



# From Evidence to Impact 2026

Policy and Practice Insights  
from ACSES



## 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 the 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 Indigenous colleagues, partners, and friends.



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## Foreword

This is the first edition of *From Evidence to Impact* from ACSES, and as the Centre's Executive Director, it is my pleasure to commend it to you.

Australia has made significant commitments to equity in higher education, but commitment without evidence to act upon is insufficient. This publication shows what rigorous, practice-connected research looks like.

As a What Works centre, we are under an obligation to distil quality research and evidence into tangible tools and messages that people in our universities can use. *From Evidence to Impact* is a good example of that responsibility in action, and it will be followed by future editions.

The aim is to inform Australian universities on their journey to better student outcomes for their underserved communities. This means communicating effectively with university leaders and governing bodies, those teaching and learning in our institutions, professionals supporting students facing barriers, and those responsible for shaping an effective and equitable national higher education system.

In the past three years, ACSES has invested resources and its own expertise in various grants and fellowships that cover the full range of student equity challenges facing us.

What has been learned, and what should be taken forward into policy and practice? Six messages stand out:

- The Australian Universities Accord has set ambitious participation targets. Meeting them requires understanding not just who is missing from higher education, but why, and what actually works.
- Equity is not a niche concern, the students from equity backgrounds represented in this research are increasingly the majority of Australian higher education enrolments.
- Across different topics and methods, the studies point towards a recurring finding: structural and institutional change matters far more than changing individual students.
- Financial hardship, from placement poverty to food insecurity to housing costs, emerges as a persistent, underacknowledged barrier.
- Belonging is not a soft outcome. It is a requisite for success that is often overlooked, and has to be deliberately designed and resourced.
- Students appear here not only as subjects of research but as co-researchers, advisors, and advocates—that too is a finding worth noting.

Taken together, this collection represents a step in an ongoing process of building and applying evidence to improve student outcomes. I encourage readers to engage with the findings, explore the full reports where relevant, and consider how this work can inform policy and practice in your own context. The challenge now is to continue strengthening the connection between evidence and action in pursuit of a more equitable higher education system.



**Professor Shमित Sagggar CBE FAcSS**

Executive Director

*Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success*

# Introduction

*From Evidence to Impact* presents policy and practice summaries from a series of projects funded through ACSES grants and fellowship programs. It is intended for practitioners, policymakers, and institutional leaders who wish to engage with the findings and recommendations in an accessible, at-a-glance format, while also providing links to the complete reports for readers who wish to explore the research in greater depth. The featured projects were selected through a competitive grants and fellowships process via an independent committee and represent the work of researchers from universities across Australia.

## Why this matters now

This collection is published at a significant moment for Australian higher education. The Australian Universities Accord, finalised in 2024, set ambitious targets for participation and equity, including a goal of 80% tertiary attainment in the working-age population by 2050 and population parity in higher education for students from low socio-economic (SES) backgrounds, First Nations communities, regional and remote areas, and students with disability. Meeting these targets will require sustained investment in evidence-based approaches to access, participation, and success, and a much stronger understanding of the structural and institutional factors that drive inequitable outcomes.

The research in this collection directly supports the evidence base needed to implement the Accord's equity agenda. Several projects provide insights that are particularly relevant to the design of needs-based funding arrangements, while others address longstanding gaps in our understanding of how institutional practices, data systems, and support structures shape outcomes for equity students.

## What this collection covers

The 14 projects included in this collection cover research on all four equity groups recognised in the Australian higher education equity framework: First Nations Australian students, students from low SES backgrounds, students with disability, and students from regional and remote areas. Several projects also address first-in-family students and students experiencing compounding disadvantage, reflecting a growing recognition that formal equity group categories do not capture the full complexity of students' circumstances.

Taken together, the projects span the full student lifecycle, from the formation of post-school aspirations in secondary school through to post-graduation labour market outcomes. This breadth reflects the understanding that equity in higher education is not only a question of who gets in, but of who succeeds, how, and with what support.

A number of the projects are Indigenous-led or were co-designed with the communities they sought to understand. This approach reflects the principle that the most useful and trustworthy evidence on First Nations student experience is produced with First Nations people, not about them. One project also draws on comparisons with Canada and Aotearoa New Zealand, situating Australian challenges and approaches within a broader international context of Indigenous higher education.

## About the funded research

The research summarised in this publication was funded through three ACSES programs, each designed to support a different type of equity research and to build the evidence base for policy and practice in higher education.

The **Equity Fellowship Program** supports senior researchers and practitioners to undertake policy-relevant research on student equity in higher education. Fellows are typically based at Australian universities and bring expertise in specific equity domains. The program is designed to produce findings that can be translated directly into institutional and national policy. Three of the projects in this collection were funded through the Equity Fellowship Program, covering placement inequity, the Regional University Study Hubs program, and equity data governance.

The **First Nations Fellowship Program** supports Indigenous researchers and practitioners to lead equity research that is grounded in First Nations perspectives and priorities. The program reflects ACSES's commitment to self-determination in research and to building the capacity of Indigenous scholars within the higher education sector. Two projects in this collection were funded through this program, examining senior leadership capability for Indigenous success and strategies to increase the number of Aboriginal teachers in the Northern Territory.

The **Small Grants Research Program** funds shorter, targeted research projects on student equity topics. The program supports a broad range of methodological approaches and equity focus areas, and is open to researchers across Australia. Nine completed projects have been funded through this program, spanning topics including Indigenous PhD scholars, assessment policy, First Nations student pathways, online learning, school student aspirations, financial hardship, pre-access programs, first-in-family status, discipline choice and labour market outcomes.

## How to use this publication

Each summary in this collection follows a consistent structure, covering the study background, objectives and methodology, key findings, and recommendations for policy and practice. The recommendations are directed at specific stakeholders, including the Australian Government, universities, and practitioners, and are intended to be practical and actionable.

Readers with a particular interest in First Nations student equity will find relevant work across several summaries, including studies on pathway programs, senior leadership capability, increasing Aboriginal teacher numbers, Indigenous PhD scholars, and First Nations student progression. Readers focused on access and aspiration will find relevant work in the summaries on school student aspirations, pre-access programs, first-in-family students, and Regional University Study Hubs. Those with an interest in the student experience and success will find relevant material in the summaries on placement equity, assessment policy, financial hardship, and online learning for low SES and regional students. The summaries on data governance and on discipline choice and labour market outcomes address cross-cutting policy questions relevant to the sector as a whole.

I encourage readers interested in the methodological detail or extended findings of these projects to consult the individual full reports, which are available on the ACSES website and are linked within each summary. Above all, I encourage readers with influence over policy or practice to translate the findings from this publication into meaningful action and improved student outcomes.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ian Li', written in a cursive style.

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

# Indigenous success: Creating a Senior Leadership Capability Model (SLCM) through capacity building



By Peter Anderson with Thu Pham and Carla Tapia Parada

**Priority study groups:** University executives and senior leadership (Vice-Chancellors, Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Pro Vice-Chancellors, Deans, Directors, Senior Managers); non-Indigenous leaders responsible for Indigenous portfolios and outcomes.

**Student lifecycle:** All stages: Participation/retention/experience/success; completion of Indigenous students in higher education, with emphasis on institutional leadership capacity to support these outcomes.

**ACSES program:** First Nations Fellowship Program

**Full report:** <https://www.acses.edu.au/publication/indigenous-success-creating-a-senior-leadership-capability-model/>

**Abstract:** This research addresses the critical need for a Senior Leadership Capability Model (SLCM) to foster Indigenous success in Australian higher education through capacity building of non-Indigenous leaders. The study recognises that unrealistic expectations are placed on a small number of Indigenous leaders to deliver all Indigenous outcomes, creating unsustainable workloads and limiting institutional change. Through national research involving 41 university executives via surveys and six in-depth interviews, the project identifies a significant disconnect between institutional Indigenous strategies and their practical implementation. Key findings reveal a “confidence-competence paradox” where leaders express high confidence in Indigenous engagement despite limited experience, alongside persistent issues of colonial load on Indigenous staff. The research proposes a portfolio-specific training model comprising six modules to equip senior leaders with knowledge and skills necessary for authentic, sustained Indigenous engagement, and institutional transformation.

## Background

Despite Australia’s first university being established over 150 years ago, the first senior Indigenous leadership position was created only in 2009. Currently, 39 Australian public universities employ just 28 senior Indigenous scholars—less than one per institution. While Indigenous student enrolment has increased, this growth is insufficient, and universities fail to provide equal employment opportunities or adequately integrate Indigenous knowledges. The legacy of colonialism persists within Australian universities, which were established to develop British knowledge systems. Indigenous leaders face disproportionate

expectations beyond their non-Indigenous counterparts, including maintaining community relationships alongside academic qualifications. The 2023 Voice to Parliament referendum rejection highlighted ongoing challenges in Indigenous participation and leadership. This research responds to the Universities Australia Indigenous Strategy 2017–2020, which showed limited progress despite four years of sustained effort, with responsibilities concentrated on under-resourced Indigenous leaders rather than distributed across institutional leadership.

## Objectives and methodology

The research aimed to develop a SLCM that fosters Indigenous success through capacity-building of non-Indigenous university executives. Specific objectives included: (1) creating portfolio-specific training modules for senior leaders; (2) identifying confidence and experience levels in Indigenous engagement; (3) understanding current support structures and training gaps; (4) examining the implementation of Indigenous strategies; and (5) developing evidence-based recommendations for institutional change that distribute responsibility more equitably.

The study employed a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative descriptive statistics. An online survey using Qualtrics was distributed nationally between July 2024 and February 2025 through LinkedIn, academic networks, and professional forums. The survey included 34 questions across three sections: demographics, workplace roles and Indigenous strategy implementation, and support needs. Forty-one university leaders participated, representing diverse portfolios including Education (21.6%), DVC Offices (16.2%), Operations (10.8%), and other areas.

Data collection included both quantitative metrics and open-ended responses analysed through thematic analysis using NVivo software. Six follow-up in-depth interviews were conducted via Teams with participants who expressed interest in further discussion. Analysis focused on five key themes: demographics, Indigenous strategy/portfolio implementation, experiences working with Indigenous peoples and communities, training and preparation, and support systems (provided and needed). The research received full ethics approval from Griffith University (GU Ref No: 2024/459).

## Key findings

**Strategic implementation gap:** While 88% of universities have identifiable Indigenous strategies, implementation relies heavily on individual interpretation rather than coordinated institutional approaches. Participants described efforts as “isolated,” “tokenistic,” or “limited to individual decisions.” Despite 76% viewing Indigenous outcomes as

“very important,” there is minimal collective action, with one participant noting, “We have strategic plans and frameworks but very little collective action.”

### **The confidence–competence paradox:**

A striking disconnect emerged between experience and confidence. Only 22% of leaders reported being “very experienced” in Indigenous higher education, yet 78% felt “fairly” or “very confident” engaging with Indigenous peoples and communities. Similarly, while only 30% had substantial experience leading Indigenous projects, confidence levels remained high. This suggests leaders may overestimate their cultural competency, raising questions about the depth of understanding required for effective Indigenous engagement.

### **Colonial load and inequitable responsibility:**

Participants acknowledged “overdependence on Indigenous colleagues” for implementing Indigenous strategies. Indigenous staff face multiple demands including teaching, research, student support, and institutional leadership, while also bearing disproportionate responsibility for Indigenous initiatives both within and outside universities. This “colonial load”—reframed from “cultural load” to properly attribute burden to the colonial project rather than culture itself—leads to burnout and sustainability concerns. One participant noted the need to “let partnerships be driven by Indigenous staff and community need,” yet structural support remains inadequate.

**Training inadequacies:** While 83% of participants had undertaken cultural awareness training in the past two years, current approaches were deemed insufficient. Leaders described training as a “band-aid approach instead of holistic,” often grouped with compliance modules, making it “a tick box” exercise. Participants sought portfolio-specific training, practical implementation guidance, and programs designed and delivered by Indigenous peoples. Concerns included assumptions about participant backgrounds and lack of deep narrative and impact.

**Partnership and support gaps:** Successful initiatives were characterised by strong, trust-based relationships with Indigenous communities, developed through long-term

engagement and reciprocal partnerships. However, 27% of participants reported receiving no institutional support for embedding Indigenous considerations into decision-making. Leaders identified needs for: dedicated resources beyond “strategies and reports,” clear accountability measures (KPIs) for senior leadership, mechanisms for Indigenous voices in governance, and practical tools to avoid tokenism.

## Recommendations for policy and practice

For government:

1. **Mandate transparent reporting frameworks** for university Indigenous strategies with measurable outcomes and timelines.
2. **Require dedicated, sustainable funding for Indigenous programs** as a condition of institutional funding.
3. **Establish national standards for Indigenous representation** in university governance structures.

For universities:

1. **Develop clear accountability measures** with specific KPIs for senior leadership in Indigenous engagement, including defined objectives, timelines, and transparent reporting protocols.
2. **Allocate dedicated resources** for Indigenous programs, ensuring long-term financial investment in staffing, program development, and infrastructure.
3. **Integrate Indigenous voices in strategic governance** by establishing Indigenous advisory councils, appointing Indigenous leaders to key governance bodies, and embedding Indigenous perspectives in institutional policies.
4. **Create portfolio-specific training programs** that move beyond introductory cultural awareness to address specific leadership contexts and responsibilities, designed and delivered by Indigenous peoples.

5. **Distribute responsibilities equitably** between Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff to prevent overburdening Indigenous employees and foster collaborative approaches to reconciliation.
6. **Establish comprehensive support structures** for all leadership levels, including mentorship programs, resource toolkits, and continuous professional development opportunities.

For practitioners and academics:

1. **Engage in self-directed learning** about Indigenous perspectives without burdening Indigenous colleagues.
2. **Build authentic relationships with Indigenous communities** based on reciprocity, trust, and long-term commitment.
3. **Integrate Indigenous knowledges** throughout work rather than as “add-ons”.
4. **Participate in communities of practice** (85% of participants expressed interest) to share knowledge and strengthen collective capacity.

As part of this project, the research team developed a fee-free course—“Indigenous Success: Senior Leadership Capability Building Modules”—which aims to equip senior leaders with the knowledge, skills, and strategies needed to advance Indigenous education. The course can be accessed here: <https://creds.curtin.edu.au/browse/acses/courses/indigenous-success-senior-leadership-capability-building-modules>

# Increasing the number of Aboriginal teachers in the Northern Territory: Planning for the future



By Tracy Woodroffe

**Priority study groups:** First Nations Australian students

**Student lifecycle:** Pre-access; access/pathways/enrolment; professional roles

**ACSES program:** First Nations Fellowship Program

**Full report:** <https://www.acses.edu.au/publication/increasing-the-number-of-aboriginal-teachers-in-the-northern-territory/>

**Abstract:** The Northern Territory (NT) faces a critical shortage of Aboriginal school teachers, despite having the highest proportion of Aboriginal students in Australia. Many of these students consistently perform below national educational benchmarks. Research indicates that increasing the number of Aboriginal teachers can positively affect student outcomes. This summary presents findings from an ACSES First Nations Fellowship study, *Increasing the Number of Aboriginal Teachers in the NT: Planning for the Future*, which explored how teaching is perceived as a career by Aboriginal senior secondary students and current Aboriginal teachers. The study also examined strategies to promote teaching as a viable and appealing profession, including the use of participants' own words and perspectives to inform culturally relevant promotional materials.

