



NCSEHE

National Centre for Student
Equity in Higher Education



Curtin University

Submission to the Job-ready Graduates Package draft legislation consultation

National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education

2020

Submission to the *Job-ready Graduates Package* draft legislation consultation

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About the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education

The National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) is a research and policy centre funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment and is based at Curtin University. The NCSEHE provides national leadership in student equity in higher education, connecting research, policy and practice to improve higher education participation and success for marginalised and disadvantaged people.

The NCSEHE conducts a broad scope of activities including:

- research-based projects both independently and in collaboration with other organisations, funded through external grants or through Centre resources
- the NCSEHE Research Grants Program
- equity policy and program evaluation
- Research Fellowships and Equity Fellowships
- student equity data analysis, online resources and briefing notes
- print and digital publications
- collaborative and independent events
- representation at national and international conferences
- an emphasis on effective communication through channels including: website, electronic newsletters, social media and general media exposure.

The NCSEHE has established a strong national presence, engaging with key stakeholders and maintaining sector-wide partnerships to enhance outcomes and delivery of research and recommendations. The growing reputation and influence of the NCSEHE has contributed to student equity becoming firmly incorporated into higher education policy.

For further information on the NCSEHE, please visit ncsehe.edu.au

Introduction

The NCSEHE would like to thank the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE) for this opportunity to provide feedback on the exposure draft for *Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020* (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020a).

The purpose and activities of the NCSEHE centre around enhancing the participation, success and outcomes of marginalised and disadvantaged people, particularly in relation to the six identified equity groups in Australian higher education:

- Students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds (low SES)
- Students with disability
- Indigenous students (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students)
- Women in non-traditional areas (WINTA)
- Students from regional, rural and remote areas (RRR)
- Students from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB)

Around 50 per cent of domestic undergraduates can be classified into at least one of the above equity categories with many falling into two or more groups. Students in these groups have historically been underrepresented in Australian higher education. For instance, low SES students are defined as residing in the most disadvantaged 25 per cent of the population, on the basis of their area of residence and data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census. In 2018, low SES students accounted for only 17 per cent of domestic undergraduate enrolments in Australia (well below their 25 per cent population share), with other equity groups seeing similar or more pronounced levels of underrepresentation (Koshy, 2019).

In recognition of this issue, over the last decade, Australia has introduced important policies aimed at increasing equity group participation. These include the demand driven funding system and specific equity initiatives such as the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP). Between 2009 and 2018, domestic undergraduate enrolments in Australia's major universities (the Table A and B providers) increased from 553,374 to 764,652, representing an expansion of around 38.2 per cent in student headcount (see Table 1). All equity groups, except for the Remote and WINTA student groups, saw higher levels of growth in student numbers. In effect, the increase in higher education participation was not only largely shared with equity group

students, but it mostly saw a narrowing of the historic participation gap between equity group students and the general student population.

Table 1: Australian Domestic Undergraduate Enrolments, Table A and B Providers, Headcount, 2009, 2015 and 2018

	2009	2015	2018	Growth from 2009–18 %
National	553,374	727,786	764,652	38.18
Low SES	90,447	115,840	129,858	43.57
Students with Disability	24,948	44,856	55,565	122.72
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	7,296	11,845	14,314	96.19
WINTA	105,438	125,888	134,406	27.47
Regional	104,266	149,001	151,636	45.43
Remote	5,368	5,911	6,076	13.19
NESB	17,649	26,661	25,793	46.14

Source: Koshy (2016; 2019).

The NCSEHE views the challenge in higher education over the next decade as one of building effectively on this success. In February 2019, the Centre released a report outlining a series of principles for equity policy over the next decade, *The Best Chance for All: Student Equity 2030 — A long-term strategic vision for student equity in higher education*. This study drew on a consultation process via 10 major workshops across Australia in 2018, attended by over 150 experts in higher education equity, who collectively produced this vision for higher education in Australia. The proposed national policy statement gives every student in Australia the best chance of success and, in doing so, aims to create the optimum educational outcomes for Australia as a whole.

The “The Best Chance for All” recognises that advancing Australia’s future depends on all its people, whoever and wherever they are, being enabled to successfully engage in beneficial and lifelong learning.

