

HEPPP Evaluation  
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Dear HEPPP Evaluation Team,

The Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) Evaluation.

The principles of equity and access are at the core of the ATN universities' mission 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 undertake 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 poverty.

As signalled under section 238-10 of the *Higher Education Support Act 2003*, Other Grants Guidelines (Education) 2012, HEPPP is a critical support program which aims to promote equality of opportunity in higher education. HEPPP allows institutions to concentrate efforts to undertake activities that deliver long-term, *sustainable* outcomes of significant scale. Ongoing support for the HEPPP program is essential to ensure that we are able to capitalise, consolidate and build on the program outcomes thus far. Research suggests that equity and access strategies are most effective when delivered in a consistent and sustained way within a coherent framework.<sup>1</sup>

It is noted that many of the most disadvantaged groups at the national level still require significant support to achieve participation and completion targets in the demand-driven system. This warrants more targeted support for this cohort, not less, both in terms of outreach (recruitment, aspiration) and complementary support to ensure that students are successful in their studies (i.e. retention, engagement). Further, the HEPPP scheme, with its emphasis on outreach for recruitment, and a wide range of supports for retention, can only operate at full value in the context of a robust income support scheme.

### Key Points

- The most effective forms of outreach are those which are scaffolded over time starting in the identity-formation years (pre-secondary); which broaden horizons and demystify jobs, careers and study pathways; and which provide practical and navigational assistance at the key decision points.

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<sup>1</sup> Gale, T. and Parker, S. (2013) *Widening Participation in Australian Higher Education*. Bristol, UK: HEFCE and OFFA. [http://www.ncsehe.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/2013\\_WPeffectivenessAus.pdf](http://www.ncsehe.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/2013_WPeffectivenessAus.pdf)

- International precedent suggests that equity and participation initiatives require long lead times for a clear and sustainable impact to be made. This prompts the need for sustained and long-term funding going forward.
- Cuts to the Higher Education Participation Programme (HEPPP) should be reversed, recognising the importance of supporting students from disadvantaged cohorts to complete their higher education degrees, in addition to the benefit of building aspiration through schools.
- Many universities were already undertaking outreach and support activities for low-SES students prior to HEPPP being established. However, HEPPP has helped to concentrate our activities, scale-up already existing initiatives at the institutional level, and undertake more coherent and ambitious projects.
- Many equity and access programs have since been integrated into university strategies on the back of HEPPP funding, with universities investing significant local funds to maintain and capitalise on participation gains. Ongoing support from HEPPP is required to maintain the sustainability of these programs.
- It should be noted that it may be too early to properly assess the success of HEPPP. The experience with the equivalent program in the UK was that it may take up to 10 years for equity initiatives to have a clear impact on participation and access

**1. To what extent is the HEPPP improving access to undergraduate courses for people from low SES backgrounds and improving their retention and completion rates? What HEPPP activities have been most effective in achieving these objectives?**

Based on the latest evidence of progress, using the parity ratios for participation and retention, the focus of effort in outreach/recruitment should be on low-SES and Indigenous cohorts. Students from a low-SES background represent 25 per cent of the population share, but only account for approximately 16 per cent of enrolments. In terms of retention, students from low-SES backgrounds who do attend university have a good retention ratio, meaning that students from this group are relatively close to parity when it comes to retention rates when compared to other students not from the equity group. (See Tables 1 and 2)

**Table 1. Higher education participation by equity group – 2014**

Equity group	Population share	Higher education enrolments	Higher education enrolment as ratio of population share
Students from a low-SES background	25.0%	15.7%	0.63
Persons with disability	8.3%	5.5%	0.66
Indigenous Australians	2.7%	1.5%	0.56
Regional and remote (ASGS)	25.8%	20.6%	0.80
Non-English speaking background	5.4%	3.9%	0.72

Source: Department of Education and Training (Table A and B universities only).

**Table 2. Retention of students from equity groups – 2013**

Equity group	National higher education retention ratios by equity group*
Students from a low-SES background	0.97
Persons with disability	0.96
Indigenous Australians	0.89
Regional (ASGS)	0.96
Remote (ASGS)	0.92
Non-English speaking background	1.04

Source: Department of Education and Training: Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2014 Student Data.

Appendix 5.5: Equity - Retention Ratios for Table A and B universities).

