

# Structural inequality in higher education: Creating institutional cultures that enable all students

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# Executive Summary

In Australian higher education, there is—rightly—significant pressure on institutions to support and improve retention, success and completion rates for students without compromising the access and participation of students from equity group backgrounds, for whom these rates have previously been shown to be lower than for other students (Behrendt, Larkin, Griew, & Kelly, 2012; Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008; Harvey, Szalkowicz, & Luckman, 2017; Naylor, Baik, & James, 2013). With higher education funding through the Commonwealth Grants Scheme frozen in 2018 and 2019 to 2017 levels, and with the idea of performance funding floated from 2020 onwards (Birmingham, 2017a, 2017b), this pressure is only likely to increase in the future. Thus, ensuring positive outcomes for students, particularly those from equity backgrounds, is not only a matter of social justice for higher education providers to actively respond to — it is an increasing financial necessity.

The purpose of this project is to examine institutional culture in selected higher education institutions across the sector to identify best practice in modifying institutional structures to support and retain students. There is a focus on those from non-traditional backgrounds or members of formal equity categories, but minimising structural inequalities faced by these students benefits all students, and has the potential to benefit staff as well. The potential impact of this approach therefore extends beyond the student equity space. In this analysis, we have adopted *structural inequality* as our theoretical framework, placing the focus on institutions and what they do to block or facilitate a sense of belonging to, and ease of navigation within, the institution, rather than on the characteristics of students. The animating idea of this report is that barriers that arise from the organisational and cultural makeup of an institution are most amenable to change led from within the sector, and therein lies a valuable way forward.

Structural inequality is a framework examining conditions wherein groups of people experience unequal opportunities in terms of roles, rights, opportunities and decision making compared to others (Archer & Leathwood, 2003). Giddens (1984) defines structure as the rules and resources, often not consciously discussed but instantiated through actions and discourse, that actors draw on as they produce and reproduce social relations in their activities. It thus includes institutional and disciplinary cultures, as well as more formal organisational processes. Structures feed anticipations about what actors (in this case, students from equity backgrounds) want and can achieve in their relations. These interactions—the discourses in which actors engage—shape conceptions of power and institutional roles, which then affect the person's further positioning acts, discourses and practices, and thereby become self-reinforcing (Rorty, 1979).

Structural inequality asks us to consider the way that institutional staff, other students, and even family members and friends distant from the university, make explicit and implicit positioning acts that determine whether an equity student has access to the same opportunities and experiences as those from other backgrounds. Structural barriers may range from exclusionary discourse in the classroom, to inflexible enrolment and assessment policies, to privileging particular communication styles. Structural inequality is the converse of traditional deficit and 'cultural resources' models of student support: rather than asking how students can acquire missing skills needed to leverage success within an institution, it asks what institutions can do to make themselves more or less inclusive and navigable for all students (and even, staff and the wider community). The responsibility for change is therefore shifted from students, or from areas associated with outreach and academic literacy programs (Devlin & McKay, 2014), to all actors within the institution.

Although retention and attrition have long been a subject of academic inquiry, particularly in terms of sociodemographic characteristics of individual students (Naylor & James, 2015), recent work has revealed significant variation even between universities with similar student

cohorts, and demonstrated that focusing on institutional factors has far greater predictive power for attrition and retention than focusing on factors at the level of individual students (Higher Education Standards Panel, 2017; Institute for Social Science Research, 2017; K. J. Nelson et al., 2017; Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2017). These studies indicate a compelling, evidence-based rationale for focusing on *institutions*, rather than the background characteristics of students, to address student attrition and improve the student experience. To these findings, we add those reported as part of this project.

This project sought to examine the following research question:

- How can institutions address systemic barriers that may contribute to student attrition, particularly in students from equity backgrounds? That is, how can structural and cultural causes of attrition be reduced through institutional change?

To do this, the following sub-questions were investigated:

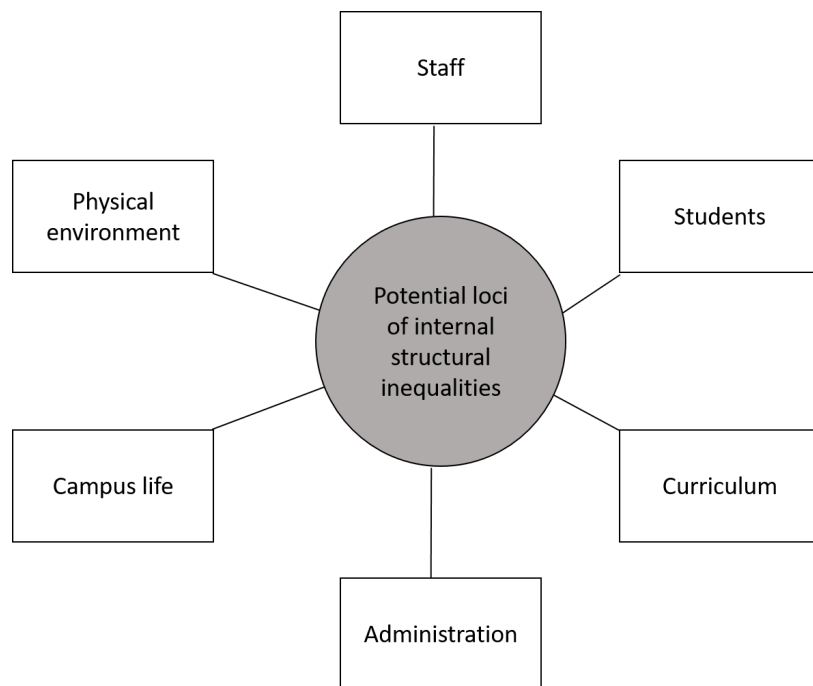
- What benefits might institutions achieve by using a structural inequality lens, in addition to the more common cultural capital lens?
- Using best practice case studies, what implications are there for formal and informal leaders within institutions to reduce structural inequalities?

This project adopted a multi-phase, qualitative methodology based on written and interview responses to develop case studies that articulate what higher education institutions are doing in the structural equality space and identify areas of good practice. Twelve universities and two non-university higher education providers (NUHEPs) agreed to participate in this study, providing a diverse and broadly representative sample of the Australian higher education sector. These case studies demonstrate that three main approaches have been adopted by the participating institutions.

- Modifying the institutional structures to minimise barriers and to ensure a wider range of people are able to more freely engage with their educations. We have termed these approaches *structurally enabling*.
- Providing services or supports that seek to build cultural resources and capacity in students to help them better navigate the existing structure or to better 'fit' the institution, which we have termed *capacity building approaches*.
- *Blended approaches*, which combine both structurally enabling and capacity building approaches.

We also identified six dimensions of university activity that may act as potential loci for internal structural inequalities: staff, students, curriculum, administration, campus life and the physical environment. An institution-level assessment of the overall approach was also included.





**Figure 1: Internal structural inequalities in higher education**

It is important to note that these areas may be ‘pressure points’ or areas where internal inequalities may arise or be reduced — they are not aspects of university activity that necessarily promote structural inequality, and institutions may productively focus on different areas as necessitated by their individual cultures or the requirements of their student cohort.

A wide range of responses from the participating institutions were received. While institutions appeared more likely to have adopted capacity building approaches in some areas (notably administration) than others, structurally enabling responses were found in each area, and academic leaders acknowledged that institutions needed to grapple with structural inequalities. Notable structurally enabling practices in each area of activity were also presented in more detailed case studies.

Importantly, this diversity in institutional responses suggests that the ‘problem’ of enacting structurally enabling change can be accomplished by continuous, modular transformation (that is, focusing on relatively small changes in specific areas at a time), rather than attempting sweeping organisational change.

We also seek to provide some guidance on the important question of how institutions that are seeking to move towards a structurally enabling model of practice might manage such a shift. A fundamental principle of this study is that student equity is ‘everyone’s business’ within an institution. Analysis of the case studies indicated that academic leaders expected a high likelihood of impact from reducing structural barriers, but that the effort required would be both substantial and enduring. We recommend that such a shift will be most effectively undertaken through distributed leadership, which holds that anyone may exert (or resist!) change within an institution (Jones, Lefoe, Harvey, & Ryland, 2012). The concept of distributed leadership used here includes all staff (those in both formal and informal leadership positions), as well as students. We propose that the concept of ‘students as partners’ could usefully be reframed as ‘students as distributed leaders.’

The research presented here indicates that removing or mitigating structural barriers appears likely to reap benefits in terms of retention, success and a positive student experience—particularly for students from equity backgrounds, but potentially for all

students. This work complements previous work by equity practitioners and institutions to develop the cultural resources of students, while shifting the focus from specific skill- or capacity-building programs to a broader understanding of ‘structurally enabling’ responses. We argue that structurally enabling approaches have been understudied relative to capacity building programs. A structurally enabling model also places the locus of responsibility on the institution and those within it, who are more effectively influenced by institutional policies and culture, rather than students. This shifts the onus from students, or from areas associated with outreach and academic literacy programs, to all those within the institution. These factors indicate that examining and responding to structural inequalities is therefore likely to be a productive area for research and practice, and that institutions must ask what they are doing to become inclusive of all students and staff.

**Table1: Examples of structurally enabling and capacity building approaches identified from the dataset**

Areas of university activity	Examples of structurally enabling approaches	Examples of capacity building approaches
Students	<p>Students are engaged as partners or co-creators throughout the institution, not just in the teaching space</p> <p>Students are included in discussions about exclusionary language in the classroom and the broader university as agents and actors</p> <p>Students are identified as being at risk of failing subjects or withdrawing from studies based on behavioural factors and supported proactively</p> <p><i>Case study pp. 36-37</i></p>	<p>A small number of students provide feedback on teaching through student representatives, but these opportunities are limited in scope and number</p> <p>Students are requested to behave professionally in the classroom</p> <p>Students are identified as being at risk of failing subjects or withdrawing studies based on sociodemographic factors and invited to attend capacity building programs</p>
Staff	<p>Staff undergo professional development to help them understand structural inequalities, and to reduce them in their interactions with students</p> <p>Professional development includes content to help support specific groups, such as Indigenous or international students</p> <p>Professional development in minimising structural inequalities is available to all staff.</p> <p><i>Case study pp 34-35</i></p>	<p>Staff undergo professional development, but “teaching with diversity” is absent or tokenistic, rather than embedded throughout the program</p> <p>Professional development builds capacity in supporting diversity as a general principle, without focus on reducing barriers specifically encountered by some student backgrounds</p> <p>Professional development in this area is available to academic staff, but unavailable to professional and administrative staff</p>
Curriculum	<p>Plain language is used for course materials (e.g. course descriptions/guides, learning outcomes statements, etc), which are provided in print and online</p> <p>Curriculum mapping supports part-time study or external demands on students’ time, including during placements</p> <p>Curriculum includes diverse practices, perspectives and content to suit a range of learning styles and acknowledge diversity in the field where appropriate</p> <p>Curriculum design considers assessment load as an entire semester</p> <p><i>Case study pp 37-38</i></p>	<p>University provides resources to assist students to understand the formal language of course guides or learning outcomes</p> <p>Curriculum mapping supports consistent skill development through the degree, but does not consider interrupted or part-time study</p> <p>Curriculum is supported by resources to help students master a particular, privileged learning style or perspective</p> <p>Curriculum design considers assessment load within the subject, but not interactions with assessment in other subjects</p>
Administration	<p>Administration systems and deadlines are responsive and flexible enough to accommodate students with family/work commitments or unexpected circumstances</p>	<p>Students may be provided support, but are otherwise expected to navigate inflexible administration systems and deadlines themselves.</p>

Areas of university activity	Examples of structurally enabling approaches	Examples of capacity building approaches
	<p>without stress or significant effort from staff or students  Staff proactively engage with students to ensure they are aware of administration requirements, without coming onto campus  Administration systems are easily navigable and use plain language rather than formal language or jargon</p> <p><i>Case study pp 38-39</i></p>	<p>“Administration HQs” are established to improve coordination between areas, but students must be proactive in engaging with these areas  Chatbots are developed to help students find administration information (provided they already know the correct search terms)</p>

# Recommendations

Based on the findings from this research it is recommended that:

- All institutional staff should continue to focus on improving retention, success and completion rates for all students enrolled in their institutions.
- All institutional staff should maintain particular focus on improving the experiences and outcomes of students from equity backgrounds. Equity is everyone's business.
- Institutional leaders should audit their institutions to identify where structural barriers exist, and evaluate ways to minimise their impact on students.
- Students should be involved in all discussions that seek to identify structural barriers and develop structurally enabling responses. Care should be taken to ensure that a diverse range of students are able to provide input into this process.
- Students should be conceptualised as distributed leaders in their own right.
- The framework described here ('Developing the internal inequality framework,' pp. 22-25) should be used to assess institutional activity to determine the model for supporting students in use in that context. This can be performed by staff at all levels to achieve change in their local contexts.
- Where primarily capacity building approaches are used, staff should consider adopting structurally enabling approaches instead.
- The administration area is particularly likely to present opportunities for transitioning to structurally enabling approaches; institutional leaders and relevant staff should therefore focus attention there to reduce structural barriers.
- The case studies presented in this document should be used as models for enacting structurally enabling change, but consideration (including consultation with local staff and students) should be given to import those models to local contexts.
- Where change is required, leaders should adopt continuous, modular change in local areas. Staff at all levels seeking to create structurally enabling change should identify ways to reducing the effort required to make that change, and on facilitating change through social influence in order to create sustainable change.
- Funding bodies and academics should support and undertake further research into structural inequality in the Australian higher education sector, and the responses institutions are making to reduce these barriers. Particularly, a more comprehensive examination of institutional responses to internal inequalities across the sector; how these inequalities arise; and how best to respond to them, is required.

# Introduction

Retention and attrition from university, especially as they relate to the sociodemographic characteristics of individual students, have been an enduring subject of higher education research (Naylor & James, 2015). Recent work has revealed significant variation in student outcomes between universities with apparently similar student cohorts (Higher Education Standards Panel, 2017; Naylor, Baik, & Arkoudis, 2018; K. J. Nelson et al., 2017).

This project sought to examine the following research question:

- How can institutions address systemic barriers that may contribute to student attrition, particularly in students from equity backgrounds? That is, how can structural and cultural causes of attrition be reduced through institutional change?

To do this, the following sub-questions were investigated:

- What benefits might institutions achieve by using a structural inequality lens, in addition to the more common cultural capital lens?
- Using best practice case studies, what implications are there for formal and informal leaders within institutions to reduce structural inequalities?

We suggest that *structural inequality*—particularly *internal inequalities*—offers a productive framework for use by researchers, teachers, and organisational leaders in explaining these institutional variations and in the ongoing effort required to achieve more inclusive tertiary institutions. Structural inequality is a framework that articulates two key concepts: first, that people (as actors or agents) interact with *structures* (conscious and unconscious rules and resources that are developed, expressed and reinforced through interactions and discourses with other actors within an organisation or community), and that those structures create unequal opportunities for people from some backgrounds in the roles, rights, and ability to make decisions within that structure (Archer & Leathwood, 2003; Giddens, 1984). More formally, an actor's conceptions of power, belonging and institutional roles are shaped by the discourses in which they are 'permitted' to engage with other actors within the structure. These conceptions then affect the person's further positioning acts, discourses and practices, and become self-reinforcing positions of greater or lesser privilege and authority (Rorty, 1979).

In acknowledging that some students (and staff) may face structural barriers to full participation in a university or non-university higher education provider (NUHEP), there are several approaches to attempting to redress this imbalance. As we argue below, these are:

- Modifying the institutional structures to minimise barriers and to ensure a wider range of people are able to more freely engage with their educations. We have termed these approaches *structurally enabling*.
- Providing services or supports that seek to build cultural resources and capacity in students to help them better navigate the existing structure or to better 'fit' the institution, which we have termed *capacity building approaches*.
- *Blended approaches*, which combine both structurally enabling and capacity building approaches.

Rather than ask how students need to change to fit into an institution, we should be asking what institutions are doing to become inclusive to all students, staff, and the wider community. This shifts the onus from students, or from areas associated with outreach and academic literacy programs (Devlin, 2013; Devlin & McKay, 2014), to all actors within the institution.

Ultimately, it may be necessary to both develop ways to build student capacity and to create institutional structures which enable a diversity of students to succeed, but so far, the latter

appears to have been underemphasised. The aim of this report is to spur greater consideration of the specific factors that institutions can target to shape themselves, rather than their students, in their drive to become equitable places of learning. In this way, we seek to complement the previous work of equity practitioners and institutions to develop the cultural resources of students, while shifting focus to a broader understanding of structurally enabling responses.

We begin by detailing the concept of structural inequality, contrast it with those programs aimed at addressing a supposed deficit in the student, and then discuss potential areas for policy intervention to reduce internal structural inequalities for particular students. In later chapters, we detail how institutions have understood and responded to internal structural inequalities; identify good practice in structurally enabling approaches through the use of several case studies collected as part of this project; and discuss change management approaches to embedding structurally enabling activity within higher education institutions.

Structural barriers faced by staff were not considered as part of this project, although we acknowledge that this is also an important area of research. We speculate that efforts to reduce structural inequalities for students will have benefits for staff as well (at a minimum, by empowering them to review and address their own experiences) but did not seek to investigate this within this project.

## **Structural inequality in higher education**

Viewing higher education through a structural inequality lens, one can argue that students from equity backgrounds may experience different opportunities and privileges in higher education than others. Institutional staff, students, and other influences in a student's life, make explicit and implicit positioning acts that create social and institutional barriers to full participation for these students. Within the institution, these acts range from exclusionary discourse in the classroom, to inflexible enrolment and assessment policies, to privileging particular communication styles (Gale, 2012; Madden, 2015; White & Lowenthal, 2011). Outside the institution, the barriers may include increased necessity or expectations for paid employment, or lower ability or willingness to support students in their studies or in navigating administrative requirements (O'Shea, 2016), to name just a few.

For the purposes of this report, we identify three types of structural inequality in higher education. The Australian higher education system is used as a specific example, although parallels in other systems also exist.

### **Vertical inequalities**

Vertical inequalities describe circumstances whereby people with particular characteristics or backgrounds have fewer opportunities to access higher education. Much of the framing of the student equity agenda in Australian higher education, including in government policy dating back several decades (Bradley et al., 2008; Dawkins, 1990), is seen through the lens of population parity (that is, that the composition of the higher education sector should ideally reflect the composition of society at large). It is well established that access and participation constitute the major disparities in higher education (Department of Education, 2016; Institute for Social Science Research, 2017; Naylor et al., 2013), with several groups, including those from low SES or non-English speaking backgrounds, accessing higher education at only half the number predicted by their population share (Department of Education, 2016). Much research in student equity and social inclusion has focused on vertical inequalities (see Nikula (2017) for an interesting cross-national critique), and factors contributing to these inequalities include, to name a few: financial obstacles, alternative aspirations to university (James, 2002), ability to navigate the application process (Gale et al., 2013) and lack of support from families (O'Shea, 2016).

