



# Project Progress Bulletin

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How the perceived risk of going to university influences the decision to participate in Australian higher education by people from low SES backgrounds



Welcome to the first project progress bulletin. The project commenced on 1 February, and this bulletin provides an update on the progress to date. I will continue to share updates as key milestones are reached. It is an honour and a privilege to be a NCSEHE Research Fellow. The journey thus far has been truly rewarding on many levels. I wish to express (again) my sincere gratitude for this opportunity.

## Project overview

The intention of this project is to increase the proportional representation of people from low socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds in Australian higher education. The project hopes to evolve the now mature 'barrier and enabler' widening participation (WP) lens and encourage a shift from practice-led WP research to research-led WP practice.

In brief, this project:

- focuses on the role of perceived risks in the decision to go (or not to go) to university for students from low SES backgrounds
- draws attention to the contemporary career context where traditional ways of planning careers no longer work.

This project is important because:

- making career decisions is becoming increasingly complex and fraught with risk
- with more occupations to choose from than ever before (hyperchoice), people may experience confusion or decision paralysis
- we live in uncertain times with the rise of the gig economy, job automation, career mini-cycles, and an erosion of the sense of security that going to university will 'guarantee' access to a defined, stable occupation
- compounding this situation are predictions that jobs in the future may be more likely to need a university education
- given low SES participation in higher education is not yet at parity, there is a need to accelerate efforts to prevent the deepening of social inequities.



**NCSEHE**

National Centre for Student  
Equity in Higher Education



Curtin University



## Project governance

The following project governance has been established. Critical friends have been engaged in the project to date with the Expert Advisory Group now finalised and to be engaged from this point forward.

### ▶ Expert advisory group

Marcia Devlin, Sally Kift, Dawn Bennett, Karen Nelson, Gary Thomas, Mary Kelly, Gabrielle O'Brien, Karen Hunt and Sarah O'Shea.

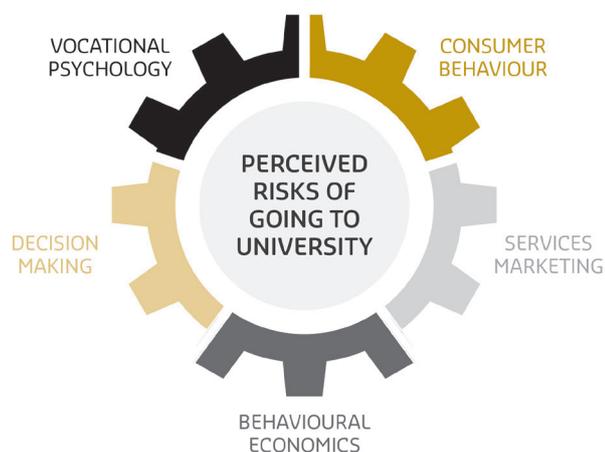
### ▶ NCSEHE and NCSEHE Equity Fellows critical friends

Sue Trinidad, Nadine Zacharias, James Smith, Erica Southgate, Cathy Stone, Matt Brett and Louise Pollard.

### ▶ Australian Department of Education and Training critical friend

Angela O'Brien-Malone.

## Project scope: first expansion and now contraction



As is typical with research, the project's scope first expanded with an all-inclusive literature review (completed in early April) giving rise to a comprehensive theoretical model (below). As the project progresses, the model will be refined.

In brief, all human endeavours carry some level of risk. There are several disciplines that explore perceived risks which have been synthesised in this project. Eight types of perceived risk were identified in the literature examined. These perceived risks and examples of likely sentiments expressed by potential university students from low SES backgrounds are presented next.

