

Australian Universities Accord: Draft Discussion Paper Response

This response by the Queensland Widening Tertiary Participation Consortium (the Consortium) focuses on section 3.5 of the Accord Discussion Paper, with a particular emphasis on the pre-access phase of the student life-cycle and addressing issues of academic and social preparation for university and reducing impact of structural barriers to higher education participation. This response represents practitioner voices from across Consortium institutions and is not necessarily the viewpoint of individual partner universities.

Summary of recommendations

Recommendation 1: Better targeting of equity funding (Accord Question 28)

Ensure targeting of equity funding includes recognition of compounding factors of disadvantage and the considerable intersectionality between equity groups. Consider the findings of the Review of Equity Groups¹ and the related study on cumulative factors of disadvantage² to improve definitions of equity groups and design and funding of programs that support them.

Recommendation 2: Reform HEPPP (Accord Question 28, 33)

Maintain HEPPP or similar program with funding by formula to support participation and success of higher education students from priority groups at a level sufficient to adequately support successful participation, completion and graduate outcomes.

Establish a separate dedicated Partnership fund for outreach and engagement with prospective domestic undergraduate students and their communities. Partnership funding should be adequate to enable long-term ongoing engagement with cohorts most under-represented in accessing higher education, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people from low SES backgrounds and regional and remote residents who face barriers to higher education participation such as low SES background and/or distance from a university campus. Such funding will need to recognize the additional costs needed for partnership delivery in more isolated regional and remote areas. Funding to be allocated by tender or a competitive grant process available to consortia that may include universities, Regional University Centres, Vocational Education and Training providers, schools, industries and other community stakeholders. A consortium approach, that is informed by community input and engagement with other key stakeholders is necessary to remove partnership activity from a university-centric and competitive approach to one that is more community-centered and focused on optimising

¹ Tomaszewski, T., Kubler, M., Perales, Western, M., Rampino, T. & Xiang, N. (2018) *Review of Identified Equity Groups: Final Report*. Brisbane ISSR.

² Tomaszewski, T., Kubler, M., Perales, F., Clague, D., Xiang, N. & Johnstone, M. (2020) *Investigating the Effects of Cumulative Factors of Disadvantage: Final Report*. Brisbane ISSR.

outcomes for individuals and communities. The 2017 HEPPP evaluation review³ also recommended a consortium approach to Partnership activity to achieve better coordination of delivery and to mitigate risks of Partnership funding being used for university promotion or recruitment.

Principles for Partnership funding should be based on more than a decade's experience in undertaking this work and considerable evidence on effective outreach and engagement policy and practice. This should include a focus on long-term, collaborative, place-based, co-designed partnership activity that builds awareness, capacity and confidence to choose from a full range of post-school career and study pathways and respects and facilitates individual preferences to stay or leave communities to pursue education and career goals.

Partnership strategies will vary by region but should include the following elements:

- Collaboration with schools, communities and other stakeholders to establish scaffolded tertiary awareness and preparation activities that are early, ongoing and experiential. This should include: building academic preparation and social support to choose post-school options; exposure to tertiary learning environments including early on-campus VET and higher education experiences (prior to end of Year 10) and authentic sources of information (such as student ambassadors); interventions timed to support critical decision making points including assisting students plan their educational pathway through school and post-school years; flexibility to respond to different school structures in regional and remote locations, including multi-aged classes and P-10 and P-12 schools; and integration with school curriculum and processes.
- Inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership in the design and implementation of Partnership initiatives including delivery of Indigenous specific activities where community need calls for it.
- Engage with parents, carers and Elders as the single largest influencers of students' pathways and post-school decisions.
- Take a lifelong learning, community-centred approach recognizing non-linear pathways and supporting community members to enter, exit and reentering education and training at different stages of their life. This may include such things as provision of bridging, enabling and capability building programs, facilitating recognition of prior learning and providing assistance to navigate financial and other support needs.
- Providing or supporting provision of career awareness and development activities to school students and community members including exposure to a wide variety of disciplines and career options if this is not available through a broader national program.

³ Acil Allen Consulting, (2017). Evaluation of the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program. Melbourne.

- Integration of evaluation into the design of Partnership activities utilizing a consistent evaluation framework such as the Student Equity in Higher Education Evaluation Framework⁴ and including broader community negotiated measures of success.

Recommendation 3: Reform NPPP (Accord Question 33)

Maintain a National Priority Pool Program that takes a wholistic approach to promoting equality of opportunity in higher education and is complementary to institutional Participation and collaborative Partnership activities. Funding should progress investigation of key national, state and regional equity priorities and foster innovation through institution and consortium led multi-year project trials. National leadership of the NPPP with input on state and regional priorities is required to implement an open and transparent process for establishing priorities, allocating funding, disseminating findings and driving reform and innovation. A body such as a revitalised National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education would be well suited to taking this coordinating role.

