University responses to enhancing equity in the post-COVID landscape

Mary Teague, Sally Baker, Farhana Laffernis, Katy Head, Sonal Singh, Carolina Morison, Christine Johnston and Jim Micsko

2022

Make tomorrow better.

University responses to enhancing equity in the post-COVID landscape

2022

Mary Teague, University of New South Wales

Sally Baker, University of New South Wales

Farhana Laffernis, University of New South Wales

Katy Head, University of New South Wales

Sonal Singh, University of Technology Sydney

Carolina Morison, Macquarie University

Christine Johnston, Western Sydney University

Jim Micsko, Western Sydney University

Acknowledgements

Members of the project group included:

Mary Teague	Principal Investigator
Sally Baker	Associate Investigator
Carolina Morison	Associate Investigator
Sonal Singh	Associate Investigator
Christine Johnston	Associate Investigator
Katy Head	Associate Investigator
Jim Micsko	Associate Investigator
Farhana Laffernis	Research Assistant
Mick Warren	Research Assistant
Jindri De Silva	Research Assistant
Matthew Breaden	Research Assistant
Christine Lemoto	Research Assistant

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of figures

Abbreviations

ATAR:	Australian Tertiary Admission Rank
COVID:	SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus
CSP:	Commonwealth Supported Place
DDS:	Demand Driven System
DESE:	Commonwealth Department of Education, Skills and Employment
EPHEA:	Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia
JRGP:	Job-ready Graduates Package
HEPPP:	Higher Education Partnerships and Participation Program
ICSEA:	Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage
IRLSAF:	Indigenous, Regional and Low SES Attainment Fund
LGA:	Local Government Area
LGBTQIA+:	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual and other sexually or gender diverse
Low SES students:	Students from low socio-economic backgrounds
MQ:	Macquarie University
NCSEHE:	National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education
NSW:	New South Wales
TEQSA:	Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency
UAC:	Universities Admission Centre
UNSW:	University of New South Wales
UTS:	University of Technology Sydney
VET:	Vocational and Educational Training
WSU:	Western Sydney University

Glossary of Terms

Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR): The primary criterion that universities across Australia use to select Year 12 domestic students into undergraduate courses. A number between 0.00 and 99.95 that indicates where a student ranks in relation to all students who started high school with them in Year 7.

Commonwealth Supported Places (CSP): Government-subsidised place at a university or higher education provider for domestic students who are either Australian citizens, permanent visa holders or New Zealand citizens.

COVID: The SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus (also referred to as 'the pandemic') that first emerged in 2019.

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Migrant and/or Refugee (CALDMR): A domestic (therefore not international) student who was not born in Australia, speaks other languages and does not share the background of the dominant cultural group (white, European descent)

Enabling programs: Refers to non-award courses designed to prepare students who may lack the requisite knowledge or experience for direct entry into an undergraduate award program. Completion of an enabling program may also constitute an alternative entry pathway into university.

Equity cohorts: Groups of students who are historically under-represented in Higher Education, such as students from a low SES background, students from regional and remote areas, and Indigenous students.

First-in-family (FiF): Those students who are the first in their immediate family to undertake a higher education qualification. Family may include parents, partners, children and siblings. FiF students are regarded as encountering additional and typically invisible obstacles as they progress through their qualification.

Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA): A measure of school socio-economic status created by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA).

Indigenous students: Refers to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students and/or Australian First Nations students. This term is used for brevity. The authors acknowledge the diversity of views with regard to using these terms. We use First Nations throughout, unless referring to government terminology.

Local Government Areas (LGAs): A spatial unit referring to the territory of a local government in Australia that encompasses multiple suburbs with different postcodes. LGAs are defined by each State and Territory and the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) and are used in the collection and dissemination of official statistics.

Low SES students: A student who comes from the bottom 25 per cent of Australian Bureau of Statistics statistical area (SA1) or postcode in which they reside. All SA1 areas are ranked on the basis of ABS estimates of the Socio-Economic Index for Areas (SEIFA) of Education and Occupation calculated using census data.

Non-ATAR pathways: Refers to pathways into university programs that use criteria other than an ATAR to determine admission.

Regional and Remote students: Students whose postcode of their permanent home residence in defined as inner regional, outer regional, remote or very remote by the Australian Bureau of Statistics' 2016 Australia Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) classification of regions.

Vocational and Educational Training (VET): Education and training that focuses on providing skills for work and the workplace. It is delivered in a number of ways — through schools, dual sector universities with VET courses, TAFE institutes, private registered training organisations and community colleges. A VET qualification or program can be a: Certificate I, II, III or IV; Diploma; Advanced Diploma; Apprenticeship; Traineeship; Graduate Certificate; or Graduate Diploma.

Executive Summary

Background

2020 was a particularly challenging year for Australian higher education and student equity. The COVID-19 pandemic has had significant and far-reaching consequences for the higher education sector, and particularly impacted on students from equity cohorts. In addition to the initial impacts of the pandemic in 2020, the introduction of the Job-ready Graduates Package (JRGP) also had significant implications for universities in terms of responding to student equity. Given the widespread and deep impacts of these changes, it was timely to explore how universities responded to these challenges in terms of access and admissions, and participation and support for equity cohorts.

Using a mixed method, comparative approach, we sought to gain an understanding of the impacts of the pandemic by exploring how universities responded to equity considerations in 2020, specifically whether institutions developed admissions requirements and pathways, support services, and strategies to increase access for equity students into higher education. The project was designed to develop a broad national account of how universities responded to COVID in terms of equity in 2020, as well to develop more detailed accounts of the considerations and decision-making within institutions through:

- A survey of equity practitioners across Australian universities.
- Interviews with senior leaders who represent Australian university executive levels.
- Development of institutional case studies, informed by interviews with university staff responsible for the implementation of their institution's COVID response.

Key findings

Pathways and admissions programs

Alternative, non-ATAR, pathways to university proliferated in the advent of COVID-19, in many cases as a means to mitigate some of the impact on school leavers who experienced significant disruption to their education in 2020. Universities accelerated the implementation of admissions pathways (including School Recommendation Schemes, non-ATAR pathways, reduced ATAR pathways, and the expansion of enabling and certificate programs), and while there was no evidence to suggest any strong impetus to recruit from equity cohorts as a result of the sector's precarious financial position, benefits to student equity from the expansion of these pathways is likely.

Support services and equity student retention

Although finances were concerning for Australian universities following the impacts of reduced international student revenue and a lack of access to the federal government's JobKeeper package, many offered increased financial support for students. Our findings speak to the ways that universities responded to the needs of equity student cohorts, with the most prevalent forms of support being financial (scholarships, bursaries) and outreach to enrolled university students (phone calls, technology). Other supports included digital resource loans and wellbeing engagement to support students coping with increased stress. However, while many universities used a range of strategies to identify "at-risk" students, our respondents also noted the difficulties of supporting equity cohorts because of challenges with identifying particular groups and/or reliance on self-disclosure of "equity circumstances".

Flexibility

All respondents spoke to the large-scale shift with regard to online learning, support and resources for students adapting to a new way of being at university. With this urgent and unplanned shift, universities introduced new flexibilities to accommodate the needs of

students. According to many of the senior leaders interviewed, some of the accommodations made, such as early conditional offer schemes for school leavers, had been planned before COVID, but they were accelerated because of the pandemic.

Partnerships and collaboration

Some respondents reflected on increased external partnerships, sector collaborations, relationships with student organisations and/or guilds. Other partnerships that began or were strengthened included those with governments, and with schools and teachers. For those institutions who sought to engage with stakeholders externally, these collaborations and partnerships appear to have been a significant enabler for the support of equity students during COVID.

Advocacy and awareness

While the pandemic in particular offered an opportunity to develop a broader awareness of student equity considerations in higher education, there was limited suggestion in the data that this opportunity had been harnessed by many institutions for promoting equity. At a national level, some respondents commented on the potential for lasting change in national acceptance of the ATAR as the most relied upon predictor of student success. There were suggestions of future advocacy for expanded admissions pathways.

Based on our findings, we make five recommendations for the higher education sector:

- **Recommendation 1**

  Ensure consistency of advocacy for student equity (not equality) via an explicit university-wide student equity strategy which is embedded across the student lifecycle.

- **Recommendation 2**

  Set key performance indicators regarding the access, participation and success of equity student cohorts with transparent data dashboards and regular internally circulated performance reporting based upon clear evaluation frameworks.

- **Recommendation 3**

  Distributed leadership within higher education institutions to allow for transparent and collaborative processes for the decision-making regarding student equity admission and transition support.

- **Recommendation 4**

  Adopt an intersectional approach to student equity admission and transition support that recognises how multiple forms of disadvantage cause compounded barriers and respond through the creation of a range of pathways and supports for engagement.

- **Recommendation 5**

  Develop institutional COVID-response plans for equity cohorts that explicitly respond to key access, participation and success needs of equity cohorts during COVID, including potential utilisation of reallocated HEPPP funding across the student lifecycle.

Introduction

While COVID has had a monumental impact on education worldwide, the consequences have not been evenly distributed. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2020), "The evidence is clear that students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are the ones likely to suffer the most" (p. 24).

This report explores equity in higher education in 2020, a year of extraordinary change for the Australian university sector. Two key events have shifted the shape of higher education for the medium to longer-term: COVID, and the federal government reforms to higher education that resulted in the Job-ready Graduates Package. The changes inflicted by these events have also had significant implications for student equity in education, creating both challenges and opportunities for widening access and participation of equity cohorts in Australian universities. Through the pandemic, universities have had an opportunity to adapt to the changing higher education landscape by embracing a broader equity agenda. The dire financial situation that many institutions find themselves in as a result of the COVID-inflicted contraction of the international student market means that a "business as usual" approach to university operations and planning — and the role of student equity within them — will be difficult to sustain.

The research presented in this report sought to explore how public universities responded to the impacts of COVID on admissions (entry) and support (participation), with a particular focus on how students from equity cohorts were considered in these responses, and whether the changes to policy and practice enacted during the pandemic are likely to be continued.

Key event 1: COVID

The first significant impact on Australian higher education in 2020 was COVID. Similar to other countries that have heavily relied on higher education as a key export, the impacts of COVID have left the Australian higher education sector in precarious shape. The abrupt closing of borders necessitated by COVID has brought Australia's over-reliance on international student income into sharp relief (ABC, 2019). As a result, the sector is facing catastrophic financial losses (predicted by Universities Australia to reach $16bn by 2023),[1] which were compounded by the absence of federal government financial support in times of lockdown. These financial challenges have resulted in a series of profound and painful changes for Australian universities, with 17,000 staff lost in 2020 alone (Zhou, 2021). In addition to the financial difficulties caused by COVID, there have been significant other ramifications for students, staff and universities. The consequences of lockdowns and remote learning have created significant educational and wellbeing challenges for all students because of the sudden and protracted shift to remote learning when community transmission rates necessitated school closures due to public health directives for social distancing (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2021). The results of lockdowns, school closures and remote teaching are likely to have enduring impacts across the life-course of a degree, particularly for equity cohorts. As O'Shea, Koshy and Drane (2021, p. 12) summarise,

> In the context of COVID-19, these issues apply to non-equity as well as equity students, and in many instances will see a further divergence in outcomes between students in the general population and those in equity groups. For this reason, it can be anticipated that existing equity group definitions may need to accommodate the complexities of the post-COVID-19 environment and the span of disadvantage that will undoubtedly become apparent.

---

[1] https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/media-item/COVID-to-cost-universities-16-billion-by-2023/

Key event 2: Job-ready Graduates Package

The second of the ongoing challenges for the sector is the introduction of the Job-ready Graduates Package (JRGP), which the Australian Parliament legislated on 19 October 2020 (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020).The reforms included in the JRGP included an increase in the number of Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs) by 30,000 places, and adding 50,000 places for short courses to "deliver more job-ready graduates in the disciplines and regions where they are needed most and help drive the nation's economic recovery from the COVID pandemic" (n.p.). While the JRGP received hearty critique (Norton, 2020; Warburton, 2021), not least because of how it revalued the cost to students of Arts and Humanities degrees, it also offers hope for greater alignment between higher and vocational institutions, and a heightened focus on preparing for the unpredictable future world of work. As Doidge and Doyle (2020, p. 5) write about the JRGP,

> COVID's radical disruption of business-as-usual provides a powerful impetus to rethink the sector's mission. In what will be an extended economic downturn, coupled with pre-pandemic uncertainty about the future world of work and careers, an ongoing 'job ready' focus is important to help prepare students young and older for a rapidly changing and increasingly precarious employment market.

While the sector will have to make difficult decisions that will undoubtedly result in a markedly changed sector over the next two to three years, there are clear opportunities for widening participation and redressing endemic patterns of inequitable access and participation rates of educationally disadvantaged cohorts. Although wildly disruptive, COVID has also presented opportunities for universities in terms of growth in the domestic cohort as people typically return to education in times of financial turmoil/ recession (Corliss, Daly & Lewis, 2020; Hillman, 2020). Moreover, as Henry (2020) notes, the provision of additional Commonwealth Supported Places (CSP) "may reduce competition for places in popular courses, having the potential to relax pressure on ATAR as a mechanism to manage student numbers", which could also have the result of helping equity cohorts to access courses that traditionally have the barrier of a high ATAR threshold, which privileges higher SES students.

Agile and responsive universities have reviewed their existing pathways and admissions requirements, creating opportunities for equity cohorts. Such opportunities have been created through the disruption to reliance on the ATAR as the primary currency for undergraduate admissions and wider uptake of early conditional entry schemes. Examples include the Gateway Admission Pathway at the University of New South Wales (UNSW, 2021) and the U@Uni Academy at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS, 2021). This presents a fruitful space for further examination of universities' responses to the pandemic and the impact of COVID-specific interventions on these institutions' priorities and resourcing and, in turn, on equity cohort enrolments and retention.

Introducing the project

This project explored how universities across Australia responded to the challenges that 2020 brought: firstly, institutions' responses to the challenges caused by COVID and the loss of international student revenue and, secondly (and serendipitously) responses to the JRGP, both of which created possibilities for growing the domestic cohort of students by refocusing recruitment activities on the domestic "market", and through the provision of funding for short courses as gateway courses through the JRGP. In particular, we wanted to examine the impact these seismic changes to "business as usual" had on increasing the access and participation of equity cohorts, in terms of addressing admissions requirements, creating or increasing the use of alternative pathways into undergraduate study, and whether their strategies targeted, or impacted on, attraction of an expanded pool of students from equity cohorts.

This project was timely for two reasons. Firstly, the impacts of the COVID pandemic and its ramifications on student enrolments and the profile of future cohorts are likely to have long-lasting and widely felt consequences. Secondly, the targets – of 20 per cent low SES enrolments and 40 per cent participation of 25–34-year-olds – set in the Bradley Review of 2008 (Bradley et al., 2008) were due to expire in 2020. There had been no significant review of higher education policy and funding until the JRGP, meaning that the role and shape of the higher education sector's response to inequitable participation of particular cohorts had remained reasonably static for the last 12 years. This means that the time is right to investigate how universities are responding to the COVID crisis.

As such, this project has explored whether higher education institutions have reconsidered their strategic priorities, resources, and approaches in the light of increasing fiscal constraints and policy reform. The impetus for this project sat in the potential risk that student equity considerations would get lost in universities' reactions to the turbulent circumstances of responding to the pandemic when, in fact, there is even greater need for continued effort, support, and advocacy for the most vulnerable and under-represented student cohorts in our communities.

To this end, we undertook a multi-partner, mixed methods national study of Australian public universities, capturing the observations, intentions, strategies, and understandings of a range of staff members from equity units, admissions units, and student members of the senior executive that sought to respond to the following research questions:

RQ 1. What are the equity opportunities – as identified by universities – with the imperative to grow the domestic student cohort following the COVID-related changes to the higher education sector?

RQ 2. How have universities changed their admissions requirements to accommodate non-ATAR pathways and in what ways have they changed, if at all?

RQ 3. Have universities targeted particular equity cohorts as a result of the imperative to grow the domestic cohort?

RQ 4. Did equity cohorts have additional attention paid to them or were they lost in the "big picture" of the pandemic?

RQ 5. What strategies have universities engaged with in order to attract and incentivise domestic enrolments, particularly with regard to equity cohorts?

RQ 6. Have collaborations across equity stakeholders strengthened to promote new, collective approaches that enhance equity for students?

RQ 7. Is there an intention for any changes (with regard to admissions, pathways, access and support) to be maintained beyond 2021?

RQ 8. What advocacy have universities engaged in with regard to equity cohorts and growing their domestic cohorts?

Through this project, we have developed a national picture of how universities responded to the shifting enrolment context from late 2020 to early 2021, the shift in institutional priorities, and universities' adaptation to the changing landscape. Further, the project examined the role of student equity in strategy and policy development, particularly as this related to admissions, pathways into study, and schemes to attract and incentivise equity student enrolments.

Context and Literature Review

Impacts of COVID on education

Schools and their relationship to university admissions practices

COVID has significantly impacted on school education, with UNICEF (2021) estimating that 77 million students were locked out from their schooling 18 months after the pandemic first hit. While the majority of these children are located in low-income countries, educational inequity related to school closures and local lockdowns are also evident in resource-rich countries. In Australia, when schools were closed to all but the children of essential workers, in-person teaching was replaced with remote learning overseen by parents or carers, which primarily occurred via online platforms, such as Google Classroom, and via video conferencing software, such as Zoom. Although all Australian children were impacted by the first national lockdown in March 2020, it is worth noting that the national picture of the days of in-person schooling lost to lockdown varies according to the state or territory: in 2020, Victoria had 90 days of remote learning (Wright, 2021), compared with 32 days in NSW (Raper, 2020), and only 24 days in Western Australia (Hamlyn, 2020). The diversity has increased even more in 2021; indeed, Melbourne was given the unenviable title of "most locked-down city in the world" in October 2021 after 262 days of restrictions (Paul & Burton, 2021).

In Australia, COVID and its associated impacts have undoubtedly disrupted the learning experiences of *all* students. However, the evidence indicates clear patterns of inequity with the impacts of remote learning intensifying pre-existing forms of disadvantage. Studies commissioned by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE) highlighted the disruptions caused by the COVID pandemic to the secondary school education sector in Australia (DESE, 2021). These studies found that at the time of publication, mass school closures in Australia had affected four million students, and 800,000 of these students (20%) faced additional barriers relating to a range of intersecting features of educational disadvantage: financial hardship, digital exclusion, and poor technology management.

The consequences of remote delivery also extended to negative impacts on wellbeing (AIHW, 2021a). Indeed, the DESE (2021) commissioned reports claim that remote delivery (or "home learning") has increased stress and anxiety among students because of increased isolation and loss of social connections. Many parents and carers shared increased anxiety due to the pressure of balancing work, remote learning, concern about their child "falling behind" in their education, and other stressors, such as employment precarity and caring duties (AIHW, 2021a; Baker, 2021; Muir et al., 2020). These stresses are exacerbated for educationally disadvantaged students and families (AIHW, 2021a; Drane, Vernon & O'Shea, 2020; Sonnemann & Goss, 2020). The international literature confirms Australian accounts of how social class impacted on students, parents, and teachers with regard to adverse health outcomes from their experience of remote delivery and the general stress of living through a pandemic. For example, the OECD (2020) cites research that estimates that in the UK, "the learning gap for disadvantaged students has widened by at least 46%" with students in general losing an estimated three months on average in their learning (p. 24). Similar findings are reported from the Chinese context, with Wu et al.'s (2020) survey of Chinese parents of students in primary, secondary and university education finding that depression, anxiety and stress of parents with low family economic level were significantly higher than those with high economic level. Similar findings have been reported internationally, including the American (Wanberg et al., 2020), German (Klapproth et al., 2020) and UK (Davillas & Jones, 2021) contexts.

A more granular analysis of the impacts of COVID and remote learning shows that some student cohorts were particularly impacted. In particular, students from CALDM/R

backgrounds were significantly affected; Mudwari et al. (2021) note that the pandemic and associated circumstances have potentially pushed many families into poverty, and these impacts likely intensified for refugee-background students' families due to economic factors such as job loss (p. 73).

A particular challenge for remote learning is the so-called "digital divide" (Chrysanthos, 2021; Mudwari et al., 2021; Seymour, Skattebol & Pook, 2021), with COVID not only exposing the variable access to digital infrastructure and equipment, but also highlighting the teaching challenges of not being able to guarantee access to particular technologies at home. For example, in their 2020 survey of teachers' perceptions of remote learning, using the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) measurement as a proxy of a student's educational disadvantage, Flack et al. (2020) reported significant concerns for students in the lowest-ICSEA category. Firstly, the teacher-respondents were more than five times as likely to be concerned about lowest-ICSEA students lacking access to basic needs (23.8%) than their peers. Teachers were almost four times as likely to be worried about lowest-ICSEA students' lack of access to remote learning technology and the internet (59.1%) compared to those in the highest-ICSEA category (16.5%).

