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Higher Education Reform Feedback
Higher Education Group
Australian Government
Department of Education and Training
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To Whom It May Concern

Submission to: Driving Innovation, Fairness and Excellence in Australian Higher Education

Thank you for providing the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) with an opportunity to make a submission on the Driving Innovation, Fairness and Excellence in Australian Higher Education Issues Paper (“Issues Paper”). Australia has a strong recent history in using departmental issues papers to drive the policy agenda in higher education and ensure that attention is focused on issues of national importance. We anticipate that this paper will be no exception.

About the NCSEHE

The Australian Government established the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE), currently based at Curtin University, with the purpose to inform public policy design, policy implementation and institutional practice in order to improve higher education participation and success for marginalised and disadvantaged people.

In Australia and internationally, the NCSEHE acts as a conduit for discussion and research on issues affecting student equity in higher education policy, practice and analysis. In keeping with its purpose, the NCSEHE aims to connect student equity policy with the activities of higher education institutions and national equity outcomes, through its input into comparative assessment of institutional strategies, systemic assessments of policy achievements and assessments of national policymaking in view of this evidence. As part of this mission, the NCSEHE strives to ‘close the gap’ between equity policy, research and practice, conducting activities through three core programs:

- **Equity Policy and Program Evaluation (Evaluation Program)** – providing leadership and support in developing a national approach and resources to evaluate the impact of initiatives to increase participation of people from low socio-economic status (low SES) backgrounds and other equity groups in higher education.
- **Equity Policy and Planning Research (Research Program)** – furthering equity policy and planning in Australia, sharing knowledge and capabilities developed in Australia, and providing evidence on the impact of policy on equity outcomes in the system.
- **Student Equity Data and Analysis (Data and Analysis Program)** – providing analysis and availability of national datasets on student equity in higher education.
The Submission

This submission to the Issues Paper from the NCSEHE, as befitting its mission, will focus on equity and fairness in higher education policy. There are three key reports the NCSEHE prepared for the Australian Government Department of Education and Training – and attached/linked to this letter – that indicate the extent to which work that has already been undertaken can provide impetus and support for the government’s intentions in the coming years.

The reports discussed are:

1. A Framework for Measuring Equity Performance in Australian Higher Education: (i) Final Report and (ii) Forward Plan, written by Dr Tim Pitman and Mr Paul Koshy, NCSEHE.
2. Pathways to Higher Education: The efficacy of enabling and sub-bachelor pathways for disadvantaged students, written by Dr Tim Pitman and Professor Sue Trinidad, NCSEHE; Professor Marcia Devlin, Federation University Australia; Dr Andrew Harvey and Mr Matt Brett, La Trobe University; and Dr Jade McKay, Deakin University.
3. Equity Scholarships Provision and Impacts, written by Professor Gail Whiteford and Professor Sue Trinidad, NCSEHE.

These three reports are briefly summarised below.

1. A Framework for Measuring Equity Performance in Australian Higher Education

Since the release of the Department’s document on equity group identification in A Fair Chance for All in 1990, and the subsequent Martin Review (The Review of Equity and General Performance Indicators in Higher Education) in 1994, Australia has used national data collection strategies to monitor and plan for equity outcomes in Australia, through the use of indicators. This saw the identification of key equity groups in Australian higher education:

- low socio-economic status (LSES) students;
- students with disability;
- Indigenous students;
- students from regional and remote areas;
- women in non-traditional areas of study (WINTA); and
- students from a non-English speaking background (NESB).

As the Issues Paper reports, equity groups continue to be under-represented in Australian higher education.¹ This observation has underpinned major policy initiatives in recent years, especially the Higher Education Partnerships and Participation Program (HEPPP), whose funding is allocated on the basis of institutional enrolment of low SES students in undergraduate courses.

The NCSEHE’s project, A Framework for Measuring Equity Performance in Australian Higher Education (“the Framework”), contributes to the development of this important system. It describes the resulting work and final recommendation on the form of a new equity collections framework for Australian higher education and is accompanied by a Forward Plan for its operationalisation.

