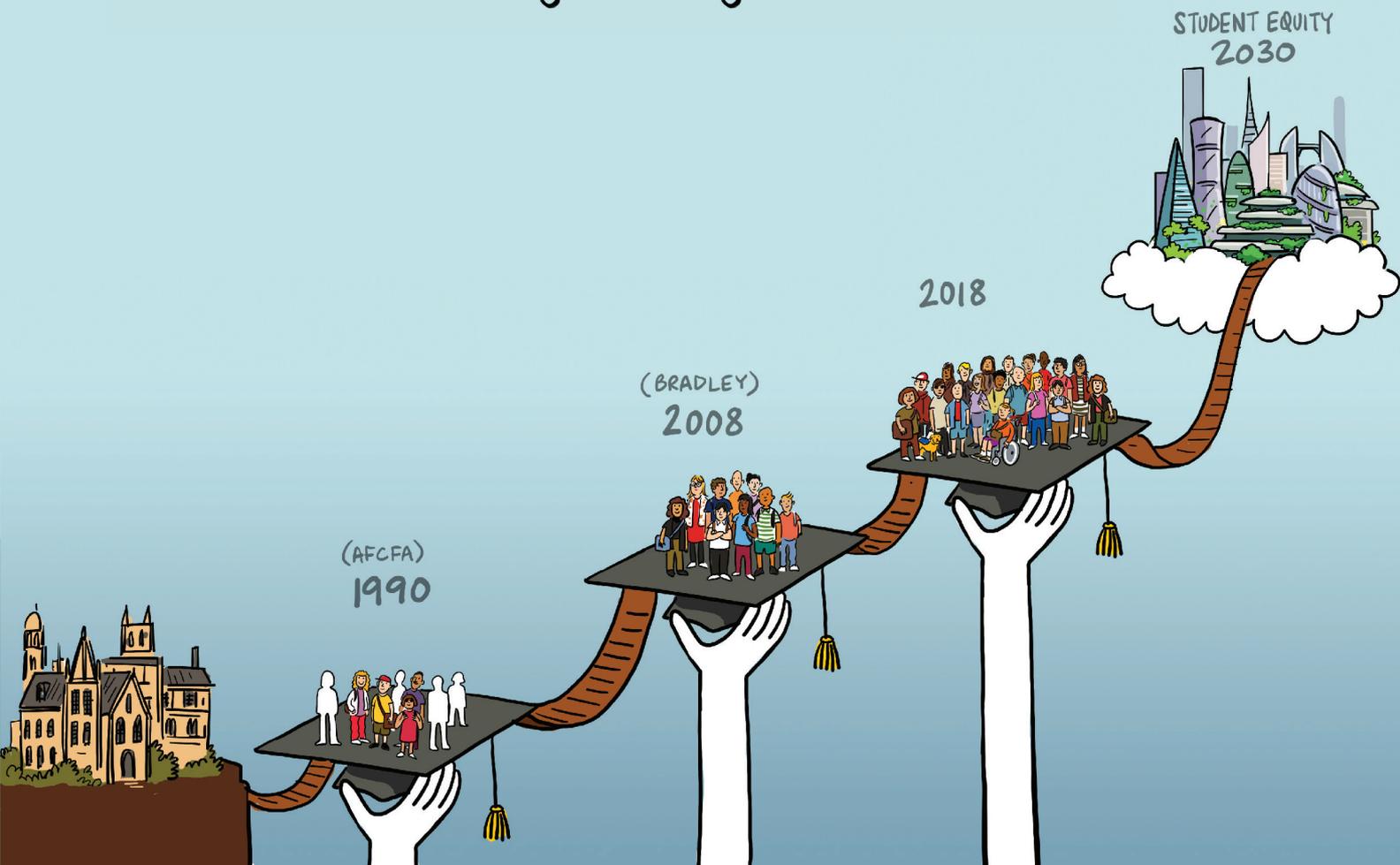


# THE BEST CHANCE FOR ALL

Student Equity 2030 — A long-term strategic vision for student equity in higher education

Australia's future depends on all its people, whoever and wherever they are, being enabled to successfully engage in beneficial lifelong learning.



NADINE ZACHARIAS  
MATTHEW BRETT  
NCSEHE  
March 2019



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Special thanks go to Professor Sally Kift, 2018 NCSEHE Visiting Fellow, for her intellectual guidance, creative genius and hands-on support on the journey towards *The Best Chance for All*. We also thank Dr Daniel Edwards, Tertiary Education Research Program Leader at the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), for his insights and assistance in shaping the outputs from the Building Legacy and Capacity workshop and co-presenting them via a webinar. Mr Jeffrey Phillips has produced illustrations for all four Building Legacy and Capacity workshops and we have enjoyed the creative process of co-developing a graphic depiction of a contemporary vision for student equity and the historic trajectory of student equity in Australian tertiary education. Finally, the NCSEHE team, Professor Sue Trinidad, Mr Paul Farnhill, Ms Sian Hodgson, Ms Rebecca McKenzie, Ms Marcia Schneider and Ms Nina-Marie Thomas, who ably assisted us in producing the workshop, webinar, discussion paper, roundtable consultations, presentation at the World Access to Higher Education Day and this summary report.

We are indebted to the participants at the initial workshop, the webinar and roundtable discussions as well as those who provided written submissions or feedback on the draft statement and documents as critical friends. All of you have contributed to a lively debate about the continued importance of a succinct and ambitious policy statement for student equity in Australian tertiary education.