Recent research reports that the home environment – including parents' capacity to support remote learning – is another significant factor. According to a 2020 Grattan Institute report, students in the lowest socio-economic quartile (low SES) were found to have the least help with schoolwork from their parents, compared to their higher SES peers (Sonnemann & Goss, 2020, p. 10). Similarly, the teachers in Flack et al.'s (2020) survey reported that they were twice as likely to report worry about capacity for support from a parent or guardian (43.6%) during remote learning. Other challenges related to the home environment include lack of quiet space, both for students and teachers (Taylor, 2021). For equity students in particular, school can provide a source of stability and basic needs, such as food and a space to study; as Drane, Vernon and O'Shea (2020) describe, "school connection is a protective factor for many students" and provides routine, pastoral care (p. 592). As such, the closure of schools provided additional disadvantage for this cohort (Brown et al., 2021). As a result, the gaps that were already evident in the schooling system (for example, Gonski, 2011) were widened and brought into sharp focus.

The group that was especially disadvantaged by the impacts of COVID was the 2020 Year 12 cohort who took their High School Certificate (HSC) exams after a year of unanticipated and extensive disruption. Without being able to rely on the traditional conditions of assessment, state governments designed go-arounds to ensure the HSC could proceed but with recognition of the disruption students experienced throughout 2020 (and 2021).

In changes initiated in response to the pandemic in 2020 which have carried over to 2021, the New South Wales Education Standards Authority (NESA) gave principals "the power to determine the number, type and weighting of tasks for HSC and Year 11 based school-based assessment". In a typical year, Assessment Certification Examination (ACE) guidelines recommend three to five assessment tasks per course, including a formal examination (NESA). In New South Wales (NSW), NESA implemented the COVID-19 Special Consideration Program,[2] which offers flexibility for students whose learning was significantly compromised for six weeks of term (30 school days) or more because of COVID-19 restrictions. The program covers HSC written exams, all performance and oral language exams, most major projects (including the folios) and the HSC Minimum Standard tests (NESA, 2021). Eligibility for the program is based upon a statement provided by the school explaining the "substantial impact" felt by their students, with no evidence required on behalf of individual students. The criteria for assessing special consideration include limited access to the internet and learning materials, and home conditions that compromised

---

[2] https://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/portal/nesa/about/news/covid-advice/hsc-exams-and-major-projects/covid-19-special-consideration-program

students' learning capacity. While students have to apply individually, in 2021 group applications were permitted from the Local Government Areas (LGAs) most badly affected by COVID transmission and lockdown.

The main provision offered by the program is for eligible students to be awarded marks by their teachers for affected work rather than by an external marker (Taylor & Rabe, 2021). A similar measure was applied in Victoria in the context of the 2020 Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), whereby teachers were encouraged to provide an indication of what a student's performance would be if they had not been impacted by the pandemic (Finefter-Rosenbluh, Perrotta & Grové, 2021). The disruptions caused by COVID in 2020 were predicted to result in a significant number of low SES students unable to complete school and, consequently, attain a Year 12 certificate, although studies suggest that the disruption was not as impactful as feared (AIHW, 2021b).

Implications for university admissions

Although the post-COVID domestic demand for university places is difficult to predict, previous recessions have led to an increase in demand for post-school education, amongst both Year 12 leavers and mature age students (Corliss, Daly & Lewis, 2020; Hillman, 2020). In addition to the complexities for students taking their HSC, COVID has presented challenges to the broader workforce – with lockdowns substantially impacting on employment. There is a growing imperative to upskill workers for new professional trajectories and to facilitate employment in growth and emerging areas, particularly for equity cohorts who are more likely to work in vulnerable industries (Australian Information Industry Association, 2020; Grodach, 2020; Tasmanian Policy Exchange, 2021).

The significant changes to the higher education sector that emerged in 2020 have foregrounded the need for universities to be flexible to accommodate unprecedented challenges to the status quo. The impacts of the disruption resulted in widespread concern about the fairness and predictive validity of the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) derived from HSC performance, which Australian universities use as the dominant measurement of academic aptitude for admissions (Cairns, 2021), with some arguing for the end of the widespread reliance on ATAR for university entry, highlighting a suite of other entry pathways (Fischetti, 2021; O'Connell, Milligan & Bentley, 2019). Moreover, early in the pandemic, Universities Australia, the peak body for Australian higher education institutions, acknowledged the difficulties students were likely to face as a result of COVID-19, and advocated for greater flexibility and understanding from universities, particularly related to admissions processes and pathways, special consideration, and individualised support (Universities Australia, 2021).

As such, many universities[3] shifted the ways that they offered places for 2021 undergraduate enrolment, through early entry offer and admission pathway programs and unconditional offers based on students' Year 11 results.

While the ATAR is the most common tool used to determine university entrance, there are many other modes of entry to university study. Captured under the label "alternative pathways", these include enabling programs, TAFE-based Tertiary Preparation Programs, Vocational and Educational Training (VET) Certificate IV or Diploma articulation, the Special Tertiary Admissions Test (STAT), TAFE in schools, or portfolio/credit transfer pathways. Indeed, despite the dominance of ATAR in discussions of university entry – leading to many school students being unaware of these alternative pathways (Black, 2021) – nearly a third

---

[3] http://timeshighereducation.com/news/australian-university-ignore-2020-school-results-2021-intake; https://www.covid-19.unsw.edu.au/information-students; https://www.canberra.edu.au/about-uc/media/newsroom/2021/september/changes-to-uc-admissions,-due-to-delayed-atar-results

of school leaver applicants are now accepted to university through a pathway that does not solely rely on the ATAR (O'Connell, Milligan & Bentley, 2019, p. 23).

Impacts on higher education teaching and learning

COVID has not only impacted on admissions and enrolments for new and prospective students. The shift to remote delivery also created significant challenges for university students and educators. In the university context, similar issues have been noted, such as the digital divide for some students – mostly from equity cohorts – with regard to both infrastructure and equipment (O'Shea, Koshy & Drane, 2021; Seymore, Skattebol & Pook, 2020), as well as inadequate space (Baker et al., forthcoming; Barber, 2021; Mupenzi, Mude & Baker, 2020), caring duties (Cruse, Contreras Mendez & Holtzman, 2020; Lin et al., 2020), and poor mental health (Tuck et al., 2021). Similar to the school context, the impacts of COVID and the disruptions to learning have been felt most strongly by particular cohorts, such as First Nations students (Bennett, Uink & Cross, 2020); Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) students (Baker et al., 2021; Mupenzi, Mude & Baker, 2020); students from regional and remote areas (Cook et al., 2021; Country Education Foundation of Australia, 2021); and students with a disability (Sutton, 2021).

Many of the barriers to learning reported in this literature relate to misplaced assumptions about moving in-person teaching onto online platforms; instead, online teaching needs to be carefully planned and delivered – particularly for equity cohorts (Stone, 2019; Stone & O'Shea, 2019). Students' experiences of the forced nature of the move to remote delivery have been variable. In 2020, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) conducted a review of Australian universities' student surveys and found that "a significant percentage of survey respondents" had suggested that they "wished to return to a face-to-face experience as soon as possible" (p. 1), with a more granular analysis showing that the most popular concerns related to a lack of academic interaction (34% of responses), a lack of engagement (29% of responses), and a lack of/insufficient peer interaction (29%). While the TEQSA report covered all students, these disconnections with the institution, staff and other students are likely to profoundly impact on the motivation and retention of equity cohort students. As O'Shea, Koshy and Drane (2021) note, many equity cohorts have a "low sense of belonging or limited generational exposure to the university environment" (p. 8), meaning the move online is likely to prevent the creation of social bonds and experiences that are important for fostering connection and persisting with studies.

It is worth noting that the challenges of moving university teaching and learning online were not exclusively experienced by students, with staff also significantly impacted by what Watermeyer et al. (2021) call "pandemia". Studies have demonstrated that stress and anxiety were prevalent in university educators (Baker et al., 2021; Erlam et al., 2021; McGaughey et al., 2021), particularly for those with caring responsibilities (Nash & Churchill, 2020), and for those on casual contracts (Moore et al., 2021). As McGaughey and colleagues (2021) surmise from their survey of 370 academics working in Australian universities during 2020, prevalent concerns include work-related stress, digital fatigue, the negative impacts on work-life balance, and broader concerns about job security and a changing sector. Research into the experiences of working in an Australian university in a student-facing support role or in an educational development role during COVID suggests similar pressures were also rife among professional staff (Baker et al., 2021), although we note that the literature rarely attends to the experiences of those working in these roles.

"Doing equity" in COVID times

COVID has created significant complexities for supporting equity cohorts to access, participate and succeed in higher education (Austin, 2021). As O'Shea, Koshy and Drane (2021, p. 1) argue,

This is a worldwide problem, with virtually the entire student population in global higher education being disadvantaged by the pandemic in some form or another. In addition, the differential impacts of the pandemic and the sector's response will see equity students – those who have been traditionally disadvantaged – at risk of seeing their positions deteriorate further relative to that of the general student population.

In their analysis of the impacts of COVID on higher education equity, O'Shea, Koshy and Drane (2021) note the breadth of the challenges, from admissions and entry, to access to campus and "university experience" which are impeded by the move online, to implications for study-life balance, to future work prospects. Other challenges to "doing equity" are evident in university outreach, with local lockdowns, school closures, and other public health measures making school visits impossible. Like other educational interactions, university outreach has had to move online; however, the complex interactions and arrangements between universities and schools, as well as challenges to school digital infrastructure (for example, the lack of access for visitors like universities to engage with school students via school digital conferencing) make these interactions very difficult to manage (Austin, 2021; Raven, 2020). While equity practice has continued, the barriers to engagement between universities and schools during lockdowns have resulted in some schools and students missing out on planned outreach activities, which may have implications for widening access to university in subsequent years.

Job-ready Graduates Package: Changes and implications for equity cohorts

Despite significant funding and policy attention, recent statistics demonstrate that although some gains are evident, the project of equity remains a deeply entrenched problem (Koshy, 2019). Prior to the Job-ready Graduates Package, the last sustained push to increase participation of so-called "equity groups" was the successful increase in Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs) through the Demand Driven System (DDS), which remained in place from 2010 until 2017. During this time, undergraduate student placements grew by 191,000 (or 7% growth), compared with a growth of 74,000 undergraduate placements during the previous eight years (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2019). While the uncapping of undergraduate places was successful in growing domestic enrolments, it is important to note that the enrolment of equity cohorts remained largely stable, with no significant gains on proportional representation of equity cohorts (Koshy, 2019; Pitman, 2017). According to the 2019 Productivity Commission report, following abolition of DDS, low SES and first-in-family students increased in representation, but there was little change in enrolments of First Nations or rural and remote students. The report was also fairly conclusive that, while the DDS improved access for equity students, students were not as well supported to be academically prepared as needed to successfully participate (Productivity Commission, 2019).

The JRGP has significant consequences for equity funding and practice in higher education. The package introduced a range of changes to HEPPP with the creation of a new Indigenous, Regional and Low SES Attainment Fund (IRLSAF) to "target better outcomes". A key change implemented in the JRGP is the allocation of funding for equity cohorts. Prior to 2021, grants had been made to eligible higher education providers each calendar year based on the provider's respective share of domestic undergraduate students from a low SES background. In the JRGP, equity funding is reallocated according to the university's respective share of domestic undergraduate students from a low SES background (45 per cent), students from regional and remote areas (45 per cent), and Indigenous students (10 per cent). In addition to the funding offered through the HEPPP via the IRLSAF, the JRGP also guaranteed a CSP to Indigenous students from regional areas who are admitted to university and offered a means-tested Tertiary Access Payment (TAP) of up to $5000 to

regional, rural and remote (RRR) students relocating to a university more than a 90-minute journey away from their home.

The JRGP legislation introduces a 50 per cent pass rate requirement for students to continue to be included as part of the Commonwealth Grant Scheme, which may have negative outcomes for low SES students (Firth, 2020; Henry, 2020). These changes require universities to have the capacity to deliver additional pre-census data checks, extra first year support, and more support for withdrawal without penalty applications (DESE, 2020). This is a fundamental requirement to go beyond the conventional measures of support. Research shows that equity cohort students are more likely to drop out of university; however, this is unlikely to be solely due to socio-economic and regional factors (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2019). Instead, the challenges of intersectional socio-cultural factors are responsible, such as first-in-family to attend university, caring responsibilities, balancing study with paid work, school attended, parental level of education, and access to resources.

Methodology

We took a mixed-methods, comparative approach to exploring how universities responded to equity considerations in 2020. This study was designed to draw on the insights and observations of people working at different levels of the academy (senior leaders, managers, practitioners) so as to develop rich and nuanced descriptions of how COVID impacted individual institutions and people.

Research design

Our project was designed to develop a broad national account of how universities responded to equity in 2020, as well as more narrow institutional accounts of considerations and decision-making in context. Identified stakeholders were invited to engage with the research data collection modes over a four-month period between March and July 2021. To draw this national picture of Australian universities, we:

- Ran a national survey of equity managers and practitioners between March and June of 2021, to examine the actions and initiatives designed and delivered by institutions to sustain student access and engagement in higher education.
- Conducted interviews with senior leaders, representative of executive levels of Australian universities.

In addition to the broad national picture, we also sought to develop rich and in-depth accounts of how universities responded in 2020 by conducting case studies of four NSW-based universities. We developed eight Research Questions (RQs) to guide this project. In Table 1, we map these RQs:

Table 1. Research Questions mapped to methods and participants

	Research Question	Method	Participants
1	What are the equity opportunities – as identified by universities – with the imperative to grow the domestic student cohort following the COVID-related changes to the higher education sector?	• Case studies	Case study representatives
2	How have universities changed their admissions requirements to accommodate non-ATAR pathways and in what ways have they changed, if at all?	• Survey • Interviews • Case studies	Survey respondents Senior Leaders Case study representatives
3	Have universities targeted particular equity cohorts as a result of the imperative to grow the domestic cohort?	• Survey • Interviews • Case studies	Survey respondents Senior Leaders Case study representatives
4	Did equity cohorts have additional attention paid to them or were they be lost in the "big picture" of the pandemic?	• Case studies	Case study representatives
5	What strategies have universities engaged with in order to attract and incentivise domestic enrolments, particularly with regard to equity cohorts?	• Survey • Interviews • Case studies	Survey respondents Senior Leaders Case study representatives
6	Have collaborations across equity stakeholders strengthened to promote new, collective approaches that enhance equity for students?	• Case studies	Case study representatives
7	Is there an intention for any changes (with regard to admissions, pathways, access and support) to be maintained beyond 2021?	• Survey • Interviews • Case studies	Survey respondents Senior Leaders Case study representatives
8	What advocacy have universities engaged in with regard to equity cohorts and growing their domestic cohorts?	• Case studies	Case study representatives

National survey of equity managers and practitioners

A national survey was distributed to higher education providers between March and June 2021, inviting institutional representatives involved in equity, widening participation, student admissions and scholarships teams to participate. These stakeholders were best placed to provide insight into policy and operational changes in response to the onset of the COVID pandemic in 2020. The survey instrument included questions that covered the following topics:

1) Changes to access and admission of domestic undergraduate students following COVID-19
2) Targeted engagement institutions deliver to connect equity cohorts with support, resources and information services
3) Changes to support services for equity cohorts following COVID-19
4) Expansion or strengthening of collaborations with stakeholders (within or external to institutions) to better enable equity cohorts to participate in learning following COVID-19.

Understanding institutional responses to the challenge of change and their appreciation of equity cohorts, will likely suggest where advocacy and practice to build decisive awareness, should be augmented in future.

The national survey was distributed over numerous campaigns via multiple media of online networks. However, despite our best efforts we received low response rates (n=27) and incomplete surveys, which are likely a result of our target respondent group experiencing high workload levels and environmental stresses at the time of survey circulation. A decision was made to condense the survey by consolidating several multiple choice and open form questions (Appendix A). Although the survey sample was regarded as too small to be of statistical value, the information reflected common insights gathered across the other research methods. Owing to the small sample size of survey participants, which was not able to quantitatively represent a wide array of institutional experiences, we focused on presenting the outcomes through the descriptive analysis of themes, supported by qualitative text provided by participants.

The majority of participants in the survey represented the experiences observed at higher education institutions located on Australia's East Coast (80%, n=12/15 institutions). The remaining survey participants reflected institutional experiences in two Western Australian universities, and one in South Australia. The state with the highest level of survey participants was New South Wales (33%, n=5/15 institutions) and there were equal numbers of institutions represented in Victoria and Queensland (n=3/15 institutions for each state).

Interviews with senior leaders

Senior leaders were invited to participate in a short interview (30 minutes) through professional bodies and online networks. These interviews were conducted with 11 representatives of senior executives from nine Australian universities (see Appendix B) and were focused on understanding the impact of COVID on institutional strategy, admissions, access and support for equity students (see Appendix C for the full interview schedule). Senior leaders interviewed are representative of Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Pro-Vice-Chancellors, Provosts, Directors, Chief Marketing Officers and Executive Directors. The majority of participants represented institutions in New South Wales (55%, n=5/9 institutions), followed by Australian Capital Territory, Queensland, Victoria, and Tasmania (n=1/9 institutions for each).

The invitation to participate in an interview was distributed through professional associations and included interviewees at senior levels of university management and members of their institution's executive level. Interviews with senior leaders sought to add depth to the survey

responses and develop a fuller picture of drivers and rationales underpinning the decision-making processes and institutional priorities for recruitment and equity following the disruption caused by COVID.

Case studies

This project also adopted a case study approach to offer a deeper, more granular analysis of the ways four case study universities in New South Wales supported equity cohorts to access higher education during COVID. Case study methodology allows a detailed contextual analysis of a real-world context (Yin, 1984). These case studies investigated the research question regarding the strategies these universities have engaged with to attract and incentivise domestic enrolments, particularly for equity cohorts, and whether these strategies were successful or not.

Case studies were based on interviews with 26 staff members and managers employed in roles related to equity, admissions, and student support, as well as those in senior leadership positions (see Appendix D). The interview schedule covered topics including institutional COVID response, factors influencing decision-making, changes to admissions and student support, and the likelihood of changes continuing in 2021 and beyond (see Appendix E for the full interview schedule). The four case study institutions are broadly representative of the Australian higher education sector; they have distinct institutional profiles but are sufficiently close in geographic terms to facilitate a complementary and coordinated approach to enhancing equity and educational opportunities for students, while maximising the effectiveness of resources, including expertise and practice.

Full case studies are included in Appendix F.

Analysis

Quantitative analysis

The small size of survey participants did not allow for sufficient quantitative representation of data. The online Qualtrics survey included a mix of open and closed question formats and was distributed via snowball sampling using nationwide, higher education industry professional networks, including social media.

Qualitative analysis

All qualitative data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analytic (TA) and the six stages of thematic analysis according to Braun and Clark (2006, p. 87):

1. Familiarisation with data/transcripts
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

Thematic analysis allows for the identification of patterns of commonality and distinction in the interview data. As such, TA reflects the values of qualitative research and views the researcher's subjectivity as a resource that is both central to the process and allows for reflections and engagement with the data. The process of reviewing themes was undertaken by the whole research team to ensure cross-validation of findings and shared and refined with the project reference group (see Appendix G for a list of members).

Findings

Our findings demonstrate significant commonalities and variance in the ways that Australian universities responded to the myriad challenges of 2020.

Survey results

Identification of equity cohorts enabled the majority of survey participants to also confirm that targeted initiatives were delivered to engage and support these cohorts, in line with equity strategies and policies operating across their institutions.

Four dominant themes emerged from analysis of the survey responses: reactive actions effected by institutions to broaden entry access for domestic undergraduate cohorts; uncertainty over the uptake of places by equity cohorts; identified institutional equity strategies and the targeted provision of services for equity cohorts; and equity advocacy and awareness.

Of note, the total number of participants who engaged with the survey was small (n=27). The survey's data collection design enabled participants to navigate and answer survey questions in a voluntary capacity. This resulted in fluctuating participant responses throughout the survey and has been reflected accordingly in the findings.

Institutional responses to access and admissions

Over half of survey participants who completed questions relating to institutional action (n=13/24) confirmed their institutions effected changes to 2021 university admissions following the federal decision in 2020 to close international borders in response to the COVID pandemic. A third of these participants (n=8/24) confirmed they were unaware of changes made by their institutions to admissions in response to COVID, and a small number (n=3/24) confirmed no changes were made to admissions at their institutions.