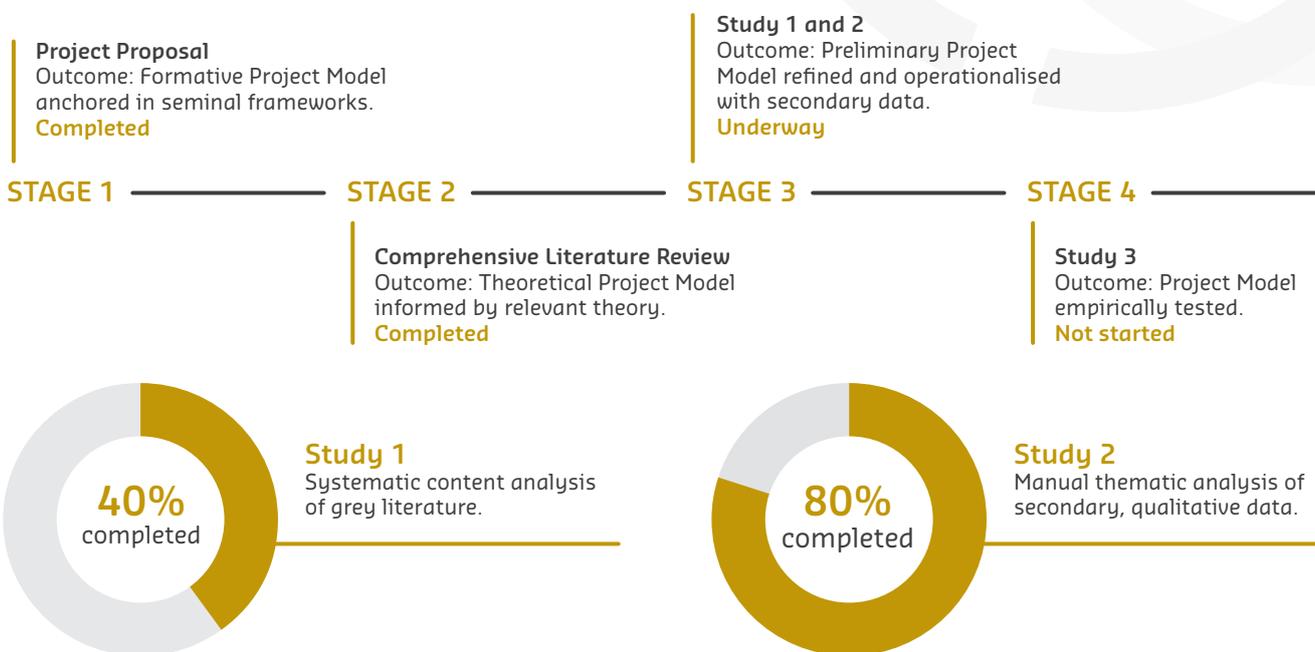
RISK TYPES	SENTIMENT
FUNCTIONAL RISK	"Will this degree secure me a job in my chosen occupation?" OR "Do I need a degree to secure work in my chosen occupation?" OR "What if I do this degree and there are no jobs in my chosen occupation at the end?"
FINANCIAL RISK	"Is this the best use of my limited money?" OR "I don't want to get into debt in order to get a job." OR "Isn't going to uni expensive?" OR "I want to earn money now."
PSYCHOLOGICAL RISK	"I don't think I'm smart enough to get into uni." OR "What if I say something wrong in class and embarrass myself?" OR "I'm worried that I might not be able to understand the class material and there is no one who can help me."
SOCIAL RISK	"People like me do not go to university." OR "None of my friends are going to uni." OR "What if I don't fit in?"
TIME-LOSS RISK	"Is this going to be a waste of time?" OR "I don't want to wait three years until I get a full-time job." OR "This is going to take up all of my time." OR "I want a break from studying."



