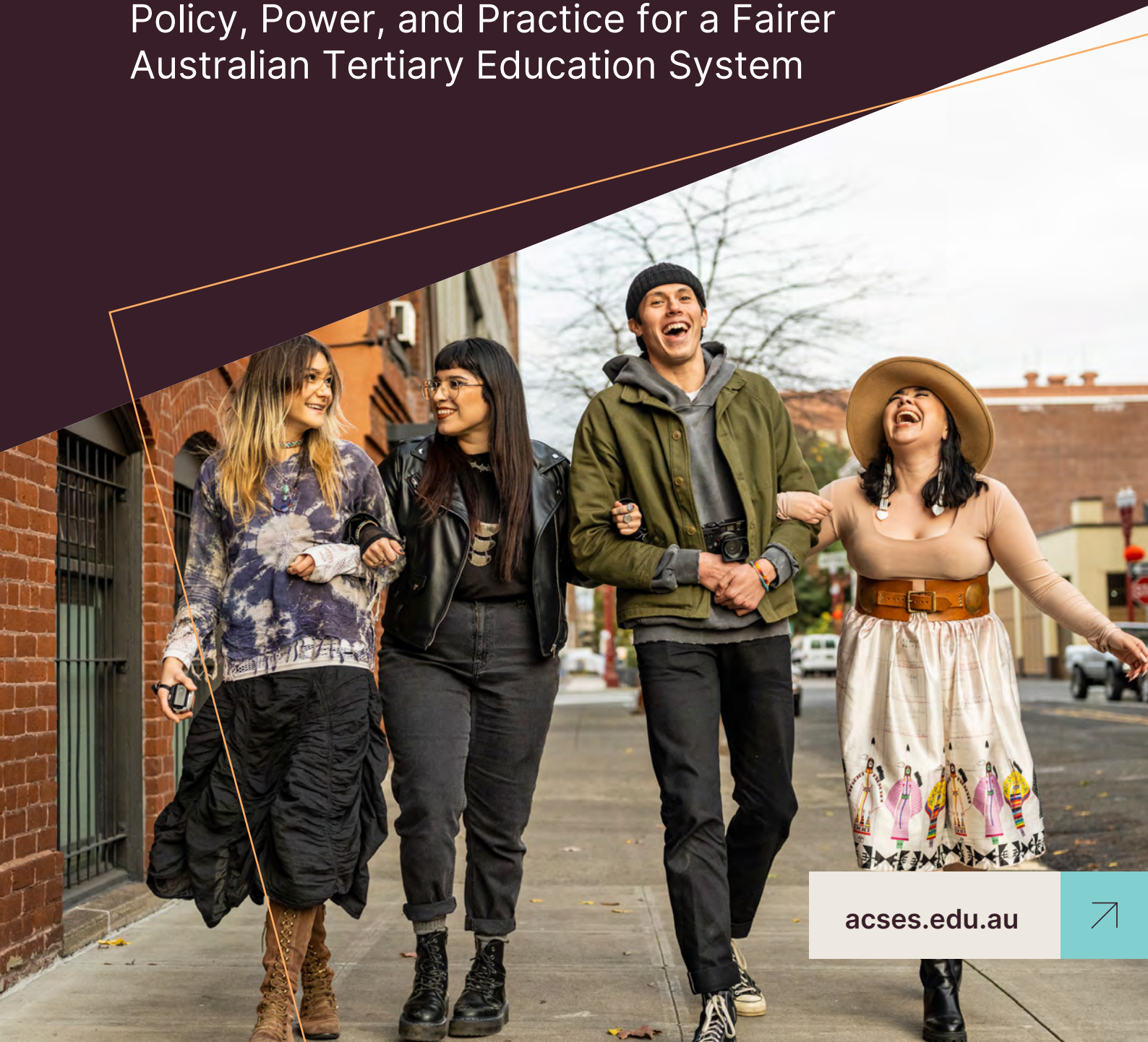
ACSES Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success

Curtin University

Equity Insights 2025:

Policy, Power, and Practice for a Fairer Australian Tertiary Education System



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Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success acknowledges Indigenous peoples across Australia as the Traditional Owners of the lands on which the nation's campuses are situated. With a history spanning more than 60,000 years as the original educators, Indigenous peoples hold a unique place in our nation. We recognise the importance of their knowledge and culture, and reflect the principles of participation, equity, and cultural respect in our work.
We pay our respects to Elders past, present, and future, and consider it an honour to learn from our Indigenous colleagues, partners, and friends.

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Foreword

Australian higher education has become a mass participation exercise in recent decades and today is earmarked for even greater expansion and participation. Yet, fresh growth in student numbers can scarcely be achieved without better access and progression among traditionally underserved groups. The nation's many universities have grown in scale, offerings, and purpose, but their responsiveness to the needs of disadvantaged students remain a work in progress.

The *Equity Insights 2025* report is about these changes and responses. Its purpose is to shed light on the challenge of student equity, the particular responsibilities and accountabilities this entails, and the progress that is being made. The report gathers 14 perspectives from key figures involved in higher education policy, university senior management, equity practice, student experience, and academic expertise. Each of these contributions reflects distinct elements of the task facing the sector.

An unusual feature of the Australian equity landscape has been the substantial political capital and financial investment committed to the cause, yet this has regrettably yielded only modest results. The 2024 Australian Universities Accord has breathed new life into equity as a priority, and the newly-minted Australian Tertiary Education Commission seeks to manage an ambitious growth agenda with equity principles baked in from the outset.

Equity Insights 2025 builds on this momentum and draws out unique features of the task facing universities and their users. Readers will quickly see that the higher education sector does not sit in isolation, and that new influences matter and will serve to improve outcomes—the incentives created from nuanced higher education policies, the accountability to a new National Student Ombudsman, the transparency to the communities universities serve, and the application of expert analysis about what works.

The Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success (ACSES) embodies the latter of these influences. For the first time, Australian universities are being directly assisted by ACSES to get ahead on student equity. Our expertise is being shared with those running universities and it is an important ingredient, among many, to drive better outcomes for marginalised students.

Professor Shamit Saggar CBE FAcSS
Executive Director
Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success

The *Equity Insights 2025* report is published by ACSES, and the Executive Director wishes to acknowledge the dedication of Isabel Buitrago Diaz, Miriam Fisher, Ian Li, and Anna Will in its production.

Introduction

Student equity and success have been focal points in Australian higher education over the last three decades. This national commitment was reaffirmed in the 2024 *Australian Universities Accord Final Report*, which set an ambitious target—by 2050, at least 80% of Australians aged 25–34 should hold a tertiary qualification, with parity targets for equity groups.

Since then, the Australian government has focused on policies that support this goal, including practicum placement payments, reduced student loan debt, and fee-free pathways. The establishment of the Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) is also critical, providing stewardship and promoting equity, access, and quality.

These changes come at a time of significant flux in higher education. International student enrolments—once a major revenue source—are now capped. Meanwhile, domestic students are more likely to study part-time, be engaged in work, have caring responsibilities, and face rising costs, housing stress, and mental health challenges.

Against this backdrop, student equity and success requires systemic reform and collaboration. To frame *Equity Insights 2025*, we asked sector leaders:

1. What has changed in Australian higher education that will have an impact on student equity?
2. What needs to change in Australian higher education that will positively impact student equity?

Contributors include university executives, policymakers, practitioners, experts, and, importantly, student leaders who draw on their own experience as well as the experiences of the student bodies they represent.

Their contributions span three themed sections—Rewriting the System: Policy, Structures, and Reform; Power, Voice, and Justice; and Making Equity Real: Practice, Place, and Participation.

Rewriting the System: Policy, Structures, and Reform

Introduced by Western Sydney University's **Distinguished Professor George Williams AO**, this section explores large-scale reforms needed to reshape systems and institutions. The section opens with insights from **Amy Persson** and **Sonal Singh** from the Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion, University of Technology Sydney, who cast a spotlight on universities' moral responsibility to provide equitable access to university. They argue that despite the increased focus on equity since the 2008 Bradley Review, the sector continues to fall short due to impeding factors such as deeply entrenched class inequalities and institutional traditions rooted in patriarchy and colonialism. Persson and Singh call for diversified entry pathways and needs-based funding, and the importance of creating a more integrated tertiary system that truly places students at the heart of educational design.

Associate Professor Hannah Forsyth, **Professor Barney Glover AO**, and **Megan Lilly** from Jobs and Skills Australia, follow with a focus on tertiary harmonisation. They highlight the segregation between vocational and university sectors as a barrier to equity. Resolving this, they say, requires increased mobility between these sectors, equal value for both sectors, and responsiveness to labour force demands and skills shortages.

Subsequently, University of New England's **Professor Chris Moran** argues that achieving the Accord's ambitious targets requires leveraging universities with proven track records in serving equity students. He proposes an "interface institution" model that provides whole-of-life care for mature-age students with high life loads, while addressing the digital divide affecting regional and low socio-economic status students.

Professor Margaret Sheil AO from Queensland University of Technology highlights the state's unique geographic and demographic challenges. Real progress toward Accord targets has been stymied by COVID-19,

cost-of-living pressures, and policy changes. She shares local innovations such as 24/7 library access and subsidised public transport, arguing that equity requires flexible, culturally safe environments that meet local needs.

In the section's fifth and final piece, Western Sydney University's **Professor Alphia Possamai-Inesedy** examines the rapid rise of generative AI in universities. She calls for structural reforms in universal access, capacity building, co-design, and structural investment, to ensure its use narrows, rather than widens, equity gaps.

Power, Voice, and Justice

Introduced by Curtin University's **Professor Harlene Hayne CNZM**, Section 2 draws on the voices of contributors with lived experience on how we can empower students and Indigenous people in their journeys.

Sarah Bendall reflects on the launch of the National Student Ombudsman in February 2025, notes high early uptake of the service, and identifies systemic issues affecting equity groups. She advocates for change that places student experience at the heart of higher education provider priorities, and stronger institutional accountability.

Ashlyn Horton from the National Union of Students critiques the weakening of student unions since the introduction of voluntary student unionism. She argues that true equity requires access to institutional power through independent student unions, calling for direct funding for independent student voices and greater student input in governance.

Meanwhile, Curtin Student Guild's **Dylan Storer** urges a return to universities as public goods, not transactional services. This necessitates radical change, he says, including free education, housing, poverty-line welfare support, and grassroots-led reform.

Professor Leanne Holt from the University of New South Wales calls for the embedding of Indigenous leadership in governance, curriculum, and research. She says universities must move beyond transactional support models toward transformational environments, where Indigenous success not only is an equity goal but a core measure of institutional excellence.

› Students at a university lecture

Finally, Charles Darwin University's **Dr Tracy Woodroffe** offers a Northern Territory Aboriginal woman's perspective. Woodroffe says effective engagement requires understanding diverse Aboriginal perspectives, concluding that positive change requires the development of strategic intercultural communication plans with culturally relevant messaging.

Making Equity Real: Practice, Place, and Participation

Introduced by the University of New South Wales's **Professor the Hon. Verity Firth AM**, the final section examines how policy aligns with practice.

Dr Patricia Vermillion Peirce CE from the Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success puts the spotlight on the need for evidence systems that inform high-level decision-making and practical application via front-line practitioners. She calls for stronger sector collaboration to build this alignment between robust evidence and practical relevance.

Curtin University's **Professor Katie Ellis** holds that equity for individuals with disability remains an afterthought, despite three decades since the Disability Discrimination Act. She proposes universal design, accountability, and leadership by disabled people to meet essential compliance with domestic law and obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Dr Matt Brett from Deakin University and ACSES looks at structural change in the student with disability in higher education landscape and notes that students with disabilities have steadily increased over 30 years. He notes that participation data remains inconsistent, and universities continue to rely on a reactive "prosthetic model" of individualised adjustments rather than inclusive design. Brett calls for inclusive design and increased Commonwealth funding.

Finally, **Dr Kylie Austin** from Edith Cowan University and Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia (EPHEA) focuses on the alignment of policy, institutional priorities, and individual values. Austin advocates for collaboration with students as active partners and co-creators, implementing practical solutions such as earn-while-learning opportunities, flexible delivery, and robust support systems.

Each contribution featured in *Equity Insights 2025* provides a unique lens on the challenges and solutions for advancing student equity. Together, they reflect the complexity of the task, and the collective effort needed to build a fairer, more inclusive higher education system.