Recommendation 4: Fund collaborative multi-year projects to improve participation (Accord Question 33)

A focus on collaborative, co-design of multi-year projects with communities where participation in higher education is low should be maintained as a focus within Partnership and NPPP programs. However, with adequate funding and improved targeting of these programs a separate regional focused program should be unnecessary.

Recommendation 5: Improve equity and alignment across education and training sectors (Accord Question 30)

Work with state and territory governments and other providers of school and vocational education to improve alignment between the sectors and ensure students from all backgrounds have the same opportunities to acquire foundational learning skills and academic preparation to enable movement between education sectors.

Recommendation 6: Improve provision of Career Development Learning (Accord Question 30)

University Partnership work over the past decade has attempted to supplement career development learning (CDL) provision in prioritized schools and communities and in the short term should be supported to do so as outlined in the Partnership recommendations above.

Longer term, through collaboration with State and Territory Governments and increased investment, Australia should move to a universal, lifelong access model for CDL with initial priority given to provision for identified equity groups. Such work requires national leadership and coordination (such as by the National Careers Institute) and involvement of a range of

⁴ Robinson, M., Tomaszewski, W., Kubler, M., Johnstone, M., Clague, D., Zajac, T., Povey, J. & Salom, C. (2021). *Student Equity in Higher Education Evaluation Framework: Final Report*. Brisbane. ISSR.

stakeholders including government, industry and education and training providers in its design and provision.

Recommendation 7: Broader reforms to higher education policy and funding (Accord Questions 30,31,33)

A more inclusive higher education policy and funding environment is likely to include:

- Recognition of the increased costs of support for people from identified equity groups and the compounding impact of multiple factors of disadvantage on higher education access and completion. Devlin et al⁵ estimated the cost of supporting undergraduate low SES students was in the vicinity of six times the cost of supporting medium and high SES students.
- A return of demand driven funding for domestic undergraduate student places to ensure growth is not constrained, especially for under-represented cohorts.
- A fair and equitable system for sharing tuition costs that includes no student paying greater than 50% of the cost of their degree, and tuition costs tied to expected graduate salaries with those gaining the highest private benefit expected to pay more.
- An equitable income contingent loans scheme for tuition costs with higher repayment thresholds and removal of indexation on student loans to remove inequities felt particularly by people in lower paid industries and those with caring responsibilities who spend time outside the workforce or with reduced hours in paid employment.
- Adequate funding for cost of living expenses for students which takes account of family and personal income and additional costs associated with the need to relocate to participate in tertiary education. Review of financial support payments for students should include increasing the level of payments, simplifying eligibility requirements including review of dependent student rules and lowering the age of independence from the current age of 22.
- Facilitation of a wide range of education and training options that are more interconnected and flexible to cater for a broader range of learners and adaptable to their needs. This may include greater use of recognition of prior learning, nested qualifications, quality online, blended and face-to face learning options and more integrated delivery and support for students through traditional campus models and through decentralised community provision (such as the Regional University Centre model).
- A wholistic approach to equity funding and delivery that is less siloed and better recognises the intersectionality of equity groups.

⁵ Devlin, M., Zhang, L., Edwards, D., Withers, G., McMillan, J., Vernon, L. & Trinidad, S. (2023). The costs of and economies of scale in supporting students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds in Australian higher education, *Higher Education Research & Development*, 42:2, 290-305, DOI:10.1080/07294360.2022.2057450

Detailed Response

1. Background

1.1 The Queensland Widening Tertiary Participation Consortium

The Queensland Widening Tertiary Participation Consortium is a whole-of-state initiative involving collaboration between Queensland's seven Table A universities and the multi-state Australian Catholic University. These universities operate in equal numbers across metropolitan and regional parts of the State (see Table 1) and together, they are responsible for over 95% of Queensland's domestic higher education enrolments⁶.

