

THE AUSTRALIAN STUDENT EQUITY PROGRAM AND INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

Paradigm Shift or Business as Usual?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS



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Executive Summary

Background

The vision of an Australian higher education system that actively widened participation and whose graduates reflected more closely the diversity of the Australian population was articulated in the Bradley Review of Higher Education and adopted as a fundamental aspiration of significant higher education reform implemented from 2010. The Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) was designed to encourage the sector to support the Government's aspiration, and has provided significant funding to 37 public universities to implement equity strategies and programs that enable people from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds to access and succeed in higher education.

The Fellowship sought to understand how HEPPP had been implemented by universities and whether the sector had acted on the government's aspiration to transform access and radically improve participation for students from low SES backgrounds in higher education. To date, there has been no national investigation of the design and implementation of institutional HEPPP programs in different universities and how these meso-structures contributed to student outcomes at institutional and sector levels.

Fellowship Methodology

The approach to the Fellowship research program has been collaborative. The questions developed in consultation with the advisory group were deliberately broad, did not aim to prove causality or impact and ventured into territory that had not been systematically explored in Australia or overseas. The study used a qualitative methodology which included five interrelated pieces of work, including the analysis of HEPPP annual progress reports (2010-2015) to produce a typology of institutional approaches to HEPPP implementation using the analytical tools developed for the Fellowship and three institutional case studies to illustrate the diversity of institutional approaches to HEPPP. This was complemented by an engagement strategy with key stakeholders, including the Department of Education and Training.

Key Findings and Outputs

This Fellowship was the first national study analysing how different Australian universities designed and implemented institutional HEPPP programs since 2010, and how these meso-structures had contributed to student outcomes and organisational change. The study found that HEPPP has provided an opportunity for universities to develop bespoke equity programs which respond to their institutional profile and strategic priorities. At sector level, the trend of stagnant participation by students from low SES backgrounds has been broken, but outcomes at the institutional level were highly variable. While the impact of institutional HEPPP programs on student outcomes is difficult to establish empirically, strategic intent emerged as an important variable. The volume of HEPPP funding had substantial influence on equity strategy and practice and, in one of the case study universities, was leveraged for transformational organisation change.

The Fellowship has produced a set of diagnostic tools, an interpretive model (Tables 1, 4, 5 and 6) building on Burke (2012), and an *Equity Initiatives Map* (Table 3) extending the *Equity Initiatives Framework* developed by Bennett et al. (2015), to enable analyses of HEPPP program design and implementation in the context of institutional equity strategy and performance. The three case studies demonstrated the application of the tools to identify universities' strategic approaches to HEPPP implementation and the success factors, outcomes and challenges associated with these.

Context Matters in HEPPP Implementation

The case studies illustrated the diversity of HEPPP implementation, which mirrors the (pre-)existing institutional differences in a stratified higher education sector (James et al., 2008) and the importance of institutional context in designing and analysing HEPPP programs:

- Wider organisational values, norms, beliefs and ways of operating shape both the approach taken to HEPPP implementation and the assessment of its success.
- It is impossible to aim for a one-size-fits-all blueprint of 'best practice' or 'what works' in HEPPP implementation across the sector.
- This diversity calls for evaluation approaches which are context-specific and can assess what kind of institutional program works best for a specific university.

The Appropriation of National Policy to Institutional Context

This study found that universities needed to actively translate the policy focus on people from low SES backgrounds into their context which resulted in different approaches to what constitutes 'low SES':

- In practice, 'students from low SES backgrounds' often became the shorthand way for addressing educational disadvantage experienced by all three groups identified in the Bradley Review: students from regional¹ and remote backgrounds, Indigenous students and low SES students, although the cohort could also include additional equity groups.
- A narrow focus on low SES as SA1 misses the broader point that HEPPP funded curriculum and student support initiatives in particular have enabled the retention and success of a much greater share of the increasingly diverse undergraduate cohort in Australian universities.
- Equity practitioners are able to deal with the complexity in their target communities and have developed interventions which address, and often overcome, the structural barriers to accessing and succeeding in higher education.

The focus on students from low SES backgrounds as the main target group for the national equity program was universally confirmed by interviewees. The consensus among stakeholders was that people with money have a lot more choices than those without even if they belong to another equity group.

