

## **Implications of the Proposed Low SES Participation Target for Australian University Enrolments – An ATN Position**

Australian higher education brings significant economic, social and cultural benefits to the Australian community. Higher education is at the core of who we are and what we can become.

The Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN) enrol 19% of the nation's students, 16% of low SES students, 18% of disabled students and 18% of indigenous students. Our retention rates across the ATN of disadvantaged students are above the national average.

With more than 190,000 students studying at an ATN University across the nation, the ATN places a high priority on policy outcomes that will support an increase in higher education participation of people from low socio-economic backgrounds.

The **Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN)** supports that the Federal Government has adopted the recommendations in the Bradley Review of Higher Education to lift university participation rates of those from low socio-economic backgrounds to at least 20 per cent by 2020.

The ATN's already-established commitment to such access and equity is well recognised by Governments and within the communities in which each of our five members operate.

Increasing the participation rate in higher education of people from low SES backgrounds has long been an ATN ambition which also complements the very high proportion of first generation students in our institutions.

The Federal Government policy for greater equity is therefore applauded by the ATN.

However, notwithstanding the ATN's strong access and equity ethos, and our equally strong commitment to the Federal Government's stated policy direction, we recognise that the successful implementation of such a policy is complex.

The attached ATN- commissioned report from the John Curtin Institute of Public Policy will assist to address these complexities and we would hope that the quantitative aspects can guide the development of scenarios that institutions might employ to ensure the greatest impact in meeting their targets for low SES participation.

Four scenarios have been presented within the report. These have been considered by the ATN Vice Chancellors. On balance they decided to recommend to Government that recommendation three, as outlined in the report, inform target setting:

**' a State-weighted target, whereby each State and Territory is assigned a percentage increase target which sums to a national total of 20 per cent low SES enrolment by 2020. The State targets are to be weighted against the 20 per cent national target, on the basis of the percentage of State population living in the bottom 25 per cent of the Australian population (the low SES postcodes) compared with the national average (25 per cent).'**

Important Note: As alluded to above, this pathway has been decided upon by the ATN, understanding that the current methodology of using postcodes to identify low SES students is under review by the Federal Government. The ATN does not consider that a change to, or refinement of, the current methodology - which the ATN agrees is a methodology in need of review - would alter the ATN's decision that a State weighted target offers the most opportunity for policy success.

A State weighted target is the ATN's policy direction of choice for the following reasons:

- Matching a university's low SES participation rate to the share of a State's low SES population is considered by the ATN to be the 'fairest' method of apportioning effort by the higher education sector. In saying this, the ATN recognises that gaining the required number of low SES students does not start with university enrolment but with what occurs earlier within the school system and the ease with which a State target can be achieved will also depend upon the preparedness of school leavers and year 12 completion rates .As well, differences in the primary catchment areas between institutions in the same State (e.g. urban or rural) will need to be taken into account.

- Using a State-weighted approach does not rely on the decisions of individual universities. It encompasses State characteristics, it suggests a cooperative rather than a competitive approach from universities and it implies a greater likelihood of meeting targets if universities and the Federal Government work closely with State Governments.
- To reach the new target participation rate of 20 per cent by 2020, Australia's universities will have to increase their enrolments of low SES students to 139,200 by 2020 – an increase of 52,000 students over 2008 levels.
- To achieve this increase, access rates will need to be almost double the current rates.
- More than 90 per cent of Australia's domestic undergraduate students attend university within their own State. The demographic characteristics of a university's primary catchment area *must* therefore be taken into account. In other words States with the highest percentage of low SES population should be expected to have a proportionately higher share of low SES students

The ATN will engage further with the Government on this important agenda. In doing so we recognise that there is a plethora of issues that require further analysis.

These include:

- The funding model as outlined in the draft HEPP guidelines
- A better understanding of where the increased number of low SES students will come from and how universities stimulate demand and adjust or manage their admissions practices.
- An outreach plan in cooperation with the State school systems that recognises the encouragement and support of low SES students into higher education must be addressed within schools and at middle school stage, not in the final years of senior school as articulated in the draft HEPP guidelines.

- How to address urban/rural issues and how to take into account the tyranny of distance within States such as Queensland and WA when target setting.
- The Government is rightly rewarding universities that increase low SES participation rates but it will be important to review this periodically based on substantiated additional expenditure.

The ATN's aim is to help secure and enhance Australia's academic reputation and contribute to its social and economic wealth while championing the principles of access and equity. We are committed to working proactively in partnership with governments and the community to deliver results for the long term.