We thank all contributors for their invaluable insights and practical ideas to improve student equity and student outcomes across the sector.

Professor Ian Li SFHEA
Research and Policy Program Director
Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success

SECTION 1:
Rewriting the System – Policy, Structures, and Reform

> University students and tutor in a table discussion

SECTION 1

Rewriting the System – Policy, Structures, and Reform

Introduction

Distinguished Professor George Williams AO
Western Sydney University

Education undoubtedly changes the world. But in doing so, we need to ask who is it changing the world for? Surely it's our responsibility to ensure that education benefits those who most need to climb the ladder of opportunity.

In this chapter, many of the tertiary sector's brightest lights explore the structural and systemic changes needed to make equity central to the future of higher education.

Amy Persson, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Social Justice and Inclusion) University of Technology Sydney (UTS) and **Sonal Singh**, Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia (EPHEA) and UTS Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion issue a call to transform the sector, not just tinker.

The pair reinforce that understanding education as a fundamental human right imposes a moral responsibility on universities to ensure accessibility for all.

A full system overhaul is required, they write, including diversifying entry pathways beyond the reliance on ATAR, embedding equity outcomes into student success frameworks, resourcing institution-wide equity infrastructure, and prioritising needs-based and place-based funding approaches.

Jobs and Skills Australia's (JSA) Commissioner, **Professor Barney Glover AO**, JSA's Assistant Director, Tertiary Policy Alignment, **Associate Professor Hannah Forsyth**, and JSA's Deputy Commissioner, **Megan Lilly** urge us to go beyond the binary nature of higher education and vocational education and training.

They write that harmonising the two systems makes it easier for students to move between them and in doing so delivers greater equity in workforce development.

In his contribution, **Professor Chris Moran**, the Vice-Chancellor and CEO of the University of New England, examines three significant sector challenges to lifting equity.

The first is the substantial increase required in equity students to meet the Universities Accord target of increasing the proportion of university educated Australians aged 25 to 34 from 45% currently to 55% by 2050.

The second is the support required for students who must learn while working, which is a growing dynamic in our sector, and the third is the digital divide affecting many equity students.

Professor Margaret Sheil AO, the Vice-Chancellor and President of the Queensland University of Technology, underscores that improving attainment is far more complex than simply changing and inspiring individuals, raising aspirations, education standards, awareness, and pathways.

My colleague, **Professor Alphia Possamai-Inesedy**, Pro-Vice Chancellor, Student Success at Western Sydney University delves into the issues around promoting student equity in an AI society, beyond technological fixes. This includes digital inequities, AI literacy, ethical responsibility, and future-proofing equity.

She goes to the crux of the issue, writing that we cannot simply retrofit digital tools onto the pre-existing fault lines of exclusion. Rather, we must fundamentally reimagine the purposes and structures of higher education in an AI society.

Reimagining Equity in Australian Higher Education: A Call to Transform, Not Tinker

Amy Persson
UTS Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion

Sonal Singh
UTS Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion
Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia

Understanding education as a fundamental human right imposes a moral responsibility on universities to ensure it is accessible to all. We are not just institutions of knowledge transmission; we are public service providers. This framing demands we design systems that serve students and communities equitably, dismantling both historical and structural barriers.

Right now, there is more focus on equity and access in the Australian higher education sector than ever before. Yet across both access and success, the sector is falling short for many of the students it claims to serve. Since the Bradley Review in 2008 (Bradley *et al*., 2008) and the introduction of Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) funding, universities have made progress in expanding participation from underrepresented groups (Department of Education, n.d.). However, class inequalities, cultural exclusions, and institutional inertia remain deeply embedded in the system.

> *Universities continue to operate within traditions shaped by patriarchy, class hierarchy, and colonialism.*

Universities continue to operate within traditions shaped by patriarchy, class hierarchy, and colonialism. These legacies are evident not only in policies, but also in the rhythms, routines, and norms of academic life. The subtle and often invisible architecture of exclusion, signalling who belongs and who thrives, can be as powerful as financial or structural barriers. If we are serious about equity, we must be prepared to confront these institutional norms and examine our own practices.

Addressing inequity requires more than targeted programs or outreach. It calls for a critical rethinking of how institutions are structured, funded, and governed. The transformation needed must extend to the very culture and operations that define the student experience. Without this, Australian higher education will fall short of the national equity goals set out in the *Universities Accord Final Report* (Department of Education, 2024).

The Accord rightly sets an ambitious target: achieving population parity for underrepresented groups by 2050. But this goal will not be achieved under current policy and system settings. For example, to achieve parity in low socio-economic status (SES) participation alone, we would need to more than double the number of low SES students entering and completing university. The current model, which leans heavily on narrow admissions pathways and fragmented support systems, is not built to deliver that scale of transformation.

Incremental changes will not suffice. A full system overhaul is required. This includes:

- diversifying entry pathways beyond reliance on ATAR
- embedding equity outcomes into student success frameworks, not just access metrics
- resourcing institution-wide equity infrastructure
- prioritising needs-based and place-based funding approaches.

Equity must become part of the institutional core. It cannot remain an add-on or be treated as the responsibility of isolated units.

The bigger challenge is not just adding more students to classrooms. It is about reimagining the academic and cultural

environment they enter. Today's students face a complexity of challenges rarely acknowledged a decade ago.These include escalating mental health concerns, financial insecurity, rising disclosures of neurodiversity, caregiving responsibilities, and academic environments that still alienate through unspoken cultural codes. These are not marginal issues. They are increasingly the norm.

To meet our equity targets, universities must be truly prepared to support the students they claim to welcome. At the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), we are striving to model a different approach. We have embedded social justice into our institutional strategy and, critically, we have resourced it (UTS Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion, 2024).

The Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion (CSJI) at UTS is one of the few remaining centralised and fully funded equity hubs in Australia. CSJI does far more than run programs. It influences institutional policy, supports staff development, advocates for students, and drives operational and cultural change across the university. It integrates student equity, diversity and inclusion, community engagement, and thought leadership into a cohesive and connected ecosystem.

And it helps UTS deliver results:

- Our low SES student success rate stands at 90%, well above the national average of 82.45%.
- The U@Uni Academy supported over 389 students in 2024, achieving an 82.6% success rate (UTS CSJI, 2024).

Student flipping through textbook

- The UTS Pathways Plan, launched in 2025, will offer non-ATAR entry routes to broaden access (UTS, 2025).
- Programs such as the Pasifika Program, Humanitarian Scholarships, and projects for LGBTIQA+ inclusion embed equity across the university experience (UTS CSJI, 2024).

These are not generic or transactional initiatives. They are co-designed, relational, and deeply informed by dialogue, lived experience, and reciprocal learning. They are made possible by a diverse team, and by an institutional commitment to equity as a foundational principle which is supported by the faculties and divisions we work in partnership with.

We are not claiming to have all the answers. UTS continues to listen, learn, and evolve. But we are unwavering in our belief that equity and excellence go hand in hand. We are building systems that elevate the voices and leadership of historically marginalised communities and give them real power to influence change.

Institutional commitment, however, is not enough. Needs-based funding, as recommended by the Accord, is critical to sustaining and scaling effective equity practice (Department of Education, 2024). Without strategic and targeted investment, even the most committed institutions will struggle to achieve lasting change. Inclusion must be viewed as a core measure of institutional performance, not as a compliance task.

> *Needs-based funding, as recommended by the Accord, is critical to sustaining and scaling effective equity practice (Department of Education, 2024).*

We (universities) must also roll up our sleeves and lean into the challenge of a more integrated tertiary system. We must do the hard work to help design a system with the student at the heart, creating and supporting more seamless transitions and

options for a more diverse student cohort. This should involve more active support for the incredible work done by our colleagues in TAFE, working collaboratively to boost the perception of vocational education and training as delivering excellence on par with the university system. They are different experiences, but the notion that one is somehow "better" than the other needs to fade into a past that is no longer relevant.

The Universities Accord provides a rare and urgent opportunity to go beyond incremental reform. It invites us to reimagine higher education. The future will not belong to those who stay comfortable. It will belong to those bold enough to lead with equity at the centre.

> *The future will not belong to those who stay comfortable. It will belong to those bold enough to lead with equity at the centre.*

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Beyond the Binary: Why Harmonising VET and HE Matters

Associate Professor Hannah Forsyth
Jobs and Skills Australia

Professor Barney Glover AO
Jobs and Skills Australia

Megan Lilly
Jobs and Skills Australia

For decades, initiatives to widen equity group participation in higher education (HE) have been impeded by formal and informal segregation of students planning to undertake vocational education and training (VET) from those planning to study at university. Such segregation, which often begins while students are still at school, can compound inequalities by restricting career opportunities for those most in need (Coffey & Bennett, 2022).

A new government initiative to improve connections between VET and higher education seeks to remedy the effects of this binary. Jobs and Skills Australia's recently released report provides a roadmap to achieving harmonisation across the two sectors (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2025). The Roadmap to Tertiary Harmonisation is not a plan to merge the sectors. Retaining their distinctiveness is as important to students from disadvantaged backgrounds as it is to staff and industry. However, Tertiary Harmonisation will make it easier for students to move between VET and HE.

This is important for the future growth in equity enrolment for HE, where the latest data shows a 9.6% decline in low SES enrolment between 2019 and 2023 (ACSES, n.d.-a). By contrast, National Centre for Vocational Education Research's (NCVER) Quintile 1 (most disadvantaged) enrolments in VET increased by 29.3% in the same period (NCVER, n.d.-a). Similarly, First Nations student enrolments in VET grew by 32% between 2019 and 2023, compared to 6% in higher education (NCVER & Department of Education, 2019, 2023).

Making it easier for students to move between VET and HE will help redress this imbalance. In 2021, 30,000 domestic students commenced a bachelor degree on the basis of a VET qualification, with First Nations, low SES, and female students more commonly using this pathway (Department of Education, 2023). There is potential to expand on this trend in a tertiary system that is better connected.

Past failures to structure Australia's tertiary system in ways that ensure parity of esteem between VET and HE has, to date, skewed the market for tertiary education in damaging ways. Hodge and Knight (2021) found:

- The binary of VET and HE imposes stark choices on school-leavers, reinforcing perceptions of difference. Perceived lower status of VET introduces a range of distortions into the post-school educational environment that affects self-esteem of students, impacts supply of skills to industry, and introduces retention and other issues in providers.

In this environment, achieving outcomes for equity across tertiary education has been a "wicked problem" (Raciti, 2021). Disadvantaged students often have less access to HE. When they enrol in VET courses, these are too-often deemed to have lower status (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, 2023).

> *Making it easier for students to move between VET and HE will help redress this imbalance.*

> *A more harmonised system will make tertiary education available at multiple entry points.*

This not only affects self-esteem but also labour market opportunity, exacerbating inequality in Australia.

In this way, the current disjointedness in Australia's present binary system "both reflect and reinforce social class differences and social immobility" (Webb *et al.*, 2024, p.4).

The Universities Accord demonstrates that a seamless and aligned tertiary education system will support better life and employment outcomes for students currently underrepresented in HE. This is because a more harmonised system will make tertiary education available at multiple entry points. Combined with fewer barriers between VET and HE, this gives those who have been deemed by traditional measures most suitable for one side of the binary, improved access to the other.

By making it easier and more socially acceptable for students to move readily between VET and HE in both directions, the tertiary system takes a key step towards equality, structurally respecting student choice (Raciti, 2022).

This is markedly important for First Nations communities, many of whom have developed community-controlled and First Nations-owned VET providers. These are not only aligned to community needs but are also connected to place in ways that research shows is important to rural, regional, and remote participation (Webb *et al.*, 2024).

Improving student mobility in both directions will enable parity of esteem and better support current economic, technological, and energy transitions. As well as entry to university via VET, students and graduates of higher education will also upskill in specific vocational skill areas.

In this way, Australian workers will be better able to respond to labour force demands and skills shortages, regardless of their background, building a resilient and more equal workforce.

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Scaling Equity: The Power of Small, Experienced Universities

Professor Chris Moran
University of New England

The Australian higher education landscape faces significant challenges in student equity that require innovative solutions. I'll focus on three critical changes: the substantial increase in equity students needed to meet Accord targets, the support required for students who must learn while working, and the digital divide affecting many equity students.