Program Design: HEPPP Expenditure and Effort Across the Student Lifecycle

The sector's response to HEPPP in most cases built on equity strategies and infrastructure which pre-dated HEPPP as well as existing equity programs which were reworked, scaled up and/or significantly expanded by HEPPP funding. The analysis showed that there were consistent trends as well as significant changes in HEPPP implementation between 2011 (Naylor, Biak & James, 2013) and 2015:

- In 2011 and 2015, most HEPPP funding was spent on initiatives in the participation and pre-access phases.
- There has been a significant shift of resources and attention into the attainment and transition out phase between 2011 and 2015, especially for careers and employment support.
- Universities seem to be under-investing in the access phase, especially in light of the excellent results achieved by the case study university in this research which allocated significant expenditure and effort to tailored access initiatives.

The *Equity Initiatives Map* can be used as a diagnostic tool by universities to review their HEPPP programs and optimally align expenditure and effort with institutional priorities and needs.

Implementation: Attributes of Effective and Efficient HEPPP Programs

Universities had very different operational arrangements for central administrative structures to support HEPPP implementation as well as the responsibility for institutional acquittal and reporting on HEPPP funding. The case study analyses found that good management practice and organisational approaches

¹ Note that Bradley et al. (2008) use the terms 'rural' and 'regional' interchangeably, however the official term is 'regional and remote' which has been used consistently throughout this report.

adopted by universities mattered in the implementation of institutional HEPPP programs. It identified attributes that can be regarded as positively contributing to the effectiveness and/or efficiency of institutional HEPPP programs. The interpretive model developed for the Fellowship can be used by universities to analyse their organisational and management approaches to HEPPP implementation and serve as a framework for identifying factors which may further improve program effectiveness and efficiency.

A More Equitable Higher Education Sector

The reform agenda to widen participation in Australian higher education over the past seven years, that is, the introduction of HEPPP and demand-driven funding, has been a demonstrable success and has broken the trend of stagnant participation of people from low SES backgrounds in higher education:

- The sector has achieved the targets identified in the budget papers for 2015-16 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016, pp.54-56).
- In the lead-up to the 2017 academic year, the number of offers to students from low SES backgrounds continued to increase while offers overall stagnated. Increases in participation rates by the target group were recorded at the same time as inequality in wealth distribution in Australia was on the rise, suggesting that the aspiration of the reform agenda for a more equitable higher education sector is being realised.

However, at the institutional level, outcomes for students from low SES backgrounds were highly variable and it is difficult to establish any influence of HEPPP funded work on those outcomes at the program level.

Unpacking the Complex Relationships between Institutional HEPPP Programs and Student Outcomes

The relationships between institutional HEPPP programs and institutional equity performance as defined by the *Martin indicators* are complex and cannot be fully explained with the methods chosen for the Fellowship study. However, the following can be observed:

- The increase recorded at sector level was not at all evenly distributed across the 37 public universities which received HEPPP funding in 2015: some universities contributed disproportionately to the national increase in low SES participation rates.
- The growth and diversification enabled by demand-driven funding have not always gone hand-in-hand with increases in the low SES participation rate: there were no clear correlations between the changes in low SES participation rates over the period 2011-2015, institutional growth, the amount of HEPPP funding received, and the size and diversity of the undergraduate student cohort.
- Put differently, more HEPPP funding did not necessarily result in larger increases of low SES participation rates. In addition, there was no empirical evidence that large increases in participation rates were mainly achieved by strong growth in the total cohort.

This study confirmed the complex relationships between demand-driven funding and HEPPP and it is difficult to untangle the relative impact of each policy empirically. However, their different contributions can be clearly delineated conceptually:

- Demand-driven funding solves access issues at sector level but not necessarily at the institutional level as some institutions and courses remain highly selective.
- Demand-driven funding does not overcome the barriers to access associated with awareness, aspirations, attainment and affordability. These dimensions are addressed by HEPPP funded work.
- Neither policy is able to address the most important barrier to access comprehensively: attainment at school level. This was a particular challenge for the selective universities in this study.