Table 1: Consortium members and their regional classification

UNIVERSITY	REGIONAL CLASSIFICATION
Australian Catholic University: Queensland Campus (ACU)	Metropolitan campus of multi-state university
CQUniversity (CQU)	Regional University
Griffith University (Griffith)	Metropolitan University
James Cook University (JCU)	Regional University
Queensland University of Technology (QUT)	Metropolitan University
The University of Queensland (UQ)	Metropolitan Headquartered University
University of Southern Queensland (USQ)	Regional University
University of the Sunshine Coast (USC)	Regional University

The Consortium was established in 2009 and provides coordinated pre-access activities that aim to improve participation of traditionally under-represented groups in higher education, particularly focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, residents of regional and remote locations and people from low socio-economic status (low SES) backgrounds. In 2022, Consortium universities partnered with 288 schools including 67 primary and 221 secondary schools as well as adult learners, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and other community groups. Two-thirds of these schools were located in regional and remote locations, and 14% of their enrolments were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

1.2 Queensland demographics

Queensland faces unique geographic and demographic challenges in terms of increasing participation in higher education. It is Australia's third most populous state and the second largest by land area. Its population is disproportionately located across a number of large provincial cities as well as more sparsely settled regional and remote locations (37% of the population is regional or remote compared to 29% nationally)⁷. In comparison to the rest of Australia, Queensland has a higher proportion of residents located in the lowest SES postcodes

⁶ Department of Education (2023). Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2021 Student data

⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2023). Search Census Data, Australia Government. <https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/search-by-area> Accessed 09.03.2023

(32% of 15-65 year olds in Queensland compared to 25% nationally - ABS 2016 census data)⁸, and a higher proportion of First Nations peoples (4.6% of the population compared to 3.2% nationally – ABS 2021 census)⁹.

These demographic factors have long been considered a contributor to lower rates of higher education attainment in Queensland in comparison to the rest of Australia. Table 3 shows that while the proportion of Queenslanders aged 25-34 years old with a bachelor degree or higher qualification has grown by almost 10 percentage points in the past decade, in 2022 Queensland still had the lowest degree attainment rate of all Australian states and territories.

Table 3: Proportion of persons aged 25-34 years with a non-school qualification at Bachelor degree level or above (%), 2013-2022¹⁰

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
NSW	38.1	39.9	40.5	41.9	43.4	44.6	44.7	44.6	48.1	47.1
Vic.	42.2	40.7	42.0	41.9	43.7	43.6	44.4	48.4	48.6	48.9
Qld	26.8	28.5	28.3	26.4	33.8	29.6	34.2	35.7	32.4	36.6
SA	26.9	34.2	34.2	33.1	30.8	35.7	31.6	34.9	37.6	41.1
WA	29.7	34.4	36.1	32.2	35.1	34.3	35.4	39.4	37.6	40.8
Tas.	26.8	23.6	25.3	24.9	26.3	29.9	35.0	34.1	38.0	37.7
NT	29.0	34.2	32.5	27.7	27.0	30.8	39.2	38.2	38.5	45.0
ACT	49.4	52.2	49.2	50.0	46.0	58.3	50.1	54.7	57.8	58.1
Persons	35.2	36.9	37.3	37.1	39.4	39.7	40.7	42.8	43.5	44.6

For Australia to be successful in its ambition to lift participation and attainment from Indigenous, regional, remote and low SES cohorts, Queensland will need to play a larger role. As a proportion of the Australian population Queensland has 29% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (ABS 2021 Census), 26% of Australia's regional and remote residents (ABS

⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2023). Search Census Data, Australia Government. <https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/search-by-area> Accessed 09.03.2023

⁹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2023). Search Census Data, Australia Government. <https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/search-by-area> Accessed 09.03.2023

¹⁰ ABS (May 2022). Education and Work. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/education-and-work-australia/latest-release> Accessed 31.03.2023

2016) and 24% of people from low SES backgrounds (ABS 2016 Census, proportion of resident population in lowest Quartile SA1, SEIFA Index of Education and Occupation)¹¹.

2 Reform to equity funding and delivery

The Consortium supports the Panel's proposition that a whole of student lifecycle approach is required to ensure all Australians have equal access to and capacity to succeed in higher education with responsibility for change shared across communities, education institutions and governments. In the pre-access stage, such an approach would involve working with students, parents and care givers; community members; schools and tertiary education institutions; industry and employers; and state and national governments.

More than a decade of partnership funding to universities has demonstrated that universities have an important and unique role in supporting student aspirations, building skills and capacity to realise those aspirations, and successfully negotiating pathways to higher education. The below sets out funding and structural reforms to improve interventions at the pre-access stage to ensure more people from under-represented backgrounds gain equal opportunity to access higher education.

2.1 Indigenous, Regional and Low SES Attainment Fund (IRLSAF)

The Australian Government currently provides funding to support universities improve access and participation of Indigenous, regional, remote and low SES students through a number of separate programs that currently make up the IRLSAF. Participation ratios (Acord discussion paper Figure 5) show the extent of underrepresentation for each of these groups with participation lowest for low SES and remote students and greatest improvement in recent years for Indigenous students.

