

A comparative study of the equity strategies employed by Australian universities

RESEARCH REPORT

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Final Report

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 - Ms Mary Kelly, Coordinator Equity, Queensland University of Technology;
 - Professor Sally Kift, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic)
 - Dr Ryan Naylor, Honorary Fellow, Melbourne CSHE, University of Melbourne
 - Professor Ron Oliver, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic), Edith Cowan University
 - Professor Sue Trinidad, Director and Program Leader of the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education
 - Dr Nadine Zacharias, Equity Senior Research Fellow, Deakin University

Acronyms

| | |
|-------|---|
| ATAR | Australian Tertiary Admission Rank |
| ATSI | Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander |
| CQU | Central Queensland University |
| FUA | Federation University Australia |
| HEPPP | Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program |
| JCU | James Cook University |
| LTU | La Trobe University |
| NPP | National Priorities Pool |
| NESB | Non-English Speaking Background |
| RUN | Regional Universities Network |
| SES | Socio-economic status |
| UON | The University of Newcastle |
| USC | University of the Sunshine Coast |

Executive Summary

This National Priorities Pool funded project has involved a collaboration of six Australian universities, which collectively undertook a comparative study of the approaches each university employs to guide the prioritisation, management and evaluation of Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) funded initiatives aimed at increasing access, participation and outcomes for people from low socio-economic status (LSES) backgrounds, and how they act on the findings from evaluation to plan future policy, initiatives and services.

The project addressed two national priority areas: building the evidence base, and more effective programme implementation.

Project aims

The aims of the project were to:

- explore the processes currently undertaken by partner universities to prioritise, select, manage and evaluate HEPPP funded equity initiatives, and identify how they act on the findings of evaluation to inform future planning;
- contribute to transformative change in the efficacy of approaches designed to improve the outcomes for students from LSES backgrounds;
- provide in-depth case studies of HEPPP strategies, within the context of the universities' broader approaches to equity, at each of the partner universities;
- contribute to the growing evidence base to inform future initiatives; and
- develop good practice guidelines to assist the wider higher education community in applying effective approaches in their own institutional contexts.

Project approach

The approach involved:

- Mapping of each university's relevant documentation to the prioritisation, management, evaluation and implementation processes they undertake in relation to HEPPP funded initiatives.
- Thematic analysis of the stakeholder interviews across the six partner universities.
- Analysis of case studies prepared by each partner university drawing on their knowledge of processes undertaken within their university, their relevant documentation and analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with key stakeholders from their university.
- Developing good practice guidelines informed by the findings.
- Final reporting and drafting of recommendations for the Commonwealth Government.

Key findings

The key findings of the project were drawn from the three sources of data (mapping of relevant documentation, thematic analysis of stakeholder interviews and case studies prepared by each partner university).

Analysis of university documentation

The findings from mapping each university's relevant HEPPP/equity related documentation identified four typical approaches to the allocation of HEPPP funds: 1). a senior executive leadership group determines the funding of initiatives that it regards are likely to have the greatest impact on improving equity outcomes for the university; 2). a hybrid approach in which senior leaders quarantine some funds for institution wide projects, with the remainder of the funds being allocated to initiatives selected following an open call for proposals; 3). a research centre advises a senior leadership group about the allocation of funds; or 4). all HEPPP funds are allocated to initiatives selected by a senior leadership group following an open call for proposals.

The partner universities were found to share common forms of documentation including access and participation plans, and specific HEPPP reporting templates and progress reports. However, universities also have key documents that are more specific to their context. It was also evident that HEPPP documentation exists within a broader student equity context, with universities also having in place other types of equity-related documentation including disability support plans, Indigenous support plans, and student equity strategies that incorporate, but are not limited to, HEPPP priorities.

Stakeholder interviews

Participant responses to the semi-structured interviews conducted with key stakeholders who were involved with HEPPP or HEPPP related initiatives in some manner at each university were shaped by the institutional context in which they were located and their role in the university. There was variation in the awareness levels of staff depending on their role at the university, with more senior staff having a clearer understanding of the broader equity context and the importance of evaluation of HEPPP funded initiatives informing future decision making than staff at the project level, though most stakeholders recognised the importance of evaluation and the need for the university to have strategies in place to build the capacity of staff engaged in HEPPP funded initiatives to undertake evaluation.

The stakeholder interviews also highlighted the benefits of sharing the findings from HEPPP funded initiatives both within the university and across the sector, with some stakeholders also suggesting that HEPPP reports should be published by the Commonwealth funding body, so that they could learn from the practices of other universities.

Stakeholders were consistent in the view that students should participate in the evaluation of HEPPP funded initiatives, though they had varying perspectives on the extent to which students should also be involved in higher level decision-making concerning the use of HEPPP funds. Despite these differences, the stakeholders confirmed the need for HEPPP programs to be student-centred, drawing on student voices in the framing, operation, and evaluation of initiatives.

All stakeholders were forthright in their view that HEPPP funding is critical to their work in improving access to higher education, and the participation, retention and success of students from LSES backgrounds. There was also consensus that funding cycles need to be longer than a year to enable adequate planning of initiatives that can have greater impact and be evaluated over longer periods, noting that the entrenched nature of disadvantage cannot be addressed through short-term initiatives.

Case studies

The case studies were drawn from the experience of each of the six universities based on their local knowledge of the institutional context, their relevant equity related documentation and the thematic analysis of stakeholder interviews conducted at their university. The case studies reflected diversity across universities and were therefore contextually defined. The partners drew on contextual knowledge of their university HEPPP processes, relevant university documentation and the stakeholder interviews conducted by them to provide a multi-dimensional perspective on the way in which each university prioritises, manages and evaluates HEPPP funded initiatives, and how they act on the findings from evaluation to plan future policy, initiatives and services.

The case studies provided a rich source of data, which combined with the analysis of institutional HEPPP/equity related documentation and stakeholder interviews, helped to inform the development of good practice guidelines.

Good practice guidelines

The collective evidence from the findings of this project have implications for the higher education sector about the types of strategies that can facilitate effective prioritisation, management and monitoring, and evaluation of HEPPP funded equity initiatives.

Good practice 1: Aligning HEPPP initiatives with institutional strategies and values

HEPPP funded initiatives are situated within a broader institutional equity context and are most effective when they align with institutional mission, strategy and culture (Bennett et al, 2015). As Thomas (2011) outlines, engaging a diverse student body requires an institutional strategy characterised by senior leadership, policy alignment, and a facilitating infrastructure, in addition to an enabling policy and funding context.

Good practice 2: Embedding evaluation into HEPPP prioritisation, management and monitoring strategy

Evaluation of equity related initiatives should consider the extent to which those initiatives are consistent with institutional strategic objectives in relation to equity and social inclusion (Naylor, 2015). The importance of evaluation in demonstrating the impact of equity initiatives and guiding future planning is well documented. An embedded approach to evaluation ensures that evaluation is considered during the initial planning of initiatives and that formative evaluation is conducted throughout the life of the initiative as well as summative evaluation at the end of the program.

Good practice 3: Providing institutional support to build capacity for evaluating HEPPP initiatives

Given the importance of an embedded evaluation approach to measuring the impact of equity initiatives "... institutions should be encouraged to invest in developing evaluation capacity and specific expertise within equity programs" (Bennett et al, 2015). Building the capacity for sustainable evaluation also requires policies and plans that embed evaluation into the institutional strategic direction, leadership support, adequate resources and opportunities.

Good practice 4: Focusing on program sustainability and longevity

The reasons for the persistent under-representation of people from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, those in regional and remote locations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people and people with disabilities are complex (Universities Australia, 2016). Therefore, effective equity initiatives aimed at redressing these inequalities need to be long-term and sustained (Gale & Parker, 2013). The need for sustainability and longevity of equity initiatives to improve access, participation and retention of under-represented groups in higher education is widely acknowledged across the sector. The sustainability and continuity of funding to support equity initiatives is also closely linked to the capacity of universities to demonstrate impact over time.

Good practice 5: Developing collaborative multi-partner initiatives that benefit students from LSES backgrounds and their communities across geographical regions

The partnerships component of HEPPP is designed to assist universities to develop activities in partnership with primary and secondary schools, VET providers, other universities, State and Territory governments, community groups, and other stakeholders to improve opportunities for people from LSES backgrounds to access and participate in higher education. The cases studies show the variety of ways in which universities are undertaking widening participation initiatives in collaboration with education providers in their communities, and highlight the importance of collaborative multi-partner initiatives that benefit students from LSES backgrounds and their communities across geographical regions.

Good practice 6: Disseminating and sharing project findings across the institution and wider sector

The findings from this project have highlighted HEPPP funded initiatives that have had an impact on improving outcomes for students from LSES backgrounds, both within the university and in the case of partnerships, across regions. However, it is also important that findings from such initiatives are shared and disseminated widely to build capacity within the university and across the sector.