The *Universities Accord Report* set ambitious goals, which translate to hundreds of thousands of new enrolments, achievable only through significantly increasing equity student participation and success.

The University of New England (UNE) is a mature example which was founded in 1938 on the principle of "access to education for all". As Australia's pioneering distance education provider, UNE developed support structures, and an academic ethos well suited for what would later be defined as equity students. Consequently, UNE already exceeds the University Accord's objectives for 2035.

A pragmatic approach to achieving the Accord's targets would be to leverage universities with proven success serving high proportions of equity students, for example, UNE, Charles Sturt, James Cook, and Federation universities. Expecting large, elite metropolitan universities to transform rapidly (or at all) is unrealistic.

> *"Universities must participate closely in students' lives rather than treating them as merely passing through."*

Most potential equity students are mature-age, employed, and have family commitments—what I term a high "life load". They cannot put their lives on hold to attend university. Maximising their success requires decades of experience in developing skilled workforces and support structures.

This demands institutional flexibility and purpose. Universities must participate closely in students' lives rather than treating them as merely passing through. They must function as interface institutions operating effectively between governments, businesses, and non-profit organisations. This interface role enables whole-of-life care and opportunities for students with high life loads, which is difficult for large universities focused on research and traditional campus-based study.

The rapid digitalisation of education delivery, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has created new forms of inequity. Digital literacy, reliable internet access, and suitable study environments have become essential prerequisites, creating digital disadvantage, particularly affecting regional, remote, and low socio-economic status students. The rise of generative artificial intelligence compounds this challenge significantly.

Regional interface universities can facilitate accessibility for rural and remote people by going to the students rather than vice versa. The university shares responsibility for success with students across their life load components. Deep partnering with regional communities is essential for this approach.

› Students attentively listening at a university lecture

> *We all want people to achieve their dreams rapidly and effectively, generating immense community benefits. The path forward requires courage, creativity, and willingness to challenge established thinking.*

The Federation University Co-operative Model, wherein students and businesses interact throughout the university degree to provide graduates with excellent employment opportunities, is an excellent example of a regional university taking a step towards the lives of its students and their needs beyond degree awards.

The current conception of needs-based funding is oversimplified—essentially a loading per student for equity categories, regardless of learning context, institutional track record, or student life load. This one-size-fits-all approach lacks sophistication in analysing student needs and doesn't consider what universities might be prepared or able to do to achieve successful graduations efficiently.

For example, UNE and Charles Sturt universities both have such a large proportion of equity students that there is a "phase shift" difference in the way services are designed and delivered. In short, the whole student body is treated equally in terms of needs for support rather than identifying and separating the needs of equity students as a small separable cohort.

We all want people to achieve their dreams rapidly and effectively, generating immense community benefits. The path forward requires courage, creativity, and willingness to challenge established thinking.

Funding, Focus, and Futures: Advancing Equity Through Smarter Policy

Professor Margaret Sheil AO
Queensland University of Technology

The challenge of improving student equity beyond population parity is one of the most critical we collectively face in higher education.

In Queensland, we have our unique challenges, being a vast state covering great distances and with significantly higher proportion of regional, remote, and Indigenous students.

Nationally, the educational attainment rate of regional Australians is significantly lower than that of metropolitan students—a factor amplified in Queensland where about half the population lives outside Greater Brisbane, compared to just 30% nationally based outside a capital city.

At Queensland University of Technology (QUT), our regional and remote students are three times as likely to come from a low socio-economic status, and twice as likely to be Indigenous. Our State also historically has lower school academic outcomes and lower rates of university attainment.

For the past 30 years, there has been a national focus on improving accessibility and outcomes for First Nations, low-income, and students with a disability, plus potential or aspiring students in regional, rural, and remote areas. The ambitious targets in the Universities Accord and the current conversation about boosting national productivity—the latter linked intrinsically to improved education—will require more than the steady but unremarkable progress we have seen over the previous two decades.

Many proposed Federal initiatives in the Universities Accord are welcome, such as the funding proposed for the Needs-based Funding program, new outreach funds and boost to disability support. This is balanced by a lack of clarity around future policy, funding, and long-term commitment and the challenges of delivering high-quality education to students with different needs and study patterns.

As a sector, we have battled strong headwinds through the COVID-19 pandemic and its jolt to program delivery and student expectations, along with the cost-of-living and housing crisis, and policy such as Job-ready Graduates and its increase in fees and applications. Understandably, those with less financial support, Indigenous, regional, and remote students are more debt averse. A strong labour market also makes it more likely that many will choose work rather than study. For aspiring students living vast distances from Brisbane (or other university locations), a university choice carries considerable financial, family, and social implications—before even tackling challenges of lifestyle changes and accommodation (availability and affordability).

Universities have, individually and collectively, sought to encourage interest and aspiration by collaborative outreach and support programs, as well as scholarships which—thanks to generous donors, large and small—open doors in part to those facing financial and socio-economic challenges. To connect aspiration to opportunity, face-to-face, peer-to-peer relationships, from relatable mentors with lived, real-world experience, fosters self-confidence and a sense of belonging. These provide meaningful support throughout the academic life cycle, but especially in first year, and pathways from vocational education and for those who may have not qualified in or completed high school.

The new Federal Government program to establish more than 50 Regional University Study Hubs is an excellent initiative aimed to provide a place of learning for those who remain in their communities and take advantage of the many programs available online from a variety of university partners.

> *"As a sector, we have battled strong headwinds through the COVID-19 pandemic and its jolt to program delivery and student expectations, along with the cost-of-living and housing crisis, and policy such as Job-ready Graduates and its increase in fees and applications."*

These hubs are being well supported by collaborations across communities, universities, and local schools, and their uptake demonstrates there remains a strong social dimension to successful learning outcomes.

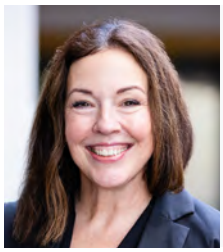
Students living in our large cities are also not immune from the financial pressure of access to physical campuses and/or online. QUT and other Queensland universities have seen a massive upsurge in campus attendance in 2025, which we attribute in part to the introduction of low-cost public transport in Brisbane ($0.50 fares) alongside other university initiatives, such as opening our libraries 24/7 to enable access to resources and internet.

> *Universities must continue to adapt and embrace change, often outside our control, to further the push to increase access.*

Finally, an integrated approach capturing non-school leavers and adult learners must also include accessible pathways for the transition to university study. In places such as our QUT College, we provide a supportive, collaborative, and non-threatening environment, where students can build a foundation from which they go on to thrive in undergraduate study. We opened it to our first cohort of about 50 domestic students in 2021 with two diplomas offered. To date, the College has grown to host more than 600 domestic students offering eight diplomas. Others with similar programs have welcomed the introduction of the new FEE-FREE Uni Ready places as another vital Federal initiative for expanding access through such critical pathways.

Improving attainment is far more complex than simply changing and inspiring individuals, raising aspirations, education standards, awareness, and pathways. Universities must continue to adapt and embrace change, often outside our control, to further the push to increase access. They must continue to offer flexible entry requirements, scholarships, and financial support when it is most needed (for accommodation and practical placements), inclusive teaching, real-world career platforms, and a welcoming, culturally safe environment.

Student Equity in an AI Society: Beyond Technological Fixes



Professor Alphia Possamai-Inesedy
Western Sydney University

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping not only the delivery, but also the fundamental purpose of higher education. Despite growing enthusiasm for AI integration into learning, teaching, and administration, initiatives remain fragmented and piecemeal. Australian universities must move beyond technological augmentation and instead confront a more difficult challenge: reconfiguring the architectures of equity that underpin our institutions. We cannot simply retrofit digital tools onto the pre-existing fault lines of exclusion. Rather, we must fundamentally reimagine the purposes and structures of higher education in an AI society.

Institutions are embedding AI-powered chatbots into classrooms and service centres, deploying predictive analytics within student success models, and enhancing administrative efficiency through algorithmic decision-making. These interventions, while often promising, typically treat equity as a secondary concern rather than a foundational design principle. Access to the promise of AI remains profoundly stratified, disproportionately advantaging students with high levels of digital literacy, reliable access to its tools, and the cultural capital to navigate the higher education landscape. While AI-driven predictive analytics hold the potential to disrupt patterns of exclusion, that potential will remain unrealised unless behavioural risk models are re-engineered to contest, rather than consolidate, the demographic biases inscribed in historical data.

> *Australian universities must move beyond technological augmentation and instead confront a more difficult challenge: reconfiguring the architectures of equity that underpin our institutions.*

> *Universities must position themselves not as passive adopters of AI, but as active, ethical stewards shaping its integration.*

True equity in the age of AI demands more than reactive support mechanisms. It demands that we rethink how learning, support, and success are conceptualised and operationalised. It requires institutions to acknowledge that AI is not a neutral tool; it is part of a broader social contract, shaped by power, culture, policy, and inequality.

This is why universities must play a leading role in navigating its ethical integration. Technology both emerges from and reshapes the social structures into which it is embedded. Universities must position themselves not as passive adopters of AI, but as active, ethical stewards shaping its integration.

Technologies that are uncritically deployed, tend to exacerbate rather than improve existing inequalities. Students from rural, regional, low socio-economic, Indigenous, first-in-family, and migrant backgrounds confront structural barriers: limited internet access, potential lower levels of digital literacy, and exclusion from the dominant techno-cultural capital embedded in academic systems. Without a deliberate investment in digital inclusion, AI-enhanced education can deepen these divides. Higher education must stop treating digital access solely as a technical or academic integrity problem to be solved and instead broaden the issue to address justice and equity.

Beyond ensuring access, universities must commit to cultivating AI literacy as a critical capacity. Beyond the technical ability to operate AI tools; it is the ability to interrogate, critique, and ethically engage with the systems shaping our social, political, and economic lives. Without critical AI literacy, students and staff risk becoming passive consumers of algorithmically mediated outputs that reinforce structural biases around race, gender, language, and ability. Students already navigating marginalisation are especially vulnerable to these risks. AI literacy must therefore be embedded holistically across curricula from first-year programs onward—not as an optional technical add-on, but as a fundamental component of developing informed, critical citizens.

Australia is uniquely positioned to lead in this work through its investment in regional and suburban university study hubs as well as the country university centres (CUCs). These spaces represent an opportunity to democratise access to AI-enhanced education—not simply by replicating existing models, but by building living laboratories of ethical innovation.

Reframing institutional responsibility in the AI era requires a paradigmatic shift. Universities must cease viewing AI as a mere operational enhancement and instead approach it as a transformative force demanding ethical stewardship. Our responsibilities are clear:

- Universal Access: Ensuring that digital infrastructures and AI tools are equitably accessible across all learning environments.
- Critical Capacity Building: Cultivating AI literacy and critical engagement as a fundamental graduate attribute across disciplines.
- Inclusive Co-Design: Engaging students—particularly those from marginalised groups—as co-creators of AI tools and policies.
- Structural Investment: Elevating equity from aspirational rhetoric to actionable, resourced institutional strategy.

The regional and suburban university study hubs and CUCs offer a rare opportunity to model a different, more inclusive future. The ethical transformation of Australian higher education in the age of AI is not merely desirable—it is imperative. The future of AI in our institutions will not be determined by technology alone. It will be determined by the values we choose to uphold.

The integration of generative AI into higher education is inevitable. But how we integrate it—whose futures we privilege, whose barriers we dismantle—is an ethical choice. AI is not just a tool—it is part of a broader social contract. Universities must play a leading role in navigating its ethical integration.

> *Without critical AI literacy, students and staff risk becoming passive consumers of algorithmically mediated outputs that reinforce structural biases around race, gender, language, and ability.*

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SECTION 2:
Power, Voice, and Justice

Group of students enjoying lunch on the grass

SECTION 2

Power, Voice, and Justice

Introduction

Professor Harlene Hayne CNZM
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Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success

In the face of significant change and challenge, the need to centre justice in our higher education system has never been greater. Section 2 of *Equity Insights 2025*, Power, Voice, and Justice, asks us to reckon with the lived realities of students who have historically been pushed to the margins of our institutions—and to listen when they tell us that equity is not only about access, but about agency, belonging, and the power to shape their own educational journeys.

