



UNIVERSITIES  
AUSTRALIA

DISCOVER LEARN LEAD

Submission to the Review of HEPPP

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Further inquiries should be made to the Chief Executive:

GPO Box 1142  
CANBERRA ACT 2601  
Ph: +61 2 6285 8100  
Fax: +61 2 6285 8101  
Email: [contact@universitiesaustralia.edu.au](mailto:contact@universitiesaustralia.edu.au)  
Web: [www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au](http://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au)  
ABN: 53 008 502 930

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## Executive Summary

The Higher Education Partnerships and Participation Program (HEPPP) is an effective initiative. It has helped drive an historic increase in university participation by people from low SES backgrounds and other under-represented groups.

Higher education access and equity is a long-term issue, and long-term solutions are needed. Government and universities should acknowledge and celebrate the gains made so far, and redouble efforts to make further improvements. HEPPP has only been in operation for six years.

Changing course now – by abolishing HEPPP, cutting it further, or changing it into a radically different scheme – would be highly counterproductive. Improving access and equity is difficult and gradual, but essential if we are to be taken seriously when we say we offer a fair chance to all. Successful programs like HEPPP should be retained and improved.

HEPPP's success has come in spite of several funding cuts. HEPPP would be more effective if it received adequate, predictable funding.

HEPPP is designed to provide support for universities' activities in both outreach and student support, addressing both access to university for students from under-represented groups, and success once they enrol. Both halves of the program are vital, and both should be retained.

HEPPP is targeted at low SES people. It would make an even more effective contribution to access and equity if it covered a broader range of under-represented groups.

Program design should include a rigorous evaluation framework. This would enable Government and universities to be clearer about objectives, as well as making it easier to assess performance against these.

## Recommendations

### Universities Australia recommends that Government should:

1. Retain HEPPP as the main national program to support access, equity and participation in higher education.
2. Commit to providing adequate and predictable funding for HEPPP.
3. Retain both the Partnerships and Participation components of HEPPP as separate elements of the Program.
4. Modify the HEPPP Guidelines to make the Program more flexible. In particular, make it easier for universities to use HEPPP funding to direct outreach and student support work to students from equity groups other than low SES.
5. Develop a detailed and rigorous evaluation framework and incorporate it into HEPPP Program design. The framework should support evaluation of:
  - a. the HEPPP program as a whole;
  - b. HEPPP Partnerships funding;
  - c. HEPPP Participation funding; and
  - d. University activities and projects funded under HEPPP.

### Universities Australia opposes:

6. Any proposal to convert HEPPP into a Government-funded scholarship scheme.

## Introduction

Universities Australia (UA) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Review of the Higher Education Partnerships and Participation Program (HEPPP).

The Review is an opportunity to showcase the success of the program and to examine the factors — in both program design and project implementation — that have supported this success. At the same time, there is an opportunity to look at factors that have limited the effectiveness of some HEPPP activities, and what improvements could overcome these barriers and boost the impact of the program. The review can also identify opportunities for the most effective targeting of HEPPP funding.

Educational disadvantage — associated with socio-economic status and other factors serves as a significant and systematic impediment to accessing higher education. Students from low SES backgrounds have long been under-represented at university, as have Indigenous Australians and those from rural, regional and remote areas.

The reasons for this persistent under-representation are many and complex.

To spread opportunity fairly, universities make substantial efforts to correct for the reality of systemic disadvantage. HEPPP has strongly supported these efforts. HEPPP has been instrumental in increasing the level of participation in higher education by disadvantaged students. HEPPP has helped universities to expand their outreach activities, and to strengthen and diversify their student support activities.

Universities Australia strongly supports the Government's intent to do more to raise student aspiration and identify and address the barriers to access and participation by disadvantaged and under-represented groups, particularly those living in regional and remote locations.