## Horizontal inequalities

People with particular characteristics or backgrounds may also have fewer opportunities to access prestigious institutions or certain highly selective fields of study. Students from low SES backgrounds, for example, are relatively overrepresented in some (arguably low status) fields, such as nursing and education, and underrepresented in fields such as medicine or architecture. Similarly, the elite Group of Eight institutions enrol low SES students at approximately half the rate of the newer, suburban 'red brick' institutions, and a third that of the regional universities (Department of Education, 2016). Many of the red brick and regional universities do not offer the full range of high-status fields, which may further reduce the opportunities that low SES students have to participate in both prestigious institutions and the higher future earnings potential offered by those fields.

While several factors no doubt contribute to these differences, including distance to a desired institution, financial constraints, perception of 'who belongs' at a particular university, and perceptions of educational quality (as opposed to educational quality per se), a major factor in horizontal inequality is likely to be the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR). Although prospective students can advance other entrance qualifications in some courses, ATAR remains the mechanism of entry for the majority (albeit a decreasing majority) of students (Norton & Cherastidham, 2018). This should be of some concern, given that ATAR has been shown to correlate more closely with SES status than with success at university (Cardak & Ryan, 2009). A further contributor may be a lack of transparent admission and outcome information, which prevents students from making informed decisions about what course to study (if at all). Career education in schools plays an important role in helping students to choose courses, careers and institutions best suited to their interests, skills and aspirations. Low SES students are nearly twice as likely as high SES students to leave their studies due to a change in career plans (Harvey et al., 2017), which may indicate that they do not have sufficient access to career education in schools, or perhaps the capacity or motivation to access it where it exists (Dunne, King and Ahrens 2014).

A full discussion of horizontal inequality in higher education is beyond the scope of this report. The matter is more fully discussed in the Australian context (Bexley, 2016; Teese, 2007) and overseas (Davies & Zarifa, 2012; Marginson, 2016) elsewhere.

## Internal inequalities

People with particular characteristics or backgrounds may also be disadvantaged within the institution itself; for example, by being less likely to complete their degree. Although the retention and subject pass rates for most students from equity backgrounds are typically close to parity with those for the wider cohort, with Indigenous students as a notable exception, completion or attainment rates are typically lower, at 80–90 per cent of the institutional average (Department of Education, 2016; Harvey et al., 2017). Even when equity students complete their degrees, they typically do so at slower rates than is typical for the institution as a whole (Harvey et al., 2017).

Note also that it is not simply equity group membership that may contribute to internal inequalities. For example, studying part-time is recognised as a major risk factor for not completing a degree. While equity students are more likely to study part-time than other students, part-time study appears to constitute a risk of non-completion by itself.

The typical reasons provided for these differences in outcomes may be divided into two broad areas: recognition of personal or relatively external factors that may impact on ability to study (for example, financial constraints, caring responsibilities, mental wellbeing); and difficulties navigating the administrative and support units in the institution, or institutional norms that do not support these students. This study focuses on this latter set of possibilities. The finding that low SES students are more likely to leave their studies because of a change in career plans discussed above, for example, suggests that policies that restrict

or make course transfers more difficult are more likely to negatively impact low SES students, providing an example of an internal structural inequality.

### **Structural inequality as a theoretical framework**

Vertical and horizontal structural inequality in Australian secondary education has been explored previously in terms of how it may be created through curriculum and delivery, as well as the selection procedures of tertiary courses and institutions (Teese, 2007). A recent consultation paper developed as part of the national review of equity groups (Institute for Social Science Research, 2017) found that roughly a third of the difference in access rates for students from equity backgrounds (expressed as odds ratios) could be explained by individual barriers to higher education. These barriers included financial barriers, academic achievement, poor school experiences, low self-efficacy, lack of family support and alternative aspirations to higher education, and were selected as a convenience sample from among the indicators collected as part of the Longitudinal Survey of Youth (LSAY), rather than specifically developed to assess individual barriers. The fact that these indicators were so explanatory, particularly given their limited number, provides proof-of-concept that attending to barriers to success in higher education is important to understand the underlying mechanisms that produce vertical inequalities (Institute for Social Science Research, 2017).

To our knowledge, however, the same analyses have not been made for students already participating in higher education (internal inequalities). Internal structural inequality will therefore be the primary focus of the remainder of this report. There is some evidence to suggest that a structural inequality approach might be productive in understanding variation in student outcomes within universities. The national Higher Education Standards Panel (HESP), in their examination of student retention and success, found that factors at the level of individual students provided only a relatively weak predictive ability, with only 23 per cent of the variation explained by factors such as mode of study, type of attendance, age, socioeconomic status and cultural background (Higher Education Standards Panel, 2017). In contrast, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) has reported that an approach focusing on aspects of institutions rather than individuals provides far greater predictive power for retention, with 41 per cent of the variation explained at the sector level, and 86 per cent for the universities (TEQSA, 2017). These findings demonstrate the potential power of focusing on institutional culture and environment—the social and institutional barriers to successful university study—rather than deficit models of students.

### **The use and misuse of ‘cultural capital’**

Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital is a pervasive concept in education studies, and has been widely applied as a theoretical lens to explain differences in outcomes for students from various backgrounds. Equity practitioners often (perhaps informally) invoke Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), and the goal of building cultural resources for students from non-traditional backgrounds is the impetus for many university preparation and support programs (Bennett et al., 2015; Braxton, Shaw Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997; Kift, 2009; Lizzio, 2006; Tinto, 1975). Particularly, ‘building’ cultural capital has been a significant focus in informing prospective students’ aspirations and expectations of university, and supporting students as they transition through and participate in their studies – or at least, the term has been adopted by many practitioners to describe the underlying purpose of university support activities (see, e.g. Bennet et al., 2015; Kift, 2009; Nelson et al., 2017).

We argue here that this is frequently a misuse of Bourdieu’s theory, when practitioners more accurately intend to build cultural resources or academic capacity rather than cultural capital. Further shortcomings of this ‘capacity building’ lens include its potential implicit notion that equity students have a ‘deficit’ (i.e. lack of cultural capital) and require assimilation into academe. This is a significant problem for institutional policy that aims to support non-traditional students, because it places the locus of responsibility primarily on students and



their willingness to engage with support programs, rather than on the institutional actors that can be more effectively influenced by policy.

Bourdieu's theory was originally advanced to account for the generation of class inequalities in educational attainment (Bourdieu, 1977), and later formed the cornerstone of Bourdieu's theory of social replication (Bourdieu, 1986). This chapter is not intended to be a simple defence of Bourdieu's work, which has been discussed in great detail elsewhere. However, as Goldthorpe (2007) has observed (see also Emirbayer & Williams, 2005; Winkle-Wagner, 2010), much confusion has resulted from the use of cultural capital in contexts that belie its radical nature and grounding in economic theory. We therefore seek to reiterate Bourdieu's framing of the idea to contrast it with the less theoretically driven, unproblematised usage particularly common in transition pedagogy and social inclusion literature. That is, some practitioners and researchers have typically used cultural capital as a substitute for 'cultural resources' rather than 'capital' in its economic sense, or conflated it with 'social capital' (McNeal, 1999).

Such use represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of Bourdieu's work. For Bourdieu, capital (in all its forms, economic, social, and cultural) amounts to power, and represents accumulated labour, "which, when appropriated on to a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 241). Children of the 'dominant class' are better able to succeed in an education system because, owing to continuity with their previous experiences, they are *already* well prepared to succeed within it. Conversely, children from other backgrounds are likely to find schooling (and, for that matter, university) an alien and distancing environment that comprises unfamiliar social and cultural norms (Goldthorpe, 2007). Thus, people from different cultural backgrounds can draw different profits, or accumulate more or less powerful outcomes from the academic markets than others (Bourdieu, 1986). Put another way, people from outside the dominant class are less able to benefit from education due to difficulties in adjustment, which at best lead to opportunity costs, and at worst, lead to exclusion for inadequate performance or self-exclusion, whereas those from the dominant class benefit from mutually reinforcing outcomes from school and at home.

In this framing, there is little that is controversial in how education research has often dealt with the concept of cultural capital. However, it ignores the nature of capital as accumulated labour whose value depends on scarcity (Bourdieu, 1986). For Bourdieu, capital gives privileged access to further capital, allowing the dominant classes to monopolise resources and reinforce their dominance. Scarcity is essential to the value of education in social reproduction; widening participation therefore must lead to the devaluing of credentials for all parties. As Bourdieu says, "Because material and symbolic profits which the academic qualification guarantees also depend on its scarcity, the investments made (in time and effort) may turn out to be less profitable than was anticipated when they were made" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 247). Bourdieu's theory can, and has, been profitably used to explain credentialism and the devaluing of bachelor-level degrees in the modern job market under universal higher education systems as new forms of vertical inequality (see, for example, Bexley, 2016; Marginson, 2016). It can explain the emergence and reinforcement of horizontal inequalities; that is, differences in the value of degrees from particular institutions, and the relative exclusion of particular backgrounds from elite institutions (Brändle, 2017; Teese, 2007). It has also been used recently to highlight changes in academic governance and decision making (Rowlands, 2017; Watson & Widin, 2015), indicating the breadth of analysis possible with Bourdieu's lens.

These implications are often not considered within the field of social inclusion in higher education, where 'cultural capital' is typically used shorn of its explanatory power as an expression of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 97); that is, the domination of one class over another. The framing of many university outreach and

development programs as 'building cultural capital' for participants seems profoundly inconsistent with Bourdieu's theory of capital and social reproduction. One might argue that these efforts are fundamentally a form of colonialism, or the enforcing of a dominant system of capital over subordinate systems; however, that is not how practitioners typically conceive of or use the term, which appears to be more closely related to 'building cultural resources' or 'capacity building' within the university system. Certainly, almost all would argue against the notion that they were committing symbolic violence upon students or subcultures by helping them build resources to succeed in higher education. Again, this is not to say that this theoretical lens cannot be used to provide insights into the higher education system, or to critique the social inclusion agenda. It does, however, suggest that practitioners are often not really engaging with the theory when they invoke 'cultural capital' (Goldthorpe, 2007; D. Robbins, 1993). For this reason, we will refer to this framing in the remainder of this report as a 'capacity building' approach, rather than as 'cultural capital,' and contrast it with a 'structurally enabling' approach which is focused on minimising structural inequalities.

## Implicit problematisation of equity students

A further difficulty for the capacity building approach is that it potentially creates an implicit deficit model for non-traditional students (Devlin, 2013; Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Students are themselves expected to change to suit the system to develop their cultural resources, rather than the system accommodating diverse backgrounds through genuine social inclusion. This, perhaps ironically, reinforces a Bourdieusian reading of social inclusion in higher education as symbolic violence — but again, it does not appear to reflect how practitioners seek to use the term.

It is difficult to avoid a deficit model while focusing on individuals within a system rather than on the system itself (Smit, 2012). Within the field of social inclusion in university, the contrast between deficit models and strengths-based models is long established. In the former, the focus is typically on building skills through extra- and co-curricular activities or streaming to maximise the chances that students will be able to achieve their goals within the institution. In the latter, the pedagogical process and philosophy is different—all students are assumed to have resources that can be mobilised to enable flourishing rather merely surviving, and capitalising on strengths is believed to be more likely to lead to success than similar effort expended on overcoming weaknesses (Lopez & Louis, 2009)—but the basic process of enculturating individuals within the system remains the same.

This process of shaping individuals to flourish within institutional culture is potentially particularly problematic for ethnic and cultural minorities. Tinto's enduring student retention model holds that for students to persist through college, they must 'become incorporated' into its social and academic communities (Tinto, 1987, p. 126), although it must be noted that the US college system is very different to the Australian system. Rendón, Jalomo, and Nora (2000) point out that Tinto's language is analogous to integration, and more broadly, is linked to an assimilation/acculturation framework. In their discussion of academic literacy and codes of power, White and Lowenthal (2011) use the lenses of cultural reproduction theory and resistance theory to examine why ethnic minority students may cling to culturally-imbued discursive patterns in the classroom and in formal assessment rather than adopting the formal academic language of their teachers. White and Lowenthal (2011) conclude that the strong link between language and identity means that these students may equate the use of academic language as 'acting White' and thus negating their own cultural identity. Similar findings about the impact of culture and resistance on academic self-efficacy have also been reported in the Australian context for Indigenous students in both secondary and tertiary education (Behrendt et al., 2012; Mander, Cohen, & Pooley, 2015); the Indigenous students in Mander and colleagues' study, for example, talked about culture shock, and the implicit requirement to change or sideline particular aspects of their cultural identity and sense of self, and 'code switch' between Standard Australian English and Aboriginal English in different contexts. Pechenkina (2017) illustrates an interesting counter-example, where

success at university is framed as resistance to White hegemony (as one participant says, “I want to succeed to prove the bastards wrong [about Indigenous stereotypes]” — Pechenkina, 2017; p. 470). As this quote demonstrates, the study underlines rather than refutes the troubling nature of assimilatory models of academic literacies and success, where students find themselves drawn into a dichotomy between “*the indigenous* and *the Western*” (Pechenkina, 2017; p. 471; italics original) and whose Indigeneity may be questioned if they are successful at university. Furthermore, other studies have made similar arguments about gender (e.g. women in engineering; Powell, Bagilhole, & Dainty, 2009) and class (e.g. upward mobility for working class students; Loveday, 2015). Requiring, or encouraging, students who differ from the traditional model of the white, upper middle-class, male student to integrate, or otherwise problematizing their participation in universities or specific disciplines, is therefore broadly at issue, even via well-intentioned programs such as the social inclusion agenda. The need for integration focuses on perceived cultural differences (such as poor communication or motivation) rather than systemic barriers such as differences in expectations, support, and funding.

A parallel discourse is emerging in the research literature to counter the assimilation narrative of retention. Rather than examine the variety of ways in which institutions assimilate their students, increasing focus is paid to how academic cultures may adapt to fit the needs of the student cohort (O'Shea, Lysaght, Roberts, & Harwood, 2016; Smit, 2012; Zepke & Leach, 2005). As part of this shift, structural inequality offers a valuable framework to encapsulate these institutional and systemic factors. Moreover, while student-focused approaches are largely confined to issues of retention, a structural inequality framework transects the educational pipeline, providing the opportunity to develop a holistic model of equity building in higher education—encompassing access, retention, and graduate outcomes—that is equally applicable to multiple equity groups.

## **Towards a consideration of systemic factors**

We have so far argued that framing social inclusion policy through ‘cultural capital’ or ‘capacity building’ is unproductive for two major reasons: that the typical usage of ‘cultural capital’ robs Bourdieu’s original concept of its theoretical power and leads to confusion with a simpler concept of ‘cultural resources’; and that attempting to assimilate non-traditional students into a traditional institutional structure may encourage problematic deficit and acculturation models. It is also apparent that a capacity building model has not reaped substantial dividends for students from non-traditional backgrounds: national retention, success (subject pass rates) and completion rates have not moved outside a three percentage point range for any Australian equity group since 2009 (Department of Education, 2016), and were largely flat for decades before that (Bradley et al., 2008; Naylor & James, 2015). One may argue that little to no change in these indicators is a success, given that this has taken place against considerable growth in the sector, and particularly in the numbers of students from equity backgrounds participating in higher education. However, it is clear that despite significant focus from both national and institutional policy and significant funding, there has been little positive improvement in the student experience for these students.

A structural inequality approach to widening participation and social inclusion provides two additional advantages. First, the three types of structural inequality presented here separate out barriers to access and participation more clearly than a capacity building lens, which allows more focused policy solutions, and therefore increase the likelihood of effective change. For example, vertical and internal inequalities are often conflated within a cultural resources model to explain poorer completion rates for equity students. Within the sphere of internal inequalities, external constraints (e.g. financial constraints) may be conflated with financial management skills, time management skills, sense of belonging or academic self-perception within programs intended to support low SES students. Conflation creates the risk of wasted resources for students, institutions, and other stakeholders. By more clearly

separating vertical and internal inequalities in the first example, it becomes clearer which types of problems might be more effectively addressed through government policy, and which might be more effectively addressed through institutional, or even more local, policies.

A structural inequality framework is also more likely to prove effective because policy change is located more fully within the locus of control of the institution (or other stakeholders). Programs that aim to build capacity in students (or prospective students) are necessarily limited in that they provide only the opportunity for change, which is then moderated by the student's natural strengths, awareness of the program's existence, level of engagement with the program if they attend at all, and so on. That is, the locus of control is with the student to determine their final outcome, which again creates the potential for wasted effort, as well as potentially reinforcing negative stereotypes or student self-perceptions. However, policy intended to reduce underlying structural barriers (for example, inflexible assessment policies, or a lack of emergency financial support for students, etc.) remains within the locus of control of the institution, and therefore is much more likely to result in more efficient, more effective change. A structural inequality approach therefore leads to different policy outcomes, as well as more focused responses.

# Methodology

This project adopted a multi-phase, qualitative methodology that included surveys and interviews to examine structural inequality in the Australian higher education sector, and to assess how institutions have considered and responded to structural barriers faced by students.

## Recruitment of case studies

The project began with a literature review intended to synthesise and critique the existing literature on structural inequality within higher education institutions. Following completion of the literature searches, a critical synthetic approach was taken to develop an initial theoretical framework and research instruments. Academic leaders from universities and non-university higher education providers (NUHEPs)—typically, Deputy Vice Chancellors (Academic) and their delegates or equivalents—were then approached to participate in the study.

University leaders were selected as the key participant group in this study as they were likely to be best able to provide a broad overview of the participating institutions. Given the time and funding constraints of this project, this was judged to be the most suitable approach to achieve the project's necessarily modest aims, while acknowledging the diversity of practice within different areas of the institution.

Inclusion criteria for initial recruitment was being the academic leader of a recognised Australian higher education provider based on the TEQSA database. In the case of universities, this was identified on a positional basis, as the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic) role or its equivalent, or their nominated proxy. In NUHEPs, academic leaders were identified similarly, using roles such as Academic Coordinator where these positions were clearly identified in the institution's web-based information. If necessary, contact was made with the institution to identify who the relevant leader should be. All universities, and a broadly representative sample of NUHEPs (determined by size, type and retention rate from institutional statistics, as described below) were invited to participate, to provide a broad sample of the sector. All academic leaders were initially approached by email, supported by follow up phone calls as required.

TEQSA previously performed a cluster analysis of the higher education sector (TEQSA, 2017), which divided the sector into three clusters of NUHEPs (including the University of Divinity), plus another cluster composed of the universities. The factors used to create the clusters included institution-based, student enrolment-based and staff-based variables. Clusters were identified broadly by teaching areas in the TEQSA report, as “small providers with a focus on Society and Culture”, “medium sized providers with an international focus”, and “medium sized providers with a mixed disciplinary focus.” Full details are provided in TEQSA (2017).