## Background

There are currently very few Aboriginal teachers in Australia. In the 2016 census statistics, a little over 2% of fully qualified and registered teachers in Australia were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Australian Council of Deans of Education, 2018). By 2020, that figure was reported to have decreased to 1.3% (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2025). That very few Aboriginal adults appear to consider teaching as a career choice may reflect the fact that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have challenges to achieving academic success. This appears as a cultural disparity, best seen in the annual standardised assessment of Aboriginal

students in compulsory education in the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). This gap in achievement is reflected in numerous Closing the Gap targets (Closing the Gap, n.d.). In 2023, the reported NAPLAN results stated that the NT performed the worst in Australia with reference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students performing lower than their non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peers. As of 30 June 2021, the Australian Bureau of Statistics reported that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of Australia was estimated at 3.8% of the total population, with the NT having the highest percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people per population at 30.8%.

## Objectives and methodology

The research answered the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** Do Aboriginal senior secondary students aspire to be teachers?
- **RQ2:** How can we encourage more Aboriginal senior secondary students to want to become teachers?
- **RQ3:** What do existing Aboriginal teachers and students think are positive reasons to become a teacher?
- **RQ4:** How do Aboriginal teachers think teaching should be promoted to other Aboriginal people?

This study employed a mixed methods approach, designed to enable a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of Aboriginal people within the broader research context. The analysis and findings highlighted the diversity of Aboriginal voices across the NT's five regions, four levels of remoteness, and three education sectors—public, Catholic, and independent—thereby amplifying perspectives often overlooked in mainstream discourse.

Approvals were given by Charles Darwin University's Human Research Ethics Committee, the NT Department of Education and Training, the Catholic Education Office NT, and the independent Indigenous schools choosing to participate. Principals disseminated information to teachers and students.

Twenty-three Aboriginal senior secondary students and 13 fully qualified Aboriginal teachers participated. Participants completed online surveys. Teachers had the option of an interview if preferred. Quantitative data and short answer responses were analysed using Qualtrics, and NVivo was employed for thematic analysis of open-ended responses.

## Key findings

**Encouragement to teach:** A central finding of this study is the lack of accessible and culturally relevant information about teaching as a career for Aboriginal people in the NT. Participants emphasised the need for more proactive communication.

**Student perceptions:** Students were concerned that they were rarely engaged in conversations about their career aspirations, particularly regarding teaching. They requested face-to-face interactions to explore the possibility of becoming a teacher and noted a desire for encouragement, even when they had doubts about their own capabilities—particularly in relation to English proficiency. One-third of student respondents reported an interest in becoming a teacher.

**Teacher perceptions:** Aboriginal teachers described teaching as a deeply rewarding profession and highlighted the importance of sharing firsthand experiences—preferably in person—to inspire others. They also noted that an individual's experience of schooling significantly influences their interest in teaching. Some teachers were motivated by positive school experiences, and others were driven by a desire to improve the system, challenge racism, and provide better educational experiences than they had received.

**Better promotion of teaching as a career:** To promote teaching effectively among Aboriginal communities, it is essential to ensure that students have positive schooling experiences. This should be followed by the provision of clear, culturally appropriate information about teaching pathways. Communication should include practical details about teacher education, such as behaviour management training, support for passing the Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education, and options for studying without leaving one's community.

**Role models required:** Participants identified the need for an Aboriginal teacher role model platform or association. Such a platform could support mentorship, provide professional development opportunities, and offer formal recognition for leadership contributions.

**Acknowledgment of diversity:** Importantly, to honour the diversity of Aboriginal communities, similar research should be conducted in other states and regions to generate locally relevant knowledge and strategies.

## Recommendations for policy and practice

For the NT Department of Education and Training, Teacher Registration Board, schools, and other interstate departments of education:

1. Teaching should be promoted more proactively as a career to Aboriginal senior secondary students, who should be given more information about how to become a teacher, including what you learn while studying teaching (such as behaviour management) and the benefits of becoming a teacher (including cultural benefits).
  2. Students should be encouraged to reflect on the positive ways that they have been engaged at school and how becoming a teacher could ensure that the next generation of Aboriginal students also have a positive schooling experience.
  3. Students should be told that teaching is a career option and that they can become teachers.
  4. More Aboriginal teachers should act as role models and share their stories of how they succeeded in becoming teachers. This is invaluable and should be recognised as leadership.
  5. The available pathways to teacher training, including the Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR) and VET in Schools (VETiS), should be presented to students.
  6. Requirements, such as completing Year 12 and achieving language and numeracy proficiency, should be discussed.
  7. Students should be involved in career education conversations to help them make informed decisions about how they can become teachers.
2. The significance of positive impacts for Aboriginal (and non-Aboriginal) students should be highlighted, along with the amazing rewards of being a teacher.
  3. It should be communicated to potential teachers that cultural knowledge combined with professional knowledge of teaching enables Aboriginal teachers to connect and engage students in a unique way that enhances learning.
  4. Pathways and possibilities should be discussed and explained.
  5. A targeted approach should be applied to encourage more young people to consider teaching as a career.
  6. A system of mentors should be created to support people once they have begun their teacher training.
  7. It should be communicated that although the work is hard, teaching can still pay for a comfortable lifestyle.

For Charles Darwin University and other teacher training institutions:

1. Teaching as a career should be promoted more proactively to Aboriginal people and should include positive, real stories from Aboriginal teachers (as role models) about what it is like to study teaching and then be a teacher, face-to-face where possible.

# Addressing placement inequities via participatory action research



By Amani Bell with Minahil Khan, Lachlan Sibir, Tara Soanes, and Tina Tran

**Priority study groups:** First Nations Australian students; low socio-economic status (SES) students; students with disability; students from regional and remote Australia; compounding disadvantage

**Student lifecycle:** Work-integrated learning/Placement

**ACSES program:** Equity Fellowship Program

**Full report:** <https://www.acses.edu.au/publication/addressing-placement-inequities/>

**Abstract:** Students undertaking compulsory placements as part of their university degrees encounter financial stress, known as placement poverty, and often other forms of exclusion, such as racism, discrimination, transphobia, and ableism. These inequities particularly affect equity-deserving students, and so this Fellowship aimed to generate actionable practices. In this project, the research team worked together with students and educators with lived expertise of placements to co-develop solutions to the interconnected issues of placement poverty and placement exclusion. They conducted four online workshops with a total of 74 participants during the project. Via the workshops and their reviews of the literature on placement poverty and placement inclusion, the research team identified 40 solutions. These include both small and large practical steps for educators, universities, placement sites, and federal and state governments.

## Background

Mandatory placements are a core aspect of many degrees. For example, in allied health degrees placements, they are commonly 25% of the degree, with students spending significant periods of time on placement. Students undertaking these lengthy compulsory full-time placements usually have to give up their paid work and therefore experience financial stress, known as placement poverty. Students may also encounter unexpected extra costs associated with placement, such as accommodation, travel, parking fees, uniforms, and mandatory training or checks.

Alongside the financial barriers associated with compulsory placements, equity-deserving students face challenges in finding inclusive, supportive, and flexible placements. Students who are culturally and linguistically diverse, carers, neurodiverse, LGBTQIA+, and/or who have a disability, face additional barriers and discrimination. Due to these urgent placement inequity issues, in this project, we aimed to co-develop practical solutions.

## Objectives and methodology

Via participatory action research, the project aimed to:

1. develop solutions to the inequalities caused by unpaid placements
2. develop solutions to ensure that placements are inclusive for all students, particularly those from equity-deserving cohorts.

Participatory action research is a scholar-activist research approach that brings together community members, activists, and scholars to co-create knowledge and bring about social change. The lead researcher, Amani Bell, worked with four student co-researchers—Minahil Khan, Lachlan Sibir, Tara Soanes, and Tina Tran—and with a wider group of 74 students and educators from across Australia.

These participants were all interested in making placements more inclusive, and many disclosed various aspects of their identities and experiences, including low SES, Indigenous, international, culturally and linguistically diverse, LGBTQIA+, disability, neurodiversity, rural/regional, caring responsibilities, minoritised religious beliefs, and being an older student. Participants often belonged to more than one of these categories and spoke about their intersectional experiences. Participants were from many disciplines, mainly from a range of Australian universities, with one from Aotearoa New Zealand and one from Canada, who were invited due to their expertise in placement poverty and inclusion.

The project team conducted four workshops over the course of the project, each offered three times, to allow participants flexibility for their schedules and time zones. The data consisted of workshop transcriptions and shared collaborative documents. The project team analysed data in an iterative and reflective way. Participants were also involved in analysing the solutions via in-depth discussions during the workshops.

## Key findings

Workshop participants shared examples of placement inequities that they had experienced or witnessed, such as financial stress, hunger, dropping out, and difficulties

navigating support systems. Participants confirmed that the impacts of placement poverty and exclusion are severe, particularly for equity-deserving students, emphasising the need for urgent action.

Participants co-developed 20 solutions to address placement poverty, grouped into six themes:

1. **Financial support**—which can range from a wage, stipend, bursary, or scholarship. This support could be from government, universities, or employers.
2. **Alternative degree models**—including apprenticeship style degrees with paid placements.
3. **Alternative placement models**—for example, students' prior or current vocational training, volunteering, caring, or part-time work could count towards placements.
4. **Reduced or subsidised living costs**—including subsidised or free accommodation for placements far from home and food vouchers.
5. **Reduced costs of higher education**—which help indirectly alleviate placement poverty, for example, increasing Commonwealth-supported places for Masters students.
6. **Clear communication about placement costs well in advance**—including about “hidden” costs like parking, professional clothing, mandatory training like CPR, vaccinations, and compliance checks.

Participants also co-developed 20 solutions to address placement exclusion, grouped into seven themes:

1. **Mentoring and tailored support.** Reflective sessions with an educator at least once a week and peer mentoring are particularly helpful.
2. **Advocacy.** Participants suggested having an independent person who can advocate for students, who are often uncomfortable speaking up about issues of exclusion on placement.
3. **Wellbeing and support.** More mental health support is needed in universities, alongside providing students with some

proactive strategies to cope with stressful placement situations.

4. **Capacity-building for educators.** Training for placement educators about inclusive practices should be built into existing workplace training if possible, and into university level education.
5. **Curriculum design.** Participants called for consistency within each university on how placements work, aligned with work-integrated learning (WIL) quality frameworks.
6. **A focus on inclusive practices.** One example is assessing the cultural safety of each placement site, and providing incoming students with feedback from previous students, as well as a set of evidence from the site about their policies and staff experiences.
7. **Flexible placements.** This includes part-time placements, which were recommended as particularly helpful for students with disabilities and who have caring responsibilities. Flexible placement models include part-time placements, shorter days, online placements, and shorter placements overall, with a focus on achieving competencies rather than a set number of hours or days.

### Recommendations for policy and practice

The study makes the following recommendations:

1. **That all stakeholders involved in placements take a partnership approach to address placement inequities.** Together, students, educators, professional bodies, policymakers, employers, and politicians need to develop shared understandings and solutions.
2. **That universities, professional bodies, and industry question assumptions about, and critically examine, WIL.** All stakeholders must critically assess assumptions in order to create fairer and less onerous WIL models, and examine systemic barriers to high-quality, inclusive placements.
3. **That federal and state governments, universities, and industry expand financial support for students on placement.** While the Commonwealth Prac Payments are a positive step, many degrees with compulsory placements are excluded, as are international students. We recommend expanding government funding, increasing financial support from for-profit industries, and strengthening university support schemes.
4. **That universities and placement sites provide flexible placement options.** Options such as part-time schedules or shorter days help alleviate placement poverty by allowing students to maintain their part-time paid work while also supporting those with caring responsibilities, health conditions, and/or disabilities.
5. **That universities, together with their placement partners, take a whole-of-degree approach to inclusive WIL.** This approach ensures that students are gradually prepared for placements throughout their studies and includes embedding inclusive practices into the pedagogy of educators and practices of professional staff.
6. **That federal and state governments, universities, and placement sites resource WIL to ensure inclusive, high-quality experiences.** Innovative WIL initiatives require funding, and sufficient staffing is required, as is increased support for student mental wellbeing.
7. **That educators, students, and other stakeholders sustain their advocacy for placement inclusion.** Advocacy, activism, and research have been crucial in raising awareness of placement poverty and pushing for effective solutions.

## “We want to build a culture of learning in our community”: The widening participation functions of the Regional University Study Hubs Program



By Danielle Keenan

**Priority study groups:** Compounding disadvantage; students from regional and remote Australia

**Student lifecycle:** Access and participation

**ACSES program:** Equity Fellowship Program

**Full report:** <https://www.acses.edu.au/publication/widening-participation-functions-of-the-rush-program/>

**Abstract:** The Regional University Study Hubs (RUSH; or Regional Hubs [formerly Regional University Centres]) program is an innovative higher education policy initiative established in 2019 that enables equitable access, participation, and success for students in regional, rural, and remote areas through place-based, institution-neutral support. Despite a rapid expansion of the program, limited research has examined how and why Regional Hubs widen participation. This Fellowship addressed that gap through a mixed-methods study involving interviews with students, staff, and community members from nine Regional Hubs across Australia, a survey of Regional Hub staff, and practitioner ethnographic observations. Four key findings emerged: Regional Hubs effectively widen participation by fostering belonging and student identity; staff play a vital role in supporting student confidence and success; partnerships with universities, communities, and education providers enhance outcomes; and Regional Hubs contribute to regional prosperity by strengthening local workforces and reducing migration to metropolitan areas. The research proposes three policy recommendations: renew funding, establish standards of practice, and strengthen cross-sector partnerships.

### Background

The RUSH program is an innovative higher education policy initiative that has widened participation for students in regional, rural, and remote areas (Australian Universities Accord Panel, 2023; Blunden et al., 2024). The Regional Hubs provide institution-neutral academic and pastoral support that enables equitable access, participation, retention, and success in higher education (Stone et al., 2022). Distinct from traditional campuses, they offer dedicated study spaces, local support staff, and high-quality digital infrastructure, while adopting a place-based approach that allows local ownership and contextual responsiveness.

In 2024, 4,390 students used a Regional Hub, representing a 29% increase from 2023, with 12,836 supported since inception in 2019 (Department of Education, 2024a). The program's demonstrated success has led to its expansion under the Universities Accord Priority Action 1, including the development of Suburban University Study Hubs.

## Objectives and methodology

Despite a rapid expansion of Regional Hubs, limited research exists on their effectiveness in widening participation in higher education for regional, rural, and remote communities. This Fellowship addresses that gap through three objectives:

1. To understand the efficacy of the Regional Hubs in widening participation and identify the mechanisms responsible for widening participation.
2. To develop a characterisation of the Regional Hubs. To date, there has been no published, peer-reviewed typological construct of the RUSH program.
3. To identify implications for future policy and practice.

A mixed-methods approach was used in this Fellowship, incorporating interviews, a survey, and practitioner ethnographic observations. Interviews were conducted with three participant groups—students, staff, and community members—from nine of the 32 Regional Hubs. These nine sites represented diversity in both Regional Hub typology, as identified in the literature review, and funding cohort (Cohorts One, Two, and Three). Participants were drawn from across all Australian states and the Northern Territory.

The second component was a digital survey distributed to all Regional Hub leaders across Cohorts One, Two, and Three. The survey gathered insights into university and community partnerships, operational and financial matters, and aspirations for the future development of Regional Hubs.

Finally, practitioner ethnographic observations were undertaken during site visits to supplement the interview and survey data. Drawing on the lead researcher’s experience within the Regional Hubs sector, these observations explored the relationship between physical space, place, and the role of Regional Hubs in widening participation. Practitioner ethnography enables a holistic understanding of the Regional Hubs, supporting deeper theoretical interpretation of the data and contextualising the lived realities of Regional Hubs within broader policy and community frameworks.

