



KEYNOTE

Translating academic research to higher education policy reform: The case of enabling programs

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Proposed reforms to Enabling programs by the Australian Government highlight the complex relationship between research and its dissemination and translation into policy. The budget proposals suggest that the Government considered broad research supportive of Enabling programs, but that academics were largely ineffective in communicating more detailed research to influence policy. These limitations have implications for specific changes to Enabling programs, but also highlight the broader need for communication and translation of research into policy. In this address I will outline four major policy questions that currently confront the Government when determining the future of Enabling programs, and the ways in which those questions were answered by the proposed reforms with little reference to related research. Findings reveal a need for the university sector to strengthen advocacy and ensure that evidence and research are clearly and coherently presented to policy makers.

After briefly outlining the nature of Enabling programs within Australian higher education, I will address the four major questions that the Government would have confronted in seeking to reform policy. First, should Enabling programs continue to be supported, or can other sub-degree programs perform the same role? Second, if programs are supported, what would be an effective allocation mechanism? Third, should the Government continue to provide an Enabling loading to support the programs being free to students, or should this system be replaced with fees and supporting income-contingent loans? Finally, how should the diversity and opacity of Enabling programs be addressed given the demand for more transparent university admissions? I will argue that the Government answers to these questions have been sub-optimal, and that both supporters and opponents of free Enabling programs have been unable to conduct a policy debate informed by robust evidence and research. The paper concludes with suggestions for further advocacy around performance-based funding and future negotiations.

Context

An Enabling program is defined within the *Higher Education Support Act 2003* as “a course of instruction provided to a person for the purpose of enabling the person to undertake a course leading to a higher education award” (Department of the Attorney-General, 2003, p. 215). The programs lie outside the Australian Qualifications Framework and are therefore extremely diverse across institutions, for example ranging in duration from four weeks to eighteen months full time (Pitman et al., 2016). The Australian Government provides institutions with Commonwealth supported places (CSP) as well as providing a separate Enabling loading

(\$3,223 per EFTSL in 2017), which allows universities to provide the programs free of charge to students. Nearly 10,000 Commonwealth supported places are offered nationwide, again with a wide variance across institutions according to largely historical patterns. Successful completion of an Enabling program may lead to admission into an undergraduate course, though many universities are not transparent about this process. In the desktop analysis led by the *National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education* (NCSEHE), fifteen courses provided no information about post-Enabling enrolment and the remainder gave non-specific information (Pitman et al., 2016, p. 35).

In developing its proposed higher education reforms, the Australian Government was cognisant of the need for ‘budget repair’ and the Minister for Education and Training, Simon Birmingham, referred to universities enjoying ‘rivers of gold’ since the introduction of the demand-driven system (interview with David Speers on Sky News, 28 June 2017 <http://wp.senatorbirmingham.com.au/interview-on-sky-news-with-david-speers-2/>). In 2009, following a major review of higher education known as the Bradley Review (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008), the Australian Government began removing limitations on the number of undergraduate places for which universities could receive public funding in most courses. This policy became known as the demand-driven system, and was the major lever proposed to reach ambitious objectives to increase both growth and student equity (Australian Government, 2009). The policy change led to an increase between 2009 and 2016 in the number of Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs) of 31.5 per cent (Australian Government, 2017, p. 4). As the public cost of supporting an expanding higher education sector continues to rise, the Government in 2017 was looking for ways not only to reform higher education but to reduce its costs where possible. There was also an intention to expand alternative sub-degree pathways, by allowing universities to enrol more students in higher education associate degrees and diplomas that “focus on industry needs and fully articulate into bachelor programs” (Australian Government, 2017, p. 24). In this context, there is some doubt as to whether Enabling programs would be supported in any form.