Good practice 7: Promoting students' voices in the design of programs

Providing a student-centred approach, one that engages students as partners in their higher education communities, is increasingly recognised as one of the important issues facing the sector in the 21st century. The level of engagement might vary according to the initiative and the institutional context, but what is critical, is that students are respected as partners in the process and that students, particularly those who are underrepresented, are given the opportunity to engage in ways that can contribute to the design of HEPPP funded programs that make a difference.

Recommendations

The findings suggest strategies that higher education institutions can adopt to strengthen institutional processes for prioritising, managing and evaluating HEPPP funded initiatives. The findings also highlight some of the challenges that limit the capacity of universities to maximise the impact of the work they are undertaking to enable students from LSES backgrounds to access and succeed in higher education and ensure community structures and relationships that support this. The following recommendations suggest ways that the

Australian Government could respond to these challenges to improve the impact of HEPPP funding at the national level.

- Support the community structures and relationships that enable students from LSES backgrounds to access and succeed in higher education by ensuring continuity of funding over longer funding cycles.
- Continue HEPPP funding support for initiatives aimed at improving access for people from LSES backgrounds and underrepresented groups, and ongoing funding support for students already enrolled, who are financially disadvantaged.
- Establish and monitor the implementation of a national framework for evaluating equity initiatives to build the evidence base.
- Extend the scope of how the impact of HEPPP initiatives are assessed, recognising the unique differences across university contexts and the importance of mixed methods evaluation approaches.
- Promote student equity research through continuing support for the National Centre of Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE); continuing and extending National Priorities Pool (NPP) research grants; publishing NPP research reports on the NCSEHE website; disseminating and publicising NPP research reports and NCSEHE reports in mainstream media.
- Increase transparency and visibility of HEPPP by publishing institutional HEPPP reports on a clearinghouse web page, similar to the publication of institutional access agreements by the Office for Fair Access in the United Kingdom
- Increase accountability of institutions for HEPPP funded use by moving evaluation criteria from a project level approach to more strategic understandings of efficacy.

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1 Introduction

This National Priorities Pool funded project has involved a collaboration of six Australian universities, namely: Central Queensland University (CQUniversity); Federation University Australia; James Cook University; La Trobe University; The University of Newcastle; and The University of the Sunshine Coast. This final project report provides an overview of the project brief, project governance, the rationale for the project, research design, case studies prepared by each partner university, key findings, good practice guidelines informed by the findings and recommendations arising from the project.

1.1 Project brief

This project aimed to build the evidence concerning the equity strategies employed by Australian universities that aim to improve opportunities for accessing and achieving success in higher education for people from low socio-economic status (LSES) backgrounds. The project involved a comparative study of the approaches each partner university employs to guide the prioritisation, management and evaluation of initiatives aimed at increasing access, participation and outcomes for people from disadvantaged backgrounds, and how they act on the findings from evaluation to plan future equity-related policy, initiatives and services.

The project addressed two national priority areas: building the evidence base, and more effective programme implementation. The first of the priority areas was addressed by gathering the evidence to inform future policy development at each partner institution and providing evidence about how each institution's practice can facilitate policy development across the sector. The project sought information about areas and aspects of improvement in current practice and achievement, and investigated new practices that were developed from previously funded projects that the six partner universities used to prioritise, manage and monitor, evaluate and act on the evidence they collect. An in-depth approach to gathering data enabled a richer understanding of past approaches and responsive changes over time in equity practice at the universities. Although varied in form at each institution, such contextual information enables development of overarching principles to inform and guide future policy, planning and operationalising of services, which have been demonstrated to be effective across the sector for increasing the access, participation and success rates in higher education for students from LSES backgrounds.

The second priority area was addressed through a collaborative approach, which led to the development of institutional case studies to identify a set of good practice guidelines for applying effective approaches to improving outcomes for students from LSES backgrounds. The consultation and collaboration with senior policy makers and equity practitioners who were members of the reference group, along with the national forum with colleagues, has enabled further development and refinement of the good practice guidelines for achieving more effective equity related program implementation, which is relevant and transferrable to other higher education institutions across the sector.

1.2 Aims

The project responded to an identified need to build the evidence base by critically examining the different approaches to prioritising, managing and evaluating HEPPP funded initiatives employed by each partner university in practice. In doing so, the project aimed to:

- explore the processes currently undertaken by the partner universities to prioritise, select, manage and evaluate HEPPP funded equity initiatives, and identify how they act on the findings of evaluation to inform future planning;
- contribute to transformative change in the efficacy of approaches designed to improve the outcomes for students from LSES backgrounds;
- provide in-depth case studies of HEPPP strategies, within the context of the universities' broader approaches to equity, at each of the partner universities;
- contribute to the growing evidence base to inform future initiatives; and
- develop good practice guidelines to assist the wider higher education community in applying effective approaches in their own institutional contexts.

1.3 Research questions

The research questions that the project sought to address were:

- What are the processes undertaken by the partner universities to prioritise, select, manage, evaluate and act on the outcomes from HEPPP funded equity initiatives?
- How do the partner universities use evidence from evaluation of equity initiatives to inform decision-making concerning future policy, prioritisation of equity initiatives and models of service delivery aimed at increasing access, participation and outcomes for people from disadvantaged backgrounds?
- How can the approaches undertaken by partner universities be enhanced or improved in response to formative process evaluation and summative outcomes evaluation?
- How can the findings of the case studies contribute to the sector more widely to guide other higher education institutions in the future?

1.4 Project governance

The project team included academics with track records in research relating to equity, widening participation, transition pedagogy, student support and retention strategies and graduate outcomes, as well as key professional staff from participating universities who have responsibility for strategic planning and oversight of equity initiatives and operationalising initiatives aimed at improving the success of students from under-represented backgrounds. The project team members were:

- Professor Denise Wood, Professor of Learning, Equity, Access and Participation, Central Queensland University.
- Professor Marcia Devlin, Deputy Vice Chancellor (Learning and Quality), Federation University Australia.
- Professor Angela Hill, Dean of Learning, Teaching and Student Engagement Directorate, James Cook University.
- Dr Andrew Harvey, Director, Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research, La Trobe University.

- Dr Anna Bennett, Head of Research Engagement and Development, English Language and Foundation Studies Centre (ELFSC), The University of Newcastle.
- Professor Geoff Whitty, Global Innovation Chair for Equity in Higher Education, The University of Newcastle.
- Professor Karen Nelson, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Students), The University of the Sunshine Coast.

The partner universities were as follows:

Central Queensland University is a comprehensive regional-based university and Queensland's first dual sector university, providing a comprehensive approach to education, training, research and engagement in the Central Queensland region and beyond. The University has 25 campuses and locations across Australia and provides a diverse range of training and education programs and courses to more than 30,000 students studying qualifications from certificate to post-graduate level. Of these students, 14,847 are enrolled in domestic undergraduate courses, 50% of whom are from LSES backgrounds and 62% from regional and remote locations. Central Queensland University adopted the Critical Interventions Framework to the prioritisation and selection of equity-related program initiatives in 2015, and has been applying this framework to the management and monitoring of these initiatives, evaluation and drawing on the evidence to make recommendations to senior managers concerning future equity-related policy and decision-making concerning ongoing student support services.

Federation University Australia is Australia's newest university. Federation University was created by bringing together the University of Ballarat and the Monash University Gippsland Campus. It is the third oldest site of higher learning in Australia and offers higher education, TAFE and secondary schooling. Federation University has approximately 23,000 international and domestic students, of whom approximately 25% of commencing domestic students are from LSES backgrounds. Federation University Australia has adopted a student retention and success plan, which draws on reliable and valid data and evidence to inform the institutional priorities aimed at improving student retention and success.

James Cook University is committed to enhancing students' access, participation and success through a 'whole-of-institution' approach to widening participation, learning, teaching and the student experience, including appropriate facilities and access to technologies. Since 2015 JCU has enacted a whole-of-institution life-cycle approach to student equity, with well-articulated responsibility across a four-domain framework across the student life cycle with lead indicators for each area. Broad strategies are proposed within each domain. The framework draws on work by Naylor et al. (2013) and is informed by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's (2014) articulation of equity performance indicators. Informed by increasingly sophisticated data available from business intelligence systems and learning analytics, JCU utilises an evidenced-based approach to strategies, activities, policies and practices. The plan has a particular focus on undergraduate students, but includes strategies to promote pathways to Higher Degree by Research (HDR) opportunities for targeted equity groups. The plan is supported by varying funding sources, including core funds, Indigenous Support Funding, strategic initiatives and other grants. Responsibility for enhancing access and participation is dispersed across the University, with the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Centre, the Directorate of Future Students and International, and the

Directorate of Learning, Teaching and Student Engagement each having specific responsibilities.

