

Capability building and leadership development for inclusive practice in higher education

Equity by Design and National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE), August 2023

The need for student equity capability building and leadership development

The Universities Accord Interim Report starts from the assumption that more jobs will require a university qualification (and vocational qualifications) in the foreseeable future. The estimate is 55% of jobs by 2050. The argument is that this target of university graduation rates can only be achieved by significantly increasing the numbers of students currently underrepresented in higher education (HE), including students from the outer suburbs and the regions, from poor backgrounds, people with disability, and people identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

Since the release of the interim report, there has been discussion about the feasibility of admitting significantly more students into undergraduate programs who are likely to be underprepared for HE study. The HE Support Amendment Bill articulates a requirement on universities to build robust processes and support ecosystems to set up for success a significantly more diverse student cohort. The Bill shifts the focus from students who have failed to students at risk of failing; many of those students are likely to be from equity backgrounds. With the ambitious growth targets being proposed in the Universities Accord interim report, deep knowledge and expertise of how to attract and support equity students will become a core skill set of university leaders and staff at all levels as the sector builds more inclusive learning and support ecosystems.

Universities already have in-house experts in equity student support thanks to the sustained investment in proactive equity measures through the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP). However, equity practitioners and other student services personnel who have supported equity cohorts are usually front-line staff focused on the delivery of programs and services or are managing these staff as Coordinators, Team Leaders or Managers. Very few of the practitioners who started as frontline staff from 2010 have made their way into senior leadership ranks or have the skills and confidence to contribute to strategic discussions about university-wide support systems and inclusive service design at scale. Executive and senior leadership teams, in turn, are lacking appropriate knowledge and expertise to effectively support equity cohorts and university executives with lived experience of disadvantage are a diminishing group.

Finally, an influx of student support staff into higher education institutions is expected following the changes foreshadowed in the Support for Students Policy Discussion Paper. It is safe to assume that many of these additional staff will have an explicit brief to support students from equity backgrounds. Yet, there is currently no systematic induction process available for new practitioners supporting equity students so that the knowledge generated over the past decade through both research and practice does not get passed on in reliable, coordinated and efficient ways.

We argue that this critical and urgent skills gap at novice, managerial and executive levels can only be addressed through a dedicated and comprehensive program of student equity capability and leadership development. This proposal outlines a three-tier program:

1. Executive leadership skills and approaches for senior managers with the potential to step into Executive roles in the next 1-3 years,
2. Mid-career leadership development for experienced equity practitioners and junior managers, and
3. A sector-wide induction program for new student support staff in higher education.

Funding for the student equity capability and leadership development programs would be generated by a compulsory contribution from universities' student equity funding (currently the HEPPP) at 1-2% of the annual institutional allocation.

The NCSEHE as the enabler of equity practitioner capability building and leadership development at the national level

The National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) has a critical role to play in student equity capability building due to its mission as a "what works" centre and national reach. Yet, it does not have existing systems or expertise to build sector-wide induction or leadership development programs so that strategic partnerships are essential in its ability to deliver a scaled-up response quickly. The NCSEHE would partner with Equity by Design to develop the 3-tier student equity capability and leadership development program next year. Initial conversations have commenced to pilot the executive leadership program in 2024.

1. Executive leadership program: "Future Leaders for Equity and Excellence in Higher Education" (to be piloted in 2024)

The pilot cohort of "Future Leaders for Equity and Excellence in Higher Education" will undertake an accelerated executive leadership program to address the urgent need for evidence-informed practice in inclusive higher education management and leadership. The program aims to equip future university leaders with the skills and approaches to lead institution-wide strategy and/or change programs to transform HE institutions into inclusive places for learning and working.

In their application, participants will demonstrate a personal leadership philosophy and presence that aligns with the core values of equity and inclusive practice. In addition, they need sufficient experience at Director/Dean (or Associate Director/Associate Dean) level to be considered for the program and have an Executive sponsor who has identified their potential to step into an Executive/Vice-Chancellor's Leadership Team role in the next 1-3 years. The Executive sponsor commits to act as a mentor for the duration of the program.

The *Future Leaders* program will include the following components:

- Inclusive leadership in Higher Education
- Executive management essentials
- Developing a whole-of-institution approach
- Strategy design and implementation
- Leading change
- Evaluating for social impact

If possible, the program will be co-developed with existing providers of executive leadership education and draw on thought leaders at the NCSEHE, Australian institutions and internationally.

2. Mid-career leadership program: "Inclusive and Student-Centred Management in Higher Education" (to be rolled out from late 2024)

To enable experienced equity practitioners and managers to contribute to strategic conversations as trusted experts, a range of generic and specific skills are required that are not routinely available through in-house training in higher education institutions. These include:

- Inclusive practice in Higher Education

- Management essentials
- Communicating for impact
- Change management
- Effective prioritising
- Evaluating for social impact

If possible, the program will be co-developed with existing providers of leadership programs and draw on thought leaders at the NCSEHE and Australian institutions. Modules in the mid-career program could be built as micro credentials which articulate to a Master of Business Administration (MBA) program at an Australian university.

3. Induction of new student support staff (to be rolled out from mid-2024)

To support the systematic and comprehensive induction of new student support staff in general, and equity practitioners in particular, a core suite of training modules needs to be developed to make available the student equity knowledge base and specialist expertise generated over the past decade thanks to significant investment in the NCSEHE. It is recommended that the induction covers the following domains of student equity practice through the development of online modules (up to 12 modules in total):

- Introduction to Student Equity: policy, practice and research
- Specialist modules: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students from low SES backgrounds, students from regional or remote backgrounds, students with disability or health conditions
- Stakeholder relationships and communication
- Business management, administration and support services
- Inclusive service design
- Service delivery
- Student communications and promotion of services
- Continuous quality improvement
- Service evaluation

As with the leadership programs, the induction program will be co-developed with existing learning providers with specialist expertise if possible. Access to the training materials would most likely be made available to the NCSEHE on a license agreement. The NCSEHE in turn would make the modules available to HE providers in Australia under an institutional license.

Timely program development and launch

Equity by Design would provide project management and specialist expertise in the development of the student equity capability and leadership development programs. It would act as a conduit for action between the NCSEHE, learning providers, and EPHEA (Equity Practitioners in HE Australasia) as a key stakeholder to ensure the timely development and roll-out of program components.

The student equity capability and leadership development program would kick off with a national event featuring senior leaders in student equity and beyond in the second half of 2024. Both leadership programs would be delivered in hybrid format with logistical support provided by EPHEA for face-to-face modules in major cities and regional centres.