## Key findings

This research produced four key findings that together provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact and functioning of Regional Hubs.

The first finding confirms that Regional Hubs do widen participation in higher education. They achieve this by removing geographic and structural barriers to access and by providing place-based spaces that foster inclusion and belonging. Students who engage with a Regional Hub develop a stronger sense of identity as university students, both individually and collectively, within their local communities.

The second finding highlights the essential role of staff in widening participation. Staff not only provide academic and pastoral support but also build students’ confidence, self-efficacy, and resilience. The friendly, collegial relationships between staff and students contribute to a sense of connection and belonging, which enhances persistence and success in study.

The third finding demonstrates that partnerships underpin the widening participation outcomes of Regional Hubs. Three main partnership types were identified: university–hub, community–hub, and education provider–hub. Each partnership type offers distinct benefits, such as access to university resources, local community engagement, and strengthened educational pathways. Together, these relationships enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of the Hubs.

The fourth finding reveals that Regional Hubs contribute to broader community prosperity. They do this by supporting local workforce development and reducing the outward migration of young people to metropolitan areas. By enabling students to study and build careers locally, Regional Hubs help regional communities address skill shortages, strengthen social cohesion, and reduce the “brain drain” often experienced in regional, rural, and remote areas.

## Recommendations for policy and practice

- 1. Renew funding and reconsider funding mechanisms.** The Commonwealth Government should fund additional cohorts of Regional Hubs to expand access to higher education for Australians living in regional, rural, or remote areas. The Regional Hubs play a critical role in achieving the Universities Accord target of 80% tertiary attainment by 2050 by enabling equitable participation and fostering community prosperity. Funding mechanisms should prioritise flexibility and sustainability, allowing Regional Hubs to allocate resources to local needs and key performance indicators. State governments should also contribute, given the workforce and economic benefits generated.
- 2. Develop and implement standards of practice.** Comprehensive standards of practice should be established to ensure

quality, consistency, and accountability across the RUSH program. These standards would not regulate Regional Hubs but provide assurance of quality while preserving autonomy. They would strengthen governance, safeguard stakeholders, and ensure students receive consistently high-quality support.

- 3. Strengthen partnerships across the sector.** Collaborative partnerships between universities, governments, and communities are essential to RUSH's success. Drawing on existing initiatives such as the Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program (RPPPP), partnerships should prioritise community ownership, shared research, and genuine, community-driven engagement. Stronger partnerships will enhance sustainability, build local capacity, and embed higher education within regional, rural, and remote communities.



# Centring equity in data and digital governance: Informing policy to empower practice



By Bret Stephenson

**Priority study groups:** The research is relevant to all equity groups, including those that are not yet formally recognised in government policy, as well as issues relating to compound disadvantage

**Student lifecycle:** The research is relevant to all stages of the student lifecycle

**ACSES program:** Equity Fellowship Program

**Full report:** Yet to be published

**Abstract:** The Australian higher education sector is undergoing rapid digital transformation, amid major reforms to data privacy law and growing demands for more extensive and granular student equity data. This Fellowship examines how universities govern increasingly sensitive student equity data amid these changes. Using a multi-level mixed-methods design—legislative review, systematic analysis of university policies, and in-depth interviews with equity practitioners and senior leaders—the study analyses governance across macro, meso, and micro levels. Findings show that equity data governance is fragmented, under-resourced, and ethically ambiguous; that emerging forms of “grey data” generated by digital systems outpace existing frameworks; and that frontline staff carry substantial unrecognised ethical labour in navigating risk. The report argues for a shift to proactive, equity-centred governance, including harmonised policy, increased oversight, privacy-by-design, and participatory structures that give students and staff real decision-making power. Without this shift, efforts to expand equity data risk deepening, rather than reducing, inequality.

## Background

Recent Australian reforms are fundamentally reshaping how student data are collected and governed across government and universities. Legislative changes to strengthen privacy, enable cross-agency data sharing and regulate emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), sit alongside the Australian Universities Accord’s call for more ambitious equity targets and “enhanced” equity data collections to support needs-based funding, better policy design, and stronger accountability. These agendas converge in university data and digital governance systems, generating both new opportunities to advance equity and heightened risks for students whose circumstances are rendered

visible through increasingly granular datasets. Yet research on how Australian universities govern sensitive student equity data, and how these tensions are navigated in practice, remains deeply limited. The perspectives of equity practitioners and senior leaders charged with balancing institutional demands, regulatory obligations, and student trust are largely absent from the literature, underscoring the need for focused inquiry into equity-centred data governance.

## Objectives and methodology

This Fellowship aimed to illuminate the tensions, risks, and opportunities that arise as student equity work increasingly intersects with data and digital practices in Australian universities. It sought to contextualise equity practitioners' experience of "working in the grey" by examining how sensitive student equity data are governed across intersecting legal, policy, and institutional domains; and to generate practical recommendations for government, universities, and practitioners.

The study was guided by three core research questions (RQs):

- **RQ1:** how current and emerging Australian privacy and data governance reforms affect universities and the governance of student equity data.
- **RQ2:** how universities articulate data and digital governance in their policies, and the extent to which student equity is considered, prioritised, and made transparent.
- **RQ3:** how equity practitioners and senior leaders understand, experience, and balance the competing benefits and risks of utilising student equity data in practice.

The research adopted a multi-level, mixed-methods design informed by Foster et al.'s (2018) "data work in context" framework, examining governance at macro, meso, and micro levels. The research included: (1) a review of recent and pending reforms to Australia's information privacy legislative framework; (2) a detailed comparative content analysis of hundreds of publicly available university policies related to data governance, privacy, students with disability, and support for students policies; and (3) in-depth, semi-structured interviews with equity practitioners and senior university leaders across the sector. Institutional policy content analysis and qualitative thematic analysis were used to identify governance gaps, map risks, and synthesise practitioner insights into practical findings and recommendations.

## Key findings

While the Australian Universities Accord recommended that government greatly expand its student equity data collections, this research has identified a critical and pervasive challenge facing the sector: universities already struggle to govern and protect current sensitive student data due to critically uneven, and often immature, data and digital governance across the sector.

This lack of preparedness is further complicated by the explosion of "grey data" within universities. Equity-related information now extends far beyond official government data collections (such as TCSI) to include large volumes of incidental, third-party, and algorithmically inferred data, such as "at-risk" flags and compound disadvantage scores. These diverse, and often sensitive forms of student information are difficult to discover, protect, and govern across large and often siloed institutions. This expansion introduces layered, opaque risks that create the potential for significant digital harms—including misclassification, heightened surveillance, and the erosion of individual and group autonomy—that cannot be reduced to simple privacy violations or security breaches alone.

Analysis highlights a fragmented legislative landscape for information privacy in Australia. Universities operate within a patchwork of Commonwealth, state, and territory regimes, leading to inconsistent obligations and practices. This macro-level patchwork reinforces a highly uneven and internally siloed institutional governance landscape. Horizontally, universities vary widely in the maturity, transparency, and coherence of their policies; vertically, internal policies often remain siloed with inconsistent terminology and unclear, ineffective delegation of responsibilities. This fragmentation undermines the development of a consistent, sector-wide approach to student equity data governance.

This systemic inconsistency manifests as a persistent capability gap at the frontline. Interviews reveal that responsible handling of sensitive equity data is critically under-supported, receiving insufficient prioritisation and investment. Consequently, data practices are fragmented, inconsistently documented,

and often ethically ambiguous, relying heavily on the judgement and caution of individual staff rather than on cohesive policy. Practitioners operate in a persistent “grey zone,” performing substantial but unrecognised ethical labour as they balance the imperative to support students with their duty to minimise risks of misuse, harm, and loss of trust.

The imperative: To successfully advance national equity goals, the sector must shift from this fragmented, compliance-based approach to a proactive, equity-centred governance paradigm. This strategic shift demands systemic capability uplift, requiring policy harmonisation, tightened oversight, and the formal embedding of participatory and democratic governance principles to ensure accountability and build trust. Without this commitment, government and universities risk inadvertently entrenching existing inequalities.

### Recommendations for policy and practice

Recommendations for government and policymakers:

- **Recommendation 1:** The Australian Government Department of Education should embed privacy, data, and digital governance safeguards across the equity policy lifecycle—design, implementation, and evaluation.
- **Recommendation 2:** The Australian Government Department of Education should permit equity-program funds to support privacy-by-design, ethical evaluation, and equity data-governance capability in universities.
- **Recommendation 3:** The Australian Government Department of Education, in broad consultation with the sector, should set a national baseline for student equity data governance and provide shared, sector-specific tools to drive consistency across a fragmented landscape.

Recommendations for universities:

- **Recommendation 4:** Universities should adopt standards above legal minima and implement privacy-by-design and robust data and digital governance.
- **Recommendation 5:** Universities should harmonise digital and data policy frameworks and centre equity across the policy suite.
- **Recommendation 6:** Universities should establish defined oversight responsibilities for equity-related evaluation activities that fall outside Human Research Ethics Committee review.
- **Recommendation 7:** Universities should embed democratic and participatory data governance and resource co-design with students and staff.

Recommendations for senior university leaders, peak bodies, and professional associations:

- **Recommendation 8:** Senior university leaders should ensure frontline equity support operates under a robust privacy-by-design data culture—backed by resourcing, clear policy, and safe escalation.
- **Recommendation 9:** Peak bodies and professional associations should develop field-specific practice standards and exemplars for ethical equity data governance.

## Navigating the cultural interface: Indigenous PhD scholars' experience of working towards equity in health research across Australia, Turtle Island Canada, and Aotearoa New Zealand



By Shawana Andrews, Tahlia Eastman, Emily Munro-Harrison, and Odette Mazel

**Priority study group:** First Nations Australian students; other First Nations student groups

**Student lifecycle:** Participation/retention/experience/success

**ACSES program:** Small Grants Research Program

**Full report:** <https://www.acses.edu.au/publication/navigating-the-cultural-interface-indigenous-phd-scholars-working-toward-equity-in-health-research/>

**Abstract:** This project examined the experiences of Indigenous PhD scholars in Australia, Turtle Island Canada, and Aotearoa New Zealand and explored the ways in which they are championing community-informed and Indigenous-led research at the cultural interface in higher education. Through an international strengths-based comparative approach and drawing on in-depth interviews and a yarning circle with Indigenous PhD scholars working in the field of health broadly conceived, this project builds the evidence base of the factors that contribute to the intellectual, cultural, and social capital that support Indigenous PhD scholars to conduct their projects within Western academic institutions, in self-determined ways. Understanding the successes of Indigenous researchers in higher education creates stronger pathways to epistemological, ontological, and axiological equity within the academy.

### Background

Universities across the globe have played active roles in the colonising process. Through systemic practices that privilege Western epistemologies and ontologies, Indigenous knowledge systems were either exploited or disparaged, and Indigenous peoples were excluded from educational institutions (González & Colangelo, 2010; Jones et al., 2024; Kuokkanen, 2007; Moreton-Robinson, 2004; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). Through Indigenous activist interventions, access to higher education across Australia, Turtle Island Canada, and Aotearoa New Zealand has improved, with an increase in numbers of Indigenous students, including those undertaking doctoral studies. While the growth in Indigenous PhD scholars is promising, international research also shows

that academic institutions continue to be unwelcoming and discriminatory places, with Indigenous PhD Scholars reporting experiences of racism, being negatively stereotyped, feeling like they are an imposter, and that they do not have access to the necessary support systems to help them thrive (Andrews et al., 2024; McKinley et al., 2011; Pidgeon et al., 2014; Trudgett, 2013). While several publications examine the experience of Indigenous PhD scholars within their own nations, there is no scholarship that empirically compares the experience of Indigenous PhD scholars across these three countries. This study contributes to the growing body of research that focuses on the success of Indigenous PhD scholars in higher education settings and captures the work they are doing to Indigenise academic spaces.

## Objectives and methodology

This comparative research project was Indigenous-led and used qualitative interviews and a yarning circle that privileged Indigenous world views and lived experience. Centring the voices of Indigenous people, we captured the experience of Indigenous PhD scholars, as well as the nature of Indigenous-led research being undertaken in health-related research.

In-person interviews were conducted by Indigenous members of the research team with 12 Indigenous PhD scholars working in the field of health. Questions were semi-structured and focused on the participant's journey into a PhD, their research topic, methodological approach, and their experience of being an Indigenous researcher in a Western academic institution. Of the 12 PhD scholars who were interviewed, three attended the yarning circle. In the yarning circle researchers reported back initial findings and allowed participants the opportunity to reflect or comment on these. Semi-structured questions were then used to guide group discussions and related to, and extended on, those asked in the interviews. The interviews were de-identified and using inductive analysis were coded thematically by all researchers to enable emergent themes to develop through multiple readings. Ethics approval was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee of The University of Melbourne (Ethics ID Number: 29120). Appropriate approvals were also sought from international universities that supported the recruitment of their PhD scholars to the study.

## Key findings

Key findings from the project are as follows:

- There are significantly more shared experiences than differing experiences across Indigenous PhD scholar cohorts in Australia, Turtle Island Canada, and Aotearoa New Zealand.
- These shared experiences are integrally linked to the PhD scholars' Indigeneity, the ongoing impacts of colonialism, and the experience of undertaking doctoral programs within Western academic institutions.
- Indigenous PhD scholars are pursuing doctoral degrees with their family and communities in mind and see role-modelling as an important part of their doctoral journey.
- Engaging in higher education is important for Indigenous PhD scholars who see the opportunity to engage Indigenous knowledge systems within their academic work and grow the body of Indigenous-led research that is relevant to Indigenous people.
- Indigenous PhD scholars are undertaking research to inform and create change for the benefit of their communities in academia, health care, policy, and governance.
- Indigenous PhD scholars are engaging in Indigenous methodologies and undertaking their projects in culturally informed and restorative ways.
- Tailored programs and pathways are effective for Indigenous doctoral students' success.
- Indigenous peer networks, cohorts, Indigenous academics, and Indigenous research units/organisations provide crucial support systems and a sense of cultural safety for Indigenous PhD students.
- Connection to land and culture, and the spiritual and natural worlds is a source of support for Indigenous doctoral scholars.
- Access to Indigenous supervisors or mentors, and advisory or governance groups is important for PhD scholars to be able to undertake their projects in culturally appropriate ways.
- Indigenous PhD scholars across all three countries continue to experience personal and structural racism and discrimination in Western higher education settings.
- Financial scholarships and supports provided by governments and universities for living stipends and field work are inadequate.

- Indigenous PhD scholars experience a colonial burden not carried by their non-Indigenous counterparts that includes racism, a lack of social capital, greater financial stress, increased caring and cultural responsibilities, high academic and community expectations, and difficulties associated with holding the dual roles of researcher and community member.
- Adequate financial support to be provided to Indigenous PhD scholars including:
  - a waiver of university fees
  - a singular full living allowance scholarship for the duration of the candidature (including extensions and intermissions)
  - more part-time scholarship options with no tax implications
  - sufficient funding for field work, and community/ethics engagements, where relevant.

### Recommendations for policy and practice

The recommendations we include here relate to initiatives that universities, higher education peak bodies, and governments can implement to better support Indigenous PhD scholars before, during, and after their candidature.

