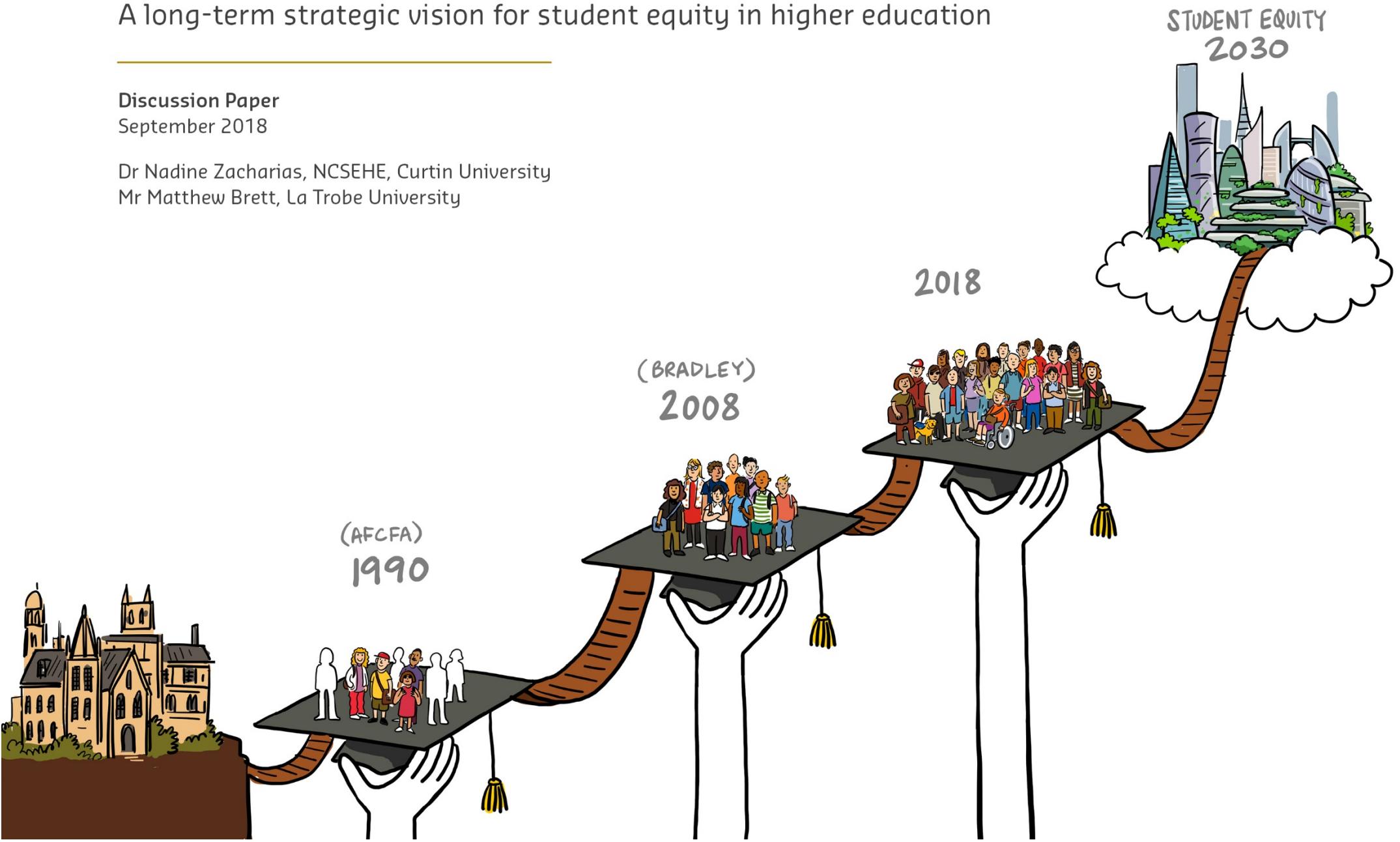


# STUDENT EQUITY 2030

A long-term strategic vision for student equity in higher education

Discussion Paper  
September 2018

Dr Nadine Zacharias, NCSEHE, Curtin University  
Mr Matthew Brett, La Trobe University



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Please submit your responses to the discussion questions by **12 October** by completing the online form available here: <https://goo.gl/forms/xntJtvTq3mkdMdZj1>

We encourage you to share your thoughts via social media using the hashtag **#StudentEquity2030**

The final report, *A Vision for Student Equity 2030*, will be launched at [World Access to Higher Education Day](#) in Perth on 28 November.