The Fellowship adds to the evidence that, as a policy package, HEPPP and demand-driven funding have achieved demonstrable success in widening participation to higher education.

Strategic Intent as a Variable to Explain Uneven Outcomes

This study suggests that one missing analytical ingredient to explain some of the variation in outcomes is strategic intent. It confirms and simultaneously extends existing findings (Peacock, Sellar & Lingard, 2014) that individual universities sought to attract more students from low SES backgrounds to either grow or diversify their undergraduate student cohort. The three case study universities pursued distinctly different growth strategies under the demand-driven funding system, had different approaches to HEPPP program design and achieved very different outcomes in terms of access and participation rates.

In one case study, the low SES cohort was crucial for achieving the university's ambitious growth targets and it recorded a strong increase in both numbers and participation rates of students from low SES backgrounds. The other two universities aimed for diversification of their undergraduate cohort rather than growth albeit with quite different enthusiasm. One of those achieved some diversification mainly through targeted and attainment-oriented access programs which effectively charted clear and accessible pathways into a selective institution. The third university had developed a collective target to increase applications to higher education providers across the state and the success of its widening participation program was only loosely coupled to institutional equity performance. Thus, it circumvented the instrumental, binary logic proposed by Peacock et al. (2014) and pursued social justice rather than institutional benefits.

Towards a Broader Notion of Success and a National Framework to Measure Progress

The Fellowship enabled conversations about the outcomes and successes of institutional HEPPP programs which collectively challenge policy makers, university leaders and practitioners to conceive of success measures in much broader ways than low SES participation rate. There are a number of important outcomes of HEPPP funded work which are currently invisible to decision makers in universities and government departments, especially those associated with successful school-university partnerships. These outcomes are, however, coherently articulated as the 'Major Aims' in the *Equity Initiatives Map*. The 'Major Aims' capture the known factors that present structural, cultural and financial barriers to access and successful completion of a higher education qualification to people from equity groups across the student lifecycle. They posit that institutional HEPPP programs should aim to:

- Increase awareness of higher education pathways, opportunities and associated careers by supporting, developing and/or maintaining aspirations, expectations and attainment.
- Provide opportunities for people to access and achieve at university, taking into account the degree of selectivity and distance to target communities.
- Address issues of affordability of higher education study: provide information, strategies and financial support to fund student life.
- Enable successful transition, engagement and progression by strengthening engagement and belonging, academic literacies and competencies in discipline area/relevant knowledges developed through inclusive pedagogies.
- Enhance the employability of graduates and facilitate their transition to postgraduate study.

The 'Major Aims' could be used as the starting point for defining more comprehensive measures of success and form the basis for developing a comprehensive suite of evaluation tools in the context of a national HEPPP evaluation framework.

From Initiative-Level to Program-Level Analysis

The *Equity Initiatives Map* is a powerful tool to produce a national picture of HEPPP expenditure and effort, as it enables a lifecycle analysis and consistent terminology across very diverse institutions and HEPPP programs. Investigations at the initiative level on the basis of HEPPP annual progress reports generate useful insights into the design and implementation of HEPPP programs. However, this approach has an

important limitation: the focus is placed on the smallest unit of analysis, often artificially separating components of larger projects, which creates an impression of a collection of many small and unrelated activities. Understanding the internal workings and how institutional HEPPP programs 'hang together' and make sense in the wider institutional context are limited by this itemised approach to progress reporting.

The case study approach adopted for this research shifted the analysis from the initiative to the program level and provided a more comprehensive understanding of the greater whole rather than its component parts. With this approach, the structural analysis enabled by the *Equity Initiatives Map* and the equity performance data produced by the Department are contextualised, and the full range of outcomes produced by HEPPP funding becomes visible. Program-level assessments also enable analyses which track progress over time.

HEPPP as a Catalyst of Organisational Change

The Fellowship explored to what extent HEPPP had acted as a catalyst for organisational change in equity strategy and practice between 2010 and 2016. The case studies and equity workshops suggest that HEPPP has fundamentally changed the scale and scope of student equity practice in universities and the power and influence of widening participation practitioners as institutional change agents:

- HEPPP increased the institutional focus on student equity, significantly lifted the level of understanding about the barriers to participation across institutions and created an expert workforce with specialist skills not previously found in universities.
- All of the case study universities pointed to processes of strategic integration of their widening participation initiatives but only one unequivocally called it a fundamental change in approach.
- In two universities, there was evidence of deep changes and processes of integration and innovation in pre-access work and student support. HEPPP funded work touched most areas of the universities while not necessarily altering them in fundamental ways.