\* The reference value for the retention ratio is the retention rate for the equity group divided by the retention rate for students not in the equity group. A retention ratio of 1.0 indicates that the students in the equity group have the same retention rate as the other students

All ATN universities have used HEPPP funding for both outreach and support initiatives. In terms of ATN enrolments, the low-SES share is rising in line with the national trend, with retention and completion rates of low SES, regional and Indigenous students at ATN universities higher than the national average.<sup>2</sup> Many of the institutional strategies supported by HEPPP which have been instrumental in contributing to this trend will be highlighted in response to the questions below.

<sup>2</sup> Sourced from equity section of Institutional Performance Portfolio (IPP) reports 2014

**2. To what extent have HEPPP outreach activities with schools, state/territory governments, VET providers, community groups and other stakeholders improved low SES individuals' access to and participation and success in higher education? What types of outreach activities have been most effective?**

Outreach programs are essential for building aspiration in traditionally underrepresented groups, by increasing awareness and understanding of higher education as a viable and attainable goal. The most effective forms of outreach are those which are scaffolded over time starting in the identity-formation years (pre-secondary); which broaden horizons and demystify jobs, careers and study pathways; and which provide practical and navigational assistance at the key decision points. In addition, two effective characteristics of these outreach activities have been the use of tertiary students from the same backgrounds as ambassadors; and taking an intentional non-deficit approach to the cohort groups.

Examples of successful outreach activities across ATN universities include:

- RMIT's "I Belong" Program, targeting low SES secondary school students in Years 9 – 12. RMIT were allocated funding from HEPPP to support the "I Belong" program, which aims to build aspiration among students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The outreach program provides tertiary immersion and preparation programs for low SES middle-secondary students from schools and groups that are underrepresented in higher education.

Since 2012, 13,5000 students have participated in a wide range of "I Belong" programs including workshops, presentations from industry experts, and Tertiary Experience Days.

A recent evaluation of *I Belong* conducted by the Director of the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Professor Sue Trinidad, confirmed that the programs are of excellent quality and effectively respond to the issues experienced by low SES, regional and Indigenous students that contribute to their low rates of participation in higher education.

- The UTS U@Uni Schools Outreach program  
The UTS U@Uni Schools Outreach program is a key component of [the UTS Widening Participation Strategy](#) which provides a whole-of-university approach to increase the number of students from under-represented communities successfully completing university study.

The program includes offering an integrated suite of programs for high school students that aims to:

- build aspiration for tertiary study
- support academic attainment
- widen participation in higher education

Outreach activities include U@Uni Summer School program for Year 11 students from U@Uni partner schools to participate in two week intensive workshops in areas such as media production, business, engineering and IT.

Such programs have contributed to UTS increasing its number of commencing domestic undergraduate students with a low SES background by 40 per cent over the 2011-2015 period, and nearly doubling commencements of Indigenous students from 85 in 2011 to 145 in 2015.

- Queensland Widening Participation Consortium

The approach of the Queensland Consortium (8 public universities including QUT) has brought large-scale partnership-based benefits to low-SES and Indigenous schools and communities across Queensland.<sup>3</sup> Without HEPPP, the scale and reach of this would not have been possible.

Higher education enrolment data of low SES and Indigenous students in Queensland is slowly improving as a result, rising from 19.6 per cent in 2010 to 20.3 per cent in 2014, however the true effectiveness of the collaboration is underscored in the Queensland Widening Participation Consortium Case Studies 2011-2015 report providing key evidence detailing the demonstrable impact of these activities.<sup>4</sup>

The above outreach programs are effective because they target early intervention and are built on *long term* relationships between universities and schools. In a review of the HEFCE Student Opportunity (SO) allocation (UK's equivalent national strategy of HEPPP), it is suggested that it may take up to 10 years for equity initiatives to have a clear impact on participation and access.<sup>5</sup>

### **3. How have projects funded under the National Priorities Pool component of the HEPPP supported more effective implementation of the HEPPP nationally and at an institutional level?**

The National Priorities Pool component of the HEPPP is an effective way of concentrating funding in areas of special need, and helping universities to build sustainability into programs to achieve scale and long-term impact.

Prior to the current NPP approach, there were at least two rounds of partnership competitive funding which intentionally gave preference to large-scale collaborations rather than single-university projects. The ATN is of the view that such dedicated incentivisation of 'joined-up' outreach activities is a desirable feature of any future NPP rounds.

