenous professional and academic staff across the university, signals that Indigenous voices, knowledge, and leadership are valued throughout the institution.

Attracting and retaining Indigenous staff is important. At Western Sydney University, our 12-month Ignite Indigenous Traineeship Program places participants in one of our business units, whilst trainees also undertake a Certificate III in

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Business. The program, launched in 2022, has had considerable success in developing and retaining Indigenous staff. Some of our most senior professional staff began their employment as trainees, a considerable inspiration to new trainees in this program. Of the 23 trainees to complete the Ignite program, 16 have secured employment within the university, four continued their studies in higher education, and three were supported in gaining employment externally. These outcomes highlight Ignite's significant impact in providing meaningful career and academic pathways for trainees within the university and beyond.

Taken together, these factors demonstrate that the challenges Indigenous students face are often systemic in nature, reflecting broader institutional structures rather than individual capability. Ultimately, improving Indigenous student outcomes cannot be relegated to isolated programs or goodwill alone—it demands sustained, whole-of-sector leadership and accountability. Universities must move beyond acknowledgement to action, investing in structural change that addresses financial inequity, grows Indigenous leadership and workforce representation, and actively dismantles racism within institutional systems and cultures. The higher education sector has both the authority and responsibility to create environments where Indigenous students are not simply supported to persist, but are enabled to flourish, lead, and shape the future of our institutions. Meeting this responsibility requires courage, resourcing, and commitment—but the cost of inaction is considerable.



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Embedding Indigenous perspectives in a post-referendum classroom



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Racism is on the rise again in Australia. For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the 2023 Voice to Parliament Referendum is marked as a turning point for such vitriolic racism. Coupled with a surge in anti-intellectualism and far-right discourses, this tidal wave of dissent toward Indigenous peoples has seeped into our universities.

In this context, the sector's commitment to embedding Indigenous perspectives in teaching, learning, and research takes on added urgency. This commitment is epistemic; it speaks to whose knowledges count in the curriculum, and the cultural safety of Indigenous students in the classroom (Fredericks et al., 2023; Bennett et al., 2023).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student enrolments in higher education are growing by roughly 7.4% per year, however, they remain well below population parity (Universities Australia, 2023). Despite studying on Indigenous lands, our students do not “see themselves” in the curriculum (Raciti, 2022). A racist or “hidden” curriculum adds compounding pressures on Indigenous students who are already less likely to complete their studies compared to their non-Indigenous peers (Universities Australia, 2023).

Racism

The 2023 Voice to Parliament Referendum was encased in a politically charged environment where racism, discrimination, and disinformation thrived across the continent. The *2024 Australian Reconciliation Barometer: Racism and First Nations Peoples* snapshot reported that racism against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had significantly increased in the past decade, with younger people experiencing higher levels than all other age groups (Reconciliation Australia, 2025).

Racism doesn't stop at the university gates; it creeps (and sometimes roars!) into classrooms and hides in our curricula (Worrell & Moorehead, 2025). Coombs et al. (2025) are clear when they state, "for some Indigenous students, racism causes them to leave university" (pp. 4458–4459). Racism is layered; explicit and implicit, which is why dominant culture curriculum and pedagogy can risk reinforcing racist stereotypes of Indigenous people.

Beyond Indigenous content

Embedding Indigenous perspectives can take many forms, the most widespread of which is the integration of Indigenous content in curriculum, for example, Indigenous-authored texts, population case studies, or political issues. However, Indigenous content is often "unproblematically" analysed through Western (dominant) knowledge systems and frameworks (Nakata, 2007, p. 188). In other words, students simply learn to view Indigenous content through Western perspectives. What if students could learn to view content through Indigenous perspectives?