<b>PHYSICAL RISK</b>	<p>“There is a lot in the news about sexual assault and harassment at universities. It doesn’t sound like a safe place.”</p> <p>OR “I don’t feel safe using public transport especially when classes are scheduled for late in the evening.”</p>
<b>SENSORY RISK</b>	<p>“Are universities set up for people like me who also have a hearing disability?”</p> <p>OR “I’m not sure if being on a busy campus and in large lectures will trigger my anxiety.”</p>
<b>IDENTITY RISK</b>	<p>“People who go to uni are snobby.”</p> <p>OR “If I go to uni, people will think I’ve got tickets on myself and that I’m trying to show them up.”</p> <p>OR “I’m afraid if I go to uni that I won’t fit in with my friends and family anymore.”</p>

## Project design and progress

The project model is being developed over four stages and is progressing well.



## Emerging insights

- Perceived risks and risk preference not only influence the decision to go to university but are also ‘attrition markers’ that could be used to trigger pre-dropout university interventions or to shape post-dropout re-entry strategies.
- There is an interplay between the types of perceived risk that may lead to some risk categories merging (e.g. physical and sensory) as well as ‘knock on’ or halo effects.
- Different types of perceived risk, while considered pre-access, appear to be active at different points in the student lifecycle. For example, functional risk may be most prominent when deciding to go to university, social risk may be most prominent during the first year and possibly linked to early attrition, and identity risk may be most prominent in the latter years of a degree and possibly linked to advanced level attrition.
- Some types of perceived risks are discussed more than others reflecting both prominence and social sensitivity. For example, functional risk is of high prominence, and low sensitivity thus is more freely discussed. Conversely, identity risk is widely experienced yet deeply personal thus not always openly shared without prompting because it is psychosocially painful.

## Engagement activities

ACTIVITY	HOST & DATE
2018 Universities Australia Conference.	Canberra (UA), Feb
National Forum — Improving the Transition and Retention of Regional Students from Low Socioeconomic Backgrounds: A 5Ps Approach (NPP Project).	Brisbane (CQU), Feb
NCSEHE Legacy and Capacity Workshop 3: Strengthening Evaluation in Indigenous Higher Education Contexts in Australia.	Sydney (NCSEHE), Apr
Professor Dawn Bennett — Developing EmployABILITY Thinking HERDSA workshop.	Sunshine Coast (HERDSA/USC), Apr
Placement with the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training (included Fellowship project presentation): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dom English (Group Manager, Higher Education)</li> <li>• Robert Latta (Branch Manager, Governance, Quality and Access)</li> <li>• Jo Chivers (Director, Higher Education Program Management)</li> <li>• Amanda Franzi (Director, Equity Policy)</li> <li>• Lyndal Groom (Branch Manager, Student Participation Branch)</li> <li>• Mike Jackson (Assistant Manager, Vocational Pathways)</li> <li>• Vicki Ratliff (Director, Australian Qualifications Framework Review)</li> <li>• Angela O'Brien-Malone (Assistant Director, Equity Policy).</li> </ul>	Canberra (DET), May
National Forum — Addressing the Gap Between Policy and Implementation: Strategies for Improving Education Outcomes of Indigenous Students (OLT Project).	Brisbane (CQU), May
NCSEHE Legacy and Capacity Workshop 4: Towards 2030 — A Long-term Strategic Vision for Student Equity.	Melbourne (NCSEHE), Jun
Higher Education Academy (UK) Invitation Only Fellowship Forum: Leading the Way in Teaching and Learning.	Brisbane (UQ), Jun
CQU Research Training Conference (invited guest speaker, giving a special address to Indigenous HDR students).	Rockhampton (CQU), Jul
USC Indigenous Studies Research Theme Seminar (Fellowship project presentation).	Sunshine Coast (USC ISRT), Aug
2018 Australasian Evaluation Society and Australian Market and Social Research Society Symposium (Fellowship project presentation).	Brisbane (AES + AMSRS), Nov

## Reach out

I welcome feedback from the NCSEHE community or suggestions as to programs, reports or literature that may be of interest. Also, if you would like to know more about the project, feel free to contact me on [mraciti@usc.edu.au](mailto:mraciti@usc.edu.au).

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