Within the three cluster of NUHEPs, we identified four institutions per cluster based on maximum variation sampling in EFTSL and retention rate as published in the TEQSA data. We therefore hoped to construct a representative sample of NUHEPs in terms of cluster, size and attrition rate.

There were no specific exclusion criteria.

## Sample details

Twelve universities (out of the 39 cluster 1 providers in the TEQSA (2017) report; 31 per cent participation rate) and two NUHEPs agreed to participate in the study. The universities represent a wide cross section of the Australian university sector, and included representatives from each of the Group of Eight, Regional Universities Network, Innovative

Research Universities, Australian Technology Network, and the unaligned universities. Together, they are responsible for 31 per cent of the total higher education study load. The NUHEPs were drawn from different clusters of the TEQSA analysis and included one from 'small providers with a focus on Society and Culture' (cluster 2) and one from 'medium sized providers with a mixed disciplinary focus' (cluster 4). No representatives from cluster 3 ('medium sized providers with an international focus') were obtained, although the focus on international students from providers in this cluster potentially made these institutions a poor fit for this project, which is focused primarily on the experience of domestic students (particularly those from equity backgrounds). We acknowledge, however, that international students are also likely to face structural and cultural barriers to full participation in Australian higher education, as has been observed previously in the literature (Arkoudis et al., 2010; Ryan, Dowler, Bruce, Gamage, & Morris, 2016; Terry, Naylor, Nguyen, & Rizzo, 2016). One might speculate that private providers with a strong international focus are well equipped to minimise these barriers, given appropriate institutional will and their specialised focus, but this hypothesis requires further research and is outside the scope of this report.

Case studies included representatives from each of the mainland states.

## Data collection protocols

The initial data collection instrument was a written institutional questionnaire emailed to academic leaders (see Appendix 1; details of the design process for the instrument are provided below), asking them about their understanding of the concept of structural inequality, and to assess how structurally enabling processes may be undertaken (or not) in different parts of the institution. This instrument was developed to obtain a 'helicopter view' of the institution as a whole, from the perspective of the academic leader. All participating leaders completed the institutional questionnaire.

As part of the questionnaire, leaders were asked to identify areas of best practice, or approaches they believed were distinctive compared to the rest of the sector. The researchers identified six case studies as particularly innovative practice, and completed follow-up, semi-structured interviews with the leaders or their delegates to obtain more detail about these examples of best practice. The interviews were conducted via telephone, and each lasted approximately 45 min. Indicative questions are provided in Appendix 2.

Interviews with students were undertaken to understand how students experienced the presence or absence of structural barriers at their institutions. Initially, student participants were sought by asking university leaders to nominate students, typically through affiliated student associations. However, as only one student was nominated by an academic leader, the researchers made independent contact with student associations to interview student office bearers or other student nominees. Students were also interviewed using a semi-structured approach that was informed by both our theoretical framework and the institutional questionnaire, in order to focus on areas of distinctive practice at that institution. Although student perspectives from all six of the 'best practice' case studies were sought, only four student leaders were able to be interviewed due to their limited availability during the research period.

Data from the three strands of evidence (institutional questionnaire, 'best practice' interviews and student interviews) underwent thematic analysis and were then synthesised to create case studies of how institutions were grappling with internal structural inequality. These case studies were then used to further refine the initial theoretical framework developed from the literature review.

Ethics permission for the study was granted by the La Trobe University Human Research Ethics Committee.

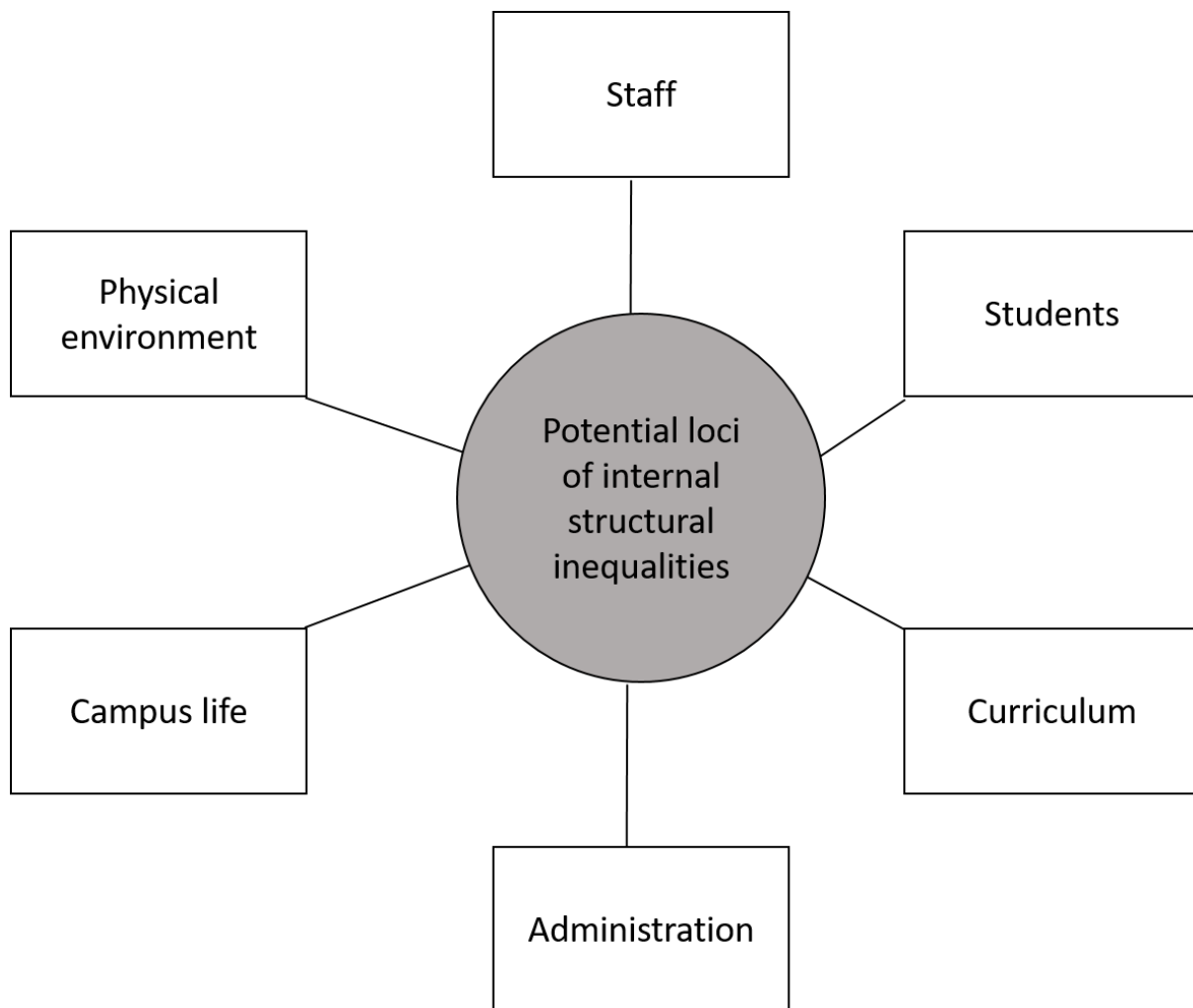
# How do institutions understand and respond to internal structural inequalities?

This chapter details a theoretical framework for describing and addressing internal structural inequalities based on findings from academic leaders' descriptions of how their institutions position student equity within different aspects of institutional cultures. This work provides a broad understanding of how the case study institutions are addressing student equity and structural causes of attrition, which is developed further in the next chapter to identify areas of best practice to reduce inequities. Several participants in this study commented that approaching equity from a structural inequality lens was more difficult than using a capacity building approach, as it required vigilance and a close examination of university processes. The theoretical framework described here may make this task easier, as it delineates the problems of internal inequality into specific areas, assisting institutions to respond through more manageable reforms. We also identify through the case studies detailed at the end of the chapter that particular types of institutions are no more or less likely to adopt structural inequality-based approaches than others; instead, institutional will and leadership seems to contribute to successful change.

## Developing the internal inequality framework

Based on the theoretical discussion presented in the previous section and the researchers' reflective understanding of areas within the university that students were likely to engage with, we developed a broad typology of different aspects of university activity that could give rise to structural inequalities for different groups of students. After further reference to the literature, the typology was used to develop the research instruments, and the results from the institutional questionnaires and follow up interviews used as a further iterative cycle to validate and refine the typology and develop models of how institutions were approaching equity issues.

Initially, six major aspects of institutional culture that may promote (or detract from) inclusivity were identified. It is important to note that these areas may be 'pressure points' or areas where internal inequalities may arise or be reduced — they are not aspects of university activity that necessarily promote structural inequality, and institutions may productively focus on different areas as necessitated by their individual cultures or the requirements of their student cohort. Similarly, students from different backgrounds may interact with university structures differently, and therefore have different experiences. Thus, while identification of 'pressure points' is important, institutions must prioritise and respond to these areas according to institutional need and in individual ways.



**Figure 2: Internal structural inequalities in higher education**

The six areas identified, which were modified to form the basis of our final analysis (see below) and some trigger questions for reflective practice, are detailed below.

### **Staff**

In Giddens' (1984) description of structure, it is instantiated through the actions and interactions of individuals, rather than having independent existence. Staff, who are arguably the 'faces' or major representatives of an institution, are therefore a primary locus for students to interact with the structure of that institution. How staff interact with students, particularly through teaching, may have a substantial effect on the creation of structural barriers for some students.

Internal inequalities may arise in classroom teaching through unconscious bias from teachers, or privileging particular styles of discourse in the curriculum. A simple, but potentially prevalent problem, is assumed knowledge; some students, particularly those from international or non-traditional backgrounds, may not have the same understandings of academic expectations and standards, which may contribute to a poor student experience and increased attrition risk (Arkoudis et al., 2010; Longden, 2004; Thomas, 2002). Supporting teachers to be aware of these issues, and to develop strategies to minimise them (see, e.g. Arkoudis et al. 2010), may be important contributors to improving the performance of all students.



- In what ways does the institution prepare or offer professional development to staff for teaching diverse cohorts?
- Is there a focus on structural or implicit bias in teaching staff training?
- In what ways do teaching staff make clear to students their expectations around workloads, academic standards, grades, assessment deadlines, etc.?

## Students

Classroom discourse is of course not simply the province of academic teaching staff; students are also active co-creators in classroom cultures, and may therefore contribute to internal inequalities and exclusionary discourses. The enduring debate about the role of students as consumers or customers of higher education—or at least perceiving themselves to be customers—is an example of the way students’ attitudes and behaviour may influence their interactions with staff and students, although to our knowledge, few of the studies in this area have focused on the creation of academic culture rather than more concrete outcomes such as effect on grades (see, e.g. Finney and Finney, 2010; Lomas 2007; Saunders 2015).

- What is distinctive about the institution’s approach to helping equity students succeed compared with other higher education institutions?
- How do commencing students assimilate or otherwise interact with continuing students within their courses or in the wider university?
- How are students taught to act inclusively in their interactions with other students and staff?
- How do students perceive the institution in terms of equity?
- How do students perceive themselves as members of the university community (e.g. as junior colleagues, as partners, as learners, or as consumers)?

## Curriculum

Beyond classroom or campus discourses, the curriculum may empower or disempower students from particular backgrounds in different ways. Much of the recent research in Indigenous education or decolonising the classroom has made this point (Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2003; Nakata, Nakata, Keech, & Bolt, 2012; Pechenkina, 2017). Furthermore, policies associated with curriculum design and administration, such as assessment policies, may also contribute to internal inequalities by increasing or reducing flexibility for non-traditional students, students with family responsibilities, or students with disabilities.

- How are curricula made accessible and relevant to students from all backgrounds?
- Which aspects of assessment policies at the institution cater to equity students?
- How does the institution provide advice on course content and selection to prospective students or current students?
- How is career advice integrated into the curriculum?
- Are students made aware of the inherent requirements of their chosen course? Does it require proactive effort from students to discover these requirements, or are they promoted to students?

## Administration

Related to the previous area, student administration beyond the curriculum may contribute to internal inequalities through alienating language; bureaucratism; inflexibility; poor coordination between services; or poor data collection, warehousing and analysis which fails to identify students in need of support or assumes that membership of a formal equity group necessitates support. While the days of having to complete administrative tasks on campus have largely passed due to increasingly online service delivery, student administration remains an important way through which students interact with the institution and can strongly influence a student’s sense of capacity and belonging to the institution.

- What help is provided to students to navigate the administrative side of the institution? What is done to make these processes accessible, transparent, flexible, and jargon-free?
- How well does the institution identify and respond to students facing difficult personal situations (e.g. homelessness, financial hardship, mental health)?
- How well does your institution accommodate part-time study, leaves of absence etc.?
- Does the institution collect and respond to data on why students have withdrawn from study?

### **Campus life**

There is clear evidence that students are spending less time on campus, but that developing a sense of belonging to a learning community remains important in retention (Baik, Naylor, & Arkoudis, 2015). Thus, a student's experience of the broader campus life remains an important contributor to their retention. Provision and normalisation of support services are considered here as part of the students' broader experiences of their campuses.

- What are the accommodation options, including emergency housing, available to students?
- To what degree do students participate in the institution's broader life outside of classes? What kinds of experiences are available? How could these be enabled? Do students from across the cohort participate equally?
- To what degree do students interact with the institution's support services? What kinds of services are available? How could these be developed?

### **Physical environment**

Finally, the physical environment may contribute to internal inequalities. While this is obviously true for students with mobility issues, it is equally true for students from other groups, who may find the physical environments of their campuses to support or restrict their study through ease of access (including commuting time), feel of the spaces, availability of community and learning spaces, and availability of fundamental services such as internet and wifi access.

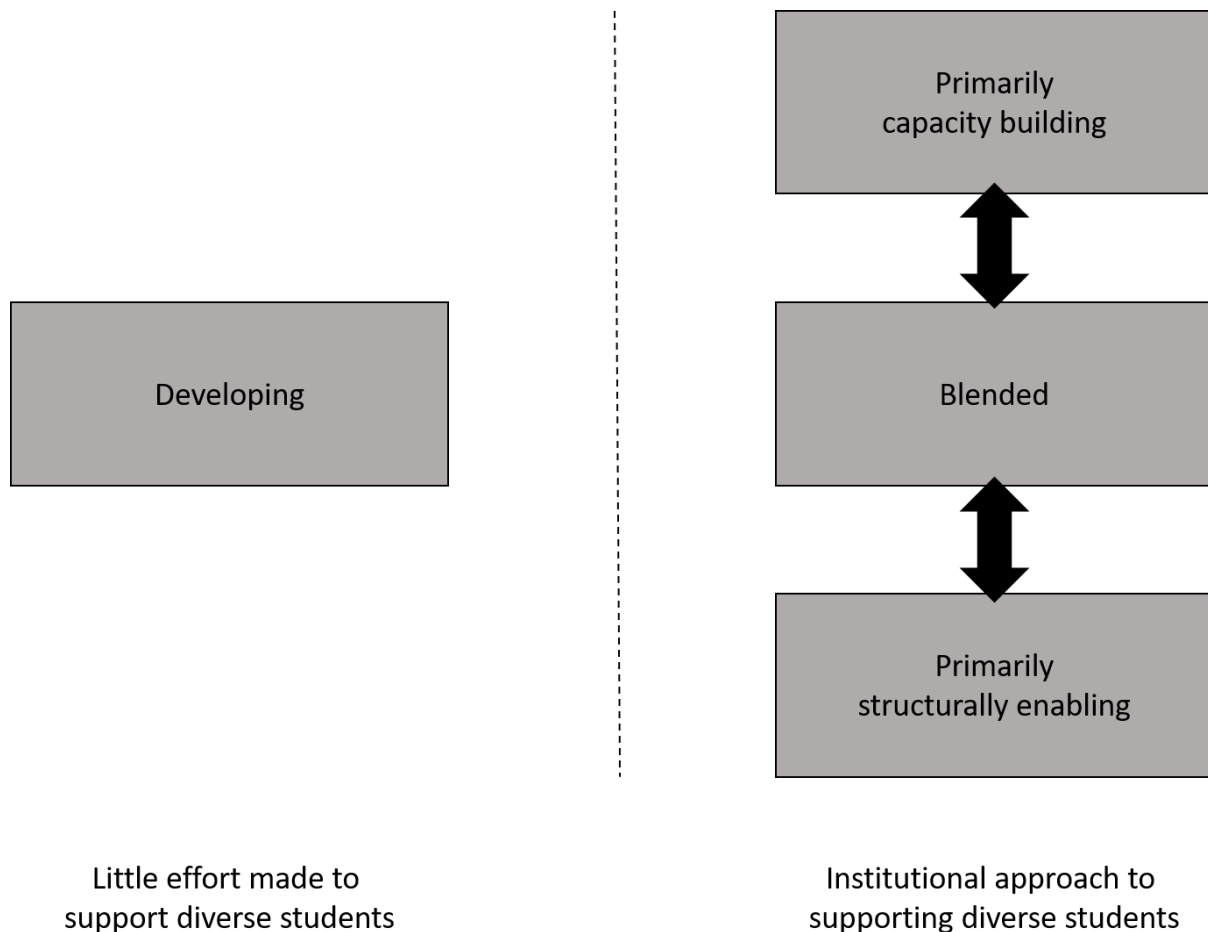
- How is the physical environment of the institution used to support or engage students with the institution or their education (e.g. through community spaces, study spaces, wifi access etc.)?
- Does the institution collect data related to commuting? If so, how, and what kind of impact on the institution has it made?
- What impression do students have of the 'feel' of the campus?

## **Conceptual models of institutional approaches**

Following analysis of the institutional questionnaires, these six areas were reduced to four based on the amount of data collected; the data recorded for *campus life* and *physical environments* was not sufficiently detailed to allow the researchers to rigorously evaluate the case studies in these areas. An additional aspect—an overall statement of the institution's approach to dealing with student equity—was also added. This measure was included to provide a sense of the academic leader's perception of the overall approach their institution was taking, and to minimise the risk of being too reductive by focusing our analysis exclusively on individual areas.

The second part of the theoretical framework developed synthesised conceptual models from the institutional case studies. This part of the model detailed how and in which aspects of their activity institutions were adopting capacity building or structurally enabling models of

student success, using a mixture of approaches, or using neither. For four of the five thematic areas (*students, staff, curriculum and administration*), this was based on our analysis. As noted above, however, the *overall* approach reports the academic leader's perception of the approach generally taken in the institution rather than our own. The conceptual model reported for the *overall* approach may therefore not be consistent with those reported for the other areas.



