

Australia



Policy Frameworks

Does equity with regard to supporting students from low-income or marginalized populations to enter or succeed in higher education feature in any government produced policy documents? If so, which government policy document(s) are these and can you provide website link(s) to them?

Some key Higher Education government policy documents include (but are not limited to):

- [The Higher Education Support Act 2003](#) (updated 30 June 2013), which defines the country's national higher education priorities.
- The [Other Grants Guidelines \(Education\) Amendment 2020](#), contain requirements on grants payable to Australian higher education providers and other eligible bodies for a variety of purposes.
- The [Higher Education Standards Framework \(Threshold Standards\) 2021](#), sets the standards that a provider must meet and continue to meet to be registered to operate as a higher education provider in Australia.
- The July 2020 [National Agreement on Closing the Gap](#) aims to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and governments to work together to overcome the inequality experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and achieve life outcomes equal to all Australians.
- The Government response to the [National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy](#) final report (the Naphthine Review) 2019, which developed a national strategy focused on improving tertiary education participation and outcomes for students from regional, rural and remote areas, as part of a broader Higher Education reform package.

What policies and actions are described in these government policy documents in terms of supporting students from low-income or marginalized populations to enter or succeed in higher education?

The *Higher Education Support Act 2003* asserts the need for a higher education that is “characterized by quality, diversity and equity of access.” The Threshold Standards 2021 underpin and provide assurance of quality and integrity in the delivery of Australian higher education, ensuring equivalent opportunities for student academic success.

The Closing the Gap National Agreement has been built around four Priority Reforms to change the way governments work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities. Each party to the National Agreement will develop their own implementation within 12 months of the Agreement coming into effect. Each implementation plan will set out how policies and programs are aligned to the National Agreement and what actions will be taken to achieve the Priority Reforms.

The Government accepted the seven recommendations of the Naphthine Review, aimed at improving regional and remote tertiary education participation and outcomes. The recommendations cover:

- improving access to study options for regional and remote students
- improving the quality and range of financial and other supports, including for equity groups
- building aspirations, providing better career advice, and strengthening schools
- developing regional communities including through strengthening the role of tertiary providers in regional Australia
- establishing mechanisms to coordinate the implementation effort and support monitoring of the Strategy.

In June 2020, the Australian Government announced a series of measures targeted at regional and remote students as part of a broader higher education reform package, the *Job-ready Graduates Package*. Worth over \$400m over four years these measures support [more opportunities for regional Australia](#) and lift

investment in regional university campuses. The measures arise from the Napthine Review 2019 and are intended to bridge the gap in attainment rates between Rural, Regional and Remote (RRR) and metropolitan students. The measures have been progressively implemented since 1 January 2021, including:

- \$177.8 million over four years for a new \$5,000 Tertiary Access Payment, to encourage and assist outer regional and remote students access tertiary study immediately following Year 12.
- \$146 million over four years to increase Commonwealth Grant Scheme funding for regional university campuses by 3.5 per cent a year.
- \$17.1 million over four years for demand driven Commonwealth-supported university places for Indigenous students from regional and remote areas.
- \$48.8 million over four years to enhance the research collaboration capacity of regional universities.
- \$21 million over four years to establish up to eight additional Regional University Centres (Centres), to strengthen the existing Centres program, and to fund additional Commonwealth supported places to support the Centres.
- \$7.1 million over four years for the Regional Partnerships Project Pool to assist universities and/or Regional University Centres to link with other universities, schools, VET providers and community organisations to develop and implement outreach initiatives. Grants will be awarded through competitive grant rounds.
- \$0.7 million over four years for improvements to Fares Allowance, administered through Services Australia.
- \$6 million over four years to establish a Regional Education Commissioner to oversee implementation of the Napthine Review response, manage key projects and report to the Government on the progress of regional education.

In addition, the Government introduced the Indigenous, Regional and Low SES Attainment Fund (IRLSAF) to fund universities to support Indigenous students and students from low SES, regional and remote backgrounds. The IRLSAF realigned new and existing funding by combining the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP), National Priorities Pool, Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program, regional loading, and enabling loading. These changes mean that an additional 125,000 students, who are Indigenous and/or are from regional and remote areas, are eligible for HEPPP support. More information is at [Access and Participation - Department of Education, Skills and Employment, Australian Government \(dese.gov.au\)](https://www.dese.gov.au/access-and-participation)

Is there a standalone policy document dedicated to equity promotion in higher education? If so, which document(s) is/are these? Can you provide a link(s)?