### **4. To what extent have HEPPP activities been incorporated into universities' standard approaches and standard activities?**

As mentioned above, the HEPPP funded project U@Uni Schools forms a key platform of the UTS Widening Participation Strategy. The UTS Social Justice Report 2015 highlights how HEPPP funded

<sup>3</sup> National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (2014) Partnerships in Higher Education, <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/NCSEHE-Partnership-Publication-Web.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> The Queensland Widening Participation Consortium (2015) The Queensland Widening Participation Consortium: Case Studies 2011-2015, [https://cms.qut.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0019/541252/widening-participation-case-studies.pdf](https://cms.qut.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/541252/widening-participation-case-studies.pdf)

<sup>5</sup>CFE Research (2015) Student Opportunity outcomes framework research: in-depth study, Report to HEFCE by CFE Research, [http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Pubs/Independentresearch/2015/Student.opportunity.outcomes,in-depth,study/HEFCE2015\\_sodepth.pdf](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Pubs/Independentresearch/2015/Student.opportunity.outcomes,in-depth,study/HEFCE2015_sodepth.pdf)

programs are just one of many university-wide initiatives that are being leveraged to support whole-of-university equity missions.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, QUT's widening participation activities include learning-based partnerships with schools; activities to promote adult entry; Indigenous-specific activities; community-based partnerships; retention and support activities. Thanks to a State-wide agreement, QUT focuses its school effort in one region – the Moreton Bay outer-urban, inner-regional area where it works in partnership with 36 low-SES primary and secondary schools. The students participate in a scaffolded program of on-campus experience days and residential camps along with in-school discipline-based, curriculum connected activities. All activities are led by QUT student ambassadors from similar backgrounds and have a strong career development focus. Community-based activities involving student and parental engagement and teacher professional development opportunities complement the student-focused initiatives.

QUT has systematically evaluated its overall program activities and also its individual sub-components. QTAC applications data indicates that interest in higher education is being stimulated. Higher education applications from Year 12 completers from QUT target schools increased by 18.5 per cent between 2010/2011 and 2013/2014; this compares with a 10 per cent increase across all Queensland schools. This increase is partially attributable to an increasing number of year 12 completers at these schools over the time period. However, when this growth is taken into consideration, an increase is still evident. When applications are calculated as a proportion of Year 12 completers, applications increased by 4.9 per cent this compares with a 2.2 per cent increase for all Queensland schools. Prior to the HEPPP funding period the application rate in low-SES Queensland schools had been declining.

All ATN universities were already undertaking outreach and support of low-SES prior to the advent of HEPPP, but all have scaled up their activities and undertaken more coherent and ambitious programs since HEPPP became available. Many universities have continued to leverage local and HEPPP funds to support equity missions, for example:

- UTS contribute through continuing position salaries that support the delivery of their Widening Participation programs alongside specific HEPPP funded contracts. In relation to the Summer School, facilities are provided for the delivery of the summer school without charge. In terms of Scholarship, UTS and QUT both include a substantial financial support to the retention and success of students from LSES backgrounds through UTS Diversity Access Scholarships.
- HEPPP funding has helped UniSA establish and scale-up outreach activities of UniSA College, which has become a key platform of the university's Participation Strategy. UniSA College was founded in 2011 to provide pathway programs targeted at students with low prior educational attainment, especially low-SES students, through Foundation and Diploma programs. HEPPP funding has helped to sustain the College's growth and improve outreach programs to engage with secondary school students and community groups. Through UniSA College, enrolments have increased from a little over 500 students in 2011 to approximately 1,200 enrolments in 2014. 225 students completed their Foundation Studies in 2015, up by 20 completions from 2014. Of the 225 Foundation Studies completions, 87 per cent received

<sup>6</sup> UTS Social Justice Report (2015),  
[https://www.uts.edu.au/sites/default/files/article/downloads/UTS%20Social%20Justice%20Report%202015\\_1.pdf](https://www.uts.edu.au/sites/default/files/article/downloads/UTS%20Social%20Justice%20Report%202015_1.pdf)

offers into an undergraduate program at UniSA. Where undergraduate programs are not offered by UniSA, the students have elected to take up offers at other universities.

##### **5. To what extent are HEPPP activities providing individual, societal and economic benefits? What flow-on effects have there been to the community and the economy?**

There are many individual, societal and economic benefits flowing out of HEPPP supported programs. For example, UTS participated in the Bridges to Higher Education Initiative, a partnership of five major universities (University of Western Sydney, University of Sydney, Macquarie University, Australian Catholic University, and University of Technology Sydney), designed to dramatically improve the participation rate of students from areas under-represented in higher education. An independent audit of the \$21.2 million program by KPMG found that every dollar invested over the duration of the two-year initiative (2012 to 2014) generated a \$6.50 return to lower socio-economic communities, including those in Greater Western Sydney, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and remote and rural areas. The economic cost benefit analysis concluded that the total return to these areas was found to be approximately \$54 million dollars.