**Figure 3: Conceptual models of approaches to supporting diverse students in higher education institutional practice**

The conceptual models that institutions adopted to support diverse students in the reported case studies were as follows:

**Developing**

A ‘traditional’ or basic approach to understanding the interactions between students and the university. In institutions adopting this approach, little is done to assist students in engaging with the institution; student diversity is poorly recognised or accommodated, and the focus is instead placed on long-established processes, standards and approaches that provide little flexibility. The stereotypical understanding of the elite-era university as the gatekeeper of academic standards and professions with limited desire to incorporate other voices is perhaps an example of this level of acceptance. Students are typically positioned as relatively passive participants in, or the objects or targets of, higher education (beyond an expectation of self-managed learning from students).

A developing level of acceptance towards student equity is an uncommon position at the institutional level in modern Australian higher education. All of the institutions that participated in this project appeared to be at a higher level of engagement with these issues. This is not unexpected, given the sector's focus on student equity over previous decades and given that academic leaders were our primary source of data and are therefore more likely to be influenced by sectoral and government expectations towards supporting equity students. However, we are unable to speculate on the prevalence of this conceptual model across the entire sector given the diversity of NUHEPs, or at more finely graded levels than the institutional. Individual departments or academics, for example, may maintain elite-era conceptions of the types or amount of support that is appropriate, which may affect the experiences of students in those areas. We must also acknowledge that the helicopter view provided by university leaders may be somewhat idealised or limited in its ability to convey the full complexities of practice and diversities of opinion in the institution.

### **Primarily capacity building**

In this approach, the institution acknowledges diversity in its student body, and recognises that some students may have more capacity to succeed within the institution than others. In responding to these differences, the institution primarily adopts programs to build capacity in students to help them navigate the institution. These programs are typically aimed at particular groups of students—often those from equity backgrounds—and are often 'bolted on' or extra-curricular additions. In many cases, these responses are fundamentally passive; while institutions provide interventions, students are required to seek out and participate if they wish. Students are therefore positioned as free agents, and the traditional processes, standards and approaches are largely unproblematised. Capacity building approaches may be based in a deficit model or a strengths-based model of the student, but the implicit emphasis is typically on 'upskilling' students to meet the demands of the institution.

Among the institutions surveyed, this was the least common conceptual model according to academic leaders' assessments of their institution's overall approach, with only one institution (a NUHEP) out of the 14 indicating a primarily capacity building approach. However, in particular areas, particularly administration (nine institutions, including both NUHEPs) and students (five institutions), this approach was much more common.

### **Blended**

In a blended approach, the institution provides a mixture of capacity building and structurally enabling interventions. Individual programs in the area may be focused on one approach more than the other, but the strategy overall adopts a mixture of the two. In a blended approach, the institution seeks to 'meet students halfway' by building capacity in its students as well as developing a structurally enabling organisation.

Half of the surveyed institutions indicated that overall, they adopted a blend of capacity building and structurally enabling approaches. Within the individual areas, there was considerable variation; some institutions adopted primarily capacity building approaches in some areas (in administration, as noted above), but professed a proactive, structural inequality approach to staff professional development or curriculum design, for example. Furthermore, institutions were more likely to claim higher focus on structural inequality than was born out in their responses to individual items. While we acknowledge this is a crude measure of comparison, and we do not wish to suggest that an overall approach is no more than a simple 'sum of the parts,' it may suggest some social desirability bias in the overall responses.

### **Primarily structurally enabling**

In this approach, the institution acknowledges diversity in its student body, and responds primarily by focusing on its internal structures that support or hamper particular types of

students. Institutions adopting a primarily structural inequality approach continue to position students as agents, but agents whose ability to navigate the institution may be more or less constrained, and the processes that create those constraints are problematized. Expectations and processes are typically explicated through active outreach, rather than expecting students to seek out the answers themselves. The emphasis is typically on making the institution as responsive and flexible as possible to the widest range of participants.

A primarily structurally enabling approach was reported by academic leaders from six of the 14 institutions, including one NUHEP, as their overall institutional model (compared to seven who believed a blended model was most likely to be productive). It was apparent from survey responses that the disability space was particularly likely to support a structural inequality approach, presumably due to both legal requirements and the well-established focus on institutional responsibility in this area. Six out of 14 institutions also adopted a strong structural inequality approach to their staff professional development and in the requirement for making academic expectations clear to students. In most, but not all, cases, the institutions who reported adopting a structurally enabling approach overall were also those who were identified as developing an understanding of structural inequalities through their staff professional development. This may indicate a positive relationship between staff conceptual models and the overall approach taken by the institution, which therefore may indicate an important role for distributed leadership in enacting institutional change. We return to this topic in the last chapter.

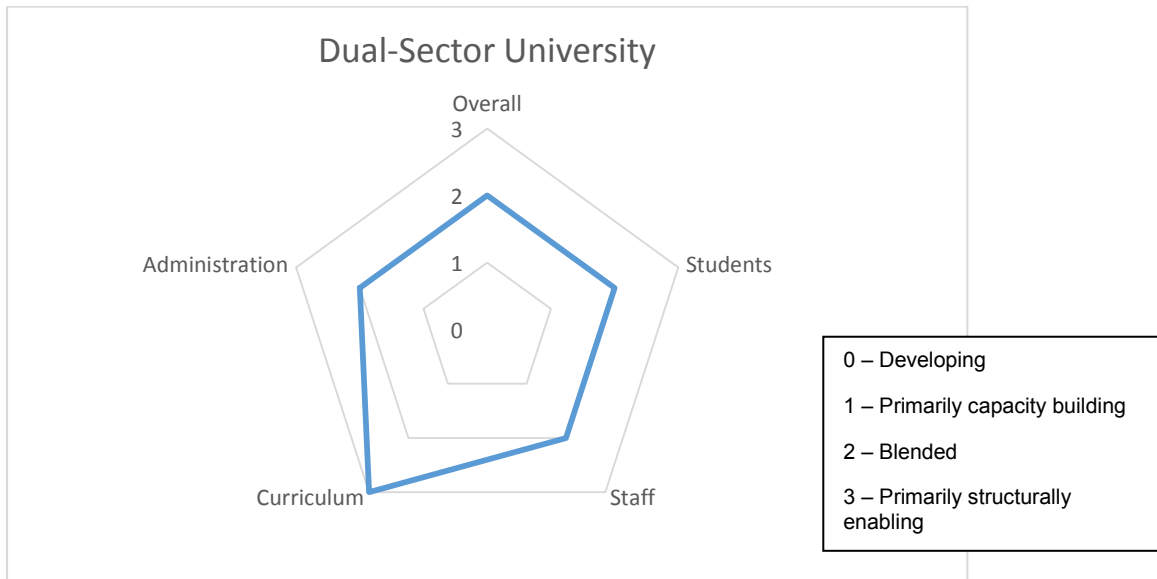
## **The case studies**

Note that in the diagrams of the following case studies, the degree of focus on structural inequality in each area of the institutional responses is noted from 0 to 3 according to the theoretical framework described above. This rating is not intended to suggest that a structurally enabling approach is superior to a capacity building or blended approach, although, as discussed above, we believe that structural inequalities are currently under-examined in the higher education sector, and it may be productive to focus more on structurally enabling approaches.

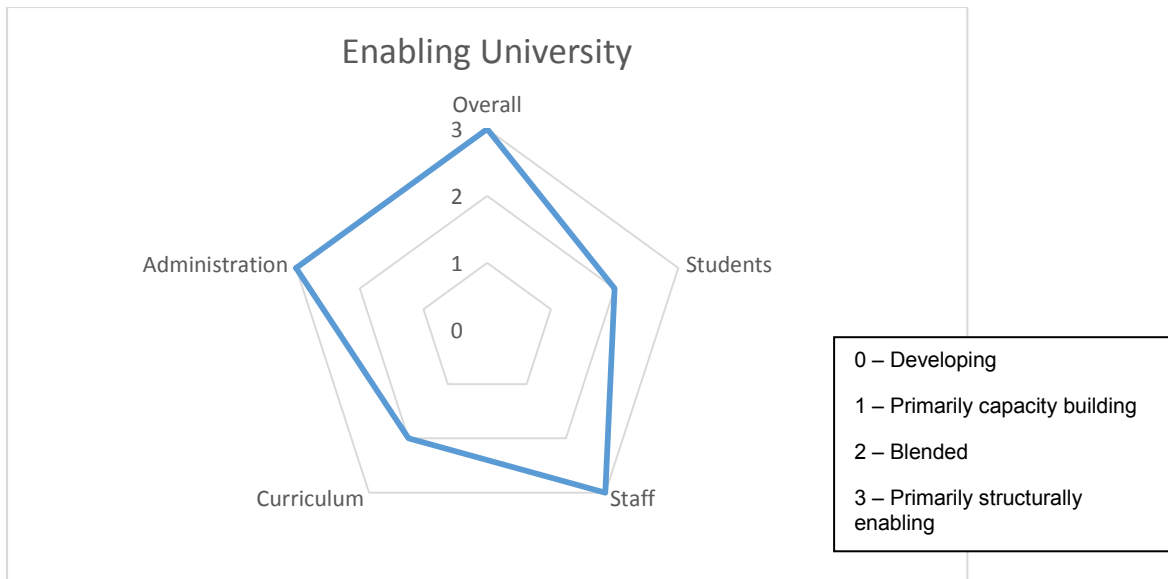
**Table 2: Institutional approaches to supporting students**

	Overall	Student	Staff	Curriculum	Admin
Dual-Sector University	Blended	Blended	Blended	Structurally enabling	Blended
Enabling University	Structurally enabling	Blended	Structurally enabling	Blended	Structurally enabling
Evolving University	Structurally enabling	Blended	Capacity building	Blended	Capacity building
Faith-based College	Capacity building	Blended	Structurally enabling	Capacity building	Capacity building
Innovative University	Blended	Blended	Capacity building	Blended	Capacity building
International University	Blended	Capacity building	Blended	Blended	Blended
New University	Blended	Capacity building	Structurally enabling	Blended	Capacity building
Pathway College	Structurally enabling	Blended	Structurally enabling	Structurally enabling	Capacity building
Regional University	Blended	Capacity building	Capacity building	Blended	Blended
Suburban University	Structurally enabling	Structurally enabling	Blended	Blended	Blended
Traditional University	Structurally enabling	Blended	Capacity building	Capacity building	Blended
University of Applied Studies	Blended	Capacity building	Structurally enabling	Capacity building	Blended
University of Technology	Structurally enabling	Capacity building	Blended	Structurally enabling	Structurally enabling
Verdant University	Blended	Blended	Structurally enabling	Structurally enabling	Structurally enabling

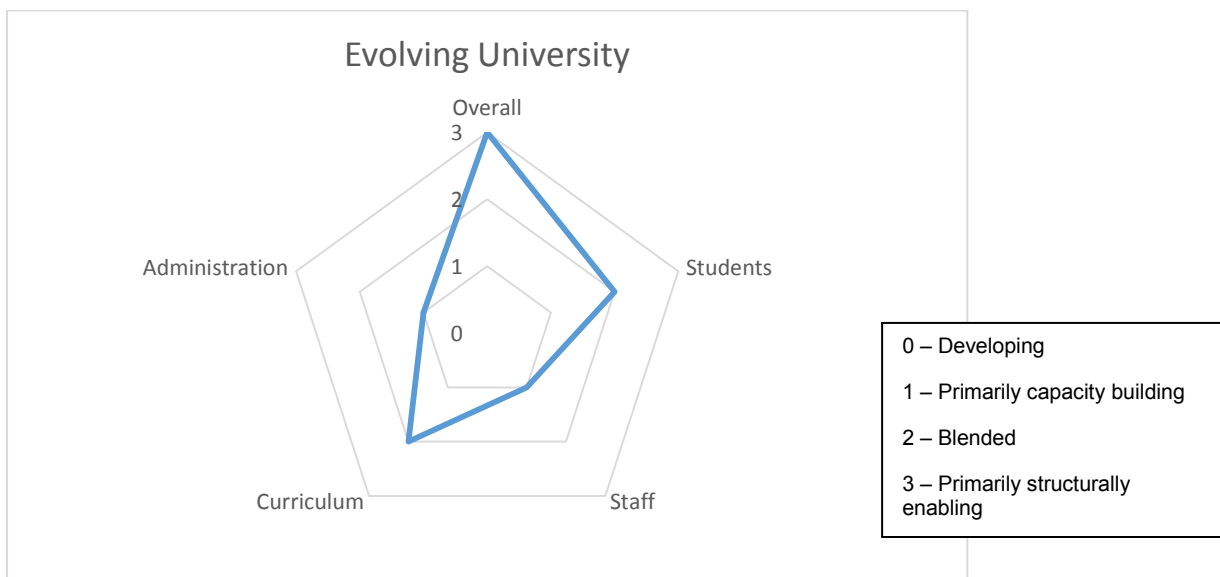
Dual-sector University has a relatively long history in tertiary education, which is offered across multiple campuses. Its higher education offerings, the majority of which retain an applied or vocational focus, have a high proportion of students from low SES and regional backgrounds enrolled. Dual-Sector University aims to adopt a blended approach, saying they sought to “upskill students to increase their cultural capital, [while] we also look to alter formal and informal institutional structures to remove inequalities.” This was particularly strong in its curriculum design, which involved both extensive review of the flexibility and content of course offerings, well-detailed formal processes for adjusting an individual’s study plan for a number of reasons, and considerable discretion for teaching staff and departmental leaders to further adjust these requirements where needed to create further flexibility.



Enabling University is a mid-sized institution, with a high proportion of students enrolled in sub-bachelor level degrees, and relatively few enrolled in postgraduate courses. This has led to a relatively young student cohort, although in most other ways, Enabling University’s student body is similar to the national average. University leaders report that unpacking the intersections of student identity and context is essential in developing institutional equity strategies, which has led to a primarily structural inequality approach in several areas, including mandated, structurally focused professional development for staff; university requirements for teaching staff to maintain ongoing discussions around expectations through a variety of communication channels, including regular in-class discussions; and actively collecting and operationalizing student feedback on administrative processes. As the university leader said, “The structural inequality framework prompts a focus on institutional practices, rather than problematizing students.”



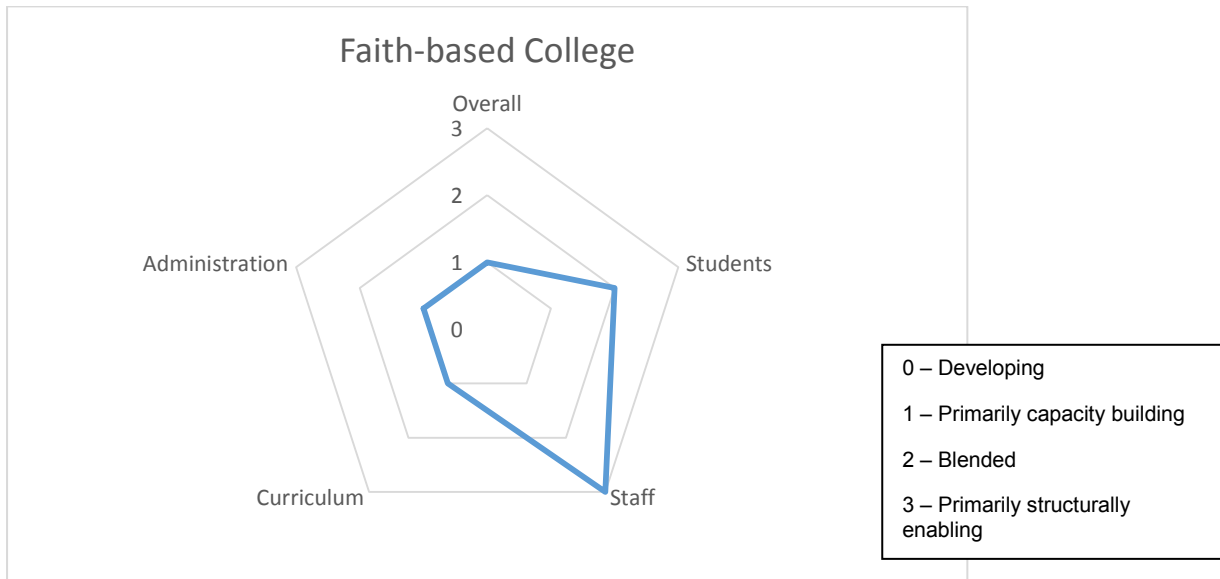
Evolving University was established as a university in the 1990s. It is a relatively small institution, but serves a large area that includes both an urban region and a dispersed rural/regional city region. Approximately a quarter of its students study part-time. According to its leaders, Evolving University adopts a structurally enabling approach to supporting its students overall. The leaders emphasized that “structural inequalities that arise from groups being excluded from equal opportunities can *manifest* in higher education practices as exclusionary discourse, inflexible enrolment policies etc. rather than these practices *being* structural inequality (emphasis original).” The data provided for the case study indicated a strong students-as-partners ethos and curriculum design principles that require both developing cultural resources and acknowledgement of structural issues for students, indicating a blended approach in these areas. For example, Evolving University has attempted to change the language and expectations around learning support to make it clear that this support is universally part of the learning experience, while still seeking to build capacity or help students develop new skills.



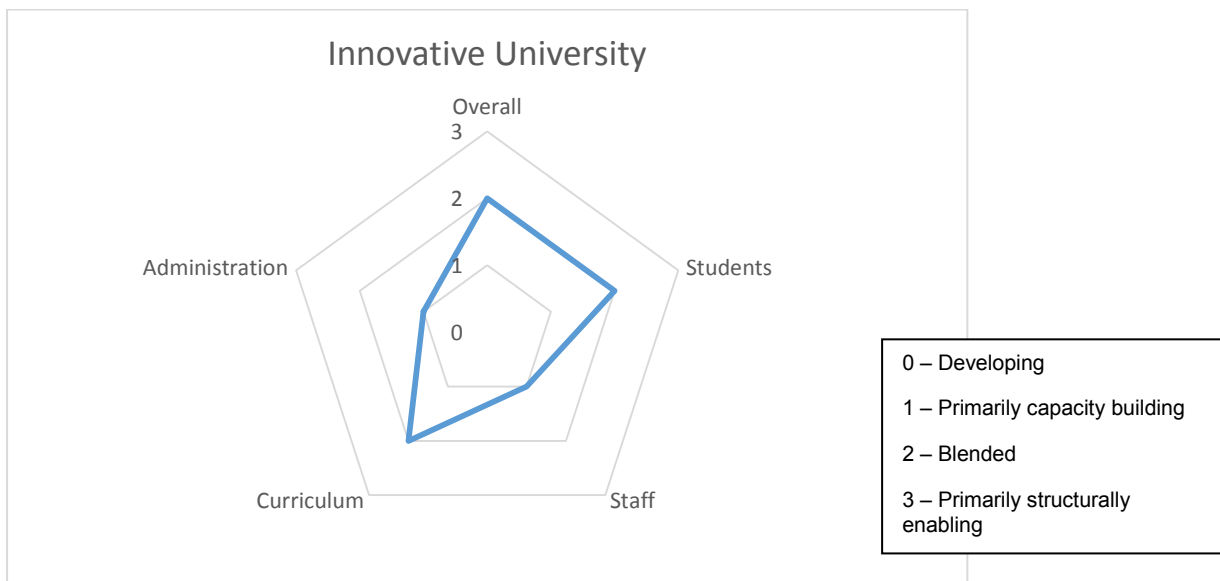
Faith-based College is a small institution with a strong theological focus to its studies. Many of its students are mature aged, typically with established careers, and it has a relatively high proportion of postgraduate students. Due to its small, college-based student experience, students are often well-known to teaching and administrative staff, which has led to a strong contextual understanding in staff development of typical issues faced by students. In other



areas, however, Faith-based College typically relies on a capacity building approach, saying, “Less attention has been paid to structural inequality at the [institution’s] governance or policy level.” As part of its daily activities, Faith-based College tends to provide relatively passive interventions to support students rather than active outreach and normalization.