- Universities to recognise, nurture, and properly support the contributions Indigenous PhD scholars and academics are making to epistemological, ontological, and axiological equity in the academy.
- University campuses to be inclusive and culturally safe for Indigenous PhD scholars and free from racism.
- Universities to recognise and reward the demands made on Indigenous PhD scholars for their expertise on committees and in relation to strategic policies and programs.
- Tailored pre-enrolment support to be provided to prospective Indigenous PhD scholars.
- Tailored support to be provided throughout candidature including access to Indigenous peer networks both within the university and beyond it.
- All supervisors of Indigenous PhD scholars to be provided with training on Indigenous research methodologies and practices.
- Flexible supervisory models to be made available to Indigenous scholars including opportunities for involvement and remuneration of Indigenous community members.
- Varied models of extended candidature and scholarship provision for Indigenous PhD scholars that recognise and support the time necessary for Indigenous community engagement, ethics protocols, and knowledge translation activities.
- Career planning support and mentorship to be provided to Indigenous PhD scholars during their candidature.
- Universities to provide Indigenous specific post-doctoral opportunities to ensure a continuum of academic success.

## Time for a rethink: Assessment policy to enable equity



By Joanne Dargusch, Lois Harris, Jill Willis, Margaret Kettle, Julie Arnold, Natasha Rogers, Jeanine Gallagher, and Do Na Chi

**Priority study groups:** First Nations Australian students; low SES students; students with disability; students from regional and remote Australia; compounding disadvantage

**Student lifecycle:** Participation/retention/experience/success

**ACSES program:** Small Grants Research Program

**Full report:** <https://www.acses.edu.au/publication/time-for-a-rethink-assessment-policy-to-enable-equity/>

**Abstract:** Students from equity groups are enrolling in increasing numbers in higher education, with research indicating that they may struggle with time and assessment due to unique time pressures. Higher education literature and policy feature strong discourses around time management, placing responsibility for time upon students, without acknowledging circumstances outside of their control. Design and enactment of assessment policy typically occurs through centralised and regulatory systems and processes. The project adopted a multi-method approach to explore impacts of time on assessment for equity students, re-analysing 92 interviews with equity-background students alongside multiple analyses of 42 publicly available Australian university assessment policies to examine accessibility and transparency. Four universities identified as implementing flexible and unique assessment policies and practices in relation to equity students and time were examined via group and individual interviews with a total of 27 participants. Key project outputs included a framework to support improved policy and practice in relation to assessment and time.

### Background

Equity goals around attraction, retention, and success for students from the identified equity groups are yet to be achieved. Assessment serves gatekeeping functions and students need to have the resources available to be successful. One often overlooked and inequitably distributed resource is time. Australian universities increasingly implement assessment policies designed to provide students with equitable access to time. However, the transparency and accessibility of these provisions remain underexamined, with research yet to examine policies across the entire Australian higher education sector or investigate how universities create more

equitable approaches to time and assessment. This study scrutinised policy and practices through multiple methods to understand how they may support or undermine students from equity backgrounds' abilities to access the time they need.

## Objectives and methodology

This research project had three aims:

1. to understand the problems around time and assessment from the perspectives of equity-background students
2. to examine how Australian higher education policy and practice currently construct and consider student “timescapes” within assessment contexts
3. to identify potentially high equity assessment policy and practices at Australian universities.

This work was carried out across four phases.

Phase 1 involved a re-analysis of existing interview data about the assessment experiences of students from equity backgrounds (n = 92), identifying time-related factors that negatively impacted on students’ assessment completion and success.

In Phase 2, searches were conducted of Australian University websites (n = 42) for policy documents, guidelines, and web-based information, relating to assessment and time. Multiple analysis methods were employed (accessibility analysis, Leximancer examination of word/phrase frequencies, and co-locations, critical policy analysis). These methods allowed researchers to identify the types of circumstances that merit additional time and time-related accommodations, and surface assumptions about students, their timescapes, and their rights to assessment equity.

In Phase 3, policy analyses were used to identify universities (n = 4) with potentially high equity practices to be involved in group and individual interviews about policy design and implementation (participants n = 27). Employing a second cycle coding approach, themes from the data were constructed.

In Phase 4, a national roundtable event discussed the findings of the study, shared potentially high equity practices, and gained feedback on a draft framework designed to support higher education leaders and educators to consider policy and practice around time and assessment.

## Key findings

The research draws attention to the importance of ensuring students can access support provisions in relation to assessment and time. Accessibility analysis found no universities with highly accessible policies in all four accessibility stages (find it, read it, use it, trust it)—underscoring the work still needed to ensure students can fully engage with policy information that supports assessment success.

Leximancer analysis identified time as a salient concept in assessment policies, co-located with assessment-related concepts. However, how time is represented differed across policy documents, with high variability in discourses around time and equity student considerations, including levels of explicitness. There was evidence of deficit discourses and assumptions about student advantage through adjustments in some policies, whilst others framed student agency around assessment timing as a shared responsibility. There was greater scope to negotiate support when interruptions were constructed as expected.

There was considerable variability in who had access to extra time and how easily it could be obtained. Policies often imposed inflexible requirements, including timing of requests. Time and financial costs to meet documentation requirements were largely silenced. Time inflexibility was designed into systems, with arbitrary due dates and time constraints linked to academic deadlines for marking and reporting.

Assessment policy design was influenced by consultation processes and whose voices informed policy design and review. The analysis emphasised the importance of including diverse stakeholders, including equity students, in policy ideation and drafting, rather than limiting their input to reviewing drafted documents. Interview participants indicated that consideration of who should hold responsibility for making decisions about extra time was actively debated in focus institutions, with participants weighing decision-making by educators (linked to workload issues and policy application inconsistencies) against centralised approaches (removing the relational from the process).

While policy provided guidance and authoritative information around assessment and time, participants indicated that university processes, structures, and systems determine how that policy plays out in practice and how time is distributed or made available to students. Educators had a significant role in mediating and clarifying policies for students, with individual educator, discipline-level, and institutional strategies for interpreting and reproducing policy statements about time for students adopted in all institutions.

Translating equitable policy into practice involves pragmatic choices, trade-offs, adaptations and unexpected effects. Key moves drawn from the analysis include:

1. raising awareness of student experiences
2. reviewing assessment policies for hidden deficit discourses and inaccessible languaging
3. collaborative sharing of promising high equity practices
4. coordinated reflexivity across the university assessment policy and practice ecosystem to prioritise student experiences.

## Recommendations for policy and practice

This study provides a model for interrogating assessment policy to identify underlying discourses and assumptions that shape how diverse students are represented and may experience time during assessments.

**Recognise assumptions.** Universities must recognise and challenge hidden assumptions about time in assessment, including that:

- students have equal access to time and experience it in similar ways
- students can independently locate relevant assessment policy relating to time and apply it to their circumstances.

**Raise awareness of tensions.** Universities must consider the tensions that exist between policy intentions and the mechanisms that either facilitate or hinder inclusive assessment practice. Attention should be given to the

visibility of university values around diversity within assessment policies/systems, whose voices shape policy, decision-making about time and assessment, and how assessment design can simultaneously consider assessment integrity and equity.

### **Talk within and across complex systems.**

Universities should identify how assessment can be enacted across complex systems in ways that promote equity. Consideration must be given to the challenges that come about because of external and internal changes or factors. Leaders and educators should identify the trade-offs necessary to work towards more equitable assessment time for students.

**Generate action and innovation.** Robust discussions are necessary, both about which student circumstances should merit extra time and about how that time can be allocated consistently across institutions to ensure equity and academic success. Collaboration to change practice could occur in different contexts, including within individual teaching teams and cross-institutional leadership teams to share good practice and work towards a more consistent policy landscape.

# First Nations students' progress into and through university



Jumbunna  
Institute for Indigenous  
Education and Research

By James Beaufiles, Rebecca Taylor, Daniel Edwards

**Priority study groups:** First Nations Australian students

**Student lifecycle:** Pre-access; access/pathways/enrolment; participation/retention/experience/success

**ACSES program:** Small Grants Research Program

**Full report:** <https://www.acses.edu.au/publication/first-nations-students-progress-into-and-through-university/>

**Abstract:** This project investigated the pathways and experiences of First Nations students entering and progressing through university. Drawing on in-depth qualitative interviews and large-scale data for contextualising the national picture, the study highlights the diverse and non-linear routes taken by First Nations students, emphasising the importance of family and community support, and institutional outreach. The research demonstrates that dedicated university centres play a critical role in supporting First Nations students, offering targeted services, such as appropriate bridging programs, mentorship, and culturally responsive guidance. These centres offer a strong sense of community and a supportive environment providing access to tailored services and supports for students. By sharing the voices of students and staff, the report provides valuable insights into best practices for assisting First Nations students and promoting educational success in higher education.

## Background

The report builds on prior research (Fredericks et al., 2022) to demonstrate how on-campus centres designed to support First Nations students can significantly aid their success. A key aim of this research was to provide an insight into each of the steps in the “university lifespan” using the voices of students as they traverse the system. Often, work with First Nations and other university students focuses on one step along the way (for example entry to university or experience as a student), whereas the aim of this work is to offer insight into experiences from thinking about going to university, through application processes, orientation, and then experiences ongoing as a student attending university.

At a time in Australian higher education policy when widening participation and facilitating broader access to universities is central (O’Kane et al., 2024), understanding the way in which supportive environments are built to engage and develop new students from traditionally underrepresented groups in this sector is paramount.

## Objectives and methodology

This research was centred on in-depth interviews with a diverse group of First Nations students and Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff who are associated with a university centre. The objectives of the discussions included understanding the factors influencing students' decisions to apply, their entry processes, and the aids critical to their first year and ongoing university journey.

The research was further informed through existing literature, and an overall national context was also explored using national level enrolment, to form a quantitative analysis to understand retention and completion differences among First Nations students by different characteristics.

The unique contributions to the field and this important aspect of higher education research include:

- **Comprehensive coverage:** The research captures the experience of progression into and through university, including outreach, application, enrolment, and progress, unlike other studies that focus solely on one stage.
- **Diverse student group:** It highlights the unique pathways of a highly diverse group of First Nations students, contrasting with studies that focus on traditional university entry pathways, or the default policy settings that assume a "one-size-fits-all" approach to supporting First Nations students.
- **The student experience "now":** It draws on the perspectives and experiences of First Nations students navigating the "post-COVID" world of higher education.
- **Methodological approach:** That explores large-scale data and involved in-depth qualitative interviews to identify a perspective that avoids generalisations, ensuring conclusions remain nuanced and reflective of the First Nations students' experience.
- **First Nations and non-Indigenous led research:** Supported by the university and students.

## Key findings

This research emphasised the diverse and non-linear pathways that First Nations students take to access and succeed in university, furthering the conceptions and importance of space and place within these colonial institutions for First Nations students. The findings reinforce that no single approach defines the journey to higher education for First Nations students; rather, a combination of family and community support, institutional outreach, and flexible entry pathways play a crucial role in their success. The importance of targeted support services, such as enabling programs, mentorship, and culturally responsive guidance cannot be overstated. When these services are accessible and contained within a dedicated centre within the university, the influence and impact of this support is strengthened.

The research adds to the existing body of work by providing examples of best practices and insights into the university experience for these students. It builds on the findings of Fredericks et al. (2023) where belonging is shown to be complex and further involvement from First Nations peoples is needed to make these spaces and places equitable and appropriate. Overall, the elements of support within such support centres highlighted across these research projects have been shown to help students overcome barriers and build confidence. This research has stressed that the existence of a space and place for First Nations students within the colonial institution of a university has helped—offering a trusted and safe environment for these students during their studies.

By sharing the voices and experiences of First Nations students and the staff supporting them, the report offers valuable insights into effective support practices that contribute to educational success in higher education.

## Recommendations for policy and practice

**Expand and resource dedicated First Nations centres:** Universities should invest in culturally safe spaces that are First Nations led, provide holistic support that includes academic, financial, housing, and wellbeing services to foster a strong sense of community, a supportive environment, and encourage confidence among First Nations students.

**Promote flexible and non-linear entry pathways:** Universities should recognise diverse backgrounds and offer enabling programs, alternative admissions, and tailored orientation to accommodate varied student journeys. Centre staff need to be acknowledged as a vital piece of this process.

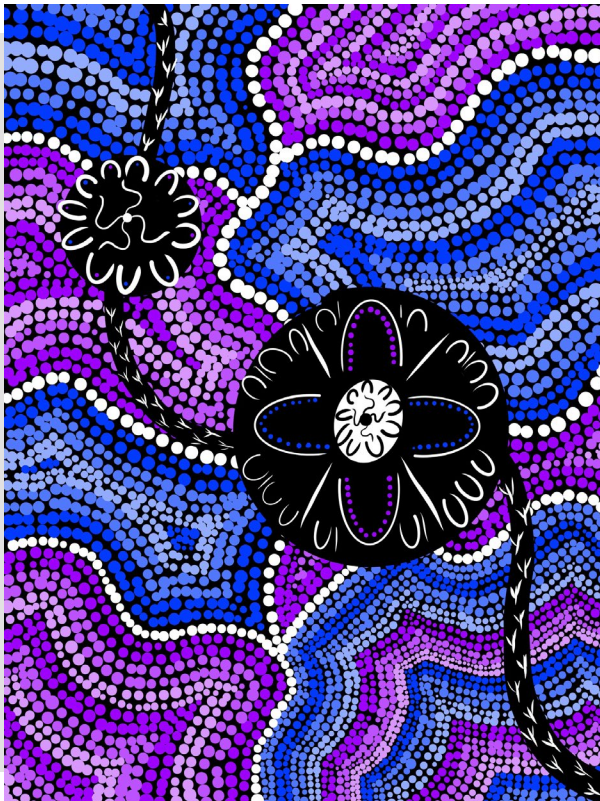
**Strengthen early engagement and transition support:** Targeted outreach, mentoring, and structured programs in the first

weeks of university are critical to prevent disengagement and dropout.

**Highlight visibility and representation:** Universities should showcase diverse success stories and role models, reinforcing the message that every path to higher education is valid and achievable, through necessary outreach.

**Ensure clear, inclusive communication:** Information about admissions, support services, and pathways must be accessible and transparent to all prospective and current First Nations students.

**Embed ongoing evaluation and best practice sharing:** Universities should continually refine policies and compare approaches across regions to sustain equity and improve outcomes.



## Artwork and Credit

**Title:** Passing on knowledge

**Description:** “The symbols of passing on knowledge with the emu footprints signify progression. The Emu is known for never taking a step back so I thought this would be a deadly theme to include.” Talifolau, T.

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## Evidence-based pedagogies to support online engagement of low SES and regional, rural, and remote students



By Frances Fan, David Hicks, and Sarah Fischer

**Priority study groups:** Low SES students; students from regional and remote Australia; compounding disadvantage; online students

**Student lifecycle:** Participation/retention/experience/success

**ACSES program:** Small Grants Research Program

**Full report:** : <https://www.acses.edu.au/publication/evidence-based-pedagogies-to-support-online-engagement/>

**Abstract:** Course completion rates in higher education are significantly lower for students studying online, with a disproportionate impact on students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Department of Education [DoE], 2025). The Australian Government Department of Education found that fewer than 40% of online undergraduate students completed their degrees over a nine-year period, and withdrawal without a qualification is 2.5 times more likely than for their on-campus counterparts (DoE, 2025), costing the student, university, and society. Integrating Learning Management System (LMS) data, survey data, and interview data, this project sought to address the issue of disengagement and attrition by providing a holistic model of online engagement for low SES and regional, rural, and remote (RRR) students and identify evidence-based pedagogical practices to maximise the engagement and retention of students in these groups.