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National Centre for Student  
Equity in Higher Education



## **The Starting Point: A Fair Chance For All**

*The overall objective for equity in higher education is to ensure that Australians from all groups in society have the opportunity to participate successfully in higher education. This will be achieved by changing the balance of the student population to reflect more closely the composition of society as a whole.*

### **Introduction**

The National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) seeks contributions from key stakeholders in preparation of a strategic long-term vision for student equity in Australian higher education. It is a decade since the last major review of the role that equity plays in Australian higher education was undertaken, the Bradley Review of Higher Education, and over 30 years since the core framework for equity was first defined in the 1990 White Paper *A Fair Chance for All*. It is time to take stock and rethink the vision for student equity in the context of the contemporary Australian higher education system and economy.

There is much to celebrate in the contributions of equity policy, practice and research to the success of the Australian higher education system and its impact on social wellbeing and economic productivity. An accessible, high-quality higher education sector that is integrated with global innovation systems has been a contributing factor to over a quarter-century of uninterrupted economic growth. However, inequality remains a concern, and many groups remain significantly underrepresented in higher education.

The structural changes to our economy that are an anticipated result of digital disruption and the 4th industrial revolution, may necessitate new approaches to supporting the transition of young people to the labour market and a national strategy for reskilling workers displaced by automation and the digitisation of the economy. Australian responses to structural economic changes have always included increasing university access and participation by underrepresented communities. Consider the establishment of outer-suburban and regional universities in the 1960s and 1970s, the introduction of the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) in the 1980s and demand driven funding post-2010. How might we position student equity in higher education as an integral component of a comprehensive national response to these current challenges?

This discussion paper builds upon the work of the NCSEHE since its establishment at Curtin University in 2013, notably 47 NCSEHE-supported research projects and the appointment of six Equity Fellows, to promote strategic conversations at the intersection of equity research, practice and policy. The NCSEHE has conducted four recent Building Legacy and Capacity workshops with the aim of extending the NCSEHE's capacity in synthesising, codifying and disseminating learnings from equity research and practice to inform future initiatives, studies and policy and contribute to national discussions about productivity and wellbeing.

The most recent of these workshops brought together 28 researchers, practitioners, policymakers and policy influencers to advance a national conversation about the long-term strategic vision for student equity in Australian higher education. Workshop discussions were synthesised and disseminated to a wider audience in the form of a webinar. The enthusiasm with which both the workshop and webinar participants engaged with the conceptual challenge of assessing the relevance and positioning of student equity crystallised two core points. Firstly, there is interest from all stakeholder groups in articulating a compelling vision for student equity that:

- recognises and builds on foundations of policy, research and practice set by leaders of the past
- responds to the challenges evident in the system of today, which include persistent underrepresentation and inferior education outcomes for some groups in higher education
- recalibrates aspects of equity policy, research and practice to respond to macro-trends that will shape the higher education system of the future.

Secondly, the breadth and complexity of issues that should be considered in developing a long-term vision for student equity cannot be resolved in a single workshop or webinar. The process by which various ideas, views and interests can be prioritised, organised, mediated and synthesised necessitates a broader deliberative conversation. The NCSEHE is supporting this conversation in line with its mission to close the loop between equity research, policy and practice.

This paper aims to outline the key concepts, challenges and contradictions associated with achieving student equity in higher education in an era of near universal participation, and point out possible options for resolving these challenges and contradictions. Eight big questions are articulated to prompt discussion and feedback from the sector. Written submissions are invited in response to these, and feedback is also welcome beyond the specific questions on broader or other issues of relevance. In addition to written feedback, a series of roundtables will be held in major capital cities and regional centres where these questions can be explored in a collaborative and constructive conversational form. Feedback from written submissions and face-to-face workshops will inform the development of a long-term vision statement, *Student Equity 2030*.

## **1. What vision of student equity is most conducive to a high participation higher education system that confronts rapid technological change and continuing funding constraints?**

How do we reframe our aspirations for a more equitable higher education sector at a time when over 40 per cent of school leavers enter Australian universities? In this high participation context, it is unusual for students from higher socioeconomic status backgrounds not to attend university. Students from low and mid socioeconomic status backgrounds remain underrepresented.

Governments across many parliaments have created Australia's high participation system by increasing the number of student places, at times rapidly. Despite these substantial investments, traditionally privileged groups remain overrepresented and achieving a more equitable level of participation faces considerable challenges. A more equitable distribution of places could be achieved by a simple reallocation of places from those participating at a high level to those participating at a low level. This is politically fraught and avoids the central challenge of creating and funding a system where all people have access to learning opportunities to fulfil their learning potential.

