

The University of Newcastle

Response to the Consultation Paper on the Reallocation of Commonwealth supported places for enabling, sub-bachelor and postgraduate courses

Thank you for the opportunity to submit a response to the *Consultation Paper on the reallocation of Commonwealth supported places for enabling, sub-bachelor and postgraduate courses*.

The University of Newcastle is pleased the consultation paper signals a strong commitment to providing opportunities for Australians to access higher education through university-based programs that promote widening access to students.

The University maintains its strong commitment to enabling programs that provide students with the highest rates of matriculation to degrees, and better outcomes in transitioning to and through higher education than other types of entry programs, including vocational education and training (VET) (Pitman et al., 2016). This comparison is consistently reflected in University institutional data.

We welcome the opportunity to put forward recommendations for a robust, clear framework that will provide clarity for the higher education sector, and particularly for providers offering enabling programs into the future.

University of Newcastle Enabling Context

Around 3,500 students commence in University of Newcastle enabling programs each year as a stepping stone to higher education. Many of our students fall into one or more of the six recognised equity groups – 62 per cent are first in family and 39.6 per cent are from low socioeconomic status backgrounds.

About 90 per cent of completing students go on to study in an undergraduate degree program, including around 2-3 Indigenous students entering medicine each year through the Yapug enabling program, now in its 20th year. Our enabling students also go on to enrol in many other universities and training providers across Australia, contributing to wider national intakes.

The University's Open Foundation program, the first Australian enabling program, was developed in 1974, with a commencing cohort of 80 students. Through community engagement and referrals, our enabling has grown to offer the largest suite of demographic-specific programs with Newstep (for students aged 18–20 years) introduced in 1990, and Yapug (for Indigenous students) in 1999.

We continue to innovate through a wide variety of enabling program options, including flexible and online delivery developed in response to the changing needs of students. Open Foundation (for students 20 years+) now includes Open Foundation Online for students who require more geographically accessible and flexible study options.

The programs are deeply embedded in a university-wide education framework focussed on teaching and learning excellence and equity. The University has a sustained commitment to excellence and equity, with this firmly established in our structural and cultural 'DNA' (Wood et al., 2016) and reinforced by our current decadal strategy *NeW Futures 2016-2025*.

As a result of our leadership, the enabling sector has looked to the University of Newcastle to influence programs and approaches, with other providers adapting our approaches to their own contexts.

Regional Distribution

The University's enabling programs serve communities in the Hunter, Central Coast, Mid North Coast and regional NSW, which are characterised by greater disadvantage and lower educational attainment than metropolitan areas. Through sustained commitment and responsive enabling program design, the University has supported students from a diverse range of backgrounds and locations to succeed at university. Breaking cycles of educational disadvantage and creating intergenerational mobility through such programs is at the heart of the University's mission as an institution.

There is still much more to do as higher education attainment rates in our regions and institutional footprint remain significantly below those of the metropolitan population, with rates of bachelor level attainment in Greater Sydney more than four times those in the Hunter Valley.

Outcomes

Around 20-25%¹ of commencing students at our University come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Student success and retention in degree programs is also consistently high for this cohort, as compared to those from all other non-school pathways.

Across all types of programs, our enabling teaching, courses and programs consistently receive the highest satisfaction levels on institution-wide student feedback surveys and external reviews.

To ensure offerings remain responsive to change and that innovation continues, it has been critical that research about teaching, learning and equity are a focus across the university. In 2013, we were the first university to embed research-informed approaches, and scholarship of teaching and learning, to staff development within enabling programs. As a result of our success, other institutions are now following this approach.

As the largest and longest-running enabling provider, the University of Newcastle is well-positioned to respond to the consultation. We propose the following important elements of a framework for Government investment in enabling places and for use by providers across the sector:

Preliminary comments

Applying a uniform 5% reduction is not equitable when regional contexts are taken into account.

It is important that equity is not conflated with uniformity across all institutions because this will adversely impact on established equity gains achieved through enabling programs, especially in regions with significant rates of social and therefore educational disadvantage.