Changes to institutional practices around admissions are not known for their agility to respond to market circumstances due to lead up and operational implementation times; yet survey participants who confirmed admission changes had been made, shared examples of changes introduced from around the third quarter of 2020, or earlier, to enable domestic 2020 school leavers to access a wider array of higher education entry options in 2021. These offerings included the lowering of institutional course marks to enable entry for students with lower Australian Tertiary Admission Ranks (ATAR); a wider array of adjustment factor points (or "bonus points") for students to add to their ATAR or equivalent admission rank; an expansion of existing early entry offers to school leavers via non-ATAR pathways and ATAR predicted scores; and a relaxation of entry requirements for students to demonstrate their eligibility to study at tertiary level. Some higher education providers were also able to offer students access to innovative pathways of sub-bachelor diplomas and bridging programs with guaranteed entry into degrees upon completion.

> (We) broadened "early entry opportunities" including adding a predicted-ATAR pathway.

> We had simultaneous course expansion for 2021,…. We introduced two new comprehensive undergrad degrees … which had a standard ATAR cut-off of 75 (previously all comprehensive u/grad degrees were 80), and … we lowered (and simplified) our positive-ATAR adjustment scheme.

Generally, the implementation of adjusted ATAR requirements and expansion of non-ATAR pathways was a common response instituted by universities in response to the pandemic but was not evident in all institutions who responded to the survey.

Uncertainty of targeted impact of changes to admissions policies on equity cohorts

While just over half of the survey participants (n=13/24) confirmed actions to broaden admissions to the domestic student market were made by their institutions, they were largely uncertain if this would result in higher admission numbers of students from equity backgrounds. At the time the survey was distributed, between March and June of 2021, preliminary admission trends enabled survey participants to reflectively confirm that domestic admissions had increased in line with the adaptations made in 2020. Survey participants were however unable to verify the demography of the students or if they belonged to identified equity cohorts. Some participants noted admission changes were organic to COVID circumstances and not intended to target specific cohorts as COVID was viewed to impact all students, especially school leavers.

The following quotes supplied by survey participants note their understanding of the changes (and no changes) to student admissions at their institutions were reactive to market forces created by institutional competitor actions and business as usual modes of operation. Considerations of domestic equity cohorts and COVID circumstances were, for these survey participants, less apparent drivers of change at their institutions.

> These decisions were… operational [in nature and did] not [consider an] equity focus. Guaranteed Entry Rank (GER) was lowered due to competitor change to a position that was previously moot in part of ATAR implementation. GER is still well above the thresholds.

> ... not explicitly due to COVID but our alternative entry scheme has taken COVID into consideration.

Further questions in the survey sought participants to identify if their institutions made considered adaptations to 2021 admissions for equity cohorts, based on institutional awareness of the compounded disruption to learning caused by COVID. Participants who completed these questions (n=16/23) confirmed consideration of the experiences of equity cohorts had been made by their institutions. These participants noted their institutions expanded existing entry offerings and increased targeted scholarship opportunities for equity students. Digital outreach and marketing campaigns directed at engaging equity cohorts were also intensified to enhance awareness of learning and career options via higher education pathways:

> For 2021 the Schools Recommendation Scheme (SRS) has been expanded to recognise the considerable disruption many students have faced in their Year 12 studies due to COVID, as well as students that face a range of educational disadvantages …

> Alternate entry pathway for equity students from targeted schools – the program was offered digitally to ensure students were able to participate. Engagement and support for students delivered with COVID-19 in mind in terms of delivery modes, types of support and considerations [for] additional challenges.

Overall, survey responses indicated a mixed consideration of equity in the implementation of new and the expansion of existing student support services during COVID.

Targeted strategies and approaches to engaging equity cohorts (admissions and support with engagement)

Survey participants were presented with a selection of equity cohorts and asked to nominate those identified by their institutions. Results (Figure 1) indicated the most frequently identified cohorts were disability, followed by Indigenous and LSES, then RRR and CALDMR. Participants identified "other" equity cohorts to include students from Pacific

Island backgrounds, LGBTQIA+ community members, First-in-family students and students from schools identified by the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) rankings.

Identified Equity Cohorts

Cohort	Percentage
RRR	13.1%
ATSI	14.1%
LSES	14.1%
Disability	15.1%
CALDMR	13.1%
Mature Age	4.0%
Care Leavers	4.0%
Women in non-traditional areas of study	10.1%
All of the above	7.1%
Other LGBTQI, FIF	5.0%
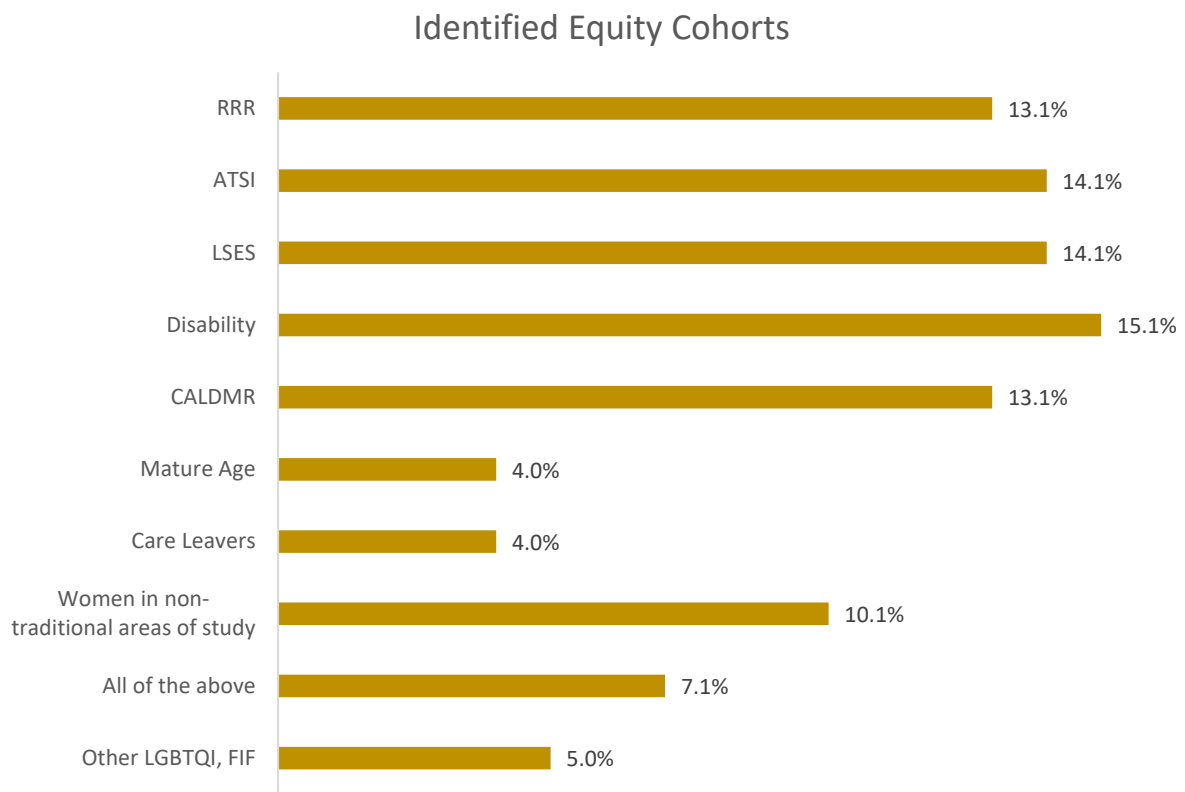
Figure 1. Shows the equity cohorts selected by survey participants as identified by their institutions

Survey participants confirmed equity cohorts were identified by their institutions based on a range of approaches, including working closely with widening participation and equity-focused teams and administrative data and scholarships information. Participants also noted some institutions were reliant on students to self-identify their equity status when seeking support or services.

> *Work with the Widening Participation team to identify cohorts and provide assistance, increase in targeted equity scholarship programs.*

> *Getting relevant data is difficult so we use existing programs (equity scholarships, student wellbeing) to identify cohorts. There also is a reliance on self-identification.*

Survey participants were then presented with a selection of engagement modes and asked to nominate those that best described their institution's approach to connecting equity cohorts with information, services, support, and resources. Results (Figure 2) indicated the three most active forms of engagement pursued by institutions included dedicated teams for First Nations students, general institution-wide services, and equity services embedded in core student services (available at institution wide level).

How did students from equity cohorts access university support services?
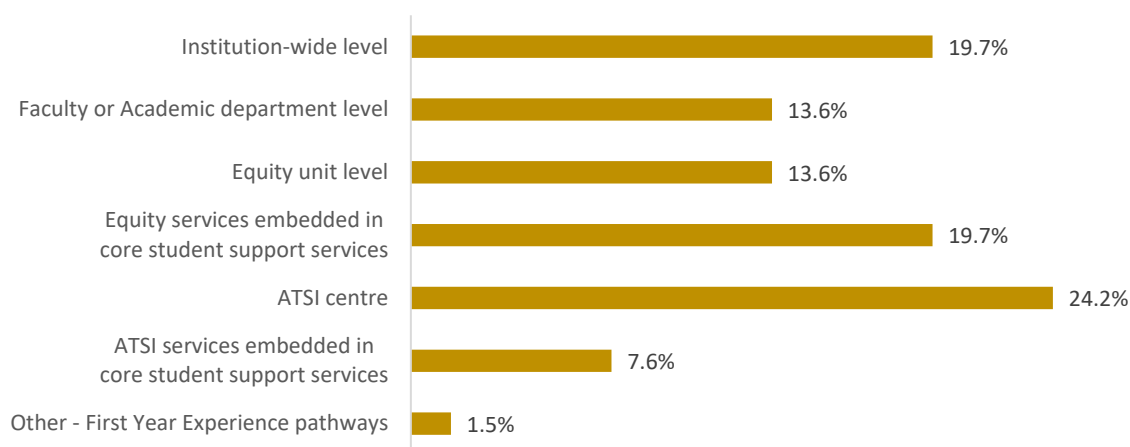
Figure 2. Shows how survey participants identified their institutions offer support services to equity cohorts

Survey participants were asked to confirm if their institutions had student equity strategies endorsed by senior university leaders. The purpose of this query was to gauge an understanding of the breadth of institutional awareness of widening participation and the depth of working knowledge to engage and enable equity cohorts to access learning opportunities, support services and resources.

More than three quarters of survey participants who responded to these questions (n=15/18) affirmed their institutions operated endorsed equity plans. These were described by participants to be embedded or linked to institutional strategies and policies, such as diversity, inclusion and student equity frameworks, working groups and committee agendas and discussion papers.

Figure 1 reflects student cohorts identified by survey participants to belong to an equity category, as identified by their institutions. Confirmation by survey participants of their institution's identification of equity cohorts along with the affirmation of institutional strategies to engage and support equity students provide evidence of awareness of responsibility to enable these students to succeed in their learning journey. Yet the apparent translation of this awareness into operational delivery of targeted services, resources, and support to specifically engage equity cohorts following COVID did not appear to match.

When asked to describe the types of services and support offered to students from equity cohorts, survey participants identified targeted initiatives delivered by specific university teams, including areas of faculty. Institutional equity initiatives included financial support, equipment loans, accommodation scholarships, holistic transition support services for first year students, peer and academic mentoring, social networks, and initiatives aimed at enhancing student research, academic skills, and employability.

> *We run a semester-long transition and community building program for students from equity backgrounds.*

> *While we have limited dedicated support services, they do exist … for cohorts who have come through an alternative access scheme or have been identified as a priority by a faculty.*

Over two thirds of the survey participants who responded to these questions (n=11/16) confirmed their institutions actioned changes to the services and resources available to

equity cohorts in response to COVID and the move to online learning. Although most institutions across the sector were operating under constrained financial environments in 2020, many were able to meet increased demand for support from students by allocating resources to areas of engagement. Participants offered examples of these changes to include increased online services and support, including phone campaigns to connect with students and assist with their continued engagement with learning, financial loans, digital resource loans, wellbeing support to alleviate students' increased stress loads, peer and academic mentoring, and a greater focus on support from dedicated transition teams for newly commencing students from equity backgrounds.

> *HEPPP was redirected to support financial bursaries and equipment loans for student experiencing significant financial hardship during 2020 and will be continued in 2021.*

> *Mentor programs have been increased and engagement teams put in place to assist new students.*

Some institutions were also able to complement their support services with emergent data systems to track student academic engagement and alert both academic and student service providers to action intervention measures where necessary.

> *We have been working to enhance our capture and reporting of student equity data to enable more accurate and timely identification of students who meet one or more equity criteria, tailor applicable interventions and evaluate the impact of associated interventions.*

Nearly a third of respondents (n= 5/16) were unable to provide information about measures (services and support) offered to equity students following COVID during 2020, as these were either delivered by specific teams at their institutions; or not provided beyond initiatives already delivered to whole student cohorts.

Despite the variation in methods of identifying equity students and the challenges present for institutions in doing so, broad expansion of support services for all students was implemented and working within existing programs specific to equity cohorts, enabling access to support during COVID.

Advocacy and raising awareness of equity issues

Survey participants were asked if their institutions actively engaged in developing new or strengthening of existing partnerships with allied organisations to promote advocacy and enhance support for students from equity backgrounds following COVID and the move to online learning. They were also asked if inter-institutional collaborations were strengthened in response to COVID induced environmental changes and the increase in demand for services and support from students. Just under half of survey participants who responded to these questions (n=12/27) confirmed their institutions formed new collaborations with external stakeholders, including non-government organisations, welfare and charity organisations, school and community networks. These collaborations enabled students to connect with services including employment opportunities, food banks and access digital learning resources. Far fewer participants (n=6/27) confirmed existing collaborations with external stakeholders grew following COVID.

Meanwhile, new and existing collaborations within institutions were least evident during COVID, according to survey participants (n=5/27 and 4/27 respectively), although, engagement across teams within institutions, in coordinated support of equity students, was noted to have increased during 2020 and into 2021. Examples of internal collaborations identified by survey participants, included the development of new scholarship offerings, streamlining of communication flows between student-facing teams and the development of

data systems to better identify and engage equity cohorts with supportive academic initiatives.

> *…established a student support forum to ensure all services were joined up and seamless.*

> *Work with the Widening Participation team to identify cohorts and provide assistance, increase in targeted equity scholarship programs.*

For those institutions who sought to engage with stakeholders externally, these collaborations and partnerships appear to have been a significant enabler for the support of equity students during COVID.

Interviews with senior university leaders

Four emergent themes from the interviews with senior leaders are explored, including changes to admissions requirements and pathways, equity student recruitment and retention strategies, COVID as an accelerant for existing plans, and the likelihood of changes continuing in 2021 and beyond.

Admissions requirements and expansion of non-ATAR pathways

A commonly reported change to admissions requirements in response to the COVID pandemic was the implementation of early admission pathways, and the expansion of existing pathways. These comprised early conditional and unconditional offer programs, School Recommendation Schemes, the introduction of minimum ATAR initiatives, expanded enabling programs, and greater flexibility in entry requirements. Senior leaders interviewed indicated that many of these programs were already in place or in development at the start of the pandemic, but were accelerated into implementation, modified, or expanded to meet the unique needs of school leavers in 2020.

Paul, a Chief Marketing Officer, discussed the institution's approach to school recommendation programs:

> *The [Schools Recommendation Program] was something you'd see in other states generally geared around high performing students, but ours was more geared around eliminating the risk for students in 2020 of them either not getting ATAR or not getting the ATAR that they wanted.*

> (Paul, Chief Marketing Officer)

While university senior leadership acknowledged the positive impact of these pathways on equity enrolments, the reported changes to admissions requirements were intended to benefit all school leavers impacted by COVID as opposed to directly targeting equity students as a means of growing the domestic cohort. One Sydney-based university introduced a COVID bonus points scheme to address the impact of the disruption to students, noting that despite the obvious benefit to equity cohorts in doing so, the scheme was not specifically implemented to actively recruit from this group:

> *… that was targeted at everyone, but we could see through our alignment that it would also be of great benefit to those equity groups where and admission is always an issue.*

> (James, Pro Vice-Chancellor)

Notably, the experience of regional universities during COVID was distinct from that of institutions located in metropolitan areas. A Deputy Vice-Chancellor at a regionally based institution in NSW with a long history of providing distance education commented that there

were no significant changes made to their ATAR requirements, owing in large part to the fact the majority of students already typically gained entry through a non-ATAR pathway:

> *I guess the core question about how COVID may have impacted at the time and continuing to impact around admissions, I would say that in many respects, not at all, because we carried on doing what we usually do … The cohort of students who enter on the basis of an ATAR at [Institution] is actually, they're a relatively small minority of students. Most of our students are mature aged students who are entering via other pathways.*

> (George, Deputy Vice-Chancellor)

Senior leaders also commented on the positive impact of partnerships with government and industry bodies. Increased offerings for short courses established under the JRGP, as well as postgraduate and professional learning options targeted at professionals whose employment was impacted by COVID were noted by senior leaders. However, the intersections between these students and equity cohorts were not clear. It was noted that the JRGP led to a reported increase in applications for university programs, those applications did not necessarily translate into increased numbers of enrolments in the programs themselves, which were described by one Deputy Vice-Chancellor as, "not fully subscribed". (Matthew, Deputy Vice-Chancellor)

"We would have done it anyway"

There was a strong consensus from the interviews with senior leadership that COVID accelerated plans to activate new admissions pathways and expand the scope of existing ones, and that the pandemic served as the impetus for universities to operationalise ideas as opposed to a direct institutional COVID response or a need to actively recruit from equity cohorts. Further, interviews suggested that members of senior leadership teams did not perceive any additional pressures to actively recruit from domestic equity cohorts in order to address declining international student numbers, and the associated loss of revenue.

When asked about the likelihood that their institution's implementation of a new early conditional offer program (and its associated ATAR adjustments) would have been implemented prior to COVID, a Deputy Vice-Chancellor from a Sydney-based university commented:

> *… unless we did something, we weren't going to make a difference and it had nothing to do with COVID … I was increasingly aware of the inequities in society and the fact that universities were becoming the problem as much as they were the possible solution. But I was moving to that position anyway. And the only way COVID made a difference is it was highlighting inequities across society at that time.*

> (Matthew, Deputy Vice-Chancellor)

Comments by other senior leaders supported this view:

> *It's something that we were doing anyway. It's a difficult one, isn't it? COVID, I mean, it's going to have lasting effects obviously for the next two years. So, in COVID, it did allow us to accelerate some things.*

> (Adam, Director)

No, we're rolling out a program of wholesale curriculum change, which was actually initiated before COVID. Again, COVID has probably reinforced the need for that whole curriculum change … COVID has probably led to an acceleration of planning and the implementation of planning, as opposed to initiating something wholly new for us.

(George, Deputy Vice-Chancellor)

So COVID did reveal some shortcomings with systems and approaches… At a strategic level I think it will be questions such as "are lectures fit for purpose in the 21st century" anymore. So that's a debate that the sector is having and, again, COVID did trigger that debate. It's just accelerated that discussion.

(James, Pro Vice-Chancellor)

Senior leadership interviews did not suggest any perceived impetus to recruit from equity cohorts, nor any pressure to do so. There is a broader sense that COVID provided a push for universities to implement or broaden the scope of admissions programs, which has had some benefit to students from equity cohorts as well as shining a light on issues with existing systems, programs, and pathways.

Incentivising higher education: Attraction vs. retention

The COVID-specific strategies targeted at equity students related to the retention of those who were already enrolled, rather than attracting or incentivising university study for prospective equity students. The provision of financial support to students impacted by COVID was one of the dominant responses observed by senior leaders. Representatives of seven universities (n=7/9) discussed the implementation of expanded financial support measures, scholarships and bursaries for students impacted by the pandemic. The expansion of COVID-related financial support was focused on currently enrolled students as a means of enabling greater student retention and was not a direct attraction strategy for new enrolments.

We had a large COVID bursary program, which again, was primarily to support existing students, while other students were commencing students that year. We devoted a lot of money into that amongst other funds as well.

(Adam, Director)

In addition to developing a strategy to increase domestic undergraduate student enrolments from equity cohorts, in 2020 [Institution] invested significantly in the success and retention of existing equity cohorts at [Institution] through its student support package.

(Stephen, Provost)

And we did what most universities would have done. We allocated far more; so, we always have equity bursaries for low [SES] students. But in addition to that, we've had a significant amount of money for emergency bursaries which wasn't targeted only for low SES, but again, you know, that group definitely were benefiting.

(Elise, Pro Vice-Chancellor)

… last year made us look really carefully at emergency financial support, not just for equity students or low SES students, but for all students… It made us think out of the box a bit, I think on how we were going to support students who were really struggling.