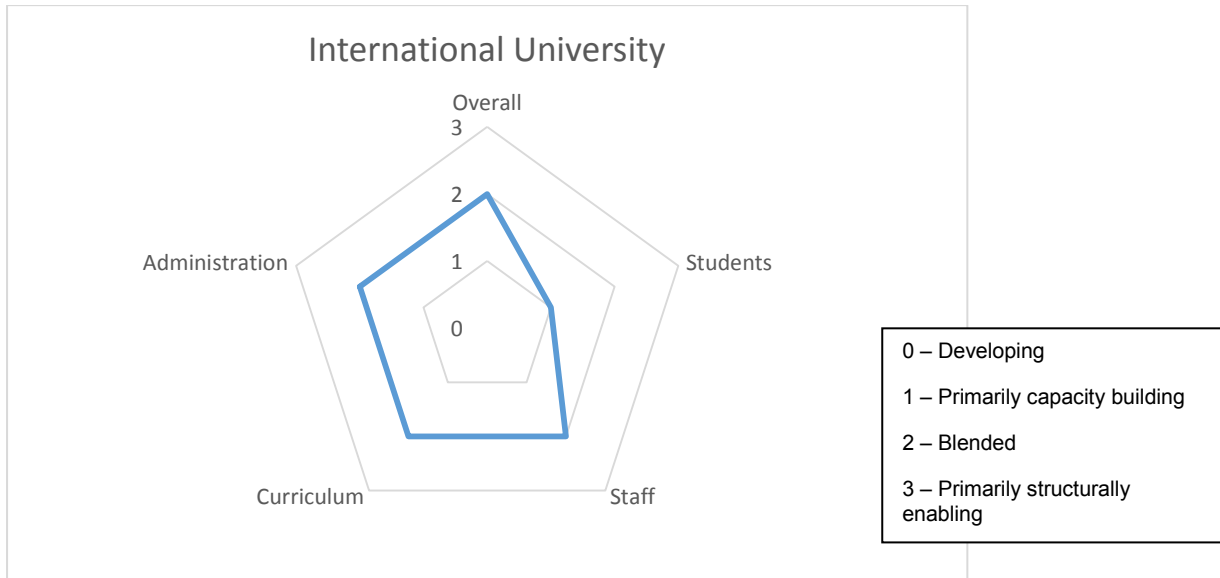


Innovative University has a strong institutional focus on inclusion, and an equally strong focus on incorporating technology into its teaching and in establishing strong partnerships with industry. Nearly a quarter of its students are external or study purely online, and another quarter have multi-modal attendance. The three university leaders who provided data for this case study differed in whether Innovative University adopted a blended or primarily capacity building approach, although they noted that the online environment required more awareness of structural inequalities; a similar sentiment was expressed by the leaders of Regional University. One of the leaders also observed that “the funding model of CSP... entrench[es] systems and impact[s] on institutional practice,” whereas a HEPPP funded project had been used to build staff capacity to create enabling academic environments and curricula over the course of several years.

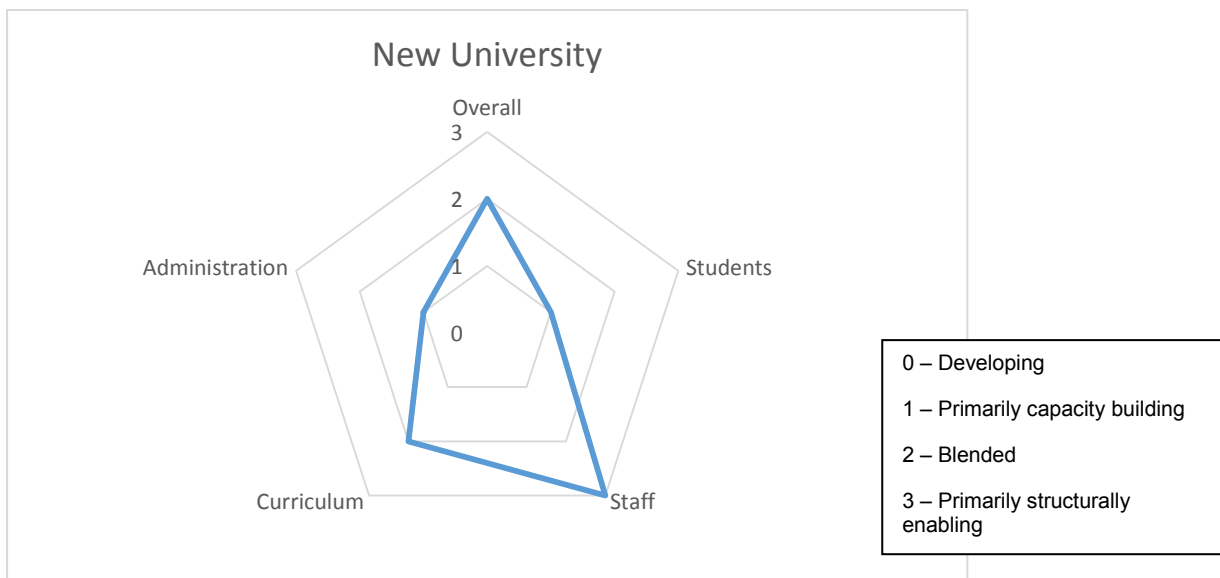


International University is a research-intensive university. It has a large student population and is well-known for the sizeable numbers of international students that it attracts. International University adopted a blended approach in most areas examined in this study.

According to university leaders, “some programs focus on changing practice to be more inclusive, and on removing barriers such as financial disadvantage and making processes more accessible. Other programs focus on developing students’ skills to navigate university systems, career planning and world of work.” The leaders maintained that both capacity building and structurally enabling approaches are necessary and complementary.



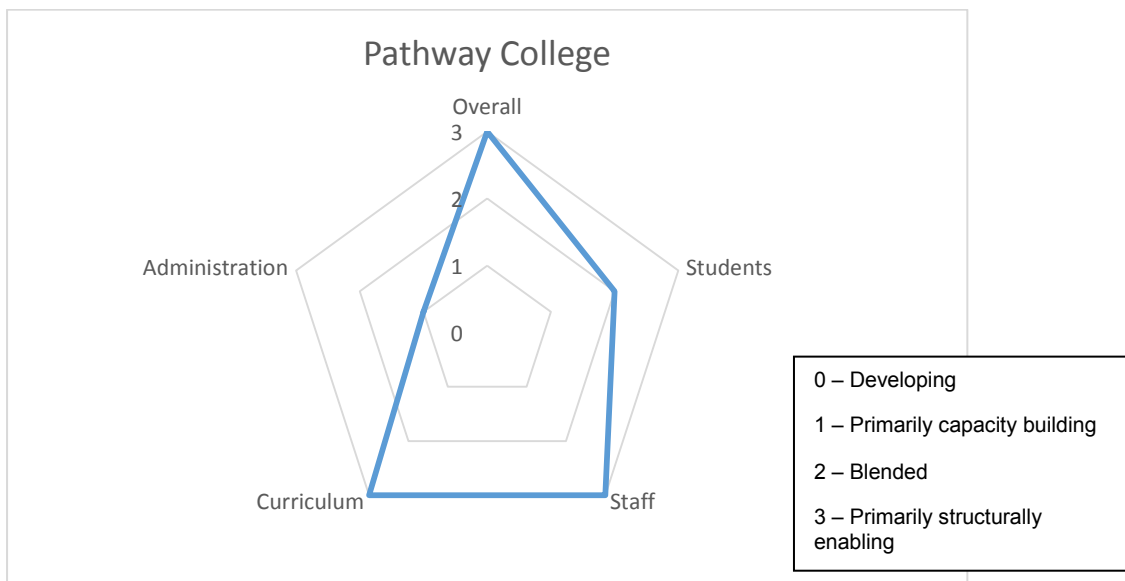
New University was created to service the suburban region of a capital city. It has a number of campuses in the area, and a significant city campus. New University has a policy of open access, and a strong institutional focus on quality of teaching. This is reflected in a strong structural inequality approach to staff development, and an acknowledgement of structural issues in its curriculum design requirements. However, in the student and administration areas, New University adopts a primarily capacity building model. As the academic leader said, “We seek to help our students to be ‘university ready’ and our institution to be ‘student ready’... both strategies are important.”



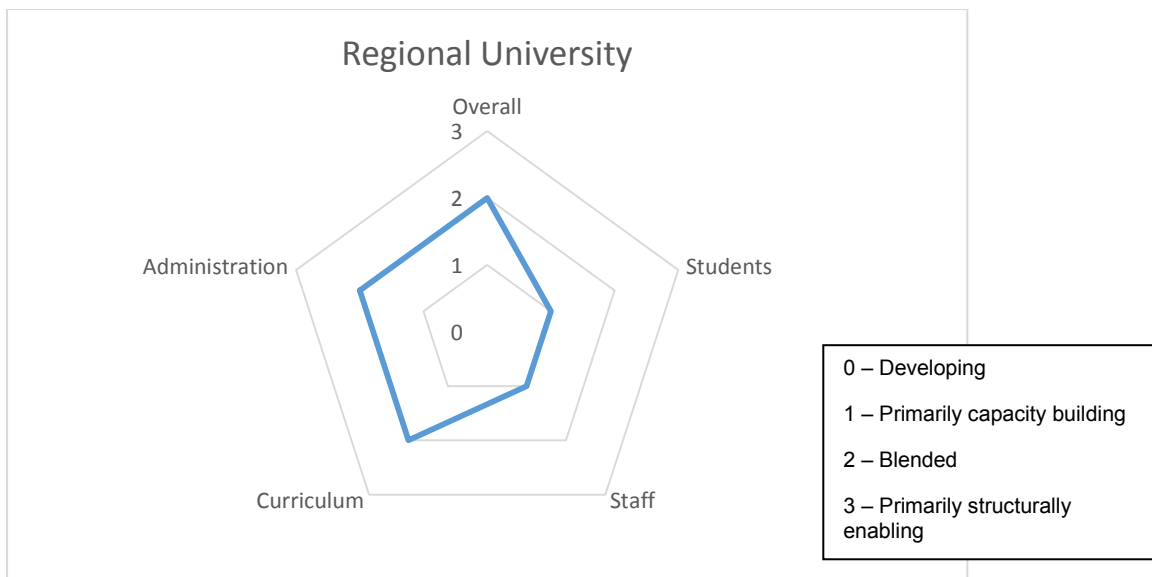
Pathway College is a relatively small institution which provides a range of pathway and foundation studies to enable access to higher education for those without the necessary qualifications to enter a Bachelor degree directly. Pathway College is associated with a university to facilitate transfers; for this project, Pathway College participated but its affiliated university did not. This separation prevented the data collected from being unduly skewed by

two associated institutions, although it is possible that Pathway College and the university have different approaches to structural inequality.

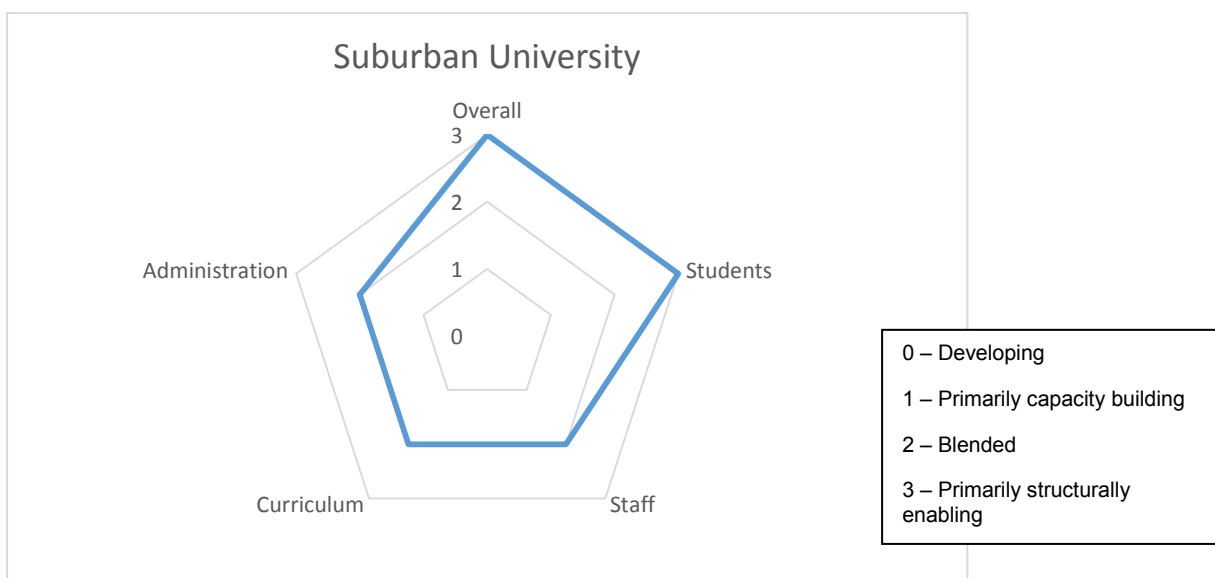
Pathway College has a strong structural inequality focus to its programs that is highly informed by the literature and seeks to create an ‘active’ culture to include students. Institutional leaders stated that, “our approaches to addressing these inequalities considers the role of the meaning-making process as central ... People create the structures, through the language adopted and discourses that are constituted.” Although student administration is more traditional, the structural inequality model is apparent in both curriculum design and staff professional development, and (to a more blended extent) in the student area as well. Staff are currently engaged in an action research project based on the ways they implement culturally responsive pedagogies, including explicitly stating expectations of students and acknowledging the power relationships that exist between students and the institution.



Regional University is a medium-sized university in a regional city location. A distinctive feature of this university is the high proportion of international students, and the strong engagement with its regional city location. Despite these factors, Regional University adopts a primarily capacity building approach in engaging with its students and staff, although its curriculum and student administration areas are blended with the structural inequality approach. They observed that increasing the range of online offerings subjects had provided the opportunity to bring “a new level of scrutiny to the design, development and review of all courses” across the university. According to its leaders, Regional University seeks a policy approach that “sits at the intersection between cultural capital and structural inequality” and “fosters an approach that is strength based and develops agency of equity students, as well as recognizing the role of the institution in addressing structural barriers.”

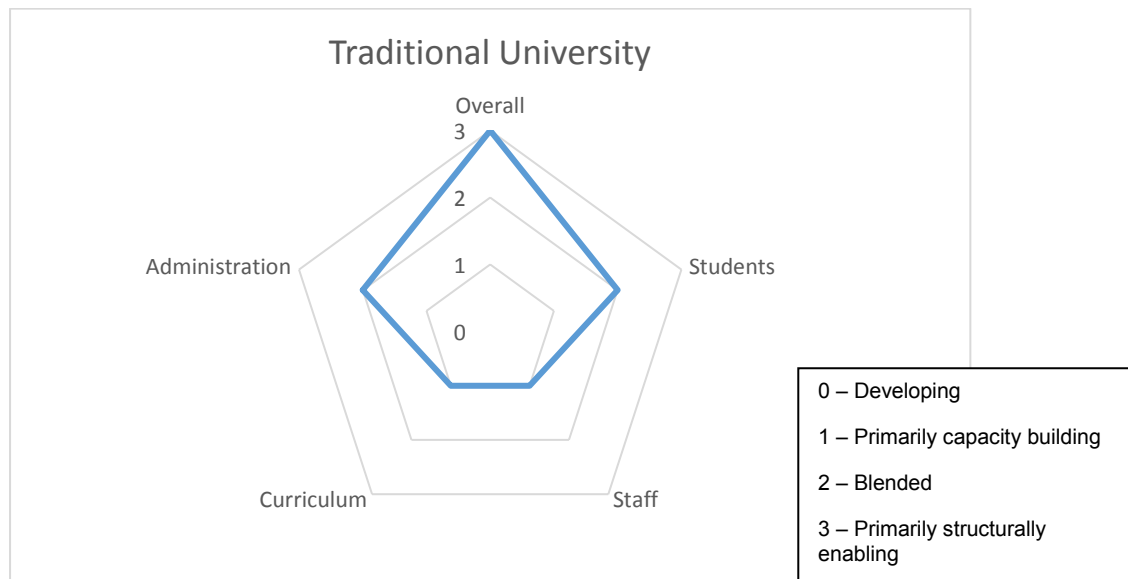


Suburban University had its origins in the expansion of higher education in the 1960s. It is a large university offering a wide range of courses. It includes a main campus around half an hour from the city and several smaller campuses. It has strong community links to its broader suburban environment, and a strong equity focus. Unusually for the institutions reported here, it has a primarily structural inequality approach in the *students* focus area, but adopts a more blended approach in the other areas. This structurally enabling model among students was developed through encouraging a culture of students assisting students, through the development of peer guides to university study on a range of topics; welcome phone calls from commencing students from discipline peers; peer-assisted study sessions; and social and study groups for students from specific backgrounds. All of these programs also provide feedback to the university on an ongoing basis to allow an institutional response.