### Background

Both globally and in Australia, online learning has increased significantly in recent years. A variety of conditions including changing student demographics (Roddy et al., 2017), advancements in technology (Coates, 2020), the expansion and improvement of online courses (Stone, 2019), and increased political and economic pressures to marketise higher education (Morris, et al., 2020) have led to this digital transformation.

Concurrently, yet separate to the digital transformation, there has been a global effort to expand access to higher education.

Researchers have found that online learning may be able to reduce or mitigate barriers to higher education that RRR students experience (Corbett et al., 2023). Unfortunately, research also shows that completion rates are traditionally lower in online and blended courses as compared to on-campus groups and these figures tend to be even lower for disadvantaged student groups (Stone, 2017). Identifying strategies to support these students is vital to meeting the needs of the incoming cohorts and increasing their chance of successful outcomes.

## Objectives and methodology

This project was conducted at the University of Tasmania (UTAS), which holds a unique position in online course delivery. As the only university in a state with high levels of disadvantage and a dispersed population, UTAS has Australia's highest proportion of student intake for low SES and RRR students, with most of these students studying in online or blended courses. The project's aims were to:

- **Aim 1:** Describe online engagement patterns of low SES students and RRR students.
- **Aim 2:** Identify evidence-based online pedagogical practices that maximise the engagement of low SES students and RRR students.
- **Aim 3:** Develop a holistic model of online engagement for low SES and RRR students that demonstrates interplay between student perceptions, student behaviours, and student outcomes and the influence of SES and RRR backgrounds, and other demographic factors.

The Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison et al., 1999) was used as the conceptual framework in the data generation and analysis. This study was conducted in two phases and used a mixed methods design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative data.

Phase 1 of the project collected quantitative data, including LMS data and survey responses, from low SES and RRR students in a selected suite of online and blended subjects (n = 16). Analysis of the LMS and survey responses used descriptive statistics, corresponding cross tabulations and structural equation modelling. Stata was used as the analysis tool.

Phase 2 of the project collected qualitative semi-structured interview data from teachers and students in seven of the initial 16 subjects, and five support staff at this university. Analysis of the interview data used a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2022) and student engagement discourse analysis (Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

## Key findings

The project identified the following key findings, which are presented according to the three research aims.

Online engagement patterns of low SES and RRR students (Aim 1):

1. The teachers interviewed recognised there have been significant changes in student profile over the past few decades, calling for reconsideration of student equity groups.
2. In many cases, low SES and RRR students can belong to more than one equity group and can be considered as students with multiple associated challenges.
3. Teachers in online and blended subjects often need to cater for large student cohorts that, in many cases, are multi-disciplinary or at different stages of study (for example, in different year groups).
4. The teachers interviewed recognised the need to learn about the student cohort in their individual subjects.
5. There is a clear need to create a sense of belonging and a sense of a (virtual) place among low SES and RRR students studying online in order to support these students' social integration into university life.
6. Low SES and RRR students relied on multiple sources of support, including teachers and peers in the subject, family and friends, and other student organisations (for example, student union).
7. Online students from low SES and RRR backgrounds, in the subjects involved in this study, achieve as positive outcomes as the other peer students studying online.

Evidence-based online pedagogical practices that maximise the engagement of low SES and RRR students (Aim 2):

1. Online pedagogical designs differed significantly between disciplines and individual subjects.



2. Teachers' presence and pedagogical design have a significant impact on the online engagement of low SES and RRR students in both social engagement and cognitive learning aspects.
3. Subjects that are designed based on Universal Design of Learning principles were well received by low SES and RRR students.
4. Teachers can design online activities to help create online learning communities.
5. Online learning communities can help foster a sense of belonging and a sense of (virtual) place among low SES and RRR students.
6. Students sought consistency in how to navigate the LMS spaces across multiple subjects and emphasised the importance of aesthetics/visual design on student experience.
7. Teachers in individual subjects remained their students' first point of contact when they needed support.
8. Teachers in individual subjects called for better ways to identify at-risk students at early stages and to develop preventative approaches.

Interplay between student perceptions, student behaviours, and student outcomes and the influence of SES and RRR backgrounds, and other demographic factors (Aim 3):

1. Low SES students spent more time on the LMS, but this does not necessarily mean greater access or content completion. Similarly, RRR students accessed the platform less often but spent more time and completed more content. This may reflect differences in available time or internet accessibility.
2. Low SES students showed slightly lower perceptions of engagement, across the three aspects of the Community of Inquiry framework (teaching, social, and cognitive), compared to the broader learning community. This pattern also applies across the remoteness spectrum.
3. There was a complex interplay between student demographics, engagement factors, and academic outcomes in online higher education. Social, teaching, and cognitive presence interacted in ways that shaped student success, with subject access and perceptions of teaching playing key roles.

## Recommendations for policy and practice

This project provides the following recommendations, organised in two categories: (1) recommendations for teachers of online and blended subjects; and (2) recommendations for university leaderships and policymakers.

Recommendations for teachers of online and blended subjects:

1. Teachers should learn about the characteristics and needs of their learner cohorts and continuously inform their pedagogy by reflecting on what students say they need.
  2. Teachers should embed links between the formal curriculum and co-curricular support and resources in subject level design to help students understand what help is available for their studies.
  3. Teachers in large online subjects, or blended subjects that have a significant online component, should use Universal Design of Learning principles to cater for the needs of their diverse learner cohorts.
  4. This project provides a toolkit with a range of tools that can be used to foster student engagement, teachers in online and blended subjects should select the tools suitable for their learner cohorts.
  5. To foster social integration, teachers should aim to create a sense of belonging and a sense of (virtual) place through online community building.
  6. Teachers should aim to reduce cognitive load for students through the design and layout of their online teaching spaces.
  7. Teachers should be familiar with institutional level supports and how to assist students to access them.
2. Learning support services requested by equity students for successful progression should inform the design of a co-curricular support framework that supports each key stage of their degree in order to help them to move on to the next stage of their university course.
  3. When using LMS data, institutions should interpret the data in light of the academic context and be aware of the varied quality and reliability of the data available.
  4. Institutions should seek higher accessibility and presentation of learning and teaching data, allowing leaderships at different levels, and teachers in individual subjects, to understand their student cohorts.
  5. Institutions should have more preventative approaches in supporting equity students and identifying at-risk students.
  6. Institutions should explore ways to understand and track students' social presence/engagement in online learning.
  7. Universities should prioritise improving online pedagogies and fostering interactive and socially engaging virtual environments and how students from various equity groups respond to these.

Recommendations for university leaderships and policymakers:

1. As access expands and cohorts become more diverse, institutions should align support and resources to match the needs of the cohort and staff supporting them.

# Understanding school students' aspirations in uncertain times



By Leanne Fray, Sally Patfield, Kristina Sincock, Jenny Gore, Courtney Rubie

**Priority study groups:** First Nations Australian students; low SES students; students from regional and rural Australia; compounding disadvantage, and first-in-family

**Student lifecycle:** Pre-access and access/pathways/enrolment

**ACSES program:** Small Grants Research Program

**Full report:** <https://www.acses.edu.au/publication/understanding-school-students-aspirations-in-uncertain-times/>

**Abstract:** This study examined how current economic, social, and environmental challenges influence the educational and career aspirations of secondary school students in New South Wales. Drawing on data collected over a 13-year period (2012–2025), it highlights the impact of climate change, inflation, geopolitical instability, and the COVID-19 pandemic on young people's post-school planning. The research focused on equity groups and students who would be first in their family to attend university. Key findings show that students are increasingly making pragmatic decisions based on financial risk, perceived value of education, and community expectations. Vocational education is gaining traction, even in traditionally university-focused communities. Mental health concerns and material insecurity are significant barriers to pursuing aspiration. The study also revealed deepening inequities due to the residualisation of public schools. These insights underscore the need for targeted policy interventions to support equitable access to education and help students navigate an increasingly complex transition to adulthood.

## Background

Young people are navigating an increasingly complex and uncertain world shaped by economic instability, climate change, technological disruption, and mental health challenges. Traditional assumptions that university guarantees secure employment are being questioned, while financial pressures, digital divides, and unpaid university placements disproportionately affect students from equity groups. Mental ill-health, climate anxiety, and academic stress further complicate educational transitions. These overlapping pressures influence how young people imagine their futures and

make decisions about post-school pathways. Despite policy efforts to widen participation, structural barriers persist, and aspirations are often misunderstood or oversimplified. This research aimed to understand how young people form and pursue aspirations in this shifting landscape. By examining longitudinal data and diverse school contexts, the study aimed to generate timely insights that can inform more responsive, equitable policy and practice in education, ensuring all students are supported to navigate their futures.

## Objectives and methodology

The study investigated how secondary students' educational and career aspirations are shaped by rapidly changing political, economic, social, and environmental conditions. Building on 13 years of research (2012–2025), the study focused on equity groups and first-in-family university aspirants to understand how aspirations evolve over time and in response to contemporary challenges.

Using a longitudinal case study design, the study followed a three-step process: (1) surveys conducted in schools involved in earlier studies; (2) focus groups and interviews with students, parents/carers, and teachers; and (3) development of five school-based community case studies. Recruitment in 2024–2025 was impacted by delayed research approvals, staffing shortages, and a shift from opt-out to opt-in consent, resulting in a final survey sample of 78 students across seven schools. Most participants were from urban areas and low-ICSEA schools.

Surveys replicated earlier instruments with minor updates and were conducted online. Focus groups involved 98 students, and interviews were held with 16 parents/carers and 14 teachers. These explored aspirations, perceptions of current societal and schooling conditions, and future outlooks. Data were analysed using SPSS (descriptive statistics) and NVivo (thematic coding), combining inductive and deductive approaches.

Case studies were developed using qualitative data, MySchool and Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) census data, and focused on five schools representing varied geographic and socio-economic contexts. This design enabled a rich understanding of how aspirations are formed and reshaped over time, offering insights to inform more equitable and responsive education policy and practice.

## Key findings

**Aspirations in an age of uncertainty:** Young people today are growing up in a world shaped by overlapping crises including climate change, economic instability, technological disruption, and global conflict. These

conditions are influencing how students imagine their futures and the pathways they consider viable. In communities such as Banks Hollow and Murrindah<sup>1</sup>, concerns about housing affordability and financial insecurity were central to students' thinking, often shaping career choices. While some students, like Ruben in Ironbark Plains, adopted strategic approaches to overcome barriers, others felt constrained by limited local opportunities and intergenerational disadvantage. These findings challenge policy narratives that frame aspiration as an individual trait and highlight the need to address structural inequalities.

### **Uncertainty as a driver of mental ill-health:**

Uncertainty was not only a material condition but also a psychological one. Students frequently expressed anxiety, fear, and stress when discussing their futures. In Ironbark Plains, for example, students described feeling worried and scared. In Banks Hollow, pressure to succeed—particularly among migrant families—exacerbated mental ill-health. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these effects, and new anxieties emerged around the value of university education in a changing job market. These findings align with broader research linking uncertainty to rising youth depression and anxiety and underscore the need for mental health support in schools.

### **The value of university and TAFE in an age of uncertainty:**

Students are increasingly making pragmatic decisions about post-school pathways, weighing financial risk, job market realities, and the perceived value of qualifications. In Riverbend, for example, vocational education was seen as a faster and more secure route to employment. In Banks Hollow, university remained a symbol of upward mobility. However, concerns about HECS debt, underemployment, and credential inflation were common. The traditional hierarchy between university and TAFE appears to be softening, with students exploring both options. The findings suggest that policy must support flexible and interconnected pathways.

### **The residualised public school—Students left behind in an age of uncertainty:**

The study also highlighted the impact of educational system changes, particularly the

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<sup>1</sup> Names of the five schools/communities are pseudonyms.

residualisation of public schools. Declining enrolments, staffing shortages, and reduced subject offerings in schools like Oldfields Central School have left disadvantaged students with fewer opportunities. These conditions compound uncertainty and limit students' capacity to aspire beyond familiar, local pathways. The findings call for urgent attention to greater equity in school resourcing and access.

### Recommendations for policy and practice

To support young people in navigating increasingly complex and uncertain futures, this study offers targeted recommendations for governments, universities, and schools. These recommendations are grounded in the lived experiences of students, families, and educators across diverse communities.

For Government:

- Invest in public schools, particularly in rural, regional, and low socio-economic areas, to address residualisation and ensure equitable access.
- Reform higher education and vocational education funding to improve affordability, including fee-free TAFE, scholarships, and income support for equity groups.
- Improve regional infrastructure, including transport, housing, and digital connectivity, to reduce relocation pressures for students.
- Elevate the status of vocational education through policies that recognise its social value and support diverse career pathways.
- Guarantee free, bulk-billed access to youth mental health services to address rising levels of anxiety and depression.
- Subsidise affordable student housing for those who must relocate to pursue further education.

For universities:

- Expand flexible access options, including regional campuses, study hubs, blended learning, and bridging programs.

- Prioritise student wellbeing and belonging through culturally safe spaces, mentoring, and inclusive teaching practices.
- Co-design outreach and recruitment initiatives with communities to reflect local needs and values.

For schools:

- Embed mental health and wellbeing supports in everyday school practice, not as add-ons.
- Strengthen career education through early, culturally responsive, and community-connected programs.
- Promote vocational and hybrid pathways by showcasing diverse alumni success stories and challenging the academic-vocational divide.

## Pathway programs and Indigenous student completion: Building the evidence



THE UNIVERSITY  
OF QUEENSLAND  
AUSTRALIA



By Bronwyn Fredericks, Katelyn Barney, Tracey Bunda, Ashley Moor, Kirsten Hausia, Scott Parlett, Nisa Richy, and Daniel Taylor-Griffiths

**Priority study groups:** First Nations Australian students

**Student lifecycle:** Access/pathways/enrolment; participation/retention/experience/success

**ACSES program:** Small Grants Research Program

**Full report:** <https://www.acses.edu.au/publication/pathway-programs-and-indigenous-student-completion/>

**Abstract:** University completion rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students remain significantly lower than for non-Indigenous students. Pathway (or enabling) programs are central to preparing and transitioning Indigenous students into university and are correlated with above average Indigenous undergraduate retention (Pitman et al., 2017). However, high-quality research-based evidence of the impact of these programs in relation to supporting university completion is limited. This Indigenous-led mixed-methods research project focused on success factors of pathway programs for Indigenous students and potential correlations to university completion. The results will assist universities to implement stronger enabling programs to prepare and support Indigenous student success and completion.

### Background

While the number of Indigenous students participating in higher education continues to grow, university completion rates for Indigenous students remain significantly lower than for non-Indigenous students (Universities Australia [UA]), 2022). The national data indicates that, while Indigenous students typically can take longer to graduate, the nine-year completion rates for Indigenous students remain around 50%—significantly below the 74% for non-Indigenous students (UA, 2022). Pathway programs are central to preparing and transitioning Indigenous students into university and are the primary strategies for improving the readiness of prospective Indigenous students (Nakata & Nakata, 2023). However, high-quality, research-based evidence of the impact of these programs in

relation to supporting university completion is limited. While pathway programs are diverse, for the purposes of this project, the focus was on programs that have coursework to develop students' core academic foundational skills required for undergraduate study.