We also agree that more needs to be done to boost the completion rates of students from disadvantaged and under-represented population groups. Just as rates of access to university vary according to socio-demographic background, so do success and completion rates. Indigenous students and students from remote areas have markedly lower retention rates than the average<sup>1</sup>.

UA is committed to examining policy options for improvements in higher education access, equity and participation, and identifying practical proposals.

UA looks forward to productive and collaborative engagement with Government on the HEPPP Review and on subsequent discussions about policy and program design.

## HEPPP is effective and should be retained

### HEPPP has supported widening participation

HEPPP has been an effective program. It has contributed to significant and historic increases in higher education participation by people from socio-demographic groups that have traditionally been under-represented in higher education, especially people from low socio-economic status (low SES) backgrounds.

Between 2008 and 2014, the number of students from low SES background increased by 45.7 per cent, outstripping growth in overall domestic undergraduate enrolments, which grew by 32.7 per cent.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Education and Training n.d., *Completion Rates of Domestic Bachelor Students – A Cohort Analysis, 2005–2013*, DET, <https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/cohortanalysis2005-2013.pdf>

As a result students from low SES backgrounds now make up 17.7 per cent of domestic undergraduate students, up 1.6 percentage points from 2008. That is more than 41,000 disadvantaged students who have taken up the opportunities that flow from university education.

These increases in low SES enrolments follow a long period of no improvement. Low SES enrolments remained static at around 16 per cent between 2002 and 2007.

Growth in low SES participation, while gradual, is to be applauded, and built upon.

Over the same period, there were very strong increases in Indigenous enrolments (60.4 per cent). Indigenous students increased their share of domestic enrolments by 0.3 percentage points. Indigenous people are still under-represented compared to their share of the population (1.5 per cent compared to 2.7 per cent).

Despite increases in absolute numbers, the relative participation rate by regional and remote students, on the other hand, has not improved and has declined as a proportion of all domestic enrolments.

Regional and remote enrolments grew by 30.2 per cent between 2008 and 2014, but this was slightly slower than overall growth. As a result, regional and remote students' share of total domestic undergraduate enrolments declined slightly from 19.6 per cent to 19.2 per cent. Efforts must be redoubled to address this imbalance.

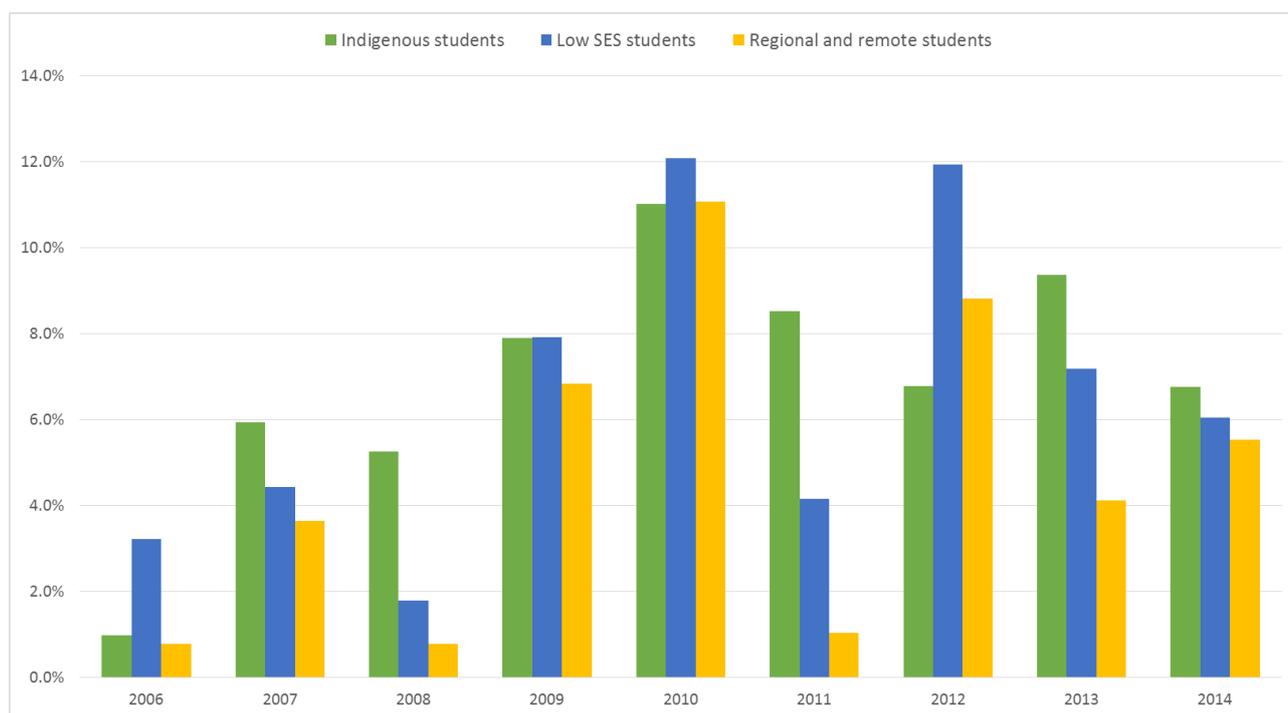
**Table 1: Growth in number and proportion of domestic undergraduate student enrolments**