La Trobe University is committed to inclusive excellence, ensuring that diversity and equity inform and strengthen quality in teaching and learning. The university remains in the top two Victorian universities for both LSES background and regional enrolments. La Trobe's commitment to regional Victoria is highlighted by its operation of four regional campuses across northern Victoria, including Shepparton, Mildura, Bendigo and Albury-Wodonga. The University evaluates HEPP initiatives according to the Commonwealth parameters and the University's own strategic plan. Within this framework, the Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research provides both quantitative and qualitative evaluation of major projects. A Senior Data Analyst leads investigation of institutional data around offers, acceptances and enrolments (including 'summer melt' and secondary school data); student retention; and graduate outcomes, as they relate to HEPPP initiatives. Other research officers in the Unit have expertise in qualitative research, enabling surveys, interviews and focus groups to inform evaluation. HEPPP is managed through the office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic).

The University of Newcastle is a national leader in equity of access to higher education with a successful history of providing a range of pathways for entry into higher education and supporting students from diverse backgrounds to achieve a university education. The University is the largest provider of enabling programs in Australia, with almost 13% of the country's Commonwealth-funded enabling students studying at Newcastle. In addition, 24% of its students come from a low socio-economic background, a figure that is well above the sector average of 15%. The University of Newcastle utilises several approaches in evidence-based evaluation of HEPPP funded equity initiatives. Multiple factors are taken in to consideration in the evaluation including quantitative analysis of access, retention, attrition, success, completion data; analysis of the demographics of the region and consideration of community views on priorities; stakeholder feedback (such as student experience surveys, commencing student surveys and focus groups); evaluation data and emerging research in widening participation. The University has also utilised the *Critical Interventions Framework* (2013) and *Equity Initiatives Framework* (2015) to classify and inform equity practices, programs and strategies.

The University of the Sunshine Coast is a unique and successful regional institution, established on a greenfield site at Sippy Downs 20 years ago to foster participation in higher education by the Sunshine Coast community. The University now has approximately 12,000 students, of which: 48% are first in family, 17% are from LSES backgrounds, 23% regional and remote and 2.2% are Indigenous, and 64% are women. USC is focused on the serving the region between Brisbane and the Fraser Coast and it has campuses at South Bank in Brisbane, Gympie and Hervey Bay with additional teaching locations throughout its region. The University achieved a 5-star teaching rating in 2007 and has held this rating in the ensuing period. As the University has matured, research activities and postgraduate student numbers have increased as USC seeks to reach its strategic aspiration to be a comprehensive (teaching and research) university of 20,000 students by 2020. USC will continue to expand, with new programs and infrastructure on its current campuses. A new full-service campus (equal in size to Sippy Downs) is planned to open in 2020 in the north Brisbane suburb of Petrie. This expansion is planned to meet the needs of local communities and industry. Since its establishment 20 years ago, the higher education participation rates

in the Sunshine Coast council area have risen by 50%, well above those of the surrounding council areas, and have begun to rise in the Gympie area, although currently these rates are still well below national and metropolitan participation rates.

1.5 Reference Group

A reference group was established to provide oversight of the project and to ensure the project outcomes are relevant and applicable to the broader context. Members included:

- Dr Laura-Anne Bull, Pro Vice-Chancellor: Student Engagement & Equity, University of South Australia;
- Mary Kelly, Equity Director, Queensland University of Technology;
- Professor Sally Kift, Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Academic, James Cook University;
- Dr Ryan Naylor, Core First Year Coordinator for health sciences, La Trobe University (formerly Lecturer in Higher Education at the Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne, and Visiting Fellow at the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education at Curtin University);
- Professor Ron Oliver, Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Teaching, Learning and International, Edith Cowan University;
- Professor Sue Trinidad, Director and Program Leader of the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education;
- Professor Hilary Winchester, Former Provost, Central Queensland University; and
- Dr Nadine Zacharias, Equity Senior Research Fellow, Deakin University

2 Project Rationale

The need for rigorous approaches to evaluating equity-related initiatives has long been recognised. The Higher Education Performance Indicators Research Group (Martin, 1994) responding to this need developed data and indicators to measure progress against objectives. The Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008) also highlighted the need for equity performance measures, recommending that Australia increase the number of highly skilled people by increasing the opportunities for those under-represented within the system to participate in higher education (p. xi). The recommendations from this report subsequently led to a series of reforms initiated by the Commonwealth Government in 2009 (Transforming Australia's Higher Education System, 2009) to meet these equity performance targets including: increasing the number of 25-34 year olds with a qualification of Bachelor level or higher to 40% by 2025 and increasing the number of enrolments of people from LSES backgrounds to 20% by 2020.

These reforms were accompanied by measures designed to support these participation targets, including an injection of funds to promote equality of opportunity in higher education, reforms to student income support to assist the access and retention of students from LSES backgrounds, funding support for a new partnerships program to link universities with LSES schools and vocational education and training providers with the view to enabling access to, and completion of, higher education, and additional funding provided to universities as a financial incentive to expand their enrolment of students from LSES backgrounds, and to fund the intensive support needed to improve their completion and retention rates (Transforming Australia's Higher Education System, 2009, pp 13-14). The Higher Education Support Act 2003 - Other Grants Guidelines (Education) (Australian Government, 2012) outlines the funding mechanisms subsequently introduced to “...assist with overcoming barriers to access and participation by domestic undergraduate students in higher education, in particular, those students who are Indigenous, who come from a low-SES background, or who have a disability” (Sect 1.5.1), including the Indigenous Support Program (Sect. 1.15-1.35.10), the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) (Sect 1.40-1.85.25) and the Higher Education Disability Support Program (Sect. - 1.110.10.10).

The importance of providing a framework that can guide institutions in implementing and evaluating such equity initiatives is self-evident. The higher education sector has made significant advances in establishing equity frameworks (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2014; Bennett et al, 2015; James et al, 2008; Naylor, Baik and James, 2013; Pitman & Koshy, 2014) and in developing strategies aimed at improving the access, participation and success of students from low SES backgrounds (Devlin, 2009, 2010; Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010; Krause & Coates, 2008; Lobo, 2012; Nelson et al, 2012). One response to this need was the development of the *Critical Interventions Framework* (Part 1) (Naylor, Baik and James, 2013). Part 2 of that project, *The Equity Initiatives Framework* (EIF) (Bennett et al., 2015), was undertaken by The Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE) at the University of Newcastle in collaboration with the University of Melbourne and La Trobe University. The CEHEE led project involved a review of the literature to identify programs that demonstrated impact through quantitative and qualitative forms of evidence, and a national online survey of equity initiatives. A major deliverable from that project has

been the development of the EIF, which provides a guide for universities in planning, monitoring and evaluating equity programs (Bennett et al, 2015).

Another approach, the draft framework for measuring equity performance in Australian higher education (Pitman & Koshy, 2014), proposes a potential set of indicators and the process used to develop them, reflecting the four key phases in the life cycle of students (pre-entry; offers, acceptances, and enrolment; experience during university; post-graduate outcomes) and aligned with the key elements of the policies and programs to improve equity. This framework includes a mixture of inputs, outputs and outcomes.

Despite these initiatives at the national level including evaluation studies showing the impact of collaborative partnership programs funded from 2011-2014 such as the Queensland Widening Participation Consortium, the Victorian Universities Consortium's LEAP program and the Sydney Basin Universities Consortium's Bridges to Higher Education program, as well as reviews conducted by individual universities in measuring equity performance and the efficacy of particular equity initiatives, there have been few studies that compare the strategies employed by different higher education institutions to prioritise, select, manage, evaluate and act on the findings in practice. This project aimed to address that gap through a comparative study of the HEPPP funded equity initiatives employed by six Australian higher education institutions. This strategy involved analysis of relevant university documentation, institutional case studies drawn from the experience of each of the six partner institutions and thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with a range of university stakeholders across the partner universities including senior managers, HEPPP coordinators and project leaders, academic staff and staff involved in the provision of student support services.

This report documents the findings from the research, outlines good practice guidelines informed by these findings and makes recommendations for the Commonwealth based on the outcomes of the study. The report is timely as the sector witnesses continuing reductions in the level of HEPPP funding, amid increasing concern about the continuity of funding and considerable discussion about the challenges in demonstrating impact given the lack of national guidelines on appropriate evaluation approaches and the difficulty in measuring impact of HEPPP funded initiatives that have a one year funding cycle.

3 Project Approach

The project employed a multimethod qualitative approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) involving four key stages. The first stage involved preliminary project work including gaining ethics approval, appointing project staff, recruiting participants and refining the methodology. The second and third stages aligned with the two priority areas: building the evidence base and developing approaches and strategies that can lead to more effective programme implementation. The final stage involved project finalisation including completion of data analysis, finalising the case studies and good practice guidelines, and final reporting.

The logic model (Figure 1) adopted for the study draws on recognised change theories (Funnell & Rogers, 2011) and is an approach that has been shown to be effective in examining how interventions (including policies, initiatives and services) contribute to results that produce the intended or actual impacts on outcomes.