## Objectives and methodology

Building on earlier research on “success factors” for Indigenous student completions (Fredericks et al., 2022), the objective of this project was to build the evidence base about success factors of pathway programs to prepare Indigenous students for university success and university completion by undertaking case studies of pathway programs at three universities that have pathway programs and which have higher Indigenous student completion rates than the national average. The project involved a mixed-methods approach (combining qualitative and quantitative methods) to identify and analyse the multifaceted dimensions and range of strategies used by three Group of Eight universities (Universities A, B, and C) in pathway programs to support Indigenous students to transition into university. The project was grounded in Indigenous data sovereignty principles (for example, Walter et al., 2020) and had an Indigenous-led project team, consisting of a majority of Indigenous members who worked closely with an Indigenous reference group throughout the project. The three universities were chosen because of their high completion rates compared to the national average. The project involved documenting evidence to demonstrate success factors of pathway programs for Indigenous students and potential links to Indigenous student success and university completion at the three universities. The project also highlights areas to strengthen pathway programs, which then in turn can support university transition, success, and completion at universities more generally. Additionally, suggested strategies were developed for strengthening and improving pathway programs for Indigenous students through engagement with an expert reference group and staff at universities.

## Key findings

Key findings from the project were:

- Peer-to-peer connections are key for Indigenous students within pathway programs and are an important factor for their university completion.
- Indigenous centres/units at universities are crucial spaces for building a sense of

connection and community for Indigenous students.

- Student–staff connections are important within pathway programs to ensure Indigenous students successfully complete the programs, and these connections are often continued through students’ university degrees.
- The Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) is a strategy to assist Indigenous students within pathway programs and in their university studies to support students to complete their degrees.
- More Indigenous perspectives are needed within the curriculum of pathway programs to affirm Indigenous student connections to the content and to their own cultural identities.
- More professional development, both in relation to building staff cultural competency and in relation to Indigenising curriculum, is needed for staff to ensure Indigenous perspectives are strongly and appropriately embedded in the curriculum of pathway programs.
- Stronger data gathering is needed to be able to track Indigenous student pathways, transition, success, and university completion so that student progress can be monitored and mentoring opportunities between current Indigenous pathway program students and university students/graduates could be developed.
- Compared to the sector, the selected institutions offered places to a smaller proportion of their applicants into undergraduate degrees. The proportions of “basis of admission” varied between institutions, providing evidence of the diverse and complex pathways into studies taken by Indigenous students.

## Recommendations for policy and practice

The findings of this project inform eight high-level recommendations under two broad categories:

- recommendations for key stakeholders
- recommendations for the Australian Government.

Recommendations for key stakeholders:

1. Pathway program leadership need to ensure cultural competency training opportunities for teachers and support staff in pathway programs.
2. Pathway program teaching staff should work collaboratively with Indigenous academics and community members to ensure Indigenous perspectives are strongly embedded in course curricula.
3. Pathway program leadership and Indigenous centre/unit staff should work together to ensure strong supports are in place for Indigenous students.
4. Pathway program teachers/support staff and Indigenous centre/unit staff should continue to develop and strengthen strategies that build a sense of belonging and connection for Indigenous pathway program students to the university. For example, student-led events, creative workshops, or co-design sessions with students.
5. Pathway program leadership should ensure there are initiatives in place to

provide mentoring opportunities for Indigenous students in pathway programs (for example, with graduates or university students who previously participated in a pathway program).

6. Pathway program leadership should work with university IT services and the Indigenous centre/unit to develop better data gathering so that student pathways can be tracked and timely support provided to Indigenous students. This could then assist with setting up mentoring opportunities between past and present Indigenous pathway program students.

Recommendations for the Australian Government:

7. The Australian Government Department of Education could pilot amendments to data collection practices to facilitate more granular analysis of the student lifecycle from application to completion potentially using Unique Student Identifiers.
8. The Australian Government Department of Education could pilot including a separate analysis of the national Indigenous student population in the annual cohort analysis of higher education students.



# Towards a financially inclusive higher education system



By Anne-Therese McMahon, Karen Charlton, Kelly Lambert, Yasmine Probst, Katherine Kent, Karen Walton, Joanna Russell, Kylie Austin, and Gabrielle O'Flynn

**Priority study groups:** First Nations Australian students; low SES students; students with disability; and students from regional and remote Australia

**Student lifecycle:** Participation/retention/experience/success; work-integrated learning/placement

**ACSES program:** Small Grants Research Program

**Full report:** <https://www.acses.edu.au/publication/towards-a-financially-inclusive-higher-education-system/>

**Abstract:** Financial stress among Australian university students is a growing concern, driven by rising tuition fees, housing costs, and food insecurity. These pressures negatively affect academic performance, mental and physical health, and overall engagement in higher education. This project investigated the prevalence and impact of financial hardship and identifies barriers to accessing assistance and assesses available support services. Using a mixed-methods approach, including a desktop audit of 41 universities, a scoping review, a national survey of 907 students, and in-depth student and staff interviews, the study reveals that one in three students experience financial insecurity, with vulnerable groups (students living away from home and those with mental health-related disabilities) most affected. Course requirements—inclusive of placements—add additional financial burden to students. Although many universities offer financial assistance, student awareness remains low and application processes are often complex. Recommendations include clearer university policies, streamlined access pathways, centralised promotion of support, expanded eligibility, and strengthened financial literacy initiatives. Addressing these systemic barriers is essential to ensuring equitable participation and student success in Australian higher education.

## Background

Higher education is a key driver of economic and social mobility, yet rising costs and persistent inequality are making it harder for many Australians to access and complete university studies. Tuition fees, accommodation, and everyday living expenses have outpaced inflation, placing significant financial pressures on students. While schemes such as HECS-HELP allow deferred tuition payments, they do not cover essential costs such as rent and food, which remain major stressors. Broader economic trends, including rising living costs, slow wage

growth, and insecure job markets, further exacerbate financial insecurity. These issues disproportionately affect marginalised groups such as Indigenous students, those from low income backgrounds, and students living with disabilities. Financial hardship has been linked to poor academic performance, higher dropout rates, and worsening mental health. Challenges such as food insecurity, unstable housing, and rising student debt highlight an urgent need for comprehensive and accessible financial support strategies to ensure equitable participation and success in higher education.

## Objectives and methodology

A mixed-methods research approach was undertaken to comprehensively assess student financial hardship in Australian universities.

Specific objectives included:

- assessing the availability and accessibility of financial aid and non-monetary support across universities
- understanding students' experiences of financial stress and its effects on academic performance and wellbeing
- exploring staff perspectives on institutional responses to student financial distress
- providing evidence-based recommendations to enhance financial inclusion in higher education.

To address the objectives four streams of enquiry were undertaken, as follows:

1. a **desktop audit** of 41 university websites to assess financial support services using a standardised checklist
2. a **scoping review** to synthesise literature on student financial hardship and effectiveness of support strategies
3. a **national student survey** (n = 907) and **semi-structured interviews** (n = 34) to capture quantitative and qualitative data on financial stress, awareness of student aid, and coping strategies
4. a **staff survey** (n = 77) and **semi-structured interviews** (n = 5) to identify current institutional practices and to capture staff perceptions of how well these approaches support students.

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and regression models in SPSS, while qualitative responses underwent thematic analysis using NVivo and consensus coding.

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Wollongong Human Research Ethics Committee for the survey and interview data collection, and confidentiality was maintained throughout.

## Key findings

Prevalence of financial hardship:

- One in three students (32%) reported financial hardship.
- The most vulnerable groups included students living away from home (67.6%) and those with mental health-related disabilities (45.6%).
- 51% of students experienced food insecurity (assessed using the 6-item FSSM tool); 64% reported struggling with housing affordability, while 46% found tuition fees to be burdensome.

University support services:

- The majority (86%) of universities were found to have dedicated financial support webpages, but 48% of students found them hard to navigate.
- Only 21.6% of students were aware of available financial support services.
- Most universities offered scholarships and bursaries, but emergency aid was underfunded, poorly promoted, and difficult to navigate.
- Non-monetary supports such as food programs (100%) and emergency financial aid (73%) were common but considered to be insufficient to meet the needs of vulnerable student groups

Barriers to access:

- Complex application processes and restrictive eligibility criteria hinder access to financial aid.
- Lack of staff and student awareness limits the effectiveness of existing support services.
- Stigma and logistical constraints further reduce uptake of assistance.

Impact on students:

- Financial stress was linked to poor academic performance (44.8% in the student survey), higher dropout rates, and adverse mental health outcomes.
- Students were often balancing part-time work with full-time study, negatively affecting academic success.
- Interviews revealed "aggravating factors"

(for example, limited transparency) and “buffering agents” (for example, housing security and food access) as critical to student well-being and success.

Staff perspectives:

- Almost half (48.9%) of staff reported a lack of coordinated financial support systems at their universities.
- Staff observed that 75% of students were struggling with housing costs while 70.6% experience food insecurity.
- Vulnerable groups included students living away from home (67.6%) and those with mental health-related disabilities (45.6%).
- Staff recommended more coordinated support, expanded aid for at-risk groups, and improved non-monetary assistance (e.g. affordable housing, meal subsidies, food banks).

Policy and systemic gaps:

- Only 38% of universities have a financial inclusion strategy.
- Government schemes (Youth Allowance, Austudy, ABSTUDY) did not reflect actual student financial needs.
- There is an urgent need for clearer policies, streamlined processes, broader eligibility criteria, and enhanced financial literacy programs.

## Recommendations for policy and practice

For Government:

- **Expand financial aid:** Increase funding for needs-based scholarships, emergency aid, and cost-of-living allowances. Introduce income-contingent models and revisit reducing HECS-HELP debt for fields facing workplace shortages such as nursing and social work.
- **Placement support:** Provide stipends, travel subsidies, and mandatory compensation for students completing degrees with mandatory unpaid practical placements.
- **Housing and transport:** Subsidise public transport for all students, review on-campus and placement site parking fees, and expand affordable housing initiatives.

- **Systemic changes:** Advocate for reduced tuition fees, flexible loan payment models, and government-funded financial literacy programs.

For universities:

- **Financial inclusion strategies:** Develop institution-wide plans, appoint executive champions, and create taskforces to ensure effective implementation of strategies.
- **Emergency aid:** Increase funding for crisis grants and simplify application processes.
- **Housing and food security:** Expand affordable accommodation, food banks, and subsidised meals through engagement with local and business communities.
- **Employment and literacy:** Offer paid internships, on-campus jobs, and integrate financial literacy into curricula.
- **Targeted support:** Prioritise aid for vulnerable groups and embed flexible teaching models and access to essential equipment.

For community groups and businesses:

- **Partner with universities** to provide scholarships, work-study programs, and flexible employment.
- **Collaborate on affordable housing and transport solutions**, ensuring accessibility for students with disabilities.

For practitioners and academics:

- **Conduct annual financial hardship surveys** with students and evaluate program effectiveness.
- **Develop a national framework** for consistent financial aid policies and share best practices.

For students and student unions:

- **Promote awareness of financial support services** and reduce stigma through university and community campaigns.
- **Enhance mental health and peer support programs** for financially stressed students.

## Investigating the relationships between First-in-Family status, equity groups, and university access



By Tomasz Zajac, Garth Stahl, Wojtek Tomaszewski, and Ning Xiang

**Priority study groups:** First Nations Australian students; low SES students; students with disability; students from regional and rural Australia; compounding disadvantage; first-in-family students

**Student lifecycle:** Access/pathways/enrolment

**ACSES program:** Small Grants Research Program

**Full report:** : <https://www.acses.edu.au/publication/fif-status-equity-groups-and-university-access/>

**Abstract:** Since the 1960s, Australian higher education policy has prioritised equity, recognising university education as a key driver of socio-economic mobility for disadvantaged groups. Efforts to widen participation have led to a rise in first-in-family (FiF) students—those whose parents lack university degrees. Research consistently shows parental education as a strong predictor of university access, with FiF students facing lower enrolment rates. However, much of this evidence stems from small-scale qualitative studies, limiting understanding of broader patterns, including field-of-study choices. These choices matter, as degrees differ in accessibility, career prospects, and earnings. This project used large-scale integrated administrative data to examine how FiF status influences university enrolment, entry into selective institutions, and access to prestigious courses. The findings reveal significant disadvantages for FiF students, underscoring the need for targeted policy interventions to address persistent inequities in higher education access and outcomes.

### Background

University education has a pivotal role to play in enhancing the socio-economic status and quality of life for disadvantaged individuals. Since the Bradley Review (2008), there has been significant financial investment in Australia in widening participation in order to increase the participation of students from non-traditional backgrounds. Successive Australian governments have identified six equity groups as requiring assistance to improve their representation in higher education. However, the current equity group definitions within the higher education equity framework in Australia do not directly capture parental educational attainment. Previous

research suggested that this might be a serious omission with implications for how we understand access to higher education among socio-economically disadvantaged students. The evidence from Australian research, while relatively limited and based on small-scale studies, suggests that students who are FiF are less likely to enrol in university studies, especially in degrees associated with prestige.

## Objectives and methodology

This study leveraged an extract from the ABS's Person Level Integrated Data Asset (PLIDA) database comprising, among other components, the 2016 ABS census data linked to immigration records provided by the Australian Government Department of Home Affairs and Higher Education Information Management System (HEIMS) records provided by the Australian Government Department of Education. Census data included information about family structures, which allowed the researchers to link children to their parents. The research team used census data on individuals aged 16 or 17 years at the time of the census—that is, born in 1999 or 2000—who lived with at least one parent, to capture their social background, including parental education. By bringing in immigration records, the sample was narrowed to individuals eligible for government-supported places at Australian universities—that is, Australian citizens and permanent residents. Higher education records were used to track their university enrolment status until 2019. The final analytic dataset comprised 443,609 individuals.

The analysis was divided into three main stages. The first aimed at investigating the overlaps between FiF status and current equity groups. The second involved analysing the impact of FiF status and equity group membership on educational outcomes (enrolment in higher education, enrolment in a selective institution, field of study) without controlling for each other and other background characteristics. The third stage focused on modelling the relationship between educational outcomes, FiF status, and equity group membership using a series of logistic and multinomial logistic regression models.

## Key findings

The analysis documented significant overlaps between FiF status and four equity groups: people from low SES backgrounds, people from regional, rural, and remote areas, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and people with disability. The overlaps were particularly large for Indigenous people and people from low SES backgrounds, nearly 90% of whom belonged to the FiF category. However, over two-thirds of the sample were

classified as FiF, compared to 18.0% who qualified as low SES and 3.9% as Indigenous, which meant that the vast majority of FiF individuals are not low SES or Indigenous.

Furthermore, the analysis provided evidence of the effects of FiF status on educational pathways. It revealed a wide gap associated with FiF status in chances of enrolling in an undergraduate program. The adjusted enrolment rate among the FiF category was 35.7% compared to 58.6% among those with university-educated parents. Comparing the effect of FiF status to those of equity-group membership showed that only people with disability were more disadvantaged in terms of enrolment rate compared to their peers. The gap in adjusted proportions was 30.7 percentage points for that group.

Marked differences were also observed in the case of enrolments in selective institutions (that is, those that attract students with higher ATAR scores). This analysis provided evidence that FiF individuals, who were already less likely to enter higher education, were also less likely to secure a spot at a first-tier university. While over half of non-FiF students were studying at a selective institution, the share among FiF students was only 39.3%.

The final stage of the analysis focused on representation of FiF individuals within fields of study. The results from multinomial logistic regression models suggested that a large proportion of fields were equally likely to be studied by FiF students and their peers with university-educated parents. However, FiF students were significantly more likely than their peers to enrol in education programs and health programs other than medical studies and less likely than their peers to study natural and physical sciences, engineering and related technologies, and medical studies.

Combined, the study outcomes emphasise that FiF status—and parental education more broadly—are very important factors affecting educational trajectories. There are some overlaps between students who belong to the officially identified equity groups and those identified as FiF. However, the latter is a much larger group, and as the results indicate, the disadvantage stemming from FiF status is distinct from that resulting from being a member of any of the designated equity groups.