Governments have mitigated the financial impact of increasing student places by shifting the cost of higher education to students through the Higher Education Loan Program (HELP). However, there are limits to that approach, with concerns evident about the long-term sustainability of the loan program. The political limits of financing intersect with traditionalist and elite views of higher education that see widening participation as an erosion of standards.

Technology is having a profound impact on the wider economy, the world of work and the delivery of higher education. There are credible predictions that a high proportion of workers will be displaced by a rapid onset of automation. There is substantial growth in online education. Online delivery is often seen as an important vehicle to widen participation. A vision for student equity should respond to these challenges, anticipating the implications of higher participation and technological changes, whilst recognising that funding constraints at both student and government levels impose limits on what is possible.

## **2. Should we extend our frame of reference to develop an equity vision for the tertiary rather than the higher education sector?**

Higher education and vocational education and training are subject to different funding and regulatory environments and operate with fundamental differences to the position of knowledge in the educational process. There are credible voices who call for these differences to be overcome, and the two systems to be treated as a single tertiary education system.

Current policy, and the legacy paradigm of *A Fair Chance For All*, is squarely focused on higher education, and predominantly public universities. Is this paradigm still fit for purpose for increasing equity in the contemporary post-school education context? Or would students, and the economy, benefit from greater system integration?

Several policies span both higher and vocational education. Income contingent loans for example are repaid at the same rate whether incurred for higher or vocational education. The Government is currently reviewing the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) and will have to resolve both the differences between systems, and points of overlap which exist at Levels 5 and 6 of the Framework. The nature of qualifications is potentially disrupted by the unbundling of education programs, micro-credentials, and blurred boundaries between work and education. Student equity in this context may need to be cast in broad terms.

KPMG and other leading policy influencers have put forward proposals to harmonise policy anomalies between vocational and higher education. The Labor party opposition has set terms of reference for a whole of tertiary education review should it take power after the next election.

A vision for student equity could maintain a higher education or university focus, or consider the broader importance of vocational education, or indeed schools education. Higher education exerts considerable influence on school education through admission criteria and the use of ATAR to rank applications, particularly in a capped system. A new vision for equity across all parts of the education system might legitimately consider more equitable ways to admit students to university that could be sustainably implemented, for example, to mitigate schooling disadvantage.

### **3. How do we articulate a clear and compelling narrative for student equity with reference to overarching sector objectives?**

There are multiple reference points that can be considered as statements of the overarching sector objectives. The objects of the Higher Education Support Act (2003) refer to a higher education system characterised by equity of access, along with references to economic development and cultural and intellectual life. Portfolio Budget Statements make reference to social wellbeing and economic productivity. Notions of equity are entwined with these policy statements, and hardwired into the higher education system.

A narrative is a written account behind a set of ideas, a story that is inspirational and unfolding in time. The value of a narrative is that it helps to coalesce ideas, and provide clarity of purpose which can then generate a consensus to implement ideals. Currently, the equity narrative is fragmented and dispersed. In mainstream policy debate, including consultation around the Ministerial Discussion Paper *Driving Innovation Fairness and Excellence in Australian Higher Education*, student equity is often positioned at the periphery and defined in terms of funding programs for specified groups. The equity dimensions of the redesign of the HELP, or of the recalibration of funding clusters, were all but ignored. Outside of government, and as a means of lobbying governments, discussion papers prepared by top tier consulting firms have ignored equity completely or have positioned it as a risk and barrier to reform.

There remains a challenge in achieving a strategic policy environment for student equity that positions the overarching macro- and targeted micro-policies as equally important. This challenge is not insurmountable. In the Bradley Review, student equity outcomes were central to the policy reform logic in that an increase in the participation of students previously underrepresented in higher education was necessary for system expansion. As the sector faces a slightly different set of challenges a decade on, there needs to be a contemporary narrative of why and how student equity is central to achieving sector and national objectives.