The Government ultimately showed support for the continuation of Enabling programs, but proposed removing the Enabling loading and replacing it with an equivalent maximum student contribution rate. A fixed number of places (approx. 9,600) would be allocated on a cyclical basis through a three year competitive tender process, for which universities, TAFEs and private providers could all apply (Australian Government 2017, p. 25). Support for the continuation of Enabling programs was significant, but was justified by reference to the earlier Base Funding Review (Lomax-Smith, Watson & Webster, 2011) rather than subsequent major research reports led by Hodges et al. (2013) and Pitman et al. (2016) which highlighted the efficacy of Enabling programs and built the evidence base as suggested by the Base Funding Review. Enabling programs are also clearly contrasted with the proposed expansion of sub-degree offerings, as these offerings are designed to be explicitly industry-focussed, rather than simply about providing pathways to university study.

Allocation

Unsurprisingly, the Government proposed a new model to allocate Enabling program places. At the Senate Estimates Committee on 31 May 2017, the Deputy Secretary of the Department of Education and Training, David Learmonth, argued that “The distribution of places here is really no different from that of postgraduate and sub-bachelor. It is a historical anomaly. They do not line up with where they are actually needed in local communities, so there will be an opportunity to improve the distribution to where they are needed” (Australian Parliament, 2017, p. 182). In the NCSEHE-led report, of which I was an author, we found that more than half of all Enabling places available nationally are enrolled through only eight institutions (Pitman et al., 2016, p. 9).

Data also reveal that, in 2015, there was an over-enrolment in Enabling CSPs relative to designated places in the Commonwealth Grant Scheme (CGS) agreements across the sector of 2097 EFTSL, including 7 universities that were enrolled over their allocated CSPs by 100 EFTSL (Department of Education and Training, uCube data and CGS funding agreements: <http://highereducationstatistics.education.gov.au/> and <https://docs.education.gov.au/node/34675>). Data suggest that some universities are cross-subsidising Enabling places from other areas. Places are currently allocated unevenly across the sector, and some institutions would clearly prefer an expansion of their allocations to meet student demand.

That a proposal to reallocate places would be developed was therefore unsurprising. However, the higher education sector did not present any clear proposal for place reallocation, or if such a proposal was presented it appears to have gone unnoticed by the Government. Instead, many universities clearly hoped that existing arrangements would be maintained. In the absence of a clear policy alternative, the Government proposed that the places (approx. 9,600) be allocated on a triennial basis through a competitive tender process, and that non-university higher education providers (NUHEPs) will also be eligible to apply for places (Australian Government, 2017, p. 25). Currently only public universities are allocated Enabling places. The criteria and operation of the tender process has not been developed at the time of writing, as evidenced by the below exchange in the Senate Estimates Committee hearings between Senator O'Neill and Mr Learmonth.

Senator O'NEILL: So there is no cut in the number of places, but a change in distribution?

Mr English: Yes.

Senator O'NEILL: Based on what?

Mr Learmonth: That will be something that we will work through in collaboration with the sector in order to find a way to best target the places to need.

Senator O'NEILL: Has the sector raised that as a problem with you?

Mr Learmonth: Not that I am aware of. It is something that we have not really engaged with them on yet, but we will do so shortly.

(Australian Parliament, 2017, p. 185)

The sector will therefore be engaged on the detail of the tender process, but the process itself has been established with little reference to research or policy input from the universities.

A number of alternative allocation mechanisms were, and perhaps still are, possible. For example, the current allocation of HEPPP funds is based on the number of low SES students enrolled at undergraduate level within each public university. One criterion for allocating Enabling places could be to use this same formula, by which universities with the most number of LSES undergraduate students would be rewarded with a high allocation of Enabling places. The current correlation between HEPPP allocations and Enabling loading is not strong, owing to historical patterns which are, in some cases, entirely justified. For example, the University of Newcastle has been effectively running large Enabling programs since the 1970s in response to specific geographic workforce needs, and jeopardising a successful, longstanding program would be short-sighted. However, using the HEPPP formula as at least one criterion for place

allocation would reflect sectoral need, and would reward the institutions that already enrol high numbers of under-represented students at undergraduate level.