***Thank you all!***



***Building Legacy and Capacity Workshop 4: Equity 2030 — A long-term strategic vision for student equity in higher education. Quest Docklands, Melbourne.***

*Top row (L-R) — Sally Kift, Paul Farnhill, Lynette Vernon, Nadine Zacharias, Amanda Franzi, Marcia Schneider, Kate Flynn, Matt Brett, Sarah O’Shea, Cathy Stone, Wojtek Tomaszewski, Kerri-Lee Krause*

*Bottom row (L-R) — Ian Cunninghame, Karen Treloar, Kim Gray, Michael Luckman, Paul Koshy, Penny Jane Burke, Sue Trinidad, Gabrielle O’Brien, James Smith, Maria Raciti, John Phillipmore, Lin Martin, Peter Noonan*

# Setting the Scene

In June 2018, the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) set out to develop a long-term strategic vision for student equity in Australian higher education through a national collaborative process under the banner of *Student Equity 2030*. The core outcome of this process is *The Best Chance for All*, a proposed national policy statement for student equity in Australian tertiary education.

*The Best Chance for All* is an outcome of the NCSEHE's comprehensive program, informing research, policy and practice to build a more equitable higher education system. This includes internal, collaborative and commissioned research; an Equity Fellows Program; the engagement of stakeholders in forums and workshops; and the production and dissemination of publications. All of these activities aim to facilitate greater success in access, retention and outcomes for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The *Student Equity 2030* project was led by Mr Matt Brett and Dr Nadine Zacharias, with support from Professor Sally Kift, staff from the NCSEHE and critical friends. The project was designed to provide evidence-informed advice to policymakers, practitioners and researchers to achieve better outcomes for students from diverse backgrounds. *The Best Chance for All* represents the synthesis of feedback from stakeholders closest to student equity policy, research and practice obtained through a comprehensive consultation process conducted between June and November 2018.

Australia is one of six countries which have recently been recognised by the global *Equity Policy Map* project for their comprehensive policy frameworks and sustained action to improve student equity in higher education (Salmi,

“*The Best Chance for All* is an outcome of the NCSEHE's comprehensive program, informing research, policy and practice to build a more equitable higher education system.”

2018). This is the legacy of *A Fair Chance for All* (Department of Employment Education and Training, 1991), developed and launched as part of the Dawkins reforms of higher education in the late 1980s (Harvey, Burnheim, & Brett, 2016). Equity principles informed the introduction of demand-driven funding in 2012 and the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) in 2010 (Australian Government, 2009; Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008). These reforms have shown demonstrable success, breaking the trend of stagnant participation of people from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds (Zacharias, 2017), and contributed to significant increases of students from other equity groups, notably Indigenous<sup>[1]</sup> students and those with disability (Koshy, 2017).

However, the pursuit of equity in Australian higher education remains a work in progress. The chances of participating in higher education remain strongly influenced by geographic location and family finances rather than intrinsic capability or social need (OECD, 2018). Many groups remain significantly underrepresented in higher education (Brett & Harvey, 2017).

Various factors place equity policy, practice and research at an important crossroads.

- Increased participation in higher education coincides with a reduction in participation in vocational education and training (Brett, 2018).
- Public expenditure on vocational education and training has declined (KPMG, 2018).
- Australia faces profound social and economic challenges, including technological disruption.
- Earlier economic adjustments have been addressed through facilitating more access to education (Harvey et al., 2016).

Both the government and opposition have devised policies aimed at reforming post-compulsory education and training. It is important that equity is appropriately positioned within, and seen as relevant to, the broader policy reform agenda for a joined-up tertiary education sector. Yet, it is almost 30 years since the core framework for equity was defined, and a decade since the last major review of the role that equity plays in Australian higher education. There are significant risks associated with major reforms if informed by legacy frameworks incompatible with current and future equity challenges.

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The *Student Equity 2030* process engaged close to 200 stakeholders and experts who shared their insights to address some of the most vexed issues confronting Australia's education system in the 21st century. The process was based on a discussion paper which included the following consultation questions:

- What is the role of education, including a university education, in achieving a thriving economy and a cohesive society?
- What happens to individuals, society and the economy if the education system, at all levels, is characterised by serious inequality?
- How do we authentically connect an equity agenda to overarching system objectives?
- Do we need a new policy statement or will a tweak of the existing suffice?
- Do we maintain the focus on equity groups or adopt a more individualised notion of disadvantage?
- Can we achieve an inclusive and personalised education experience for all students? What is the role of online and flexible learning in bringing this about?
- How do we conceive of success in education?
- Do we have high expectations of all students in the system? If so, how do we make sure that institutions enable students to deliver on these expectations?

This report charts the process undertaken to arrive at *The Best Chance for All* as a policy statement to guide future developments in Australian tertiary education. It briefly describes the key issues confronted during consultations with a wide variety of stakeholders in student equity research, policy and practice and how they were addressed in the context of the proposed policy statement. This is not an exhaustive report that lists the myriad of challenges and possible solutions. Instead, it focuses on a proposed policy statement, *The Best Chance for All*, its genesis, and its potential for informing future policy reforms, practice and research.

The consultation process confirmed a need for a new policy statement, not just for universities but for the tertiary education sector as a whole, and

“The consultation process confirmed a need for a new policy statement ... ideally for the entire Australian education system.”

ideally for the entire Australian education system. Furthermore, there is an imperative to adjust institutional practices and mindsets to respond to near-universal levels of participation and to enable the successful engagement of diverse cohorts. For example, a focus on admission processes for school leavers is no longer reflective of the system, nor its challenges. To make better decisions, we also need to collect longitudinal data which allow for the tracking of individuals across the education system. Finally, we need to develop the processes, capability and infrastructure necessary to carry out these evaluations ethically, competently and efficiently. This report and recommendations focus on how to make these shifts happen.

We commend the *The Best Chance for All* to all those interested in an equitable post-compulsory education system and the role this plays in Australia's national interest. We trust it is a useful reference point for those working towards a more inclusive education system and that it will be built upon and extended in the years ahead.