	Number of domestic undergraduate students			Proportion of domestic undergraduate student enrolment		
	2008	2014	Growth (%)	2008	2014	Growth (percentage point)
Students with Disability	24,311	43,385	78.5%	4.3%	5.8%	1.5%
Indigenous Students	7,038	11,286	60.4%	1.3%	1.5%	0.3%
Low SES Students	90,467	131,800	45.7%	16.1%	17.7%	1.6%
Regional and Remote	110,124	143,339	30.2%	19.6%	19.2%	-0.4%
<b>All Domestic Undergraduate Students</b>	<b>561,886</b>	<b>745,733</b>	<b>32.7%</b>	-	-	-

Source: Department of Education and Training 2015, *Selected Higher Education Student Statistics*

Figure 1 shows that there has been a significant increase in the number of commencing undergraduate students who are Indigenous, from a low SES background or from regional and remote areas. Between 2008 and 2014, annual average growth for commencing undergraduate enrolment was 7.9 per cent per annum for Indigenous students; 7.3 per cent for low SES students; and 5.5 per cent for students from regional and remote areas. This compared to an annual average growth of 5.6 per cent for all commencing domestic undergraduate students over the same period.

Figure 1: Growth in commencing undergraduate student enrolments by equity group



Source: Department of Education and Training 2015. Higher Education Statistics Collection 2014 Student Data Appendix B – Equity Groups

## Widening participation: everyone's responsibility

As a national program in which all universities participate, HEPPP sends a powerful message that higher education and access is everybody's business: all universities play their part. The program enables every university to make a contribution. Just as importantly, HEPPP encourages universities to work together to address access and participation through joint projects and consortia. This cooperative approach enhances both the effectiveness and the efficiency of the program and the activities it funds.

HEPPP helps to raise aspiration among disadvantaged groups within the population. This is not a matter of institutional student recruitment, but is a commitment to building awareness of post-school options in higher education, VET and employment. This 'bigger picture' approach is vital to long-term efforts to boost participation.

Since HEPPP started in 2010, the university sector has made significant progress, but this has been uneven across different equity groups. Even where enrolment has markedly increased (low SES and Indigenous students), university participation remains well below population parity. Participation by regional and remote students has not increased, and has even declined slightly.

Clearly, there is more to be done. But the Government and the sector have made a solid start. While it is important to identify where we could do better, it is also timely to celebrate the significant achievement. Universities and Government should work together to build on successes so far.

It is important to be realistic about expected results for a program that has only been running for six years. To effect long-term, sustained change, HEPPP needs to operate as an integral and permanent part of the higher education funding system.