- **Contributing to:** A fair, democratic, prosperous, and enterprising nation; reconciliation with Indigenous Australia; and 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.

In this submission, the NCSEHE considers the exposure draft legislation in the context of the *Job-ready Graduates Package*, set out in the *Job-ready Graduates – Higher Education Reform Package* discussion paper (“Discussion Paper”) released on 19 June 2020 (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020b). The *Job-ready Graduates Package* bolsters Australia’s commitment to a higher education system that meets the goals outlined above. Some of the proposed changes specifically respond to the historical disadvantage and significant barriers faced by students in RRR areas in Australia, as well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Importantly, these changes come at a critical time for Australian higher education, with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic creating an array of challenges for the sector.

The NCSEHE notes that the reforms propose to create an additional 100,000 university places for Australian students and reduce cost to students in certain fields such as teaching, health, information technology, science, engineering, and agriculture. The Centre commends the Minister for Education’s support of students who experience cumulative or compounded disadvantage, including the revised HEPPP allocation formula which will count students more than once where they fall into more than one equity group. We note the specific recognition of issues faced by students from low SES backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and also those from RRR areas.

Considering recent research and evidence on student equity in Australian higher education, the NCSEHE proposes four overarching responses to elements of the proposed measures defined in the *Job-ready Graduates Package*, detailed below.

Response to the Draft Legislation

The NCSEHE's response considers the following key areas of the draft legislation:

- proposed changes to degree funding and impact on equity groups
- choices of degree pathways and equity groups
- issues related to student study load and prescribed pass rates
- incentives relating to RRR student participation.

The NCSEHE has considered the draft legislation in the context of the Discussion Paper. As such, the response touches on some aspects not directly/specifically addressed in the exposure draft legislation, but which are relevant to its operation and reflection of policy outlined in the Discussion Paper. It is also acknowledged that the proposed reforms are limited to a focus on select equity groups¹ and may exclude other underrepresented or disadvantaged groups, such as students with disability. The NCSEHE is heartened, however, by the Minister for Education's assurance that this group will be considered through other measures/reforms, potentially arising from the 2020 Review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005.

Proposed changes to degree funding and impact on equity groups

The *Job-ready Graduates Package* announced changes to cluster funding in Australian higher education, including the creation of a new structure of four clusters and adjustments to the levels of both Commonwealth and student contributions.

This new structure is one response to new evidence on graduates' capacity to repay HECS-HELP loan debts (Corliss, Daly & Lewis, 2013) and the forecasted changes in labour market demand. The largest amendments have occurred in relation to the annual student contribution under HECS-HELP, as reported in Table 2 below. Several disciplines have seen quite dramatic variations in the level of student contribution. For instance, students in the new Band 1 disciplines (those requiring the lowest annual contributions from students) such as *Maths*, *Languages* or *Nursing*—all areas

¹ The reforms largely focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, RRR students and those from low SES backgrounds

forecast to require more graduates in the future—are projected to make contributions of A\$3,700 per annum in 2021 under the new Package. In the case of *Nursing*, this constitutes a 45.6 per cent reduction from the current contribution of A\$6,804 per annum.

The evidence on this approach seems to indicate that the impact of differentials in income-contingent fee systems such as HECS-HELP is muted, as students are more likely to respond to other factors, including their career preferences and long-term employment prospects, rather than short-term price signals (Chapman & Ryan, 2005). The strength of this effect amongst equity students has been under-studied. However, it is known that equity students have historically favoured qualifications in clusters such as *Social Studies, Political Science & Behavioural Science, Teaching, and Nursing*, while remaining underrepresented in professional (*Law & Economics; Management & Commerce* etc.) and *Medical* disciplines (Gale & Parker, 2013; Southgate, 2017). The move of *Social Studies, Political Science & Behavioural Science* into the new Band 4 cluster sees its annual student contribution rise to A\$14,500 per annum in 2021, up from A\$6,804 under current arrangements, placing it alongside the professional degrees. This may be one instance in which the change in fee structure alters student demand, to the detriment of equity students who have long viewed this discipline cluster as an option. Again, this is a policy change which would benefit from closer scrutiny of recent enrolment trends by equity students.