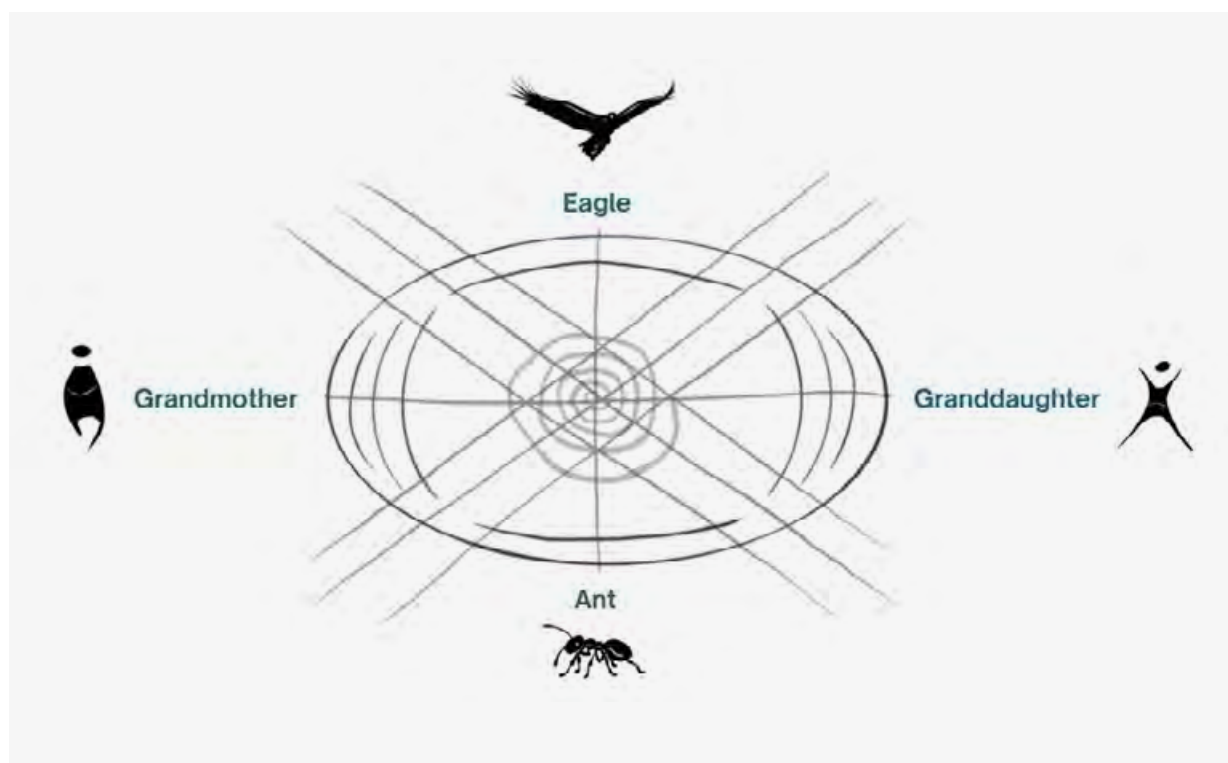
In my 2025 ACSES First Nations Fellowship project, we sought to develop Indigenous

pedagogies. Pedagogies focus on *how* we teach, rather than simply *what* we teach. The basis of the project was to develop the Kin and Country Framework (the Framework) as a pedagogical approach in higher education.

The Framework was developed by me and Gamilaroi education scholar Dr Michelle Bishop to help bring more-than-human perspectives into teaching and learning (Bishop & Tynan, 2024). The Framework invites students to analyse scenarios and content through the perspectives of Eagle (macro, systems view), Ant (micro, community view), Grandmother (deep past and what has come before), and Granddaughter (deep future and optimism). Students then apply pattern thinking—the spiral at the centre—to bring those perspectives together and connect insights to other contexts.

Indigenous issues not up for debate

The major outputs of the Fellowship have been a website, films, and teaching resources to help university educators engage the Framework across all disciplines, because embedding Indigenous perspectives requires guidance.



> Figure 1: The Kin and Country Framework (Bishop & Tynan, 2024)

In the *Teaching Guide for the Kin and Country Framework* (Tynan et al., 2026) we explain:

Myth: The Kin and Country Framework can only be used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and/or about Indigenous 'issues'.

This is not the case at all! Anyone can use this Framework, and it does not have to be used only with Indigenous content and/or Indigenous issues. In fact, the Framework works best when examining dominant culture content and mainstream issues. This approach also supports cultural safety for Indigenous students, where Indigenous issues aren't offered up for debate (Coombs et al., 2025). The Framework fosters collaboration and discussion that stimulates and requires students to think outside of their immediate thoughts, knowledge and experiences. (p. 9)

Whilst students should and will grapple with Indigenous issues and content in their higher education studies, the Framework applies an Indigenous pedagogical lens to dominant issues. Students are learning *through* Indigenous ways, not simply about them. This also makes the Framework portable across disciplines.

In our study, the Framework was introduced to students across seven disciplines and two institutions. Our results show that the vast majority agreed the Framework enhanced their understanding of their course content, Indigenous knowledges, and Country.

Conclusion and recommendations

With racism on the rise, it is incumbent upon universities to commit to anti-racist training and embed Indigenous perspectives across all curricula. Universities need to move beyond tokenistic engagements with Indigenous knowledges and focus on culturally safe classrooms. Our study reaffirms the literature

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With racism on the rise, it is incumbent upon universities to commit to anti-racist training and embed Indigenous perspectives across all curricula. Universities need to move beyond tokenistic engagements with Indigenous knowledges and focus on culturally safe classrooms.

that shows Indigenising curriculum requires support, including communities of practice, resources, and teaching guides.

Indigenising curricula also brings benefit to non-Indigenous students, who translate their enhanced understanding of Indigenous peoples, histories, and Country to their workplaces. In our ACSES study, 80% of students reported applying the Framework beyond the class where they initially learned about it. This study shows that Indigenous pedagogies have the potential to translate Indigenous epistemologies beyond the classroom. Our hope is that this learning carries into the Australian political ether to move beyond our post-referendum predicament.

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Disability: Anything but average



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Australia's most renowned scholar of higher education has written in the context of equity that the "social averages do not shift very much" (Marginson, 2016). Participation rates for students from equity groups are generally consistent with this proposition.

We see something remarkable, however, in the data for students with disability. Over the last decade and a half, participation rates tripled from around 4% to more than 12% (Department of Education, 2014, 2025). This increase is multi-factorial, but includes changes to social understandings of disability and how disability is measured and reported (Pitman et al., 2023). This increase in participation is catalysing new paradigms for support and inclusion.