The National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) study¹² of impacts of the Consortium's widening participation activities across regional and urban locations found a statistically significant correlation between high levels of engagement and improvements in university application rates. Analysis of case-study schools found that ongoing engagement with schools and communities including hands-on experiences of higher education and authentic sources of information such as student ambassadors, built a virtuous circle leading to better informed and more confident decision making about post-school pathways. The study also found that resourcing constraints meant that outside metropolitan areas and large provincial cities, widening participation activity had not been implemented and sustained at sufficient depth to prove effective. As well as lacking depth of widening participation engagement, in regional areas where students needed to relocate to undertake higher education, additional financial and emotional costs increased the risks associated with attending university. These findings are

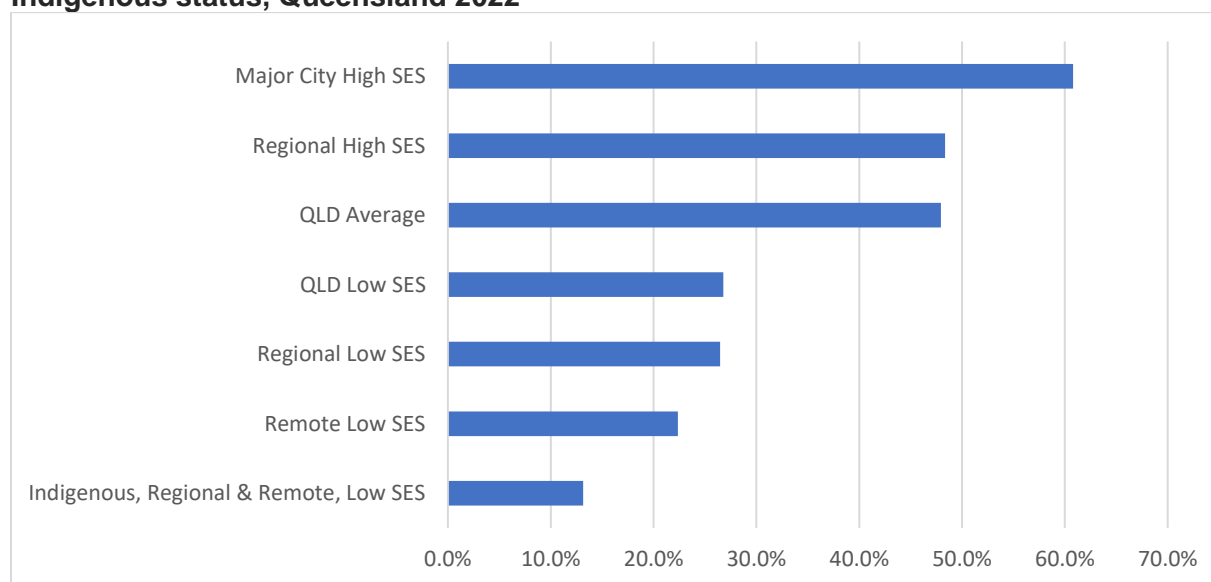
¹¹ ABS. (2023). Search Census Data, Australia Government. <https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/search-by-area> Accessed 09.03.2023

¹² Zacharias, N., Mitchell, G., Raciti, M., Koshy, P., Li, I., Costello, D., & Trinidad, S. (2018). *Widening Regional and Remote Participation: Interrogating the Impact of Outreach Programs across Queensland*. Perth: National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education.

consistent with research by Gore and colleagues¹³, who highlight the significance of complex community factors on higher education decisions and Tomaszewski et al's¹⁴ findings related to the cumulative impact of disadvantage factors.

Consortium data on Year 12 application rates for university study demonstrate that it is the compounding effect of multiple factors that have the greatest impact on whether a regional student displays interest in progressing from school to university. This data, displayed in Figure 1, shows that for Queensland Year 12 students, the highest application rates come from those attending higher SES urban schools, but high SES regional schools have application rates just above the state average. However, if the school is in the lower SES category, application rates decline dramatically with further reductions occurring for remote students. Application rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from lower SES regional or remote schools have the lowest application rates. These results suggest funding for regional students needs to be prioritised to regions with greatest needs including presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island populations, concentrations of low SES background communities, and distance from a university campus.

Figure 1: Year 12 university application rate (proportion of Year 12 completers applying through QTAC for Semester 1 study at a Consortium University) by remoteness, SES and Indigenous status, Queensland 2022



Note: Remoteness based on schools ASGS 2016 remoteness classification: Major cities of Australia, Regional (Inner and Outer Regional classification), and Remote (Remote and Very Remote classification). Low SES includes schools with ICSEA below 1,000 while High SES includes all schools above ICSEA 1,000.