More importantly, the overall funding of clusters is also changing — declining on average across the entire higher education sector. For instance, under the current system, each Commonwealth Supported Place (CSP) in *Social Studies, Political Science & Behavioural Science* attracts annual funding in 2021 of A\$11,015 in Commonwealth support, in addition to the student contribution of A\$6,804. This is equal to a total contribution of A\$17,819. Under the proposed arrangement, the Commonwealth's contribution would decline to A\$1,100, while the student contribution would increase to A\$14,500, for total funding per place of A\$15,600. In effect, total funding per CSP in 2021 would decline by A\$2,219 under the proposed measures — a reduction of just under 12.5 per cent. This decline in resourcing has implications for sub-disciplines in this cluster, particularly those who enrol equity students.

Table 2: Projected Student and Total (Commonwealth and Student) Contributions by Discipline in 2021, Current and Proposed (*Job-ready Graduates Package*), A\$ and per cent change.

Disciplines	Student Contribution (\$)			Total Contribution (\$) (Commonwealth & Student)		
	Current	Proposed	Change (%)	Current	Proposed	Change (%)
Law & Economics	11,355	14,500	27.7	13,592	15,600	14.8
Management & Commerce	11,355	14,500	27.7	13,592	15,600	14.8
English	6,804	3,700	-45.6	13,030	17,200	32.0
Social Studies, Political Science & Behavioural Science	6,804	14,500	113.1	17,819	15,600	-12.5
Maths	9,698	3,700	-61.8	20,713	17,200	-17.0
Architecture	9,698	7,700	-20.6	20,713	21,200	2.4
IT	9,698	7,700	-20.6	20,713	21,200	2.4
Other Health	9,698	7,700	-20.6	20,713	21,200	2.4
Teaching	6,804	3,700	-45.6	18,266	17,200	-5.8
Communications	6,804	14,500	113.1	20,351	15,600	-23.3
Clinical Psychology	6,804	3,700	-45.6	20,351	17,200	-15.5
Creative Arts	6,804	7,700	13.2	20,351	21,200	4.2
Languages	6,804	3,700	-45.6	20,351	20,200	-0.7
Allied Health	9,698	7,700	-20.6	23,245	21,200	-8.8
Nursing	6,804	3,700	-45.6	21,929	20,200	-7.9
Engineering	9,698	7,700	-20.6	28,958	24,200	-16.4
Science	9,698	7,700	-20.6	28,958	24,200	-16.4
Agriculture	9,698	3,700	-61.8	34,144	30,700	-10.1
Environmental Studies	9,698	7,700	-20.6	34,144	24,200	-29.1
Medical	11,355	11,300	-0.5	35,801	38,300	7.0
Dental	11,355	11,300	-0.5	35,801	38,300	7.0
Veterinary Science	11,355	11,300	-0.5	35,801	38,300	7.0

Source: Department of Education, Skills and Employment. (2020b).

The very short lead time to the introduction of these funding adjustments also has implications for further inequity across student cohorts in coming years. Students who made subject choices in Year 10 or before on assumptions around the costs of study, are now in Year 12 and confront markedly different fee structures. Given that we know students from more financially disadvantaged backgrounds tend to be more debt averse when it comes to studying (Raciti, 2019), the increases in fees may exacerbate fears and impact on educational decision making. Further, such students are likely to be most vulnerable to funding cuts at the discipline level, with the resultant increase in class sizes and reduced services most impacting on students who have fewer resources and networks available to them outside of university (Halsey, 2017).

Recommendation 1: The Department of Education Skills and Employment (DESE) examines the impact of changes in funding allocations on equity group undergraduate enrolments and considers measures to minimise these. This would include exploring how these funding changes impact longitudinally on diversity in affected disciplines.

Recommendation 2: The DESE considers a phased introduction of the new funding clusters to enable students to recalibrate their choices of profession and prepare future cohorts for the increased financial expectation.