Changes to social norms rarely arise spontaneously. The conceptual origins for rising participation include debates between British disability rights organisations The Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) and The Disability Alliance, which defined disability as:

the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairment and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities. (UPIAS 1976, p. 14)

We now know this as the social model of disability. Whilst understandings of disability have evolved in the 50 years since this definition was published, the central insight remains valid across all categories of disability. Social factors create barriers to participation and shape the level of disadvantage experienced by people with disability.

Subsequent decades have sought to dismantle these barriers through policy interventions that



include the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* and the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*. Their influence has been a profound enabler of rising university participation, but progress towards elimination of discrimination remains a work in progress.

For students with disability, it is important to appreciate that their participation experiences are contextualised within the broader social context. The social model has contributed to the dismantling of many barriers, but many barriers remain with the net result being pervasive discrimination. In 2024, students with disabilities had the lowest of all equity group agreement (72.6%) that they were free from discrimination, harm, and hatred (Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success [ACSES], 2026). Students with disabilities also consistently demonstrate the lowest levels of having a sense of belonging to their institution (38.4%) (ACSES, 2026).

Consistent with a social model of disability and backdrop of concerning performance data, a recent ACSES report sought to better evidence features of the learning environment that students with disability encounter (Brett et al., 2026). Universities were found to be performing better against some criteria than others. For example, all universities had a clear policy on reasonable adjustment, and nearly all construct their core digital infrastructure with fewer accessibility errors than the global education domain average. Conversely, no university was able to produce three core documents (strategic plan, annual report, and disability action plan) that aligned with a common accessibility standard. Whilst a digitally accessible strategic plan may have limited impact on student learning, it serves as a proxy of whether universities are producing learning and support information in a barrier-free manner.

Whilst there are areas for concern for universities, this should be considered within a broader social context. Progress towards the *Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport 2002* is far from ideal. Australia's built environment is not broadly aligned with the *Disability (Access to Premises — Buildings) Standards 2010*. If one can imagine a university environment where disability and its intricate nuances were to be effectively hard-wired into inclusive strategy, policy, planning, delivery, and quality assurance practices, this university would still be situated within a broader social context where disability is not adequately considered.

In what seems like a historic inflection point, disability is emerging as a focal point of higher education policy.

It is common for students with disability to disclose their disability to the university, and yet not access university disability services. Disability can manifest in any number of participation-restricting environments, not just the university. This insight focuses attention on the virtuous inclusion cycle that universities could aspire to establish. This cycle would see students and staff with disability participate within university environments without disadvantage. Teaching and research activities would build and apply the disability knowledge base and expedite progress to inclusion across many more social environments.

The road map for this inclusion cycle has already been developed (Harpur, 2025) and a nascent indicator framework for assessing progress in some domains is now in play (Brett et al, 2026). Implementation of the road map will require clear stewardship, effective regulation, financial support, and institutional buy-in.

In what seems like a historic inflection point, disability is emerging as a focal point of higher education policy. Disability is included as a strategy priority of the Australian Tertiary Education Commission (Australian Tertiary Education Commission, 2026) and the Tertiary Education and Standards Agency (Department of Education, 2026). Funding for disability in higher education has quadrupled.

I encourage you to consider how you might influence your institution to systematically dismantle barriers to participation whilst aiming to be anything but average for how disability inclusion is advanced.

The one factor that remains unclear is institutional buy-in. My advice is to take inspiration from the development of the social model of disability. I encourage you to consider how you might quantify barriers to participation that are embedded in the social organisation of your institution and the sector at large. I encourage you to consider how you might influence your institution to systematically dismantle barriers to participation whilst aiming to be anything but average for how disability inclusion is advanced.

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Addressing the social determinants of student mental health in higher education



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University students are in a unique life stage characterised by significant developmental, social, and economic transition. For many, this period involves moving away from home, navigating financial independence, forming new social networks, and managing increasing autonomy over daily life (Browne et al., 2017). While this transition presents important opportunities for growth, it also coincides with heightened vulnerability to poor mental health (Kessler et al., 2007; Patel et al., 2018; World Health Organization, 2022). Across Australia, rising rates of anxiety, depression, and psychological distress among university students highlight the need for a more comprehensive and coordinated response (Sanci et al., 2022).

Despite this, student mental health is still commonly framed as an individual issue, centred on resilience, coping, and help-seeking. While these factors are important, they overlook the broader conditions shaping students' wellbeing. A growing body of evidence demonstrates that mental health is strongly influenced by social determinants, defined as the conditions in which students live, study, and work (World Health Organization, 2022, 2026). These include financial security, housing stability, access to essential services, and experiences of social inclusion or exclusion (Milner et al., 2013; World Health Organization, 2025; Universities Australia, 2018). Recent synthesis work also highlights that research in this area has typically examined a narrow set of determinants, limiting understanding of how these factors interact to shape student mental health (Knapp et al., n.d.).

Students today are navigating a convergence of pressures beyond their academic responsibilities. Cost-of-living increases have intensified financial strain, with many students balancing

full-time study alongside substantial paid work (Universities Australia, 2018). Others face housing insecurity, limited access to transport and healthcare, or ongoing financial uncertainty. These challenges are not peripheral to mental health, but rather central to it. Financial strain, for example, is consistently associated with increased psychological distress, while instability in housing and access to basic needs can contribute to chronic stress and reduced sense of control (Bentley et al., 2011; Richardson et al., 2017).