Dr Nadine Zacharias  
Mr Matthew Brett

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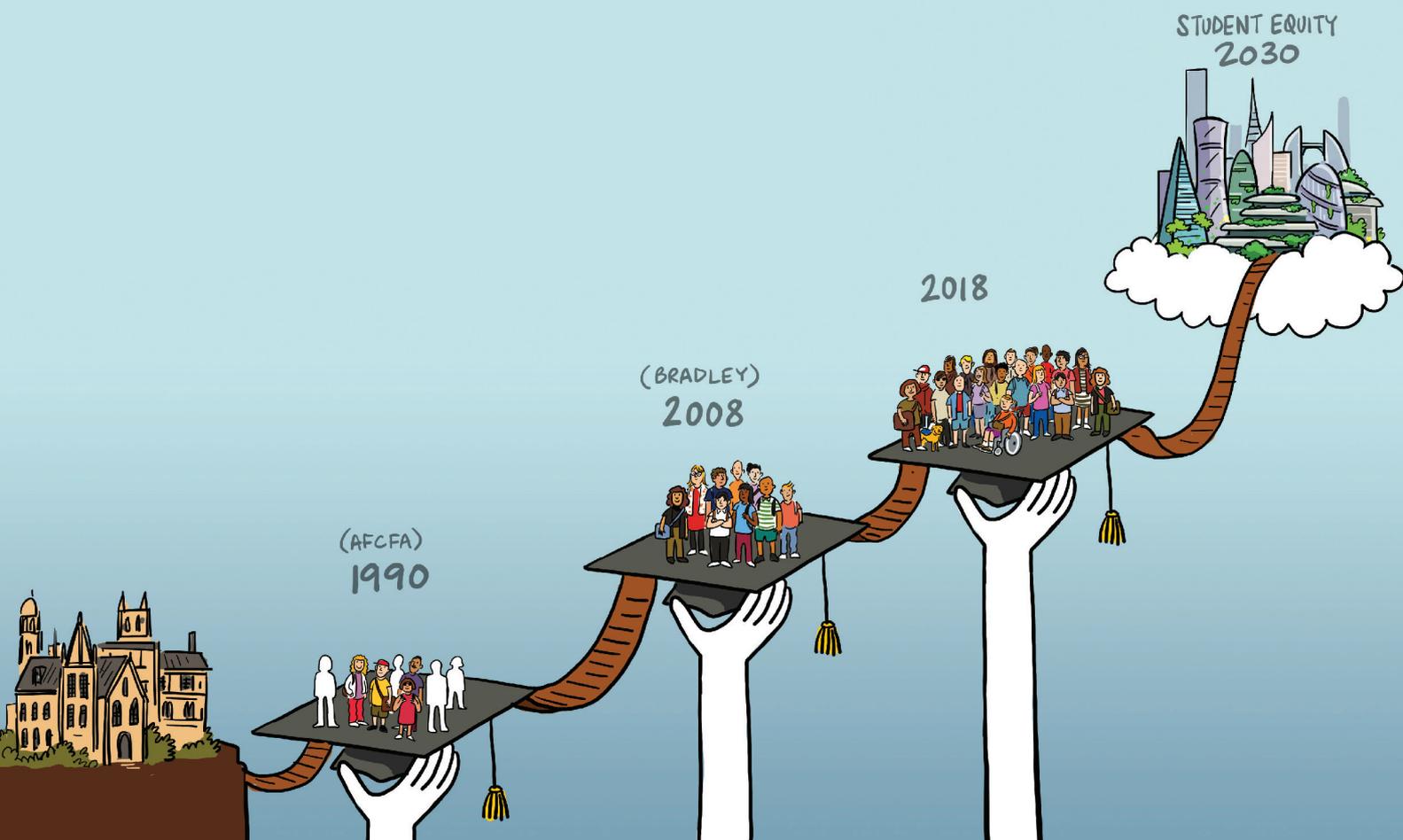
[1] For the purposes of this report, “Indigenous” refers to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people and/or Australian First Nations people, unless specified otherwise. This term is used for brevity. The authors acknowledge the diversity of views with regard to using these terms.

# Summary of Outcomes

This summary report introduces *The Best Chance for All* and provides recommendations for practitioners, policymakers and future research. The development of student equity policy in Australia, including the proposed policy statement, is captured in this visual illustration.

## THE BEST CHANCE FOR ALL

Australia's future depends on all its people, whoever and wherever they are, being enabled to successfully engage in beneficial lifelong learning.



# Defining Success: *The Best Chance for All*

At the start of the project, stakeholders were asked: “What does effective student equity policy, practice and research look like in 2030?” The answers to this question gave rise to a draft vision statement. Further consultation has led to the following policy statement for student equity in Australian tertiary education, complemented with specific practical recommendations for government and institutional action.

“Australia’s future depends on all its people, whoever and wherever they are, being enabled to successfully engage in beneficial lifelong learning.

## Contributing to:

A fair, democratic, prosperous, and enterprising nation; reconciliation with Indigenous Australia; cultural, civic and intellectual life.

## Achieved by:

An inclusively designed system with multiple entry and exit points; proactive removal of barriers to participation; and tailored support where needed.

## Accountable through:

An integrated approach to measuring success at institutional and national levels to align performance with policy objectives.

## Recommendations for Future Policy, Practice and Research

1. The DET should affirm and bolster references to the centrality of equitable education to nation building within relevant policy instruments.
2. The DET should develop new success indicators in consultation with the sector. Performance measures should:
  - a. have relevance to national policy objectives and localised need
  - b. account for the evolving characteristics of student populations and course structures
  - c. draw upon qualitative and quantitative data sources
  - d. span the student life cycle
  - e. reflect the potential for multiple learning engagements across an individual’s working life.
3. Institutions should be expected to foster a nuanced understanding of the needs, challenges and preferences of their diverse student cohorts and design intentional, integrated and inclusive processes, curricula, and support systems to improve students’ chances of completion.
4. Partnerships and collaborations between institutions and educationally disadvantaged communities should be enabled and coordinated ensuring that all communities are connected to the tertiary ecosystem.
5. A comprehensive and evidence-based life cycle model for lifelong learning should be developed to accommodate transitions from VET to higher education and vice versa, transitions into postgraduate study and employment, and the emerging opportunities for lifelong upskilling and reskilling, such as micro-credentials and MOOCs.