### Recommendations for policy and practice

Based on the findings, the following four recommendations are made:

1. The Australian Government and stakeholders should consider FiF status (or parental education) as another important factor affecting university enrolments, access to first-tier institutions, and certain fields of study.
2. The Australian Government and stakeholders should work together to build a data asset covering the full educational paths that would allow investigation of when and how the educational pathways of FiF individuals and their peers diverge.
3. The Australian Government should consider funding further research exploring why attitudes and aspirations of FiF young people differ from those of non-FiF youth and how they shape educational outcomes. This is needed to better understand the mechanisms leading to the divergence of educational pathways.
4. The Australian Government and stakeholders should invest in approaches to assist FiF individuals in gaining access to higher education, selective institutions, and fields in which they are underrepresented. They should also expand outreach and career counselling programs to equip FiF individuals with the knowledge necessary to navigate the higher education system as well as help them understand various career paths.



# Socio-economic backgrounds, choice of disciplines, and post-university labour market performance



**Flinders  
University**



**UNIVERSITY OF  
CANBERRA**

By Rong Zhu and Xiaodong Gong

**Priority study groups:** First Nations Australian students; low SES students; compounding disadvantage

**Student lifecycle:** Access/pathways/enrolment; post-graduation outcomes

**ACSES program:** Small Grants Research Program

**Full report:** <https://www.acses.edu.au/publication/socioeconomic-backgrounds-choice-of-disciplines-labour-market-performance/>

**Abstract:** This project examined how multidimensional disadvantage shapes students' choices of university disciplines, in turn influencing their career prospects and post-graduation labour market outcomes. The analysis drew on nationally representative panel data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey, which offers detailed information on university enrolment patterns and early-life socio-economic conditions. By linking field-of-study choices to long-term labour market trajectories, the study provides new insights into how socio-economic disadvantages and inequality are transmitted across generations through career pathways. The findings aim to inform both individuals' educational and career decision-making and the design of policy interventions that promote more equitable opportunities in higher education and the labour market.

## Background

Higher education is widely recognised as a pathway to improved labour market outcomes, including higher wages and better job opportunities. In Australia, individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds have made notable gains in accessing and completing higher education, helping to narrow social inequality. Yet, a more subtle form of inequality may have received less attention. Childhood socio-economic conditions may shape university students' choice of study field, which in turn influences career prospects and labour market performance. As a result, inequality can persist after tertiary attainment. If students from disadvantaged backgrounds enter lower-paying disciplines more often, it may offset the equalising effect of expanded

higher education participation. Meanwhile, analysis of labour market outcomes without controlling for subjects chosen in universities may disguise real disadvantages especially when individuals from certain demographic groups tend to select higher-earning subjects to compensate their disadvantages.

## Objectives and methodology

This project sought to enhance understanding of how childhood socio-economic backgrounds shape university subject choices and subsequent labour market outcomes.

Using data drawn from the HILDA survey, the research team analysed the relationship of university graduates' university subject choices and labour market performance with five key indicators of childhood background: Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin, non-English-speaking background (NESB), low SES in childhood, father's unemployment during childhood, and living in a single-parent household at age 14. The HILDA survey also provides five core labour market outcomes, including full-time employment, permanent or ongoing employment, employment in managerial or professional occupations, gross weekly earnings, and job satisfaction. Additionally, the survey offers detailed information on 15 fields of tertiary education, such as Natural and Physical Sciences, Information Technology, Architecture and Building, Management and Commerce, and Society and Culture.

Using cross-tabulations and multivariate regression analysis, this study addressed three central questions:

1. What are the patterns of graduates' field choices and their associated labour market outcomes?
2. How do multidimensional childhood disadvantages influence the selection of tertiary study fields?
3. To what extent do university field choices contribute to disparities in employment and earnings among Australians from different socio-economic backgrounds?

By linking educational pathways to labour market performance, the analysis undertaken for this project provides insights into mechanisms for the potential transmission of inequality across generations, offering evidence to inform both policy and individual decision-making regarding higher education and career planning.

## Key findings

The analysis revealed significant patterns in Australian graduates' fields of study and their subsequent labour market outcomes, as well as the influence of socio-economic backgrounds on these choices and outcomes.

The study found that graduates are heavily concentrated in a few disciplines, with Management and Commerce, Education, and Society and Culture accounting for nearly half of all degrees. Over time, younger cohorts (born 1980 or later) have shifted away from traditional fields like Education, Society and Culture, and Nursing toward Creative Arts, Law, and Other Health-Related fields. Fields such as Medicine and Agriculture, Environment, and Related Studies maintained steady appeal over time. Labour market outcomes varied considerably by field of study, highlighting the significant role academic disciplines played in shaping long-term career trajectories. Some fields provided stronger employment opportunities, higher earnings, and greater job satisfaction than others.

Among the five indicators of childhood socio-economic background examined, only NESB significantly predicted field-of-study choice. NESB students were more likely to enter high-paying fields and less likely to pursue low-paying fields, suggesting that their educational pathways are not always constrained by disadvantage. In contrast, Indigenous origin, low childhood SES, father's unemployment during childhood, and growing up in a single-parent household had negligible effects on the likelihood of choosing high- or low-paying fields.

Long-term labour market outcomes were broadly comparable across several equity groups. Indigenous Australians and individuals whose fathers experienced unemployment for six months or more had similar outcomes to their respective counterparts. Graduates from single-parent families even reported higher weekly earnings than those from two-parent households. Outcomes for low SES individuals were mixed: low SES was not significantly associated with full-time employment, weekly earnings, or job satisfaction but showed a positive association with permanent employment and a negative association with managerial or professional roles.

NESB workers faced the most pronounced challenges. Compared with English-speaking background peers, NESB graduates were less likely to hold managerial or professional positions and earned significantly lower weekly wages. Subject choice played a particularly important role for NESB graduates, as their selection of high-paying fields helped narrow the earnings gap and improve employment prospects, although it did not fully eliminate disparities. For other disadvantaged groups, field-of-study choices had limited influence, likely because their selection patterns did not differ substantially from those of non-disadvantaged graduates.

### Recommendations for policy and practice

The findings highlight how low SES background shapes academic pathways and labour market outcomes, with significant implications for creating a more equitable workforce in Australia. Based on these results, the research team proposes several policy recommendations.

First, students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including low SES families, First Nations communities, and single-parent households, should have greater access to career guidance. Tailored counselling in schools and universities can provide clear information on employment prospects, job security, earnings potential, and long-term career outcomes. Partnerships between educational institutions and industry can deliver timely, relevant resources to support informed academic and career decisions.

Second, government initiatives should increase representation of disadvantaged students in high-return fields such as medicine and law. Scholarships, mentoring, preparatory programs, and contextualised admissions criteria can reduce financial and informational barriers, expand access to competitive courses, and promote social mobility.

Third, NESB graduates may face labour market disadvantages that require targeted support. Government- and industry-sponsored programs—such as job search assistance, internships, and networking opportunities—

can improve access to managerial and professional roles. Employers could also adopt inclusive hiring practices, including anonymised recruitment and diversity training.

Finally, post-university support for disadvantaged graduates could be strengthened through mentoring, leadership development, and sponsorship programs. These measures could help people overcome structural barriers and achieve sustained career success and long-term social mobility through receiving higher education.

## Author biographies



### Professor Peter Anderson

Professor Peter Anderson is from the Warlpiri and Murinpatha peoples of the Northern Territory and is Pro-Vice Chancellor Indigenous at the University of New England. His scholarship advances Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educative rights, Indigenous student success, and self-determination in higher education. Through Indigenous Rights-based method and methodologies informed by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples his work seeks to transform both educational practice and outcomes, challenging deficit-based frameworks and advancing Indigenous-led and informed approaches to educational equity.



### Professor Shawana Andrews

Professor Shawana Andrews is a Palawa Trawlwoolway woman, Director of the Melbourne Poche Centre for Indigenous Health, and Associate Dean Indigenous, Faculty of Medicine Dentistry and Health Sciences at the University of Melbourne. Professor Andrews' research areas include Indigenous peoples' doctoral experiences; social capital, place, and Aboriginal health leadership; Aboriginal mothering practices and family violence; Aboriginal feminisms and gendered knowledges, and cultural practice-based methodologies.



### Dr Julie Arnold

Dr Julie Arnold is a Senior Lecturer in Education at QUT in Brisbane, Australia, whose research investigates students' assessment experiences to enhance teacher practice. Dr Arnold brings a critical lens to accessibility in research, including ethics processes that influence who can participate. Her current work spans accessible Assessment for Learning in English and Mathematics and reflective teaching for equity in higher education. A former English Head of Faculty, she co authors Cambridge's Essential English and is Vice President of the English Teachers Association of Queensland.



### Dr Kylie Austin

Dr Kylie Austin is Director, Student Life at ECU and has over 16 years of experience in the higher education sector in leadership and student experience focused roles. She holds qualifications in Education, Mental Health in Education Settings and research qualifications in collaborative partnerships, equity, and student success in higher education settings. She is the former president of EPHEA and is engaged in many national research projects and collaborative networks focused on the student experience.



### Dr Katelyn Barney

Dr Katelyn Barney is an Associate Professor at the University of Queensland. Her research focuses on improving pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students into and through higher education and advancing understandings about the role of collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. She is a non-Indigenous researcher who grew up on Jagera and Turrubal lands and this project builds on her prior research collaborations.

### Dr James Beaufils

Dr James Beaufils is a Senior Research Fellow at the Jumbunna Institute of Indigenous Education and Research and UTS Faculty of Law. His work focuses on child protection, youth justice, criminology, and education, with particular attention to First Nations children, care systems, and justice reform. He has led and contributed to research across Australia and the UK, partnering with government and community organisations to strengthen policy, practice, and post-release support for people involved in the justice system.



### Associate Professor Amani Bell

Amani Bell, Associate Professor at The University of Sydney School of Health Sciences, focuses her research on increasing accessibility and success for equity-deserving university students. Co-editor of the books *Using Social Theory in Higher Education* and *Understanding Experiences of First Generation University Students*, she has practical and research expertise spanning equity in higher education, professional learning for educators, and educator-staff partnership initiatives.



### Emeritus Professor Tracey Bunda

Emeritus Professor Tracey Bunda is a Ngugi/Wakka Wakka woman who has undertaken research projects on Indigenous higher education and negotiating university equity from Indigenous standpoints.



### Professor Karen Charlton

Karen was a Professor of Nutrition and Dietetics at the University of Wollongong at the time of this project. She is now in the School of Health Sciences at the University of Newcastle. She is a registered public health nutritionist, a Fellow of Dietitians Australia, and has a four-year Future Fellowship from the Australian Research Council. Karen has published over 250 scientific articles and has worked with colleagues in Ghana, Zambia, South Africa, Fiji, Italy, UK, and USA.



### Dr Do Na Chi

Dr Do Na Chi is currently an instructor in the Foundation program at UQ College, University of Queensland, Australia. He earned a Master of TESOL degree from La Trobe University and a PhD (Education) degree from Queensland University of Technology. He has been a member of several research and training projects to support English as an additional language (EAL) teachers and learners. His research interests include English language teacher and learner identity, second language writing, English for academic purposes, intercultural rhetoric, language and culture, and transnational education.



### Associate Professor Joanne Dargusch

Joanne Dargusch is Associate Professor and Director of the Centre for Research in Equity and Advancement of Teaching and Education (CREATE) at Central Queensland University, based in Brisbane, Australia. Her research focuses on assessment and pedagogy across school-based and higher education contexts, with an emphasis on research translation to inform and improve practice. A central theme of her current work is equity in higher education—particularly how students from underrepresented groups experience assessment policy and practice.





### **Dr Tahlia Eastman**

Dr Tahlia Eastman is a Tasmanian Aboriginal descendant and an early-career researcher with extensive experience delivering high-impact academic and policy projects. She recently completed her PhD at the University of Melbourne, examining Passing and the Sociopolitical Boundaries of Aboriginal Identity in Tasmania, focusing on colonisation and cultural reconnection. Dr Eastman investigates Indigenous family violence policy, contributes to curricula projects, and leads graduate support for Indigenous PhD students. Her most recent work explores Indigenous scholarship and epistemological equity across Australia, Turtle Island Canada, and Aotearoa New Zealand.



### **Dr Daniel Edwards**

Dr Daniel Edwards is Head of ACER's Education Research, Policy & Development Division. He is responsible for coordinating ACER's education research programs, covering early childhood to vocational and professional education and training. His research interests are in educational transitions, long-term outcomes from education, and equity in higher education. He has led a range of large-scale educational research projects in Australia and across the globe with a keen focus on equity and inclusion.



### **Associate Professor Frances Fan**

Frances Fan is an Associate Professor in the School of Education, University of Tasmania. Frances has a broad research interest, within which higher education and online pedagogy is the most significant aspect. Her latest work has focused on supporting university academics through promoting Scholarship of Teaching and Learning practices, and documenting evidence-based approaches to enhance student engagement in online and blended courses. Recommendations emerged from her research aim to support equity, inclusion, and student success, informing both teaching academics and university support services.



### **Dr Sarah Fischer**

Dr Sarah Fischer is a Senior Research Fellow with the College of Business and Economics at the University of Tasmania. With over 25 years of experience in policy research across Australia and the United States, her work spans ocean governance, higher education equity, and international development. Her education research focuses on access, retention, and success for underrepresented students, as well as the governance of higher education internationalisation—including how diverse, geographically dispersed cohorts engage with higher education pathways and processes.



### **Dr Leanne Fray**

Dr Leanne Fray is a Senior Lecturer, primary literacy lead, and a member of the Teachers and Teaching Research Centre. Her research focuses on student aspirations, literacy education, and quality teaching. She contributes to major longitudinal studies on educational equity and COVID 19 impacts on schooling and has received competitive grants supporting equity focused interventions and widening participation in higher education.

### Professor Bronwyn Fredericks

Professor Bronwyn Fredericks is Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Indigenous Engagement) at the University of Queensland. She is an Aboriginal woman from south-east Queensland, who has over 30 years of experience working in and with the tertiary sector, state and federal governments, and Indigenous community-based organisations.



### Dr Jeanine Gallagher

Dr Jeanine Gallagher is an applied education researcher in Brisbane, Australia with experience in policy and practice improvement. Her work examines inclusive education practices, disability, supports for neurodiverse students, teacher work, and governance in education systems. She has peer-reviewed publications that translate evidence into practical guidance for schools, with particular attention to ethical, transparent decision-making in the collection and use of student data to design adjustments that enable access and participation.



### Dr Xiaodong Gong

Dr Xiaodong Gong is a Professor in Economics at University of Canberra. He has published in leading journals including Journal of Business and Economics Statistics, Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization, Journal of Human Resources, and Journal of Econometrics. His work includes modelling labour supply, tax and welfare policy, childcare, child development and education, and household consumption. Dr Gong is adjunct to the Research School of Economics, Australian National University and a Fellow of the Institute of Labor Economics (IZA).



### Distinguished Laureate Professor Jenny Gore

Distinguished Laureate Professor Jenny Gore is Director of the Teachers and Teaching Research Centre at the University of Newcastle. She has been awarded more than \$38M in research funding, including grants from the Australian Research Council, Paul Ramsay Foundation, and multiple State Departments of Education, and her publications have been cited more than 19,000 times. Professor Gore tackles persistent educational challenges through comprehensive programs of research on teacher development, pedagogical reform, enhancing student outcomes, and the formation of student aspirations.