Importantly, these pressures are not experienced equally. Students from equity groups including those from low socio-economic backgrounds, first-in-family students, culturally and linguistically diverse students, gender and sexually diverse students, and students with disability, often face intersecting forms of disadvantage (Department of Education, 2023; Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success, 2026). Experiences of discrimination, marginalisation, and reduced access to resources can further undermine mental health and sense of belonging (Peltzer et al., 2016). Without targeted policy responses, these inequities risk being reinforced within the higher education system.

Current approaches to student mental health are largely reactive, with a strong emphasis on counselling and crisis support services. While these services are essential, they are not sufficient to address the structural drivers of distress. Expanding service provision alone will not reduce the conditions that contribute to poor mental health (World Health Organization, 2022). A more effective approach requires a shift towards upstream, preventative strategies embedded within institutional and sector-wide policy.

“Current approaches to student mental health are largely reactive, with a strong emphasis on counselling and crisis support services. While these services are essential, they are not sufficient to address the structural drivers of distress.”

There are several key areas where policy action is needed:

First, reducing financial strain should be prioritised. This includes expanding access to financial assistance (for example, Youth Allowance and emergency financial relief), alongside universities increasing the availability of scholarships, food relief programs, and on-campus emergency support services for students experiencing financial hardship. Further, governments have a role in strengthening income security and cost-of-living support, including secure and flexible employment opportunities that reduce economic precarity. Addressing cost-of-living pressures is fundamental to improving student wellbeing.

Second, ensuring access to basic needs is critical. Governments can reduce day-to-day stressors that negatively impact mental health through policies such as affordable student housing initiatives, subsidised or free public transport for university students, and expanded access to bulk-billed healthcare services. Universities also have a role through partnerships and on-campus support services, but coordinated government action is needed to address these challenges at scale.

Third, universities must prioritise inclusive and supportive environments. A strong sense of belonging is a key protective factor for mental health, yet many students report feeling disconnected or excluded. Embedding equity, diversity, and inclusion into institutional policy and practice, alongside initiatives that foster peer connection and community, can help strengthen student wellbeing (Advance HE, 2024).

“ Student mental health is not solely a health issue; it is also an equity and policy issue. If the higher education sector is committed to supporting student success, then addressing the social conditions that shape mental health must be a central priority. ”

Fourth, academic systems must be considered. Workload expectations, curriculum design, inflexible assessment structures, and limited recognition of students' external responsibilities can exacerbate stress, particularly for those balancing study with work or caring roles (Orygen, 2017). Embedding flexible and inclusive teaching practices within academic policy is an important component of a whole-of-university approach (Advance HE, 2024; Filippou et al., 2025).

Finally, there is a need for more integrated data and research to inform policy. Understanding how multiple social determinants interact to influence mental health will enable more targeted and effective interventions, particularly for students experiencing cumulative disadvantage.

Student mental health is not solely a health issue; it is also an equity and policy issue. If the higher education sector is committed to supporting student success, then addressing the social conditions that shape mental health must be a central priority. By moving beyond individual-level responses and embedding a social determinants approach within policy and practice, universities can better support students during this critical period of transition and create environments in which all students can thrive.

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The distance tax: Geography, opportunity, and the role of regional universities



Professor Tyrone Carlin
Southern Cross University

One of the very positive aspects of Australia's regional universities is the strength of connections and networks between colleagues that are so deeply woven through these institutions. This sustains a real sense of shared purpose and affords rich insights into the common opportunities and challenges that our regionally-based universities face.

Across these institutions, and through sustained engagement with policymakers, community leaders, employers, and advocates with a deep interest in regional Australia, a picture builds—not from any single vantage point, but from the accumulated weight of many. What is striking is not the diversity of that picture, but its consistency. Wherever those conversations lead, the same concerns surface: access, equity, and the aspiration that a student's postcode should not determine the ceiling of their educational and professional life. That consistency of concern is a signal worth attending to.

The starting point for any honest conversation about equity and regional higher education has to be this: for a significant proportion of students in regional and remote Australia, the question is not which university to attend—it is whether university is possible at all. Proximity to a regional campus is often the threshold between participation and exclusion.

This is a key reason why regional universities work so hard to maintain as comprehensive a suite of programs as possible across discipline areas. They often do this across multiple campus locations spread across the country. This is an institutional commitment that carries real operational and financial consequence, but it is not incidental—it is the point.

Geography, however, does not dissolve as a factor once enrolment is secured. Distance and time

exert a persistent pressure on students throughout their studies, and that pressure compounds in ways that are easy to underestimate from the outside. Travel to campus can involve hours in each direction, and for students already managing work, family, and caring responsibilities, every trip is a negotiation between competing demands. The financial cost of distance—fuel, accommodation for placements, lost working hours—adds up in ways that are invisible in aggregate data but acutely felt in individual lives.

The evidence on why students leave before completing their studies is instructive here. Surveys of students who withdraw without completing consistently identify three dominant drivers: financial hardship, family and caring responsibilities, and health-related causes. These are not academic failures. They are life pressures that intersect with study, and in regional contexts they are routinely intensified by the friction of distance. A student managing a sick child, an escalating fuel bill, and a clinical placement two hours from home is not dealing with one problem—they are managing a compounding system of stress where each element makes the others harder to absorb.