(Matthew, Deputy Vice-Chancellor)

There were some notable shifts observed in the institutional approaches to providing financial assistance, and the students who receive it. Representatives of two institutions specifically commented on the availability of financial assistance for international students, highlighting this cohort as one of emerging equity-related needs "as a consequence of COVID" (George, Deputy Vice-Chancellor). A director at a regional NSW-based university discussed an increase in awareness of the barriers students face in accessing scholarships and bursaries as a result of COVID, in particular, a greater institutional awareness of the administrative burden often placed on students who are already experiencing hardship to access support:

> *And we're much more agile than we used to be … They're re-engineering the way we do scholarships and looking at it differently, not making it as hard, you know, applying for it. Why do you need fifteen pieces of evidence? You know, so it really made us look at it differently saying, why are we making it so hard?*

(Jessica, Executive Director)

In addition to financial support for currently enrolled students, two interview participants also reported the introduction of COVID grading schemes at their institution, where students who passed a course but felt their performance was affected by COVID could apply to have a passing grade with no numerical value recorded on their transcript. Any COVID-related disruption therefore had no impact on the student's GPA/WAM, while students who failed a course due to COVID could apply to not have the fail recorded on their transcript. This was used to offer greater flexibility to students in terms of assessment (Elise, Pro Vice-Chancellor), as one executive director commented, "providing some room for students who have not succeeded because of circumstances beyond their control" (Adam, Director).

Continuation of changes post-COVID

Senior leaders commented on the challenges present in making the case for the expansion of non-ATAR pathways to continue at their institutions in the post-COVID period. A number of respondents indicated that data and evaluation would play a significant role in this expansion.

There was some indication of a perceived shift in some senior leaders' thinking around ATARs. An executive director at a university in Victoria commented on their institution's recent experience of evaluating student performance through access and pathways programs and finding participation in such programs to be a strong indicator of future academic success for the students who access such schemes. However, they noted the difficulty in persuading universities to explore the expansion of alternative entry pathways as legitimate options for entry into university. Whether there is a widespread shift in institutional thinking related to ATAR as the best predictor for student success at university remains to be seen.

While the implementation and expansion of pathways into university are likely to continue, the responses from senior leaders when asked about the likelihood of ATAR adjustments continuing in the post-COVID period were mixed.

> *We believe the [Schools Recommendation Program] will be a valuable tool to allow people to access university going out of Year 12 … Will ATARs exist in the future, absolutely… High performing students need an ATAR, we know that. You need a comparison point for all the universities and you don't want to constrain choice. The ATAR will exist. It's an imperfect mechanism for student success though … I think if 80 percent of our students come from the [Schools Recommendation Program] and 20 percent from an ATAR, so be it. It's about*

access, it's about providing a different way of access to university and not about saying one's better than the other.

<div align="right">(Paul, Chief Marketing Officer)</div>

I think COVID has alerted people to some inequities in society, but let me be frank, I think the people who say that COVID impacts will allow a reset and the change are actually more optimistic than I am … I don't think it will be ongoing. It was a very special circumstance in 2021, and we actually use those levers as an attempt to supply and demand in a fairly impassionate way. We did publicly and genuinely make the statement of disruption this year. But my expectation is that supply and demand equations will kick back in.

<div align="right">(Matthew, Deputy Vice-Chancellor)</div>

What we've tried to do is provide alternatives to ATAR that are actually more predictively valid than ATAR. And looking at our data, the students' performance in [Program Name 1], and in [Program Name 2], that performance is a better indicator of their success at university than an ATAR is going to be. So the challenge is going to be to convince the more selective institutions and courses of the data, and the data is absolutely transparent and rigorous. But of course, ATAR has become such a shibboleth for a lot of universities.

<div align="right">(Adam, Director)</div>

Interview participants noted that the shift towards online learning was significant for many institutions, and the flexibility it affords students and staff is likely to ensure its ongoing provision, as well as the perception of increased online offerings as an enabler of greater participation in higher education for under-represented cohorts. Large scale adaptation to the online environment, increased digital literacy and the resulting diversity of options in how students can engage with university teaching, learning, and support were seen as consequences of COVID for metro institutions with potentially significant implications for equity students and their ability to access higher education.

If we're going to deliver the most seamless return to a new normal, we've got to reflect on the lessons that we've learned over the last 12 months. Again, there were some things we probably can do in different ways – online mode of delivery, Zoom. Now that opens up opportunities that might in fact enhance access, for example. So again, we could contemplate, looking at ways in which our refugee mentoring is more online driven, and that can have advantages for students who are more isolated socially or physically.

<div align="right">(James, Pro Vice-Chancellor)</div>

The flip side of the technological divide, the digital divide, is that universities have adapted through COVID, in terms of being more responsive and flexible around their provision. And that, in turn, has enabled some students to access university who couldn't otherwise. And a lot of those changes will continue.

<div align="right">(Adam, Director)</div>

The adaptation to the online environment, increased digital literacy and the resulting diversity of options in how students can engage with university teaching, learning, and support were seen as the consequences of COVID for metropolitan institutions, and as ones with potentially significant future implications for equity students and their ability to access higher education.

Case studies of four universities

This research project adapted a case study approach to report on the strategies adopted by four NSW universities to support equity cohorts to access higher education during COVID.

These institutions are broadly representative of the Australian higher education sector, in that they attract different student cohorts, service different locales, and have distinct institutional profiles, but are sufficiently close in geographic terms to facilitate a complementary and coordinated approach to enhancing equity and educational opportunities for students, while maximising the effectiveness of resources, including expertise and practice. The case studies are available in Appendix F.

Although they vary by context, the challenges and opportunities encountered by the universities were relatively similar in relation to university admissions. Consistencies included:

Decision-making: A state of play

Participants interviewed for the case studies included many staff members who work directly with students and educators and see the implications of national and institutional policy decisions on student admissions and progress through university. Participants also shared a perception that formal and transparent governance around student equity was lacking in their institutions. Participants from each case study university highlighted the challenges that staff members faced with navigating different levels of university structures to implement changes. The administrative load associated with the necessity of urgently redesigning and implementing admission changes and support for students was significant, with an impact on staff workload and wellbeing (particularly for staff in student-facing roles).

There was also a noted lack of time to effectively plan and consult widely on university responses to the pandemic, in a rapidly evolving system of regulations. It also created opportunities to fast-track decision-making but, in some institutions, equity was lost in a crowded agenda with priority given to other decisions related to finances. Respondents also questioned whether the lack of focus on equity was because of a lack of equity-representation on these committees.

Data-informed responses: Challenges and opportunities

Participants highlighted several gaps in the university systems around accessing data to implement or develop appropriate responses due to COVID. Participants identified that their institutional responses tended to lean on reaction to a perceived need, rather than proactively investing in identifying needs of students from equity cohorts. Further, there were no visible, motivating incentives for staff to build databases to track students from equity cohorts and the lack of data made it challenging to develop appropriate responses.

The pandemic highlighted the need to have robust student data to provide timely support. The gaps in student data need to be addressed in order to develop interventions to better implement equity in admission and student support in universities.

Partnership models: A game of luck

Silos – both within universities as institutions, and with how universities interact in the broader community – have been an ongoing challenge across the sector and were presented as a recurring theme amongst interview participants. In some cases, while there is already a wealth of information available, resources and stakeholders working to embed equity in a range of ways across the university are not connected cohesively, resulting often in duplication of work. This was further exacerbated when stakeholders had different levels of understanding of what equity means. Some participants responded to the questions from the lens of equality – ensuring everyone has the same opportunities and receives the same

treatment or support, as opposed to giving people what they need in order to make things fairer. This fundamental misunderstanding demonstrated a need for universities to provide more (or alternatives) to those who need it, to enable the same opportunities and access as others.

Intersecting marginalities

Participants highlighted the challenges faced in addressing equity concerns through the narrow prism of the formally identified equity cohorts and expressed the need to focus on intersectionality when dealing with equity implications and developing responses to COVID. The disruptions and the resulting impact on the labour market resulted in groups of students who were not traditionally identified as equity cohorts falling through the cracks, particularly international students. International students were encouraged by the government to return to their home countries – without consideration for the later completion of their degree in Australia – while many international full-fee-paying students were not able to return home because of the pandemic's rapid spread across the globe and the dramatic reduction in international flights available. COVID also contributed to many families of international students no longer being able to support their children studying in Australia, placing greater financial strain on these students.

This significant financial impact on international students was observed by participants who noted that their institutions pivoted to providing financial assistance to this cohort as part of their COVID response in recognition of the reality that many international students are in insecure employment and ineligible for government support.

Summary

Overall, the case studies of these four institutions allowed for a closer examination of the experiences of the staff members charged with the implementation of rapidly developed and ambitious changes to university strategy, teaching and learning, programs, and student support. While many of the changes implemented have positive impacts for equity students, case studies suggested that such changes were reactive to the evolving situations (however this is not surprising, given the circumstances universities were faced with). The stressors of working in increasingly challenging environments undergoing change and uncertain resourcing was evident across all four institutions, with a notable increase in administrative responsibilities alongside calls for staff resilience. Access to data and systems was inconsistent across case study interviews, raising concerns about data-informed responses. The lack of a shared understanding of student equity (targeted cohorts, definitions, and the broader program of work within equity areas) posed further challenges and led to reports of duplication and silos in some cases, as was the lack of consultation with equity practitioners to inform the development of future strategies. Further to this, there appears to be a lack of formal and transparent governance around work pertaining to student equity. As a result, in many cases, equity is peripheral to the core business of many universities.

Discussion

The COVID pandemic was a catalyst for higher education institutions to effect dynamic changes to their modes of operation relating to equity: for student engagement, admission processes, learning and teaching delivery and support for equity student cohorts. The swiftness of the changes actioned during the 2020 academic year were unparalleled, and many survey respondents largely regarded these as macro-level emergency measures in response to unprecedented environmental factors that impacted primarily on mobility but had knock-on effects for all other aspects of higher education.

With the anticipated drop in international fee-paying students, domestic students arguably became a critical market for higher education providers to expand into. While the senior leaders interviewed were unwilling to identify these circumstances as a significant driver in the COVID responses, they did acknowledge that the pandemic accelerated the implementation of planned activities. The market dynamics prompted timing to be an essential component in enabling institutions to capitalise on the pivot. Many institutions reengineered their approach to domestic students, particularly school leavers, by broadening the scope of admissions. A subsequent shift to attract domestic student enrolments and the move to online learning delivery formed immediate operating priorities for institutions.

However, institutional understanding of the impacts the changes would have on student stakeholders and, in particular, equity cohorts, can be described at best as evolving. Initial institutional changes to admission processes were confirmed by the majority of survey participants to have been actioned with an intent to attract domestic students, with little real regard given to the specific targeting of students from equity cohorts.

RQ 1: What are the equity opportunities – as identified by universities – with the imperative to grow the domestic student cohort following the COVID-related changes to the higher education sector?

The ongoing and expansive impacts of the disruption of 2020 magnifies the need for institutions and communities to work together beyond the status quo, requiring greater collaboration with new partners, more innovation, and more investment. All of these are necessary to help the government to meet its stated intentions in the JRGP with regard to widening access for equity cohorts and upskilling people to meet the unknowns of society and the economy in the future.

The data we gathered from university senior leaders suggest that university staff did not substantially attribute changes in attraction and recruitment strategies to the pandemic, nor to any such imperative to grow the domestic cohort as a result of the sector's overall financial position or loss of international enrolments. The majority of university senior leadership interviewed (n=6/9) suggested that COVID acted as an accelerant to operationalise existing plans, rather than as a catalyst for new programs. This was particularly evident in the implementation of early conditional offer pathways, School Recommendation Schemes, enabling programs, and digitally based outreach. Some of these initiatives enabled greater access for equity cohorts but many were seeking to broadly mitigate some of the impact on school leavers, rather than to actively recruit domestic equity students.

Furthermore, our findings demonstrated a growing awareness of the challenges faced by students in response to increased demand for university-delivered services and support, particularly concerning students from equity backgrounds. In many of the survey-represented institutions, awareness of the impact on equity students evolved, firstly leading to enhancing widening participation initiatives and support for pre-university equity students,

followed by improving access by broadening entry pathways into higher education learning. However, this was not a universal approach. Indeed, while most survey participants confirmed their institutions maintained highly visible equity strategies and policies, the operating interpretation of these equity approaches varied between institutions, as did the manner in which equity cohorts were identified, and how they were supported or how they accessed support, services, and resources available at their institutions.

Universities' responses have demonstrated previously unknown flexibility and agility. These need to be harnessed and operationalised to create more opportunities for equity cohorts in terms of sustaining the expanded admissions options. Specifically, universities should consider creating more targeted supports that go beyond responding to financial hardship. Further, flexible models of course delivery and assessment that are inclusive of equity cohorts and that consider issues to do with establishing "belonging" within an online environment, along with early transition programs that are data informed and incorporate early intervention strategies, would be a welcome shift.

Moreover, the global nature of the pandemic has raised the stakes for universities to actively seek collaboration with other institutions and communities to meet the needs of the future workforce. The reach of the ramifications across the world also foregrounds the need for Australian universities to actively seek to learn from and contribute to international discussions about how to advance equity and widening participation across the academy.

RQ2: How have universities changed their admissions requirements to accommodate non-ATAR pathways and in what ways have they changed, if at all?

A common response to the pandemic was the rollout or expansion of non-ATAR pathways, early conditional offers, School Recommendation Schemes, and the use of Year 11 results as indicators of student success. Such responses were implemented to minimise the impact of COVID on school-leavers and their ATARs. Some members of university senior leadership expressed scepticism of such measures prior to COVID, suggesting the potential for these programs (and subsequent data on students' academic performance and retention) to shift institutional thinking around the effectiveness of these pathways and the capability of the students who utilise them for entry. Our findings suggest there is a stronger sense of commitment to sustaining these shifts in admissions requirements in the medium and longer term.

The other significant change in admissions practices is the use of undergraduate diplomas as an admission pathway. However, it is worth noting that many of the respondents in the senior leader interviews were keen to note that they already had available a suite of alternative pathways, including enabling programs and sub-bachelor degrees. What was unclear, however, was whether universities had shifted their communication and marketing around these alternative pathways and had made further adjustments to existing pathways in an effort to attract higher numbers of domestic students.

RQ3: Have universities targeted particular equity cohorts as a result of the imperative to grow the domestic cohort?

Overall, there was no clear evidence to suggest that universities have targeted specific equity cohorts as a result of the pandemic or an associated need to grow the domestic cohort. However, there was a noted increased awareness and sensitivity to students with caring responsibilities and the gendered impact on female students.

RQ4: Did equity cohorts have additional attention paid to them or were they lost in the "big picture" of the pandemic?

In the context of admissions, students from equity cohorts did not appear to have been actively targeted or in receipt of any special attention. While equity cohorts may have benefited from increased flexibility and expansion of alternative entry pathways, there was little to no evidence to indicate that these measures were designed or implemented with the intent of recruiting equity students. However, this was not the case for enrolled students from equity cohorts, who in many cases were the target of specific supports aimed at their retention through the pandemic. In addition to broad phone and email campaigns, digital resources, and wellbeing support for all students, increased support for equity cohorts included establishment of dedicated transition teams for commencing students and considerable financial support for students from low SES backgrounds and other equity cohorts experiencing hardship.

RQ5: What strategies have universities engaged with in order to attract and incentivise domestic enrolments, particularly with regard to equity cohorts?

Senior leadership reported an increase in offerings of undergraduate certificate programs, short courses, and postgraduate courses aimed at reskilling professionals impacted by COVID. Many of these initiatives and program adjustments appeared to have some focus on employment outcomes and job-readiness; for example, a university repackaging undergraduate courses into certificate programs for students in Year 12 in order to provide students with a certificate-level qualification that would enable employment in their field prior to commencing university. While these initiatives may be attractive to students, further attention to their attrition and graduation rates would be warranted to understand their effectiveness as a pathway into undergraduate programs beyond completion of a certificate.

RQ6: Have collaborations across equity stakeholders strengthened to promote new, collective approaches that enhance equity for students?

The enormity of the COVID pandemic has highlighted, for many institutions, the need for strong collaborative partnerships within institutions as well as with external stakeholders, to maximise capacity and resources to assist students in need. Advocacy to grow institutional awareness of the needs of students from equity backgrounds must be sustained beyond the near term and involve all institutional stakeholders, so as to maximise a consistent and working understanding of what equity in education means for students from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds. Consistency of advocacy for equity must be practised and embedded to encourage institution and sector-wide commitment to equity in education for all students.

Despite evidence provided by survey participants of there being institution-wide policies and strategies aimed at enabling identified equity cohorts with support, the majority of targeted initiatives were delivered by a micro-level network of teams. A tendency of university departments to operate in silos was noted in case study interviews and highlights an ongoing challenge across the higher education sector. In particular, the reported consequences of working in silos include the duplication of work and a lack of cohesion and connection between staff operating in similar spaces. Interestingly, some staff members responded to questions through the lens of equality as opposed to equity. This misunderstanding is particularly concerning, as staff members and senior leaders also discussed the benefits of providing flexible and individualised support to students as a positive outcome associated with COVID. However, there were reports of increased collaboration internally, particularly around scholarships and support.

Despite the issues of internal silos within institutions, external partnerships and collaborations flourished. The need for universities to support school leavers through alternative entry led to increased adoption of School Recommendation Schemes, giving more weight to the advice of teachers and principals as a predictor of student success in higher education. It also created stronger linkages between universities and high schools. Institutions reported increased collaboration with state and local government, as well as with charities, non-profit organisations, student unions and guilds. Inter-university partnerships included the establishment of forums for sharing knowledge, practices, and research collaborations.

RQ7: Is there an intention for any changes (with regard to admissions, pathways, access and support) to be maintained beyond 2021?

The impact of COVID on shifting institutional thinking related to non-ATAR pathways was varied. Some institutions implemented significant ATAR adjustments as a means of redress for school leavers, and senior leader interviews indicated many of these adjustments were not likely to continue post-COVID. Despite this intent, various states and territories were subject to additional lockdown measures in 2021 ensuring that the disruption to education was far from over.

The increased rollout of alternative entry programs and non-ATAR pathways during the pandemic will enable significant access to data on the performance of students who entered via a non-ATAR pathway.

The provision of COVID-specific financial support is not likely to be economically viable in the long term. However, it is notable that at least one university reduced the administrative burden on students in receipt of scholarships as a lasting impact of COVID. The sense of urgency around financial support for students who were significantly economically impacted by COVID through loss of income and housing instability led to a reported reframing of how scholarships and bursaries are administered by universities. Senior leaders and case study participants discussed widespread implementation of financial support programs, reducing, or removing evidence of hardship requirements, and simplifying application procedures for students to access support. The immediate impact of these programs on student retention signalled a change in how institutions are approaching this process during and post-COVID.

The adoption of online platforms for teaching and learning was reported as likely to continue, particularly for those institutions that did not historically have many online or distance offerings. Regional universities were less impacted and reported being better prepared for a large-scale shift to online learning. The experience of regional universities and those with long histories as distance education providers presents an opportunity for increased inter-university collaborations and increased practice sharing between those institutions and metro-based universities seeking to establish their online programs and improve support for distance learners in future.

RQ8: What advocacy have universities engaged in with regard to equity cohorts and growing their domestic cohorts?

There was little to no evidence of any engagement of equity roles in informing the COVID response at an institutional level. Governance associated with universities' COVID response varied but often took the form of high-level taskforces made up of representatives of senior leadership levels.

Recommendations

Universities are incredible places: they are houses of learning, generators of new knowledge, unifiers, and convenors and, sometimes, drivers of social change. Universities have an immense contribution to make towards positive change to create a more just and equitable world.

It is still true that the university model of learning and engagement can prioritise certain types of knowledge – and types of people – above others. Universities need to transform this if we are going to truly serve society. The purpose of universities in the 21st century is tied not only to delivering quality education and research, but to accepting a moral responsibility to drive positive social change. Universities all over the world are competing for those top spots in global rankings, but many of them run the risk of losing sight of what is truly important: making the world a better place. As public institutions, funded with public money for the purpose of public good, universities can and do deliver benefit to communities and society more broadly. Universities strengthen democracy and civic engagement, drive progress that brings improvements to people's lives while interrogating past narratives about what "progress" means and who benefits. Universities hold up a mirror to society and apply a more objective, analytical gaze to the forces that shape our culture and practices.

Although it is important to support students from various equity groups, there is a risk of further isolating these students and eroding their identity. Inclusion is the recognition that an institution's success is dependent on how well it values, engages, and includes the rich diversity of students and staff consciously. Diversity has to go hand in hand with equity and inclusion, and inclusion is the next step beyond formal diversity. Without inclusion, under-represented groups including both staff and students will face challenges to succeed and that also has implications for universities. Doing this means taking an active hand in shaping our sector's future.

Although universities have long strived to take up their public purpose role and contribute to social change, the modes of applied practice are ever changing. COVID-19 comes with a set of pressing social challenges. These include environmental catastrophes such as the Australian droughts and bushfires, and the impending crisis of global warming. Social and health issues – which include debilitating poverty, racial and income inequality, and chronic diseases – also loom large. In this turbulent environment, universities have an important role to play as anchor institutions that support communities in transition. Rather than undertaking knowledge work on behalf of society, they must do so in collaboration with society. This means building relationships with business, industry, government, and not-for-profit organisations, to name but a few.