The contributors remind us that our role as educators, policymakers, and leaders is not simply to extend a hand, but to share the microphone. Justice requires more than generosity. It demands that we interrogate the power structures embedded in our universities—structures that shape whose stories are heard, whose knowledge is valued, and whose success is supported.

We hear from First Nations educators and researchers, including **Dr Tracy Woodroffe** and **Professor Leanne Holt**, who show how cultural safety, Indigenous leadership, and place-based research are essential to both student outcomes and institutional integrity. We learn from student leaders, like **Ashlyn Horton** and **Dylan Storer**, who powerfully articulate the need for reform. And we hear from **Sarah Bendall**, from Australia's first National Student Ombudsman, who offers vital early insights into where our systems are falling short, and how institutional accountability must be strengthened.

Together, these perspectives remind us that the pursuit of justice is not a one-size-fits-all solution, but a deeply contextual and relational process. It is built on trust, co-design, and respect for different ways of knowing and being.

As Chair of ACSES's Advisory Board and Vice-Chancellor of a university serving one of the most diverse student populations in the country, I am privileged to see this work every day. I also see where we fall short. This section does not offer easy answers, but it does offer an invitation. It asks us to reflect, to listen, and to lead differently—with humility, with courage, and with an unwavering commitment to equity.

A key part of a university's mission is to enhance access and maximise the success of our students from equity groups. ACSES is an Australian first, a national Centre dedicated to providing the higher education sector with tangible proof of what really works to improve student equity. By working in partnership with ACSES, institutions can help ensure all students, irrespective of their background, have the opportunity to participate in and succeed at university.

Because justice is not a destination. It is the ongoing act of remaking our institutions to ensure that all students—not just some—can thrive.

From Complaint to Change: Early Insights from Australia's National Student Ombudsman

Sarah Bendall
National Student Ombudsman

When the National Student Ombudsman (NSO) opened its doors on 1 February 2025, it marked a significant and positive change in our shared effort towards an equitable and fully inclusive higher education sector in Australia. More than 1.6 million students in higher education across the country can now access a free, independent, and impartial service dedicated to resolving complaints about higher education providers. This is a major step forward for student equity—a prominent theme in the *Australian Universities Accord*—and the first action under the National Action Plan to Address Gender-based Violence.

Our tagline at the NSO is: "Empowering students, ensuring fairness." We take this seriously across the broad scope of our services. We can handle complaints about student safety and wellbeing, complaints about course administration, the student learning environment, and complaints about how universities handle appeals and grievances. Our goal is to provide individual resolutions as well as to amplify the voice of individual complainants to effect systemic improvements in the quality and safety of services to all students.

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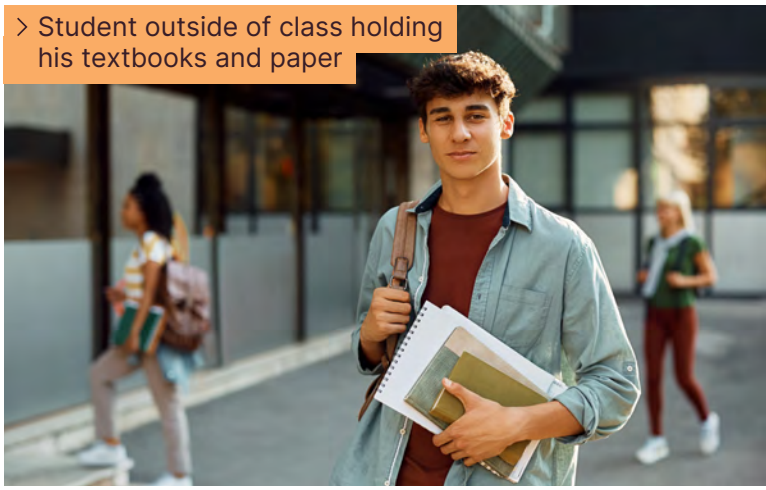

Student outside of class holding his textbooks and paper

> *Course administration, including special consideration, enrolment, and withdrawals, is the most common category of complaints, accounting for one-third of all contacts.*

Demand for NSO services has been strong. In our first five months, to 30 June 2025, we received over 1,750 contacts from students across Australia. Course administration, including special consideration, enrolment, and withdrawals, is the most common category of complaints, accounting for one-third of all contacts. Other common categories include teaching and learning and academic misconduct or unmet academic requirements, for example enrolment cancellations or suspensions based on academic performance. Fees and other financial issues are also a prominent theme.

Of course, statistics only tell part of the story. In these first months, my team and I have engaged widely around the country, including with students from diverse backgrounds and university leaders. Together we have had the privilege of undertaking over 250 engagement activities, such as Orientation Week events, and meetings with student representative bodies, First Nations students, students with disability, and international students to name just a few.

What has become clear from our discussions is that significant challenges remain in achieving equity in higher education. For students, we've heard that cost-of-living pressures, housing issues, and concerns around mental health and wellbeing are barriers as they seek to balance the demands of study and their busy lives. We know these challenges are often more acute for underrepresented groups. As the *Australian Universities Accord Final Report* noted, underrepresentation in tertiary education of people from disadvantaged groups, such as First Nations people, people with disability, and people from regional backgrounds, is "stark" (Department of Education, 2024, p. 9).

This is backed up by complaints from First Nations students. They have told us about the challenges of balancing personal, cultural, and community responsibilities with the demands of tertiary study, and about the added burden of being a regional student in securing essential student needs such as housing.

So, what needs to change?

Over the last 40 years, Australia has made significant strides towards creating equitable access to higher education. The Australian Universities Accord resets the blueprint for how we can unlock access and success in higher education for even more people. Importantly, the Accord recognises that a critical aspect to achieving this goal is creating "a better and fairer higher education system" (Ministers' Media Centre, 2024).

› Students working together on a project

> *At the Universities Australia Solutions Summit in February 2025, I heard Distinguished Professor George Williams AO, Vice Chancellor of Western Sydney University, declare publicly that "2025 was the year of the student". He went on to say that, in fact, at his university, every year would be the year of the student.*

This means making improvements within places of learning and across the system to ensure *all* students receive a high-quality and supportive education experience.

Although the NSO has only been in operation for a few months, it's clear from our engagement with students and the sector that, at a macro level, the necessary change is embedding a culture that places students, and, by extension, student experience, at the heart of provider priorities.

At the Universities Australia Solutions Summit in February 2025, I heard Distinguished Professor George Williams AO, Vice Chancellor of Western Sydney University, declare publicly that "2025 was the year of the student". He went on to say that, in fact, at his university, every year would be the year of the student. This, in my view, is the change that is needed. Strong and consistent leadership across the sector that drives change to support high-quality education for all students.

From this change come operational innovations within institutions to help students feel more connected and better supported, so they can reach their full potential and maximise their learning opportunities.

In short, the best people to answer the question of what needs to change are those in leadership positions within higher education providers. I know from my engagement that many are asking this question. I would encourage all to do so.

Any student who has concerns about the actions of their higher education provider can contact the NSO via nso.gov.au or by phoning 1300 395 775.

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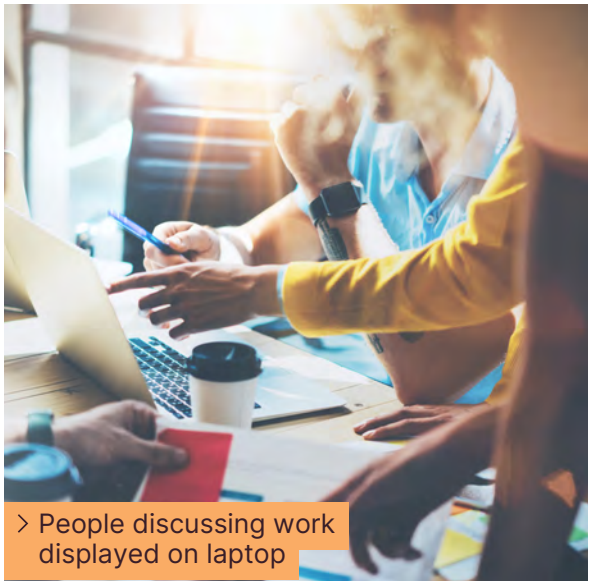

People discussing work displayed on laptop

Independent Student Unions: Reclaiming Student Voice in Higher Education

Ashlyn Horton
National Union of Students

Discussions of equity in higher education often prioritise admissions, financial aid, and attainment gaps. While these areas are foundational, they overlook a critical dimension: the student experience. Equitable outcomes in higher education require not only access and completion, but also structural mechanisms that support student representation, safety, and agency throughout the academic journey. Central to this infrastructure are independent student unions. Since the introduction of Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU) in 2006, student unions in Australia have faced significant challenges, including reduced funding, weakened independence, and diminished influence (Parliament of Australia, 2005).

Historically, student unions have functioned as multifaceted institutions offering not only services such as legal aid, food security, and health support, but also acting as vehicles for student advocacy and accountability. Their contributions have been particularly significant for students from historically marginalised communities, who often face systemic barriers to participation and voice within institutional governance (National Union of Students [NUS], 2023).

On a national level, it was student unions that were responsible for lowering the age of independence from 25 to 22, increases to Austudy during the pandemic, the partial reversal of the Job Ready Graduates Package, and the creation of the National Student Ombudsman (Department of Education, 2025). On individual campuses, student unions have successfully campaigned for simple extensions, standardised submission times, and more accessible appeals processes.

> *The marginalisation of student unions has broader implications for equity and accountability within the higher education sector. When student voices are silenced or diluted, structural inequities go unchallenged.*

The introduction of VSU in 2006 marked a critical turning point in the Australian higher education landscape. Marketed under the principle of individual choice, VSU led to the defunding of many student organisations. Essential services and advocacy functions previously provided by unions were dismantled or severely limited. As a result, independent student voice and agency became fragmented, and in many instances, formerly independent student associations were absorbed into university management structures.

Since the implementation of VSU, student life has become increasingly precarious. Financial pressures have intensified due to rising living costs and stagnant income support, international students face heightened risks of exploitation, and campuses often remain inaccessible for students with disabilities. Moreover, First Nations students and those from regional, remote, or low socio-economic backgrounds continue to be underrepresented in institutional decision-making processes. Mental health challenges, housing insecurity, and experiences of discrimination persist across campuses. These conditions underscore the urgent need for robust, student-led advocacy.

In many cases, student unions now operate under the oversight of university bureaucracies or rely on unstable and discretionary funding. Such arrangements compromise their ability to act as independent watchdogs and representative bodies. Instances where student "representation" is allocated to management-appointed committees further undermine democratic participation and student autonomy.

While the introduction of the Student Services and Amenities Fee (SSAF) in 2011 was intended to mitigate the effects of VSU, it has not fully restored the capacity of student organisations. Universities retain substantial control over SSAF allocations, often directing funds away from independent student unions toward administrative or compliant alternatives. The federal mandate requiring that 40% of SSAF be allocated to student-led organisations is frequently circumvented through broad or ambiguous interpretations of what constitutes a "student-led" organisation (Department of Education, 2021).

The marginalisation of student unions has broader implications for equity and accountability within the higher education sector. When student voices are silenced or diluted, structural inequities go unchallenged. Institutions lose valuable feedback mechanisms that could inform more inclusive and responsive policies and practices. Furthermore, marginalised students lose the collective structures that have historically amplified their concerns and advocated for transformative change.

To address these challenges, three interrelated reforms are necessary.

First, SSAF allocations should be distributed directly to democratically elected student unions, independent of university management. Transparent funding mechanisms and governance safeguards are essential to preserving autonomy and accountability.

Second, student representation should be embedded across all levels of institutional governance—from faculty boards to national policy forums. Representation must be inclusive, properly resourced, and supported to ensure it is substantive rather than symbolic.

> *Equity in higher education must be understood not only as access to academic resources, but also as access to institutional power.*

> *Higher education policy and practice must reframe student unions not as optional or peripheral, but as essential to student wellbeing, democratic engagement, and institutional accountability.*

Third, higher education policy and practice must reframe student unions not as optional or peripheral, but as essential to student wellbeing, democratic engagement, and institutional accountability.