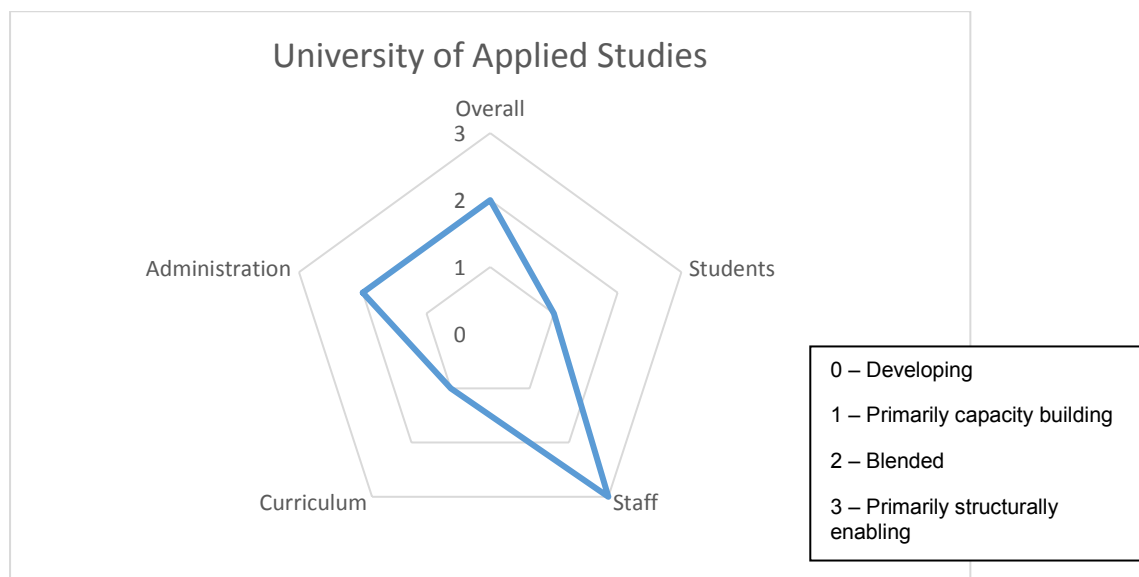


Traditional University is a long-established institution with a wide range of degree programs. It is known for its highly competitive entry and the relatively high proportion of school-leavers in its first-year intake. Despite a long history as a research-focused institution, Traditional University’s leaders currently use a structural inequality approach to determine “whether processes, practices and structures are inadvertently causing unintended consequences for particular groups of students.” Online tools and specialist staff, including advisors are used to assist students navigate the university’s administrative systems, and a strong policy

background exists to integrate careers advice and assist students. However, staff and curricula are more strongly weighted towards capacity building. Student feedback (provided by the university leaders) commented on the “overwhelmingly inclusive feel.”

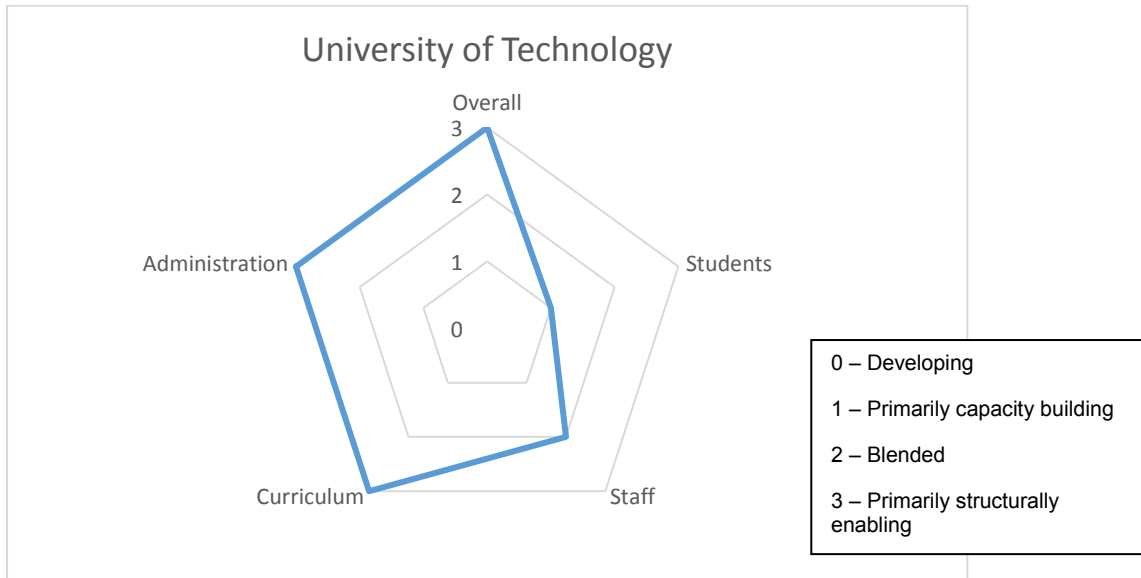


The University of Applied Studies has a reputation for practical courses and applied courses, partly the result of its origins as an institute of technology. It is small to medium in size, has strong industry-education links (particularly in sport) and offers courses in several professional areas. The student population profile is close to the national average. Although the University of Applied Studies’ staff development programs have a primarily structural inequality approach, like many other institutions, the administration and students areas are informed by a primarily capacity building model. Overall, the University of Applied Studies adopts a blended approach, but seeks to ‘improve’ some capacity building programs to address structural mechanisms more effectively.

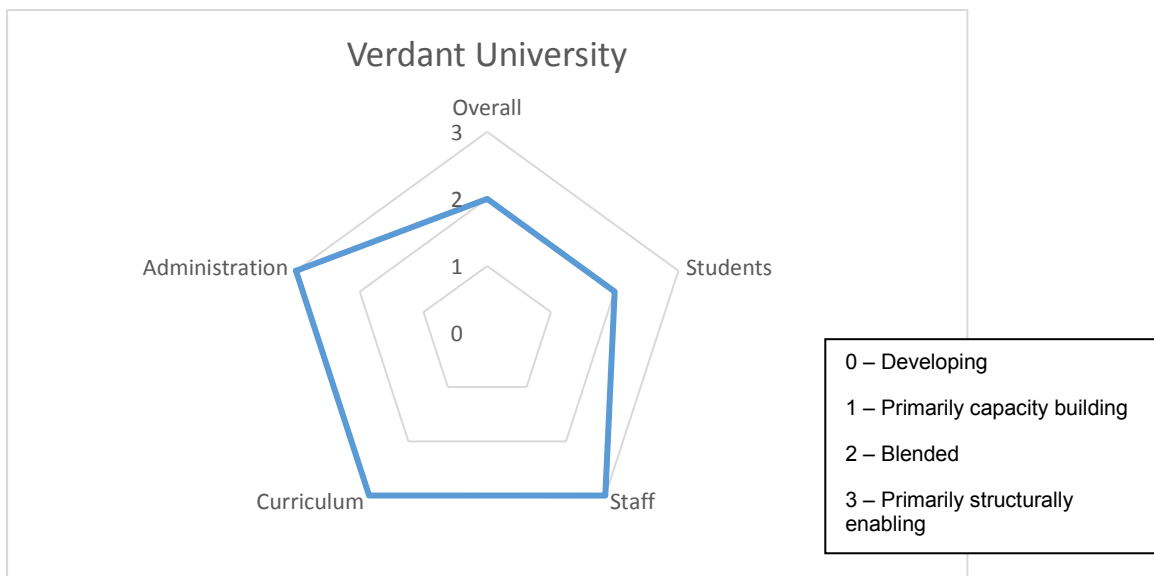


The University of Technology is a large university offering a wide range of applied and professional programs. It has strong industry partnerships, a focus on on-campus education, and aspires to create an inclusive culture for a diverse body of students. This inclusive culture is aligned with a clear awareness of structural issues in most aspects of the university’s activity, through an intersectional development framework for staff, extensive curriculum development and review processes, and a project identifying and addressing

administrative barriers to participation. The academic leader identified the value of promoting inclusion in the institution through a number of action plans and strategies, including the University Strategic Plan.



Verdant University was established in the 1970s and is well known for its extensive bushland suburban campus. It has a long history of outreach to students from non-traditional backgrounds, including provision for alternative entry requirements. It is known for its focus on health and Asian studies. Perhaps because of its long focus on student equity, Verdant University has a strong structural inequality approach to most areas examined in this study, although university leaders identified a balance between that and building student capacity as being ‘key.’ They identified a structural inequality approach as particularly beneficial for students with disabilities and Indigenous students, but warned that, ‘the structural approach is ideal, but dependent on significant cultural and organisational shifts. The cultural capital approach is easier to accommodate.’



## Findings

The case studies presented above are necessarily limited, in that they are based on the perspectives of academic leaders. As the leaders themselves sometimes acknowledged, they are unable to comment in detail on every aspect of the institution, although several

attempted to overcome this by drawing in other institutional leaders who were better placed to provide this insight. Bearing in mind these limitations, several observations were able to be drawn about enacting structurally enabling change in universities and NUHEPs.

It was apparent that there was an appreciation across the case studies that institutions needed to grapple with structural inequality. However, considerable variation exists across the sector and within institutions in how they dealt with student equity issues. In each of the five areas examined, the institutions encompassed approaches ranging from primarily capacity building to primarily structurally enabling; even in areas such as student administration, where there was a stronger tendency for institutions to use a capacity building lens, institutions were identified that were working to reduce structural barriers to engagement for non-traditional students. A tendency was observed that institutions with higher proportions and longer traditions of enrolling non-traditional students were somewhat more likely to be using structural approaches, but this was not universally true (compare Traditional University and Regional University, for example). Academic leaders themselves tended to point to policies, plans and institutional projects as being important in enacting change. While it is perhaps understandable that academic leaders would highlight the importance of tools of institutional leadership, this does appear to be a consistent theme in the case studies.

Similarly, most institutions varied in at least some areas, adopting different types of approach according to local needs or cultures. A common theme, however, was that structural inequality was particularly well understood in the disability space, where there are legal requirements for reducing structural barriers. This adds further evidence to the idea that institutional will—in this case, to minimise legal liability—rather than tradition or type of institution, was important in enacting structurally enabling change.

These findings together suggest that institutional leadership has a large influence on determining whether institutions adopt a structural approach or not, and that institutions can make those changes in one area but not others as institutional context demands. This is important, as it suggests that leadership may be able to drive change in these areas—should there be a desire to do so—without constraints from contextual factors such as type of institution, size, research intensiveness, or location. That is, institutions can enact structurally enabling changes to their cultures regardless of whether such an outlook is ‘part of their DNA’ or a relatively recent understanding. This is a positive finding for making higher education in Australia more accommodating of a diverse range of students. Models for exerting institutional change will be discussed in the final chapter.

# Structurally enabling practice: detailed case studies

This section presents more detailed case studies from four institutions, which have established strong examples of structurally enabling practice in one of the major area of our conceptual framework. The four case studies, and the area in which they demonstrate enabling practice, are the University of Technology (staff), Verdant University (students), Enabling University (curriculum) and Dual-Sector University (administration).

These case studies are presented here as a resource to provide practitioners and institutional leaders with models to reduce structural inequalities in specific areas of their own institutions. As discussed in the previous chapter, although institutional leaders were largely split on whether a blended or a structurally enabling approach was most suitable overall, providing models of practice focused on removing structural barriers may be useful to both groups given the focus to this point on capacity building programs in the literature. The individual programs in each case study are not unique to those institutions; in each case, however, the degree of coordination and integration between the different programs was striking. The case studies were also explicitly positioned as intended to reduce structural inequalities for students and make the institution more accessible to a wide variety of students.

The initial selection of the case studies was based on the data from the institutional questionnaires provided by academic leaders. Based on this information, we identified a shortlist of respondents, who were interviewed again to gain further detail about aspects of their institution's approach and specific activities or programs. From this subset, the four cases studies were chosen.

Several limitations to this analysis must be acknowledged. By their very nature, the initiatives highlighted by these case studies are context-dependent — what works in one institution may not work in another. Acknowledging this, however, does not mean that there is nothing to learn from the case studies. Successful implementation relies on a sensitive range of factors including resources and need, as well as institutional will and leadership, as will be discussed in the following chapter. Further, these case studies do not seek to be an exhaustive description of practice in the sector, due to the limited nature and perspectives captured in this study; no doubt further examples of structurally enabling practice may be found elsewhere. Finally, it is important to note that the case study examples are presented only at the level of theoretical justification. It is essential that further evaluations of programs' effects are conducted and reported.

## Staff (University of Technology)

### Broad context

Teaching activities are at the heart of the higher education enterprise, and staff—including both academic staff and professional staff associated with the broad work around teaching—are frequently the primary representatives of the institution that students encounter. The character of these interactions can therefore have a major impact on students' sense of belonging. Conversely, ensuring staff are adequately supported to have positive interactions and create enabling environments may have a disproportionately large impact on students' perceptions of institutional culture.

In this case study, the content and reach of staff professional development was of particular interest. Structurally enabling practice in this area involves training staff to understand structural inequality, to support them in altering classroom teaching, course communication, or other major areas of discourse, to have an explicit focus on inclusive discourse. While the



basis of such a system was reported by multiple institutions, it appeared most holistic, mature and well-developed at the University of Technology.

### **Specific initiatives**

The University of Technology's staff development system uses a distinctive tiered approach that initially arose from a concerted effort to streamline the various specialist training offered by internal experts. Like most institutions, it includes mandatory online modules that address legislative requirements such as equal opportunity and anti-discrimination practices. With this as a foundation, there are then both online and blended modules on more advanced topics, starting with an explicit intersectional, literature-based approach (e.g. inclusive teaching) and then moving to further specialised topics (e.g. Indigenous inclusion). This was available to a wide range of staff who might interact with students, not just established academic staff on continuing contracts.

From an institutional perspective, an advantage to this approach is the efficiency and effectiveness allowed by collapsing multiple legislative reporting and best-practice exercises into a single system. It also allowed an escape from the 'siloed' approach that is a typical consequence of different areas of an institution working in a progressive but dispersed manner. This change ensured that staff were aware of intersectional identities, and better aware of the impact of aspects of those identities beyond the staff member's immediate purview. An example given by the institutional leader was that a student who is of low SES background, identifies as Indigenous and lives in a regional area would not be served adequately by staff working in an SES-focused silo, as the cultural implications and aspects of their location would be missed. The zigzag interactions previously required to negotiate institutional silos, as the institutional leader noted, "doesn't recognise how people's lives play out." This understanding of students' complex identities is built in to the University of Technology's staff training, including activities that have staff reflect on their own 'intersectional selves'.

### **Case analysis**

An insight raised by the institutional leader related to the differences in approach—the silos—between student- and staff-focused areas of the university. In the former ('student world'), the focus is on delivering benefit to the student — a drive towards 'substantive equality' related to Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program goals. Meanwhile, the staff space at the University of Technology, revolving around systems, policies and processes, operates within a structural inequality paradigm that highlights the barriers that such systems can create, but misses the clear focus of students as agents and partners of the student-focused silo. In the process of drawing staff in these spaces together through their integrated training approach, gaps and opportunities emerged. For example, the work required in developing policy to address the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program laid a foundation for staff to explicate task-based inherent requirements for their courses, rather than focusing on students' individual traits. Clear inherent requirements allowed students to select their courses based on their own understanding of their capabilities.

The distinctive approach to staff development taken by the University of Technology is therefore one that arose from existing, institution-specific circumstances. However, its basic DNA may be able to be developed where sufficient institutional will exists. One issue may be that the transformation drew upon pre-existing sources of expertise, and if such experts are not already working within an institution a consultation-like arrangement might have to be arranged, or new roles created. Although this problem is unlikely to arise in most universities given their large sizes, smaller universities or NUHEPs may potentially confront this problem. In addition, it would form a multi-year endeavour involving cooperation across organisational areas, with all the corresponding difficulties such a project involves. Nonetheless, the

advantages, both in terms of student and staff experience and long-term financial implications, appear to outweigh such challenges.

## **Students (Verdant University)**

### **Broad context**

Many Australian higher education institutions have recently begun to cultivate partnership between students and staff in learning and teaching, as well as in broader aspects of the student experience. While there are some precedents to the approach, such as peer-assisted learning, over the past decade, students-as-partners has become an increasingly prominent ideology both domestically and internationally (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2016; Matthews, 2016).

The students-as-partners agenda poses an interesting link to structural inequality, as the possibility of partnership with a diverse range of students could prove transformative and help move the equity agenda forward — and yet, it is essential to adopt such practices in a consciously inclusive manner, or risk reinforcing the existing hierarchies and power relations of the institution (see Felten et al., 2013). The student voice is also becoming evident in arenas beyond the classroom, as more institutions launch initiatives seeking to co-develop an epistemology of higher learning and come to a shared understanding about the uses and norms of on-campus space. This is clear at Verdant University, which seeks input from its students in multiple arenas through a wide variety of measures.

### **Specific initiatives**

An exemplar initiative at Verdant University is a student-led ‘change agent’ program introduced in 2017, which allows students to propose and lead research projects around, as the institutional leader put it, ‘what they think can improve learning and teaching experience at the university’. Students undertaking these projects have individual mentoring from staff and receive course credit in recognition of the work. Receiving credit for service learning in this way still appears to be unusual in many countries, where the majority of partnership activities described in the students-as-partners literature occur outside of coursework (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). The difficulty of scaling partnership activities to larger numbers of students remains due to the intensive, mentorship nature of the program. Students in the program also receive an honorarium to allow the dissemination of their outcomes, including at national conferences such as HERDSA. The projects themselves are often highly aligned with structural inequality approaches. For example, one project underway at the time of research seeks to use a consultation process to examine how assessment rubrics at the institution can be made more accessible to students.

Another commendable feature of the institution is its explicit organisational support for student groupings, beyond and in partnership with the traditional student association framework. There are support groups for LGBTIQ+ students, students with disabilities or medical conditions, and students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. These groups aid transition into higher education and can contribute to the success and retention of these students. For example, the culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds group was formed to provide a support network for international students, to build a sense of belonging, and involves a series of events through the year (such as guest speakers) that allows a collective of staff and students to discuss common issues. The LGBTIQ+ group is particularly connected to faculty and features a governance committee that consists of both staff and students focused on LGBTIQ+ initiatives, allowing and promoting joint decision-making. The group therefore performs as both a social group connecting students and staff as colleagues, and to enact change within the institution. While similar groups may be found at other universities, the coordinated framework of student participation in university activity strengthens Verdant University’s approach.

## Case analysis

Notably, the institutional leader for Verdant University suggested that “significant cultural and organisational shifts”—for instance, in staff understanding and prioritisation—were required to accommodate a structural approach. In other words, while the right policies or initiatives can be in place, their success will be dependent on individuals across the institution being willing to support that work — to understand the ‘why’ of the university’s diversity aims. This underscores the need for appropriate staff development, as exemplified by the University of Technology above, and in which the institutional leader for Verdant University says they “struggled”. Interestingly, while these kinds of cultural and organisational shifts have already (largely) occurred for Indigenous support, the institution also boasts a range of capacity building programs. This indicates that the approaches can co-exist and serve different purposes at different times, boosting an institution’s responsiveness to these issues.