As Mr Learmonth also outlined, the anomalous allocation of Enabling places is mirrored by postgraduate CSP allocations – both are heavily reliant on historical practices. Yet the Government has proposed completely different solutions to these problems, arguing for a ‘student-centred’ approach to postgraduate CSP allocations but an institutional bidding system for Enabling places (Australian Government, 2017). Unlike Enabling places, postgraduate CSP is under-subscribed across the sector. In 2015, there was an effective postgraduate CSP over-allocation of 3,910 EFTSL (Department of Education and Training, uCube data and CGS funding agreements: <http://highereducationstatistics.education.gov.au/> and <https://docs.education.gov.au/node/34675>), which presumably influenced the Government’s 2017 proposal to reduce postgraduate CSP across the sector by 3,000 EFTSL. Yet several universities are both under-subscribed in postgraduate CSP and over-subscribed in Enabling places. Another potential means of allocation would therefore be to provide universities with the flexibility to transfer load between postgraduate and Enabling levels according to their need.

Indeed, there is no reason why the HEPPP formula could not also be used, at least in part, to allocate postgraduate CSP. Given the dramatic under-representation of low SES students at postgraduate level (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2014), raising postgraduate equity should be a high priority within any reallocation mechanism. The Government has emphasised only that Commonwealth supported places will be allocated to students directly, presumably as merit-based ‘scholarships’ (Australian Government, 2017, p. 23), yet why would we not expect a criterion of ‘need’ to apply also? Given the proposal is to continue with a limited number of postgraduate CSPs, and given institutions have the freedom to charge full fees to postgraduates wherever demand exists, the allocation of the limited publicly subsidised places to students could, and arguably should, include an element of financial need. Under current arrangements, there are doubtless some extremely wealthy students at Group of Eight universities receiving a subsidised postgraduate education while others in financial need, often in regional areas, are either locked out of postgraduate study altogether or unable to access a subsidised place.

A coherent sectoral approach would consider student equity as a priority in the allocation of Enabling places, sub-degree places, undergraduate support, and postgraduate places. Instead, we have a system based on historical allocations at Enabling, sub-degree and postgraduate levels. The proposed solution to this problem is to include non-university providers within a tender process for Enabling places, allow unlimited sub-degree programs provided they are ‘industry’-focussed, and allocate postgraduate places through vouchers according to student ‘merit’, with a (possibly cumbersome and highly bureaucratic) intermediary body required to ensure some form of equity across institutions and fields of education. Partly, the inadequacy of these proposed ‘solutions’ derive from inadequate policy input by universities during the consultation process. Most telling is the Deputy Secretary’s suggestion that the sector had not raised the allocation of Enabling places as a problem.

Fees or free?

Most attention following the announcement of the proposed Enabling program reforms was focussed on the removal of the Enabling loading, which would save the Government \$110 million over four years (Australian Parliament, 2017, p. 187). The Enabling loading allows universities to offer programs to students free of charge, and the new system envisages students paying fees in conjunction with income contingent loans. In other words, if the current reforms are legislated, students in Enabling programs would essentially be treated the same as domestic

undergraduate students. In defending the abolition of the Enabling loading, both the Deputy Secretary of the Department and the Minister for Education and Training argued that income-contingent loans ensure that low SES students were not blocked from participation.

In Senate Estimates, the Minister argued that, “the income contingent loan arrangements are a great equity policy ... because ... they ensure that nobody is blocked in terms of their participation” (Australian Parliament, 2017, p. 187), while subsequently the Deputy Secretary of the Department defended the proposal after questioning from Senator O’Neill.

Mr Learmonth: ... the evidence is very clear that the HELP system offers no barrier to students, whether they be low SES or otherwise ...

Senator O’NEILL: And what study did you do to ascertain this, with particular regard to enabling students?

Mr Learmonth: It is the evidence that I have referred to. It is the evidence of the experts, such as Professor Chapman. It is demonstrable in the admission history of higher education over the last decade ...

(Australian Parliament, 2017, pp. 187-188)

This response is perhaps the most damning indictment of the sector’s inability to translate research into advocacy and policy. The NCSEHE-led report (Pitman et al., 2016) highlighted clear data based on a national analysis of geo-demographic participation in Enabling programs and a survey of 2,500 Enabling students. The data revealed that students from low SES backgrounds have more than twice the rate of representation at the Enabling level than they do at undergraduate level. Similarly, “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people represent 1.5 per cent of undergraduate students, but six per cent of [E]nabling students” (Pitman et al., 2016, p. 37). Our own research at La Trobe University found that students from refugee backgrounds, mature age students, and those from foster care backgrounds were also more likely to enrol in a free Enabling program than any other pathway (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2014). The national survey of 2,500 students also found that almost two-thirds of respondents believed that the free or low-cost nature of the pathway strongly influenced their decision to enrol (Pitman et al., 2016, p. 65).