Choices of degree pathways and equity groups

The NCSEHE supports the introduction of flexibility in offering CSPs to students from sub-bachelor to postgraduate. This is a welcome development that may allow institutions to target Commonwealth support at various points of the student life cycle, from point of entry to advanced training. We encourage this flexibility to be extended to enabling programs which NCSEHE research has identified as being a powerful mechanism for providing access, support and opportunity for students from equity/underrepresented groups, further supporting greater educational participation (Habel, Whitman, Stokes, 2016; Pitman, Trinidad, Devlin, Harvey, Brett, & McKay, 2016).

The NCSEHE also commends the reintroduction of demand driven funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from RRR areas, but advocate that this reform be extended to other underrepresented/equity groups. This should include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students located in metropolitan areas, all RRR students (not only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students or relocating), as well as students from low SES backgrounds. This would align demand driven funding with the focus areas of the new Indigenous, Regional and Low SES Attainment Fund (IRLSAF). While adopting a more nuanced approach to supporting equity students is welcomed, further delineating groups in terms of perceived or additional need may create confusion for students and/or increase perceptions of exclusion.

Recommendation 3: The DESE extend demand driven funding to include more equity groups particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students located in metropolitan areas, all students in RRR areas as well as students from low SES backgrounds.

Issues related to student study load and pass rates

The exposure draft legislation proposes two specific changes to the status of CSPs in relation to unreasonable study load and student academic progress (pass rates).

In relation to **unreasonable study load**, the legislation indicates in Subsection 36–12 that institutions may not advise a person that they are a Commonwealth supported student in relation to a unit of study if their current, or prospective (after enrolment), study load is in excess of two (2.0) equivalent full-time student load (EFTSL). The NCSEHE views this as a reasonable cap on individual student engagement in domestic higher education as it ensures a balance between flexibility in course engagement and overall study capacity.

In relation to Commonwealth support for students on the basis of their **pass rate**, the draft legislation, in subsection 36–13, requires that institutions may not advise a person that they are a Commonwealth supported student in relation to a unit of study if, in the case of students studying at the **bachelor degree or higher** level, they have already undertaken **eight** (or more) units of

study and not passed at least 50 per cent of these units, or for **other students**, undertaken **four** (or more) units of study and not passed at least 50 per cent of these units.

It can be argued that this unfairly penalises students for failure in their first year of study, especially as the repercussions of COVID-19 will continue to impact on student performance. This is an especially pertinent issue for equity students. The distribution of fail rates across the domestic student population can be seen in Figure 1 which reports on the success rate — the percentage of all subjects taken that are passed. This shows that in all equity groups except the NESB student group, students have lower success rates than the national average of 84 per cent, with remote (79.2 per cent) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (70.4 per cent) having markedly lower rates.



Figure 1: Success Rate (%) — All Equity Groups and All Students - National (2018)

Source: National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (2020).

This evidence reinforces recent research that indicates equity status is a key determinant of outcomes over the course of the student cycle, as measured by student success, academic performance and completion (Li & Carroll, 2017; Walker-Gibbs et al., 2019). The quantitative and qualitative research indicates this pass rate condition may particularly disadvantage and/or limit equitable access and participation. Academic failure early in the student journey should not immediately attract a response that inhibits a student from continuing to engage with their education. Emerging research into how students consider academic failure indicates that this experience can actually positively inform the learning journeys of students (Ajjawi, 2019; Walker et

al., 2019). There is some value in allowing students to try and risk failing, without significant financial (or other unreasonable) implications or expectations on that student. The Open Universities Australia (OUA) model is an example, providing a low-risk "try-before-you-buy" pathway into higher education, which has facilitated significant growth in higher education attainment for equity groups.

Students themselves contribute significant funding to their studies and deserve some agency in determining the risk they are willing to take in challenging themselves to undertake, and persist with advanced studies. Universities also already have policies in place, which manage student progression/enrolment following failure, including termination of enrolment where a student does not pass a minimum number of units. Such policies already ensure both student and Commonwealth funds do not continue to be spent where a student is unlikely to complete their qualification.

The NCSEHE commends the clear onus on providers to ensure integrity in their promotional and admissions strategies to ensure students are accurately informed of the likely costs of study, and given the best chance to succeed. It is noted, however, that these changes were not explicitly prefaced in the Discussion Paper, and we advise further explanation and consultation occur in relation to these changes.