¹³ Gore, J., Patfield, S., Fray, L., & Harris, J. (2022). *Community Matters: The Complex Links Between Community and Young People's Aspirations for Higher Education* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003019534>

¹⁴ Tomaszewski, T., Kubler, M., Perales, F., Clague, D., Xiang, N. & Johnstone, M. (2020) *Investigating the Effects of Cumulative Factors of Disadvantage: Final Report*. Brisbane: ISSR.

Recommendation 1:

Ensure targeting of equity funding includes recognition of compounding factors of disadvantage and the considerable intersectionality between equity groups. Consider the findings of the Review of Equity Groups¹⁵ and the related study on cumulative factors of disadvantage¹⁶ to improve definitions of equity groups and design and funding of programs that support them.

2.2 HEPPP

Implementation of the HEPPP significantly increased funding and support for improving participation and success for under-represented students included a focus on universities building partnerships with schools and communities which had hitherto been limited, ad-hoc and uncoordinated. Guidelines¹⁷ accompanying the introduction of the HEPPP established 'Partnership' activities underpinned by principles of: collaboration; early intervention and continuing engagement; awareness of pathways and information on access; integration with other programs and activities and avoidance of duplication; focus on participation not promotion of individual institutions; and evidence-based interventions.

Initial HEPPP Partnerships funding was comprised of small institutional allocations and larger competitive grant funding which in Queensland enabled targeting of partnership funding to areas of greatest need such as large, low SES regional locations and places with large Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations. Changes to HEPPP in 2015 and the demise of separate Participation and Partnership allocations, led to a disconnect between funding allocation to universities and the cost of partnering with large and dispersed under-represented cohorts, mostly borne by regional universities. Internal university tension also emerged between the need to support enrolled students from under-represented cohorts and the cost of maintaining deep and ongoing partnerships across large regions and geographically spread communities.

The current formula based HEPPP funding model which ties allocations to the number of enrolled Indigenous, regional, remote and low SES students is disconnected from the actual costs of providing outreach and engagement to prospective students which is dependent on the scale, complexity and geographic dispersal of outreach activity. There is currently little incentive for universities to undertake outreach with dispersed regional and remote communities when the high cost of doing so comes at the expense of supporting enrolled students. In a study by Devlin et al¹⁸, universities noted the significant costs involved in building aspirations and student

¹⁵ Tomaszewski, T., Kubler, M., Perales, Western, M., Rampino, T. & Xiang, N. (2018) *Review of Identified Equity Groups: Final Report*. Brisbane ISSR.

¹⁶ Tomaszewski, T., Kubler, M., Perales, F., Clague, D., Xiang, N. & Johnstone, M. (2020) *Investigating the Effects of Cumulative Factors of Disadvantage: Final Report*. Brisbane ISSR.

¹⁷ Commonwealth of Australia. (2012). *Other Grant Guidelines (Education) 2012*. Canberra.

¹⁸ Devlin, M., Zhang, L., Edwards, D., Withers, G., McMillan, J., Vernon, L. & Trinidad, S. (2023). The costs of and economies of scale in supporting students from low socioeconomic

capital, and while they saw this work as critical, they were mindful it was not cost-effective and nor was there a direct correlation between a university's aspiration work and increased enrolments at that university.

There is thus a need to separate Participation funding which relates to enrolled students who are the responsibility of individual universities and Partnerships funding which is of multi-sectional concern for institutions, schools, industry and community.

Recommendation 2:

Maintain HEPPP or similar program with funding by formula to support participation and success of higher education students from priority groups at a level sufficient to adequately support successful participation, completion and graduate outcomes.

Establish a separate dedicated Partnership fund for outreach and engagement with prospective domestic undergraduate students and their communities. Partnership funding should be adequate to enable long-term ongoing engagement cohorts most under-represented in accessing higher education, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people from low SES backgrounds and regional and remote residents who face barriers to higher education participation such as low SES background and/or distance from a university campus. Such funding will need to recognize the additional costs needed for partnership delivery in more isolated regional and remote areas. Funding to be allocated by tender or a competitive grant process available to consortia that may include universities, Regional University Centres, Vocational Education and Training providers, schools, industries and other community stakeholders. A consortium approach, that is informed by community input and engagement with other key stakeholders is necessary to remove partnership activity from a university-centric and competitive approach to one that is more community-centered and focused on optimising outcomes for individuals and communities. The 2017 HEPPP evaluation review¹⁹ also recommended a consortium approach to Partnership activity to achieve better coordination of delivery and to mitigate risks of Partnership funding being used for university promotion or recruitment.