## HEPPP should continue to support both outreach and student support

HEPPP funds both outreach and student support projects, through Partnership and Participation components, respectively. These address access to university, and retention. Both halves of the program are vital to Government's and universities' efforts to make real and sustainable progress in higher education equity, access and participation.

Outreach to support students from under-represented communities to access higher education is critical. The evidence shows that students from low SES and other under-represented backgrounds are often unaware of higher education opportunities, or believe that university is not for them. Sustained outreach work is necessary to raise awareness and build aspiration for higher education, helping students understand their options and focus their preparation. HEPPP is currently the only dedicated source of support for university outreach.

Access is only half the challenge. Once students from under-represented backgrounds get to university, they tend to face further obstacles. Longer working hours, and greater family and caring responsibilities often combine with less money and less academic preparation. All of these factors are associated with attrition. In combination, they explain why students from under-represented groups are less likely to complete. For all of these reasons, funding for student support through the Participation component of HEPPP is needed to fund support services — both academic and other — to keep students in study and give them a fair chance at success.

The National Priorities Pool is also a useful component of HEPPP, enabling practical, action-oriented research on relevant issues of policy and program design, as well as equity practice, to inform effective, evidence-based interventions.

While there is some diversity in the types of programmes to support outreach and participation, most studies have found a high level of effectiveness<sup>2</sup>. For example:

- The *Queensland Widening Participation Consortium* of eight universities developed a partnerships approach in 2009 to improve the participation of low SES and Indigenous Queenslanders in tertiary education. School outreach involves each partner university working with a cluster of local low SES schools, focusing on activities with Year 6–12 students including demystification and awareness-raising, on-campus experiences, curriculum enrichment, career development, and information on access, scholarships and financial support.

A survey of over 6,000 school students in 2013 found 15 per cent improvement in agreement with the statement “I believe it is possible for me to go to university” after on-campus visits, compared to before. Application data from QTAC shows tertiary application rates for students most engaged in program activities improved by 2.5 per cent between 2012 and 2014.

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<sup>2</sup> Bennett, A et al. 2015, *The Critical Interventions Framework Part 2: Equity Initiatives in Australian Higher Education: A Review of Evidence of Impact*.

- The NSW *Bridges to Higher Education* collaboration was established in 2012 as a collaboration between five Sydney universities to improve the participation rate of students from communities under-represented in higher education in NSW.

KPMG reports that there was a statistically significant difference between Bridges and non-Bridges schools. The average increase in rates of Bridges applicants receiving an offer was significantly higher (5.13 per cent) than that of non-Bridges schools.