### **4. Do we need a whole new student equity vision and framework, or minor refinements to the existing vision and framework outlined in *A Fair Chance For All*?**

Participants at the Building Legacy and Capacity workshop were of the consensus view that this vision, and associated equity framework, has served as a powerful driver for equity in Australian higher education. We have a framework, and there is no need to reinvent the wheel. There are however key questions to consider in refining the framework, which include:

- How can we ensure that ‘all groups’ are not reduced to one, or several, of the six identified equity groups to the exclusion of other groups in society?
- How do we explicitly account for the important role of outreach work in raising participation levels in underrepresented communities?
- How do we acknowledge the equity related dimensions and differences of institutions, courses, disciplines, professions and international education?
- How do we ensure that institutional strategic and operational plans, especially with regard to teaching and learning, student support, student experience and wellbeing, consider principles of inclusive design and include targets relevant to equity group students?
- How are universities monitored in the implementation of student equity initiatives?
- Do we need to unpack the concept of ‘successful participation’ which appears under-theorised and under-researched in higher education, especially for part-time students and those in pathway and enabling courses? Students may learn and benefit from doing any university study but may exit before obtaining a qualification.

A new vision for student equity could simply tweak *A Fair Chance For All*, or employ a complete reimagining.

## **5. What could a multi-dimensional concept of ‘success’ in student equity look like?**

The strong consensus evident in the Building Legacy and Capacity workshop was tested when considering the notion of ‘success’. The standard quantitative measure of success as defined by the Commonwealth is based on the proportion of passed equivalent full-time student load (EFTSL). While this is an important metric in higher education, there is more to success than quantitative statistics that can be disconnected from personal and institutional context. We know from recent analysis by the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) and the Grattan Institute that attrition rates are correlated with institutional type, and thus student profile.

A multi-dimensional concept of success should integrate both qualitative and quantitative indicators. Stories and statistics together provide a better assessment of success than either one in isolation. The risks of a quantitative approach are illustrated by the Grattan Institute proposals that students be provided with a calculated relative probability of success, defined as course completion, based on several individualised criteria including equity group status. This approach would see students informed that they are more likely to fail than pass before they have even commenced. Students capable of succeeding with the right supports are subtly discouraged to engage with higher education. A deterministic model of successful education, in which only those with a good chance of achieving success are encouraged to enter, runs counter to the system level adjustments that may be required to accommodate higher rates of participation and the reskilling of displaced workers. It also does not capture the value of pathway and enabling programs.

A contemporary vision and framework for student equity should aim for a multi-dimensional concept of ‘success’ that embraces stories and statistics and which provides both the Government and the electorate with confidence that public expenditure on post-school education is being spent productively and appropriately. However, how could such a measure be designed and efficiently implemented?

## **6. How do relationships with other aspects of public policy (education and non-education) need to be brought into alignment so as to achieve an implementable vision for equity?**

Recent research has highlighted that student equity is synonymous with equity-specific program funding, for example the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP), for many stakeholders. This diminishes recognition of the role that other aspects of the system play in progressing the vision for student equity, which include:

- the location, focus and history of institutions
- tertiary education financing (for example, the Commonwealth Grants Scheme and HELP)
- student support through the Centrelink system.

This question seeks to call out what is important, and what is peripheral to achieving a vision for student equity. If everything is in scope, how are the equity dimensions surfaced and managed? If only some elements are in scope, how can a vision for equity be sustained if excluded elements are radically remade? Key elements to consider in response to this question include:

- Does base funding have a role to play in student equity, and if so, how might this be included in a vision?
- How does the strategic intent of institutions to grow or diversify their student cohort shape student equity outcomes? Do the variations in equity orientation and participation profiles need to be included in a vision?
- How do we articulate an equity vision across course levels, from certificates and enabling to PhD?
- How do we accommodate cross-portfolio contributions (such as social services and taxation policy) to student equity within the vision?
- How are national priorities for equity defined and implemented?
- How are the needs of groups and circumstances that do not fit the criteria of national priorities but have relevance at a local level understood, met and evaluated?

## **7. What changes to data collection, monitoring and evaluation approaches, capability and infrastructure are necessary to support the vision and ensure its continuous review?**

Evaluation plays an important role in ensuring successful policies and practice are more widely adopted. Evaluation of equity in Australian higher education is influenced by the equity paradigm of *A Fair Chance For All*. The collection of data on the six identified equity groups and existing Martin indicators has its roots in *A Fair Chance For All*. There is much to be done to fully utilise the data already gathered by the sector, for example, the equity participation and performance data for non-university higher education institutions. Many low participation groups and circumstances are not captured in the Martin indicators and there are challenges in tracking students across schools, TAFE and universities. The release of the report on the review of equity groups will also provide an important contribution around which data is collected for what groups and with what purpose, but remains focused on universities and higher education.