Principles for Partnership funding should be based on more than a decade's experience in undertaking this work and considerable evidence on effective outreach and engagement policy and practice. This should include a focus on long-term, collaborative, place-based, co-designed partnership activity that builds awareness, capacity and confidence to choose from a full range of post-school career and study pathways and respects and facilitates individual preferences to stay or leave communities to pursue education and career goals.

Partnership strategies will vary by region but should include the following elements:

status backgrounds in Australian higher education, *Higher Education Research & Development*, 42:2, 290-305, DOI:10.1080/07294360.2022.2057450

¹⁹ Acil Allen Consulting, (2017). Evaluation of the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program. Melbourne.

- Collaboration with schools, communities and other stakeholders to establish scaffolded tertiary awareness and preparation activities that are early, ongoing and experiential. This should include: building academic preparation and social support to choose post-school options; exposure to tertiary learning environments including early on-campus VET and higher education experiences (prior to end of Year 10) and authentic sources of information (such as student ambassadors); interventions timed to support critical decision making points including assisting students plan their educational pathway through school and post-school years; flexibility to respond to different school structures in regional and remote locations, including multi-aged classes and P-10 and P-12 schools; and integration with school curriculum and processes.
- Inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership in the design and implementation of Partnership initiatives including delivery of Indigenous specific activities where community need calls for it.
- Engage with parents, carers and Elders as the single largest influencers of students' pathways and post-school decisions.
- Take a lifelong learning, community-centred approach recognizing non-linear pathways and supporting community members to enter, exit and reentering education and training at different stages of their life. This may include such things as provision of bridging, enabling and capability building programs, facilitating recognition of prior learning and providing assistance to navigate financial and other support needs.
- Providing or supporting provision of career awareness and development activities to school students and community members including exposure to a wide variety of disciplines and career options if this is not available through a broader national program.
- Integration of evaluation into the design of Partnership activities utilizing a consistent evaluation framework such as the Student Equity in Higher Education Evaluation Framework²⁰ and including broader community negotiated measures of success.

2.3 National Priority Pool Program (NPPP)

Since 2014 the National Priority Pool Program (and its predecessor, the National Priority Pool) has allocated funding for commissioned projects and university led initiatives for the purpose of:

- conducting research that builds the evidence base that informs equity policy and practice;
- conducting trials of innovative approaches to equity policy and practice;
- more effective and efficient implementation of equity policy and programs; and
- responses to emerging priorities that will maximise equity student outcomes.²¹

²⁰ Robinson, M., Tomaszewski, W., Kubler, M., Johnstone, M., Clague, D., Zajac, T., Povey, J. & Salom, C. (2021). *Student Equity in Higher Education Evaluation Framework: Final Report*. Brisbane. ISSR.

²¹ Commonwealth of Australia. (2022). *Higher Education Support (Other Grants) Guidelines 2022*. Canberra.

This program has enabled some quality research and trials that have informed national policy and practice. However, the implementation of the program has been uneven as has been dissemination and implementation of project outcomes. While \$6.5 million is allocated annually to this program, funding for innovation and program trials has evaporated and there has been quite limited dissemination and implementation of outcomes from significant commissioned NPPP projects. In 2019 there was no project funding allocated despite the department calling for expressions of interest and universities undertaking the considerable work required in developing applications. Between 2020 and 2022 only a small number of government commissioned projects were funded with no funding for innovative, institution or consortium led initiatives. The sector is poorer for missed opportunities on learning from insights of innovation to inform practice.

Recommendation 3:

Maintain a National Priority Pool that takes a wholistic approach to promoting equality of opportunity in higher education and is complementary to institutional Participation and collaborative Partnership activities. Funding should progress investigation of key national, state and regional equity priorities and foster innovation through institution and consortium led multi-year project trials. National leadership of the NPPP with input on state and regional priorities is required to implement an open and transparent process for establishing priorities, allocating funding, disseminating findings and driving reform and innovation. A body such as a revitalised National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education would be well suited to taking this coordinating role.

2.4 Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program (RPPPP)

Based on recommendations of the Napthine Review, the RPPPP aimed to support collaborative outreach projects that enable higher education aspirations of students in regional and remote Australia. Providing \$7.1 million over three years (2022-2024) the fund is far from adequate to cover the cost of reaching regional and remote locations across all Australian jurisdictions and the timeframe too short to develop deep and ongoing partnerships required to change participation in these locations. Implementation of the RPPPP has also been frustratingly slow. After program announcement in June 2020, the Phase one round did not open till late 2022. Further delay in commencement of Phase one projects and consideration of Phase two submissions (over 4 months) has been detrimental to building partnerships and trust with regional and remote communities involved in Phase one consultations, as well as impacting project continuity and staff resourcing.