## HEPPP needs adequate and predictable funding

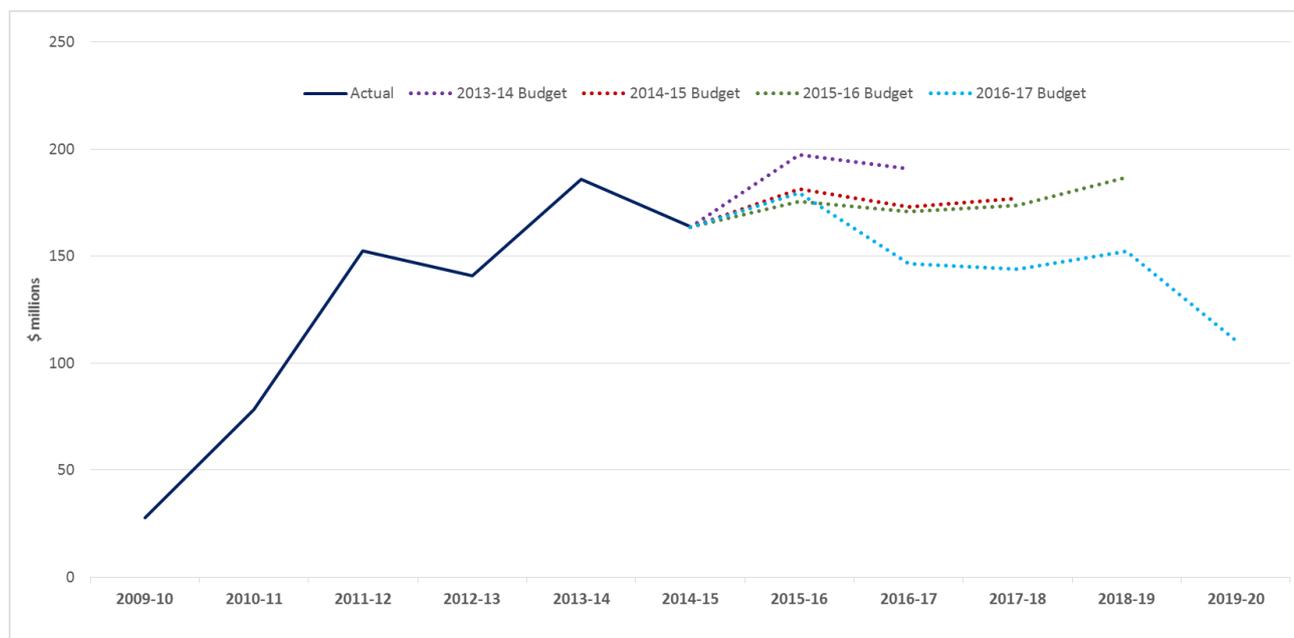
UA believes that HEPPP would have been even more effective over the past six years if program funding had been more reliable. It is regrettable that HEPPP has been subjected to repeated Budget cuts by Governments of both parties. When HEPPP was introduced in the 2009–10 Budget, funding was set at 2 per cent of Commonwealth Grant Scheme (CGS) funding, and was budgeted to increase to 4 per cent by 2012–13, in line with the recommendation of the Bradley Review of Higher Education in 2008.

Regrettably, though, HEPPP funding was cut in the 2011–12 Budget and several times since – most recently in the 2016–17 Budget. As a result, HEPPP has not reached the four per cent target. Currently, HEPPP is slightly more than 2.6 per cent of CGS (including Enabling and Regional loadings).

While earlier Budget cuts constrained growth in HEPPP funding, the most recent round of cuts leads to an absolute decrease in the nominal value of HEPPP funding. By 2019–20, HEPPP will be only 1.6 per cent of CGS.

UA urges the Government to consider restoring HEPPP funding at least to levels before the 2016–17 Budget.

**Figure 2: HEPPP Budget cuts**



Source: DET administrative data, various years; Commonwealth Budget papers, various years

Restoring adequate and predictable funding will boost the capability of HEPPP to further widen access to university, and to support students more effectively once they are there.

As stated above, higher education access and equity is a persistent, long-term problem. There is no plausible 'quick fix', so effective interventions need to be long-term. Reliable funding is vital to maintaining effort over the time needed to make an impact.

## Program design should include evaluation

Greater clarity about the program's objectives, together with more explicit and realistic expectations and timeframes would further enhance the effectiveness of the program. Differences in access to higher education based on socio-economic factors is a long-term, persistent problem. It requires a long-term solution.

HEPPP program design should include a detailed and rigorous evaluation framework. The university sector has argued for several years that HEPPP should be evaluated against clear and agreed criteria. This will not only improve universities' and Government's understanding of the effectiveness of HEPPP projects, but will optimise design and targeting of such activities in the first place. Both of these will work to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of HEPPP overall.

Program design should build in an evaluation framework, and benchmarking against specific, realistic objectives. This would support program effectiveness and efficiency of investment by both universities and Government. It would also give clarity to the outcomes being sought.

The evaluation framework should enable both Government and universities to assess the effectiveness of HEPPP-funded activities. Government should be readily able to evaluate the impact of HEPPP in general, as well as the Partnerships and Participation components separately. The framework should also support ongoing evaluation by both universities and Government of particular HEPPP-funded projects and activities.

