Australian Universities Accord Interim Report:
Feedback from Queensland University of Technology's Widening Participation Team

QUT's Widening Participation Team endorses the following aspects of the Interim Report (with some caveats)

- Placing First Nations at the heart of higher education - through a self-determined approach to funding and policy, enshrining First Nations knowledge systems and practices, and measures to drive positive outcomes for First Nations students.
- Developing a student-centred, needs-based learning and teaching funding model which takes student characteristics into account so scaffolded support can be provided as appropriate, noting that this funding model needs to take account of cumulative disadvantage.
- Moving towards an aligned tertiary system with greater integration between Higher Education and VET, noting that new types of qualifications may need to be developed. Ideally, this aligned system would:
    - View tertiary education holistically and value VET and higher education equally
    - Provide national consistency regarding admission practices and RPL.
- Providing greater access to preparatory/enabling programs.
- Ensuring higher education is affordable by reviewing student contributions, loan repayments, and income support.
- Providing financial support for students undertaking WIL placements.
- Creating additional Regional University Centres (RUC's) and establishing Tertiary Study Hubs in outer urban locations, noting the success of these hubs is their community-led nature, which may not translate to the establishment of university campuses.
- Aligning efforts to achieve equity group parity across early childhood, primary and secondary education.
- Providing more pre-access funding to increase underrepresented groups' participation, noting that, as part of this, adequate funding is required for institutional consortia to engage in collaborative activity.
- Broadening outreach activities to put greater emphasis on non-school leavers. This could potentially be achieved by quarantining a certain proportion of pre-access funding for activities with non-school leavers and developing a coordinated national approach to identify and implement effective actions. This would include a coordinated approach to RPL.
- Improving the availability of high-quality careers advice so school students and non-school leavers have the information they need to make informed career and study choices.
- Proposing that all priority learners be eligible for funded place.
- Creating a Universal Learning Entitlement that helps all Australians access tertiary education and makes lifelong learning a reality.
- Creating fast, stackable skills pathways which are transferable between institutions and have more entry and exit points than traditional degrees.
- Stating that increasing priority learners' participation must be tackled by all institutions and that every part of the higher education system must achieve greater equity.

<u>What QUT's Widening Participation Team (1) considers is missing and (2) needs to change</u>

- As schooling currently reproduces privilege, it is imperative that public school funding is increased to the levels recommended in the 2012 Gonski Review with a focus on measures which impact attainment levels. These reforms are an essential precursor to achieving parity in higher education access and participation.
- Parity for students from equity backgrounds is unachievable without a substantial focus on the school–higher education pipeline:
  - While school students from all socio-economic, geographical and cultural backgrounds have the <u>potential</u> to succeed at university, student <u>preparedness</u> is an issue. Therefore academic skills development in senior school and post-school bridging/enabling programs require greater attention/funding.
  - Queensland statistics indicate that 42% of all students and 75% of First Nations students are on <u>non-ATAR pathways</u>, and that only 5% of non-ATAR students progress to university[1]. These data suggest the need for two concurrent courses of action:
    - That multiple alternative pathways to university be widely available and that this information be proactively disseminated to school students to dispel the myth that an ATAR is the required pathway to higher education.
    - That more students from underrepresented groups be supported to undertake academic senior school pathways.
- Reframing the approach to avoid deficit thinking:
  - The Interim Report refers to universities <u>increasing</u> or <u>developing</u> the aspirations of potential students. This is misleading. Research demonstrates that Individuals in the target groups already have aspirations[2]. However, they may lack the navigational capacity to reach their goals and/or the achievement levels to gain access to their chosen institution or field. This is where the focus should be.
  - This focus on individual's aspirations/preparedness fails to recognise that efforts to increase the proportion of priority group learners also need to include their parents/carers and communities and to recognise and address systemic issues which perpetuate poverty and racism.
  - The 'equity' group labels represent deficit thinking, especially with respect to Indigenous Australians who have many strengths to contribute. We suggest that the 'equity' label be dropped and replaced with the term 'priority groups' or 'priority learners.' We suggest that the focus shift towards valuing the strengths priority learners from all backgrounds bring to HE environment.
- The six Government designated 'equity' groups lack nuance and fail to capture the full spectrum of higher education underrepresentation. We consider it important to revisit and expand the 'priority learner' groups, starting with the 2018 Review of Equity Groups recommendations[3] and including groups such as refugees. It will, however, be important to continue to track participation, retention, success etc. for the current six equity groups as this longitudinal data is invaluable in tracking the representation and participation of the identified population groups and it will be vital to monitor changes in the data as the Accord reforms are implemented.

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[1] *The impact of school streaming on growth and equity in Australian higher education: evidence from Queensland*. (2023). Harvey. A. et al. Griffith University.

[2] See for example, Bok, J. *The capacity to aspire to higher education*. (2012). Critical Studies in education. 51:2

[3] *Review of Identified Equity Groups*. (2018). Institute for Social Science Research, University of Queensland.

- The current retention measure is unhelpful as it only captures students who are retained at a single institution. We recommend this measure be changed to 'retention in the tertiary sector' and that national level dashboards be developed to enable data tracking. This definitional change may reduce competitiveness for priority group learners between universities.
- Expand the student-centred approach to:
  - Proactively consult current students and school students rather than solely relying on their input via submissions.
  - Include the voices of underrepresented groups in the pre-access stage to find out what would lead the disinclined to undertake HE and what barriers are stopping those who would like to attend but don't.
- We consider social imperatives are as important as the current 'skills growth through equity' economic argument for increasing the proportion of priority learners. As a democratic nation education systems ought to reflect the composition of Australian society. This will be good for Australia as a whole.
- Similarly, it is important to emphasise university's civic responsibilities. University study is not just about employability. Universities and the people who study and work there can and do contribute positively to society in a range of ways.
- We recommend that Universal Design for Learning (UDL) frameworks be introduced across the higher education sector to ensure that learning experiences proactively meet the needs of <u>all</u> learners rather than privileging the middle and upper socioeconomic groups.
- A greater focus needs to be placed on supporting graduates to transition to positive employment outcomes. Research demonstrates this is particularly true for domestic students from non-English speaking backgrounds, low SES backgrounds, and graduates with a disability[4].
- While greater differentiation between universities and Mission-based Compacts creates the potential for more nuanced place-based approaches, care will be needed to avoid exacerbating the current situation where priority learners are concentrated in less prestigious institutions.
- We suggest that targets for priority learners' participation and outcomes be set for the tertiary education system as a whole (rather than just for higher education) with a sub-set of higher education targets.
- It is unclear whether the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) would still exist under the proposed new needs-based funding model. While the proposed needs-based funding is welcome, rather than incorporating it into overall funding allocations, we consider it important to retain HEPPP or something similar as a separate funding allocation to be used exclusively for activities that benefit priority learners.
- We recommend that a pre-access tracking mechanism similar to the UK Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) be set up[5]. This will make it possible to collect pre-access participant data and link it to tertiary education participation and outcomes across Australian institutions.

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[4] See: *Investigating the Effects of Cumulative Factors of Disadvantage*. (2020). Institute for Social Science Research, University of Queensland.

[5] As recommended in the *Student Equity in Higher Education Evaluation Framework* report. (2022). Institute for Social Science Research, University of Queensland.