Following our engagement with the data collected, we offer five recommendations to universities for proactively planning for student equity, offering strategies for implementation that are contextually responsive, non-reactive, and establish a shared understanding of the identified needs, purpose, evidence and monitoring of progress.

Recommendation 1

Ensure consistency of advocacy for student equity (not equality) via an explicit university-wide student equity strategy which is embedded across the student lifecycle.

- Inequity is institutional, not individual – universities should use student equity strategy to develop and implement effective evidence-based strategies that improve access and success of students from equity groups in higher education, report on outcomes and avoid reactionary approaches to equity student needs.

Recommendation 2

Set key performance indicators regarding the access, participation and success of equity student cohorts with transparent data dashboards and regular internally circulated performance reporting based upon clear evaluation frameworks.

- Evaluation is key to any program's success and the implementation of equity initiatives/activities should be evidence-based. Along with widely communicating the impact of programs within the university, equity practitioners should consult with schools, parents, current students and community leaders to determine the best way to support the access and success of students from equity groups in higher education.

Recommendation 3

Build distributed leadership within higher education institutions to allow for transparent and collaborative processes for the decision-making regarding student equity admission and transition support.

- Student equity should be part of every university's core business, with clear lines of accountability from senior management down to those responsible for program implementation. The cultivation of critical voices and practices across the university should also be a priority, developing programming that increases the competency of university professional staff, academics, and leaders.

Recommendation 4

Adopt an intersectional approach to student equity admission and transition support.

- Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991) shows how gender and racial inequalities are interconnected and compound other forms of social exclusion, such as sexuality, disability, class, age, religion, and geography and so on.

- To account for compound disadvantage, criteria based on an intersectional/more nuanced view of equity (beyond low SES, Indigenous and RRR) should be developed to prioritise the needs of students who might not be identified by existing methods of student support allocation.

Recommendation 5

Develop institutional COVID-response plans for equity cohorts that explicitly respond to key access, participation and success needs of equity cohorts during COVID, including potential utilisation of reallocated HEPPP funding across the student lifecycle.

- Working documents could be distributed via DESE or NCSEHE and act as a blueprint for anchoring activity across the student lifecycle. This could be a live document, ensuring key internal stakeholders are working towards a coordinated, cohesive, and targeted response which is at once responsive to the varied and changing needs of diverse student cohorts.

- We often expect our diverse student and staff cohorts to fit into university structures and systems rather than the universities adapting to the needs of the diverse cohort. Our students and staff rightly expect to have a sense of real belonging with their university.

References

ABC (2019, 21 August). Australian universities risk catastrophe due to over-reliance on Chinese students, expert warns. https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-08-21/australian-universities-too-dependent-on-chinese-students-report/11427272

Austin, K. (2021). Facing the pandemic: Considering partnerships for widening participation in higher education in Australia, *European Journal of Education, 56* (1), 98–101.

Australian Government Productivity Commission (2019). *The Demand Driven University System: A Mixed Report Card. Productivity Commission Research Paper*. Available online at: https://www.pc.gov.au/research/completed/university-report-card/university-report-card.pdf

Australian Information Industry Association. (2020). *Building Australia's Digital Future in a Post-COVID world*. https://aiia.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Building-Australias-Digital-Future-in-a-Post-COVID-World-AIIA-Whitepaper-2020.pdf

Australian Institute for Health and Welfare (AIHW). (2021a). Australia's youth: COVID-19 and the impact on young people. https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/covid-19-and-young-people

Australian Institute for Health and Welfare (AIHW). (2021b). Secondary education: school retention and completion, https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/secondary-education-school-retention-completion

Baker, J. (2021, October 13). The 'impossible' juggle: Parents spent 14 hours a week on home learning, *Sydney Morning Herald*, https://www.smh.com.au/education/the-impossible-juggle-parents-spent-14-hours-a-week-on-home-learning-20211012-p58zdq.html

Baker, S., Anderson, J., Burke, R., De Fazio, T., Due, C., Hartley, L., Molla, T., Morison, C., Mude, W., Naidoo, L., & Sidhu, R. (forthcoming) Equitable teaching for cultural and linguistic diversity: Exploring the possibilities for engaged pedagogy in post-COVID-19 higher education. *Educational Review.*

Barber, M. (2021). Gravity assist: Propelling higher education towards a brighter future: report of the digital teaching and learning review. https://ofslivefs.blob.core.windows.net/files/Gravity assist/Gravity-assist-DTL-finalforweb.pdf

Bennett, R., Uink, B. & Cross, S. (2020) Beyond the social: Cumulative implications of COVID-19 for first nations university students in Australia, *Social Sciences & Humanities Open, 2 (1), 1 – 5* https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2590291120300723

Black, S. (2021, 31 July) Alternatives to the Atar: 'Most kids don't know about them', *Guardian Australia,* https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/jul/31/alternatives-to-the-atar-most-kids-dont-know-about-them

Bradley, D., Noonan, P., Nugent, H., & Scales, B. (2008) *Review of Higher Education*. Canberra: Australian Government.

Braun, V. & Clark, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101.

Brown, N., te Riele, K., Shelley, B., Wooroffe, J. (2020) Learning at home during COVID-19: Effects on vulnerable young Australians. Independent Rapid Response Report, University of Tasmania, https://www.utas.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/1324268/Learning-at-home-during-COVID-19-updated.pdf

Cairns, R. (2020). Exams tested by COVID-19: An opportunity to rethink standardised senior secondary examinations. *Prospects,* 1–15. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-020-09515-9

Campus Morning Mail (2020, 1 June). "ATAR" becoming Australian for obsolete. Available online at: https://campusmorningmail.com.au/news/atar-becoming-australian-for-obsolete/

Chrysanthos, N. (2021, February 7) Remote learning exposed Sydney's digital divide. But not much has changed, *Sydney Morning Herald,* https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/remote-learning-exposed-sydney-s-digital-divide-but-not-much-has-changed-20210121-p56vsx.html

Cook, J., Burke, P., Bunn, M. & Cuervo, H. (2021) Should I stay or should I go? The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on regional, rural and remote undergraduate students at an Australian University, Educational Review, DOI: 10.1080/00131911.2021.1958756

Corliss, M.C., Daly, A., & Lewis, P. (2020), Is a university degree still a worthwhile financial investment in Australia?, *Australian Journal of Education*, *64*(1), 73–90

Country Education Foundation of Australia (2021) COVID-19: How it affected our rural students, in their words, https://cef.org.au/covid-19-how-it-affected-our-rural-students-in-their-words/

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review, 43*(6), 1241.

Cruse, L.R., Contreras-Mendez, S., & Holtzman, T. (2020) Student Parents in the COVID-19 Pandemic: Heightened Need & the Imperative for Strengthened Support, Institute for Women's Policy Research, https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED612659.pdf

Davillas, A. & Jones, A.M. (2021). The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on socioeconomic inequality in psychological distress in the UK, *Health Economics,* 30 (7), 1668 – 1683

Dawson, V. (2020, April 8). Cited in Ross, J. (2020) Australia's inclusivity gains 'will be reversed by pandemic, *Times Higher Education,* https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/australias-inclusivity-gains-will-be-reversed-pandemic

Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE). (2020). *Job-ready Graduates Package.* https://www.dese.gov.au/job-ready

Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE). (2021). *Commissioned Studies - Coronavirus (COVID) information for schools and students.* https://www.dese.gov.au/COVID/schools

Doidge, S. & Doyle, J. (2020). Australian universities in the age of Covid, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1804343

Drane, C.F., Vernon, L., & O'Shea, S. (2020). Vulnerable learners in the age of COVID-19: A scoping review, *The Australian Educational Researcher*, *48*, 585–604. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-020-00409-5

Erlam, G.D., Garrett, N., Gasteiger, N., Lau, K., Hoare, K., Agarwal, S., & Haxell, A. (2021). What Really Matters: Experiences of Emergency Remote Teaching in University Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic, *Frontiers in Education,* 6, 639842. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2021.639842

Finefter-Rosenbluh, I., Perrotta, C., & Grové, C. (2021, August 13). 'How outrageous and impossible is that?': factoring in how year 12 students coped in lockdown is a grading nightmare for teachers, *The Conversation,* https://theconversation.com/how-outrageous-and-impossible-is-that-factoring-in-how-year-12-students-coped-in-lockdown-is-a-grading-nightmare-for-teachers-162851

Firth, V. (2020, September 9). Job-Ready Graduates Package risks entrenching inequity. *University of Technology Sydney,* https://www.uts.edu.au/partners-and-community/initiatives/social-justice-uts/news/job-ready-graduates-package-risks-entrenching-inequity

Fischetti, J. (2021, September 10). COVID gives us a chance to rethink traditional end-of-school exams, and move into the 21 century. *The Conversation,* https://theconversation.com/covid-gives-us-a-chance-to-rethink-traditional-end-of-school-exams-and-move-into-the-21-century-167038

Flack, C. B., Walker, L., Bickerstaff, A., & Margetts, C. (2020). Socioeconomic disparities in Australian schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Pivot Professional Learning*, https://docs.pivotpl.com/research/COVID-19/Pivot_Socioeconomic+disparities+in+Australian+schooling+during+COVID-19+July+2020.pdf

Gonski, D., Boston, K., Greiner, K., Lawrence, C., Scales, B., Tannock, P., (2011), *Review of Funding for Schooling: Final Report*. Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

Grodach, C. (2020, August 3). Why coronavirus will deepen the inequality of our suburbs. *The Conversation*, https://theconversation.com/why-coronavirus-will-deepen-the-inequality-of-our-suburbs-143432

Hamlyn, C. (2020, 26 March). Coronavirus crisis sees WA schools announce big changes to tackle COVID-19 — here's what you need to know, *ABC News*, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-26/wa-coronavirus-schools-changes-what-you-need-to-know/12093056

Henry, M. (2020, July 22). *The good, the bad, and the 'TBC': How the Job-Ready Graduates Package affects student equity*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/job-ready-graduates-package-student-equity/

Hillman, N. (2020, April 2). Covid-19 could be a curse for graduates but a boon for universities, *Times Higher Education,* https://www.timeshighereducation.com/opinion/covid-19-could-be-curse-graduates-boon-universities

Karimshah, A., Wyder, M., Henman, P., Tay, D., Capelin, E. and Short, P. (2013). Overcoming adversity among low SES students. *Australian Universities Review*, 55(2),5–14.

Klapproth, F., Federkeil, L.,; Heinschke, F., & Jungmann, T. (2020). Teachers' experiences of stress and their coping strategies during COVID-19 induced distance teaching, *Journal of Pedagogical Research, 4*(4), 444–452. http://dx.doi.org/10.33902/JPR.2020062805

Koshy, P. (2019). Equity Student Participation in Australian Higher Education: 2013 – 2018. *National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE),* Perth: Curtin University.

Lin, H., Zeanah, P.L., Olivier, D.F., Bergeron, M.A., & Liu, C.H. (2020). Responding to the pressing yet unrecognized needs of student-parents amid the COVID-19 pandemic, *Journal of American College Health,* https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2020.1870474

Meddemmen, D. (2021, September 27). Changes to UC admissions, due to delayed ATAR results, *University of Canberra,* https://www.canberra.edu.au/about-uc/media/newsroom/2021/september/changes-to-uc-admissions,-due-to-delayed-atar-results

McGaughey, F., Watermeyer, R., Shankar, K., Ratnadeep Suri, V., Knight, C., Crick, T., Hardman, J., Phelan, D. & Chung, R. (2021): 'This can't be the new norm': academics' perspectives on the COVID-19 crisis for the Australian university sector, *Higher Education Research & Development.* https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2021.1973384

Moore, R., Rudling, E., Kunda, M., & Robin, S. (2021). Supporting casual teaching staff in the Australian neoliberal university: A collaborative approach. *Journal of Applied Learning & Teaching, 4*(2), 1–14. DOI: https://doi.org/10.37074/jalt.2021.4.2.8

Mudwari, N., Cuskelly, M., Murphy, C., Beasy, B., & Aryal, N. (2021). Impact of COVID-19 on refugee-background students during school shut down in Australia: A call for action. *Teachers and Curriculum*, *21*(1), 71–76.

Muir, T., Murphy, C., Hicks, D., & Beasy, K. (2020, September 22). 'The workload was intense': What parents told us about remote learning, *The Conversation,* https://theconversation.com/the-workload-was-intense-what-parents-told-us-about-remote-learning-146297

Mupenzi, A., Mude, W., & Baker, S. (2020). Reflections on COVID-19 and impacts on equitable participation: The case of culturally and linguistically diverse migrant and/ or refugee (CALDMR) students in Australian higher education. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *39*(7), 1337–1341.

Nash, M. & Churchill, B. (2020). Caring during COVID-19: A gendered analysis of Australian university responses to managing remote working and caring responsibilities. *Gender, Work and Organisation*, *27*, 833–846.

NCOSS (2020) A Wave Of Disadvantage Across NSW: Impact of the COVID-19 Recession. https://www.ncoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/A-WAVE-OF-DISADVANTAGE_-COVID-19_Final.pdf

Norton, A. (2020, October 9). 3 flaws in Job-Ready Graduates package will add to the turmoil in Australian higher education. *The Conversation,* https://theconversation.com/3-flaws-in-job-ready-graduates-package-will-add-to-the-turmoil-in-australian-higher-education-147740

O'Connell, M., Milligan, S.K. and Bentley, T. (2019) *Beyond ATAR: a proposal for change*. Koshland Innovation Fund, Melbourne, Victoria. https://all-learning.org.au/app/uploads/2021/02/beyond_atar_proposal_for_change_all.pdf

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2020, 19 November). The impact of COVID-19 on student equity and inclusion: supporting vulnerable students during school closures and school re-openings (Tackling Coronavirus (COVID-19): Contributing to a Global Effort). https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=434_434914-59wd7ekj29&title=The-impact-of-COVID-19-on-

student-equity-and-inclusion&_ga=2.153210296.1663928056.1636325784-902243332.1636083365

O'Shea, S., Koshy, P., & Drane, C. (2021) The implications of COVID for student equity in Australian higher education, *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, DOI: 10.1080/1360080X.2021.1933305

Paul, S. & Burton, M. (2021, October 222) Melbourne reopens as world's most locked-down city eases pandemic restrictions, *Reuters,* https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/melbourne-reopens-worlds-most-locked-down-city-eases-pandemic-restrictions-2021-10-21

Pitman, T. (2017) Widening participation in higher education: A play in five acts, Australia Universities' Review, 59(1), 37–46

Raper, A. (2020, May 18). NSW public school students to return to classrooms full time after coronavirus shutdown, *ABC News*, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-18/nsw-school-students-to-return-full-time-on-monday/12260252

Raven, N. (2020). COVID and outreach: the challenge and the response, *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, *22*(2), 255–263.

Ross, J. (2020, April 8). Australian university to ignore 2020 school results for 2021 intake, *Times Higher Education,* https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/australian-university-ignore-2020-school-results-2021-intake

Seymour, K., Skattebol, J. & Pook, B. (2020) Compounding education disengagement: COVID-19 lockdown, the digital divide and wrap-around services, *Journal of Children's Services, 15*(4), 243–251.

Sonnemann, J. & Goss, P. (2020). COVID catch-up: Helping disadvantaged students close the equity gap, *Grattan Institute,* https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/COVID-Catch-up-Grattan-School-Education-Report.pdf

Stone, C. (2019). Online learning in Australian higher education: Opportunities, challenges and transformations. *Student Success*, *10*(2), 1–11.

Stone, C., & O'Shea, S. (2019). Older, online and first: Recommendations for retention and success/ *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, *35*(1), 57–69.

Sutton, H. (2021). COVID-19 disproportionately impacts students with disabilities across all sectors, *Disability Compliance in Higher Education, 26*(6), 9*.* https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/dhe.30973

Tasmanian Policy Exchange (2021). COVID-19 and the future of work in Tasmania. https://www.utas.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/1475567/Future-of-work-final_02092021.pdf

Taylor, C. (2021, August 23). COVID pushes teachers to breaking point, as home schooling and lack of priority vaccines bite, *ABC News,* https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-08-23/covid- school-home-learning-teachers-at-breaking-point/100393190

Taylor, A. & Rabe, T. (2021, July 31). 'A fair HSC': Year 12 students given special consideration for COVID-19 disruption, *Sydney Morning Herald,* https://www.smh.com.au/national/a-fair-hsc-year-12-students-given-special-consideration-for-covid-19-disruption-20210731-p58epe.html

Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) (2020). *Foundations for good practice: The student experience of online learning in Australian higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Sydney.

Tuck, D., Berger, E., Wiley, J.F., & Patlamazoglou, L. (2021, October 21). COVID has increased anxiety and depression rates among university students. And they were already higher than average, *The Conversation*, https://theconversation.com/covid-has-increased-anxiety-and-depression-rates-among-university-students-and-they-were-already-higher-than-average-167787

UNICEF (2021, September 15). Schools still closed for nearly 77 million students 18 months into pandemic – UNICEF, *UNICEF*, https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/schools-still-closed-nearly-77-million-students-18-months-pandemic-unicef

Universities Australia (2020, April 7). Certainty for Year 12 students vital, *Universities Australia*, https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/media-item/certainty-for-year-12-students-vital/

University of New South Wales (2021). *UNSW Gateway*. https://www.futurestudents.unsw.edu.au/unsw-gateway

University of New South Wales (2021). *Information for Students* https://www.covid-19.unsw.edu.au/information-students

University of Technology Sydney (2021). *U@Uni Academy.* https://www.futurestudents.unsw.edu.au/unsw-gateway

Universities Australia (2021). 2021 University Admissions, Universities Australia, https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ATTACHMENT-B-UA-Statement-on-admissions-in-2021.pdf

Wanberg, C. R., Csillag, B., Douglass, R. P., Zhou, L., & Pollard, M. S. (2020). Socioeconomic status and well-being during COVID-19: A resource-based examination. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 105*(12), 1382–1396. https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000831

Warburton, M. (2021, September 13). The hollow promise of job-ready uni graduate funding. *InDaily,* https://indaily.com.au/opinion/2021/09/13/the-hollow-promise-of-job-ready-uni-graduate-funding/

Watermeyer, R., Shankar, K., Crick, T., Knight, C., McGaughey, F., Hardman, J., Ratnadeep Suri, V., Chung, R.& Phelan, D.(2021). 'Pandemia': a reckoning of UK universities' corporate response to COVID-19 and its academic fallout. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2021.1937058

Wright, A. (2021). Primary and secondary school closures in Victoria due to COVID-19, *Department of Parliamentary Services, Parliament of Victoria,* https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2021-04/apo-nid311812.pdf

Yin, R. (1984). *Case study research: Design and method*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Zhou, N. (2021, February 3). More than 17,000 jobs lost at Australian universities during COVID pandemic, *Guardian Australia,* https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/feb/03/more-than-17000-jobs-lost-at-australian-universities-during-covid-pandemic

Appendices

Appendix A: Survey instrument, including reflection of changes to Multiple Choice Questions
Appendix B: Overview of Senior Leader Participants
Appendix C: Senior leader interview schedule
Appendix D: Overview of Case Study Participants
Appendix E: Case study interview schedule
Appendix F: Case studies
Appendix G: Reference Group Members

Appendix A: Survey instrument, including reflection of changes to Multiple Choice Questions

Original MCQ	Revised MCQ & open format
Q2 – Has your university made changes to admission requirements for domestic undergraduate students for 2021 in response to COVID-19? • Yes (Please describe some of these changes) – open form response • No • Don't Know Q3 – Has your university lowered the ATAR and or Guaranteed Entry Rank? • Yes (Please describe some of these changes) – open form response • No • Don't Know Q4 – Does your university offer non-ATAR pathways for domestic undergraduate students? • Yes (Please describe some of the non-ATAR pathways) – open form response • No • Don't Know Q5 – Has your university offered new admissions pathways for domestic undergraduate students in response to COVID-19? • Yes (please describe) – open form response • No (Go to Q7) • Don't Know Q6 – Has your university expanded existing admissions pathways for domestic undergraduate students in response to COVID-19? • Yes (please describe) – open form response • No • Don't Know	Consolidated Q2, Q3, Q4, Q5 & Q6 into two questions: Rev1 – Has your university made any of the following changes to admissions for domestic undergraduate students for 2021 in response to COVID-19? (MCQ) • Expanded existing admissions • Lowered ATAR entrance marks • Introduced new non-ATAR OR admissions pathways • Other • No changes have been made • Don't know Rev2 – (To be answered by if any of the above EXCEPT 'No changes have been made' are selected.) Please share more information about changes you have made to admissions for domestic undergraduate students in response to COVID-19 (open form response)
Q13 – Does your university have a targeted approach to support or provide services to students from equity cohorts • Yes (How is this done?) – open form response • No • Don't Know Q14 – Has your university made any amendments to these services or supports? • Yes (please share some examples of these amendments) – open form response • No • Don't Know	Consolidated Q13 & Q14 into one question: Rev3 – Does your university have a targeted approach to support or provide services, resources and or programs to engage equity cohorts to meet their identified needs? • Yes – SKIP LOGIC → Please share some examples of targeted approaches (open form response) THEN → Has your university made amendments to these services in response to COVID-19 (open form response) • No • Don't Know
Q17 – Following COVID-19, has your university introduced new services, resources, supports or programs to engage students from equity cohorts to meet their identified needs? • Yes (please share some examples of these amendments) – open form response • No • Don't Know	Consolidated Q17, Q18 & Q19 into two questions: Rev4 – Following COVID-19 has your university done any of the following to better engage and support students from equity cohorts? (MCQ) • Formed NEW collaborations or partnerships with stakeholders external to the university (including TAFE or other NGOs) • Formed NEW collaborations or partnerships with intra-university stakeholders