# Developing *The Best Chance for All*

The development of *The Best Chance for All* is entwined with the work of the NCSEHE. Funded by the Australian Government Department of Education and Training (DET), the NCSEHE's purpose is to inform public policy design and implementation, and institutional practice, in order to improve higher education participation and success for marginalised and disadvantaged people through research and national debate.

## Equity Fellowships

Consistent with the NCSEHE's purpose, the DET funded the Equity Fellows Program through the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) National Priorities Pool (NPP) in 2016/17. Six Equity Fellows undertook strategic projects of national significance to improve the access, participation and success in higher education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Two Equity Fellowship reports (Zacharias, 2017; Brett, 2018) specifically considered the importance of policy objectives in shaping equity in Australian higher education and identified the need for a rethink of equity policy. Other Equity Fellowship reports, and other NCSEHE projects, were equally concerned with policy-related questions and the nexus between research, policy and practice as it relates to online education (Stone, 2017), access to elite professions (Southgate, 2017), remote student success (Pollard, 2018) and Indigenous evaluation (Smith, Pollard, Robertson, & Shalley, 2018). Due to their depth, duration and design, the Equity Fellowships provided an opportunity to consider complex student equity issues and develop evidence-informed recommendations in consultation with key stakeholders.

## Building Legacy and Capacity Workshop Series

The Equity Fellowships inspired the design of the NCSEHE's Building Legacy and Capacity Workshop Series. These workshops allowed for in-depth discussions of nationally significant issues through the format of expert workshops and associated webinars which were based on existing research — essentially a condensed and collaborative version of an Equity Fellowship project. The objectives of the series were to define a collective knowledge base; engage in strategic and action planning to guide institutional practice and future research; and develop evidence-informed policy advice.

## Equity 2030: Expert workshop and webinar

The final workshop in the Building Legacy and Capacity series, entitled *Equity 2030 — A long-term strategic vision for student equity in higher education*, brought together 28 researchers, practitioners, policymakers and community partners who contributed their insights as subject matter experts. The *Equity 2030* workshop included a critical examination of the legacy of *A Fair Chance for All* as well as possible alternatives. The achievements of the current equity framework were acknowledged and celebrated in the presence of key figures in Dawkins and Bradley era reforms, Lin Martin and Peter Noonan, who were amongst workshop attendees.

There was consensus that it was time to move on from *A Fair Chance for All*, respecting the past but focusing on the challenges of today and the future. Workshop participants suggested that this involve a tweak, rather than complete redesign, of the existing framework. The need to better link equity to overarching policy objectives for higher education was seen as important. This would necessarily require our understanding of success to be revitalised, combined with a stronger emphasis on evaluation of equity initiatives.

In facilitating the *Equity 2030* workshop, and disseminating its outcomes to a broader audience, it was evident that a long-term vision for student equity could not be produced in a single meeting, or webinar, or tightly controlled consultation process. The issues to contend with are numerous and complex. For any policy statement to be relevant and suitable for implementation by a diversity of actors at all levels of the system, it has to be owned by the sector.

## Student Equity 2030: Discussion paper and consultation process

The *Student Equity 2030* project was introduced as an extension of the *Equity 2030* workshop. Based on the themes, strategic priorities and open questions identified through the workshop, a discussion paper and student equity vision statement were drafted. Eight questions were put forward for discussion and open-ended feedback was sought on the draft vision through a process of written submissions and roundtable discussions. The roundtables were held in every

state and territory, major capital cities and regional centres, convened by three NCSEHE Equity Fellows, one Visiting Fellow, and the Director of the NCSEHE.

The roundtables were remarkable for the constructive and collegiate approach in which over 120 expert participants, including students, engaged in the national conversation. Combined with the wealth of written feedback submitted by a number of stakeholders, the central challenge in completing this project was to provide a concise and accessible policy statement which can attract bipartisan support while weighing up each critical insight and authentically integrating participant feedback.

This challenge was resolved by developing a succinct yet multifaceted policy statement augmented by:

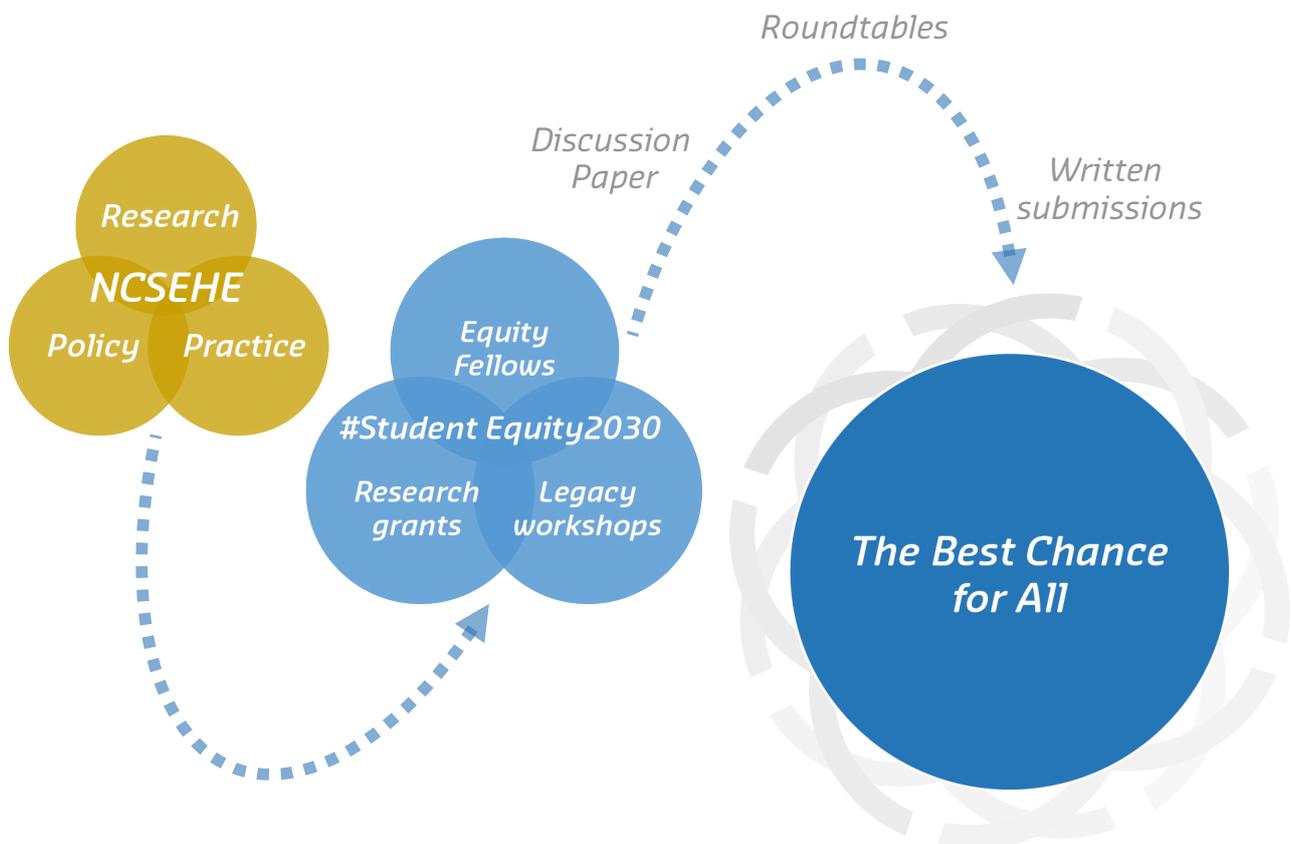
- a statement of its relevance
- the process by which it can be achieved
- mechanisms by which accountability for progress can be embedded.

The wording and phrasing of concepts embedded within this structure have been shaped by the consultation. The “proposed policy statement” is a direct result of participant feedback.

*The Best Chance for All* emerges from expert stakeholder consultation on matters of policy. This is a project report prepared and structured to be accessible to a wide audience. It is not a research report that speaks to just an academic audience or conventions.

The quality and range of the feedback received through the consultation process was impressive, and mirrored and reinforced findings of the available research literature. This is not surprising given so many of the participants are at the forefront of innovative student equity research, policy and practice. The ideas presented in this document will be relevant to the work of people at the front line, in practice, management, policy design and research.

In the remainder of the report, *The Best Chance for All* is introduced and sets out five strategic themes raised during the consultation which represent the core policy dilemmas. Recommendations are provided which would enhance the usefulness of the proposed policy statement across a range of levels from individual practice to national policy design.



## 1. A holistic notion of student equity

*The Best Chance for All* takes a holistic approach to student equity which asserts that education is central to nation building only if it is equitable. This assertion encapsulates three interrelated ideas which are described in this section.

### Nation-building perspective

A fundamental challenge in developing a policy statement for student equity is whether to frame it predominantly in terms of national or individual benefits. The proposed policy statement is fundamentally based on the view that student equity is integral to achieving national goals and system objectives. In fact, it is argued that the goals of the sector, and the nation, can only be achieved by an equitable system, and that achieving this aim requires a collaborative effort involving a diverse range of stakeholders.

Wording for what can be understood as nation building objectives are adapted from the Monash Commission which articulates a vision of Australia “as a fair, democratic, prosperous and enterprising nation, [and as] a good global citizen ...” The idea of global citizenship was deleted as something that is beyond the scope of this policy statement.

Stakeholders saw reconciliation with Indigenous Australia as something that should be central to the purpose of Australian education. The statement is also consistent with the longstanding legislated objectives of tertiary education in terms of its contributions to cultural, civic and

intellectual life. It takes a lead from Hans Rosling and colleagues (2018), forming the view that prosperity enables, but is subservient to, the higher purpose of culture and human rights.

This nation-building view was advocated by the vast majority of participants. However, some argued that the policy statement should be grounded in a more individualistic stance and consider what is likely to be in the best interest of prospective students, given their ambitions, abilities and aptitudes as well as their realistic options and opportunities at the time. While it is not its dominant frame, the policy statement is not incompatible with these views. Enabling all people to successfully engage in beneficial learning, whoever and wherever they are, implies that personal benefits accrue to learners and, through them, to their families and communities.

### Intentionally broad framing of the education system

Another core challenge in crafting the statement was its scope: should it retain the focus on higher education adopted in *A Fair Chance for All*, or be expanded to tertiary education, or even the entire education system? Participants made valid arguments for each of these options.

An expansive policy statement for Australian education has been worded which could span the entire education system. However, there are challenges inherent in implementing a policy statement that spans early childhood, school, vocational and higher education across public



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and private providers. Thus, at least initially, it is proposed that a statement focuses our thinking and action on the tertiary sector.

The aim should be to create seamless pathways and financing options which allow students to move between meaningful vocational and higher education experiences throughout their lives. The argument is that a strong vocational sector is beneficial to the individual learner, the economy and society as a whole, especially during a time of structural changes. This will be explored later under heading *Industry transition and lifelong learning*. At the same time, a thriving vocational sector should be highly interconnected with an increasingly diverse higher education sector, which includes public and private universities as well as well for-profit and not-for-profit independent providers. The sector also needs to examine and challenge inequalities at all levels of higher education. Stakeholders put forward a compelling case that postgraduate students are often overlooked in equity policy as a result of the false presumption that these students have overcome barriers to participation when, in fact, they can face significant hardship and disadvantage.