Similarly, UniSA College has had a significant effect on community groups and schools in the northern Adelaide regions (historically one of the most socio-economically disadvantaged regions in Australia). Its UniSA Connect program helps to develop and inspire STEM skills, promote career awareness and strengthen capabilities of teachers via professional development activities. Over 4,100 student interactions and 450 teacher interactions at metropolitan and regional secondary schools have been achieved through the outreach program.

In terms of benefits to the individual that are less quantifiable, research shows that Indigenous pathway and enabling programs have broader effects than what higher education sector might traditionally deem as 'success' factors e.g. reaffirming personal/cultural identity and building confidence.<sup>7</sup>

Another example is the Curtin Row AHEAD program which uses the sport of rowing as a means for raising aspirations, awareness and capabilities of Aboriginal students to successfully partake in higher education. It has aimed to establish an ongoing rowing sport program for Aboriginal students to assist the development of personal well-being, as well as raise awareness and build capacities for higher education.

The initiative offers students from the Clontarf Aboriginal College (a boarding school which offers placements for Aboriginal students from metropolitan Perth and regional Australia) opportunities to engage in the sport of rowing. The students participate in rowing training sessions over a twelve-week period with the aim of competing in state regattas.

In addition to rowing training, students also attend weekly academic development sessions. Lessons vary in focus; some explore elements of health, physical and emotional wellbeing, and the role of exercise and nutrition. Other lessons reinforce the action-learning that happens during the rowing sessions through journaling assignments that develop literacy skills further. Related to rowing activities, a number of core lessons are designed to explore the purpose of a uniform as a physical representation of identity. Students research concepts of uniforms before designing their own zootie

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<sup>7</sup> Fredericks, B., Kinnear, S., Daniels, C., Croft Warcon, P. and Mann, J. (2015.) Path+ Ways: Towards best practice bridging and Indigenous participation through regional dual-sector universities. Report submitted to the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE), Curtin University: Perth

(an outfit that rowers wear) and are encouraged to produce a written account explaining their design. The students have proudly worn a chosen design that they have compiled when participating in events and competitions.

#### **Outcomes for students include:**

- Learn to row as individuals and in teams;
- Awareness of the wider health and social benefits of rowing as a sport;
- Learn team-building skills through communication, cooperation and trust;
- Foster investigative, communicative and collaborative skills to participate in school work and sports;
- Improvements in attitudes towards school and learning;
- Motivation to be resilient in achieving set goals;
- Develop self-awareness and the ability to plan potential career pathways;
- Awareness of the tertiary environment, building confidence to engage with tertiary facilities and community members.

The initial pilot project which concluded in August 2014 saw the creation of a rowing program at Clontarf Aboriginal College. Rowing is now a part of the Junior Physical Education curriculum at the college and is offered to students from Years 7 to 9.

#### **Achievements**

- On 26 July 2014, sixteen Clontarf Aboriginal College students fulfilled a significant milestone by forming the first Indigenous rowing squad to take part in a state regatta.
- Row AHEAD is now Western Australian Certificate of Education (WACE) accredited. This enables students to be appropriately recognised for the resilience they demonstrate in completing the program.
- 112 students have taken part in the program with since 2014.
- 100% of students feel more comfortable when at a university as a result of taking part in activities in the program
- 100% of participants are now considering university to be an option one day.

#### **Feedback**

“It’s made me think that maybe I can start to do more things [than] I thought I could do before, for instance rowing. If someone had told me I would’ve been rowing, I definitely wouldn’t have believed them at the time. Being able to row in front of a big crowd [was] a big step.” Participant, 2014

#### **6. Has the need that the HEPPP addresses changed over time? Do the reasons for the creation of the HEPPP still exist to the same extent?**

The initial program objective of HEPPP was to support higher education institutions to implement strategies and activities to expand access for people from low SES backgrounds and improve their retention and completion rates, with the specific goal of helping Government meet the target of 20 per cent of domestic undergraduate students coming from low SES backgrounds by 2020. While the target is an effective way to focus efforts, the ATN encourages the HEPPP evaluation team to look beyond achieving this arbitrary target and consider the intersectionality between the HEPPP scheme and other important policy frameworks such as the Indigenous Support Program, the Higher Education Disability Support Program, and direct income support schemes (e.g. Centrelink) to ensure stable and ongoing support to promote and maintain equity gains in higher education.