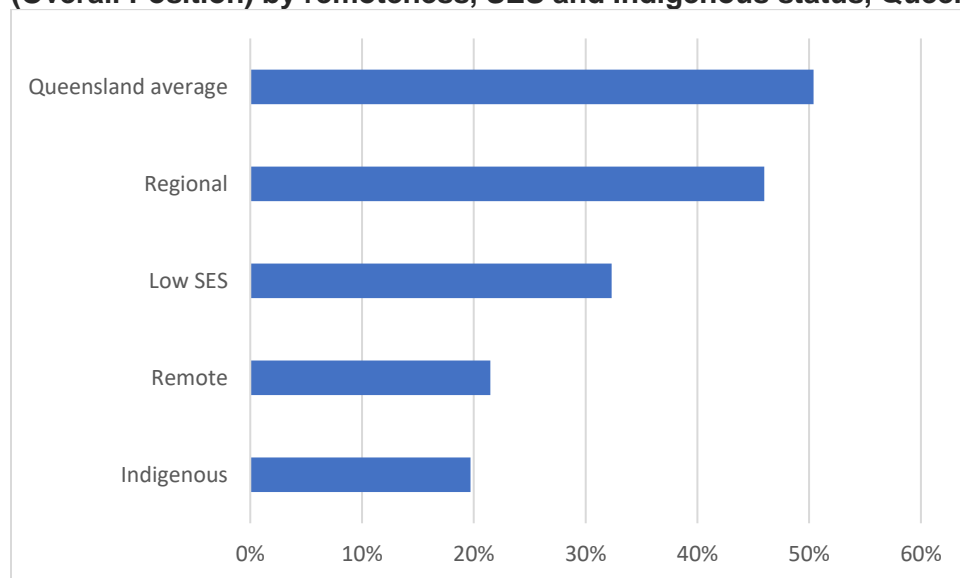
Recommendation 4:

A focus on collaborative, co-design of multi-year projects with communities where participation in higher education is low should be maintained as a focus within Partnership and NPPP programs. However, with adequate funding and improved targeting of programs a separate regional focused program should be unnecessary.

3. Reform and alignment of equity outcomes for schools and vocational education

Initiatives to improve access to higher education cannot ignore the crucial role of state governments in the provision of school education and Vocational Education and Training and the development of foundational learning skills and preparation of students for lifelong learning. However, the Australian Government's role in funding across these two sectors provides opportunity to positively influence school and training outcomes. The current review of the National School Reform Agreement provides a timely opportunity to ensure equity reforms in schooling and higher education are aligned. Priority funding and innovation is needed to ensure school students from equity groups have improved outcomes in terms of developing foundational learning skills, accessing quality career development learning, completing Year 12 and having academic preparation in school that enables choice of tertiary education pathways. Figure 2 shows that the proportion of Year 12 completing students who also receive an academic qualification (2019 Queensland Overall Position) is impacted by low SES background, remoteness and by Indigenous status. This data is a major explaining factor for the higher education application rates displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 2: Proportion of Year 12 completers with an academic preparation qualification (Overall Position) by remoteness, SES and Indigenous status, Queensland 2019



Note: Remoteness based on schools ASGS 2016 remoteness classification: Regional (Inner and Outer Regional classification), and Remote (Remote and Very Remote classification). Low SES includes schools with ICSEA below 1,000.

Universities are well placed to play a major role in supporting development of academic skills through the delivery of initial teacher education, professional development of teachers and ongoing education research as well as through its school and community partnerships. It is however recognised that the primary responsibility for foundational learning and academic skills is with the school sector and teachers as key influencers for students at school.

Recommendations of the Naphthine Review²² and the Joyce Review²³ recommended improved delivery of career information and clearer secondary school pathways. Improved alignment between secondary, vocational and higher education sectors is critical to achieving better post-school outcomes for all students and particularly those from equity groups who are commonly over-represented in lower level VET qualifications but under-represented in higher level qualifications including diplomas, degrees and postgraduate qualifications. As outlined in the Partnership recommendations above, collaboration between vocational education and higher education providers is essential in working with communities to increase engagement in education and training, develop clearer and more varied pathways, facilitate successful movement between sectors, and enable successful completion of a range of qualifications.

Recommendation 5:

Work with state and territory governments and other providers of school and vocational education to improve alignment between the sectors and ensure students from all backgrounds have the same opportunities to acquire foundational learning skills and academic preparation to enable movement between education sectors.