None of this makes failure inevitable. What it does require, though, is a more deliberate and refined institutional response than may be required in denser urban settings with functional public transport and a richer ecosystem of available support services. The good news is that much of what helps is neither mysterious nor impossibly expensive—it is a matter of focus and follow-through.

Timetable design, for instance, is a practical lever that is underused. Concentrating contact time so students travel to campus on fewer days, while still accessing rich face-to-face learning and the peer

These are not academic failures. They are life pressures that intersect with study, and in regional contexts they are routinely intensified by the friction of distance.

connection that sustains motivation, reduces the cumulative cost of attendance over a semester. Greater flexibility in how content is delivered can also make an enormous difference. Text-based materials are of little use to students on long driving commutes, but an audio version of the same content can turn travel time into study time.

For students undertaking placements, which are common in health, education, and social work programs and often located considerable distances from home, earlier notice and proactive support with accommodation planning can mean the difference between being appropriately prepared for and completing a placement and abandoning it.

None of these represent grand systemic reform. But they are examples that reflect something more fundamental: whether an institution has genuinely reckoned with the geography its students inhabit, and designed accordingly.

The question of mode of attendance also matters more in regional settings than is sometimes acknowledged. The pandemic accelerated online capability across the sector, and regional universities have rightly invested in ensuring that distributed study offers genuine engagement rather than mere content delivery.

Sustaining peer connection and a sense of belonging at a distance doesn't emerge by default—it requires deliberate design. Getting this right has become one of the defining pedagogical challenges of contemporary regional higher education. Financial support, including Commonwealth Prac Payments, cost-of-living bursaries, and emergency assistance schemes, provide essential cushioning at moments of acute pressure. For some students, these are not supplementary—they are the margin between persisting and withdrawing.

The funding architecture for Australian higher education is shifting, and reforms under the Australian Tertiary Education Commission will create meaningful opportunities to address some of the structural disadvantages regional students carry, particularly by strengthening the financial underpinnings that make access sustainable across a full degree.

What regional universities bring to that conversation, from long practice, is a clear-eyed understanding of what is actually at stake. Place matters. The distance between where students live and where educational opportunity is concentrated

What regional universities bring to that conversation, from long practice, is a clear-eyed understanding of what is actually at stake. Place matters.

is not an immutable feature of the landscape—it is a policy condition, shaped by deliberate choices, and therefore open to deliberate remedy.

The work of closing that gap, institution by institution and student by student, has tentatively begun, but the road ahead is long and strewn with a multitude of potholes, corrugations, and washaways. It is vital that the present enthusiasm for creating a better balance of opportunity between metropolitan centres and our regions is prioritised and maintained on a sustained basis. The rewards of this investment can be profound—not just for our regions, but for the state of our nation as a whole.

Professor Tyrone Carlin served as Chair of the Regional Universities Network for 2024 and 2025.





Author biographies



Sarah Bendall
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Sarah Bendall joined the Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman as First Assistant Ombudsman, National Student Ombudsman (NSO) in September 2024, and leads the NSO function. A qualified lawyer, Sarah has worked in and around external oversight agencies for more than 25 years and is passionate about supporting individuals to resolve disputes and organisations to continually improve their systems and services. Prior to joining the NSO, Sarah was Victoria's Chief Dispute Resolution Officer, a statutory position responsible for leading statewide dispute resolution services for domestic building and consumer and community disputes. Sarah's other roles have included General Counsel at Victoria Legal Aid and Head of Legal and Dispute Resolution at the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission.



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Dr Matt Brett is Director of Academic Governance and Standards at Deakin University. He is also an Adjunct Professor with the Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success (ACSES) at Curtin University and Project Director for the ACSES Disability Support Program Capacity Building Fund Project. Dr Brett is a CODA (Child of Deaf Adults), and his lifelong experience of disability has informed a longstanding commitment to student equity spanning roles in research, policy, and practice. He is also a non-executive director of Expression Australia.



Dr Patrick Broman
Manager, National Student Equity Evaluation, *Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success*

Dr Patrick Broman has most recently been HEPPP Evaluation Manager at Swinburne University of Technology and was previously Lead Adviser, Network at the New Zealand Ministry of Education. He holds continuing appointments as Research Fellow at the Centre for Health and Social Practice, Waikato Institute of Technology (Hamilton, New Zealand) and the Centre for Just Places, Jesuit Social Services (Melbourne).

He is a demographer by training and applies strong quantitative and statistical modelling skills to his research and evaluation practice, much of which has involved regional disparities, especially in education; innovations in tertiary education and training; and the classification and counting of ethnic groups.



Professor Jonathan Bullen
Deputy Vice-Chancellor
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Professor Jonathan Bullen is Curtin University's inaugural Deputy Vice-Chancellor Indigenous. A Wardandi Noongar and Yamatji man from Western Australia's south-west, he leads the university's Indigenous strategic portfolio, providing institution-wide leadership to advance Indigenous participation, success, knowledge, and impact. He holds a PhD in Psychology and has attracted more than \$55 million in research funding focused on the wellbeing of Indigenous Australians.