The Higher Education Support Act 2003 is the main act governing higher education in Australia. It is supported by the Other Grants Guidelines (Education) Amendment 2020. These solidify a commitment to equity in higher education.

Which equity target groups are identified in the policy documents? (Please choose as many groups as apply in your own country)

- Low-income or lower socio-economic background students
- Gender groups
- Indigenous populations
- People from rural backgrounds
- Students with disability

Does the country have concrete targets for the participation of specific equity groups in higher education?

The Australian Government monitors the performance of students from equity groups against their access, participation, retention, completion and success in Higher Education and publishes this information at <https://www.dese.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/student-data/selected-higher-education-statistics-2019-student-data>

The Closing the Gap National Agreement sets the target of 70 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people attaining a tertiary qualification, Certificate III and above, by 2031.

The Napthine Review also recommended establishing a Regional Education Commissioner to provide a national focus for regional and remote education. The Commissioner will have a central goal of at least halving the disparity in tertiary education outcomes between regional and metropolitan students by 2030.

Which agency has responsibility for policies related to equity in student participation/success in higher education?

The Department of Education, Skills and Employment is the Australian government agency responsible for defining and implementing national policies in higher education.

Which stakeholder groups are consulted during the equity policy formulation? (Please choose all the stakeholders that are invited to the consultation process in your own country)

- ➔ Higher Education Institutions' Associations
- ➔ Others: Australia works with the following specific stakeholders:
 - Students from identified equity groups
 - Universities Australia
 - Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia (EPHEA)
 - University Peak bodies (e.g. Go8, RUN, IRU, ATN)
 - National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Consortium 2020 (NATSIHEC)
 - All individual higher education universities in Australia
 - The Equity in Higher Education Panel (EHEP) advisory body to inform policy.

Achieving Policy Targets

Are there any non-monetary instruments such as outreach work between schools and universities, reforms to university admission etc. used to promote access/success for students from specific equity groups in higher education? If so, can you describe what they are?

The Australian Government supports several non-monetary instruments to promote equity and inclusion. These include retention programs and conditions of registration as a higher education provider, to meet the [Higher Education Standards \(Threshold Standards\) 2021](#).

Higher education providers must be registered with the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA). The Threshold Standards 2021 legislative instrument, provides the basis for TEQSA's regulation of the higher education sector. The Standards outline the requirements and expectations of higher education providers regarding the delivery of higher education in or from Australia, including Standard 2.2 (Diversity and Equity).

On 1 July 2021, the Threshold Standards 2021 replaced the 2015 Threshold Standards, to implement and bring together recommendations of the 2019 [Review of the Higher Education Provider Category Standards](#) (PCS Review) and an outstanding recommendation from the 2017 [Review of the impact of the TEQSA Act on the higher education sector](#) (Impact Review).

Higher education providers are funded to deliver a range of outreach, access and transition activities and support to students from equity groups. These activities may be undertaken in partnership with schools, vocational education and training providers, employers and community organisations.

Are there any financial instruments such as bursaries, scholarships and loans used to promote access/success for students from specific equity groups in higher education? If so, can you describe what they are?

The Government provides financial assistance to all students, including students from equity groups, under the Higher Education Loan Program (HELP). The HELP removes up-front cost barriers to tertiary education by providing income contingent loans to all students (totalling around \$67 billion).

The Government also subsidises tuition costs for higher education students, including veteran students, through the Commonwealth Grant Scheme (CGS) (\$7.5 billion in 2020-21).

Other financial instruments used to support equity and inclusion in higher education include needs-based scholarships and grants, student loans and equity-linked financial incentives.

The Australian Government administers multiple equity-linked financial incentives to allocate public resources to higher education.

The [More Opportunities for Regional Australia](#) measures (under the Job-ready Graduates package) is providing \$177.8 million over four years from 2020-21 for a \$5,000 Tertiary Access Payment to school-leavers from outer regional and remote areas who need to relocate for full-time, higher-level tertiary education (Certificate IV and above) at an education provider located at least 90 minutes by public transport from their family home. Up to 8,000 students are able to benefit from the payment in 2021.

A smaller but significant measure is the reduction of the initial waiting period for [Fares Allowance](#) from six months to three months to help families meet travel costs for relocated tertiary students to return home mid-year in their first year of study (\$0.7 million over 4 years).