The Commonwealth has supported several major research projects that have actively focused on issues of evaluation, implementation and data management. An important theme emerging from this work is that transparency can be a powerful tool for change. The Higher Education Standards Panel (HESP) has placed transparency as a core consideration in both admissions and retention reforms and highlighted the need for improvements in key metrics, especially around attrition rates. Tools like the Equity Initiatives Map can support the consistent reporting of equity information but will be more effective if fully integrated with an updated framework for nationally and locally significant groups; data collection that enables longitudinal analysis (such as a universal student identifier); and an agreed national equity evaluation framework.

Within the existing paradigm more could be done to ensure that key stakeholders are equipped with the skills and knowledge to access relevant data and utilise the right systems and analytic tools in the production of better policies and practices. Any change to the vision for student equity will require associated adjustments to data collection and evaluation approaches, as well as improving the capability of practitioners in universities, other institutions, and the Department of Education and Training (DET) to conduct and interpret meaningful program evaluations and the infrastructure necessary to support nationally consistent evaluation approaches.

## **8. How can transparency be enhanced and accountability strengthened to ensure the vision for student equity is progressed?**

Student equity is an important feature of the Australian higher education system but does not have equivalent influence over accountability in Australian higher education. There are few financial consequences of poor equity performance. Student equity is not considered in the risk frameworks for TEQSA. Australian universities all articulate some commitment to student equity, but there are few checks and balances in place to ensure these commitments are upheld. The Access and Participation Plans submitted by universities to the DET are statements of intent and are not subject to review. The obligations of higher education providers to meet the diversity and equity requirements of the Higher Education Standards Framework have yet to be tested. Any new vision for student equity confronts this reality and should integrate some view on strengthening accountability for equity performance in terms of participation, retention, success and completion outcomes.

Embedded in the preceding questions is an implicit statement of how accountability can be enhanced. The vision should build on the success of the past but be suitable for the current context and reconcile the key question of scope: whether to retain the focus on higher education and universities, or to broaden it to the tertiary education sector as a whole. The vision should provide guidance on how success is defined and be clear about what components of the system are relevant for evaluation. The vision should support the right data being collected for the right reasons and be subject to an appropriate form of evaluation. Each of these elements can be considered precursors to an effective strategy for accountability, but without these elements accountability will remain weak.

## A Draft Vision for Student Equity in Australian Tertiary Education

The questions posed in this document emerge from a rich research literature, a vibrant culture of practice and longstanding bipartisan policy commitment to student equity in Australian higher education. The Building Legacy and Capacity workshop and webinar tapped into the zeitgeist of equity research, policy and practice to sketch an outline of how a new vision could be framed. This sketch is presented as a consultation draft and will be refined as responses to consultation questions and insights from the roundtable discussions are collated and integrated.

The draft framework takes the view that the vision should anticipate the need for more access to education as a response to technological change, but in doing so recognises the fiscal challenges of achieving this outcome. The framework takes the view that universities will continue to play an important role in the life chances for individuals, in catalysing innovation and economic growth, and ensuring environmental sustainability. A vision for student equity should however recognise the broader role of non-university higher education institutions and vocational education. A broader perspective will better connect student equity to the core functions of higher and vocational education in social and economic development, advancing knowledge, and fostering intellectual and cultural life. This vision does not necessitate a complete reimaging of equity policy, and should celebrate and build on the successes of the past. The vision should include a clearer statement of what success looks like and ensure that the data and evaluation capability, frameworks and infrastructure is in place to support accountability for achieving the vision's objectives.

### Student Equity 2030

 *All members and groups in society will have access to high quality learning opportunities aligned with their aspirations and which allow them to fulfil their potential.*

#### Contributing to:

Advancing social wellbeing, improving economic productivity, and promoting cultural and intellectual life.

#### Achieved by:

Anticipating the diverse learning and support needs of all groups and communities with targeted additional policies on individuals whose specific needs cannot be readily addressed by inclusive system design.

#### Accountable through:

Collecting relevant data, monitoring against sector standards, implementing a nationally consistent approach to evaluation to inform continuous quality improvement processes.

## Acknowledgements

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We are indebted to the workshop participants, many of whom travelled to Melbourne during a particularly bad cold snap in June 2018, and contributed to a lively debate about the continued importance of a vision for student equity in Australian higher education:

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Finally, we thank the webinar participants who represented the wider community of equity practitioners, researchers, policy thinkers and change agents who we want to engage throughout this consultation process.

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