Transformational Change

One of the case study universities realised transformational change as defined for the purposes of this study (Eckel & Kezar, 2003), that is, it achieved deep and pervasive alterations to the status quo. This change resulted in an equity strategy that became deeply embedded in the academic enterprise as well as the new strategic priorities, operational structures and institutional culture which emerged. Transformational change was enabled by a number of interrelated factors:

- Change was driven out of one organisational area by a well-connected group of senior change agents.
- These change agents leveraged the energy and opportunities created by the introduction of a new course model and centralised admissions processes to systematically advance a widening participation agenda.
- HEPPP funded initiatives repositioned the equity agenda within the university and turned it into a collective endeavour that senior managers, academics and practitioners could readily buy into.

While the commitment to equity work did not penetrate the entire organisation equally, every faculty was by default impacted and had to respond to the increasing diversity of the student cohort as part of normal business because the equity agenda had been embedded in changes to admissions and course systems.

Drivers of Change

It is possible to identify clear and consistent drivers of change in all case study institutions, although they played out with different emphases across the three universities:

- The volume of HEPPP funding mattered in all cases, including the availability of substantial amounts of competitive funding, which enabled a significant scaling up of equity initiatives and gave strategic importance and visibility to the institutional widening participation endeavour.

- A university's mission and values which positioned equity and merit, social justice and excellence, equity and partnership as dual goals and core commitments were seen as key drivers.
- Influential equity directors and/or senior champions who drove the widening participation agenda across the institution were critical, as were the skills of those individuals to either initiate institutional change and/or leverage the energy generated by changes elsewhere to further the equity agenda.

At the same time, the case study analyses suggested that the national participation target had only limited influence as a driver of change at the institutional level. From the sector's perspective, the key issue appeared to be that there were no perceived consequences of (not) meeting institutional targets.

The existence of a 'national equity target' was not considered as essential for progress into the future by any stakeholder group interviewed for the Fellowship project.

Barriers to Change

The key challenge associated with the design of HEPPP by equity directors and practitioners was that the program was trying to address a long-term challenge with short-term funding. Interviewees reported that the current funding arrangements created inefficiencies and unnecessary anxiety at the coal face which impeded program effectiveness:

- The worst outcome of annual funding allocations and late announcements of funding amounts was exemplified in perpetual staff turnover which resulted in inefficiencies and under-performance.
- At the same time, practitioners and equity directors shared a view that their university would not want to, and not be able to, walk away from core outreach and retention activities.
- A prevalent perception across the sector was that HEPPP funding was continually at risk.
- Current funding arrangements necessitate the continual monitoring and active management of HEPPP funds.

Interviewees in all case study universities commented that the allocation of three-yearly budgets would effectively address these issues. Moreover, the current formula does not account for a university's geographic location and the disproportionate cost involved with delivering outreach activities in large states.

The Importance of Cross-Institutional Partnerships

Widening participation to higher education is a systems issue. The nature and scale of the task require long-term funding and collaboration which should be enabled by Australia's national equity program:

- Universities have demonstrated their capability to work at the earlier stages of the education system to prevent or ameliorate educational disadvantage.
- The imperative for collaboration is increasing rather than reducing: there was evidence in the case studies of attempts to co-opt widening participation programs and practitioners for marketing purposes in the context of increasing inter-institutional competition.
- The HEPPP competitive partnership projects overcame, or at least undermined, the competitive urge and provided a process for constructively working through the intersection between marketing and widening participation activities. This was demonstrated by successful state-wide partnerships in Queensland and Victoria as well as the largest of all collaborative endeavours, *Bridges to Higher Education*, in the Sydney basin. None of these partnerships have stayed fully intact beyond their funding period, illustrating the value of competitive partnership funding that fosters cross-institutional collaboration.
- Providing all universities with HEPPP funding is crucial for preserving student choice and access to elite institutions and degrees for students from equity backgrounds.

