

23/06/2017

Student Inclusion – Indigenous and Equity Team

Department of Education and Training

GPO Box 9880

Canberra ACT 2601

Dear Indigenous and Equity Team,

The Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN) would like to thank you for allowing us the opportunity to comment on the ‘Possible key elements of Higher Education and Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) Guidelines’

The ATN is a national collaborative group of five major universities including Queensland University of Technology, University of Technology Sydney, RMIT University, University of South Australia and Curtin University. ATN Universities are all young, innovative, and have genuine linkages to industry as an inherent part of both our teaching and research. Students are at the core of everything we do.

The ATN would like to note that individual ATN universities may submit their own responses to the proposed guidelines, especially in relation to university specific programs that have been run over several years.

The principles of equity and access are at the core of the ATN universities’ missions and institutional DNA. Collectively as universities, we co-invest millions of institutional funds into support programs to ensure that traditionally under-represented groups in higher education (e.g. students from low SES, regional, first in family backgrounds, students with disabilities and Indigenous students) have every opportunity to attend university, and are adequately supported during their studies. Completion of higher education leads to greater employment outcomes and inspires others in these communities to pursue further studies, potentially breaking a cycle of disadvantage.

Given the ATN’s strong focus on equitable outcomes and longstanding advocacy in this area, the ATN commends the decision to enshrine HEPPP in legislation, thereby protecting support for disadvantaged students.

It is vitally important that universities remain accessible to all Australians and the legislating of HEPPP ensures that universities can provide Australia’s most disadvantaged with additional and much needed support as they pursue higher education studies. The legislating of HEPPP also provides much needed funding certainty to equity practitioners to develop and implement programs to improve the success and attrition rates of disadvantaged students at

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university. This funding certainty will enable universities to plan long term investments that will build aspiration in underrepresented communities.

The decision to enact a per student loading (indexed) for HEPPP students is positive, providing funding certainty that will assist universities to adequately plan programs to improve retention and success rates for vulnerable students. The ATN is proud of the projects that have been funded as part of HEPPP. The ATN universities are also proud of the excellent equity programs that our universities fund from their operational expenditures.

The ATN are largely supportive of the proposed guidelines for HEPPP. Noting in particular the streamlined approach taken with the guidelines. Despite the positive aspect of legislating HEPPP, the ATN have concerns in relation to how the current guidelines are written.

Namely, there is a logical inconsistency in the guidelines. Despite the stated intentions and purpose of the program, the guidelines neglect to address a key element of the program: outreach. The extract below, from the proposed guidelines describes the purpose of HEPPP.

*The purpose of the Program is to promote equality of opportunity in higher education by improving:*

*(a) access to \*undergraduate courses for persons \*from a low socioeconomic status background; and*

*(b) the extent to which persons from a low socioeconomic status background participate, remain and succeed in higher education, and obtain \*higher education awards.*

This extract has not changed from the previous guidelines. The purpose clearly identifies the promotion of access to higher education. Access programs funded under HEPPP involve partnership and outreach programs.

The changes to the guidelines for outreach are of concern. Most notably, the current clauses outlining what partnership programs are, and more importantly what these programs are not have been removed from the proposed guidelines. Current clauses 1.70 and 1.80 have been crucial in ensuring that outreach does not become just another version of competitive recruitment. These clauses have meant that universities are not simply selecting a few individuals to study, rather universities are stimulating community interest in undertaking higher education.

The guidelines currently describe outreach as being targeted at communities not individuals; focussed on the long-term building of aspiration, awareness and achievement. Retaining and enforcing these clauses is crucial if partnership and outreach programs, as distinct from marketing/recruitment programs, are to continuing providing opportunities for higher education to the most disadvantaged Australians.

Additionally, the proposed guidelines state that a university's Access and Participation Plan should outline the minimum level of investment and activities planned to raise aspiration of higher education in low-SES student, there is no requirement for a university to have a minimum spend on outreach either as a percentage of HEPPP funds received or a fixed dollar

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amount. The ACIL Allen Consulting Evaluation of HEPPP found that approximately forty per cent of HEPPP projects and just over forty per cent of HEPPP project expenditure occurred in outreach to schools and communities<sup>1</sup>. Raising aspirations and stimulating demand for higher education requires a national focus. Outreach programs impact upon the country, raising aspirations for all participants to attend university, not just the aspiration of a select few to study at a particular institution. The risk is that some universities may spend as little as possible in outreach, resulting in diminishing returns for Australia's most disadvantaged. By implementing a minimum fixed percentage, all universities would contribute to raising aspirations, resulting in a more robust, equitable national outreach approach.

Finally, while the proposed HEPPP Evaluation Framework is welcomed, the requirements on institutional reporting appear to be almost non-existent. The proposed guidelines state that:

*the provider must report to the Department in accordance with any reporting requirements set out in the evaluation framework for the HEPPP.*

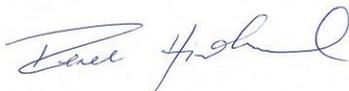
With the framework being developed under a 2017 National Priorities Pool grant, the reduction of reporting requirements has the potential for HEPPP to be even less focussed than it has been in the past, especially while the framework is being developed, and evaluated for fitness of purpose. One of ACIL Allen Consulting's key findings was the difficulty to accurately obtain consistent, complete and comprehensive data and that

*"there is often not specific targeting of HEPPP Participation projects to low SES students"<sup>2</sup>.*

Maintaining existing reporting requirements, either in their current or streamlined form until the proposed evaluation framework is in place and has proved effective in steering intended performance and outcomes will ensure that HEPPP funding remains transparent and accountable.

Please do not hesitate to contact the ATN Directorate on (02) 5105 6740 or via e-mail at [renee.hindmarsh@atn.edu.au](mailto:renee.hindmarsh@atn.edu.au) to discuss any elements of the submission further.

Yours sincerely,



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<sup>1</sup> ACIL Allen Consulting 2017, Evaluation Of The Higher Education Participation And Partnerships Program, Melbourne

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.