The main problems HEPPP addresses in the access area, are the effects of poverty, racism and unequal schooling on higher education access. These structural issues are society-wide and persistent. HEPPP has to adapt to industry-specific issues such as the existence or not of Gonski funding for schools, and the affordability or not of public VET. Overall the fundamental reasons for HEPPP's existence are still with us, but the emphasis within the program will change from time to time especially in the outreach area, for which HEPPP is the sole source of funds.

### **7. Is the structure of the HEPPP effective and efficient for achieving its objectives?**

Positive aspects of the current HEPPP structure are:

- Guidelines which are clear and provided guidance on allowable activities, and give strong support to collaboration in the outreach space;
- Guidelines which essentially allow each university to choose the proportion of outreach and support activities to suit their circumstances;
- Funding levels which have allowed HEIs and consortia to scale up significantly;
- Funding allocative processes which ensure every university must play their part;
- Competitive rounds of outreach (partnership) funding which have incentivised large-scale consortia. (For example, in the Queensland Consortium case, the group divided up the grant so that universities with higher costs of provisions for outreach activities were allocated a greater share of funding).

Aspects which could be improved include:

- More activity from the relevant Government department on the national centre to analyse HEPPP reports and provide feedback, ideas and suggestions; and to bring HEIs together on specific aspects of the national work such as evaluation;
- Changing the words of the guidelines to legitimise the current situation where low-SES cohorts of many different demographics (e.g. rural, refugees etc.) are being serviced, and to indicate that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are explicitly included;
- Further consideration to bring back incentive outreach funding dedicated to large-scale consortia involving multiple universities;
- Require all universities to develop and implement a focused program of work over 3-5 years, so universities invest in a shared mission.

### **What changes to the HEPPP could further assist students from disadvantaged backgrounds to access, participate in, and succeed at higher education?**

As mentioned in the ATN's response to the *Driving innovation, fairness and excellence in Australian education* review, the HEPPP program, supported by a robust income support system, is well-placed to pursue further targeted progress nationally. These two distinct dimensions of public policy are outlined in further detail below and are crucial to any package of higher education reform.

HEPPP provides funds to assist universities to stimulate demand and to improve retention for low-SES cohorts, and has proven to be effective to date. The Centrelink-administered income support system (which includes Commonwealth Scholarships) is, with one exception, fit-for-purpose – to assist low-income students (wherever they live or choose to study) deal with the costs of living and studying.

The ATN believes that existing Centrelink-administered income support measures (with the exception of the Start-up Scholarship) are structurally sound in that they are:

- Means-tested so that benefits are targeted at low-income students consistently across the nation regardless of where they live or study;
- Commonwealth-funded;
- In the form of grants, not loans;
- Have additional targeted elements for specific circumstances e.g. rent assistance, the Pensioner Education Supplement, Relocation Scholarships, and the Start-up Scholarship (which was recently converted from a grant to a loan).

Many universities have created their own equity scholarship schemes to provide additional assistance for students, and these local scholarships act as a welcome top-up to the main forms of income support. The research of impact indicates that retention is improved for recipients of financial support, where that support is tailored to local need.<sup>8</sup>

The ATN believes that Commonwealth Scholarships, which were re-introduced by Minister Nelson in the Howard Government in 2005 were a useful addition to income support as they provided funds in a lump sum at the start of semester (when student costs are high) rather than through fortnightly payments. These Commonwealth Scholarships have continued since that time and are now called Start-up and Relocation (administered by Centrelink) and Indigenous Scholarships (administered by universities).

The ATN would encourage the Commonwealth to restore the Start-up Scholarship to a grant, not a loan; to retain the Relocation Scholarship, Indigenous Scholarships and other targeted benefits; and to encourage universities to establish their own equity scholarship schemes by means of local budgets and philanthropic effort.

The HEPPP programme, with its emphasis on outreach for recruitment, and a wide range of supports for retention, can only operate at full value in the context of a robust income support scheme.

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<sup>8</sup> Zacharias, N., Kelly, M., Cairnduff, A., Cherednichenko, B., Ryan, J., George, K., Mandre-Jackson, S., Gasparini, L. & Sun, D. (2016) Moving Beyond 'Acts of Faith': Effective Scholarships for Equity Students. Report submitted to the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE), Curtin University: Perth. <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/moving-beyond-acts-of-faith-effective-scholarships-for-equity-students/>