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**Topic:** Responses to the NCSEHE discussion paper *Student Equity 2030: A long term vision for student equity in higher education*.

## HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY AND PROJECTS

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The University of Sydney welcomes the opportunity to respond to *Student Equity 2030: A long-term strategic vision for student equity in higher education* Discussion Paper (September 2018). In doing so we commend the recent NCSEHE Building Legacy and Capacity Series' efforts to define a collective knowledge base that can inform future research and practice and engage in strategic and action planning to inform institutional practice, future research, develop evidence and informed policy advice.

Q1: What vision of student equity is most conducive to a high participation higher education system that confronts rapid technological change and continuing funding constraints?

1. We would welcome a refining of the broad objective first posited in *A Fair Chance for All*<sup>1</sup>; "to ensure that Australians from all groups in society have the opportunity to participate successfully in higher education, to be achieved by changing the balance of the student population to reflect more closely the composition of society as a whole". This is needed to recognise and respond to the continuing challenge of persistent under-representation in higher education of students from low and mid socio-economic status backgrounds, notwithstanding high and generally improving secondary education completion rates for students from all socioeconomic backgrounds. .

While technological changes such as the online delivery of courses have the potential to widen participation, access to technology is a key factor that needs to be considered in a refined definition of student equity.

Technology can enable educational opportunity for students from underrepresented groups. However, barriers for engagement remain, especially if courses are not delivered well. As such it is worth considering what innovative delivery modes can be incorporated to enable participation and attainment.

Student equity also needs to be defined in a way that recognises the economic challenges for prospective students to participate in higher education. These economic challenges relate to access to higher education (high fees and limited government funding) but also to challenges experienced throughout the course of a degree (balancing the necessity of paid employment with the demands of university study) and attrition factors.

For these reasons [The University of Sydney's Access and Participation Plan 2018](#) differentiates equity outcomes across four different categories: pre-access, access, participation, and attainment.

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<sup>1</sup> Commonwealth of Australia (1990). *A Fair Chance for All: Higher Education That's Within Everyone's Reach*. Canberra: AGPS

Q2: Should we extend our frame of reference to develop an equity vision for the tertiary rather than the higher education sector?

2. Yes. Extending the frame of reference to develop an equity vision for participation and success in the Australian post-secondary education sector is strongly supported. We need both the VET and HE sectors to be as strong and inter-connected as possible, with seamless pathways and financing options built in to the system to allow students to move between the sectors throughout their lives. There should be new targets set for participation and success in both VET and HE, with both sectors recognised as being critical to Australia's future prosperity.

One example is current TAFE pathway or preparatory courses to higher education that would benefit from a better integration to address equity issues for students preparing for university.

Q3: How do we articulate a clear and compelling narrative for student equity with reference to overarching sector objectives?

3. The overarching objective of the Australian higher education sector is to advance societal wellbeing through the pursuits of education, research, knowledge preservation and translation. The economic and other benefits that flow from higher education will only be experienced fairly if people from all societal groups access and succeed in higher education at the same rates as people from privileged backgrounds. Research has demonstrated that policies that widen participation in higher education improve health, well-being, civic engagement, political and social stability in addition to economic productivity and output.

We can articulate a clear and compelling national narrative for student equity by emphasising constantly that achieving equity in higher education is critical to Australia being a fair and just society, where access to opportunity does not depend on factors such as students' postcodes, the school they attended, or the levels of education achieved by their parents.

Q4: Do we need a whole new student equity vision and framework, or minor refinements to the existing vision and framework outlined in 'A Fair Chance For All'?

4. We echo the need to create a mechanism to explicitly account for the important role of outreach work in raising participation levels in under-represented communities and see aligned institutional strategic and operational plans, consideration of principles of inclusive design and transparent targets relevant to equity group students as key to supporting a new vision for student equity.

We recommend a review that aims to include both state and federal governments educational equity initiatives that spans the secondary school sector through to Universities, allowing for an integrated model to be developed.

Given the disrupted and changing economic environment we would also endorse an expansion of the definition of equity groups as specified in 'A Fair Chance for All' to include, for example, mature aged and second-chance education students.

Q5: What could a multi-dimensional concept of 'success' in student equity look like?

5. A deterministic model of successful education, in which only those with a good chance of achieving success are encouraged to enter, continues to be in tension with system and institutional level adjustments that might be required to accommodate and support higher rates of participation and the value of pathway and enabling programs. Multi-dimensional concepts of success that integrate qualitative and quantitative indicators guard against potential misrecognition of capability and enliven the transformative impacts of student success.

Q6: How do relationships with other aspects of public policy (education and non-education) need to be brought into alignment so as to achieve an implementable vision for equity?

6. Ensuring student equity is not only synonymous with equity specific programs like the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) would help ensure whole of institution, sector-wide and cross-sectorial conceptualisation of relationships critical for effective implementation of any reinvigorated vision for student equity.

It is crucial to acknowledge that student access and participation can be affected by policy settings that are not education specific. In particular, student poverty is a growing concern which is an even greater issue for under-represented groups.

Q7: What changes to data collection, monitoring and evaluation approaches, capability and infrastructure are necessary to support the vision and ensure its continuous review?

7. We would support adjustments to data collection and evaluation to build towards nationally consistent evaluation approaches helpfully guided by the *Equity Initiatives Map*<sup>2</sup> across each stage of the student life cycle, ensuring data relevant to national and institutional equity goals is collected consistently. Longitudinally focused research looking at the short, medium and long-term outcomes for students, schools and communities, tertiary institutions, and partner stakeholders engaged in collaborative equity initiatives over time should be prioritised. In addition, the identification of and mapping of secondary school data with university data would provide greater transparency around the impact and value add of outreach programs, equity initiatives more broadly and would provide a national and state-based understanding of program impact.

Q8: How can transparency be enhanced and accountability strengthened to ensure the vision for student equity is progressed?

8. We would welcome a strengthening of accountability for equity performance beyond current Access and Participation Plan institutional submissions. We support proposed publishing of transparent quantitative performance measures and targets to more effectively embed student equity goals across the system.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Nadine-Zacharias\\_The-Australian-Student-Equity-Program.pdf](https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Nadine-Zacharias_The-Australian-Student-Equity-Program.pdf)