## Curriculum (Enabling University)

### Broad context

Like teaching, curricula have a unique ability to impact students, as they must be encountered by necessity by all students at an institution. An institution that pursues a primarily structural inequality approach in this area will seek to build inclusivity and access in such a way that it leads to positive outcomes for all students.

A useful metaphor in this area may be the extending the concept of ‘universal design principles’ to curriculum design. Universal design emerged in the 1970s in architecture and urban design. A classic example is kerb ramps that connect roads to footpaths; a critical function to support wheelchair users but effectively serving everyone, from pedestrians to cyclists (see King-Sears, 2009; McGuire, Scott, & Shaw, 2006). To extend this metaphor to the curriculum, the accessibility movement may forge the path towards broader inclusivity and benefits for all students. Enabling University was of note here, reporting a range of measures embedded into their curriculum design and review.

### Specific initiatives

At Enabling University, universal design for learning has been applied through developing a range of teaching and assessment methods in each course; designing plain-language, non-exclusionary learning outcomes; carefully selected resources; and well-designed teaching materials. One example provided was that the institution’s business and law faculty mandates printed versions of all information, in a reversal of the movement many institutions have taken towards online-only provision of those materials, which allows students to study while incarcerated. Edyburn (2010) argues that universal design is a learned skill, not a natural trait embodied by certain teachers; in line with this, Enabling University offers staff development modules that specifically involve universal design and is developing a set of principles that can be used across a wide range of institutional functions and areas.

Enabling University has also developed extensive curriculum mapping to support both skill development across the program, as well as minimising the stresses of both part-time and full-time study. For instance, progressive learning outcomes have been developed, learning and support has been structured to facilitate transition into and out of study, and overall coursework loads balanced via the scheduling of assessment tasks. These considerations are important as not every student will be equally equipped to manage intense periods of workload. As an institution with multiple campuses and students learning via different modes, there is considerable attention given to developing equivalent tasks in terms of their complexity and cognitive demand, even if the tasks are not identical. There is also a focus on effective and timely feedback to aid the reaching of learning outcomes, including self and peer assessment supported by teachers. Notably, curriculum is supported by a range of staff embedded in individual schools and departments, including academic developers, learning

designers, and learning and career advisers. This embedding of policies and implementation was identified as a powerful aid; school staff were more aware of specific requirements and cultures within the disciplines and also possessed a working knowledge of discipline-specific cohorts and their particular needs.

As is typical for large Australian institutions, and more broadly in the student retention space, Enabling University has developed a holistic system to support students in their first year of study—but with an emphasis on curricula. There is an attempt to build ‘a sense of purpose... and belonging to the course’ in their introductory units by having staff contextualise courses within students’ programs and future careers. Moreover, curriculum content is tailored to individual cohorts and locations. This aim is supported by mandatory professional development courses for teaching staff, as well as third-party providers. In addition, while all units aim for timely feedback, as mentioned above, it was mandated that first-year undergraduate and postgraduate coursework units have an assessment task submitted and returned to students with feedback “within the first third of the teaching period”—usually four weeks. These practices are reviewed in a systematic fashion by a collaborative team of staff and is ‘informed by a sophisticated business intelligence system’. This ensures any responses are evidence-based, and occur on an ongoing, systematic fashion across the university.

Finally, there has been a sustained project to embed career advice into the curriculum. This includes work-integrated learning in all undergraduate courses and aiming to have assessment tasks be ‘as authentic as possible’ with the aim of replicating tasks specific to and occurring in each student’s disciplinary field. As noted above, embedding careers development staff within departments assisted in this goal. There are also a ‘growing number of courses’ that take an e-portfolio approach, where students build a ‘course-long workbook’ to record and reflect upon their understandings of what they have gained from their learning activities and provide further evidence of employability skills.

### **Case analysis**

The takeaway from this case study is the holistic nature of the range of initiatives – every aspect of the student’s experience with the curriculum was considered and managed. The success of the university in this area was echoed by a currently enrolled student who was interviewed about their experiences. The student supported the university’s actions to examine the balance of coursework across a program and use of authentic assessment. In regard to embedding of course advice, the student summed it up as “impeccable”, highlighting the value of a mandatory careers-oriented course and the career advice staff (“one of the most active departments”) in particular.

## **Administration (Dual-Sector University)**

### **Broad context**

As described in the previous chapter, structural inequalities can arise in administration in a variety of ways, including alienating language, inflexibility, poorly conceived or applied data analytics, or poor coordination between service areas of the institution. Several institutions in this study reported that they were attempting to increase coordination through the centralisation of administrative teams; moving from distribution across multiple faculties to a single site (often labelled ‘HQ’). At this single point of access, students were typically able to receive support for everything from course advice, program planning, fees and special consideration, to graduation services, facilities management (e.g. ID cards) and transcripts.

However, these efforts, while worthy, represent a passive, capacity-building solution; students are still required to actively seek out help, and the administrative barriers for some students created by language, inflexibility and bureaucratism may remain, or become amplified, if centralisation is the major response to addressing structural barriers in this area.

An extension of this potential shortcoming is the finding that multiple institutions have developed a 'chatbot' for students to interact with, which intelligently pulls relevant information from the administrative jungle to answer queries. This adjunct to face-to-face enquiries may broaden the capacity of an institution to support a growing student body. Again, however, work must be done to make the administrative language of the answers provided accessible, comprehensible and actionable for all students, and to make sure all students are aware of relevant policies as they become pertinent without having to search for them. The provision of institutional knowledge, automated or not, will rely on the more invisible work of crafting accessible and sensible policies that are articulated to students as they need, rather than simply when or if consulted. In this respect, the set of practices taken by Dual-Sector University strongly stood out among our survey respondents.

### **Specific initiatives**

Broadly speaking, the institution takes a proactive approach, particularly regarding identifying students who face difficult personal situations. Prior to commencement, students at Dual-Sector University receive a survey that includes questions designed to identify their preparedness for study, their financial and living situations, and to gauge their support networks. Note that students are therefore identified on an individual basis, rather than as a member of a 'deficit' equity group, and may choose whether or how much personal information to disclose. Survey respondents receive personalised emails containing information about relevant support and aid opportunities, and, by request, phone calls from the centralised student support unit. Post-commencement, undergraduate students are provided near-peer mentors (later-stage students on an employment contract) and can attend weekly meetings for five weeks that provides an introduction to student support services, the physical campus and other expectations and institutional knowledge. Further reflecting a whole-of-institution approach, teaching staff can refer 'at-risk' students in the early stages of each semester, prompting an email with targeted information. These flagged students may also receive follow-ups by staff at either the institutional or faculty level.

Another policy of note was the ability of faculty deans to exercise discretionary powers to increase administrative flexibility (particularly in terms of assessment administration to allow students to progress in their program). This can assist in circumstances where a student may need an extension or supplementary alternative for an assignment but not have undergone severe hardship and therefore qualified through existing special consideration procedures. Lecturers also can grant five day extensions at their discretion. Recently, Dual-Sector University has introduced a process where students are automatically offered alternative assessments for marginal fails of courses (marks of 45-49). This has had the impact of reducing the number of discretionary cases, and accords with an explicit attempt to, as the institutional leader put it, 'alter formal and informal institutional structures to remove inequalities'.

### **Case analysis**

Dual-Sector University demonstrates a whole-pipeline approach to administration. This was emphatically confirmed by an interviewed student. Many of their peers were said to have good relationships with lecturers; for those who were unused to university, they acted as a "security blanket ... for them to succeed". Moreover, the student's experience of transition from full-time to part-time study was "really smooth", as the "university really understands where I am". Consultations with course coordinators or the degree coordinator were available to guide the student through the process.

## **Findings**

A common thread in these detailed case studies is the importance of coordination and integration, generally over a number of years, in reducing structural barriers for students. A slightly paradoxical message, and one that we will explore further in the next chapter, is that,

while large-scale shifts may be necessary in many areas to fully accommodate structural inequality approaches, piecemeal progress can be made. Sometimes different areas of the institution may work in parallel or on divergent paths, and the reconciliation of these areas not only has logistical and financial value but possibly significant improvement in flexibility, responsiveness, and being able to facilitate diversity and inclusion initiatives. Ultimately, incremental progress requires eventual coordination to provide efficiencies and unite disparate programs. The recurring identification of staff professional development may indicate an organic way this coordination can occur, by increasing staff awareness, and providing opportunities for collegial interaction with staff (and, indeed, students in their role as partners) from across the university and outside their organisational silo. Professional development therefore allows an opportunity for distributed leadership to enact evidence-based change across the institution.

# Reducing structural inequalities in higher education institutions

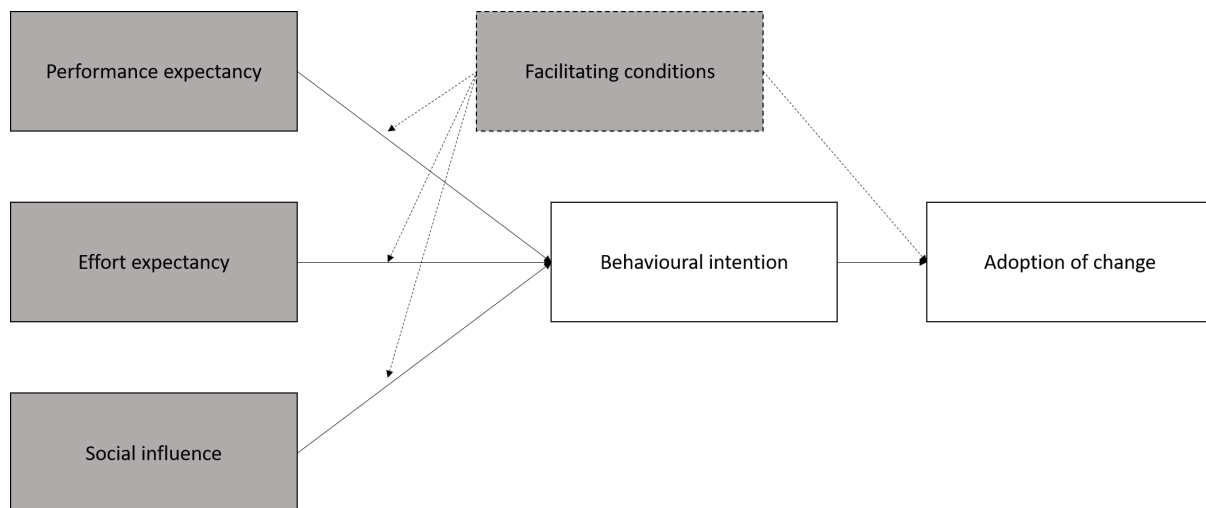
This chapter describes a change management approach to reducing structural inequalities in higher education institutions. Based on the analysis of the case studies presented in the previous chapters of this report, with particular focus on the experience of university leaders provided in the research interviews, we identified common blockers and facilitators of institutional change that aims to minimise structural inequalities.

Given institutional complexity and the necessity of buy-in from disparate stakeholders, we believe the most favourable approach to change is an incremental and modular process using a distributed leadership approach. We present this integrated model of institutional cultural change with reference to the existing change management literature and evidence from the case studies.

## Change management within higher education institutions

In this section, we review the major factors facilitating or blocking institutional change identified in this study. For an organisation to survive and prosper, change management is key (Todnem By, 2005). Yet, while the potential for change may be constant and ever-present, organisational change itself may be unpredictable—often reactive, discontinuous or ad hoc, and triggered by organisational crisis rather than a planned or continuous process (Burnes, 2004; de Wit & Meyer, 2005; Luecke, 2003; L. Nelson, 2003). Research indicates that around 70 per cent of all change programs fail (Balogun & Hailey, 2008) due to four overarching reasons: poor goal focus or vision; unexpected or unplanned external events; low buy-in; and change fatigue (Beer, Eisenstat, & Spector, 1990; Blackman & Kennedy, 2011; H. Robbins & Finley, 1998; Senior & Fleming, 2006).

It is clear from the previous chapters that some institutions are more open to the idea of a structural inequality approach than others, and that different institutions have prioritised different areas of university activity to promote structural changes. To address this issue, we have adopted the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) model (Venkatesh, Morris, Davis, & Davis, 2003). This model is an empirically validated synthesis of eight change acceptance models used in sociology, psychology and communications theory—the theory of reasoned action; the technology acceptance model; the motivational model; the theory of planned behaviour; a model combining the technology acceptance model and the theory of planned behaviour; the model of PC utilization; innovation diffusion theory; and social cognitive theory (Venkatesh et al., 2003). In Venkatesh et al's 2003 model, the 14 initial constructs from these other theoretical models were reduced to four; a later revision of the model (Venkatesh, Thong, & Xu, 2016) rearranged these factors into three primary factors, which are then moderated by individual-level and higher-level contextual factors. Although this model was originally developed to explain the acceptance and usage of technology—explaining between 70 per cent and 80 per cent of variance in intention to use a technology—the model has been validated in other fields outside of information systems (reviewed in Venkatesh et al 2016), and the change acceptance models on which it is based are largely independent of the technology field. We have therefore adopted it to explain intention to use a structurally enabling approach to addressing student success and outcomes. Facilitators and blockers have also been placed within this framework to identify mechanisms for increasing the likely acceptance of this approach within institutions across the sector.



**Figure 4: The UTAUT model (Venkatesh et al., 2003)**

The major factors in the UTAUT model are performance expectancy (the degree to which an individual believes that using the approach will help attain desired goals); effort expectancy (the degree of ease of use of the approach); and social influence (the degree to which an individual perceives that important others believe they should use the new approach). These individual beliefs contribute to the behavioural intention to adopt the new system, which in turn leads to adoption of the change and thus a new outcome. As noted above, facilitating conditions, including individual or higher-level contextual factors, moderate between the behavioural intention and actual adoption of the change.

Effective adoption of structurally enabling approaches within a university are therefore dependent on high performance expectancy compared to a capacity building (or even a traditional) approach, low effort expectancy, high social influence (from positional and distributed leaders, particularly within the local area), and establishing facilitating conditions within the institution.

## **Performance expectancy of structurally enabling approaches**

The case studies presented in this report indicated a high level of performance expectancy for structurally enabling approaches among institutional leaders. All of the responses to the institutional questionnaires expressed support for the usefulness of a structural inequality approach to their institution (even those who were using a primarily capacity building approach). As noted in the introduction, structural inequality places the locus of control for improving student outcomes within the institution's remit. This increases the potential performance expectancy for the approach by placing the responsibility for enacting change on institutional actors who can be influenced by local policies and culture, instead of on students who vary in their levels of engagement with capacity building programs.

A finding from this study was that structurally enabling approaches were most widespread and well developed in the disability space, where formal legislation exists to ensure that students with disabilities can pursue their studies with appropriate adjustments. This indicates an area where the performance expectancy of a structural approach clearly supported its widespread acceptance within relevant areas of the institution. In this case, the clear benefits of adopting a structural approach—by minimising legal risk and complaints from students and staff, as well as promoting social justice outcomes—compared to the negative potential outcomes of using another approach, or doing nothing, may have contributed to its widespread adoption across the sector.



However, interviews also identified that high performance expectancy may not translate to all areas or individuals within the institution, where ‘pockets of resistance’ or of traditional practice may be maintained. Uneven adoption of an approach is a risk in any aspect of university activity, where much has been written on the problems of this in teaching particularly (Botham, 2018; Deaker, Stein, & Spiller, 2016; Quinn, 2012). However, an interesting theme that emerged from the interviews for this study was that academic and professional staff may incline differently towards capacity building or structurally enabling models respectively. We hypothesise that this difference may be due to two factors. The first may be the style of interactions these staff primarily have with students. Academics, who may be more likely to interact with students on an individual basis, may be more likely to consciously or unconsciously emphasise students’ individual agency and cultural resources. In contrast, professional staff may more commonly consider students from the level of course or cohort, which makes their interactions with institutional structures more obvious to them.

Alternatively, the difference may be due to the relatively privileged position academics enjoy relative to most professional staff within the university hierarchy. In this case, institutional structures may be less visible to academics because privilege increases their ability to effect change within them; previous research has identified that those who benefit from structures are more likely to ascribe individual outcomes to agency rather than restricted choices or reduced opportunities within structures (Gardner, 2009; Rothenberg, 2000). Conversely, professional staff are more aware of institutional structures and are therefore more likely to adopt a structurally enabling approach to dealing with students. Further research is required to more robustly investigate the prevalence and magnitude of this finding, and to further investigate the reasons behind this tendency if it is supported.

It was interesting, however, that structural inequality was considered in most responses through a student equity lens. This was obvious both from the content of the submissions, and the delegations made when a university leader other than the DVCA was called upon to complete the institutional questionnaire, which typically brought in the manager of the university equity programs in place of the DVCA. It must be acknowledged that the questionnaire may have primed respondents in a number of different ways to consider structural inequality from a student equity angle, but the institutional leaders clearly had this lens in mind even with questions that were intended to examine the experience of students generally.

There are few drawbacks to considering institutional structures primarily from the point of view of non-traditional students; the performance outcomes in terms of retention, success rates and institutional culture for these students may provide sufficient expectation of benefits to the institution to convince leaders to adopt a structural inequality approach where possible. However, we wish to emphasise that structural barriers affect all students and staff to a greater or lesser extent. Interrogating these structures and reducing barriers where possible is likely to reap benefits in terms of success rates and the student experience across the institution, not just for students from equity backgrounds. Therefore, the performance expectancy—the expected benefits to the organisation overall—of a structural approach could be even higher than currently professed by some institutional leaders if the student equity lens was abandoned and the scope of structural change widened, although this may have impact upon the effort expectancy of the change.

## **Effort expectancy of structurally enabling approaches**

Effort expectancy is defined as the degree of ease associated with the use or adoption of the approach. This was found to be the major stumbling block for adopting a structurally enabling approach; while university leaders were typically enthusiastic about the benefits of a structural inequality or blended approach (performance expectancy), they consistently expressed that it was a lot of work to do so.

It was noted that capacity building approaches were easier to adopt for two reasons. The first was that it was relatively simple to develop and implement a program to help students develop an understanding of how to succeed within the institution (although often more difficult to formally evaluate its impact). In comparison, attempting to shift institutional culture in even a small area, while not impossible, required more effort and longer timeframes.

Institutional will and the requirements of HEPPP funding may also contribute to the ease of adoption of capacity building programs. These programs provided a tangible outcome that leaders could point to as an example of the progress being made in that area, which enabled them to build and maintain support from other leaders. Undergoing structural change, however, provided less tangible outcomes, particularly (as discussed above) in the short term, which made it more difficult to garner institutional support. Thus, structurally enabling programs are likely to be more successful when institutional support already exists, and a fair understanding of the longer timeframes involved are understood from the beginning. Of course, it should also be noted that many case studies adopted a blended approach, and that several of the best practice examples detailed in the previous chapter leveraged existing capacity building programs into more comprehensive structural change. The effort expectancy of structural reform can (in at least some areas) therefore be reduced by using pre-existing capacity building programs as 'stalking horses,' or as intermediate points in a continuous change program.

