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Dear Members of the Accord Panel

This submission provides a short summary of the findings of research relevant to increasing engagement in higher education by students from defined equity groups. This submission is relevant to the following questions:

Q20 how can pathways between VET and higher education be improved, how can students be helped to navigate these pathways?

Q28 what is needed to increase the number of people from under-represented groups applying to and prepared for higher education, both from school and other pathways?

Q29 what changes in provider practices and offerings are necessary to ensure all potential students can succeed in their chosen area of study?

The development of alternative pathways into university has widened participation and provided access to higher education to a broader cross-section of the population by facilitating the participation of students from diverse backgrounds. However, supporting non-traditional students through to the completion of their higher education degrees involves changing institutional policies and practices. For example, students from non-traditional backgrounds may need opportunities to enhance their study skills before their first semester. Expanding funding for enabling programs appears to be a cost effective and efficient way to prepare potential students for higher education. An enabling program is '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' (Australian Government, 2012 p. 26). Enabling programs can smooth the transition for students with VET qualifications who tend to be under-prepared for higher education. They can also prepare mature age students and school leavers who did not successfully complete sufficient ATAR subjects. Students are provided with opportunities to develop academic skills such as, critical thinking, academic writing, researching, referencing, paraphrasing and literacy skills. In other words, students acquire the foundational skills necessary for the successful completion of a Bachelor Degree. Students in enabling programs do not contribute to the costs of their tuition. Although, students are under no obligation to complete the Program or to enrol in a higher education degree after completion of the Program, the retention and attrition rates of the students who do enrol in a Bachelor Degree are of particular interest to policymakers and the Commonwealth Government. Non-traditional students are typically students from low socio-economic backgrounds and/or those with parents who have lower levels of education. Young people from low SES families are more likely than those from high SES families to have parents who have no experience of the higher education sector. Although non-traditional students are more likely to discontinue their studies, analysis of administrative data from two universities with well-developed enabling programs indicates that students who successfully complete these tertiary preparation courses are just as likely to complete their Bachelor Degrees as traditional students who enter university on the basis of their ATAR (Chesters et al. 2018; Chesters & Watson 2016). Administrative data provided by the University of Canberra for the 2007 cohort of commencing students shows that of the seven pathways into university, the traditional pathway accounted for 51% of students; enabling programs accounted for 22% of students and VET accounted for 18% of students (Chesters & Watson 2016). Analysis of the data indicates that students who were accepted on the basis of completing the University of Canberra enabling program were less likely than students who entered via any other pathway, including ATAR students, to discontinue their studies. For example, students admitted on the basis of Year 12 completion at school were 1.7 times more likely than students from the on-campus enabling program with the same GPA to discontinue their studies. This is more than likely due to on-campus enabling programs supporting students through their familiarisation with aspects of university life, social engagement and commitment to the university before they commence undergraduate studies. Administrative data provided by the University of the Sunshine Coast for the 2010 cohort of commencing students indicates that 60% entered via the traditional pathway, 16% entered after completing a lower level higher education qualification, 12% used their VET qualification and 10% had completed the University's enabling program [Tertiary Preparation Program] (Chesters et al. 2018). After controlling for sex, age, study status, field and GPA, students who entered via the enabling program were no more likely than traditional students to discontinue their studies. In other words, although not being eligible to enrol in a Bachelor Degree without completing the Tertiary Preparation Program, these students were just as likely to graduate as their peers who did enrol on the basis of their ATAR. Providing extra funding for enabling programs via the Commonwealth Grants Scheme would allow universities to offer these opportunities to a broader range of potential students. Encouraging potential students who did not complete secondary school with a high level of achievement to undertake an enabling program before they enrol in a Bachelor Degree will require a change in the way Universities, and the community, regard 'success'. Students may not achieve success in the form of a high level ATAR, but may achieve success through the completion of an enabling program. Therefore, if

the Commonwealth Government is serious about supporting students from non-traditional backgrounds to complete a higher education degree, it needs to expand enabling programs and encourage all universities to provide these opportunities to students from all of the identified equity groups. In other words, rather than restricting entry into enabling programs to students from Indigenous backgrounds or students with a disability, all universities should be funded to widen access to students from all of the identified equity groups. Diversifying the cohort engaged in enabling programs may also remove any stigma attached to students taking up opportunities for a 'second chance'. Students are more likely to complete their studies if they feel that they belong to the institution and can identify with the ethos of the institution. Furthermore, being part of a cohort of students enrolled in an enabling program may provide a support network that develops before, during and after university study. Australian Government. (2012). Administrative Information for Higher Education Providers: Student Support. Canberra: Australian Government. Chesters, J., Rutter, K. Nelson, K. & Watson, L. (2018) Alternative pathways into university: Are tertiary preparation programs a viable option? Australian Universities Review 60(1): 35-44. Chesters, J. & Watson, L. (2016) Staying power: The effect of pathway to university on student achievement and attrition. Australian Journal of Adult Learning 56(2): 225-249