Recommendation 4: The DESE considers the range of repercussions from removing Commonwealth funding when students do not pass 50% of the units undertaken (either 8 or 4 units depending on program of study) with specific focus on the impacts on those students from recognised equity groups.

Incentives related to RRR student participation

The NCSEHE welcomes the initiatives around the support and promotion of RRR student participation, which builds on the *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy* (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2019) notably through the introduction of the Tertiary Access Payment (TAP) for students intending to move to metropolitan areas to engage in

higher education. This policy response is particularly pertinent given the uncertainty, risks and costs associated with entering university in the immediate period following the emergence of COVID-19.

This does raise the important policy question as to whether the TAP should be extended, at commensurate rates of payment, to RRR students attending local regional campuses and, possibly, to students in other equity groups. A recent Universities Australia (2018) study of student finances indicated that 58.2 per cent of all domestic undergraduate students agreed with the statement that “My financial situation is often a source of worry for me”, with higher levels of congruence with this sentiment seen among regional (64.2 per cent), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (72.2 per cent) and low SES (62.7 per cent) students (Universities Australia, 2018, Table 4.2A, p.40). Given concerns around the emerging impacts of COVID-19 on workforce participation among current higher education students (O’Shea, Koshy & Drane, in-review), a widening of the recipient base for the TAP may be effective in addressing short-term concerns around student transitions to university from school, tertiary education, or work.

Though the Discussion Paper refers to the legislative change facilitating establishment of the National Priorities and Industry Linkage Fund (NPILF) and IRLSAF, neither are mentioned in the draft legislation itself. Instead, the legislation includes a new requirement for providers to outline what such funding would target or apply to (detailed in the mission-based compacts), and extends capacity to offer grants to cover industry engagement. How these grants will be administered, structured, allocated and evaluated will likely be set out in associated Guidelines (i.e. the Other Grants Guidelines), which may not require legislative change and, therefore, may not be subject to public/sector consultation. The NCSEHE recommends the DESE seeks input and undergoes consultation with the sector in drafting associated changes to the Other Grants Guidelines.

Recommendation 5: The DESE examines the potential for an extension of the Tertiary Access Payment, in full or modified form, to regional students attending local regional universities, and also a possible extension to other equity student groups.

Recommendation 6: The DESE seeks input and feedback from the broader higher education sector in drafting changes to the Other Grants Guidelines, in relation to IRLSAF and NPILF, particularly as it relates to the prospective operation of the HEPPP.

Recommendations

The NCSEHE supports the potential contribution of the *Job-ready Graduates Package* to addressing multiple facets of the higher education student experience. There are a number of reforms advocated by the NCSEHE. However, careful work is required in refining and adjusting the reforms to ensure students, particularly those from recognised equity groups, are not negatively impacted.

Based on the research and policy work undertaken by the NCSEHE, and its consultation with equity stakeholders, we propose the following recommendations, which we hope will inform the ways in which this reform package is structured and defined:

Recommendation 1: The Department of Education Skills and Employment (DESE) examines the impact of changes in funding allocations on equity group undergraduate enrolments and considers measures to minimise these. This would include exploring how these funding changes impact longitudinally on diversity in affected disciplines.

Recommendation 2: The DESE considers a phased introduction of these new funding clusters to enable students to recalibrate their choices of profession and also, prepare future cohorts for the increased financial expectation.

Recommendation 3: The DESE extends demand-driven funding to include more equity groups, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students located in metropolitan areas, all students in RRR areas as well as students from low SES backgrounds.

Recommendation 4: The DESE considers the range of repercussions from removing Commonwealth funding when students do not pass 50% of the units undertaken (either 8 or 4 units depending on program of study) with specific focus on the impacts on those students from recognised equity groups.

Recommendation 5: The DESE examines the potential for an extension of the Tertiary Access Payment, in full or modified form, to regional students attending local regional universities, and also a possible extension to other equity student groups.

Recommendation 6: The DESE seeks input and feedback from the broader higher education sector in drafting changes to the Other Grants Guidelines, in relation to IRLSAF and NPILF, particularly as it relates to the prospective operation of the HEPPP.

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