An integrated tertiary education policy statement is challenging in the context of regional tertiary education provision where a perceived bias exists for vocational education, and universities struggle to achieve and maintain critical mass. If we conceive of a truly integrated tertiary sector, the relative status and power of institutions may rise or fall, contributing to political, financial and implementation challenges. Many participants argued passionately that employers need to be productive contributors to conversations about student equity and the future of tertiary education.

## Multiple dimensions of equity

A holistic approach to student equity in education was seen to have multiple dimensions capturing the complexity of issues that underpin educational disadvantage. These include the learner, their various forms of capital and their personal wellbeing. It also includes factors external to the

learner, such as key supporters of the learning endeavour and the institutions which provide or support learning opportunities. Others pointed to the structural drivers of educational disadvantage in the form of poverty, racism and unequal schooling. It was also argued that, in Australia, student equity has a spatial dimension in that access to and success in tertiary education differs markedly in metro and regional and remote locations.

There was much discussion about the implications of the changing student population on disadvantaged groups and individuals that should be prioritised for interventions by way of policy and government programs. It is clear that the definition of underrepresented groups needs to be renewed. Student equity policy should be sufficiently nuanced to respond to emergent forms of disadvantage and account for the intersections between equity groups giving rise to compounding disadvantage. Student equity policy should be able to address systemic national challenges as well as accommodate localised responses to community needs. Some participants queried why equity groups did not reflect protected attributes in Equal Opportunity legislation. Others argued for fewer equity groups, limited to low SES; Indigenous<sup>[1]</sup>; and regional and remote students.

The policy statement uses the terms “whoever” and “wherever” to incorporate the widest conceptualisation possible when referring to target groups. The Review of Equity Groups is expected to provide authoritative advice on contemporary national equity groups; however, equity policy over the long term will necessitate national priorities to be balanced with local ones and responses to individual need. Thus, the statement allows for multiple narratives to cover the diversity of the tertiary student population and to accommodate different versions of a “good life”. These considerations are accommodated by referring to “beneficial and lifelong learning” as the primary outcome of effective student equity policy.

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[1] For the purposes of this report, “Indigenous” refers to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people and/or Australian First Nations people, unless specified otherwise. This term is used for brevity. The authors acknowledge the diversity of views with regard to using these terms.

## 2. An integrated approach to “success”

There was broad agreement across the expert workshop, roundtables and written submissions that the current measures of “success” with regard to student equity outcomes are too narrow, one-dimensional and reliant on quantitative indicators. An integrated notion of “successful engagement” is proposed which accommodates the interpretations of learners, institutions and governments, spans vocational and higher education sectors, and consists of qualitative and quantitative indicators.

Consistent with a nation-building perspective, it is argued that any national indicators of success should be aligned with sector-wide goals, be based on a consultative process, and include narratives as well as quantitative data. Many participants stated that targets for equity groups and appeals to fairness remain important. Others supported the development of a measure of “learning gain” similar to that currently being crafted in England.

Consistent with principles of institutional autonomy, it is argued that it is appropriate for institutions to define their own equity goals aligned with national objectives and local needs in the form of student demographics and emerging course structures. This applies to autonomy consistently linked to universities and academic freedom, but also to the legitimate strategic choices and priorities of higher and vocational education providers. Policy should support this intent and ensure that incentives are designed to produce an accessible, inclusive, high-quality and locally-responsive system. National data collection processes should be sufficiently flexible to support this ideal.

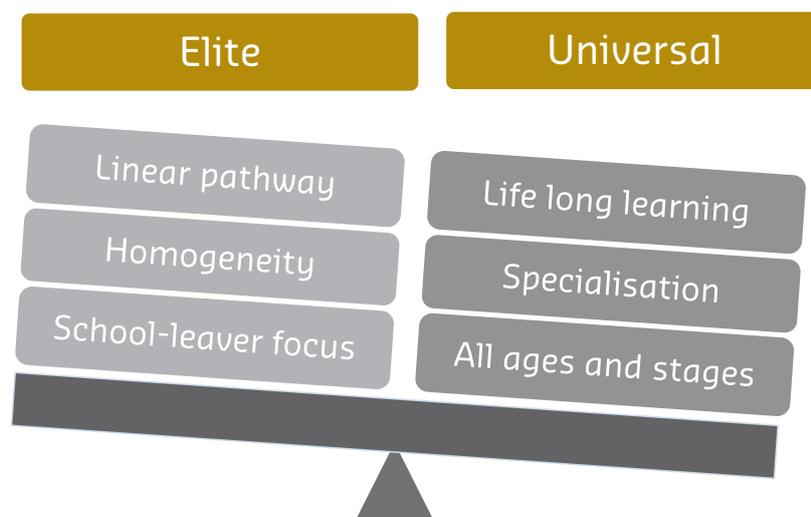
It is clear that the expectations of all stakeholders regarding the key measure of success have moved beyond that of access to an undergraduate degree. The existing Student Lifecycle model of pre-access, access, participation and attainment/transition out is seen as a useful framework to think about success measures specific to each stage of the student journey. In addition, participants were concerned about transitions from vocational education and training (VET) to higher education and vice versa as well as transitions into postgraduate study and employment. Moreover, policy needs to consider the emerging imperative to engage in lifelong learning to upskill and reskill which may take the form of shorter learning packages, such as micro-credentials or massive open online courses (MOOCs).