Previously Deputy Vice-Chancellor Indigenous at Griffith University, Professor Bullen has also held senior leadership roles at Curtin University across Indigenous advancement, health research, and medical education. He is a member of the Australian Research Council Forum, advising the Australian Research Council Board on matters of equity, governance, and accountability across the higher education system.



Professor Tyrone Carlin
Vice-Chancellor and
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Professor Tyrone Carlin has served as Vice-Chancellor and President of Southern Cross University since September 2020, following two years as Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic). He previously held senior leadership roles at the University of Sydney, including Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Registrar), Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education Operations), and Co-Dean of the Business School, as well as roles at Macquarie University, including Dean of Law. Professor Carlin holds degrees in commerce and law, including honours qualifications, and a PhD from Macquarie Graduate School of Management. His academic interests include contract and commercial law, financial reporting, and public financial management. He is a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Law and a recipient of the University of Sydney's Law Graduates Association Medal.



Professor Carolyn Evans
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Chair, Universities Australia

Professor Carolyn Evans is Vice-Chancellor and President of Griffith University, a position she has held since 2019, and will become Vice-Chancellor of the University of Melbourne in late 2026. A University of Melbourne Arts and Law graduate, she earned her doctorate at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar and has taught law at both institutions.

Before joining Griffith, Professor Evans was Dean of Law, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Graduate and International), and Professor of Law at the University of Melbourne. A Fulbright Senior Scholar and Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, she is Chair of Universities Australia and serves on the Australian-American Fulbright Commission board.



Claire Field
Principal, *Claire Field and Associates*

Claire Field is the Principal of Claire Field and Associates, an independent tertiary education consulting practice. She is also a co-founder of EvaluAlte—a new AI assurance agency for the tertiary education sector.

She has recently completed work for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations on business engagement models for upskilling and reskilling the workforce, and is undertaking a PhD at Torrens University Australia writing the history of the university's first decade of operations. In 2023 Claire was awarded the International Education Association of Australia's Excellence in Professional Commentary Award.

Claire has previously held senior positions in education agencies in the New South Wales and Australian governments, as well as in public, private, and non-profit tertiary education institutions.



Bree Glasbergen
Casual Academic, *University of the Sunshine Coast*

Bree Glasbergen is a Casual Academic at the University of the Sunshine Coast (UniSC) and Australian Catholic University, and the outgoing (two-term) unpaid president of the UniSC Student Guild. She started her undergrad in 2021 with a five-month-old baby, and graduated from UniSC with a BA, an Academic Medal of Excellence, a Student Leadership Award, and the coveted Chancellor's Medal. The "why" underpinning her student volunteerism was a sense of duty to pass along the sense of student-led belonging she was gifted during her first year at university. Bree held multiple volunteer positions, including on the UniSC Student Services and Amenities Fee Advisory Committee and the Gender-Based Violence Prevention Taskforce. Her recently published Master of Creative Arts thesis explores creative practice-led ways to capture and nurture women's voices through performance and playwriting. Her other research passions are student leadership and success, immersive theatre, and equitable access to tertiary education for studying parents.



Professor Barney Glover AO
Chief Commissioner,
Australian Tertiary Education Commission

Professor Barney Glover AO is the Chief Commissioner of the Australian Tertiary Education Commission, commencing in July 2026. A distinguished academic leader, mathematician, and educator, he previously served as Commissioner of Jobs and Skills Australia and was Vice-Chancellor and President of Western Sydney University from 2014 to 2024. He was appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia in 2019 for distinguished service to tertiary education and has held leadership and governance roles across the education, research, and community sectors.



Paul Harris
Chief Executive Officer,
2050 Alliance

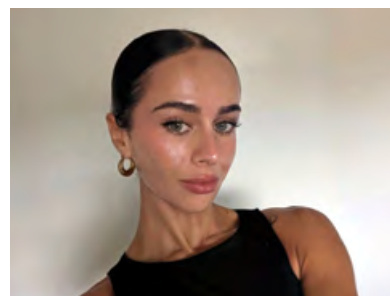
Paul Harris is Chief Executive Officer of the 2050 Alliance—a group of universities focused on students, communities, and the future. From 2021 to 2026, Paul was Executive Director of the Innovative Research Universities, the predecessor group to the Alliance, and served on the Ministerial Reference Group for the Australian Universities Accord. Previously, Paul worked in diplomatic positions in Australia's Embassies in Japan and the United States, focusing on education and research cooperation. Paul has also worked as Deputy Director of the Australian National Institute for Public Policy at the Australian National University; as Acting General Manager, Science Policy in the Australian Government; and as General Manager of Government and International Relations at the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation. He has a Master's degree in International Relations.



Professor Braden Hill
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Professor Braden Hill (he/him) is a Noongar (Wardandi) man from the south-west of Western Australia and Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Students and Education) at Edith Cowan University (ECU), where he leads a portfolio spanning teaching and learning, student experience, access and equity, student success, and graduate outcomes. A trained secondary teacher who entered university through a non-ATAR pathway, he advocates for broadening participation and diverse entry pathways into higher education.