This Fellowship has explicitly considered the diversity of the Australian higher education sector in analysing the successes brought about, and challenges associated with, HEPPP implementation. The universities selected had very different starting points on the road to improving low SES participation in terms of the diversity of their student cohort, their equity infrastructure and structural barriers impacting the accessibility of undergraduate courses, including geographic location, their level of selectivity and flexibility of delivery methods. The absence of transformational change does not constitute failure. Instead, this assessment of change can be seen as an indicator of the distance travelled since the launch of HEPPP.

Recommendations

A number of recommendations are made throughout this report and are grouped here by audience: recommendations for policy makers, recommendations for the sector, and recommendations for research.

Recommendations for Policy Makers

Recommendation 1: Completion and Publication of Institutional Equity Initiatives Maps

The Department should request universities to complete the *Equity Initiatives Map* based on their annual progress reports and publish them on the Department's website. This would provide regular updates on HEPPP implementation to the sector, increase accountability for HEPPP expenditure and effort and provide an efficient mechanism to share good practice and innovations across the sector.

Recommendation 2: Institutions to Provide Overarching HEPPP Narrative

The HEPPP reporting process should invite program-level analysis and reflections over time by asking universities to provide an overarching narrative of its program's intent, structure, achievements and challenges to more fully capture outcomes and persistent issues associated with HEPPP funded work.

Recommendation 6: Stability of Policy Settings

The government should maintain stable policy settings with regard to demand-driven funding and HEPPP to continue the unprecedented improvements in equity group participation.

Recommendation 7: Participation Target

There does not seem to be a strong argument for continuing with a participation target for students from low SES backgrounds. If such a strategy were to be pursued in the future, the mechanisms for meaningfully connecting a national target to institutional sub-targets and desired program outcomes would need to be carefully considered and consistently enforced.

Recommendation 8: Compound Disadvantage

The HEPPP Guidelines should legitimise other equity groups to address compound disadvantage while the focus remains on poverty and the socio-cultural disadvantage it creates. The definition of socioeconomic disadvantage should be extended to include the next quartile up (26-50 per cent of the population) which experiences similar disadvantage in terms of educational attainment and material wealth.

Recommendation 10: National HEPPP Evaluation Framework

The Department of Education and Training should develop an evaluation framework for HEPPP to enable the sector to systematically evaluate the influence of HEPPP funded initiatives on broadly defined student outcomes across the four main phases of the student life cycle. The framework should encourage evaluation approaches which are stakeholder centred, context specific and iterative and combine qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection. The 'Major Aims' articulated in the *Equity Initiatives Map* could form the basis for developing a comprehensive suite of evaluation tools.

Recommendation 11: Maintain Funding Levels

The government should continue HEPPP funding at current levels to ensure that the scale and reach of institutional programs are maintained. Funding should be allocated for three years to improve the efficiency of HEPPP implementation. HEPPP must remain as a national program, with dedicated equity funding to all Australian universities and an explicit incentive to engage in cross-institutional partnerships.

Recommendations for the Sector

Recommendation 3: Review and Reform Institutional HEPPP Programs

Universities should use the *Equity Initiatives Map* as a diagnostic tool to review their HEPPP programs and optimally align expenditure and effort with institutional priorities and needs.

Recommendation 4: Improvements to HEPPP Program Effectiveness and Efficiency

Universities should use the interpretive model to review their organisational and management approaches to HEPPP implementation and identify any factors which may further improve program effectiveness and efficiency.

Recommendation 12: Ongoing Employment of Core Staff

Staff delivering core outreach or retention activities should be paid out of university operating funds or at least be employed as ongoing staff.

Recommendations for Research

Recommendation 5: Analyse Individual Dimension of Program Success

Future research could include the analysis of the individual dimension, building on Burke's (2012) work, to more fully capture the relationships between individual equity practitioners, leaders or champions and institutional structures and discourses to assess how these relationships influence the success of institutional HEPPP or other equity programs.

Recommendation 9: Definition of the Target Group

The current review of the equity groups should develop a target group definition, or a blended model of group and individualised indicators, which is more accurate and user-friendly in targeting equity interventions at groups and individuals.