Original MCQ	Revised MCQ & open format
Q18 – Following COVID-19 has your university formed collaborations with partners within or external to the university to better engage and support students from equity cohorts? (this may include TAFE or other NGO service providers) • Yes (please share some examples of these collaborations) – open form response • No • Don't Know Q19 – Following COVID-19 has your university strengthened existing collaborations with partners within or external to the university to better engage and support students from equity cohorts? (this may include TAFE or other NGO service providers) • Yes (please share some examples of these collaborations) – open form response • No • Don't Know	• Expanded/Strengthened EXISTING collaborations or partnerships with stakeholders external to the university (including TAFE or other NGOs) • Expanded/Strengthened EXISTING collaborations or partnerships with stakeholders intra-university stakeholders • Don't Know • None of the Above Rev5 – Please let us know about New or Expanded/Strengthened collaborations or partnerships that your institution has engaged in following COVID-19 (what's been done and with whom) (open form response)
Q20 - Has your university engaged in any external advocacy for students from equity cohorts since COVID-19 (access to higher education/ support while studying)? • Yes (Please share some EXAMPLES of these measures) • No • Don't know Q21 - Has your university engaged in any internal advocacy for students from equity cohorts since COVID-19 (access to higher education/ support while studying)? • Yes (Please share some EXAMPLES of these measures) • No • Don't know	Consolidated Q20 & Q21 into one question: Rev6 – If your university engaged in advocacy with external or intra-university stakeholders please let us know what was done (open form response)

Appendix B: Overview of Senior Leader Participants

PSEUDONYM	ROLE (AT TIME OF INTERVIEW)
Edwina	Deputy Vice-Chancellor
Matthew	Deputy Vice-Chancellor
Stephen	Provost
Julia	Pro Vice-Chancellor
Jessica	Executive Director
Adam	Director
James	Pro Vice-Chancellor
Nicholas	Deputy Vice-Chancellor
George	Deputy Vice-Chancellor
Paul	Chief Marketing Officer
Elise	Pro Vice-Chancellor

Appendix C: Senior leader interview schedule

1. Your institution.

2. Your role at the institution.

3. As a result of COVID-19, what strategies have been developed by your institution to increase domestic undergraduate student enrolments from equity cohorts for 2021?

4. What underlying principles were considered when developing and implementing these strategies?

5. What challenges did the institution face when implementing these strategies?

6. What evidence was utilised in navigating the institution's response to COVID-19 based strategic refocusing?

7. Are these strategic shifts likely to continue beyond 2021?

8. As a result of COVID-19, what are the major changes to student support services that will assist in growing domestic undergraduate student enrolments from equity cohorts for 2021?

9. Do you have any other comments or feedback to add?

Appendix D: Overview of Case Study Participants

PSEUDONYM	ROLE AREA (AT TIME OF INTERVIEW)	CASE STUDY UNIVERSITY
Ian	Senior Leader, DVC Academic	University 1
Arthur	Manager Widening Participation	University 1
Ben	Manager Scholarships	University 1
Sarah	Manager Student Admissions	University 1
Melissa	Director Undergraduate Students	University 1
Lisa	Senior Manager Student Life	University 1
Tabitha	Student Engagement Officer	University 2
Amanda	Senior Manager, Widening Participation	University 2
John	Manager, Careers & Employment	University 2
Nancy	Senior Manager, Student Life	University 2
Cathy	Manager, Widening Participation	University 2
Jasmine	Manager, Student Engagement	University 2
Matthew	Deputy Vice-Chancellor	University 2
Edwina	Deputy Vice-Chancellor	University 2
Stephen	Provost	University 3
Kendell	Executive Director, Social Justice	University 3
Ash	Student Equity Officer	University 3
Lara	Senior Manager, Admissions	University 3
Dianne	Marketing Manager	University 3
Nic	Executive Director, Equity	University 4
Eman	Director, Operations	University 4
Jessie	Director, Equity and Diversity	University 4
Farj	Manager, Widening Participation	University 4
Abir	Director, Student Engagement	University 4
Jordan	Senior Manager, Engagement	University 4
Sam	Vice-President	University 4

Appendix E: Case study interview schedule

Lead-in questions

1. Please describe the institution that you work for and your role in it.
2. How long have you been in this role?
3. What other roles have you had in relation to admissions pathways or supporting students from equity cohorts?

Interview questions:

1. Describe the admissions pathways and student support structure at your institution.

2. Following COVID-19 – describe the key underlying principles that your institution considered when making decisions and changes to admissions to attract domestic undergraduate students from equity cohorts in 2021 and 2022.

3. Could you describe the process undertaken to make these decisions, highlight the key changes and process undertaken to implement the changes?

4. Describe any challenges, barriers and enablers for these changes.
   - How effective do you think these changes have been? Can you describe the impact by sharing data if possible (Applications, Offers and Enrolment data such as percentage increases/ decreases)?
   - Will these changes continue post COVID-19? Have these changes impacted Institutional thinking and/or approaches around ATAR and non-ATAR admissions?

5. Following COVID-19 – describe the key underlying principles that your institution considered when making decisions and changes to provide student support to domestic undergraduate students from equity cohorts in 2021 and 2022.

6. Could you describe the process undertaken to make these decisions, highlight the key changes and process undertaken to implement the changes?
   - Describe any challenges, barriers and enablers for these changes.
   - How effective do you think these changes have been? Can you describe the impact by sharing data if possible (Student Progression Data, Student Feedback Survey Data)
   - Will these changes continue post COVID-19?

7. Describe any collaborations with partners formed internally and externally to the university to support students from equity cohorts (such as TAFE or other NGO service providers)
   - Describe any challenges, barriers and enablers to this collaboration

8. What recommendations would you make for future strategic action/direction/initiative based on your understanding of the efficacy and impacts of your university's response to COVID-19 and students from equity cohorts?

Finally, is there anything else that you'd like to add?

Appendix F: Case studies

Case Study – University 1

Summary

The scale of disruption caused by COVID demanded a rapid response to engineer workable solutions to enable access to learning for new and continuing students. To achieve this, the university formed an emergency taskforce, comprised of executives, and supported by operational teams, to action agile responses to the evolving and immediate needs impacting the institution, its students, staff, and stakeholders. To encourage domestic enrolments of pre-university students, the university expanded existing alternative pathway initiatives and criteria to award entry adjustment factors, early entry offers and entry into sub-bachelor pathways. These measures were taken to alleviate the anxiety and stress of current school leavers, ensuring they would not be disadvantaged by COVID circumstances. Meanwhile, access to learning for the university's students was enabled by the taskforce and its teams, who coordinated the transfer of learning to online media and then later ensured the safe return of students to the university campus to resume face-to-face learning. These operational changes were actioned using a student-focused approach, designed to support all students through the challenges of COVID.

While a targeted equity approach was not employed at a macro-level, many of the university's decisions enabled equity cohorts to access and participate in learning. The new and broadened alternate admission entry modes and courses were successfully taken up by domestic students seeking undergraduate study and will continue to be offered to enable students, including equity cohorts, to access higher education. Meanwhile, the decision to resume campus-based learning benefited all students, including equity cohorts who were known to have experienced significant challenges due to lack of access to the campus and its learning resources. Of note, the university's decision to resume on-campus learning in 2020 was unique to most institutional approaches, despite negative risks to student engagement and participation due to campus closures.

Overall, the university effected a positive response to the COVID circumstances faced in 2020, by securing continuity of, and access to, learning for all students. Institutional opportunities illuminated by the experiences and achievements of the university's responses at this time, demonstrated the possibility for more widely coordinated communications and operational structures to engage student support and learning networks. A more coordinated approach could enhance understandings around the diversity of student equity experiences in accessing and participating in higher education learning. A scaffolded approach could be achieved with more broadly shared insights into the needs of the equity cohorts, enabling relevant teams to design and deliver targeted initiatives to better support students from equity backgrounds. Moving forward, the university has opportunities to capitalise on momentum to increase understanding of equity in education across the institution and situate the importance of equity in education as a university-wide responsibility.

Setting the Scene

The university has a range of access and admission strategies available to school leavers, including a traditional pathway through Universities Admission Centre (UAC) admissions, which relies on a student's selection rank. The university also offers an array of alternative admission pathways that include, but are not limited to, a school recommendations scheme, academic entry and recognition of community service and engagement.

> *So for admission pathway for undergraduate student, domestic students, they all go for UAC … or we have some early entry schemes (where) we look at Year 11 results and also the community engagement and the learning. (Sarah, Manager Student Admissions, University 1)*

The university emphasises student selection ranks, rather than raw ATAR ranks, as important determinants of their admissions process. A student's selection rank includes their ATAR plus relevant adjustment factors, which are given to account for academic performance in relevant HSC subjects, their residential postcode and geographical location (which assists to identify socioeconomic circumstance) or the university's catchment area, as well as students' sporting achievements and community engagement.

> *We also have a lot of adjustments schemes ... So it's given points ranging from two or three … to a maximum of 15 points combining all the different (adjustment factors) ... And some are equity based. Some are academic based, and some are location or achievement based. (Sarah, Manager Student Admissions, University 1)*

This approach highlights the university's dedication to looking at student capacity beyond ATAR ranks and enables the accessibility of entry into higher education for students from equity backgrounds who may experience disadvantage in their access to educational resources. Furthermore, the university utilises equity scholarships as a driving force to attract and incentivise domestic equity cohort enrolments.

> *For current high school leavers, we also have something called academic entry whereby they're assessed on their performance in HSC subjects that relate to the course that they wish to study. And they're offered a position in that course based on their performance in those subjects regardless of their ATAR. (Melissa, Director Undergraduate Students, University 1)*

Beyond admissions, the university has transition support available to students from equity backgrounds once they commence their higher education learning journey. Transition support includes student engagement, counselling, accessibility services, advocacy, peer and academic mentoring and access to financial grants that aim to support commencing equity students as they begin their university learning.

Action taken

In 2020, the university turned its attention to increasing domestic student enrolments in response to the closure of international borders and the loss of access to the international student market. The university sought to engage domestic students, particularly school leavers, by offering access to new entry modes and courses. These pathway initiatives aimed to encourage opportunity of access for all students who intended to pursue higher education learning. They were also intended to alleviate COVID-induced anxiety for school leavers, who experienced intense disruption and uncertainty in their final school year.

> *[T]he underlying principle was to support students and to make sure that students who were here or were intending to come here weren't disadvantaged, because of the circumstances they found themselves in, due to COVID. (Ben, Manager Scholarships, University 1)*

The university's early entry schemes were increased and adjustment factors able to be added to student ATAR ranks were broadened from 10 to 15. In addition to these, the university extended course application dates and adjusted the academic components required for specific courses to accommodate for disruptions to study.

> *We have actually increased the cap that we kept for each of the courses. In the past for a course at the highest cap for [adjustment factors] was 10 now is 15. So what we're trying to do is … give them a chance to demonstrate themselves. (Sarah, Manager Student Admissions, University 1)*

Students from low SES backgrounds were identified as potentially not having had opportunities to engage in fee-incurring extracurricular activities to demonstrate their non-

academic engagement and capacity to pursue higher education. This inequity of opportunity was recognised by the university who responded by expanding the criteria for early entry application to include carer responsibilities and paid work experiences. The Commonwealth introduced a new award course type, Undergraduate Certificates, during the lockdown period to allow those who were not working to re-skill, and/or to act as a pathway to higher education. These certificates were also offered to school leavers as another pathway to access undergradute study.

> *During the pandemic, we introduced some undergraduate certificates initially targeting non-school applicants ... And then that expanded so that we could offer them for current school leavers commencing in 2021. (Melissa, Director Undergraduate Students, University 1)*

To respond appropriately to COVID circumstances, the university established an emergency taskforce comprised of high-level decision-making executives who communicated with operational teams to quickly develop and deliver initiatives for students. The taskforce proved highly effective for executing proactive, fast-paced decisions to meet demand. In addition to the taskforce, network collaborations across university teams allowed information sharing and responses to be actioned to meet identified needs of prospective and continuing students.

> *There was a task force created, a COVID task force that looked at all of these issues, and that was obviously made up of senior management ... And then the next layer, which was the operational team. (Ben, Manager Scholarships, University 1)*

> *… a lot of decisions were made much more quickly than before and with a lot more high-level consultation and high-level decision-making than there would typically be. (Arthur, Manager Widening Participation, University 1)*

The taskforce steered macro-level institutional actions and resources to ensure the safe continuity of learning for all student cohorts. Targeted assistance for specific students from known equity backgrounds was delivered by teams within the institution who were well placed with appropriate knowledge and networks to engage and support these students. Meanwhile, a comprehensive wellbeing and financial support package was delivered by the university for all students who found themselves in immediate circumstances of hardship.

> *The important thing to note about the COVID-19 emergency, was an emergency that faced the entire sector and then therefore all of our cohorts. And so all student cohorts were impacted and therefore our response was a whole of institution response rather than a targeted WP response. (Ian, Senior Leader DVC Academic, University 1)*

> *COVID could not distinguish or discriminate between our regular body, student body or our equity groups. We just had to make sure that our responses were fit for purpose for all equity groups and all cohorts. (Ian, Senior Leader DVC Academic, University 1)*

> *The Student Success and Support Package (SSSP) … was primarily for students in financial need. They could ask for money from the University, they could also ask for loans, they could ask for a deferral of their fees … the University coming up with money in a very challenging time financially, I think was a good outcome. (Ben, Manager Scholarships, University 1)*

Result

The university was well placed to respond dynamically to changes prompted by COVID. Their non-ATAR entry pathways were well established, making it easier to adapt aspects and criteria of the admissions process to meet circumstances and enable students to access entry with minimal complication. A key enabler of the university's positive response was the emergency taskforce who functioned to streamline critical communications and action decision-making without the delay of traditional bureaucratic procedures. Further contributors were the networks of teams who collaborated to support the needs of students.

> *… there was a lot more involvement … in terms of departments than there would typically be. There was a lot more regular input from faculties in some of the decisions that were made at the university level. (Arthur, Manager Widening Participation, University 1)*

> *… working together and bringing the knowledge from different areas, understanding the market … and trying to still deliver something within the university framework … it involved a lot of different people working closely together and very quickly. (Melissa, Director Undergraduate Students, University 1)*

While a macro-level approach to engaging and enabling students from equity backgrounds is still evolving at the university, the response to COVID in 2020 demonstrated that there is a working awareness of equity across teams. Yet, while some teams were well placed to engage equity cohorts, this was not universal. An opportunity now exists for the university to capitalise and convert the micro-level working knowledge of equity that is currently actioned by some teams and expand it across the institution in a formal, coordinated manner. This would meaningfully and actively address issues of equity in education experienced by students from disadvantaged backgrounds when seeking access to and participation in learning.

> *I think that there is a lack of coordination across those different areas and lots of areas, which don't really know what the other areas are doing. (Arthur, Manager Widening Participation, University 1)*

Steps towards a more coordinated understanding of equity in education across the university could be aided by cohesive operational communications and sharing of knowledge and awareness of the support being delivered by different teams to different cohorts. Greater awareness around issues of equity in education should be shared using internal advocacy and research that explores the needs of students who experience inequity in education. Collaborative design and delivery of initiatives that embed objectives to enhance educational equity for students would also facilitate the spread of awareness and increase coordination.

> *… in terms of equity training, I generally feel the whole of institution needs a bit of a refresher … it has to be on everybody's mind and we should not lose sight and we should not generalise about our student population. (Lisa, Senior Manager Student Life, University 1)*

Supporting a coordinated approach to enhancing equity necessitates robust central data intelligence that can be accessed by all stakeholders. The university understood the value of a central data intelligence source and had started work to streamline real-time data into a central resource, yet the scale of such a project meant it was not completed when COVID impacted in 2020. This meant areas and teams of the university had limited access to coordinated data to identify equity students and respond accordingly to their needs.

The biggest problem we face in a way is the lack of data. (Lisa, Senior Manager Student Life, University 1)

I think the problem is getting the data understanding … When you get to know your students, and you get to know your cohort, you can actually do better. (Lisa, Senior Manager Student Life, University 1)

Moving forward, enhanced data flows across the university alongside institution-wide awareness of the needs of equity cohorts, will enable the university to better partner with students from equity backgrounds to enhance their access to and participation in higher education learning. At the time of writing this case study there was confirmation from the university that the centralised data system was now operative.

Next Steps

The university's operational response in 2020 to COVID illuminated opportunities to enhance its approach to equity. The university will continue to focus on developing and refining non-ATAR admission pathways alongside other offerings such as graduate certificates. Further, the university has acknowledged the benefits to students in allowing greater flexibility in learning and teaching methods, enabling students to engage in their learning in a manner accommodating for personal circumstances.

… what COVID has reinforced was the trend towards more personalised and flexible forms of teaching and learning … And so that opportunity to allow students to choose between on-campus or an online synchronous and asynchronous learning experience made a difference and will continue to shape the way we go in the future. (Ian, Senior Leader DVC Academic, University 1)

Awareness and engagement of students who experience inequitable access to educational resources and opportunities remain limited to specific teams at the university. Yet the pandemic demonstrated that equity in education is experienced differently by different students, thereby requiring attention to be paid by more stakeholders to better understand and address it. This responsibility must be shouldered by all university community members and greater work is needed to maximise the collective efforts and resources that are currently in action.

I'm not sure I can say that across the institution … things have dramatically changed in terms of how other people perceive of equity matters. (Ian, Senior Leader DVC Academic, University 1)

I think there's room for expanding that (equity) knowledge and awareness as well, and it's something that needs to be reminded. (Melissa, Director Undergraduate Students, University 1)

The university's taskforce produced agile communications with targeted teams. This model could be expanded to promote consistent messaging around a unified approach to equity in education and a collective strategy to engage students from equity backgrounds with tailored support initiatives. At the time of writing this case study, the university confirmed they were progressing with the development of a comprehensive equity policy.

During 2020, multiple teams and units across the university came together to build solutions to COVID issues impacting the institution and its students. It was apparent that teams enjoyed collaborating to deliver initiatives, enabling students to access support and resources, and streamlining and improving processes. With the creation of a robust operational framework, work across teams along with decisions and communications actioned by the emergency taskforce, evidenced strong institutional capacity for further and more sustained collaborations to support equity for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. A risk to the gains achieved during this period is that if an equity-focused

framework enabling cross-collaborations fails to be implemented, the university will be less able to capitalise on the momentum. This would also constitute a loss of opportunity to situate equity in education as an institution-wide focus and leave students from equity backgrounds to continue to experience inequity in their education journey.

> *… one of the challenges that [University 1] has … (is) that there's a bit of a lack of coordination across all the supportive support for students … And I think that is an ongoing challenge and how that support can be more coordinated right across the university. (Arthur, Manager Widening Participation, University 1)*

> *… there's been some rethinking of how decision-making is done at some levels to make it a bit more responsive. And I think that is positive. (Arthur, Manager Widening Participation, University 1)*

Case Study – University 2

Summary

University 2 undertook a number of key shifts including online programming, access and pathways, and student support in response to the COVID pandemic, particularly in regard to attraction and retention of domestic undergraduate students from equity cohorts. The university moved towards online and blended delivery for outreach programs, admissions pathways, online teaching and student support services, and the provision of emergency financial support payments (prioritising currently enrolled students from low SES backgrounds, First Nations students, and international students experiencing financial hardship).

Prior to COVID, the university was preparing to launch an early conditional offer pathway and program of accompanying academic support targeting students from low SES backgrounds who are under-represented in higher education. The early conditional offer program was impacted in delivery only, moving from an experiential, face-to-face program on campus to fully online. The staff members interviewed considered the program to be a success and noted the increased uptake from students in regional and remote areas but noted concerns that these successes, while welcomed, included unintended positive outcomes of the necessary shift in delivery and the number of students engaged in this format. Concerns were also raised from outreach to student support regarding this shift to online programming becoming standard practice due to its cost effectiveness and scalability. These concerns highlighted a perception amongst staff of a loss of opportunities for face-to-face interaction, building a sense of belonging and community in the online environment, and rapport between staff and commencing students.

