

A Critical Interventions Framework for advancing equity in Australian higher education

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List of Abbreviations

ATAR	Australian tertiary admission rank
ENTER	Equivalent national tertiary entrance ranking
HEPPP	Higher education participation and partnerships program
SES	Socioeconomic status
VET	Vocational education and training

Executive Summary

This report presents a Critical Interventions Framework designed to assist in advancing equity in Australian higher education. The purpose of the framework is to assist in identifying the characteristics and foci of initiatives and strategies that are most effective and to contribute to a better understanding of how activities and resources can be best targeted to generate positive outcomes.

The report:

- summarises the patterns of access and participation for key equity target groups in the period following the 2008 Review of Australian Higher Education (the ‘Bradley Review’);
- reviews the national and international literature in search of available evidence in support of the effectiveness of specific initiatives and programs implemented to advance equity;
- presents a typology of equity initiatives, styled as a Critical Interventions Framework, to assist in conceptualising policy and practice and informing research and evaluation;
- presents a summary of the plausibility and apparent evidence base for the types of initiatives described in the Critical Interventions Framework; and
- presents a broad summary of the national patterns of equity initiatives drawn from an analysis of the institutional reports provided to the Commonwealth as part of the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships program (HEPPP), again against the Critical Interventions Framework.

The report’s emphasis is on low SES access and participation given the importance that has been assigned to this group in public policy.

The progress: the patterns in higher education equity following the Bradley Review

Since the Bradley Review a number of factors have affected the patterns of access and participation for students from equity groups. These include:

- the uncapping or deregulation of the volume of undergraduate places, which has influenced patterns of institutional recruitment, selection and admissions;
- the establishment of a national target for low SES participation — a 20% share of places by 2020 — and the inclusion of institutional equity targets in Mission-Based Compacts and the allocation of performance-based funding incentives;
- the funding available to institutions for equity initiatives through the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships program (HEPPP); and
- wider societal trends in community beliefs about the value of undertaking higher education and changing assumptions about entry requirements and eligibility for participation.

These factors are tightly interwoven and it is difficult, and risky, to speculate on their relative impact. Nonetheless, the uncapping of undergraduate places has had a major effect on the character of the higher education sector and led to a dramatic period of growth in overall student numbers. Uncapping may have been the single most significant factor in the rising numbers of students from equity target groups who

have been admitted to higher education. However, it is equally true that uncapping has lifted access to higher education across the board. Thus the gains in the participation *share* for low SES people have been modest even though the trend is clearly in the right direction. On current trends the 20% target will be elusive by 2020. For most equity target groups, and Indigenous people in particular, parity in the share of higher education places seems a long way off.

On the plus side though, close analysis of access data against a pre-Bradley Review baseline of 2007 reveals considerable growth in the number of students from low SES backgrounds and Indigenous students, indeed growth rates that have outstripped those of domestic onshore students as a whole. Against an increase in total onshore domestic student numbers of 16.4% since 2007, the number of Indigenous students has increased 27.0%, while the number of students from low SES backgrounds has increased by 21.2%. These patterns are particularly notable given the proportion of students from these equity groups remained little changed in the decade before the Bradley Review.

The future: Identifying key foci for equity initiatives

The positive trends in access for historically under-represented groups are a direct result of the federal government and institutions placing equity group participation centrally in the higher education agenda. Part of the federal government's commitment to equity has been the provision of HEPPP funding to allow institutions, often working in partnerships, to influence particular key points in the student 'life cycle' to encourage more students from equity target groups to, among other things, consider higher education to be a possibility for them, to build academic attainment and to be more fully conversant with the opportunities available to them. HEPPP funding has provided an important resource for universities and has led to a wide range of significant initiatives across the nation.

There remains much to be done. Despite increased participation for students from equity groups, the participation rate for students from low SES, Indigenous and remote backgrounds (as well as other educationally disadvantaged backgrounds) remains below parity—in some cases, well below. The participation ratio for low SES students is 0.62, with 1.0 indicating parity, whereas that of Indigenous students is 0.55, and students from remote backgrounds, 0.39.

Some institutions have achieved little or no gains in the proportion of low SES students among cohorts of commencing students, although others have generated increases. The reasons for the unevenness across the sector are not clear.

There remain widespread beliefs, often tacit, that allowing more educationally disadvantaged people will lead to higher attrition rates or a lowering of academic standards in order to achieve successful completions. In fact, there is little evidence for these perceptions. Once at university, low SES students are not substantially less likely to successfully complete their studies, having approximately 96% of the retention and success rates of domestic students overall.

For these reasons, we believe that initiatives to increase access for educationally disadvantaged students are fundamentally important in meeting the Federal Government's higher education targets for the proportion of the population with university level qualifications from low SES backgrounds. The major disparities continue to lie in access, not in retention or completion. This is not to argue that

students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds do not need support once enrolled.

Indigenous students and students from remote backgrounds are an exception to these conclusions. Students from these groups display notably lower retention and success rates than students from other groups. The retention rate for Indigenous students is only 85% of the average onshore domestic student, while for students from remote backgrounds, it is 91%. The success rate for Indigenous students is 81% of the average; the success rate for remote students is perhaps less concerning, at 94% of the average. In these cases, targeted efforts to increase academic, financial and personal support, and therefore academic success, are particularly warranted.

The Critical Interventions Framework

The Critical Interventions Framework is summarised in Figure 1.1 on the following page. This framework is a simple typology of the broad categories of equity initiative and is designed to be a device for focusing on supporting national consideration of the most effective ways to target efforts and resources. This typology was derived from commonplace assumptions about potential barriers or inhibitors for students for equity target groups and refined following a literature review.

The typology has been used to present a summary tabulation of:

- the plausibility or theoretical case for particular types of equity initiatives; and
- the available evidence, national or international, on the effectiveness of these equity initiatives.

This framework is designed to inform future initiatives and to guide evaluation.

The final phase of the project involved analysis of the HEPPP reports provided by institutions to the government. Information from anonymised reports were then mapped against the typology in the framework to determine a broadbrush analysis of where national efforts have been focused. This stage of the project did not seek to reach any judgements on the effectiveness of the initiatives, for the reports typically do not include evaluative evidence. It is noted that many equity initiatives implemented post-Bradley Review are relatively new and their effects may take some time to become apparent.

Strengthening the evaluation and research evidence-base

A major finding of this project is the relative dearth of publicly available, peer-reviewed research or evaluation, conducted with rigorous methodologies, on the effects of equity initiatives. In some cases, this is due to the high number of confounding factors that can influence, say, an individual's decision to attend university, and the complexity of attempting to analyse those decisions within a diverse population. In these situations, it may be difficult, if not impossible, to assess the efficacy of equity initiatives and programs with any reliability. Program design in these circumstances is an act of faith, though often highly well-judged and highly credible. A stronger platform for research and evaluation needs to be developed and utilised and the results of program evaluation should be published more widely.

It is suggested that:

- institutions use the Critical Interventions Framework as a guide for monitoring their equity programs and reviewing whether they have an appropriately targeted and evidence-based set of programs for their specific institutional contexts;
- consideration be given to institutions reporting their equity programs annually to government against the Critical Interventions Framework, for the purposes of developing a better understanding of the national expenditure on particular equity initiatives and building a stronger evidence-base on effective strategies;
- institutional evaluation of equity initiatives be focused around the Critical Interventions Framework to enhance sector-wide understanding and dissemination of effective practices; and
- the higher education sector commits to greater publication of evaluation findings based on sound methodologies.