Comparative study of the equity strategies employed by Australian universities logic model

| Overarching Goal: Build the evidence through a comparative study of the equity strategies employed by Australian universities that are aimed at improving opportunities and the success in higher education by people from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds. | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| PRIORITIES | INPUTS | OUTPUTS | | OUTCOMES | | IMPACT Long Term Accomplished in 7-10 years |
| | | Strategies | Participation | Short Term Accomplished in 1-3 years | Medium Term Accomplished in 4-6 years | |
| Addresses the need for rigorous approaches to measuring the efficacy of equity related initiatives by examining the different approaches in practice | Grant funding Completed literature review of existing frameworks. Evidence drawn from institutional evaluation data and interviews & focus groups with university stakeholders. | Comparative evaluation PAR approach to developing effective approaches. Development of good-practice guide. | Senior managers responsible for policy and decision making concerning equity-related programs. Supervisors and staff delivering equity related initiatives. | Improved capacity of partner institutions and higher education institutions more broadly to employ effective approaches to prioritising, managing, evaluating and acting on findings to inform policy and future models of service delivery. | Adoption of improved approaches to prioritising, managing, evaluating and acting on the evidence to inform future initiatives and operationalising equity-related services across sector. Adoption of evidence-based approaches to policy development and service delivery. | Sector wide uptake of approaches showing to be effective in building the evidence, acting on the evidence and using the evidence to guide future policy, decision making and equity related programs and service delivery |
| LOGIC ASSUMPTIONS | | | | EXTERNAL FACTORS | | |
| Rigorous evaluation is required to guide institutions in the development of equity-related policies and adopting an evidence-based approach to improving outcomes. Previous research explores a variety of approaches adopted by higher education, but does not provide evidence of the efficacy of the approaches applied in practice. | | | | Widening participation agenda. Need for public accountability of equity-related initiatives. Need for continuous improvement of equity-related programs. | | |
| EVALUATION FOCUS - OUTCOMES | | | | EVALUATION FOCUS - IMPACT | | |
| Documented strategies employed by universities to prioritise, manage, evaluate, disseminate and act on the findings from evaluation to inform future practice. Improved capacity of institutions and the sector to apply different strategies in practice. | | | | Building the evidence about different approaches in different higher education contexts. Adoption by the wider sector of evidence-based approaches to prioritising, managing, evaluating and acting on the evidence to inform future policy, equity-related programs and ongoing services. | | |

Figure 1: Logic Model applied in the comparative study of the equity strategies employed by Australian universities (adapted from the Colorado Local Public Health and Environmental Resources, Office for Planning, Partnerships and Improvement logic model template)

3.1 Preliminary preparation

This first milestone focused on the preliminary activities required to provide a strong foundation for the research. These activities included:

- identifying key stakeholders to be interviewed at each institution
- determining the recruitment protocol
- framing the interview questions to act as prompts during the semi-structured interviews

- developing the case study guidelines
- gaining human research ethics approval
- recruiting project staff

During this preliminary stage of the project, the partner universities prepared a National Ethics Application Form (NEAF), which was subsequently approved by the ethics committees of each partner university (see Appendix A). The ethics application described the research methodology, recruitment methods and protocol for ensuring the voluntary participation via a recruitment letter and signed consent form outlining stakeholders' right to withdraw at any time and the approach to ensuring their anonymity and the confidentiality of the data. The ethics application included the relevant associated documentation, including recruitment letter (Appendix 2), consent form (Appendix 3) and interview questions (Appendix 4).

3.2 Building the evidence base

The second stage of the research involved building the evidence base through studying the different approaches employed by each partner institution in prioritising, managing and monitoring, evaluating and acting on evidence, and to identify the common key findings about approaches and overarching principles to inform future policy and decision making concerning equity related initiatives. The three milestones involved in this stage of the research involved:

- identifying the strategies employed by each partner institution;
- building the evidence base through an explication of the approaches adopted by each partner institution; and
- interim progress report.

Building on the evidence gained from previous national research conducted in this area, this stage involved identification of the strategies employed by each partner institution to prioritise, manage and monitor, evaluate and act on the evidence to inform future policy and decision-making.

The evaluation involved: 1) mapping of each university's relevant documentation to the prioritisation, management, evaluation and implementation processes they undertake in relation to HEPPP funded initiatives; 2) thematic analysis of the stakeholder interviews across the six partner universities; and 3) analysis of case studies prepared by each partner university drawing on their knowledge of processes undertaken within their university, their relevant documentation and analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with key stakeholders from their university. These three sources of data were collected to provide triangulation of the data to "...improve the accuracy of [the team's] judgments by collecting different kinds of data bearing on the same phenomenon" (Jick, 1979, p. 602).

3.2.1 Mapping of relevant university documentation

Each partner university provided relevant HEPPP/equity documents to the CQUniversity Project Team. Examples of relevant documentation included university access and participation plans, HEPPP guidelines, HEPPP final reports, evaluation guidelines, and for those universities that provide open invitations to apply for internal HEPPP funded initiatives, guidelines for applicants. These documents were aligned to the strategies

undertaken to prioritise and select, manage and evaluate HEPPP funded initiatives, and the strategies undertaken by universities to act on the findings of evaluations. The mapping documentation was then provided to each partner university for further discussion and clarification to enable deeper understanding of the content of documents provided.

3.2.2 Stakeholder interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders who were involved with HEPPP or HEPPP related initiatives in some manner at each university. The stakeholders included senior managers responsible for governance, prioritising, strategising, evaluating and operationalising HEPPP programs, HEPPP coordinators overseeing the management of HEPPP funded initiatives, those responsible for delivery of HEPPP initiatives, and other key stakeholders including faculty and university student support staff. The target number of interviews for each university was 12-15, however, there was some variation between partners in the number of interviews conducted depending on the availability of key stakeholders and their willingness to participate in the project. Because of the way in which universities de-identified the data, it was not possible to determine the specific roles of participants, however, each university did recruit a mix of senior executives, HEPPP managers and staff leading HEPPP initiatives. Table 7 shows the number of interviews conducted at each of the partner universities.

Table 1: Interviews conducted at each university

| UNIVERSITY PARTNERS | INTERVIEWS |
|----------------------------------|------------|
| CQUniversity | 11 |
| Federation University Australia | 10 |
| James Cook University | 11 |
| La Trobe University | 11 |
| University of Newcastle | 20 |
| University of the Sunshine Coast | 13 |

The interviews were designed to gather the views of key stakeholders about their understanding of HEPPP, how their university prioritises the allocation of HEPPP funding for equity initiatives, their experience of how the university manages and evaluates HEPPP funded initiatives, and how the university acts on the findings of evaluations to guide future decision making. In addition, stakeholders were asked about the extent to which they perceived that students were involved in decision making concerning HEPPP initiatives. Finally, stakeholders were asked to share their views on the role that HEPPP plays in supporting students from LSES backgrounds and the implications that might arise should HEPPP funding be reduced or no longer available in the future.

The analysis of qualitative data from the stakeholder interviews involved thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews using a grounded inductive approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The grounded, inductive analysis involved developing the categories of interpretation from the textual material (in this case the transcripts) rather than from pre-defined categories derived from pre-existing hypotheses (ie deductive content analysis). The inductive analysis followed a reductive process (Mayring, 2000) allowing for the themes to develop and

emerge from the voices of those who are interviewed. Following Mayring (2000), the inductive approach employed in this study is depicted in Figure 2.

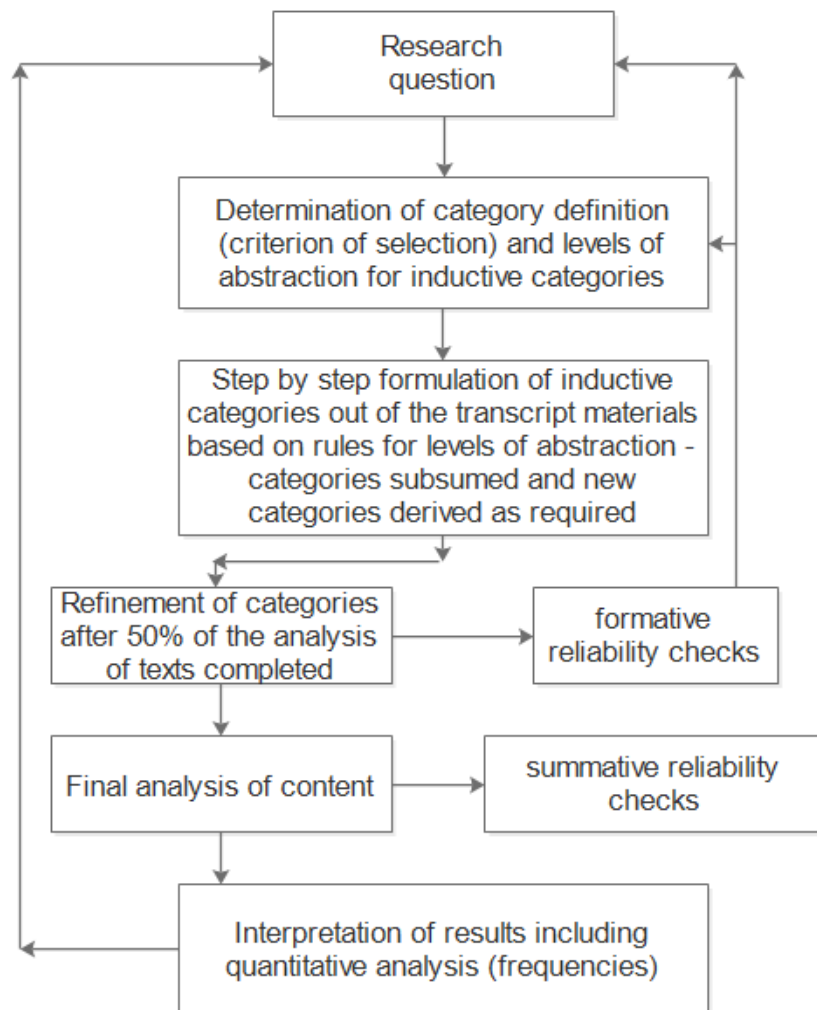


Figure 2: Inductive Analysis Approach (adapted from Mayring, 2000)