Interviews with the university's senior leadership suggested thinking was beginning to shift away from ATAR-only pathways at senior levels, and towards a change in perception of students from low SES backgrounds and under-represented students. Early evaluations show promising results, including a high retention rate for students who gained entry to the university through the early conditional offer program. While the program had support for its implementation from senior leadership and faculties at the institution and was at the point of being approved pre-COVID, staff members involved in the program observed they had heard comments from others in the institution that this support could be attributed in part to pressures to increase domestic student enrolments to compensate for the decline in international student numbers. However, this view was not shared by members of the university's senior leadership interviewed, who indicated that the impact of increased Commonwealth Supported Places (CSP) and lower international enrolments "wasn't material" (Matthew, University 2) for the university. A senior manager in Widening Participation further explained, "Increasing the low SES access rate at [University 2] is an institutional goal and it's part of our strategy, the pathway was long overdue." (Amanda, University 2)

The provision of student support was significantly impacted by COVID. In recognition of the financial hardship experienced by students (both domestic and international), $5.4 million was allocated to emergency payments for currently enrolled students in 2020. Interviews with staff members indicated this was a welcome initiative which had a positive impact on students' sense of belonging and regard for the institution; some staff members perceived this as a token gesture that did not go far enough to address the ongoing issues students faced as a result of loss of income, housing issues, lack of access to appropriate study environments, and lack of access to technology.

In addition to emergency funding, student support services swiftly moved to online delivery, including Zoom and phone appointments, live chat functions, and online training for student mentors. Staff responsible for the provision of these services felt positively about increasing accessibility to support – particularly for students who do not live near to the campus and

students with disability – but acknowledged the boost in accessibility was an unintended consequence of the necessary shift to online delivery and expressed doubt that the access needs of students were considered at senior levels in decision-making.

Setting the Scene

University 2 is a Group of Eight (Go8) institution, with more than 59,000 students currently enrolled. Students from low SES backgrounds make up 10.9 percent of this population. Prior to COVID, the university maintained multiple access and admissions pathways and strategies; operating centrally as well as cohort-specific pathways (i.e., First Nations students), faculty-based programs and admissions strategies for equity cohorts. The university's Widening Participation Strategy details a range of access and pre-access programs including: educational outreach; the launch of a new early conditional offer pathway and program targeting schools with the intent to increase the low SES access rate at University 2 and access to tertiary education; improved representation of diverse cohorts; and provision of guidance in the development of an accompanying program of support once students are enrolled. Additionally, an annual plan outlined priorities across the student lifecycle over a 12-month period.

The university's widening participation area leads pre-tertiary outreach, access and steers the design of and prioritisation of other relevant strategic initiatives and programs of support for equity cohorts. Student Support is provided by central teams in the Pro Vice-Chancellor Education (PVCE) portfolio and both areas work closely with admissions and faculty representatives. All Commonwealth funding is managed by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) however the allocation of Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) funding is proposed by a working group. This working group makes recommendations to a steering committee, which includes representatives of faculties, as well as senior leadership from areas including Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, DVC Academic and First Nations portfolios.

University 2 appointed staff to COVID response taskforces to manage the impact of the pandemic and make recommendations for the university, and these responses to COVID were implemented during a time of significant workplace change and restructures across the institution. The financial impact of COVID led to significant job losses; in June 2020, it was announced that approximately 500 full time employment (FTE) roles would be disestablished (through workplace change and voluntary redundancies) as a result of the university's financial position. In addition to workforce changes, the recommendations included a revised faculty and division model, greater flexibility for students and staff, and a commitment to increase online and blended delivery methods.

Action taken

The university implemented three key actions in order to attract and retain domestic undergraduate students, with a focus on equity cohorts – the implementation of an early conditional offer program, the shift to online delivery of programs and support, and the introduction of emergency financial assistance for students impacted by COVID.

Early conditional offer program

The early conditional offer program was delivered entirely online and was accompanied by significant ATAR adjustments for students seeking entry to the university via this pathway. Interviews with senior leadership and staff members at the university indicated that the program was designed prior to COVID, with the intention of its running as a face-to-face program. The program was redesigned as an online model in response to the pandemic, and as a hybrid model for 2022. A staff member in Student Engagement commented:

... the alternative access scheme and [the] program [of targeted equity support] that I've run did emerge during and after COVID, but it wasn't because of COVID. They were probably designed in the time some of them had to be designed with COVID in mind, but our program was always going to run ... regardless of COVID. (Tabitha, University 2)

While it has been acknowledged that the university's adoption of an early conditional offer program was not a direct response to COVID, there is a perception amongst staff that the pandemic accelerated the rollout of the program and is having an impact on shifting institutional thinking around equity students and their ability to succeed at university. A senior manager in Widening Participation noted:

I think there was an underlying assumption that students from equity backgrounds would not succeed in programs that required a high ATAR, and that to reduce the ATAR would lower the prestige of the courses and brand, or erode academic excellence within those programs if included in a pathway ... To have a very open conversation around ATAR performing as a structural barrier to students gaining entry to [University 2] was extremely beneficial, and a level of institutional reflection came to the fore which helped make some significant changes. (Amanda, University 2)

When asked about the institution's readiness to adopt ATAR adjustments for students entering the university through the program, comments by a member of the university's senior leadership team indicated that this was likely to have occurred regardless of COVID:

I think it's clear we would have done it anyway. I was probably the person who needed to be convinced that this was going to work and that the students were going to be able to cope. And the students who didn't get in, who just missed out through conventional means, we're going to accept that this was the right thing to do, and that it was necessary. And imperative that we do it now ... And unless we did something, we weren't going to make a difference and it had nothing to do with COVID… I was increasingly aware of the inequities in society and the fact that universities were becoming the problem, as much as they were the possible solution. But I was moving to that position anyway. And the only way COVID made a difference is it was highlighting inequities across society at that time. (Matthew, University 2)

The program was accompanied by a suite of pre-access programs, delivered online. Staff members responsible for the program's implementation commented on collaboration between schools and other institutions in the redesign of these programs to ensure their relevance and uptake in a climate of increasing and conflicting priorities. A staff member in this area observed there was a tacit understanding of this in working with schools, and the university and other institutions made a conscious effort to consult with partner schools, teachers, and careers advisers:

Yeah, we did consult with schools. So, we consulted with teachers, and it was really important to make sure that any potential sort of barriers and a lot of the platforms, we really wanted to make really accessible for all the students which is really important ... I think a lot of [universities] were very conscious that for so many of the schools and students our sort of work was probably not the highest of the priority list at that time. (John, University 2)

Staff members involved in the program's implementation commented on the evolution of partnerships between institutions and outside of the sector, with a particular focus on how they were supporting students during the pandemic, and "workshopped potential issues and barriers" (John, University 2). A key collaboration between institutions and schools that emerged during COVID is a partnership between three universities and six schools in

western Sydney to deliver a whole-of-cohort outreach program over five years to students in Years 7–9. One senior manager observed that COVID strengthened their partnerships with other universities and led to greater collaborations:

> I think we became critically aware of the heightened needs in some of the schools in which we worked with. It certainly strengthened our relationship with those key schools and our colleagues at [universities]. An intended outcome of the partnership is to share resources, knowledge and expertise in relation to student equity and to collectively improve access to higher education for under-represented students. In the early days of setting up the partnership, the University of Sydney was approached and although initially interested unfortunately decided to withdraw at the last minute. Their inclusion would have extended the outreach to Year 10, now that is being undertaken in partnership with TAFE. (Amanda, University 2)

Online teaching and student support service delivery

The shift to online delivery impacted on teaching, delivery of outreach and admissions activities, and the provision of student support services. Student support initiatives, peer support, and services targeting commencing students and their transition to university were swiftly moved online; a move described by staff members in student support as "necessary" (Nancy, University 2) and with the aim of ensuring that students were "not required to be physically on campus to get support, which wasn't done before COVID" (Tabitha, University 2).

Prior to COVID, the majority of support services were offered face-to-face with limited provisions for online delivery, and staff members spoke positively about students accessing service remotely and the particular benefit for students with disability, mental health conditions, and those living far from campus. A staff member from Student Engagement observed that the university lacked digital literacy and will need to adapt to this environment in the long term to reach new cohorts:

> ... we're not a particularly digitally literate institution. We have not historically been at the forefront of online learning. And there has been an understanding that whilst we are hoping to move back towards where we were sitting before, it won't be the same. And so, we are going to need to offer more flexible and hybrid models of education which has the effect of maybe attracting a different cohort. (Tabitha, University 2)

Another Student Engagement staff member commented that offerings for peer mentoring programs and new student orientation followed suit, swiftly moving to online modes of delivery and expanded to include a new program for student with disability, signalling a move to design programs specifically for equity cohorts.

Emergency financial assistance for students impacted by COVID

A significant intervention by the university targeting equity students impacted by COVID was the release of $5.4 million in emergency grants to students impacted by COVID, including international students experiencing financial hardship. Emergency support was accessed by 10,124 students through this scheme in 2020.

All students from a low SES background received a phone call from a member of staff to inform them of their eligibility to receive a payment, and to determine if any additional support was needed. There were no application procedures for students from low SES backgrounds; the grant was an automatic payment upon completion of a registration form and was not required to be paid back to the university. Additional support grants were made available to other equity cohorts and students from a low SES background who required further financial support, however these were subject to additional eligibility criteria and a

review of the students' individual circumstances. Eligible students were also provided with prepaid vouchers for the purchase of essential items. A senior manager in Student Life commented:

> *During COVID we offered financial hardship funds to students who are identified as low SES, and that was explicitly in response to COVID ... The team did a fantastic job of making sure as many students as possible got access to financial assistance in order to help them through what was a difficult period and particularly students who may already be kind of living quite frugally which is often the case for our equity cohorts ... They don't often have that extra money or any kind of buffer around them financially. And so being able to provide that, I think was something that we did really well last year. (Nancy, University 2)*

Result

Since the implementation of the early conditional offer program in 2020, early evaluations show promising results. Preliminary data indicates a high retention rate for students who gained entry to the university through this pathway, with an attrition rate of less than two percent after the census date from this cohort. The university's low SES access rate rose to 10.9 percent, the greatest increase since 2009. Widening Participation reported a 64 percent increase in the number of students registering for their Winter program in 2021 compared with 2020, engaging 686 students from 173 different schools across NSW, and that these students were significantly more representative of low SES and regional and remote backgrounds compared with the broader undergraduate community. A staff member who worked on the program commented that higher domestic enrolments will positively impact equity students, and has the potential to further progress institutional thinking at senior levels in terms of the value these students bring to the University:

> *... if there's more domestic students coming to university, if we increase that, it is going to be the equity cohorts that benefit from that. And that might play a role in being able to convince the powers that be at the university to let people in that they have historically been hesitant to. (Cathy, University 2)*

While the program seeks to enable better access to university education for equity students, regardless of the institution students choose to attend, staff members noted a perception of a "blurred" (Tabitha, University 2) distinction between widening participation and promoting the university itself over its competitors, and the impact of delivering online programming at a large scale. Another staff member voiced concerns about the competition between institutions for the same pool of high-achieving equity students, and the conflict this can pose where widening participation and outreach is linked to student recruitment activities for specific institutions, as opposed to universities in general.

> *What we do not want to be doing is having universities compete for the same pool of high-achieving disadvantaged students because that doesn't help the overall game of increasing the number of students, for instance, from low socio-economic backgrounds or from regional remote backgrounds or Indigenous students accessing university, all it does is spend precious government money on universities, ruthlessly competing for the same pool of students. (Cathy, University 2)*

Changes related to the shift to online programming are likely to continue post-COVID due to resource efficiency and ease of scalability, including the early conditional offer program, which was redesigned as a fully online program in 2020 and will be delivered as a hybrid program for 2022. Staff members from Student Engagement reported a 50 percent increase in the number of First Year Mentors trained, which they attribute to accessibility of online training and support (Jasmine, University 2). Staff members spoke positively about the

impact of online delivery, and the number of students they were able to engage through this format:

We never were able to engage with as many students. Like I actually think the scope and reach and number of students, we were able to reach because of COVID and because we had to digitize was much higher and I'm not sure whether we even had really considered how beneficial that might be ... And I know that the model of people on the ground going out is being really seriously reconsidered in light of how successful some of those big online programs were because they are more replicable year on year. They are easier to manage large numbers of students and they require fewer human resources. (Tabitha, University 2)

Some concerns were raised regarding this shift and the risk of fully online program delivery becoming standard practice. Staff members' comments suggested there was a fear of the university moving away from in-person delivery altogether. While there is an acknowledgement from staff of the benefits of online delivery for resource efficiency, access and scale, and that university resources should be utilised effectively, one staff member cautioned against this and expressed their concern that the successes of online programming could lead to fewer face-to-face programs in future:

I think that my worry is that by seeing the scale we can operate and its cost effectiveness in going online that many of the face-to-face interactions will no longer be seen as feasible by the leadership ... And I do think that that's to the detriment to the students who could have those face-to-face opportunities ... it's a concern that I think, I would hope that a lot of universities don't just suddenly go to online because it's cheaper and more scalable. (John, University 2)

Comments from staff members on the necessity of a speedy shift to online programming suggested that there was little opportunity for principles of accessibility to be closely considered. Staff recognised the positive outcomes for certain equity cohorts (particularly students with disability and mental health concerns) but also observed that this was a fortunate result of the move, rather than a deliberate one or a key underlying principle in the design for online programs. Staff members in Student Life and Peer Support and Transition noted that as the ongoing impact of the COVID pandemic becomes clearer, they have concerns about creating a sense of belonging and community for students – socially and academically – in an online environment; particularly where opportunities for casual connection and unplanned interactions are limited.

... whilst we provide support and hopefully a sense of connection to the university, I'm still not sure about students connecting with other students like they do in their peer-to-peer space, but those interactions that just come naturally through sitting in class and running into each other at the coffee cart, and I'm just not sure how that's happening and that's still for me a challenge about, how do you create online communities? (Nancy, University 2).

... the large part of [students'] experience and their enjoyment of university comes from their engagement with their academic learning and their peers and their classroom setting. So, they create social networks and we run amazing programs, but like at the end of the day, they're at uni to get an education. And so that educational space is really critical. And so if students are in impersonal large scale online classes that don't actually have best practice for digital communities embedded into them, we're going to have an issue in terms of how we recruit, retain and support equity students. (Tabitha, University 2)

Staff members commented that the student response from those who received an emergency payment was positive, with one senior manager noting that, "feedback from

students was phenomenal in terms of what it meant to them, not just the money, but that the university had considered their personal financial circumstances during COVID and demonstrated that it cared" (Amanda, University 2). International students were notably also eligible for emergency support, and the ways in which these students have been widely impacted by the pandemic has resulted in the beginnings of a shift in perception of this cohort, highlighting them as an emerging cohort with equity-related needs due to the loss of work, isolation from family and community, financial hardship and challenges associated with studying offshore.

Having a strategic commitment to equity was seen as another positively contributing factor in the university's response to COVID. University 2 has a specific social justice remit with leadership in this area embedded in the university's most senior governance structures. One staff member's comment suggested this structure, and the visibility this has created at senior levels for equity, has the potential to play a significant role in the wider institutional response:

> *I think having an explicit division that is responsible for equity and sticks to make it visible is one piece having it embedded in the institutional strategy. And so, when people come back and say, oh, it's not really a priority it's like, actually it is, it's in your document. And it's one of our core ones. So, we're going to have to do something that's more than lip service to this. (Tabitha, University 2)*

Going beyond this "lip service" (Tabitha, University 2) is a necessary next step. Interviews with staff indicated a perceived lack of clear strategic thinking and frontline staff consultation, and that some of the noted successes of the university's COVID response were attributable to unintended positive outcomes. While the advent of access initiatives such as the early conditional offer program and the strategic impetus to increase access to university for equity student cohorts, one staff member's comment highlights a necessity for greater institutional literacy around equity, and understanding of the learning and support needs for these cohorts:

> *... we will be left behind if we do not innovate and think creatively about how we are delivering excellent learning experiences, both in-person and online, and excellent student support and experiences for all students, but particularly equity groups. I don't think the literacy about what the equity cohorts need is there across the institution. And so I think that will be a real challenge for us. (Tabitha, University 2)*

Next Steps

Next steps for University 2 include:

Continuation of emergency support payments in 2021

As New South Wales entered a second lockdown in July 2021, emergency support payments for students were extended. Staff members indicated this intervention is likely to continue in the post-COVID period.

Continuation of the early conditional offer program

University 2's early conditional offer program is ongoing, and a key component of the university's Widening Participation Strategy for 2020–2025. The program will be delivered in a hybrid format.

Further ATAR adjustments outside of the program are not likely to continue. When asked about the future of ATAR adjustments at University 2, a member of the university's senior leadership commented, "It was a very special circumstance in 2021 ... but my expectation is that supply and demand equations will kick back in" (Matthew, University 2).

Provision of online access to support services

The provision of online and remote access to student support services is likely to continue in future due to the increase in students accessing support and training programs, as well as accessibility for students who cannot easily attend campus.

Online/hybrid teaching, learning, and working

The COVID pandemic accelerated the adoption of online teaching and learning at University 2, and mixed mode teaching and programs are likely to remain in place. This also extends to flexible working arrangements.

Case Study – University 3

Summary

The COVID pandemic has transformed Australia's higher education sector. Ensuring that students from backgrounds typically under-represented at university do not miss out because of the increased competition for capped domestic places is a key focus at University 3 which is committed to increasing the diversity of those that complete a degree at the institution.

To attract enrolments from equity cohorts, the university expanded its Schools Recommendation Scheme (SRS) to recognise the considerable disruption many high school students faced because of the COVID pandemic and associated lockdowns.

In an unprecedented move, the university used students' Year 11 grades as the basis for 428 unconditional early offers in 2020–2021. Advocating for change in a large institution, particularly rapid change, is never easy. ATAR cut-offs for university study can be particularly contentious given the sector's reliance on them as a way to measure a student's aptitude for further study and the brand value attached to courses that attract high-ATAR students.

To support equity cohorts in future, University 3 focused on targeted outreach in Southwest Sydney through its new program piloted in 2020 that offers a non-ATAR pathway, assisting high school students to gain the skills they need for future study.

Setting the Scene

University 3 believes that universities have a responsibility to support students from the widest range of backgrounds to access quality education. While education opens doors and expands opportunities for individuals to make positive contributions to society, the diversity of our student community is also one of our strengths. University 3 has a whole of institution student lifecycle Widening Participation Strategy which aims to increase the access and success of students from under-represented backgrounds at university. This strategy is overseen by a dedicated team overseeing the following programs:

- An educational access scheme which allows students with an ATAR of 69 (or 80 for Law) to use personal factors – such as financial hardship, English language difficulties, illness, or other disruptions to their studies – to increase their selection rank. These factors are based on categories determined by the NSW and ACT University Admissions Centre (UAC).
- The Schools Recommendation Scheme (SRS) is based on a student's achievement of an ATAR of 69 (or 80 for Law). It recognises students for skills and achievements beyond their performance in Year 12 and relies in part on a recommendation from a school principal (or careers advisor). It is specifically aimed at students from low SES backgrounds.
- A humanitarian access scheme supports asylum seekers unable to access Commonwealth Supported Places or government loan schemes. The Humanitarian Scholarships are also offered across all University 3 faculties that offer undergraduate degrees.

Part of the challenge of building effective non-ATAR pathways into university – where students not just enrol but stay to complete their studies – has always been to support students to build the confidence and skills needed for university study before they enter a course. University 3 outreach programs developed as part of the Widening Participation Strategy are vital to achieving this. They comprise:

- A two-year program for senior high school students attending partner schools. Beginning at the end of Year 10, it introduces students to the university experience,

with tutoring and additional support to develop skills to succeed at university and beyond. All students who successfully complete the program are offered a place at the university.

- Programs for First Nations high school students in years 10–12, introducing them to undergraduate programs through five short courses held annually. These short courses are held by different faculties, including engineering and IT, and design, architecture and building.
- Regional outreach and coordination of the university's implementation of and reporting on the Australian Government's Indigenous, Rural and Low SES Attainment Fund (IRSLAF).

In addition, an admissions pathway program coordinated by the Indigenous student centre that offers First Nations students an opportunity to demonstrate university potential through life experience, other education and previous work, then supports commencing students with tutoring and bridging courses.

Other alternatives to ATAR entry at University 3 include but are not limited to:

- the Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building's portfolio process
- the Faculty of Science's aptitude test
- the Elite Athletes Program
- the Women in Engineering and IT's bonus points scheme
- Business School cadetships.