Perhaps most illuminating, a study by Stokes (forthcoming) discovered that around 30 per cent of students at an Enabling orientation session were from the lowest socio-economic decile. This is crucial because it reveals a fundamental weakness in the current analysis of student equity in higher education, namely the focus on socio-economic status by quartiles alone. When we look more closely at deciles, we can see the people for whom income contingent loans are a barrier to university (Harvey, Andrewartha & Burnheim 2017). Within the lowest socio-economic decile, fewer than 10% of people hold a degree, compared with 58% of those in the highest decile. Similarly, only 9% of 18-19 year olds in the lowest socio-economic decile were participating in higher education in 2011, compared with an average of 28% across all deciles, and 55% within the highest decile. A person from the highest socio-economic decile is more than five times as likely to hold a Bachelor degree as someone from the lowest decile (Harvey, Andrewartha & Burnheim, 2017).

Among other things, these data highlight the limitations of income-contingent HELP loans. University participation of disadvantaged students has not worsened after previous increases to tuition fees, but neither has it improved much. For 25 years, the proportion of university students

from the lowest socio-economic quartile has hovered between 15 and 16% (Harvey, Burnheim & Brett, 2017). HECS is broadly equitable, but it still deters some groups from accessing university. Alternative vocational pathways, such as diplomas, typically do not differ substantially in student geo-demographics from undergraduate university programs (Wheelahan, 2009). It is only Enabling programs that significantly widen participation, particularly reaching the most under-represented groups. There are therefore strong reasons of social justice to support continuation and indeed expansion of Enabling programs. However, there are also clear financial imperatives to continue programs that are able to re-engage some of the most under-represented and disadvantaged people in education.

Many of the students recruited by university Enabling programs include young parents, carers, those with some prior tertiary education, and others whom the Government has specifically identified in its Australian Priority Investment Approach as at risk of welfare dependency. In 2016, the Department of Social Services commissioned PwC to conduct a baseline valuation report that estimates the total lifetime costs of welfare dependence for the Australian population. That analysis revealed that the number of young carers in the welfare system has trebled in the last decade to 11,200 people, and that over 60 per cent of these people will likely be receiving income support payments in 10 years. The Government will spend an estimated \$109 billion on future welfare payments for all people currently receiving a Carer Payment over their lifetime, with young carers expected to have an average future lifetime cost (to taxpayers) of \$464,000 per person. Similarly, Departmental analysis shows that around 70 per cent of Parenting Payment recipients will likely be receiving income support in 10 years, and that the Government will spend an estimated \$191 billion on future welfare payments for all people currently receiving this benefit (Department of Social Services, 2016, p. 2).

Welfare dependency is often persistent and intergenerational. As the Government's baseline valuation reveals, welfare is also extremely expensive to taxpayers and harmful to both economic productivity and social cohesion. Enabling programs attract more First in Family students, and more students from at-risk demographic groups, than undergraduate programs or vocational pathways. Our previous research found that many Enabling students had personal circumstances that made studying difficult, including negative secondary school experiences, single parenthood, and mental health issues (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2014, p. 58) while similar studies have found disproportionate numbers of Enabling students from refugee backgrounds, or with family and employment responsibilities, social and cultural displacement, and poor English language proficiency (Klinger & Tranter, 2009). For many students, Enabling programs are uniquely able to break intergenerational barriers. The public subsidy of an Enabling loading is therefore very minor when compared with the costs of educational disengagement, often leading to welfare dependency.