Equity in higher education must be understood not only as access to academic resources, but also as access to institutional power. Independent student unions are integral to achieving this broader vision of equity. They offer culturally safe spaces, elevate marginalised voices, and advocate for reforms that internal structures are often ill-equipped to pursue. The decline of student unions has created a vacuum in student support and representation. Rebuilding these institutions is vital to ensure students play a genuine role in shaping their educational environments.

> *The decline of student unions has created a vacuum in student support and representation.*

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For the Poor and the Obscure: Reclaiming What Universities Forgot

Dylan Storer
Curtin Student Guild

There's a truth many of us on campus already know, even if it's not written into glossy strategic plans or university mission statements: Australian higher education has been gutted. Although never perfect, what was once grounded in the public good—a place to exchange ideas, transform lives, and challenge the status quo—has been slowly and deliberately reshaped by neoliberalism into something transactional, and student equity has taken one of the hardest hits. John Curtin once said a great university should be "a friend of the reformer, the host ever willing to receive the initiator, the champion always ready to defend the poor and the obscure". That ideal, although never fully realised, now feels farther away than ever.

I have $62,090.11 in student debt. To be fair, a couple of failed units didn't help, but when life and work get in the way, something needs to give. Spoiler: it's usually your grades. That's the quiet crisis at the heart of Australian higher education. It's not just the cost of tuition—it's the cost of surviving while studying. We've built a system that tells students to chase their dreams, while demanding they work 25+ hours a week to afford the privilege. Equity? Not even close.

Right now, students across the country are skipping meals, couch-surfing, putting off doctor visits, and pulling all-nighters—not to revise, but to squeeze in another shift. When your focus is on making it to payday, it's pretty hard to make it to class. And even harder to meaningfully participate.

The result? Students are burnt out, their academic performance suffers, and people drop out. Students are not struggling because they're incapable, but because the system is stacked against them. As students, we're told it's our fault—for not "prioritising study", as if education happens in a vacuum. As if you can write a thesis on a 15-minute lunch break.

> *Students are not struggling because they're incapable, but because the system is stacked against them.*

At the root of this mess is the ideology that has hollowed out our public institutions. Neoliberalism turned education into a private investment—something to buy, not something to build. Universities now compete for markets, not meaning. In the process, they've lost something far more critical than rankings or revenue—they've lost their soul.

So, what needs to change?

We need to stop managing the decline and start dreaming again.

First, education must be free. Actually free. No fees, no debt, no compromise. If we're serious about equity, we need to treat all education the same way we treat Medicare—universal, publicly funded, and essential.

Second, the poverty crisis needs to be tackled head-on. That means lifting welfare and post-grad stipends above the poverty line. It means investing in food security, mental health care, and accessible transport. No one should need to choose between buying a textbook and buying dinner.

Third, universities must exit the for-profit student housing game. Education should not come with rental stress. It's time for campuses to provide genuinely affordable, safe, and accessible housing run for students, not for profit. Public institutions should serve the public good, not compete with the private rental market.

Fourth, we need to fundamentally rethink how universities are run. Corporate governance structures that prioritise profit over learning have no place in public education. Students and staff should have a real say in the decisions that shape their institutions. Equity isn't just about accessing courses or scholarships—it's about accessing power.

Finally, we need to return to the idea that education isn't just about employment. It's about enlightenment. It's about participating in our democracy, contributing to our community, and learning how to think, not just what to do.

These ideas aren't just theoretical. Across the country, students and staff are doing a great deal of heavy lifting. At Curtin University, the Student Guild I lead has advocated for affordable housing, delivered emergency income support, and defended free speech on campus. We've proven that when students are organised, change doesn't just happen—it's powerful.

Imagine a university where your ability to learn isn't determined by how many hours you can pick up at Coles, where education is an actual contest of ideas, not a KPI spreadsheet, where your future isn't a gamble, but a right.

> *Imagine a university where your ability to learn isn't determined by how many hours you can pick up at Coles, where education is an actual contest of ideas, not a KPI spreadsheet, where your future isn't a gamble, but a right.*

That vision is possible. But it won't come from the top; it will come from students and staff organising, imagining, and demanding better.

I might have $62k in student debt, but what I owe this country is to fight for a better system than the one I inherited.

And I'm not alone.

From Transactional to Transformational: Reimagining Indigenous Student Experience

Professor Leanne Holt
University of New South Wales

Over the past decade, Australian higher education has undergone significant change, creating both new challenges and opportunities for improving Indigenous student outcomes. The Universities Accord has explicitly positioned Indigenous peoples at the heart of the education system, recognising the urgent need to embed Indigenous knowledges, leadership, and voices within university structures.

Simultaneously, broader societal factors, including the rising cost of living, advances in technology, shifts in learning environments, persistent racism, and political pressures on university funding, continue to impact Indigenous student experiences.

To create meaningful change, higher education must move beyond transactional models of support towards transformational environments that empower Indigenous students, amplify Indigenous-led research and teaching, and strengthen partnerships with communities. Through sector-wide commitment, alignment with the principles of the Uluru Statement from the Heart, and a bold focus on Indigenous self-determination, universities can reshape their role to not only improve equity but contribute to broader societal transformation.

Nationally, universities have increasingly embedded Indigenous strategies into their core business, particularly through initiatives like the Universities Australia Indigenous Strategy (2017–2020; 2022-2025) (Universities Australia, 2025) and renewed commitments through the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (Closing the Gap, 2025). Although access to higher education for Indigenous students improved over the past decade, progress has stalled since 2020, with a 3% decline from 2021 to 2022 that has yet to recover (Department of Education, 2025).

Completion rates also remain lower, underscoring the urgent need for stronger retention strategies and structures that are conducive to Indigenous student success.

Structural reforms in universities, including the establishment of Indigenous governance bodies, Indigenous leadership roles at executive levels, and Indigenous research centres, have made Indigenous education more visible (Coates, *et al.*, 2021). Universities have also started emphasising Indigenous-led research and Indigenous data sovereignty principles, creating more culturally responsive and affirming environments for students. Importantly, the move towards "whole-of-university" approaches, where responsibility for Indigenous student success is shared across all faculties and services (not siloed in Indigenous units alone), is beginning to reshape the landscape (Perry & Holt, 2018).

However, broader societal challenges also impact outcomes. Rising costs of living, alongside an increasingly competitive labour market, mean Indigenous students often juggle significant financial pressures with study. Although technology and AI have expanded hybrid learning opportunities, making study more flexible, they can also exacerbate digital exclusion where reliable access is an issue. Universities are investing more in technology, but the rapid adoption of AI tools also demands critical attention to culturally appropriate learning design.

To positively impact Indigenous student equity, Australian higher education must move beyond transactional inclusion to a transformational model where Indigenous students thrive through culturally affirming, empowered experiences. Universities must embed Indigenous leadership at the heart of governance, curriculum, and research, and align their strategies to raising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices, truth-telling through education, and progressing self-determination.

In the wake of the 2023 Voice referendum, Indigenous peoples were subjected to heightened racism and public vilification, a trend that has once again intensified leading into the 2025 federal election. These events highlight the ongoing reality that Indigenous peoples in Australia continue to be politicised based solely on race.

> *"Universities must embed Indigenous leadership at the heart of governance, curriculum, and research."*

Higher education institutions must recognise that neutrality is not an option; instead, they must demonstrate strong, visible, collective leadership in standing against racism, and embedding Indigenous perspectives as a core, unapologetic part of their missions.

Universities must reframe their positioning from a deficit support narrative to environments where Indigenous students are provided opportunities that ensure a deep sense of connection and community, as well as experiences that contribute to long-term success beyond graduation. Funding models must be stabilised and protected from political cycles, and sustained investment is needed in scholarships, mentoring, and the offering of student opportunities, particularly to counter the impacts of rising living costs. Universities must also ensure hybrid learning models, technology, and AI adoption are equitable, culturally appropriate, and do not widen the digital divide.

Furthermore, stronger harmonisation across universities, vocational education, schools, and industry is needed to create a shared vision and aspirations.

In this pivotal moment for Australian higher education, universities must evolve from limited, engagement-based practices to cultivating environments that empower Indigenous self-determination, uphold truth-telling and drive lasting societal change. While structural reforms such as the Universities Accord position Indigenous peoples at the heart of the education system, this vision must be matched by collective sector-wide leadership, clear advocacy for Indigenous knowledges, and an unwavering stand against racism and political opportunism.

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> *Universities will succeed when Indigenous success is seen not only as an equity goal but as a core measure of institutional excellence.*

In doing so, universities have a profound opportunity, and responsibility, to influence broader systems, aligning with schools, vocational education, and industry to ensure Indigenous voices are not just heard but drive lasting change. Universities will succeed when Indigenous success is seen not only as an equity goal but as a core measure of institutional excellence. True progress will only be achieved when Indigenous students are empowered to thrive, Indigenous research and leadership are valued and centred, and Indigenous knowledges are embedded across every level of Australian education.

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Reframing Higher Education: A Northern Territory Aboriginal Woman's Call for Change

Dr Tracy Woodroffe
ACSES First Nations Fellow
Charles Darwin University

Equity in access to higher education for First Nations people is still an issue in Australia. Something I have been thinking more deeply about since conducting a series of workshops in 2020 (Woodroffe *et al.*, 2021), has been, *"What do people think is the purpose of higher education institutions?"*

The academy assumes everyone understands what a university is, and that higher education is a common goal. This is not necessarily the case, particularly if people think in terms of practicalities and in diverse ways about knowledge.

Changes in higher education impacting equity

Review of higher education access and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people: Final Report (Behrendt *et al.*, 2012) emphasised the importance of equity in higher education for Aboriginal people. It advocated for recruiting Indigenous students into professions like teaching and healthcare, which are critical for Indigenous communities in Australia.

This document sparked a conversation and rational argument for empowering parts of the population to achieve practical outcomes for students and wider society. The review helped to sharpen the concept of empowerment through higher education, and the promise of a more equitable future. Rereading the document now, it is disappointing how many recommendations are still a work in progress.

> *The academy assumes everyone understands what a university is, and that higher education is a common goal.*

> Three students reading books and on devices

Practical applications and personal perspective

As an Aboriginal educator and researcher, the use of my knowledge and skill has always been about immediate practical impact. It is about finding the best way to support someone's learning that enables them to "do" something. These objectives and impact are visible and measurable. This determination may have to do with my Indigeneity, but perhaps it is also about my identity and positioning in society as a teacher or educator, and even something as foundational as being a woman and a mother.

Whatever the reason, the 2024 ACSES First Nations Fellowship entitled "Increasing the number of Aboriginal teachers in the NT: Planning for the future" (Woodroffe, 2024; Woodroffe & Chauhan, 2024) enabled the very practical application of research findings to impact directly on Aboriginal people, especially Aboriginal students and the teachers of Aboriginal students, to shift attitudes and understandings about the potential of enrolling in higher education and becoming a teacher.

If the point of research is expanding knowledge, and finding out something new, then the knowledge that is most relevant to as many people in society as possible is through education, including the promotion of education. As an Aboriginal woman, I believe my work should benefit society, especially other Aboriginal people who experience inequity.

This is the goal for the translation of research findings and the communication and implementation of the findings as recommendations. Communication is pivotal because people must first hear about research, so they can know the purpose and focus, and understand the significance of the findings as it applies to them. Messaging about the research, if applied correctly, could produce the groundswell required to create change.

> *Messaging about the research, if applied correctly, could produce the groundswell required to create change.*

Future changes for positive impact

A suggestion for future change that will positively impact Aboriginal student equity in higher education is to think about and plan more carefully for intercultural communication. Institutions should begin with developing a strategic media and marketing plan that promotes careers to Aboriginal people.

This requires an insight into Aboriginal perspectives and demands conversations with Aboriginal people who hold those perspectives. This strategy includes younger people being better informed while they are still in secondary school about post-school options. There should also be a plan for communicating with Aboriginal potential mature age students as well that has embedded relevant cultural messaging.

The findings from the 2024 ACSES First Nations Fellowship research "Increasing the number of Aboriginal teachers in the NT" revealed the need for more targeted information, created with the words and perspectives of Aboriginal people to convince more people of the importance of study in teaching. The findings could be applicable to other careers. Promotional materials should include the significance to community and culture in a way that is relevant and relatable. The inclusion of cultural perspective could bridge the gap between different understandings of higher education and increase engagement and participation boosted by greater understanding by Aboriginal people.