3.2.3 Analysis of university case studies

Case studies provided another important source of evidence that helped to provide an analysis of the context and processes (Hartley, 2004) undertaken at each university to prioritise and select, manage and evaluate HEPPP initiatives and to act on the findings of the evaluations of HEPPP initiatives. The case studies were drawn from the experience of each of the six partner universities and following the approach recommended by Yin (2003) involved an investigation of the phenomenon within the institutional context, drawing on multiple sources of evidence, with data converging in “a triangulating fashion” (p. 15).

The approach taken was for each partner to prepare a case study based on their local knowledge of the institutional context, their relevant equity related documentation and the thematic analysis of stakeholder interviews conducted at their university. Case study guidelines were developed (Appendix 5), however, due to relative diversity across programs,

it was also important that approaches to collecting data were contextually defined. Thus, as expected, there is some variation in the way in which the case studies are written up, even though all case studies adopted a similar structure to that outlined in the case study guidelines.

3.3 Strategies that contribute to more effective programme implementation

There were two major milestones associated with this stage of the project: 1) collaborative discussion of the findings by project team members; and 2) drafting of the good practice guidelines.

3.4 Finalisation of the project

The final stages of the project involved three milestones: 1) consultation with the wider higher education sector via a national forum (see Appendix 6 and Appendix 7); 2) refining the good practice guidelines taking into account the feedback from participants at the forum (see Appendix 8); and 3) final reporting.

4 Findings

The following sections document the key findings from building the evidence base regarding the different approaches employed by each partner institution to prioritise, manage and monitor, evaluate and act on the evidence to inform future policy and decision making concerning equity related initiatives.

4.1 Mapping of relevant university documentation

Each university provided access to their relevant HEPPP/equity documents for analysis. An analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between policy documents and how these documents inform selection and prioritisation of HEPPP funded initiatives, management of initiatives and evaluation and how the evaluation informs future policy undertaken. The preliminary analysis was then provided to each university, with collaborative discussions enabling deeper understanding of the content of documents provided.

It is evident from the documentation provided by partners that there are four typical approaches to the allocation of HEPPP funds: 1). A senior executive leadership group determines the funding of projects that it regards are likely to have the greatest impact on improving equity outcomes for the university; or 2). a hybrid approach in which senior leaders quarantine some funds for institution wide projects, with the remainder of the funds being allocated to projects selected following an open call for proposals; 3). a research centre advises a senior leadership group about the allocation of funds; or 4). all HEPPP funds are allocated to projects selected by a senior leadership group following an open call for proposals.

The partner universities were found to share common forms of documentation including access and participation plans, and specific HEPPP reporting templates and progress reports. However, universities also have key documents that are more specific to their context. For example, universities that invite staff to submit internal expressions of interest for HEPPP related projects might have documentation providing guidelines for applying for HEPPP funding, specified criteria by which expressions of interest will be assessed and templates/application forms. For each partner university, HEPPP documentation exists within a broader student equity landscape. For example, universities typically have disability support plans, Indigenous support plans, and student equity strategies that incorporate, but are not limited to, HEPPP priorities.

4.1.1 Central Queensland University (CQU)

Analysis of Central Queensland University documentation shows alignment across prioritisation and selection headings, with an emphasis on management of initiatives and an embedded evaluation requirement as articulated in the *CQUniversity Project Submission Guidelines*, *HEPPP Funding Application* and *Work and Finance Plan*. The *Access and Participation Plan* includes expectations for research driven evaluations and the expectation of identifying actions from findings for future planning. The *Institutional Evaluation* provides an overall evaluation of HEPPP funded initiatives and recommendations for future planning.

4.1.2 Federation University Australia (FUA)

The structure of the Federation University Australia documentation framework, with links to other plans and processes embedded in the *HEPPP Participation Funding Grant Workflow Cycle 2015-2017* document, provides a useful 'at a glance' example of the overall picture of HEPPP/equity process. Content analysis of the FUA documentation reveals an embedded evaluation approach with the use of evidence informing future planning.

4.1.3 La Trobe University (LTU)

The analysis of documents at La Trobe shows an embedded approach to evaluation and consideration of how projects can be sustained in the longer term. The *HEPPP Funding Allocation and Projections* documents help guide the prioritisation and selection of initiatives, and the university has effective management processes in place to ensure initiatives are monitored and evaluated. These documents are also critical to ensuring that evaluation evidence is used to guide the allocation of funding for future equity related initiatives.

4.1.4 James Cook University (JCU)

The James Cook University *Access and Participation Plan* is comprehensive, related to student life cycle, includes pertinent demographic data and connects to the university's strategic plan and other relevant university documentation. The *HEPPP Planning Process* documentation provides a brief, explanatory overview of the HEPPP planning process outlining the ways in which the Vice-Chancellor's Advisory Committee reviews and endorses fund distribution annually. While much of the JCU HEPPP fund is used for sustained long term initiatives (outreach, scholarships, student support services), the documentation suggests an embedded evaluation approach with the findings from evaluation informing future equity related decision making.

4.1.5 University of Newcastle (UON)

Analysis of HEPPP/Equity related documents from the University of Newcastle show clear documentation guiding selection and prioritisation, management and evaluation of equity initiatives. For example, the *University of Newcastle's Access & Participation Plan* sets out the equity priorities for UON, the broad strategies for achieving these priorities and notes that the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE) has carriage of the qualitative and quantitative data analysis and evaluation agenda and measures short and long term impact of equity strategies.

4.1.6 University of the Sunshine Coast (USC)

Analysis of HEPPP/Equity related documents from USC show a comprehensive approach to prioritisation and selection of initiatives, management, evaluation and future planning. The *Pathways Working Party – Planning Summary* outlines the university's approach to prioritising, selecting and managing engagement (outreach/partnership) activities. The HEPPP Funding Internal Request documentation provides guidelines for selection and management of HEPPP initiatives and with an embedded expectation that funded initiatives are evaluated. Individual Project reports (e.g. Smart Steps Survey, Creative Writing Excellent Program) provide evaluation examples and how findings from evaluation guide future planning.

4.2 Stakeholder Interviews

Analysis of stakeholder interviews needs to be understood within the context of the university at which the interview was conducted as the data show that each university has a distinct approach to how HEPPP funding is allocated, managed, and evaluated, and how evaluation outcomes are used to inform future decision making concerning equity initiatives at the university.

4.2.1 What is your understanding of the Higher Education Participation & Program (HEPPP) scheme?

All stakeholders interviewed appeared to have a clear understanding of the purpose of HEPPP funding, the most common response being that HEPPP is designed to provide opportunities and support for students from low SES backgrounds in higher education. For example, as one stakeholder commented:

I understand that it's a government program that's aimed at supporting students from equity backgrounds, a range of backgrounds, to not only raise aspirations and increase participation, but to also increase student success for those key equity areas. (U1)

A U4 stakeholder elaborated further:

My understanding of the scheme is that it's a federally funded scheme for wider participation across the country in tertiary pathways for students from low socioeconomic, Indigenous backgrounds, students from rural and remote or regional and remote, students with disabilities and women in non-traditional fields. (U4)

Some stakeholders elaborated on their responses providing some context about the broader policy environment, suggesting:

So, my understanding is that HEPPP is a direct outcome of the Bradley Review, and that report and the two ambitious targets that were set, for improved participation in tertiary education of the students from low SES backgrounds, and to also increase the number of Australians with a tertiary qualification, in order to be able to participate in the new knowledge economy. (U1)

Other stakeholders differentiated between the participation and partnerships component, for example, as one U3 stakeholder explained:

I understand the current HEPPP program is there's a partnership component which is more the outreach side of work that we do within schools and community. Then we've got the participation component which is more around retention. But both parts of HEPPP are focused on low SES target groups. But within that obviously picking up other equity groups such as indigenous and disability as well. (U3)

Similarly, a U5 stakeholder suggested that HEPPP is a:

Government funding to help reach the 20% low SES target. There's confusion around whether it's the original "HEPPP" or the modified "HEPP" which was

planned but not legislated. There's been 2 streams: The grant allocation based on low-SES numbers; Competitive grants for collaboration. It's about opportunity raising and engagement with key groups. (U5)

And a U6 stakeholder noted:

HEPPP stands for Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program, although there's been a recent time where there was a 'p' removed, but it seems to be back though. I guess it emerged post-Bradley review. One of the recommendations out of the Bradley review was supporting successful participation for, I guess, the equity groups recognised by the federal government into higher education... and the partnerships component was about connections outside of university. (U6)

As evident from the preceding quotations, although some stakeholders had a more detailed understanding of HEPPP, all those interviewed were clear that HEPPP is government funded and designed to support students from LSES backgrounds.