The [Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program](#) (HEPPP) under the Indigenous, Regional and Low SES Attainment Fund provides funding to universities listed in Table A of the *Higher Education Support Act 2003* to implement strategies that improve access to undergraduate courses for people from regional and remote Australia, low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds, and Indigenous persons. Universities use HEPPP funds to deliver a range of activities aimed at supporting pre-access (outreach and pathways), access, participation, and attainment and transition out. These can include scholarships and bursaries.

The [Rural and Regional Enterprise Scholarships Program](#) (RRESP) is an Australian Government initiative to improve access to, and the completion of, high-level tertiary education courses, for students from regional and remote Australia. The scholarships are for courses from Certificate IV to PhD level. Recipients are selected on the basis of financial need, with priority for scholarships given to equity groups such as women and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The scholarships are valued at up to \$18,000 each and are available to support students studying for six months full-time or up to 8 years part-time, on campus, or through online and distance education. Round 5 of the scholarships launched on 1 March 2021.

The Government is also providing \$1 million for 50 Creative Arts Scholarships for regional and remote students commencing an eligible creative arts Bachelor degree from 2021 only. These scholarships are being administered alongside the RRESP.

Who is responsible for monitoring the impact of measures used to promote access/success for students from specific equity groups in higher education?

The Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment is responsible for the collection and dissemination of statistics relating to the provision of higher education at all Australian institutions, including the participation and performance of students from the six identified equity groups.

What instruments, methods and data are in place to carry out the monitoring and evaluation?

The Department of Education, Skills and Employment monitors equity group participation and performance using the Higher Education Information Management System (HEIMS) and Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) Graduate Outcomes Survey (GOS).

The [Tertiary Access Payment](#) is scheduled for two evaluations, the first is to examine its appropriateness, effectiveness and efficiency in meeting its intended objectives in its first year of operation (2021). A second evaluation is planned for 2023-24.

What kind of autonomy do higher education institutions enjoy in reaching the policy targets set by government?

Australian universities are fundamentally autonomous and the Australian Government does not intervene in their day-to-day operations, or corporate policies and procedures. While they are largely self-governing, they must be registered with the national higher education regulator, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), which requires them to comply with the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021. Standards 2, 3 and 7 include requirements supporting student access and diversity.

Under Standard 2.2 of the Standards (Diversity and Equity), registered higher education providers are required to ensure that institutional policies, practices and approaches to teaching and learning accommodate student diversity, 'including the under-representation and/or disadvantage experienced by identified groups, and create equivalent opportunities for academic success regardless of students' backgrounds.' They are required to give specific consideration to the recruitment, admission, participation and completion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. They are further required to monitor participation, progress and completion by identified student subgroups, and using the findings to inform admission policies and improve teaching, learning and support strategies for those subgroups.

How do you see the role of inter-governmental/international organisations in supporting higher education equity policies? In which areas would be their contribution the most valuable? (1=most valuable contribution 4=least valuable contribution)

Unranked: Policy setting

Unranked: Technical assistance and capacity building

Unranked: Financial assistance (grants, loan financing, scholarships)

Unranked: Facilitating peer learning, exchange of experience among countries

COVID-19 and Equitable Access and Success in Higher Education

How, if at all, has Covid-19 affected the existence and implementation of policies designed to encourage greater access and success on higher education of those from low-income/marginalized groups?

Australia has been concerned by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, including its disproportionate impacts on students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The Department of Education, Skills and Employment continues to work with universities to ensure students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds are supported to access reliable technology and appropriate services to continue their study.

Australia is continuing to monitor the impact of COVID-19 on its policies and programs. In relation to individual programs and the [Regional University Centres](#) program specifically, to date there have been reports of increased registrations from regional and remote students studying with the support of a Regional University Centre. This is possibly due to increased numbers of students remaining in their local community to study, rather than relocating to a city or a larger regional centre.

Sources

This country brief was prepared as part of the "[ASEM National Equity Policies in Higher Education](#)" report, a collaboration between the [Asia-Europe Foundation \(ASEF\)](#) and the [National Education Opportunities Network \(NEON\)](#). The report was launched at the [8th ASEF Regional Conference on Higher Education \(ARC8\)](#) on "[Inclusive and Diverse Higher Education in Asia and Europe](#)" on 10 September 2021.

All information in this country brief was provided by the Department of Education, Skills and Employment of Australia, as of 16 July 2021.