Also notable is an international trend towards free provision of tertiary and university education. In the United Kingdom, the Labour Party nearly won an election on the promise of removing all university fees, with a dramatic rise in the youth vote and in some specific electorates where universities are based (Scott & Kirk, 2017). Senior British Conservative figures, such as Damien Green, the de facto Deputy Prime Minister at the time, have since raised the need for a national debate about the high fee model (http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/michael-gove-defends-university-tuition-fees-after-cabinet-colleague-calls-for-debate_uk_5958cd7ee4b02734df32e5f8). In the US, New York recently joined Tennessee, Minnesota and Oregon in offering free college for lower and middle class students (<https://www.ny.gov/programs/tuition-free-degree-program-excelsior-scholarship>). In Germany, university tuition fees for citizens were repealed in 2014 (<https://theconversation.com/how-germany-managed-to-abolish-university-tuition-fees>

-32529). Many jurisdictions are acting on evidence of the efficacy of tuition free tertiary education, particularly for students in financial need.

Despite the evidence that free programs attract a different student cohort from programs that charge fees – with or without student loans – neither the Minister nor defenders of existing Enabling programs seemed aware of, or convinced by, this evidence during policy formation. In fact, the only evidence raised to support a transition to tuition fees was the higher retention rates of fee-bearing Enabling programs than free programs (Australian Government, 2017, p. 25). This evidence is tendentious, since it compares a very small number of fee-paying students with 12,000 students in free programs across the country. Worse, our analysis of this small fee-paying cohort reveals that it mirrors the national undergraduate demographics, and is thoroughly different from the free Enabling program cohort. Only 16% of the fee-paying Enabling program students were from low SES backgrounds (Department of Education and Training, uCube data). This is less than half the proportion of low SES students in tuition-free Enabling programs. The only real conclusion that could be drawn from comparing the two cohorts is therefore that fee-paying Enabling programs do not widen university access.

Further, the NCSEHE-led report (Pitman et al., 2016) highlighted that, overall, Enabling students who transition to university record higher retention rates on average than other undergraduate equity group students, despite their typically higher level of disadvantage. Nevertheless, it does not appear that key figures in the Department were aware of the limitations of evidence provided, or of the more robust evidence that would support places remaining tuition free. Again, an exchange in Senate Estimates between Senator O’Neill and the Department’s Deputy Secretary is instructive.

Senator O’NEILL: The government has argued that 62 per cent of students in fee-paying enabling courses completed them—well, only 52 per cent of the students in free courses, like Newcastle’s enabling courses, completed their studies. There has been a counterargument put by Professor Fagan saying that the figures are unfair because they only compared completion rates for 340 fee-paying students against 12,000 in free courses across Australia, including the University of Newcastle. Do you want to comment on that?

Mr Learmonth: I will take it on notice.

(Australian Parliament, 2017, pp. 183-84)

It may be argued that Government and Department representatives should have read the various reports and evidence around Enabling geo-demographics and the evident limitations of income-contingent loans. However, there is also clearly a gap in advocacy here, and a need for advocates to translate their research into compelling public policy arguments.

Transparency of admissions and diversity of programs

The fourth major question for the Government was around the diversity and opacity of Enabling programs. Enabling programs currently range in duration from four weeks to eighteen months (Pitman et al., 2016). Some programs are completely open access, while others have academic hurdle requirements, and in these cases institutions have often developed pre-Enabling programs or arrangements with partner TAFEs to redirect students. Some Enabling programs involve compulsory subjects across multiple disciplines, e.g. science and mathematics, while others offer greater choice to specialise according to the intended undergraduate pathway. Enabling programs are not part of the Australian Qualifications Framework so they display extraordinary

diversity of duration, content, and delivery mode.

This diversity is advantageous in some ways and has enabled tailoring of courses to specific groups and institutional need, as well as allowing learning across institutions. However, diversity has limited the capacity of Enabling program advocates to develop robust evidence and commensurate data, and to advocate and speak with one voice. Further, the diversity has limited student mobility, with most Enabling programs tailored explicitly to providing undergraduate access to the same institution (Pitman et al., 2016). Completion of an Enabling program reveals different levels of preparedness at different institutions, so completing students have limited portability to access other universities. Equally, institutions are typically not transparent about admission pathways, failing to clarify which undergraduate courses are available following successful completion of an Enabling program, and/or what grades are required within the Enabling program to access different courses. The NCSEHE-led report found that “There is a lack of transparency, transferability and information about enabling programs that is likely to hinder student take-up, mobility and progression” (Pitman et al., 2016, p. 8) with several programs providing non-specific advice on their website about the ability of Enabling programs to be used as a basis of admission.