› Students in discussion gathered by a laptop

Conclusion

Achieving different results requires innovative approaches. To effectively engage the Aboriginal audience, it is crucial to understand their perspectives on higher education. By actively listening to Aboriginal voices, we can uncover the reasons behind lower engagement and develop promotional strategies that are culturally relevant and impactful. This inclusive approach not only respects Aboriginal viewpoints but also paves the way for more effective communication and increased participation in higher education.

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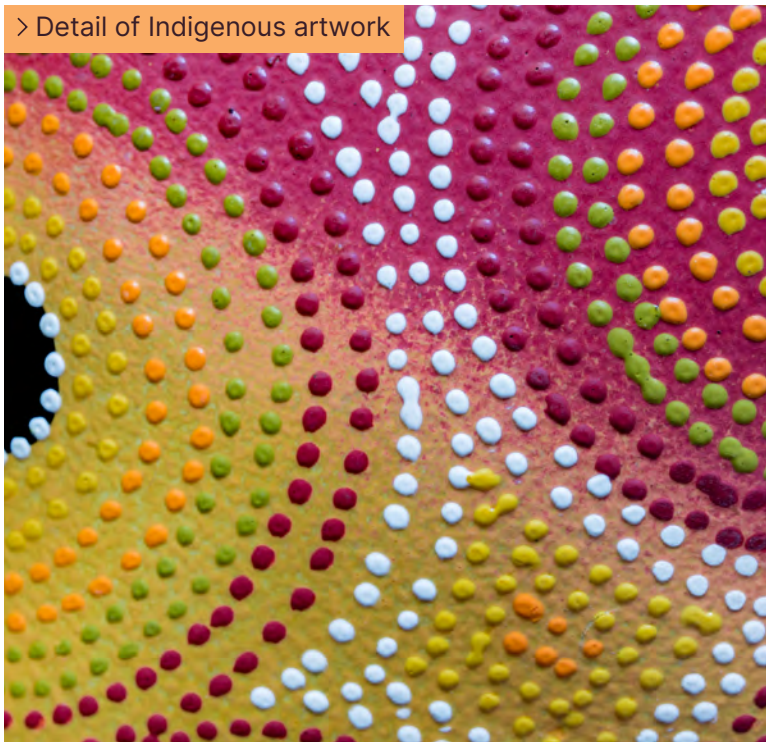
> Detail of Indigenous artwork



> *"The inclusion of cultural perspective could bridge the gap between different understandings of higher education and increase engagement and participation boosted by greater understanding by Aboriginal people."*

SECTION 3:
Making Equity Real – Practice, Place, and Participation

Students gathered by a desk discussing a drone

SECTION 3

Making Equity Real – Practice, Place, and Participation

Introduction

Professor the Hon. Verity Firth AM
University of New South Wales

Australian higher education is at a pivotal moment. The federal government has responded to the Australian Universities Accord, outlining an ambitious agenda for change. Australia is to grow the skills the country needs through equity. A target has been set for 80% of the working age population to hold a tertiary qualification by 2050.

By this time the representation of equity cohorts—low socio-economic status (SES) students, First Nations Australians, students with disabilities, and students from regional and remote areas—must be at parity to their share of the Australian working age population.

Regulation and funding won't achieve this goal alone. Change of this magnitude is transformative and requires significant cultural and systems change—a rebuilding and reimagining of the system of higher education in this country. The articles featured here, authored by **Dr Patricia Vermillion Peirce CE**, **Professor Katie Ellis**, **Dr Matt Brett**, and **Dr Kylie Austin**, collectively challenge us to move beyond incrementalism and compliance toward a bold reimagining of equity in Australian higher education.

Together, these contributions illuminate a shared truth—although we have made significant headway to making our institutions more accessible and inclusive of diverse student cohorts, our current approaches are still not fit for purpose. Systemic barriers persist.

As Dr Austin points out in her contribution, "[Universities]... were built for a different time, and for a different kind of student—one with privilege, financial stability, and often a family history of university experience. If we are serious about equity, we must be bold enough to say: the system itself is the problem."

The authors call for practical transformations to our sector and institutional cultures, each in their own powerful way, but coherent in their recommendations, by:

- empowering Indigenous self-determination, upholding truth-telling, and driving lasting societal change
- understanding the reality and complexity of students' lives, reshaping the delivery of teaching, and learning to better respond to the demands of students' work, caring, and other commitments
- allowing Universal Design for Learning and inclusive curriculum design to become standard practice
- re-thinking of evidence-based approaches that ensure datasets and evaluation methods support both leadership and practitioner decision-making
- elevating student voice and leadership to allow for power shifts that allow students to participate in co-designing institutional change
- focusing on practical, scalable solutions through concrete actions.

What emerges is a compelling vision for a sector that embraces diversity not as an obligation, but as a source of strength. These papers are a call to action. The political momentum behind this equity agenda is rare and powerful. But as the authors remind us, alignment alone is not enough. We must be willing to cross boundaries, get uncomfortable, and rebuild our higher education system so that it works for all students.

Making What Works Work: Building a More Useful Evidence System for Equity

Dr Patricia Vermillion Peirce CE
Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success

Efforts in the United Kingdom, United States, and Australia to improve educational equity have been supported by organisations that curate impact evaluations estimating the size and significance of various initiatives.

Repositories such as ACSES's Trials Registry make individual studies accessible to the Australian equity sector (Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success, n.d.). Study reviews, like those conducted by the Institute of Education Sciences' What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) in the United States, build trust in findings by assessing the quality of evidence behind reported outcomes (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Evidence summaries, such as the toolkits developed by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) and Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) in the UK, clarify what the collective evidence says about the effectiveness of specific initiatives (Education Endowment Foundation, n.d.; Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education, n.d.). These efforts provide a foundation for understanding what works, what doesn't, and how variations in delivery, context, or learner characteristics influence outcomes.

Despite this growing availability of evidence, many equity practitioners do not actively use it. This disconnect is not necessarily due to a lack of interest in effectiveness. More often, it reflects the fact that such evidence remains somewhat removed from the day-to-day practice of delivering equity initiatives. While impact evidence may inform high-level decisions, such as whether to adopt, continue, or discontinue an initiative, it rarely fits neatly into the operational rhythm of equity delivery teams.

"What Works" infrastructures typically draw on evidence quantifying the effects of activities for target populations. This information is helpful for funders and institutional leaders when making decisions about continuing or scaling initiatives, although the evidence can sometimes fall short in guiding real-time implementation.

How can we work towards greater equity, as a system, and better support equity-focused delivery teams through our Australian What Works infrastructure?

Funders as good-practice partners

One important way to better support the system is to ensure that funded evaluations, particularly those requiring publication as the key output, generate evidence that is genuinely useful to a range of stakeholders. Many randomised controlled trials (RCTs) examine the effects of an initiative over and above the "status quo", making clear to decision-makers the impact and value of the initiative within that context. Other randomised trial designs can help test and compare different delivery approaches.

For instance, a parallel-arm design can randomly assign participants to two or more delivery approaches, allowing direct comparison of their relative effectiveness. A factorial design can randomly assign participants to various combinations of these approaches, helping clarify the relative value of these different combinations for the participant population. Further analytical approaches can help explore the different impacts on distinct population groups, answering not only *what works* but also *for whom*.

For example, heterogeneous treatment effect analysis looks at whether an initiative is more or less effective for different groups of people.

> *"What's often required is either a nudge for researchers to engage more broadly, or the funding structures that enable and encourage such engagement."*

> *The disconnect between evidence and equity practice is not rooted in disinterest, but in the somewhat limited usability of available evidence for day-to-day decision-making.*

Information generated through these various designs and analyses may offer practical insights for those charged with implementing activities.

The central challenge, and opportunity, is to embed funding mechanisms that give equal weight to the information needs of practitioners and those of institutional decision-makers. Randomised evaluations can, and often do, accommodate these practical needs. What's often required is either a nudge for researchers to engage more broadly, or the funding structures that enable and encourage such engagement, so evaluations can address both implementation-focused and high-level policy questions.

Often when funding flows through equity-advocacy organisations, such as TASO or ACSES, processes are in place to support this broader objective. ACSES, for instance, funds impact evaluations that are: led by the sector, reflect sector priorities, and support learning among funders, institutional management, and delivery teams (Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success, n.d.).

Evidence synthesis as a system steward

Further, evidence syntheses can summarise existing research in ways that align with the varied needs of stakeholders. What Works Centres often select topics and define review aims based on specific decision-making priorities. The focus of these reviews, and the methods used to generate these evidence summaries, aim to support informed decision-making across these relevant contexts.

EEF, for example, developed an evidence framework that informs decisions at both the school and classroom levels within the compulsory education sector. EEF's "Teaching and Learning Toolkit" provides evidence summaries that support school leaders in making strategic decisions, such as whether to implement a school uniform policy or introduce a behaviour intervention. This same toolkit also supports classroom-level decisions, such as whether to group students by attainment or tailor teaching to learning styles. EEF's summaries thereby offer valuable insights for different layers of decision-making.

ACSES is working to develop similarly useful syntheses for the Australian higher education sector. However, the sector currently lacks the volume of evidence needed to accommodate both strategic and operational decision-making. It would be valuable, for example, if there were sufficient evidence to understand if widening participation activities in Australia lead to increased tertiary applications and enrolments, and for whom; such insights could inform national policy and institutional outreach strategies.

For delivery teams, evidence on effective outreach methods, mechanisms, and types of support would be of greater practical relevance. Work is underway to develop a clear framework for these syntheses, while continuing to encourage aligned evidence generation.

Reconnecting evidence and equity practice

The disconnect between evidence and equity practice is not rooted in disinterest, but in the somewhat limited usability of available evidence for day-to-day decision-making. While we have made significant strides in collecting, evaluating, and synthesising impact evidence, the next step is to strengthen the way this infrastructure responds to the varied needs of those working to improve equity.

> *We have made significant strides in collecting, evaluating, and synthesising impact evidence, the next step is to strengthen the way this infrastructure responds to the varied needs of those working to improve equity.*

Funders and evidence synthesists are already playing a key role in supporting the sector. What's needed now is to continue these focused efforts to shape evaluations and syntheses that reflect the information needs of policy, management, and delivery teams. It's a long-game, whereby equity advocacy organisations like ACSES and TASO are building the infrastructure as activities are designed and funded; nonetheless, this alignment will help ensure evidence is not only robust, but also relevant to better support equitable outcomes through the layers of decisions being made.

> *It's a long-game, whereby equity advocacy organisations like ACSES and TASO are building the infrastructure as activities are designed and funded; nonetheless, this alignment will help ensure evidence is not only robust, but also relevant.*

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Beyond Compliance: Reimagining Disability Inclusion in Australian Higher Education

Professor Katie Ellis
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The promise of equity in Australian higher education remains unfulfilled for disabled students. Despite more than three decades since the Disability Discrimination Act, our universities continue to treat accessibility as an afterthought rather than a foundational principle (Steele, Banks, & Louis, 2023). If we genuinely want to create equitable educational environments, we need transformative change, not incremental adjustments.

The gaps are glaring. An audit of 41 tertiary institutions revealed many lacked current Disability Action Plans, while simultaneously claiming inclusive practices (Steele *et al.*, 2023). Meanwhile, recent studies show disabled students experiencing persistent barriers: inaccessible buildings, delayed materials, and the exhausting process of repeatedly justifying their existence in academic spaces (Hickey, 2023; Steele & Richards, 2023).

This article proposes four critical transformations that would meaningfully impact equity for disabled students.

> *If we genuinely want to create equitable educational environments, we need transformative change, not incremental adjustments.*

From token training to disability confidence

Current disability awareness training in universities is woefully inadequate. Most modules perpetuate stereotypical

understandings of disability as primarily physical, visible, and static. This leaves staff unprepared to support students with hidden disabilities, chronic conditions, or fluctuating impairments—the majority of disabled students (Hickey, 2023).

Universities must invest in comprehensive disability confidence training that addresses the full spectrum of disability experiences. This training should cover neurodivergence (Baron-Cohen, 2017), crip time (the different temporal experiences of disabled people) (Kafer, 2013; Samuels, 2017), and the importance of disability as identity and community (McRuer & Berube, 2006). Most critically, this training needs to reach beyond disability services offices to become standard professional development for all academic and administrative staff.