“Access” to tertiary education becomes a challenging concept in an era of near-universal participation and it may be more useful to adopt the notion of “informed choice” to underpin measures of success which relate to accessing tertiary courses: Australians should not be excluded from opportunities to learn but should be enabled to access the appropriate course, at the right time, according to their needs and the national interest with a reasonable chance of completing their qualification, or of acquiring the knowledge and skills they need at that point in time.

While most participants rejected a view of success that predetermines any individual’s chance of completing a qualification, there was broad agreement that success measures needed to provide good quality and accessible information to prospective students and act as a consumer protection tool.



### 3. Sector differentiation and institutional diversity



The policy statement also needs to be placed in the context of a changing Australian tertiary education sector which has been expanding and diversifying over the past 10 years in line with Trow's typology of elite to universal systems (Trow, 2007). There are currently 40 Australian universities, 170 higher education providers, and 6,900 registered training organisations, including Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutes. The tertiary education system now enrolls individuals from early adulthood and across the life course in roughly equal numbers.

Australia's universities are comparatively large, predominantly publically funded and comprehensive. More recently, however, higher education and training providers with varying degrees of specialisation in terms of both mission and products have emerged to cater for a diversifying student cohort looking for lifelong learning opportunities. Stakeholders were of the view that this diversification had accelerated the development and adoption of innovative practices within, and outside of, universities. The nature and pace of innovation across the sector was thought to provide benefits for students from diverse backgrounds, especially with regard to online and blended learning delivery, multi-disciplinary programs, project-based learning, micro-credentialing, stacked degrees and exit qualifications. It is acknowledged, however, that calls for greater institutional specialisation and product differentiation are not without risk to students, providers and taxpayers.

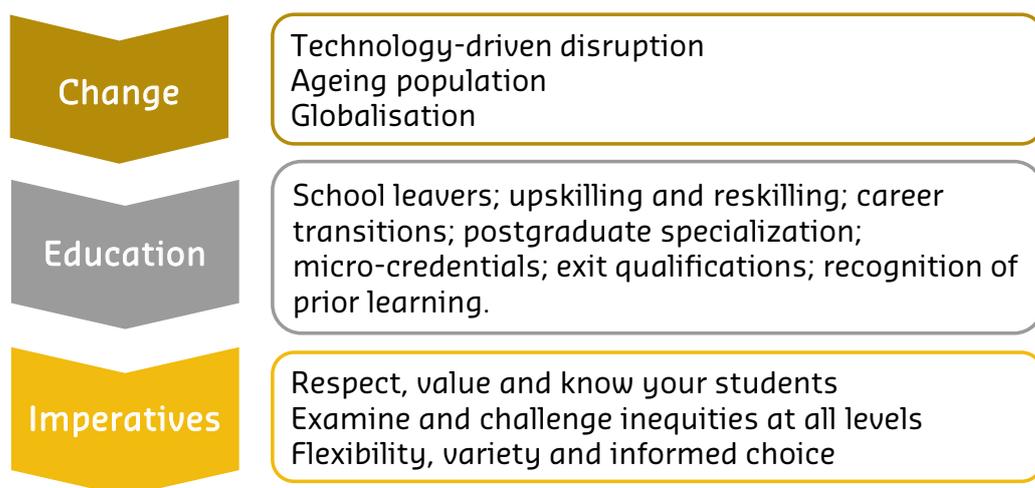
The goal should be to create smooth transitions and better outcomes for students across a diversifying system. The proposed statement

reflects this goal by including the "Achieved by" column as a "how to" guide. We stress the importance of inclusive system design, proactive removal of barriers in the curriculum and university processes as well as tailored support.

Participants argued that smooth transitions across the tertiary system are currently inhibited by a range of factors. These include unnecessary competition between providers, differences in funding and the associated value of qualifications, especially with regard to enabling education, defunding of public VET providers, fee penalties for private providers, and unregulated postgraduate fees. The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) review and the development of a Unique Student Identifier (USI) were seen as strategic opportunities to enable some resolution of the VET/higher education tensions.

There was much debate about online education as the enabler of greater student equity in a near-universal tertiary education system which consists of a diverse range of providers. Participants acknowledged the importance and effectiveness of online education to widen access to non-traditional learners and to enhance engagement. However, most cautioned that these benefits were only realised under certain conditions. Any detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this report but three of the Equity Fellows (Stone, 2017; Southgate, 2017; Pollard, 2018) have explored these challenges in depth. The bottom line is that technology remains a tool and much thought and effort are required to turn technological tools into effective mechanisms of education delivery to provide equitable support to students from diverse backgrounds.

## 4. Industry transition and lifelong learning



In the context of the fourth industrial revolution, a policy statement for the Australian tertiary education system should recognise that the system has a critical role to play in providing lifelong opportunities for reskilling and upskilling of mature workers and in supporting mid-career transitions. Its purpose is not just the initial education of academically talented school leavers. The technology-driven disruptive trends that are rapidly reshaping economies, industries, societies, regions and cultures are also reshaping education systems (their purpose, content, delivery and institutional participants). Australia's historical lack of workforce planning was called out as having done a disservice to the tertiary education sector because workforce needs remain opaque. Furthermore, participants raised that there are threats and opportunities inherent in an ageing population which have not been fully considered in policy or practice.

The goal should be for all Australians to be able to step in and out of tertiary education throughout their lives and to have the capability and confidence to navigate the ever changing world of work; that is, they should be enabled to successfully engage in beneficial and lifelong learning. Participants argued that recent policy reforms have reduced the accessibility of tertiary education across the life course, especially the funding cuts to the VET sector in most states, the change in the balance of student and government contributions to undergraduate education and unregulated fees for postgraduate courses.

Aimed squarely at institutional leaders, an impassioned call emerged from the consultation process to get to know their students better. The argument is that, in an era of near-universal participation, educational institutions at any level

can no longer make assumptions about who their students are, and what knowledge and practices they bring to the education environment. It is now imperative to genuinely engage with students as partners to find out about their needs, preferences and challenges, and to listen to the student bodies who have surveyed their constituents.