Context is a critical factor for effective enabling interventions (Bennett et al., 2015).

This is because effective intervention responds to the specific and historical needs of the communities that they are attempting to engage in higher education.

Geographical and socio-economic disadvantage indicators, and evidence of impact, should be used to provide a better understanding of need for and quality of enabling programs.

Regular evaluation activities, specific to program and demographic contexts, should be reported, with responses to evaluation findings informing responsive and innovative approaches to program and course design.

¹ % of the commencing, domestic, undergraduate cohort at UON

In order to provide robust evidence of impact through the provision and evaluation cycles outlined below, it is important that the frequency of reallocation aligns with institutional funding agreements, not an annual cycle.

Recommendations for a reporting framework for funding allocation of enabling places:

The minimum viable allocation for enabling places should remain at the base levels already in place across the sector.

Demand shown through utilisation of places should inform reallocation if places are filled within reporting cycles based on institutional funding agreements, not on an annual cycle.

In the new institutional agreements, distribution of places should be based on maintaining the current allocation through considerations of:

- **Demand and Reach** – as demonstrated by the geographical and demographic characteristics of students. Programs should provide opportunities for access to a wide range of programs and institutions
- **Evidence of Impact** – identified through a mix of measures of strong student outcomes and high standards of academic preparation, which re-engage students in education, especially those who have been disengaged due to disadvantage. This should include:
 - **Participation and completion** in enabling programs. This should take into account the fact that enabling programs are diverse, and include a wide variety of program types, from short tailored programs that develop academic capability and improve student outcomes within degrees, to standalone programs that run from a period of weeks to 2 years, and are offered in various modes of study.
 - **Successful transitions** to higher education, including data about the proportion of students that are enrolled in an enabling course in one year and are then enrolled in a tertiary level program one year later, as identified through institutional and UAC data to track access to other institutions, as well as performance in the subsequent first period within a degree.
 - **Reporting on regular internal evaluation and external review activities**, including benchmarking and qualitative data. Ongoing evaluation is important understanding student needs and the changes in contexts across student groups. Also included should be data capturing the utility of enabling provision for other purposes, including transitions to other vocational and training options and for improving employing options for students who are not able to continue on to higher education.
 - **Responsive program and course design** – knowledge gained from evaluation must be shown to feed back into courses. Finding out about student experiences is important for developing teaching and learning innovations
 - **Ongoing high quality professional development** opportunities for staff through in-house training and the national association, with development informed by research.
 - **Explicit institutional strategies** committed to both teaching and learning excellence, as well as equity and adequate resourcing to enabling programs

- **Diverse student engagement strategies** through recruitment, outreach and progress in programs monitored and evaluated

To provide opportunities for institutions to develop enabling programs where there is limited track record in delivery and/or to recover unused places during periods where economic, social or educational forces impact on demand and/or reach, special provisions should be available for institutions to include in their reporting the factors and plans for addressing issues and/or developing programs, in line with their request for allocation of places.

Additional recommendations for enabling provision

- **Enabling programs need to remain aligned with purpose to reach target demographics, remain tuition-fee free and open access so that disadvantaged groups are not unduly left out due to enabling program admission barriers.**
- **Student residential address, not location of campus** should be the focus of policy seeking to capture students from regional and remote areas. Regional and remote geographical categorisations must also be calibrated to capture sector innovations in high quality online enabling education that reach into those areas.
- **Enabling programs must remain situated within universities** where there is proven expertise, responsiveness to community needs and capacity to offer successful pathways into and through undergraduate study transitions.
- With a rapidly growing diversification of industries and employment needs, there is associated need to retrain, upskill, and increase higher education access levels according to population growth and demographic inequalities.
- **Institutions should be encouraged to engage with the *National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia (NAEEA)***, which represents enabling educators and managers from across the country.
- **Collection of reporting and evaluation data is critical** so that information can be stored, shared and accessed to build a better knowledge of sector-wide trends and forms of provision, evaluation and outcomes.