From digital afterthoughts to digital inclusion by design

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed both the possibilities and limitations of digital learning environments. While remote options created unprecedented access for some disabled students, the hasty implementation revealed how little consideration had been given to digital accessibility (Parsloe & Smith, 2022).

Australian universities need to adopt universal design principles for all digital platforms from the procurement stage onward (Burgstahler, 2021). This means ensuring learning management systems, online assessment tools, and digital resources are compatible with assistive technologies and designed with cognitive accessibility in mind. It also means maintaining remote participation options post-pandemic rather than rushing back to "normal" operations that exclude many disabled students (Block *et al.*, 2021).

From enforcement burden to institutional accountability

Currently, the onus falls on disabled students to identify barriers, request accommodations, provide medical documentation, and follow up repeatedly when supports fail. This system treats access as exceptional rather than expected and creates additional labour for those already navigating complex systems with fewer resources (Dolmage, 2017).

> *This system treats access as exceptional rather than expected and creates additional labour for those already navigating complex systems with fewer resources (Dolmage, 2017).*

Universities must shift toward proactive accessibility where inclusive design is the default expectation. This requires robust data collection on disabled students' experiences, transparent reporting of accessibility barriers, and clear accountability mechanisms when institutions fail to meet their obligations (Beauchamp-Pryor, 2012). Government funding should be tied to demonstrated progress toward equity targets, not mere compliance with minimum standards.

From objects of research to leaders of change

Perhaps most fundamentally, universities must centre disabled people's expertise in developing policy and practice. The disability rights principle of "nothing about us without us" (Charlton, 1998) remains largely unheeded in Australian higher education, where disabled students are rarely involved in decisions that directly affect their educational experiences.

Universities should establish paid roles for disabled students and staff in governance structures, ensure representation on curriculum design committees, and create pathways for disability leadership within institutions. Research involving disabled people should employ co-design methodologies (Blomkamp, 2018; Rieger, 2020) and preferably be disability-led (Hadley & Rieger, 2021).

The path forward

These transformations aren't merely aspirational—they're essential for meeting Australia's obligations under both domestic law and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006). They're also smart institutional strategy as universities face increasing competition for domestic and international students.

> *Universities must centre disabled people's expertise in developing policy and practice.*

La Trobe University's Neurodiversity Program demonstrates the potential impact of this approach. By creating explicit support for neurodivergent students and fostering community among them, La Trobe has seen "skyrocketing" registrations and increased retention of previously marginalised students (Radulski & Jaworowski, 2022).

The pandemic disrupted normative expectations about how education must function and created unprecedented opportunities for reimagining accessibility (Parsloe & Smith, 2022). As universities emerge from this period of upheaval, they face a choice: return to exclusionary "business as usual" or build on these disruptions to create truly inclusive educational environments.

True equity requires more than accommodation—it demands transformation (Titchkosky, 2011). By moving beyond compliance to embrace disability as diversity, Australian universities can become global leaders in inclusive education. The question isn't whether we can afford these changes, but whether we can afford not to make them.

> *"True equity requires more than accommodation—it demands transformation."*

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> *"The question isn't whether we can afford these changes, but whether we can afford not to make them."*

Rethinking Disability in Higher Education: Beyond Adjustments

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The longevity of universities hinges on their adaptability—including the ability to generate and assimilate new fields of knowledge, and teaching modalities. A widening proportion of the population now pass through our universities, and over decades the "new" becomes the "norm" enabled by evolving evidence and standards.

Australia's first female graduate was in 1883 (University of Melbourne, 2025). Female participation became the majority a century later (Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 2001). Even with a female majority, the sector has yet to fully adapt, evidenced by what constitutes a new standard, the Action Plan Addressing Gender-based Violence in Higher Education (Department of Education, 2024a).

Disability is not new to higher education, but the process by which universities have evolved to accommodate disability is slower than that for gender. Australia's first blind student was in 1891 (Pitman & Brett, 2022), but it was not until 1994 that disability was officially counted in universities. This change did not come easily, with a disability indicator added as a temporary measure following a contested committee vote (Martin, 2016).

The counting of disability emerged from system reforms with stated objective of changing the balance of the student population to reflect more closely the composition of Australian society (Australian Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1990). In a parallel process, new regulatory standards were set within the passage of the Disability Discrimination Act.

> *The normalised effective participation of students with disability is, however, far from complete.*

> *Universities accept this reality because the Disability Standards for Education emphasise reasonable adjustments and entitle providers to preserve the integrity of their awards.*

Since disability was first counted, the absolute number and proportion of students with disabilities enrolled in higher education has increased every year for 30 years. We can rightly celebrate this as a public policy triumph and statistical proof of system adaptation.

The data collection and standards associated with the inclusion of students with disabilities have outgrown their use.

What was a temporary disability indicator has become quasi-permanent but still fails to answer with precision the question of whether the participation of students with disabilities is consistent with Australian society. Higher education disability data bears little resemblance to adjacent datasets contributing to sustained misrecognition (Pitman, Brett, & Ellis, 2023).

The Australian Universities Accord stated participation rate for students with disabilities (11.6%) exceeds the expected enrolment share (8.4%) (Department of Education, 2024b). Both values have since been revised upwards but remain below the proportion of students enrolled in Australian schools (25.7%) (Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority, 2025).

National and institutional strategy, planning, financing, and quality assurance would look very different if disability was scrutinised with greater precision. The current system objective of "skills through equity" encourages more sophisticated questions relating to labour market engagement and productivity than imperfect enrolment counts.

The Disability Discrimination Act makes it unlawful to develop or accredit curricular that excludes students with disability or exposes them to "any other detriment". Across recent decades, higher education has adopted a prosthetic model of support (Williams, 2016), where adjustments react to specific needs rather than accommodating diverse needs by design or routine localised differentiated practice. The resulting emphasis on individualised adjustment at massified scale exposes students to pervasive inconvenience at best, and in many cases borderline discriminatory detriment.

Students face systemic barriers to remedy unlawful exclusion they may experience (Dickson, 2022) and invariably navigate myriad barriers they confront without complaint. Universities accept this reality because the Disability Standards for Education emphasise reasonable adjustments and entitle providers to preserve the integrity of their awards. The Standards also specify a requirement to take "reasonable steps" to ensure curriculum design is inclusive, albeit with tempering clauses that reiterate the primacy of adjustment.

If we are to expedite the adaptation of higher education to better enhance the experiences and graduate outcomes of students with disability, there is a need to enhance data collection, translate this data into evidence, and apply actionable insight into standards reforms that recalibrate relationships between accreditation, adjustment, award integrity, and curriculum design.

The pre-conditions for a more rapid rate of change are coming together. Commonwealth funding for disability in higher education was recently quadrupled and institutional expenditure on universal design for learning is now claimable for reimbursement.

It is time to get serious about aligning evidence with standards. We can begin this process by elevating inclusive design in the current review of the Disability Standards for Education, then better aligning related standards including the higher education standards in the years ahead. A stronger emphasis on inclusion by design might render adjustment a last resort rather than first point of call and provide a better experience for students.

> *A stronger emphasis on inclusion by design might render adjustment a last resort rather than first point of call and provide a better experience for students.*

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Crossing Boundaries: New Approaches to True Equity in Higher Education

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Let's take a moment to reflect on where we are as a sector.

Since 2022, we've witnessed a significant and encouraging shift in Australian higher education. For the first time in recent memory, we are seeing a powerful alignment between national policy, institutional priorities, and individual values (Universities Accord Panel, 2024). This alignment is not just symbolic—it's strategic, and it's creating real momentum for change.

At the heart of this shift is a renewed and collective commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion. The focus on increasing access and participation for students from underserved backgrounds (including First Nations students, students from regional, rural, and remote areas, students from low SES, and students with disability) is no longer the work of a few passionate individuals—it's a national priority. It's embedded in the missions of our universities, and it's reflected in the daily efforts of staff across the sector who work alongside students to help them thrive.

We now have a blueprint for a higher education system that values a diverse student cohort. We're seeing investment in initiatives that directly address barriers to participation—like the practicum placement scheme, which provides financial support to students undertaking unpaid placements (Department of Education, 2024). These are the kinds of practical, student-centred solutions that will make a tangible difference.

Importantly, this isn't just about policy or programs. It's about people. Across our 44 Australian universities (TEQSA, 2025), equity and inclusion are now embedded in strategic plans. More Vice-Chancellors are speaking publicly and passionately about equity and the importance of supporting underrepresented students. This is a cultural shift as much as it is a structural one.

And let's not forget the thousands of staff—academic and professional—who have been advocating for change long before it became a national priority. These are the people who go above and beyond every day to ensure students have every possible chance to succeed. Their work is the foundation on which this new alignment is being built.

So yes, we have alignment. And that alignment is powerful. It gives us a unique opportunity to make lasting, systemic change.

But we must also be honest with ourselves: alignment alone is not enough.

Despite the progress we've made, systemic barriers persist. These barriers prevent many students from accessing university in the first place—and for those who do make it to university, they often face additional challenges that push them out before they can complete their studies. Mental ill-health, financial stress, and managing the balance between study, work, family, and cultural commitments are among the primary reasons students do not persist with their studies.

The truth is, our systems, the way we organise teaching and learning, and our cultures were not designed for the students we are now trying to serve (Universities Accord Panel, 2024). They were built for a different time, and for a different kind of student—one with privilege, financial stability, and often a family history of university experience. If we are serious about equity, we must be bold enough to say: the system itself is the problem.

And if we want to change the system, we can't do it alone.

> *We now have a blueprint for a higher education system that values a diverse student cohort.*

> *We need to sit around the table—alongside our students—and truly understand their needs.*

We need to sit around the table—alongside our students—and truly understand their needs.

Embracing boundary-crossing means going beyond simply listening; it means putting students in the driver's seat and empowering them to help transform our universities. This requires a genuine shift in power, where students are not just recipients of support, but active partners in shaping the systems that affect them.

Collaboration is hard. It's messy. There's no playbook. But it's also where the most meaningful change happens.

So, where do we start? As a sector, we must work alongside students to:

- Engage with industry to design at-scale opportunities to earn while they learn—integrating authentic, paid employment alongside university studies.
- Reimagine how teaching and learning are delivered and timetabled, with conscious attention to the work and personal commitments of our students.
- Create safe spaces for students to share where racism and discrimination are occurring within our institutions and implement effective mechanisms to address them.
- Establish robust listening platforms to identify where students are struggling—and act on what we hear.
- Invest in innovative, low-barrier mental health and financial support initiatives that meet students where they are.

We are in a rare and powerful moment. The alignment between policy, institutional strategy, and individual commitment gives us a platform for real transformation. But to seize this moment, we must be willing to get uncomfortable. We must be willing to get messy and we must be willing to engage with students in ways that we possibly haven't before.

Let's not waste this opportunity. Let's cross boundaries, challenge assumptions, and build a higher education system together that truly works—for all students.

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> *Alignment alone is not enough.*

Students facing away in their graduation caps and gowns

Author biographies

Dr Kylie Austin
Director, Student Life,
Edith Cowan University
President, *Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia*

Kylie has more than 17 years' experience in the higher education sector in leadership and student experience focused roles. Kylie holds qualifications in Education, Mental Health in Education Settings, and research qualifications in collaborative partnerships, equity, and student success in higher education settings. In addition to her role as the current Director, Student Life at Edith Cowan University, Kylie is also the current President of Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia and is engaged in a number of national research projects and collaborative networks focused on the student experience and student equity. In addition to this, Kylie has led large teams and is passionate about supporting teams to establish person-centred and collaborative cultures.

Sarah Bendall
First Assistant Ombudsman,
National Student Ombudsman

Sarah joined the Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman as First Assistant Ombudsman, National Student Ombudsman (NSO) in September 2024, and leads the NSO function. A qualified lawyer, Sarah has worked in and around external oversight agencies for more than 25 years and is passionate about supporting individuals to resolve disputes and organisations to continually improve their systems and services. Prior to joining the NSO, Sarah was Victoria's Chief Dispute Resolution Officer, a statutory position responsible for leading state-wide dispute resolution services for domestic building and consumer and community disputes. Sarah's other roles have included General Counsel at Victoria Legal Aid and Head of Legal and Dispute Resolution at the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission.