Student participants pointed out that poverty remains a live issue which undermines students' engagement in their education, especially in unpaid internships and Work Integrated Learning (WIL) placements, which are increasingly a requisite for completing undergraduate degrees. Many students, especially those who are mature age or postgraduate, reportedly struggle with finances, care responsibilities and mental health issues.

Associated with the concept of "informed choice" was the need for flexibility, variety and choice in accessing tertiary education options. Maintaining choices and access to all levels of tertiary education was seen as a challenge in the regions. There was a perception that students were often shoehorned into VET while funding arrangements incentivised university education. A rapidly changing world of work is likely to elevate the importance of objective and quality career advice as well as the relative importance of independent providers and the VET sector to create diverse learning options and informed choices. Innovations in micro-credentialing and early exit qualifications were seen as essential and positive developments.

## 5. Accountability, capability and transparency

### Collecting the right information

Linkages across education and social systems: Unique Student Identifier  
Longitudinal evaluations and research which span the education system  
Performance measures relevant to student cohorts and course structures

### Evaluate stories and statistics

A nationally consistent approach and capability for evaluation  
Build evaluation into equity and Indigenous programs and funding  
Qualitative approach relevant to national, institutional & personal context

### Evidence-based consequences

Link program planning to outcomes and funding  
Embed an 'equity lens' across the sector: policy, practice, funding

Accountability for progress features prominently in the policy statement. This responds to the urgent need to develop an integrated approach to measuring success at institutional and national levels to align performance with policy objectives, identified through the *Student Equity 2030* consultation process and the Equity Fellowship research projects.

There was broad recognition that the foundation of a strong, effective and responsive national equity program is data-driven decision making. The argument is that once a more comprehensive evidence base exists, institutions can, and should, be held accountable for the outcomes of their equity strategies and initiatives.

It was raised that, at the program level, equity funding needed greater clarity of intent and methodology which should lead to a streamlining of programs, guidelines and reporting. Many participants pointed to the need to link planning, such as the Access and Participation Plans, to institutional funding allocations and outcomes to ensure the achievement of policy objectives and increased accountability as well as better outcomes and returns on investment.

Moreover, it was pointed out repeatedly that Australia is still lacking a nationally consistent evaluation approach which would ensure that data relevant to national and institutional equity goals are collected consistently. It was argued that a national evaluation framework, methodologies and processes need to be developed by experts, in collaborative and rigorous ways, to assess the

overall impact of equity policy and programs and to inform future improvements. We are aware that the HEPPP Evaluation Framework will be developed as a commissioned NPP project during 2019 and this should make a substantial contribution to addressing this long-standing issue.

Many participants raised the need to include qualitative evaluation approaches due to the relevance of national, institutional and personal contexts to program outcomes. There was also a recognition that a national evaluation approach needs to build capability for excellent evaluation practice. Once the framework is established, evaluations should be built into programs and funding allocations by default. Such an approach could illustrate value for money in public expenditure and help achieve greater efficiency and effectiveness in spending.

There was universal recognition of the need for longitudinal data collection and analysis, including of widening participation data and students' transition to further study or employment. The sector may achieve better outcomes and practice if data sources across the different parts of the education system were linked to create a holistic picture of student progression. A Unique Student Identifier (USI) could be the most efficient way to achieve this. Better alignment in reporting is also required and, thus, better collaboration between the states and the Australian Government. There was some support for the more contentious option of linking education data to other data sources; for example, to tax, health or other existing national data sets.

# Good Practice Principles

Participants voiced strong support for a tertiary education system based on Universal Design for Learning principles (Rose & Meyer, 2002; Ostroff, 2011). Appreciative and strength-based approaches were seen as most effective in engaging and re-engaging students from diverse backgrounds in tertiary learning. Roundtable participants felt that inclusive practice needed to be rewarded and that the goal was for institutions to take the burden of one-way integration off the student. It was argued that the intentional, integrated and inclusive design of curricula and support structures was important to achieve equitable outcomes and that institutions needed to adopt a systems approach to change which was informed by the students it meant to support. These insights have been used in the “Achieved by” statement to stress the importance of inclusive design for an enabling tertiary education system.

## Social Justice Principles for Education

There was also strong support for the idea of Social Justice Principles for (Tertiary) Education. This support was grounded in philosophical as well as practical arguments. There was broad acceptance that neoliberal principles do not work in an education context. Competition in education systems was seen as bad for students and some argued it resulted in debt and non-completions.

If the policy statement was to be adopted for use across the entire education system, such an approach would need to consider how each part of the system contributes to, or prevents, social inclusion and social mobility for a cohesive modern society. There would also need to be clarity about the roles and responsibilities of institutions at each stage of the education journey for student equity outcomes. The principles could provide a tool to ensure consistency across education sectors while allowing for local interpretations of the policy statement.

1. Self-determination

2. Equity

3. Access

4. Participation

5. Rights

# Student Equity 2030 Roundtables

City/Region	Date	Location
Perth	25 September	Curtin University with lead Sue Trinidad
Adelaide	26 September	University of South Australia with lead Matt Brett
Canberra	10 October	University of Canberra with lead Nadine Zacharias
Sydney	11 October	University of Technology Sydney with lead Nadine Zacharias
Melbourne	15 October	RMIT University with lead Nadine Zacharias
Wodonga	15 October	La Trobe with lead Matt Brett
Launceston	17 October	University of Tasmania with lead Matt Brett
Brisbane	22 October	QUT Gardens Point Campus with lead Sally Kift
Brisbane	23 October	QUT Gardens Point Campus with lead Sally Kift
Darwin	25 October	Charles Darwin University with lead James Smith



Top images (L-R) — Perth and Queensland roundtables  
 Bottom images (L-R) — Sydney and Darwin roundtables

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