### Dr Lois Harris

Dr Lois Harris is a Senior Research Fellow at Australian Catholic University's Institute of Learning Sciences and Teacher Education. Her research interests include educational assessment, teacher education, and student engagement, with a particular focus on improving educational equity.



### Kirsten Hausia

Kirsten Hausia is Program Manager at Murrup Barak, the University of Melbourne. She is an Aboriginal woman whose mother is Yamatji from Perth, Western Australia, and has research skills in educational leadership and guidance/counselling.





### Dr David Hicks

Dr David Hicks is a researcher whose work focuses on the intersection of education and equity. His research explores how teaching practices, institutional structures, and learning environments influence student engagement and success across diverse student populations. A key aspect of his work is the use of quantitative methods in areas of education that have traditionally relied on qualitative approaches, enabling new insights into complex educational challenges. Through collaboration with universities, schools, and community organisations, his research aims to inform evidence-based practices that support inclusive and equitable learning environments.



### Danielle Keenan

Danielle Keenan is co-CEO of Study Hubs Australia and an ACSES Equity Fellow. With almost 10 years' experience in the study hub space, her work focuses on place-based and community-led approaches to improving tertiary education access and success. She has expertise across practice, research, and policy, particularly in student equity, study hub operations, and the contribution of study hubs to regional, rural, and remote communities.



### Dr Katherine Kent

Dr Katherine Kent is a public health nutritionist with expertise in measuring household food security. She is passionate about investigating the impact of social determinants issues like food insecurity on diet and health related outcomes in various priority populations across Australia. Related to university students, her collaborative research documenting high levels of food security and dietary challenges of university students has helped to inform the Healthy, Sustainable, and Equitable Food Strategic Plan implemented at the University of Tasmania (2023–2028).



### Minahil Khan

Minahil Khan is a third-year dental student at the University of Sydney. She is an international student from Canada and has a keen interest in research focused on public health and accessible practices.



### Professor Margaret Kettle

Margaret Kettle is a research-intensive Professor at Central Queensland University, based in Brisbane, Australia. Her areas of research are Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and second language use in schools, workplaces, and higher education. Her research approaches include critical discourse analysis and participatory designs that make visible assumptions in language use and advocate for the equity of participants in the production of culturally relevant research findings and outputs.



### Professor Kelly Lambert

Kelly is a Professor, Fellow of Dietitians Australia and Academic Program Director for Nutrition and Dietetics at the University of Wollongong in New South Wales, Australia. She is passionate about advocating for students completing mandatory unpaid professional placements and has recently undertaken extensive research in this space. Professor Lambert's other research interests and values are supporting people with kidney disease to live better lives, improving patient education by health professionals, and educating future dietitians.

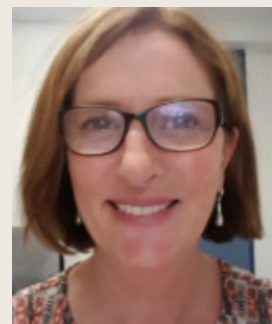
### Dr Odette Mazel

Dr Odette Mazel is a non-Indigenous person and Senior Research Fellow at the Melbourne Poche Centre for Indigenous Health at the University of Melbourne. She leads the Centre's research and evaluation program and has had over 20 years' experience working and researching in areas relating to Indigenous human rights and self-determination, Indigenous student access to and success in higher education, and agreement and treaty making with Indigenous communities.



### Dr Anne-Therese McMahon

Dr Anne-Therese McMahon is an Honorary Senior Fellow at the University of Wollongong. Her current research focus on student equity issues has been driven by her extensive experience dealing with vulnerable students in her student academic management role 2020–2025. Her experience working with vulnerable populations in respectful reciprocal research has underpinned her current research approach with student groups. She is an Accredited Practising Dietitian with 30 years' experience and has a developing track record in qualitative health research with over 70 publications in scientific journals.



### Ashley Moor

Ashley Moor is Senior Manager of Academic Pathways and Programs at UQ College. He has family connections to Wakka Wakka Country and has expertise in curriculum development and educational leadership.



### Dr Emily Munro-Harrison

Dr Emily Munro-Harrison (Wiradjuri) is the Academic Lead Indigenous Health Leadership. Her research interests include participatory and creative methods and using research as a tool for activism and change in settings including prisons, youth programs, and higher education spaces. She has worked for over a decade on research projects focused on First Nations health and wellbeing including connection to place and culture, community and family support, prevention of violence, and working with young people to develop desire-based frameworks for the future.



### Dr Gabrielle O'Flynn

Gabrielle O'Flynn is a researcher at the University of Wollongong. She specialises in qualitative, critical health research with a focus on social justice, gender, body norms, social class, and environmental health. In collaboration with A/Prof. Anthony McKnight and Aboriginal communities, her recent research adopts a strengths-based, two-way knowledge approach that centres Country as a knowledge holder. Through this approach, her research challenges dominant Western ideologies in health and health education and contributes to socially just, community-driven approaches to health and wellbeing.



### Scott Parlett

Scott Parlett is Director of Nura Gila at UNSW. He is a Malyangapa and Barkindji descendent who was born and raised in Winton in rural Queensland. He has over 20 years of extensive knowledge and experience working in the higher education sector.





### Dr Sally Patfield

Dr Sally Patfield is a Lecturer in the School of Education at the University of Newcastle and member of the Teachers and Teaching Research Centre. Her research focuses on issues of equity and social justice across formal schooling and higher education, particularly in relation to educational and social inequities connected to social class, rurality, first-in-family status, and the changing nature of the education system.



### Dr Thu Pham

Dr Thu Pham is a researcher specialising in Indigenous higher education, with a strong commitment to advancing Indigenous student success through Indigenous-led and evidence-informed approaches. Her research focuses on improving Indigenous student experiences and outcomes, particularly by examining how university leaders can effectively create culturally responsive and supportive higher education environments. She led the development and validation of the Higher Education Success Factor (HESF) model, a practical framework for measuring the influence of social determinants on student completion in Australian universities.



### Professor Yasmine Probst

Yasmine Probst is a professor and Associate Dean (Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion) at the University of Wollongong. She is recognised as an Advanced Accredited Practising Dietitian with Dietitians Australia and a Fellow of the Australasian Institute for Digital Health. She holds a current Senior Research fellowship with multiple sclerosis (MS) Australia. As a person living with MS, her research focuses on nutrition management for people living with MS and she is a keen advocate for people living with diversity considerations.



### Nisa Richy

Nisa Richy is Crimean Tatar, Southern European, and Originaria Yucateca, Mexican and grew up on Jinibara and Kabi Kabi Country. She is a research assistant in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit and the School of Music at the University of Queensland.



### Natasha Rogers

Natasha Rogers taught History and English in Queensland high schools for 26 years, eight of them as Head of Department for Humanities and Languages. She is currently completing her PhD investigating the motivations and deterrents for students choosing to study Ancient History in senior secondary and working as a Research Assistant on equity-related projects.



### Courtney Rubie

Courtney Rubie is a proud Wiradjuri woman, early career academic and Lecturer in Indigenous Education at the University of Newcastle's Wollotuka Institute. A former secondary teacher and now Initial Teacher Educator, she has 14 years of experience in Indigenous Education across school, professional, and tertiary contexts. Her practice centres leadership in embedding Indigenous knowledges into curriculum, culturally grounded pedagogy, and strong relational approaches to teaching. Her interests focus on Initial Teacher Education, improving educational experiences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and supporting Aboriginal community led approaches to education.

### Dr Joanna Russell

Dr Joanna Russell is an Honorary Fellow at the University of Wollongong. She is a public health nutritionist with a research focus on food security, primarily in older adults as well as research into the sustainability of food environments. As Head of Students in the School of Social Sciences, she provided support and academic advice to vulnerable students to assist them through their degree pathway.



### Lachlan Sibir

Lachlan is a proud Kamilaroi man who grew up in Western Sydney on Darug Country. He holds a Bachelor of Teaching and Arts from the Australian Catholic University and Honours in history at the University of Sydney. He has worked in schools as a School Learning Support Officer and as a history, Aboriginal Studies, and geography teacher. He has also worked as a research intern and assistant in Indigenous Education at ACU, and in Placement Poverty at the University of Sydney.



### Dr Kristina Sincock

Dr Kristina Sincock is a researcher and project manager interested in student equity and the ways social structures perpetuate power imbalances. Her earlier work focused on girls in STEM and the influence of identity on school subject and career choices. At the Teachers and Teaching Research Centre, her work highlights the complex interaction of individual and social factors influencing student aspirations. Her current focus is a collaborative project to support First Nations career education.



### Tara Soanes

Tara Soanes is currently studying her Bachelor of Arts, majoring in Sociology, and Bachelor of Social Work at the University of Sydney. She has a keen interest in policy and social research.



### Associate Professor Garth Stahl

Garth Stahl is an Associate Professor in the School of Education at the University of Queensland. His research interests focus on the relationship between education and society, socio-cultural studies of education, student identities, equity/inequality, and social change. Currently, his research projects and publications encompass theoretical and empirical studies of youth, sociology of schooling in a neoliberal age, gendered subjectivities, equity and difference as well as educational reform.



### Dr Bret Stephenson

Dr Bret Stephenson is a researcher and consultant specialising in student equity, success, and data and digital governance in Australian higher education. With over 20 years' experience across teaching, institutional research, and strategic leadership, he works alongside universities to align policy, practice, and data culture with the needs of diverse student communities. Bret is the Founder and Director of PositiveSum, a specialist consultancy partnering with institutions to deliver rigorous strategy, policy design, and program evaluation.





### **Dr Carla Tapia Parada**

Dr Carla Tapia Parada is an educator and researcher based in Queensland, Australia, with active roles in the Queensland Department of Education and at Griffith University. Her work sits within the sociology of education, focusing on gender, CALD inclusion, decolonial methodologies, critical pedagogies, and educational justice. With over a decade of experience across early childhood, primary, secondary, and tertiary education in Chile and Australia, she contributes to projects on CALD inclusion, Indigenous success, leadership development, and language and literacy acquisition.



### **Dr Rebecca Taylor**

Dr Rebecca Taylor is a Senior Research Fellow at ACER where she has worked across assessment, tertiary education, and policy driven research. Her work spans the design and evaluation of large scale national and international assessments, major higher education and workforce surveys, and complex program evaluations for government and professional bodies. She has led a range of large-scale surveys and their reviews, managed evaluations of Australian and International tertiary education systems, and contributed to research on equity, student experience, workforce development, and music education in schools.



### **Daniel Taylor-Griffiths**

Daniel Taylor-Griffiths is Senior Manager of Student Transition and Success at the University of Queensland. He is a non-Indigenous man who lives on the lands of the Bundjalung people and previously coordinated multiple university pathway programs.



### **Professor Wojtek Tomaszewski**

Professor Wojtek Tomaszewski is Professorial Research Fellow and a Research Group Leader at the Institute for Social Science Research. He is the Director of the Social Science Research Infrastructure Network and is also Chief Investigator and Program Leader in the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Children and Families over the Life Course. He has a strong research interest in the impact of disadvantage on educational and labour market outcomes and has specialist expertise in quantitative research methods and advanced statistical analysis.



### **Tina Tran**

Tina Tran is a Bachelor of Social Work (Honours) student at the University of Sydney from Western Sydney. Her research interests focus on the history and evolution of social work and how social work education shapes professional identity. She currently works as an Administrative Assistant at the Sydney Knowledge Hub and has experience working with young people.

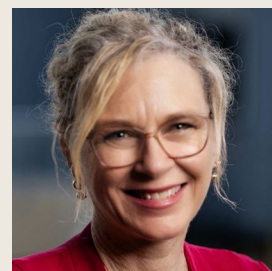


### **Professor Karen Walton**

Professor Karen Walton is an Advanced Accredited Practising Dietician and Fellow of Dietitians Australia. At the time of the report, she was the Discipline Leader of Nutrition Science and Dietetics and Associate Dean Student Life at the University of Wollongong. She has over 30 years' experience as a dietician, has been a previous Associate Dean of Education, and is now a Deputy Dean Education. She is passionate about optimising student engagement, experience, and success.

### Professor Jill Willis

Jill Willis is a Professor of Education at Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane Australia. She researches the social structures of assessment and learning spaces to make recommendations for improving teacher and student agency. Recent funded projects include research on accessibility in assessment, and student evaluations of vertical schools. She is a founding member of the Centre for Inclusive Education.



### Dr Tracy Woodroffe

Dr Tracy Woodroffe is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Arts and Society, specialising in Teacher Education and the significance of culture and inclusive teaching practice. She was a 2024 ACSES First Nations Fellow. Dr Woodroffe is a Warumungu Luritja woman with extensive experience in early childhood, primary, secondary, and tertiary classrooms. Her expertise is in educational pedagogy, identity, perspective, and cultural responsiveness. Her work includes Indigenous methodology in examining the Australian education system through an Indigenous Women's Standpoint.



### Dr Ning Xiang

Dr Ning Xiang was a Research Fellow at the University of Queensland, specialising in higher education equity and the long term outcomes of underrepresented student groups. With expertise in longitudinal data analysis and mixed methods research, she has led major projects examining how social, educational, and institutional factors shape student wellbeing, achievement, and post school pathways. Her work draws on large scale national datasets to inform evidence based policy aimed at improving equity and inclusion across the Australian education system.



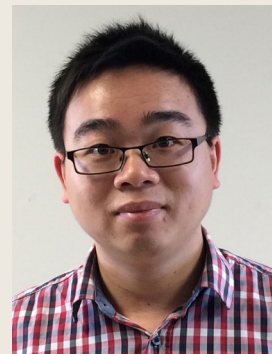
### Dr Tomasz Zajac

Tomasz is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Social Science Research at the University of Queensland and the Deputy Lead of the Opportunities research program at the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Children and Families over the Life Course. He is a sociologist specialising in quantitative methods, particularly in using linked administrative data. His research interests include individual educational trajectories, especially within tertiary education, labour market outcomes of graduates, and social inequality and its impact on young people's educational and professional paths.



### Dr Rong Zhu

Dr Rong Zhu is a Senior Lecturer in Economics at Flinders University. His research interests include labour economics, education economics, and health economics. He has an established record of publications in leading journals, such as the Economic Journal, Journal of Human Resources, Journal of Health Economics, and competitive research grants (for example, Australian Research Council Discovery and Linkage schemes, Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success). He was a recipient of the 2022 South Australian Young Tall Poppy Science Award.



## Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACSES	Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success
AI	Artificial intelligence
ATAR	Australian Tertiary Admission Rank
DoE	Department of Education
FiF	First-in-family
HECS-HELP	Higher Education Contribution Scheme-Higher Education Loan Program
HEIMS	Higher Education Information Management System
HILDA	Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia
ICSEA	Index of Community Socio-educational Advantage
ITAS	Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual +
LMS	Learning Management System
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy
NESB	Non-English speaking background
NT	Northern Territory
PLIDA	Personal Level Integrated Data Asset
RPPPP	Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program
RQ	Research question
RRR	Regional, rural, and remote
RUSH	Regional University Study Hubs
SES	Socio-economic status
SLCM	Senior Leadership Capability Model
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
TCSI	Tertiary Collection of Student Information
UA	Universities Australia
UTAS	University of Tasmania
VETis	VET in Schools
WIL	Work-integrated learning
WSU	Western Sydney University

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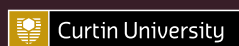
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## Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success

Curtin University  
GPO Box U1987  
Perth WA 6845  
Australia

Email: [aces@curtin.edu.au](mailto:aces@curtin.edu.au)  
Tel: +61 8 9266 1743

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