The Framework (627kB) is intended to build on this legacy. In doing so, it will:

- provide a set of indicators that will allow the measurement of institutional and system-wide achievement in the higher education sector against the Government’s commitments, targets and goals in relation to equity; inform policy through the provision of relevant information to support the development of evidence-based policy;
- foster informed debate through the provision of key information;
- provide a platform which will guide evaluation of programs by government and activities by Institutions; and
- inform practice within, and support equity in, the higher education system.

¹ As per Table 1 (p. 11) of the Issues Paper.
Work on the Framework involved widespread consultation with the Department, external data collection agencies and institutions and incorporates feedback from a wider consultation with practitioners and administrators and results from the testing phase of the project.

Importantly, the Framework has been established in view of the development of the demand driven enrolment system in higher education and possible extension of the HECS-HELP program to non-university higher education providers (NUHEPs).

The Framework will report on specific institutional and system-wide performance among higher education providers in terms of the access, participation and performance of the six groups of under-represented students (equity groups) in higher education. Additionally, the Framework can be extended to include any new identified equity groups.

The Framework reports a series of Indicators for equity performance in higher education. It is hierarchical in structure and is comprised of three Tiers:

1. **Context** (Pre-higher education) – covering pre-primary, primary and secondary education results;
2. **Performance** (Higher education) – covering all 129 Australian higher education providers (see Appendix B) and university students at all levels of study; and
3. **Outcomes** (Post-higher education) – covering graduates from higher education.

Each Tier has related Domains and within each Domain are specific Indicators that measure higher education equity performance. Underlying each Indicator are data which represent the measurement of that Indicator. Details of the Framework can be found in its final report.

The **Forward Plan** (816kB) for this project outlines three options for the rollout of the Framework:

- **Option 1** (Continue Reporting in the Current Context);
- **Option 2** (Separate Reporting of Equity Performance Data); and
- **Option 3** (Development of a Standalone ‘Equity Report’).

Currently, the Framework and proposed Forward Plan for this project await public release, but we would strongly recommend that it feature in policy initiatives that flow from policies initiated in, and deliberations on, the Issues Paper.

2. **Pathways to Higher Education: The efficacy of enabling and sub-bachelor pathways for disadvantaged students** (7MB)

The Pathways to Higher Education report considers the efficacy of a variety of sub-bachelor pathways to higher education, with implications for future policy on such programs and their importance to ensuring fairness in the system. The report represents the most complete and up-to-date study of this kind, specific to the Australian higher education sector. Its key findings include:

- More than half of students admitted into higher education do not use an ATAR and transition via alternative pathways. Greater attention needs to be paid to the transparency of higher education admissions processes in these alternative pathways. Students, parents of students and the media need to be better educated in this regard.
- A greater proportion of students enrolled in and transitioning via enabling pathways are from recognised equity groups\(^2\) than any of the other sub-bachelor pathways examined.
- In terms of raw numbers, enabling programs are second only to VET studies in transitioning more equity-group students to Bachelor-level studies than the other sub-bachelor pathways examined.
- Students from recognised equity groups who articulate via an enabling program generally experience better first-year retention rates than those articulating via most other sub-bachelor pathways.

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2 Namely: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders; people from low socio-economic status background; people with a disability; people from regional and remote areas; people from non-English speaking backgrounds; and women enrolled in non-traditional areas of study.
Therefore, we think it of critical importance that measures designed to improve the transparency of higher education admission processes give appropriate consideration to the full range of alternative pathways, including enabling programs, sub-bachelor programs and VET. These pathways add a degree of complexity to any proposed admissions transparency framework. It is essential that this complexity be recognised, otherwise prospective students will be misinformed.

Our research reveals much variety in the structure, duration and focus of enabling programs that will need to be accommodated in an admissions transparency agenda. This variety does not fit neatly into the principles proposed by the Standards Panel. For example, students cannot be expected to have equal knowledge of how various admissions processes treat enabling and pathways programs (Principle 2), and presenting information about diverse entry pathways in a comparable form (Principle 6) risks drifting into overly elaborate and lengthy descriptions.