Professor Hill has previously held several senior leadership roles at ECU, has led ECU's Kurongkurl Katitjin, and was Director of Aboriginal Education, Equity and Inclusion at Murdoch University. He is nationally recognised for leadership in Indigenous and LGBTQIA+ research, and reaches a wide public audience through social media, translating education, equity, and policy issues for broader community impact.



Jacinta King
Student, *Griffith University*

Jacinta King is a First Nations student from the mob Punthamara, currently studying a Bachelor of Psychological Science and Bachelor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Griffith University. Passionate about wellbeing, belonging, and social justice, Jacinta is interested in creating culturally safe and inclusive spaces for young people and university students. Her work often explores the experiences of diverse students, with a focus on identity, resilience, and community connection. Through her studies and creative projects, she aims to advocate for stronger support systems and greater representation of First Nations voices within education and wider society.



Alison Knapp
PhD student,
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Alison Knapp is a PhD student from the University of Newcastle and a member of the Hunter Medical Research Institute's Nutrition and Metabolic Health Research Program. Her doctoral research focuses on exploring social determinants of health behaviours including diet, physical activity, sedentary behaviour, sleep, smoking, alcohol and drug use, and mental health among university students. Under the supervision of Associate Professor Melinda Hutchesson, Professor Tracy Burrows (The University of Newcastle), and Dr Sjaan Gomersall (The University of Queensland), Alison's research aims to better understand how social and environmental factors influence wellbeing during the transition to adulthood. With a background in clinical and public health nutrition, her work contributes to identifying at-risk student population groups and informing evidence-based interventions to promote both physical and mental health in tertiary education settings.



Professor Kerri-Lee Krause
Chief Commissioner,
*Tertiary Education Quality
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Professor Kerri-Lee Krause (PhD, GAICD, PFHEA) is Chief Commissioner of Australia's Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency. She previously served as Chair of the Higher Education Standards Panel, advising respective Education Ministers on quality and standards for almost a decade. Professor Krause has held senior executive roles across several Australian universities, including Western Sydney University, Victoria University, La Trobe University, The University of Melbourne, and Avondale University. Combining regulatory and governance expertise with strategic executive leadership, Professor Krause is an experienced Board Chair and Director, committed to governance quality and transparency. Author of *Learner-centred leadership in higher education: A practical guide*, she is internationally recognised for her higher education policy research, bringing a practical lens to contemporary governance, leadership, and curriculum challenges.



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Professor Ian Li is an applied economist with expertise in labour and health economics. He has an accomplished track record of research funding from nationally competitive schemes and has published his research in *Social Science & Medicine*, *Higher Education*, and the *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*. His excellence in teaching is recognised by awards and citations at the institutional and international levels. Ian is Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and IZA Research Fellow at the Luxembourg Institute of Socio-Economic Research. He is co-editor of the *Australian Journal of Labour Economics*, and is on the editorial boards of the *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* and the *Journal of Education and Work*.



Josh Mason
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Josh Mason is the Director of the Badanami Centre for Indigenous Education within the Division of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Indigenous Leadership at Western Sydney University. A proud Wiradjuri man living on Darug Country, Josh has more than two decades of experience across the Indigenous education sector, spanning community organisations, not-for-profit services, peak advisory bodies, and higher education. He is passionate about empowering Indigenous students to thrive in higher education and leads initiatives and partnerships that strengthen access, participation, retention, and success, while fostering culturally safe, supportive, and community-connected learning environments.



Natalie Nelmes
Director, *Geraldton Universities Centre*

Natalie Nelmes is the Director of Geraldton Universities Centre in Western Australia, the first not-for-profit regional university centre in Australia. Having worked at the coalface of creating this innovative model for supported university education in the regions since 2009, Natalie has gone on to extend assistance to many communities creating their own centres under the Commonwealth's Regional Universities Study Hub (RUSH) program. She was the inaugural Chair of the RUSH Network Advisory Committee and remains a Network Lead. Natalie is the current Secretary of the Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia and serves on the Board of a local Geraldton secondary school. With a Master in Management, Arts degree, and a marketing and public relations background, Natalie works with the firm belief that communication and collaboration opens doors to new solutions for tackling community issues.



Professor Karen Nelson
Interim Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Education and Students, *Western Sydney University*

Professor Karen Nelson is an internationally recognised higher education leader, researcher, and strategist with more than two decades of distinguished service to the Australian university sector. A highly respected senior executive, scholar, and change agent, she has consistently advanced evidence-based reform. Her leadership is marked by major institutional achievements, including serving as Deputy Vice-Chancellor Academic, Provost, and Vice-Chancellor at the University of Southern Queensland, where most recently she led a comprehensive program of transformation focused on culture change, financial sustainability, and strategic realignment.



Professor Susan Page
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Professor Susan Page is an Aboriginal Australian educator and leader whose research focuses on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' experience of learning, academic work, and leadership in higher education and student learning in Indigenous Studies. She is currently Pro Vice-Chancellor Indigenous Education at Western Sydney University. Susan is a Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. She has collaborated on multiple competitive research grants, and has received a national award for Excellence in Teaching (the Neville Bonner Award for Teaching Excellence).