University of Newcastle Sub-bachelor Award Program Context

The University of Newcastle currently has no sub-bachelor Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs). This has made it difficult to design and deliver programs that meet community and industry needs. For example, the University has been working closely with the Department of Education, NSW to design programs that match the needs of students and the local economy. However program delivery is hampered by lack of CSPs.

Students and business groups have consistently demonstrated an interest in this type and level of qualification. The University's associate degree in aged care (constructed with support from NSW Department of Education and Training) has attracted the interest of students working in aged care institutions and has contributed to upskilling that workforce. A program like this can lead onto other degree programs including, but not limited to, nursing.

The University urges the Government to consider diploma and associate degrees not exclusively as pathways to degrees, but additionally, as valid and useful qualifications. Consideration should be

given to lowering the expectation of full-articulation of credit from a sub-bachelor program onto degree programs. There is a risk that, if the requirement is maintained, as students within a degree program exit with a lower qualification such as a diploma or associate degree, the perceived value of such qualifications can be limited and their standing reduced.

The University of Newcastle's experience with supporting students from widening participation communities is that they need additional support to succeed. If this is built within a qualification, students will develop the necessary skills and confidence to succeed in higher education. While providing this level of support this may be appropriate for an AQF Level 5 qualification, it is less appropriate for Level 7. For this reason, full credit articulation is difficult as it either places significant challenges onto students at the point they transition into a full degree program, or compromises the design of the sub-bachelor component so that the student is pushed to reach Level 7 competencies. We are concerned this will not lead to positive student outcomes.

The University would also like to indicate the importance of specialised qualifications such as the Diploma of Languages. Programs such as this offer competitive advantage to students as a stand-alone qualification or as an additional qualification alongside another program. Further, these programs lead to graduates with skills highly sought after by employers. It is unlikely the needs of industry would be met by graduates of programs dedicated only to the study of languages, though the importance of a second language in an increasingly global economy should be actively encouraged, and could give graduates a competitive edge.

Recommendations for sub-bachelor award provision

- **There should be an increase in the number of CSP for sub-bachelor programs**, which are allocated to institutions that currently have limited places
- **Articulation requirements into the degree program from sub-bachelor programs should be maintained** but this should be structured around the AQF requirements which typically indicate an expectation of 50% of the credit with an allowance for more if this can be justified.
- While an articulation pathway to at least one degree program should be defined per sub-bachelor qualification, **sub-bachelor qualifications should be respected as valuable qualifications in their own right.**

University of Newcastle Postgraduate Award Program Context

The University has a comparatively small number of CSPs for postgraduate programs to allocate and we suggest that this acts as a deterrent to low SES students in our region undertaking postgraduate coursework programs.

Commonwealth funded postgraduate programs are typically associated with opportunities for continued professional development, upskilling of important industry needs (such as cyber security), and skill development for entry into research programs. We would welcome access to CSP places for a broad range of industry relevant courses.

The University of Newcastle is highly engaged with industry and small business within our regions, and our ability to help the workforce upskill and reskill would be better served by a more flexible postgraduate CSP system.

We would also wish to see increased transparency and equity in the allocation of postgraduate CSPs and ongoing monitoring by the Department to ensure that allocated places are being used in the best way.

Recommendations for CSP for Postgraduate Coursework Awards

- **CSP allocations for Postgraduate Coursework programs across the sector should be reviewed** and subject to ongoing monitoring.
- Allocation of **CSP for Postgraduate Coursework programs could incorporate equity targets** to ensure that students from low SES students have better access to this type and level of qualification.

References

Bennett, A., Naylor, R., Mellor, K., Brett, M., Gore, J., Harvey, A., James, R., Munn, B., Smith, S. & Whitty, G. (2015). *Equity initiatives in Australian Higher Education: A review of evidence of impact*. Newcastle, NSW: Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education, University of Newcastle. https://www.newcastle.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0016/261124/REPORT-FINAL.pdf

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RULES OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF ENABLING EDUCATORS OF AUSTRALIA INC. <http://enablingeducators.org/rules.html>

UON New Futures 2016-2025

https://www.newcastle.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/355979/Delivering-on-our-Strategy.pdf

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