Dr Matt Brett
Project Director, *ACSES*
Director of Academic Governance and Standards,
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Matt is Director of Academic Governance and Standards at Deakin University, where he leads higher education standards compliance, academic governance and policy, course governance, student evaluations, and quality assurance. Matt has longstanding research interests in higher education policy and student equity with publications covering financing policy, disability, inherent requirements, mental health, regional participation, and assessment. Matt has recently taken on a role with ACSES as Project Director for the Disability Support Program Capacity Building Fund Project, where he will oversee projects evaluating universal design and reasonable adjustments, and establishment of a collaborative enabling infrastructure framework.

Professor Katie Ellis
Director, Centre for Culture and Technology,
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Katie is an Australian Research Council (ARC) mid-career industry fellow and Professor in Internet Studies at Curtin University. She is the Director of the Centre for Culture and Technology and academic co-lead of the Gender Research Network. She is internationally recognised for her research in disability, media, and digital inclusion. Katie has authored or edited 19 books, curates the Routledge Research in Disability Media Studies series, and has led more than $5 million in funded research. Her work bridges community, policy, and practice to advance accessibility and equity. She played a key role in introducing audio description to Australian TV.

Professor the Hon. Verity Firth AM
Vice-President, Societal Impact, Equity and Engagement,
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Professor Verity Firth is the inaugural Vice-President Societal Impact, Equity and Engagement at the University of New South Wales (UNSW). She has more than 20 years' experience at the very highest levels of government and education sectors in Australia. Prior to her role at UNSW, Professor Firth was the Pro Vice-Chancellor Social Justice and Inclusion at UTS (2015-2022), the CEO of the Public Education Foundation (2011-2014), and the NSW Minister for Education and Training (2008-2011). Verity is a member of the Commonwealth Government's Implementation Advisory Committee for the Universities Accord.

Associate Professor Hannah Forsyth
Assistant Director, Tertiary Policy Alignment,
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Associate Professor Hannah Forsyth is a historian, writer and education researcher. She is Assistant Director in Tertiary Policy Alignment at Jobs and Skills Australia and Adjunct Associate Professor of History at the University of New England. She is author of *A History of the Modern Australian University* (NewSouth 2014) and *Virtue Capitalists: The Rise and Fall of the Professional Class in the Anglophone World* (Cambridge University Press 2023).

Author biographies

Professor Barney Glover AO
Commissioner,
Jobs and Skills Australia

Professor Barney Glover AO is Commissioner of Jobs and Skills Australia and an experienced university leader. He was Vice-Chancellor of Western Sydney University (2014–2024) and previously led Charles Darwin University. An accomplished mathematician and STEM advocate, Professor Glover is known for his work strengthening partnerships between higher education and the vocational education and training sector. He has been recognised for his leadership with numerous honorary titles and national awards, including Officer of the Order of Australia in 2019. He has served on the boards of state and national research, innovation, and workforce organisations.

Professor Harlene Hayne CNZM
Vice-Chancellor,
Curtin University
Advisory Board Chair,
Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success Success

Professor Hayne is Vice-Chancellor of Curtin University. Prior to this she was the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Otago. Professor Hayne received a BA from Colorado College, a Master of Science and PhD in Behavioural Neuroscience from Rutgers University, and spent three years as a post-doctoral fellow at Princeton before joining the University of Otago in 1992. She conducts research in the areas of memory development and adolescent risk taking. In 2022 she was made a Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit (CNZM), in recognition of her services to health and wellbeing.

Professor Leanne Holt
Deputy Vice-Chancellor Indigenous,
University of New South Wales

Professor Holt, a Worimi/Biripi woman, is Deputy Vice-Chancellor Indigenous at UNSW. With over 25 years' experience in higher education, she was previously PVC Indigenous Strategy at Macquarie University and co-Director of the Wollotuka Institute, University of Newcastle. Her educational and research interests are in leadership and Indigenous education and health policy. She is a member of national and international Indigenous education committees and expert panels, as well as Chair and Director for local Indigenous community not-for-profit boards. She has chaired external reviews of Indigenous programs and services at universities nationally and internationally, is author of Talking Strong, and has been recognised for her leadership and community contributions with national and international awards.

Ashlyn Horton
President,
National Union of Students

Ashlyn (she/her) is the 2025 President of the National Union of Students, representing more than one million tertiary students across Australia. A student at the Australian National University, she studies mathematics and international relations. Originally from Nambour, Queensland, she has been active in student unionism since starting university. She is a passionate advocate for accessible education and for student voices to be centred in national policy, with a focus on accountability, equity, and student wellbeing across the higher education system.

Professor Ian Li SFHEA
Research and Policy Program Director,
Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success

Ian is an applied economist with expertise in labour and health economics. He has a track record of research funding as chief investigator totalling AUD$7 million to-date from nationally competitive schemes including the National Health and Medical Research Council, National Centre for Vocational Education Research, and National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (now ACSES). Ian has published in *Social Science and Medicine, Higher Education, and the Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*. He is co-editor of the *Australian Journal of Labour Economics* and is on the editorial board of the *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*.

Megan Lilly
Deputy Commissioner,
Jobs and Skills Australia

Megan is the Deputy Commissioner at Jobs and Skills Australia, with a longstanding commitment to education and skills development in Australia. She was previously the inaugural Executive Director of the Centre for Education and Training at the Australian Industry Group, and spent two decades shaping skills policy at Ai Group. Megan has held senior roles in TAFE and industry training bodies and served on numerous national advisory boards and councils. She is also Deputy Chair of the WorldSkills Australia Board and holds a Master in Educational Policy and Administration.

Professor Chris Moran
Vice-Chancellor and CEO,
University of New England

Professor Moran is Vice-Chancellor and CEO of the University of New England. He joined UNE at a pivotal time for the university, for regional universities and for the sector more broadly. He is an experienced and respected university leader with an academic background in agriculture, natural resources, and sustainable development. He brings a commitment to working with staff to support UNE's aspirations in research, education, community engagement, and workplace culture. He is an alumnus of The University of Sydney, spent his early career in CSIRO then went on to the University of Queensland, and was most recently Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Research at Curtin University.

Amy Persson
Pro Vice-Chancellor (Social Justice and Inclusion),
University of Technology Sydney

Amy is a public policy specialist who has worked across the private, public, and not-for-profit sectors for more than 20 years. Prior to joining UTS, Amy spent eight years in various Senior Executive roles in the NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet, driving reform in portfolios such as child protection, Aboriginal Affairs, social and affordable housing, city shaping, and public transport. Amy was a senior political adviser to several State Government Ministers, including the Minister for Education and the Attorney General, and spent time in the UK driving national climate change and environment initiatives. Amy now runs the Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion and oversees the Human Technology Institute. She is passionate about driving greater equity and diversity in the higher education sector and ensuring higher education is inclusive for all students.

Professor Alphia Possamai-Inesedy
Pro Vice-Chancellor Student Success,
Western Sydney University

Professor Possamai-Inesedy is dedicated to leading strategic initiatives that ensure student success from pre-admission through to graduation and employment. Her role involves overseeing programs and policies that support academic achievement, student belonging and well-being, career readiness, and fostering a holistic approach to student success. She is the current President of the Australian Sociological Association and the inaugural Chair of the Social Justice Network, where her work focuses on advancing equity and social justice in higher education. A professor of sociology, Alphia is currently involved in ongoing research that focuses on higher education, risk society, religion, digital sociology, and methodologies.

Professor Shamit Saggar CBE FAcSS
Executive Director,
Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success

In addition to being ACSES's Executive Director, Professor Shamit Saggar is a Visiting Professor at King's College, London, and an Emeritus Professor at the University of Essex. He has 37 years of experience in international academia, government, business, regulation, and philanthropy, is a former Senior Advisor to UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, and a Knowledge Exchange Fellow in the David Cameron administration. Shamit was previously Director of the UWA Public Policy Institute. He has held personal chairs, visiting professorships, and senior management roles at Essex, Sussex, Liverpool, and Queen Mary in the UK, and at UCLA, Yale, and Toronto in North America. He has published six books, 70+ journal papers and book chapters, and 20+ policy reports. His research grant capture exceeds $70m.

Professor Margaret Sheil AO
Vice-Chancellor and President,
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Professor Margaret Sheil AO has been Vice-Chancellor of QUT since 2018. She is currently Chair of Queensland Museum Network, Deputy Chair of Universities Australia, Chair of Reef 2050 Independent Expert Panel, Chair of Queensland Vice-Chancellors Committee, and Member of Australian Academy of Science Council. She is a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Science (AAS) and the Australian Academy of Technology and Engineering (ATSE). Previous appointments include Provost at the University of Melbourne and Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Research Council, following academic and senior roles at the University of Wollongong. She holds a Bachelor of Science and a PhD in Physical Chemistry from the University of New South Wales.

Sonal Singh
Vice-President, *EPHEA*
Head of Pathways,
Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion, UTS

With more than 15 years in higher education, Sonal has shaped sector-wide strategies and led transformative national research, driving change in regional and remote partnerships, refugee education, and culturally inclusive practice. She has led multiple National Priority Pool Projects, and an Office for Learning and Teaching project focused on refugee pathways. Before joining UTS, Sonal led Widening Participation at Macquarie University. She played a key leadership role in university consortia across NSW and now nationally, driving collaboration to expand equity pathways and reimagine alternative admissions for students historically excluded from higher education. Sonal received the NSW Humanitarian Award in 2023, and advocates for systemic change grounded in community partnerships, cultural respect, and a belief in the transformative power of education.

Dylan Storer
President,
Curtin Student Guild

Dylan Storer is a student unionist, journalist, and organiser from the Kimberley, now serving as President of the Curtin Student Guild. The first in his family to attend university, he believes in the power of education, justice, and truth-telling to build a fairer society. From reporting on natural disasters in remote Western Australia to appearing before Senate hearings in Canberra and protest rallies in Perth, Dylan knows change doesn't just happen—it's built, every day, by people willing to fight for it.

Dr Patricia Vermillion Peirce CE
Trials Lead,
Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success

Dr Patricia Vermillion Peirce CE is a credentialed evaluator, designated by the Canadian Evaluation Society, with expertise in experimental and quasi-experimental evaluation designs. She brings more than 20 years of professional experience and has delivered more than 100 independent evaluations for a range of international governments and agencies. Her work spans from leading small pilot studies to large-scale evaluations and trials of national significance, as well as multi-country evaluations. Patricia holds two master's degrees from Queen Mary, University of London, and a PhD from Victoria University of Wellington.

Distinguished Professor George Williams AO
Vice-Chancellor and President,
Western Sydney University

Distinguished Professor George Williams AO is the Vice-Chancellor and President at Western Sydney University. He is proud to lead an institution renowned for providing broad access to higher education and for achieving real-world impact through positive social, environmental, and economic change in Western Sydney and globally. Professor Williams commenced as Western Sydney University's fifth Vice-Chancellor in July 2024, bringing decades of experience as a constitutional law scholar and teacher, senior leader in higher education, barrister, and as a national thought leader.

Dr Tracy Woodroffe
Senior Lecturer and Researcher,
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Dr Tracy Woodroffe, a Warumungu Luritja woman, is a Senior Lecturer at Charles Darwin University and a 2024 ACSES First Nations Fellow. Her work spans Early Childhood, Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary classrooms, with interest in educational pedagogy, identity, perspective, and cultural responsiveness. Dr Woodroffe's work includes Indigenous methodology in examining the Australian education system through an Indigenous Women's Standpoint. Tracy is widely recognised for her scholarship and teaching excellence, and her work supports systemic change through cultural standpoint and educational leadership.

About ACSES

The Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success (ACSES) is a national research and policy centre funded by the Australian Government Department of Education and based at Curtin University.

Leading a new era for student equity in Australia, ACSES partners with universities to close equity gaps in higher education by identifying and promoting evidence-based policies, practices, and programs that improve student success.

As a What Works Centre, ACSES provides tangible, research-backed guidance on what works to support equity students—particularly First Nations Australians, students with disability, those from low socio-economic backgrounds, and students in regional and remote areas.

Through collaboration, innovation, and a focus on real-world outcomes, ACSES is shaping a fairer higher education system.

ACSES Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success | Curtin University

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