Domestic students can also access university by completing preparatory courses through University 3's College.

Action taken

In response to the COVID epidemic, University 3 expanded the SRS to recognise the considerable disruption many students faced in their Year 12 studies due to the 2020 COVID outbreak and subsequent state-wide lockdown.

The evidence requirements for the educational access scheme and the existing Equity Stream of the SRS remained unchanged from 2019 – with those students who could prove financial hardship, English language difficulties, illness, or other disruptions to their studies able to boost their ATAR with adjustment points. However, an additional option for entry – the 2020 Access Stream – was also introduced. Additionally, one interviewee mentioned "that because COVID hardship was assessed under the SRS, 'the equity aspect' was a big part of how decisions were made around these offers" (Dianne, University 3).

To qualify, students generally needed to provide evidence that one or both of their parents had lost work and were on either the JobKeeper or JobSeeker program. An applicant's Year 11 results and their Year 12 ATAR (including any adjustment points related to other disadvantage) were taken into account when considering whether students would be offered a place.

In addition, unconditional offers were also made by University 3 to 428 students based on their Year 11 grades.

> This year, we got around 450 [of the] lowest SES kids in a group of around a thousand kids who came in by that school's recommendation scheme pathway. We increased the numbers of lowest SES kids by broadening some of the eligibility criteria for that pathway. (Ash, University 3)

Recognising the potential for COVID lockdowns to disproportionately affect domestic students with more limited resources. One of the senior leaders commented:

> *[University 3] invested significantly in the success and retention of existing equity cohorts at [University 3] through its Student Support Package. Under the package, domestic students were eligible for: grants of up to $1500 for living and other expenses, interest-free loans of up to $3000 and student housing subsidies of up to $2000. (Stephen, University 3)*

During lockdown, University 3 was also able to extend extra support to low SES high school students in Southwest Sydney considering future study at University 3. A senior leader mentioned, "It really did surprise us how much of an issue [digital access] still was for people. Even the people that did have a laptop didn't necessarily have Wi-Fi on ... it really was a big issue"; also, "There is a digital divide in our education system. It affects capacity, critical thinking skills and access to online learning, and the pandemic has exacerbated it" (Kendell, University 3).

Face-to-face workshops and tutoring were moved online for students participating in the two-year access program for partner schools, and 110 students in the area were provided with laptops by the university (in partnership with Lenova).

Result

The number of students enrolled in the university under the SRS scheme rose more than threefold – from 156 students in 2020 to 526 in 2021.

According to the staff who implemented the changes, the initiative contributed to a significant increase the numbers of low SES students accepted by the university, with several explaining that as the SRS team struggled to implement COVID-related initiatives to meet UAC deadlines, they relied, at least in part, on applications already made through the original equity stream of the program. As this stream of the SRS specifically targets low SES students, the proportion of students who were from these backgrounds accepted into university in 2021 on the basis of hardship caused by COVID is likely to be high.

The shift online during lockdown was raised as a potential factor that may have contributed to this. Several on the SRS team were struck by the number of students – both at university already as well as those enrolled in partner school program – who didn't have laptops or internet connectivity at home. As University 3 moved their school outreach activities online, this may have affected their ability to communicate effectively with this audience. Again, further investigation is needed to determine the complex array of factors that contributed to young people's decision-making about work and study during this period.

The siloed nature of traditional academia is well understood, but these silos also exist amongst support staff, meaning it is hard for staff in one part of a university to understand the challenges and pressures on staff in another. "I think in terms of challenges ... making sure that all of the different arms of the university understood why this was important to do" (Lara, University 3). For this reason, communicating the changes to the ATAR requirements – both externally (to potential students) and internally (to the university executive, support staff and academics) – was one of their biggest challenges.

The longer-term impact of the change to the ATAR requirements for the SRS will not be clear until the results of those admitted under the scheme are known at the end of 2021.

Next Steps

University 3 will rely on information collected about those admitted under the SRS in 2021, particularly in terms of the rate of students who continue study beyond first year when compared to both previous SRS years, to determine if changes to the admissions process should be explored further.

For the time being, the minimum ATAR required for consideration under the SRS and educational access scheme has returned to 69.

Aspects of University 3's COVID response that will continue in 2021–2022 are:

- the consideration of COVID impacts when assessing applications under the SRS
- early offers to students based on Year 11 results.

The results, particularly in terms of how those admitted under the changes are faring in their studies, are obviously not yet in. However, University 3 believes the value of such experiments lies, at least in part, in the contribution they make to a larger conversation – at University 3 and within the higher education sector more widely – about the ATAR's true value when it comes to measuring a student's ability to successfully undertake higher education study.

When creating admissions policies it's easy for universities (and students) to get fixated on the ATAR – how high or low it is, or even if it is used at all by different universities and faculties. But a key focus of University 3's longer-term strategy to increase the diversity of its student intake is to look at the bigger picture and target learners before they reach their final exams rather than after.

> "[Partner school program] is definitely sticking around and everyone's really excited [about] it. ... It's a [new, non-ATAR based] pathway to all courses [at] University 3." (Kendell, University 3)

By supporting students at partner high schools in Southwest Sydney – who might be considering university study but face challenges that have been exacerbated by the unfolding pandemic – University 3 hopes to increase not only the number of low SES enrolling at University 3 but also the numbers of those hopeful first years who successfully graduate and go on to rich and rewarding careers. Importantly, the partner school program is also another avenue for students to apply directly to the university for entry rather than relying on UAC's centralised system.

Case Study – University 4

Summary

COVID was seen as acting as an accelerant leading to the faster implementation and expansion of existing and proposed programs and practices at University 4 that had been designed to attract and retain domestic student enrolments, particularly with respect to equity cohorts. Central to the approach adopted were enhancements to the existing early offer program.

This program was first launched in 2017 to provide students with an early offer into most University 4 courses based on their HSC results, instead of a scaled ATAR. This was done in recognition of the inherent disadvantage that the ATAR presents to many students from equity cohorts. As a result of COVID, the program was reworked with students being made early offers on the basis of their Year 11 or Year 12 results. It should be noted that those applying were also required to successfully complete the Higher School Certificate. The early offer program was very successful with a 97 per cent increase in applications and a 5 per cent increase in offers and will continue in its current form in 2022.

University 4 also focused heavily on implementing and promoting equity specific programs targeting, for example, First Nations and Pasifika communities to incentivise enrolments of prospective and future equity students.

Existing Widening Participation and Engagement programs which had been specifically designed to address the multiple forms of disadvantage experienced by students from equity group backgrounds were expanded and had their offerings diversified to give a greater focus to promoting multiple, alternative higher education entry options and pathways. Data indicate a more than 30 per cent increase in offers made from 2020 and an increase in enrolments. Increases were also seen in University 4 program participants receiving a broader range of offerings than previously from multiple institutions.

Programs were also developed or expanded to support retention of current and commencing students. These included a range of initiatives aimed at checking on students' welfare, provide financial support and boost student wellbeing. A major challenge was the digital disadvantage experienced by many students in terms of access to technology and broadband. This was exacerbated with the move to online learning. It was realised that much more work needs to be done in this area to engage with students proactively and not assume that they all have the same level of access and skill.

Setting the Scene

With respect to admission, the early offer program has operated since 2017 and provides an alternative path with early offers made on the basis of students' HSC results rather than the ATAR. It is seen as central to the university's approach to its students and community. Sam, a member of the senior leadership stated:

> … how we tackled the inherent disadvantage that the ATAR presented [to] a lot of our students in our community, especially from equity groups, first-in-family, low SES, those whose education had been disrupted. So, our thinking has been that we should establish or stand up an alternative to the ATAR. (Sam, University 4)

This, together with other strategies available pre-COVID such as those available to TAFE and VET Students, First Nations students and pathway programs offered through the university's college, offers alternative ways into study at University 4. Whilst these are not necessarily targeted at equity cohorts, with the exception of those for First Nations students, they are taken up by those who have experienced disadvantage.

University 4 also has a long-term commitment to running and developing programs with local schools and community partners to promote successful participation in higher education to anyone who might benefit from it and, in particular, to those who are typically under-represented in current Higher Education participation rates. As a manager working in the Equity and Diversity area commented:

> So much of what we do now literally builds on decades of that kind of diversified Widening Participation and inclusive factors. It's just something that started in the identity of the university, because of who we are and where we came from. (Jessie, University 4)

Nor was this seen as aimed at only attracting students to study at University 4; the objective was seen as broader.

> It's called Widening Participation because it's really around trying to attract students or have students envisage that they can do something after high school in terms of higher education. That's not necessarily about getting students into University 4. It's about getting students into higher education, where that could be any university or it could be tech, for example. Something after school. (Nic, University 4)

To achieve this, the university conducts specific Widening Participation programs for secondary students, primary students, those from First Nations backgrounds, those from Pasifika backgrounds and those from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds. These provide the opportunity to engage with young people and their families in the region and to encourage their participation in post-school education.

Notably, these programs also facilitate the personal, academic and professional development of students participating in them. Retention of students once they are enrolled in the university is supported through counselling, disability and welfare services, peer mentoring programs and targeted support for first years with each academic unit having a First Year Advisor.

Action taken

The university introduced a number of new measures and also strengthened existing programs and partnerships to attract domestic enrolments and retain current students with a focus given to equity cohorts.

Central to the domestic enrolment strategy was a revision of the early offer program to enable early offers to be made on the basis of Year 11 subject results and not just Year 12 results as had been the case previously. Offers of admission were then made on whichever measure was most advantageous to the student. Thus, for example, as explained by a Director in the Operations area:

> [The] scheme looks at their results in particular fields of study, and then maps that to particular course offerings so that they can get an early offer based on performing well in certain disciplines. So, it might be that if you get a band five in business, that you'd get an offer to a business course rather than it being based on the ATAR. (Eman, University 4)

In addition, to assist these students further to complete the HSC "they were given exclusive access to … a personalised tool to help students complete the HSC and explore their career options as well if they enrol(led) here" (Farj, University 4). These initiatives were seen as critical in addressing the disruption to study caused by COVID.

The university also continued to promote its existing equity programs by implementing a more focused approach to increasing First Nations enrolments, making it more explicit in the strategic plan. One key action that flowed from this is targeting an increase in the number of

First Nations researchers employed to develop strategies to better engage with prospective First Nations students.

Retention of students was also a consideration with a number of initiatives being introduced to support current students who were experiencing difficulties as a consequence of the pandemic. For example, upon the transition to online learning, the university's learning and teaching unit offered online training for the equity cohorts on how to use online teaching resources to best effect. This was accompanied by extended hours for "study halls" where the students could access guided assistance.

In addition, the student engagement team set up a Virtual Community where students could share experiences, connect socially online with their peers and engage in virtual events or discussions that met their interests. Some of these events were open to all, others were more targeted such as drop-in sessions for Pasifika students and "campfire chats" for students from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds. The weekly soup kitchens which had previously existed became virtual with the ingredients for the meal delivered to the students who then cooked together online. A senior manager saw the aim behind these programs as "build[ing] that sense of belonging for students" (Nic, University 4).

To ensure that there was a sound understanding of what the students were experiencing, the university conducted pulse surveys which were sent out to all 40,000 students. A senior manager in Equity explained that these were intended to "find out how they were going during the COVID period and asking what we could do to support them better" and added:

> I believe that was a really good thing to do. We got a sense of where our students were at and how they were faring. Every student who put down as a response to that survey that they were feeling overwhelmed or that they'd like contact with somebody, received a reach out. (Nic, University 4)

A student assistance fund was set up to provide tangible support to students who were experiencing financial difficulties in the form of rent assistance, food vouchers and groceries. By mid-July 2021, some 2,100 domestic and international students had received one or multiple grants through the fund with some $2,900,000 expended. Approximately 20 per cent of those accessing this support were domestic students. This funding came from the university itself, university staff giving and philanthropic sources.

Central to these strategies was the extension of the university's student engagement network to work with and act as a conduit to targeted services for both domestic and international students who are at risk either in their studies or in terms of their wellbeing or finances. The early indicators suggest it has made a difference in terms of student retention.

University 4 also took action to strengthen existing collaborations with some 40 external organisations which focus on First Nations, migrant, refugee, asylum seeker and Pasifika communities. More online tutorial groups were also offered via an existing partnership with a large charitable organisation. These relationships assisted the university in better supporting students from equity cohorts.

In terms of attracting future enrolments from equity cohorts, the university transitioned its existing school partnerships/outreach programs to be delivered virtually with all programs transitioning to online delivery in 2020. To ensure engagement opportunities for schools were maintained, and future enrolment incentives for schools and students were enhanced, the Widening Participation teams turned their focus to adapting existing content, which would have ordinarily been provided on campus, to an online platform. Between September and November, program staff developed a range of engaging new content presented through various online delivery modes, including virtual on-campus days, and workshops on topics such as what a university is, study skills, time management, learning styles, stress management, life beyond high school and modules covering the process of applying for scholarships.

Those interviewed also pointed to an emphasis on involving current students in the programs offered with a manager in student engagement stating:

> *Getting current students to participate in all of our online sessions really helped kickstart that engagement and that identity. Our student ambassadors often will come through those equity backgrounds as well. So, there's that relatability so we did a lot more of that. (Abir, University 4)*

The teams also delivered online resources for teachers and created online hubs for all programs to provide students, teachers, and parents with a range of resources linked to the program outcomes. The hubs contain a range of activities to assist with the next steps in a student's educational journey, and access to specific topics related to courses, careers, and study. More than 10,000 primary and secondary students were involved in these programs.

Examples of equity programs that were further promoted include alternative pathways for First Nations students, students from Pasifika backgrounds and high school equivalency programs to attract post-COVID equity cohort enrolments. These initiatives were seen as promoting the worth and commitment of University 4 to prospective students. A manager in Widening Participation explained:

> *I think there was a focus there on showing that University 4 is the university that cares more. That was a concerted advertising campaign, I think, aimed at attracting students in difficult times. This campaign pointed out the range of initiatives and support services that the university has, and showing them that this is an institution that will care and support you through your studies as well, not just get you in the door. (Farj, University 4)*

The strategies employed were therefore seen as long term and extending beyond increased enrolments to increased retention. Finally, the consensus was that these initiatives were not seen as a way of compensating for falling enrolments. Indeed, a senior leader stated:

> *We never said, "Look, these (equity) groups, we really need to make up for the loss of international students." It was never part of the discussion. (Sam, University 4)*

Those interviewed pointed to engagement and support as the key considerations in the actions taken.

Result

University 4 saw a very significant 97 per cent increase in applications under its modified alternative pathway program with a 57 per cent increase in the number of offers made. This translated to some 18,000 offers with 4,000 consequent enrolments and a conversion rate of close to 30 per cent. The number of First Nations students seeking admission through the cohort-specific pathway led to 162 offers and 103 enrolments; a substantial increase from the previous year. Interestingly, reaction to the scheme from schools was mixed; with some welcoming it while others expressed reservations. A Manager for Widening Participation noted:

> *Sometimes [feedback] was provided by teachers, unsolicited. They would just be thankful that the students were being considered and given an option. Some teachers appreciated the fact that it relieved a lot of pressure and stress on some of their students. We did get other feedback, though, from teachers and principals saying that they weren't entirely supportive of early offer programs because of the risk that students take their foot off the accelerator leading into the HSC, and schools can be all about their HSC performance. But, I mean, the thing with [the alternative pathway program] is that they still have to complete the*

> *HSC as well. It's a conditional offer scheme really. They still have to achieve a certain band level to get that offer. (Farj, University 4)*

In addition, there was an increase in the number of offers made to students who were engaged in the secondary school program from 1,617 in 2020 to 2,155 in 2021. The average number of offers that a student received also increased from 2.06 in 2020 to 2.35 in 2021. This is seen as related to the impact of the alternative pathway scheme with offers to enrol being provided to a broader base of eligible students from equity cohorts.

It is also worth noting that the percentage of students from low-SES backgrounds has remained relatively stable over the period 2017 to 2021 at about 30 per cent. The fact that this has remained stable during the pandemic is seen as a positive outcome.

A lesson learnt, from the necessity of moving to online delivery of classes, was the impact of digital disadvantage in the region with respect to access to both hardware and broadband. It was realised that it could not be assumed that everyone has the same level of access when it comes to the digital experience and that more work needs to be done in this area. The importance of further strengthening external partnerships also came to the fore as a means through which the university could better support those from equity cohorts.

A number of those interviewed commented on the ways in which the lessons learned about online delivery during the initial lockdown were acted upon and led to new ways of operating. For example, the Director, Equity stated:

> *So, in support services such as counselling, disability and welfare. We've continued, even though we're back on campus, we've continued with this hybrid model of delivery. So we haven't returned to face-to-face only, which is what it was predominantly prior to COVID even though we had online available, (as we introduced it in 2012). People tended to use the face-to-face, whereas now we're actually far more flexible and agile in terms of meeting students' needs, I believe. (Nic, University 4)*

Furthermore, the experience of offering successful and effective online services led to new initiatives such as a peer-to-peer mental health program. This was explained as:

> *That's a global peer community which allows students to speak 'in language' to somebody else and it's 24/7. We've just received our first results from that and they're looking really quite positive. I think there's a real opportunity there to co-create or do more. (Nic, University 4)*

The changes made as consequence of the pandemic were often, therefore, seen as having long-term benefits for the university and its community.

Next Steps

University 4 will continue to refine its alternative pathway program and to develop additional pathway options that are not reliant on the ATAR as future strategic actions for the university. The program has now been linked to a bespoke platform that is based on insights around how human potential can be assessed. Based on work done at the University of Southampton, the aim is to provide a metric around capacities such as emotional intelligence, resilience, perseverance, and cultural competency. The approach sees students' work and life experiences being viewed as capital that they bring to university rather than a deficit.

A longitudinal study is being undertaken to track students enrolling at University 4 through the alternative pathway program not only in terms of retention, but in terms of academic performance and outcomes. As a manager in Widening Participation indicated:

> *We know for a fact that students that we work with in aspiration building programs and widening participation, once they enrol at university, they're more likely to be retained. Their retention rates are six or seven percent higher than those that don't come through, or the rest of the general population. (Farj, University 4)*

In addition, an analysis of applications under the scheme is being conducted in terms of gender, linguistic background and other equity cohorts such as female students in engineering. These will guide any further changes to the program.

The exigencies that led to many of the strategies employed in 2020, especially around approaches to teaching and learning, are being seen as beneficial in the ways in which they have demonstrated the efficacy of giving students greater choice and flexibility and will be continued.

> *So while initially it was a rapid move to online, now there's, you know, a more strategic direction in terms of how we deliver online and how we, I guess, enhance our normal face-to-face delivery with some of the online methods as well. So, moving to (a new model) where students can have the option that suits them. So they can study on campus, but they can also have options to study online or to join an online class, virtually. (Eman, University 4)*

These changes are seen as enhancing the view of the university as flexible and student centred and, therefore, more attractive to prospective students.

The impact of working with school students from an early age has also been identified as critical:

> *The work that's done to normalise university for these students is critical and demystifying that whole process for them from whenever they start engaging with the university. We've got students in years five and six in primary schools doing some program work with us … (Farj, University 4)*

Linking such work to a more focused targeting of equity cohorts is, thus, seen as fundamental to future approaches to engagement.

Finally, despite the changes to HEPPP, which will significantly reduce the amount of funding coming to the university from that source, University 4 is committed to finding alternative ways of funding its equity programs with a Senior leader confirming:

> *With the changes to HEPPP funding we are now starting to look at the different ways of actually funding our programs. So, there is a commitment, certainly, from the Vice-Chancellor, that the core activities that we've been engaged in over the past decade or so will continue. We'll just find alternative sources of funding for it, because we recognise the value. We recognise the efficacy. We recognise the contribution it makes to the life of [the university] and to the broader community. (Sam, University 4)*

Giving emphasis to engaging students from equity cohorts is seen as nuanced and benefiting both the university in terms of its enrolments as well as building capacity in those students and their communities.

> *[There is] not only sort of the ethical and moral imperative that we have to serve students from non-traditional backgrounds and to ensure their success. But there's also the advocacy that we would see those students mount for us, for the university and moving forward and how they could perhaps be better engaged with the university when they become alumni. And how they can actually feed back into the widening participation program. (Sam, University 4)*

To summarise, those interviewed argued that the underlying principle and the approaches taken in terms of changes to admission policies were not fundamentally about COVID, but rather about addressing the longstanding inequality the ATAR system produces. COVID was seen as providing the immediate platform but not the final impetus for change.

Appendix G: Reference Group Members

NAME	ROLE
Lila Mularczyk	NSW Dept of Education
Craig Petersen	President, NSW Secondary Principals Council
Brian O'Neill	President, SPERA
Lara Rafferty	Secretary, EPHEA
Sarah O'Shea	Director, NCSEHE