The Government has currently refrained from specific recommendations for Enabling programs regarding (in)consistency and transparency. However, two broader changes will clearly affect Enabling programs. First, a proposed review of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) provides both an opportunity and a challenge for proponents to advocate the inclusion of Enabling programs and their differentiation from other sub-degree awards. Second, the Higher Education Standards Panel review of transparency in admissions, the recommendations of which were accepted by the Australian Government and translated to an implementation plan, will drive universities to clarify their entry requirements. Both developments are welcome, and it is hoped that the sector will advocate strongly around the development of more consistent Enabling programs, perhaps within the AQF, and more transparent admission requirements, both of which would promote student certainty and mobility. The Government agenda around transparency and commensurability provides an important opportunity for providers of Enabling programs to advocate solutions that serve students and the sector, but change will occur with or without strong sectoral input.

Performance-based funding

A further potential point of advocacy has arguably been understated in the consultation phase of the higher education reforms. The Government has proposed the introduction of performance-based funding, in part to prevent the enrolment of academically under-prepared students and others at risk of non-completion (see Harvey, 2017). The evidence on performance-based funding is mixed and a major US study has found limited benefit to such schemes (Dougherty et al., 2016). However, the problem of academically under-prepared students being enrolled directly into undergraduate programs at high risk of non-completion is real, if perhaps overstated. Students admitted on the basis of ATAR below 50, for example, comprise a small, though growing, proportion of the undergraduate population. However, analysis has found that around half of such students will not complete their undergraduate courses (Norton, 2015). In identifying the problem of non-completion among some students, the Government has proposed a complex solution around performance-based funding that would reward those universities that are able to demonstrate improved retention and completion rates.

Arguably, a better solution would have been to expand provision of Enabling programs to enable universities to redirect at-risk students away from undergraduate programs and into Enabling

pathway programs instead. Such a policy would have supported scaffolded learning and raised academic preparation levels, particularly given the evidence that undergraduate students transitioning via an Enabling pathway record relatively high retention rates (Pitman et al., 2016). Unfortunately, this argument was not made with conviction or effect, though there remains space within the subsequent consultative and negotiating phase before the proposals are legislated.

In hindsight, there was an opportunity for proponents of Enabling programs to promote existing research and strongly advocate: a rationalisation of programs and their inclusion within the AQF, squarely confronting the Government's transparency in admissions agenda; a reallocation of places based on transparent criteria of need, perhaps including the undergraduate low SES enrolment numbers of institutions; the restriction of allocated Enabling places to public universities given their specific equity missions, as opposed to expanding access to non-university providers; an overall expansion of places to meet student need (given existing sectoral over-enrolments) and enable institutional redirection of under-prepared students to strengthen retention and completion efforts; and the preservation of tuition free programs on the basis of the unique ability of free programs to widen participation, particularly to students from the lowest socio-economic decile.

Some of these arguments can and should still be made during the negotiation phase of the reforms. Nevertheless, the 2017 higher education policy reforms indicate a need for sectoral research to be translated more effectively into policy through greater dissemination and advocacy. The establishment of a specific advocacy and professional body, the *National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia* (NAEEA), can help to achieve these objectives, but advocacy must be strengthened within institutions, across discipline-specific and sectoral bodies such as *Universities Australia* and the *National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education* (NCSEHE), and through specific connections with representatives from the Department and Ministry of Education and Training. Since the introduction of the Department's National Priorities Pool research grants and further research grants allocated by the NCSEHE, academics within the sector are now undertaking unprecedented levels of research into student equity in higher education. Much of this research is profound and has the potential to influence broader university policy in new and emancipatory ways. To fulfil this potential though, advocates must increase their efforts to translate student equity research into tangible policy outcomes.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge the research assistance of Michael Luckman and Beni Cakitaki, and the *National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia* for convening the Research Development and Collaboration special interest group at which these ideas were first presented.

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