Jesse Parmar
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Jesse Parmar is an accomplished researcher and policy analyst with a passion for evidence-based practices and social mobility. He graduated with Honours in Economics and is currently pursuing a Master's degree, focusing on evaluating the effectiveness of contemporary Australian programs aimed at combating human trafficking.

With extensive experience in public policy analysis, Jesse has conducted numerous randomised control trials to enhance community safety. He has worked with the Western Australia Police Force, the Department of Justice, and the Premier's Priorities Unit, where he contributed to initiatives improving the State's educational outcomes. Jesse has also presented at a number of criminology conferences and chaired sessions on crime prevention.

His work continues to focus on leveraging research to drive meaningful change, aiming to promote social mobility for vulnerable groups.



Professor Shamit Saggar
CBE FAcSS
Executive Director,
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In addition to being ACSES's Executive Director, Professor Shamit Saggar is a Visiting Professor at King's College, London, and an Emeritus Professor at the University of Essex. He has 37 years of experience in international academia, government, business, regulation, and philanthropy, is a former Senior Advisor to UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, and a Knowledge Exchange Fellow in the David Cameron administration. Professor Saggar was previously Director of the UWA Public Policy Institute. He has held personal chairs, visiting professorships, and senior management roles at Essex, Sussex, Liverpool, and Queen Mary in the UK, and at UCLA, Yale, and Toronto in North America. He has published six books, 70+ journal papers and book chapters, and 20+ policy reports. His research grant capture exceeds \$70m.



Luke Sheehy
Chief Executive Officer,
Universities Australia

Mr Luke Sheehy commenced as the CEO of Universities Australia in February 2024. He is a highly skilled leader with more than 20 years' experience shaping the agenda of higher education.

Prior to Universities Australia, Mr Sheehy led the Australian Technology Network of Universities for almost five years. He has also held key education roles in government, worked as an education and strategy consultant for the Asian Development Bank, and held senior management roles at Swinburne University.

As the first member of his family to graduate from university, Mr Sheehy knows first hand the power of education to transform lives and is driven to ensure that opportunity is provided to as many people as possible.



Giridharan Sivaraman
Race Discrimination
Commissioner, *Australian
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Giridharan Sivaraman commenced as Australia's Race Discrimination Commissioner in March 2024. Previously, he was Principal Lawyer with Maurice Blackburn where he led the firm's Queensland Employment Law department. He also held the position of Chair of Multicultural Australia from 2021 to 2024 and served on the Queensland Multicultural Advisory Council from 2019 to 2024, where he was an advocate for the rights of victims of racial vilification.

Born in India, Commissioner Sivaraman migrated to Australia as a child. His legal and advocacy work reflects a longstanding commitment to human rights and challenging discrimination. As Race Discrimination Commissioner he promotes equality, undertakes research and education to combat racial discrimination, and helps protect people from unfair treatment or vilification based on race, colour, descent, visa status, or national or ethnic origin.



Brooke Szucs
PhD student, *The University
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Brooke Szucs (she/her) is a PhD student at The University of Queensland (UQ) and an inclusion advocate working towards a more inclusive Australia, where everyone has the opportunity to achieve their educational aspirations and access meaningful employment. She runs the UQ Disability Inclusion Advocacy Network and is an Australian Human Rights Commission IncludeAbility Ambassador. Her research focuses on how universities can better support students with disabilities to access global learning opportunities that enrich personal and professional development, alongside broader issues relating to equity, diversity and inclusion in higher education and workplaces, governance, and intersectional experiences. Brooke is passionate about translating lived experience and research into practical institutional change that improves inclusion and belonging for diverse communities.



Professor Michelle Trudgett
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Professor Michelle Trudgett is an Indigenous scholar and executive leader from the Wiradjuri Nation in New South Wales. She currently serves as the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Indigenous Leadership at Western Sydney University. Additionally, she is a Board Member of the GO Foundation. Professor Trudgett is one of Australia's foremost researchers in Indigenous Education and leadership. Her significant contributions to the sector have been recognised through several prestigious awards, including the National NAIDOC Scholar of the Year Award, the Neville Bonner Award for Teaching Excellence, and the University of New England Distinguished Alumni Award.



Lauren Tynan
Scientia Research Fellow,
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Lauren Tynan is a Pairrebenne Trawlwoolway woman from Tebrakunna Country in northeast Trouwerner (Tasmania), Australia. She is a Scientia Research Fellow and Senior Lecturer in the UNSW School of Built Environment. Lauren's research areas encompass cultural land management, Indigenous research methodologies, and Indigenous pedagogies. She was a 2025 ACSES First Nations Fellow based at Macquarie University, completing a study entitled "Kin and Country learning: Developing Indigenous pedagogies for Australian higher education".

About ACSES

The Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success (ACSES) is a national research and policy centre funded by the Australian Government Department of Education and based at Curtin University.

Leading a new era for student equity in Australia, ACSES partners with universities to close equity gaps in higher education by identifying and promoting evidence-based policies, practices, and programs that improve student success.

As a What Works Centre, ACSES provides tangible, research-backed guidance on what works to support equity students—particularly First Nations Australians, students with disability, those from low socio-economic backgrounds, and students in regional and remote areas.

Through collaboration, innovation, and a focus on real-world outcomes, ACSES is shaping a fairer higher education system.

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