## Increased flexibility would make HEPPP more effective

The *Higher Education Support Act 2003 – Other Grants Guidelines (Education) 2010* states that:

*The Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) provides funding to providers to undertake activities and implement strategies that improve access to undergraduate courses for people from low SES backgrounds and improve their retention and completion rates.*

*The HEPPP aims to encourage and assist providers to meet the Commonwealth Government's ambition that, by 2020, 20 per cent of domestic undergraduate students must be from low SES backgrounds.<sup>3</sup>*

In line with the policy emphases of the previous Government's higher education equity and access agenda, HEPPP program design is focussed closely on low SES students. While the program has contributed to significant improvement in low SES enrolments since 2010, it would have a more effective impact on higher education access and equity if it adopted a broader definition of disadvantage, and included a wider range of under-represented groups.

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<sup>3</sup> *Higher Education Support Act 2003 – Other Grants Guidelines (Education) 2010*, Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program, p.11.

In practice, HEPPP has benefited Indigenous and regional students, and students with disabilities, either because they are also low SES or because of spillover benefits from HEPPP activities within universities. But the guidelines and formal requirements of the program are squarely aimed at low SES students only.

Under current Guidelines, HEPPP Partnership funding is allocated to support 'initiatives which target current and prospective domestic undergraduate students from low SES backgrounds'. Guidelines should be amended to cover all under-represented groups. This would acknowledge the particular needs and disadvantages (beyond low SES status) of other equity groups, especially Indigenous students and students from regional and remote areas.

Similarly, the Participation component of HEPPP funding is intended to increase participation by low SES students. The objective would be better expressed as supporting students from all under-represented groups to stay at university and complete their studies successfully. As well as making the program's aims clearer, this would allow universities to use Participation funding to support students across the full range of equity groups.

It is timely to update our understanding of disadvantage and under-representation in higher education. The equity groups still used today are those identified by the Martin report more than 25 years ago.

UA notes that the Department of Education and Training (DET) has put out a tender for a project to examine the relevance and comprehensiveness of the Martin equity group framework, with a view to making recommendations about how to update and improve the framework. UA will engage constructively and collaboratively with this process.

## Income support and scholarships

The Government's higher education options paper *Driving Innovation, Fairness and Excellence* suggests a Government scholarships program as a possible alternative to HEPPP.

UA cannot support this option. HEPPP allows universities to provide scholarships and bursaries to eligible students, and should continue to do so. Universities are well placed to make decisions about what kinds of projects and assistance – including scholarships – are most effective in supporting access and success among their own prospective and actual students.

Government scholarship schemes, on the other hand, should be considered as complementary and additional to, rather than as a substitute for, HEPPP. Options for scholarship schemes could form part of a comprehensive and well targeted system of means-tested income support administered by the Commonwealth.

Income support is vital to access and success for disadvantaged students. UA acknowledges that current policy settings for student income support are sound — assistance is targeted effectively to those who need it most.

The one significant exception to this is the recent conversion of Commonwealth Start-Up Scholarships from grants to income-contingent loans. UA continues to oppose this decision, and calls on the Government to restore Scholarships as grants. We note with concern and disappointment that the Budget Savings Omnibus Bill introduced into the Senate at the end of August would end current grandfathering arrangements for students who were in receipt of Commonwealth Scholarship as at the end of 2015, forcing these students too to take out loans.

Converting Commonwealth Student Start-Up Scholarships to loans goes against the fundamental policy assumptions and objectives of student income support, namely that income support to assist with living and relocation costs should primarily be funded through targeted, means-tested transfer payments to those students who need them most.

UA believes that redirecting HEPPP money to a Government scholarship scheme would undercut the aims and successes of the program and would potentially duplicate the purposes of other Government programs. The basic structure of HEPPP – partnerships, participation and national priorities — is sound and effective and should continue.