Some suggestions for how these challenges may be resolved include:

- Integrating information about key entry pathways (e.g. enabling and VET) within any admissions transparency framework; and
- Informing students the degree to which these programs have currency within institutional admissions processes. For example, institutional policies that indicate that students may gain entry following a pathways program are potentially misleading within a transparency agenda if institutional admissions practices do not value this pathway, or do value this pathway but with limited prospect of success.

Finally, a broader question relating to pathways programs, and particularly enabling programs, is the extent to which these programs could or should align with any nationally agreed definition. There are important policy implications of knowing which types of enabling programs are more effective than others and this question could be considered in more detail by the Higher Education Standards Panel.

3. Equity Scholarships Provision and Impacts

Australian universities provide equity scholarships to new and continuing students as a standard practice. The equity scholarships that are made available across universities vary in amount and duration and also in stated eligibility criteria. A process through which eligibility is determined and through which the scholarships are administered, also varies significantly from institution to institution. Until relatively recently, there has been little data available which reflects both institutional practice(s) in the provision of equity scholarships and the impacts on the recipients – the students – of these scholarships. This is an issue of concern for funders and providers alike given that the aggregated number of scholarships offered has, in an uncapped and HEPPP funded context, raised significantly in the period between 2009 and 2016. Addressing the range of issues associated with an uncapped environment is currently the focus of the newly formed Higher Education Standards Panel (HESP, 2016).

As part of its national mandate to highlight and address issues pertaining to student equity in Australia, the NCSEHE commissioned a review of four recent Australian studies focussed on equity scholarships. The purpose of this review was to:

- identify which scholarship architectures are most appropriate;
- determine which equity students-relative to need– benefit most from scholarships;
- identify what the threshold amounts for scholarships are that have most impact; and
- identify best institutional practice for administering scholarships.

Based on this analysis, the review of four significant studies aimed to also posit recommendations with respect to:

- Policy – for funders and providers;
- Institutional administration of equity scholarships; and
- Future research priorities.

In terms of research recommendations what is required is to provide evidence of the impact of scholarships in order to determine the true impact of what is a patchwork of offerings across the sector currently.
The findings indicate that significant funds are devoted to scholarships and evaluation practice is diverse in terms of ascertaining its likely impact and efficacy of those funds. There is scope for institutions to ‘own’ aspects of their scholarships practice and implement evaluation frameworks through which the institution-level impacts of scholarships become more visible. This would allow for improvement of processes on the run, and also to acquit against funding.

What needs investigation is how much of this information may already be captured through existing collections. For instance, the first and final year questionnaire of the University Experience Survey (UES), which is completed by a large number of students, could form the basis of data collection on scholarships. If there are gaps in the UES they can be addressed through the introduction of a module in the UES for scholarship recipients only. This would provide the type of data needed to access the impact of scholarships without necessarily initiating a new survey. The challenge would be to ensure that more scholarship recipients completed the UES and the additional questions. Completion of the UES could be a condition of scholarships.

A data set on scholarship holders of this type would allow for sophisticated statistical modelling, including multivariate analysis, to be undertaken at institutional, state and federal levels to determine causal relationships between student background, age, scholarship type, duration, university context (equity support infrastructure) etc. This will complement the extant, descriptive statistics available and provide a more detailed picture of the impact of scholarships. This could complement a national, multi method, longitudinal study that tracks individual students from equity backgrounds. This should include those who have been in receipt of a scholarship so that intra- and inter-group comparisons can be made on a range of indicators (including access to and use of social and academic support). This could also include ethnographic research component within discrete socio-demographic communities (e.g. remote communities) and socio-cultural communities (e.g. Indigenous, CALD communities) to illuminate the meanings associated with community members (in receipt of an equity scholarship) engaging in higher education and impacts on aspiration and attainment.

Concluding Remarks

We provide links to these reports in this letter. We trust that they prove to be a source of discussion and debate as the Department shapes the higher education policy agenda for the coming years.

In addition, the NCSEHE has conducted an exercise to ‘identify the gaps’ in its own higher education research program, one which summarises key research outcomes and discusses potential future issues facing equity programs in Australian higher education.

We would be happy to provide further comment on the reports provided, our future research direction, or other matters as required.

Yours sincerely

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