4. Improved provision of Career Development Learning

Further investment in career development learning (CDL) is also required to improve post-school outcomes, participation in tertiary education participation and improved workforce productivity. Australian and international studies have highlighted the crucial role of career development learning and especially so for students from identified equity groups whose families and communities often lack exposure to a broad range of career opportunities and experience of diverse post-school education and training pathways. Despite some good resources and initiatives, Australia lacks universal access to consistent, high quality CDL provision both for school students and the broader community. Recent studies²⁴ highlight this lack of adequate CDL in Australia and its unequal provision in low SES schools.

²² Naphthine, D., Graham, C., Lee, P. & Wills, M. (2019). *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy final report* (Naphthine Review). Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia

²³ Joyce, S. (2019). *Strengthening Skills: Expert Review of Australia's Vocational Education and Training System* (Joyce Review). Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

²⁴ Austin, K., O'Shea, S., Groves, O., & Lamanna, J. (2022). *Best-practice career education for students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds: Final report*. Perth: National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education.

Bennett, D., Coffey, J., Bawa S., Carney, D., Dockery, A. M., Franklyn, K., Koshy, P., Li, I. W., Parida, S., & Unwin, S. (2022). *Ameliorating disadvantage: Creating accessible, effective and equitable careers and study information for low SES students*. Perth: National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education.

Recommendation 6:

University Partnership work over the past decade has attempted to supplement CDL provision in prioritized schools and communities and in the short term should be supported to do so as outlined in the Partnership recommendations above.

Longer term, through collaboration with State and Territory Governments and increased investment, Australia should move to a universal, lifelong access model for CDL with initial priority given to provision for identified equity groups. Such work requires national leadership and coordination (such as by the National Careers Institute) and involvement of a range of stakeholders including government, industry and education and training providers in its design and provision.

5. Broader reforms to higher education policy and funding

A stable, fair, transparent and inclusive tertiary education policy environment is essential for widening participation of under-represented groups in higher education. Following enactment of post Bradley Review higher education reforms that promoted sector growth and inclusion, Australia saw growth in higher education participation including growth in the number of students coming from Indigenous, low SES and regional and remote cohorts.

However, post 2016, high profile debate over higher education costs and benefits, the eventual cessation of demand driven funding and the introduction of the Job Ready Graduates package created an environment in which challenges and risks associated with undertaking university study were exacerbated. While HEPPP has enjoyed bipartisan support, it did not grow to the level envisioned by Bradley and nor was it able to counter a narrative focused on devaluing mass higher education participation and shifting more of the cost of higher education to students. This policy environment and the higher education changes that have occurred have heightened impacts on members of under-represented groups who are more risk averse than other groups²⁵ and are less connected to the benefits of higher education experienced by members of higher SES families.

Recommendation 7:

A more inclusive higher education policy and funding environment is likely to include:

- Recognition of the increased costs of support for people from identified equity groups and the compounding impact of multiple factors of disadvantage on higher education access and completion. Devlin et al²⁶ estimated the cost of supporting undergraduate low

²⁵ Raciti, M. (2019). Career Construction, Future Work and the Perceived Risks of Going to University for Young People from low SES Backgrounds: Research Fellowship Final Report, Perth: National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education.

²⁶ Devlin, M., Zhang, L., Edwards, D., Withers, G., McMillan, J., Vernon, L. & Trinidad, S. (2023). The costs of and economies of scale in supporting students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds in Australian higher education, *Higher Education Research & Development*, 42:2, 290-305, DOI:10.1080/07294360.2022.2057450

SES students was in the vicinity of six times the cost of supporting medium and high SES students.

- A return of demand driven funding for domestic undergraduate student places to ensure growth is not constrained, especially for under-represented cohorts.
- A fair and equitable system for sharing tuition costs that includes no student paying greater than 50% of the cost of their degree, and tuition costs tied to expected graduate salaries with those gaining the highest private benefit expected to pay more.
- An equitable income contingent loans scheme for tuition costs with higher repayment thresholds and removal of indexation on student loans to remove inequities felt particularly by people in lower paid industries and those with caring responsibilities who spend time outside the workforce or with reduced hours in paid employment.
- Adequate funding for cost of living expenses for students which takes account of family and personal income and additional costs associated with the need to relocate to participate in tertiary education. Review of financial support payments for students should include increasing the level of payments, simplifying eligibility requirements including review of dependent student rules and lowering the age of independence from the current age of 22.
- Facilitation of a wide range of education and training options that are more interconnected and flexible to cater for a broader range of learners and adaptable to their needs. This may include greater use of recognition of prior learning, nested qualifications, quality online, blended and face-to face learning options and more integrated delivery and support for students through traditional campus models and through decentralised community provision (such as the Regional University Centre model).
- A wholistic approach to equity funding and delivery that is less siloed and better recognises the intersectionality of equity groups.