A key distinction between change programs is their continuity with existing practice. Continuous (or incremental) change involves continuously monitoring, sensing and responding to the environment in small steps, whereas discontinuous change seeks to make significant changes to an organisation's structures in one step. The complexity and functionally dispersed nature of higher education institutions may render the latter, discontinuous approach difficult. Therefore, we recommend to create continuous change where possible within the institution to reduce and then remove structural inequalities in relatively small but ongoing improvements. This type of change appears more generally effective, and more likely to have lasting effect, than discontinuous change, where defensive behaviour, complacency, inward focus and routine may undo the benefits (Luecke, 2003; Todnem By, 2005). One consequence of this is that change-enabling responses such as taking a students-as-partners approach (discussed further below) must necessarily involve an ongoing dialogue with students rather than collecting input during a time-limited project only.

A related concept—modular transformation—is the process whereby individual parts of the organisation deal increasingly and separately with one problem or objective at a time. It has been found to improve the likelihood of effective institutional change (Burnes, 2004; Dunphy & Stace, 1993), since it allows organisations to grapple with multiple problems at once, in specific and nuanced ways that develop solutions that are appropriate for and situated within their local contexts. Modular transformation can be viewed as a way to enact continuous improvement within large institutions and decrease effort expectancy, as it resolves potentially dramatic changes into smaller, local changes that can be dealt with by specific areas individually. As is clear from the case studies, institutions tended to advance change in one area at a time; both in terms of the major areas of university activity such as curriculum design or staff professional development, but also in terms of allowing local programs to develop in individual departments through distributed leadership, and then expanding the scope of that reform to encompass the whole institution. Thus, institutions should consider processes to identify pockets of good practice, and then to develop them further to improve scope and make them business as usual, although in some areas, more explicitly planned change may be required.

## Social influence in structurally enabling approaches

Social influence is defined as the degree to which an individual perceives that important others believe he or she should use the new system. As the commonalities of the change process models indicates, identifying leaders, communication and creating buy-in is important in any effective institutional change. This is therefore an area where a distributed leadership model can have profound influence on institutional change.

In this report, leadership is taken simply as the ability to exert change within a structure. Hence, a distributed leadership model acknowledges the ability of both positional and informal leaders to exert change (Jones et al., 2012). Leadership capacity is therefore developed via the collaborative action of many people operating within contexts that enable their ability to achieve identified goals (Jones, Hadgraft, Harvey, Lefoe, & Ryland, 2014). The role of positional leaders in such a system is supportive; for instance, to coordinate distributed leaders' initiatives and mitigate the risks of increased inefficiencies or unclear responsibilities (Jones et al., 2014). Benson and Blackman (2011) identify several benefits to distributed leadership, including greater buy-in from those involved in change; greater organisational flexibility; faster, more effective change; increased capacity building; increased innovation; and better decision making, whereas Rosenholtz (1989) found that distributed leadership resulted in a tighter congruence between values, norms and behaviours.

Distributed leaders can create a critical mass for institutional change, or they can create pockets of resistance where they do not support an idea. As distributed leadership involves both positional and informal leaders, this facilitation or blocking can occur in both top-down and bottom-up approaches to change, where formal leaders activate local leaders, or vice versa. As mentioned in the University of Technology's best practice case study, professional development is a potentially powerful tool to create social influence to develop institutional change, although a professional development pathway and the activity of distributed leaders are not necessarily concordant, and may be aligned or misaligned in different situations.

In the distributed leadership model, institutions must also acknowledge the importance of students as partners (or indeed, students as leaders). Previous research has shown that institutions often minimise or give lip service to student input, although the move towards recognising students as partners has made some ground against this (Little, Locke, Scesa, & Williams, 2009; Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017; Ratsoy & Bing, 1999). However, it must be acknowledged—in an example of structural inequality itself—that the students who are drawn to traditional student leadership positions may not themselves represent the full diversity of the student body, which may result in some unconscious bias or other inequalities remaining in the system. Thus, a 'students as distributed leaders' approach must try to engage with a wide variety of students, and ensure that this is an ongoing dialogue in order to create lasting, relevant institutional change.

'Students as partners' is acknowledged as a spectrum of experiences, ranging from relatively shallow engagement with students to near-equal partnerships (Felten et al., 2013; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). 'Students as distributed leaders' must be placed near the active partnership end of this spectrum, while also engaging with students beyond the learning and teaching context in which most 'students as partners' programs occur (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). The benefits of this change may include those observed elsewhere in the distributed leadership literature (Benson & Blackman, 2011; Jones et al., 2014; Jones et al., 2012; Rosenholtz, 1989): better decision making, increased innovation and greater flexibility from institutions, and increased buy-in from students into university activities, and therefore richer and more dynamic student experiences and learning outcomes.

We also hypothesise that social influence may account for the finding that institutions with a higher proportion of non-traditional students were somewhat more likely to have adopted primarily structurally enabling approaches. As discussed above, institutional leaders typically

held high performance expectancy of structurally enabling approaches, while recognising the high effort expectancy involved. Despite this, some institutions were more successful in adopting primarily structurally enabling approaches. Ongoing contact with students (again including students as distributed leaders and active participants in formal and informal institutional structures), as well as interactions between staff themselves, may have created a more pressing need and stronger social influence for institutional change, which led to more structurally focused outcomes and greater acceptance of change.

## **Facilitating conditions in structurally enabling approaches**

Facilitating conditions, defined as the degree to which an individual believes that an organisational and technical infrastructure exists to support the use of an approach, moderates individual intentions to adopt that approach. They can be individual- or higher-level, including organizational and contextual factors.

As noted in the case studies chapter, we did not find that institutional 'type,' location, age or research intensiveness was a facilitating or blocking condition for adopting structural inequality approaches. While further research may be required, particularly among NUHEPs, this suggests that any institution could adopt a structural focus if sufficient leadership will were present.

Change management models (Todnem By, 2005) provide some broad guidelines about facilitating conditions to enable change: an identified need for change (at whatever level, and by whichever formal or informal leaders); a shared vision and sense of urgency to address the change; identification, communication and involvement of other leaders (including students) to create buy-in; and an outcome-focused culture with sufficient monitoring to enable continuous or incremental change. Similarly, an institutional culture that supports distributed leadership (again, including from students), and enables modular transformation, are also likely to facilitate change. These processes also have potential to strengthen outcomes by ensuring broad ideas (such as those presented in the case studies) are differentiated by context, to develop locally embedded, situated solutions. These could be truly local, or simply adapted to the requirements of specific institutions. Again, involving students can create powerful, embedded solutions suitable to individual institutional contexts.

Of course, a corollary of this principle is that primarily structurally enabling approaches may not be desirable in all situations or institutions. Faith-based College, for example, is a small institution with a primarily postgraduate, mature-aged cohort who have strong collegial relationships with their teaching staff. While this enabled an awareness of structural issues to flourish in the students and staff areas, the institution used relatively passive, capacity building approaches in its administration and curriculum areas. Given its cohort, these approaches may indeed be the most appropriate for this context. Bearing this caveat in mind, however, we suggest that critically examining institutional structures is still likely to be productive for all higher education institutions.

# Conclusion

Equity in student outcomes remains a major challenge in the Australian higher education sector, and as a group, students from equity backgrounds continue to have poorer retention, success and completion outcomes than 'traditional' or 'mainstream' students. A contributing factor to these poorer outcomes may be barriers faced by these students that are created by the institutional cultures and organisational structures of universities and NUHEPs. This study has argued that identifying and addressing these barriers by creating structurally enabling changes may help institutions support these students in their studies.

This project sought to examine the following research questions:

1. How can institutions address systemic barriers that may contribute to student attrition, particularly in students from equity backgrounds? That is, how can structural and cultural causes of attrition be reduced through institutional change?
2. What benefits might institutions achieve by using a structural inequality lens, in addition to the more common capacity building lens?
3. Using best practice case studies, what implications are there for formal and informal leaders within institutions to reduce structural inequalities?

To answer these questions, we conducted a review of the literature on structural barriers in higher education. This literature revealed that, although considerable effort has been expended examining vertical and horizontal inequalities, relatively little research has been published examining the role of institutional cultures and structures on differential outcomes for students during their higher education experience, which we have termed *internal structural inequalities*.

The dominant paradigm in dealing with all three types of structural inequalities has been a so-called cultural capital approach (which we have chosen to call a 'capacity building' approach instead). However, potential downsides of this approach include the problematisation of equity students, the establishment of deficit models, and assimilationist discourses for Indigenous and culturally diverse students. Most importantly, the capacity building model has resulted in only limited benefits in terms of student outcomes so far.

We therefore identified that focusing on internal structural inequalities may be a potentially productive approach for institutions. A major advantage of this model is that, by placing the locus of responsibility with institutions rather than students, institutions are better able to address these issues. Limited research data also indicates that focusing on institutional factors has much greater explanatory power in understanding retention than focusing on students' individual characteristics (Institute for Social Science Research 2017, TEQSA 2017).

We then analysed current practice in the sector through interviews and questionnaires. These case studies identified a diversity of practice both between and within institutions. Institutions varied significantly from each other in terms of whether they were using primarily capacity building or primarily structurally enabling models, or a blended model. In different areas of institutional activity (teaching, student life, curriculum, administration and the overall approach), institutions were able to adopt a range of approaches. These different approaches did not appear dependent on the type of institution, but rather on institutional will.

Finally, we analysed the potential for institutional change using a model of change acceptance. In this model, we found high performance expectancy for structural inequality approaches from institutional leaders, although it is possible that others within university hierarchies may not see the value of this approach as strongly and so resist change. The major problem with adopting the structural inequality approach, however, was in the effort expectancy: structural inequality was found to require significant, ongoing effort, whereas

capacity building approaches were both easier to implement and provided more tangible outputs in the short term. Modular transformation and continuous change, including leveraging existing capacity building programs to generate structural changes, were suggested to reduce the effort expected of these changes.

Finally, the important role of distributed leadership, including students as leaders, was proposed to enable successful change by creating buy-in across the institution, as well as developing local, context-sensitive, embedded reforms that could contribute to continuous change across the institution. Although further research is required to more rigorously assess the outcomes of this model, there is a strong theoretical case for further investigating internal structural inequality within higher education institutions to improve outcomes for all students, particularly those from equity backgrounds.

# Recommendations

Based on the findings from this research it is recommended that:

- All institutional staff should continue to focus on improving retention, success and completion rates for all students enrolled in their institutions.
- All institutional staff should maintain particular focus on improving the experiences and outcomes of students from equity backgrounds. Equity is everyone's business.
- Institutional leaders should audit their institutions to identify where structural barriers exist, and evaluate ways to minimise their impact on students.
- Students should be involved in all discussions that seek to identify structural barriers and develop structurally enabling responses. Care should be taken to ensure that a diverse range of students are able to provide input into this process.
- Students should be conceptualised as distributed leaders in their own right.
- The framework described here ('Developing the internal inequality framework,' pp. 17-25) should be used to assess institutional activity to determine the model for supporting students in use in that context. This can be performed by staff at all levels to achieve change in their local contexts.
- Where primarily capacity building approaches are used, staff should consider adopting structurally enabling approaches instead.
- The administration area is particularly likely to present opportunities for transitioning to structurally enabling approaches; institutional leaders and relevant staff should therefore focus attention there to reduce structural barriers.
- The case studies presented in this document should be used as models for enacting structurally enabling change, but consideration (including consultation with local staff and students) should be given to import those models to local contexts.
- Where change is required, leaders should adopt continuous, modular change in local areas. Staff at all levels seeking to create structurally enabling change should identify ways to reducing the effort required to make that change, and on facilitating change through social influence in order to create sustainable change.
- Funding bodies and academics should support and undertake further research into structural inequality in the Australian higher education sector, and the responses institutions are making to reduce these barriers. Particularly, a more comprehensive examination of institutional responses to internal inequalities across the sector; how these inequalities arise; and how best to respond to them, is required.

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# Appendices: research instruments

Institution Inventory

Structural inequality and retention in equity students



Thank you for participating in the fieldwork of this research project.

This institution inventory is organised into modular sections and supplied in editable format to enable flexible completion and dissemination should you wish to forward to colleagues for their input.

We would be grateful if you could return the completed inventory by **Monday 2 April 2018**.

A project member will contact you before this date to provide assistance.

For further information, or should you have any concerns about the project, please do not hesitate to contact Dr Ryan Naylor (03 9479 5110, [R.Naylor@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:R.Naylor@latrobe.edu.au)) or Dr Nathan Mifsud ([N.Mifsud@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:N.Mifsud@latrobe.edu.au)).

Institution background and context
What is the name of your institution?
What is/are your name(s)?
What is/are your title(s)?

Introduction to structural inequalities
Structural inequality is a framework examining conditions where groups of people are provided with unequal opportunities in terms of roles, rights, opportunities and decisions compared to others (Archer & Leathwood, 2003). It differs from a cultural capital framework in that the focus is on altering formal and informal institutional structures to remove inequalities, rather than upskilling students to increase their cultural capital. Examples of structural inequalities in higher education may include exclusionary classroom discourse, inflexible enrolment and assessment policies, privileging particular communication styles, assumed knowledge of institutional processes or expectations, etc.
Is this concept useful for you?
How does this concept differ from the principles guiding your current approach?

### Staff & students

In what ways do your teaching staff make their expectations clear to students about workloads, academic standards, grades, assessment deadlines, etc?

What is distinctive about the ways your institution prepares or offers professional development to staff for teaching diverse cohorts?

Aside from staff development, what is distinctive about your institution's approach to helping equity students succeed compared with other Australian higher education institutions? This includes, but is not limited to, ways that your institution might help students to 'speak the lingo' of higher education.

If not included above, could you provide examples of good practice in these areas?

### Curriculum

How does your institution make curricula accessible and relevant to students from all backgrounds? Provide examples of good practice where possible.

Thinking generally, which aspects of assessment policies at your institution cater to equity students?

How does your institution provide advice on course content and selection to prospective students?

How is career advice integrated into the curriculum?

### Administration

How does your institution help students navigate the administrative side of the institution?

How well does your institution identify students facing difficult personal situations (e.g. homelessness, financial hardship, mental health)?

How well does your institution provide flexible study arrangements (e.g. part-time study, leaves of absence)?

Administration

--

Student life & support

What are the accommodation options made available to students by the institution (if any)?

--

To what degree do students participate in your institution's broader life outside of classes? What kinds of experiences are available?

--

To what degree do students interact with your institution's support services? What kinds of services are available?

--

Other

Does your institution collect data related to commuting? If so, how, and what kind of impact on the institution has it made?

--

Thinking generally, what impression do students have of the 'feel' of the campus?

--

In what other ways does your institution reduce barriers for current students from diverse backgrounds to participate fully in their university experiences?

--



## FOLLOW UP SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS – INDICATIVE QUESTIONS

Total estimated time commitment 30–45 min

- Introduction to structural inequalities
  - Particularly but not exclusively about equity students
  - Is our definition useful?
- Teaching
  - What is distinctive about the ways your institution prepares or offers professional development to staff for teaching diverse cohorts?
  - In what ways does your teaching staff make clear to students their expectations around workloads, academic standards, grades, assessment deadlines, etc?
  - Examples of good practice — suggestions for us to follow up
- Students
  - What is distinctive about your institution’s approach to helping equity students succeed compared with other Australian higher education institutions?
  - In what ways does your institution help students to ‘speak the lingo’ of higher education, or for the institution to speak their language?
  - How do your students perceive your institution in terms of equity?
  - Examples of good practice — suggestions for us to follow up
- Curriculum
  - What is distinctive about your institution’s approach to making curricula accessible and relevant to students from all backgrounds?
  - Thinking generally, which aspects of assessment policies at your institution cater to equity students?
  - How does your institution provide advice on course content and selection to prospective students? What about current students?
  - How is career advice integrated into the curriculum?
  - Examples of good practice — suggestions for us to follow up
- Admin
  - What is distinctive about your institution’s approach to helping students navigate the administrative side of the institution?
  - How well does your institution identify students facing difficult personal situations (e.g. homelessness, financial hardship, mental health)?

- How well does your institution accommodate part-time study, leaves of absence etc?
- Examples of good practice — suggestions for us to follow up
- Campus life
  - What are the accommodation options available to students?
  - To what degree do students participate in your institution's broader life outside of classes? What kinds of experiences are available?
  - To what degree do students interact with your institution's support services? What kinds of services are available?
  - Examples of good practice — suggestions for us to follow up
- Physical environment
  - How do you use the physical environment of your institution to support or engage students with the institution or their educations?
  - Does your institution collect data related to commuting? If so, how, and what kind of impact on the institution has it made?
  - Thinking generally, what impression do students have of the 'feel' of the campus?
  - Examples of good practice — suggestions for us to follow up
- Other
  - In what other ways does your institution reduce barriers for current students from diverse backgrounds to participate fully in their university experiences?

#### Interview questions

- Teaching
  - In what ways does your institution prepare its academic staff for teaching diverse cohorts?
  - What kinds of opportunities are available for your academic staff to improve their ability for class facilitation?
  - Thinking generally, how do most academic staff at your institution approach the task of connecting to and making material relevant for equity students?
  - Can you provide some examples of inclusive materials in courses at your institution?
- Students
  - What is distinctive about your institution's approach to helping equity students succeed compared with other Australian higher education institutions?

- In what ways does your institution help students to 'speak the lingo' of higher education?
- How do your students perceive your institution in terms of equity?
- Curriculum
  - How flexible are your institution's course programs for part-time students (requisite courses, order of completion, etc.)?
  - How does your institution provide advice on course content and selection to prospective students? What about current students?
  - What kind of careers advice is available to current students?
  - Does relevance of content to equity groups come into course review process?
  - To what degree are courses at your institution made accessible in terms of content delivery?
  - Thinking generally, which aspects of assessment policies at your institution cater to equity students?
- Admin
  - What policies dictate how student can take a leave of absence? Are those students actively re-recruited, and if so, how?
  - What guidelines are provided to students about their workloads?
  - How transparent are administrative procedures that directly impact students (e.g. application for late submission of an assessment)?
- Campus life
  - What are the accommodation options available to students?
  - To what degree do students participate in your institution's broader life outside of classes? What kinds of experiences are available?
  - To what degree do students interact with your institution's support services? What kinds of services are available?
- Physical environment
  - Does your institution provide a wide range of facilities for students' use?
  - As an example, what kind of assistance could your institution provide for a student who became homeless during semester? How might such a student be identified?
  - Does your institution collect data related to commuting? If so, how, and what kind of impact on the institution has it made?
  - Thinking generally, what impression do students have of the 'feel' of the campus?