4.2.2 Thinking about HEPPP initiatives at [your university], what processes are in place to prioritise and select the initiatives which will get HEPPP funding?

All stakeholders interviewed understood that decisions regarding the allocation of HEPPP funding need to be aligned with HEPPP guidelines and many stakeholders also recognised the importance of ensuring that the prioritisation and selection of initiatives with institutional priorities. As noted in the preceding section discussing the analysis of university documentation, all six partner universities have documentation in place that shows alignment between the prioritisation and allocation of HEPPP initiatives, particularly in relation to HEPPP guidelines, university access and participation plans and other strategic planning documents. However, given the contextual differences, each university differs in their approach to the prioritisation and selection of HEPPP funded initiatives. These contextual differences are reflected in stakeholder responses to this question

For example, stakeholders who were employed at universities that take a strategic, centralised approach to the prioritisation of HEPPP funded initiatives demonstrated an understanding of the university's approach observing that:

...we've enacted a whole-of-institution, evidence-based, research-informed approach to the distribution of HEPPP funds endorsed by the Vice Chancellor's [committee name] annually. (U4)

Similarly, another stakeholder explained

...we moved to a more proactive strategic approach to how we prioritised or selected the projects and it was based on some quite robust data analysis from all courses at [institution name], to find out which courses had highly diverse demographic groups that we know are normally those equity groups that we're trying to work with, whether it's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students with disabilities, low SDS. So we went to a more strategic approach to try to identify courses, rather than individual staff members projects that they wanted to focus on, as the driver, for where we placed our particular focus. And I

think in the first year we selected 18 courses based on that data analysis that we focussed our particular energies on, and that has grown over the last couple of years. (U4)

Stakeholders employed at universities where a central unit has responsibility for the prioritisation of the way in which HEPPP funds are allocated had varying levels of understanding about the processes depending on their position in the university. For example, senior executives were clear that having a central unit:

... has enabled a deeper reflective mechanism around those kinds of questions and looking into the future and making sure that what we invest in is actually going to be valuable for the communities that we're working with... you need a very rigorous very carefully thought through methodology to make those kinds of decisions. We're at a point know [sic] where we're putting that in, you know, we're going through a review period and stopping and thinking about the portfolio programs that we have and what's working and what's not working and layering. (U6)

Another senior executive stakeholder noted a change over time to the way the university prioritises and allocates HEPPP funding, observing that:

When I arrived, which I can really only speak to, when I arrived the allocation which would have been made for 2012 was quite ad hoc. So money was basically going to whatever people thought was a good idea, and there wasn't a framework for allocation of the funds at all. So there's a framework now in place, four key areas, which guide the allocation of the funding. (U6)

Another stakeholder emphasised the alignment between decisions concerning the prioritisation of HEPPP allocation and institutional priorities noting:

Colleges and Administrative Divisions are requested to prepare proposals consistent with University plans which include objectives to: increase the proportion of domestic undergraduate students from low SES backgrounds to 20%; increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to 250; and increase student retention and student success in all Fields of Education Initiatives designed to address student retention are particularly encouraged." If someone hadn't dealt with the HEPPP process before, they may find information about the central unit which manages the HEPPP funding on the website and contact them. If so, the central unit would advise the person enquiring to contact the relevant person in their College regarding HEPPP requests. (U5)

Similarly, a stakeholder from another university observed:

So, we have a [name] Working Party. But more significantly than that, I think for the first time [name] this year has a strategy which is agreed to by the [Senior Manager] and which has been developed in consultation with all the key stakeholders and so that prioritises where the focus is going to be. In the past it's been a bit of a scramble for money, if you like, and so there's not always been a theme or strategic direction in the funding. But now, I think, the creation, firstly of the strategy and secondly of the (name) Working Group, has bought HEPPP into a more legitimate space, I think. (U3)

Stakeholders from universities that provide the opportunity to bid for HEPPP funded initiatives were generally clear about their institution's guidelines for applying for HEPPP funding. As noted in the section discussing the findings from analysis of university documentation, most of these partner universities also have documentation guiding processes for applying for HEPPP funded initiatives. For example, CQUniversity's *2015-2017 Project Submission Guidelines & HEPPP Project Application Form*; FUA's *HEPPP Funding Guidelines & Funding Application*; and USC's *HEPPP Funding Internal Request & Agreement*. Stakeholders interviewed at these universities were able to articulate the processes in place for prioritising and allocation of HEPPP funding. As one senior executive stakeholder commented:

Most people have to put in applications like others do for the funding left but they aren't part of a competitive process, they are given funds off the top; so that's the first stage after we know how much money we've got. But then we put out a call for bids for the remaining funds and we have a template that we have developed that is aligned with the criteria of the HEPPP funds, so the applicants have to indicate which low SES students it will target, the money will target, or the project, or the initiative of the activity, whatever it is they're doing, how they will address the needs of the students in what ways, how they'll know that what they've done has worked, etcetera, and they put in a budget. Those bids will come in to a HEPPP advisory panel which advises me on how to give out these funds, and that group determines whether or not first of all the applications meet the criteria ... and then we allocate on that ranking, we allocate the funding. (U2)

Although most stakeholders were clear about the selection processes, some staff at project level were less aware of high level processes. As one stakeholder commented:

I really have no idea about this because I just do my one thing. I'm not across all the projects that we have nor how they're selected. (U2)

Similarly, a project officer at another university stated:

No, I'm not really certain on that. I think some time ago that I attended the first meetings where those kinds of projects were all shared and the initial meeting where we all talked about goals. I mean, it's obvious to me that there's a very wide spread of projects so there's a wide spread of – a wide spread of projects that focus on the five different target groups. But as to how those are decided, I'm not really certain of that. I mean, obviously the application and those sorts of things but what the priority is for which target group, I don't really know. (U1)

Variation in awareness levels among staff reflects the reality that HEPPP is a large program at many of the partner universities, several of whom receive over \$5m in annual HEPPP funding and employ more than 4,000 staff. The interviews confirmed that scaffolded communication approaches are usually developed and required, but that most participants were clear about the broad institutional and governmental guidelines and priorities.

4.2.3 From your perspective how are HEPPP programs coordinated or managed at [your university]?

The responses to this question were very much context sensitive depending on the approach taken by the university to the prioritisation, management and evaluation of HEPPP funded initiatives. For example, at universities where there is a more centralised approach to management of initiatives, stakeholders in leadership positions generally understood the process. As one executive stakeholder described:

Ultimately there's a team of people who are supported by somebody who has responsibility at the moment for reviewing that process and providing some leadership around that process who then feeds back to our associate director who's been a long-standing coordinator of equity initiatives at [name of university] so has an extensive knowledge of the practice field. Then that gets fed back to myself and to my co-director who has the kind of research overview and is able then to feed into that side of the reflections about how it should be managed and how the resources should be allocated and how effective the programs are and how we want refine [sic] the programs and those kinds of questions as well. I think that what characterises it is very much a collaborative approach so a participatory approach in which, like I said, the evaluation mechanisms that we're forming will help everybody involved with those programs make those assessments. (U6)

A stakeholder who works in a central unit of another university also had a clear understanding of the processes for managing and coordinating HEPPP funded initiatives noting:

The HEPPP Coordinator is situated within the Unit and is responsible for the day-to-day coordination of HEPPP, reports to the Director of the Unit and [that] the Unit fits within the portfolio of the Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor. The HEPPP Coordinator role includes: liaising with internal and external project partners about budgets, expenditure, and progress against objectives; liaising with the University's Finance Division regarding the grant's revenue and expenditure, including the monitoring of monthly financial reports; preparing and submitting compliance reports and financial acquittal reports to the Commonwealth Government's Department of Education and Training; preparing and submitting proposals for competitive HEPPP funding e.g. the National Priorities Pool; organising collaboration agreements or other types of research contracts. (U5)

Some stakeholders outside the unit were less clear about the processes. One stakeholder commented that they were not familiar with the process, suggesting that it "Would be useful to get groups of people who are involved in HEPPP programs together to discuss what they're doing so they can all see what the others are doing." (U5)

At those universities where HEPPP initiatives are decentralised (for example individual projects led by project leaders) there is greater autonomy for the management of the project, with overall support provided by a HEPPP coordinator or middle manager. For example, as one stakeholder explained:

I've got the overall executive responsibility for the funds. I'm responsible for reporting to the Vice Chancellor that we've received HEPPP funding, that we've allocated it appropriately and according to the guidelines, and that we've spent what we were supposed to spend. That's my responsibility. Then, obviously, each of the projects has a project leader, and their responsibility then is to manage the project in terms of making sure that they deliver what they say they were going to deliver, that they get outcomes that are measurable, that they report those outcomes, that they manage their budget appropriately, and they are provided with guidance and support from both the Project Manager and also from the research intervention. (U1)

Universities that allow a degree of autonomy in the management of projects often still have a centralised approach to monitoring those projects to ensure that they meet their milestones within budget and are evaluated. For example, as one stakeholder from one university commented:

In any application that we put up we have to put up a case that argues how we're addressing the objectives and the priorities. For the HEPPPP funding pool, we have to provide some justification for that and a fully detailed project plan which, you know, here are the steps to the project, here are the milestones, here are the deliverables and here is the budget. So that's the initial submission and then it would get signed off. We're advised of the amount of funding and of the reporting timelines. So there's normally two reporting timelines, one mid term and then a final report and those reports go to [Administrator 2] and there are pretty frequent reminders about the reporting periods and then final acceptance of the report for each project. So it's a centrally coordinated process and I'd say very tightly managed in terms of overall project, achievement of objectives, expenditure of funds. (U2)

A stakeholder from another university also noted that while each project leader has responsibility for their own particular project, there is some central coordination at the middle-management level to ensure efficiencies:

... individual projects are managed within themselves and they're spending themselves ... I think there was a good process in place with a middle manager last year, in regards to looking at the overall type thing, and that then we gave efficiencies out of that, because she could recognise that "Hey, this project over here was under spending a little bit and this project here had capacity to spend a bit more" so it was good to be able to have that communication across the board. (U3)

Most stakeholders understood the processes in place at their university for managing projects, although staff at a project level were occasionally uncertain about higher level processes. For example, one stakeholder asserted:

I'm not sure how that overall process is done. I think that's tended to be up to those upper level management areas that decide on it. I will always call myself a ground runner so of course we feed into what we see on that grassroots level as to being a priority and then, yeah, I suppose that goes into that discussion area. (U3)

These minority views reflect the complexity and scale of HEPPP in most of the partner universities, though also confirm the need for clear communication strategies tailored to different groups of stakeholders. Overall, the partner universities appear to have developed sufficient processes to engage HEPPP staff at different levels, though universities differ on their levels of devolution and delegation.

4.2.4 Thinking about how HEPPP projects are evaluated at [your university], could you tell me about your understanding of that process?

In the absence of national guidelines about appropriate strategies for evaluating HEPPP initiatives, each university partner varies in their approach to evaluation depending on the context. For example, some universities have a centralised approach for evaluating initiatives, other universities rely on each project team to undertake their own evaluation, though often with support for building capacity at the local level. And others engage external consultants or critical friends to undertake the evaluation of HEPPP funded initiatives.

The importance of recognising individual contextual factors and employing a diversity of measures was evident from many of the stakeholder interviews. One stakeholder noted the importance of an embedded evaluation approach, one which is informed by theory and links research and practice. As they commented:

It's a rigorous process that's informed by theoretical perspectives so kind of deeper evaluation process is already being put into play. We're actually working on something that is taking a step further, a very explicit set of methodologies and concepts that will help inform the evaluation process in the future. The idea is to cement this relationship between research and practice so that the area of practice is able to participate actively in the evaluation to work together with the communities in which the HEPPP is actually embedded to ensure that all of the perspectives come to play to help understand what the purpose of the HEPPP programs are from those different perspectives and to be able to then understand how you best evaluate that based on the understanding of why they're in place and what different mechanisms have. (U6)

Another stakeholder from a university that undertakes external evaluations of HEPPP projects suggested:

So all our programs are put out to critical review. So in the partnership space, it's through the [Australian state name] Equity Consortium. In the institutional space, last year we had our inclusive curriculum program reviewed by [name] at the [institution name 1]. We've had our [academic skills program name 2] reviewed by [name], [name], [name], [name] and we've had the transition programs benchmarked against IRU activities. So we're really into the external critical friends. (U4)

Most stakeholders understood the importance of evaluation in informing future decisions regarding continuation of funding specific initiatives. For example, as one stakeholder noted:

I think right from the beginning I realised that if I wanted to continue to get some funding, I would need to be trying to ensure that there was evidence and that

each year further gains were being made, so there would be more, and different, types of evidence in terms of what sort of impact it would be having. I think that if you don't, my understanding is that if you're not showing some sort of impact, there is very little chance you would ever get funded again. (U2)

Another stakeholder noted:

Evidence determines whether ongoing funding is provided for these programs. The evidence informs whether the programs should be embedded as core business and suggests whether or not the funds have been spent wisely in terms of supporting low-SES and students generally. (U5)

For projects that are evaluated by individual project teams, the importance of building capacity for undertaking rigorous evaluation was evident from stakeholder responses. For example, as one stakeholder described:

I'm saying that people aren't aware of how time consuming research is and they've just gone, okay, yeah, we'll evaluate the program. I think that the more guidance in regards to that - or it should be coming holistically, where there should be a budget for research and things like that, as opposed to having to pull from - my understanding is that it's coming from [centralised support team] is providing a lot of the research support. I mean - yeah. That's great. I think that's awesome. 'I don't think that has been necessarily well managed in the sense that a lot of pressure has been put on every project coordinator to do quantitative and qualitative evaluation, and as you can imagine, it's not an easy feat because it hasn't been budgeted for. But some projects may have done it. So there's built in - when you have a research project, there's built in evaluation. (U1)

The importance of having a clear understanding of the evaluation process underpinned by a framework of what is being evaluated was emphasised by one stakeholder who explained:

I think that sometimes the evaluation process is misinformed because it's not clear about what it is. What is the lens? What are you actually measuring and what are you evaluating? What we're trying to do is to create a much clearer framework around what is being evaluated. It's not necessarily the program itself but it's actually the mechanisms that you put into place that create the change that you want to take place. (U6)

A similar theme was evident in one stakeholder's response suggesting the value of the institution establishing an evaluation framework, but also providing support for building capacity of staff to undertake rigorous evaluations of the projects they are leading:

She's got quite a rigorous evaluation framework that she's gone through that's very much guided by research and best practice in terms of evaluating these sorts of programs. We've tried to roll that out for each of them. We tried to make sure that each of the projects go through the appropriate ethics approval process, which never happened in the past. Our evaluation is coordinated and in some ways guided and led by that central resources of having a professor in that space. Obviously it's then managed by each of the project leaders. (U1)

4.2.5 What is your understanding of how evidence from the evaluation of HEPPP is used to inform future decision-making?

The importance of using evaluation data to inform future decision making was emphasised by stakeholders across each of the university partners. As one stakeholder explained:

Our problem is that, I think, when we set up these sorts of schemes we fail to put in place the evaluation framework that's needed for a good longitudinal status. So, I think, we've got it in place, whether we've got it in place too late is another question. But it would be against the key indicators and metrics. So you've got things like participation rates, retention rates, success rate for - if you just take each of the categories, but some of those are going to take an awfully long time to measure. (U6)

This comment reflects a common theme evident across the stakeholder interviews about the short HEPPP funding cycles and the challenges this creates for both evaluating the impact of initiatives over time and using the findings from evaluations to inform future decision making.

Another stakeholder echoed these concerns stating:

To develop more meaningful management and evaluation processes at an overarching level, and a better focus on outcomes, a minimum of 3-year funding cycles is needed. There's no incentive with the rolling yearly funding of continued uncertainty to invest into the oversight. The funding model itself should build in expectations re the evaluation model and the expectations on evidence to show the impact. (U5)

Similarly, a stakeholder from another university emphasised:

I think a lot of that analysis is really quite long term, so you can't do an analysis within a year or whatever, you need to see the impact over the lifetime of the students study. So it could be three, four, 10 years maybe. (U3)

Another stakeholder spoke of the frustration of not being able to continue with an effective HEPPP funded initiative because no further funding was available. As this stakeholder described:

So that [...project] attracted some HEPPP funding as well and I got ethics for that one and did quite a lot of work and wrote quite an extensive report for the Department of Education, but that only actually went for that one year. That went till funds expired and I didn't get a chance to gather any more evidence. That was a really successful project and it was all about raising aspirations with young local secondary school students, involving local industry and management to work with students to develop work-related understandings and also basically making them more aware of opportunities in higher education and also stressing employment and things like that. (U2)

Some partner universities addressed this problem by planning HEPPP initiatives to be conducted over several years on the assumption that funding would be forthcoming each year. As a stakeholder explained:

So, they're tracking the students that they've worked with on this project for a number of years. In terms of what they're doing with building aspirations, one of the arms of our widening participation project is Indigenous engagement and widening participation amongst our local indigenous students. And I'm seeing the connections that we are making there in those communities and at the local schools, where they are seeing that they're - first of all they're seeing that the university's not such a scary place to be. And we're seeing students participating in programs that are really tailored at saying to them, "There are a lot of things that you can do in your future with this university." And, we're seeing the numbers increase in terms of students engaging with that, and then going on and becoming students. Some of those things, we're getting tangible outcomes. (U1)

However, it is clear that the uncertainty of HEPPP funding and the short funding cycles does impact on the capacity of universities to prioritise, manage and evaluate HEPPP funded initiatives, as evident from the following stakeholder comment:

I've been very fortunate. I have fabulous staff who are on one-year contracts and even though I don't know by the end of November they still stick with us. I could at some stage lose them and I'm very fortunate that I don't and I think it's because they love what they're doing. But that meant that we're tending to be saying, "Well, we're not sure if this is going to exist," so it tends to be yearly rather than strategic. (U6)

Another challenge expressed by stakeholders concerns the difficulty in undertaking evaluation of initiatives due to the number of factors that can influence the outcomes of participants. As one stakeholder suggested:

It's hard to measure I suppose the success of a project, which is about building aspirations to attend university. It's hard to measure the impact that you're having on a community, rather than that individual student, or prospective student base. (U1)

Another stakeholder referred to challenges in tracking impact due to privacy concerns, asserting:

We explored a number of different ways of doing this (tracking impact of HEPPP program). The issue is privacy. We actually approached a teacher in Queensland to see if we could have material uploaded into Learning Place, which is their version of Blackboard, and we could potentially track students by their EQ number. We've tried that from two different campuses, we've had nothing back from Ed Queensland around that. (U3)

Other stakeholders expressed concern about the way in which the discourse concerning HEPPP funded initiatives focusing on a deficit approach and relies on categorisation of students or prospective students. As one stakeholder put it:

We have an academic welfare perspective about using HEPPP money that it's for underprepared, under-resourced, underequipped students and communities, I think there's the value of overlaying this welfare mentality. If we are really conscious of the fact that what we're looking at are under-representations and

then all of the granular things that fall out of that for specific communities, we address those in particular ways. But it's a right, it's an entitlement. It's part of that rights discourse. Normalising it is really important, I think. (U3)

Another stakeholder commented:

We've also done a lot of work in terms of normalising student support because we've had services that are relatively stable. Withdrawing HEPPP would potentially destabilise the access to those services or the provision of those services and interrupt our discourse around normalising students attending support service. (U4)

Other stakeholders pointed to the challenges of targeting support based on a categorisation of students by their socio-economic status. As this stakeholder explained:

What I find difficult in general with HEPPP because its focus is low SES and once you're talking internally at a university, you can't put a dot of low SES on a person's forehead... Because low SES is still kind of a concept and has a broad definition, it is harder to do totally targeted interventions because you can't say that student is low SES individually. (U2)

The need for better communication of the findings from HEPPP evaluations to inform future practices both within and across universities also emerged as a theme from stakeholder interviews. As one stakeholder suggested:

I just think we're not really good at the very final step of taking all the woodwork that's happened and analysing it and actually saying well if that works with this particular cohort of students why wouldn't it work right across the board or why wouldn't it work with another school of cohort of students and give people – I'm not saying re-mandate them, we might, but I'm saying give other academics and professional staff the opportunity to use the strategies that have been so successful for others. I think it's that final communication and recommendation that we just need to do better. (U1)

Other stakeholders suggested that the sharing of successful HEPPP initiatives and good practices would be beneficial. For example, one stakeholder proposed:

If you look at the number of universities, because it's obviously across the spectrum, and then which ones - what are the things that have worked well at other universities and what can we learn from them as well? I think that would be really interesting, and that's the thing that I don't know. I'm very much into always benchmarking, and I like to learn from others. (U1)

4.2.6 Are students involved in the planning/development of HEPPP initiatives (if 'Yes' explore to give examples of the role)?

Although most stakeholders interviewed acknowledged that students were involved in the HEPPP evaluation process as participants, less evident was the involvement of students in decision making processes. As one stakeholder suggested:

So we certainly do get that feedback from students, but it's not, in this space anyway (planning involvement), it's not any regular formal ongoing occurrence. (U3)

Another stakeholder explained:

In projects which [respondent] has been involved in students have been surveyed for the evaluations [respondent] is sure that more informal types of feedback are used as well. For example, observations by the demonstrators conducting the outreach activities would inform changes in HEPPP projects. (U5)

Similarly, a stakeholder from another partner university described how:

The students are involved in that they give feedback on the programs and how they can be improved, how the training can be improved and that kind of thing. But in terms of the planning and development of HEPPP activities except for that students are not really involved, its more staff led on the student's behalf. (U2)

Stakeholders had varying perspectives on the extent to which students should also be involved in decision making with respect to HEPPP funded initiatives (beyond providing feedback as participants or recipients of HEPPP supported initiatives). For example, the following stakeholder was clear that although it would be good for students to be involved in planning HEPPP initiatives, this stakeholder is less confident about how that might work at their university:

Not in a systemic way, but I think that they should be and I would like them to be and possibly they are in terms of individual projects, but in terms of planning what we need to do, not at this stage. Interestingly, at [U1] we've had difficulties for many years in terms of engaging students in a whole range of things, including the decision making of the university. So at this stage no, but I really like that idea. (U1)

Other stakeholders spoke of engaging students to deliver HEPPP funded initiatives. As one stakeholder describes:

The [transition activity program name] is overseen by two [job title] coordinators who are paid and then they also run [job title] training supported by our staff but [job title] training for the 500 [job title] around the university. And those students have – including the student coordinators – have a very large say in how that program has evolved including initiating an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander [job title] program. So they have a say in terms of the way the training goes, the way the budget is spent, the types of celebration events that they would have, so the design of the t-shirts, all of those things. In terms of [academic skills program name 2], I think that's probably a question better for [name] but, I mean, certainly they feed back and they've fed back about the spaces that they're engaging in that work in. (U4)

Another suggested:

I use a lot of my students ... who are Educational students, so they've all got Working with Children checks, they're all in schools all the time. There's a whole body of volunteers who work with the student group every time they come to the

University, and they really have been extremely pro-active, and two in particular who I get to be the Coordinators, and they actually get paid some of the funding, they plan all of the activities. (U2)

Partner universities differed in the extent and type of activities in which students were involved. Several programs involved students at an operational level, for example as mentors, coordinators, and volunteers. Similarly, most universities were clear about the important role of students in informing evaluation at program level, and subsequent revision. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the area of lowest student engagement was at the highest, strategic level in which HEPPP programs and funding are prioritised by universities. Despite diverse institutional approaches, interviews confirmed the overall need for HEPPP programs to be student-centred, drawing on student voices in the framing, operation, and evaluation of projects.

4.2.7 Impact if HEPPP funding was reduced or did not continue

Stakeholders were clear about the potential impact of no longer having HEPPP funding to support their work in raising awareness of higher education pathways and improving the participation, retention and success of people from LSES backgrounds. Responses highlighted the perceived importance of HEPPP funded projects to broader institutional equity objectives, the need for carefully structured and scaffolded approaches that might enable sustainability in a variable and uncertain funding climate, the difficulty in establishing strategic, necessarily long-term approaches to raising university awareness and achievement levels in light of funding uncertainty, the need to maintain credibility and confidence in the communities where current work is taking place, the need to manage the expectations of partners, such as secondary schools, and the potential benefits of greater funding certainty in developing coherent, meaningful programs. Responses also highlighted that most stakeholders interviewed perceive HEPPP as an investment more than a cost, and are concerned about the broader implications of a decline in HEPPP funding for addressing equity in higher education participation, particularly for the currently under-represented groups, who are the reason HEPPP was originally funded.

As one stakeholder in speaking about HEPPP programs/funding articulated:

I think it's an incredibly important scheme because it gives legitimacy to the work around equity and it gives the resources in order to facilitate that work. It's embedded in a very explicit policy agenda about widening participation particularly to low socio-economic status groups but also other equity groups that are connected to that category. It's an important scheme that enables some explicit work to happen around that. One of the issues I think around the work though is that when it's not necessarily informed by research it can be well intended but it can lack the kind of rigour that's necessary to make sure that the work is actually doing what it sets out to do. (U6)

Another stakeholder expressed the view that a decline in HEPPP funding would be:

...catastrophic in my view. For example, the learning advisors, we have a team of ten, I think it's 9.6 fulltime equivalent, ten people, of those 2.5 fulltime equivalent, ongoing funded. Everybody else is mostly HEPPP with a couple of SAF funded positions. So we would not be able to deliver anything that we are

delivering now. So we would see the closing of the [academic skills program name] program, closing of the learning advice desk where we have peer advisors working with students, the closing of our post O week workshops because we have student facilitators working in those, we wouldn't be able to pay them and we wouldn't have staff to run them. So we would have our website and possibly some individual consultations. That would be the end of our capacity to deliver to students and learning support. (U4)

Other stakeholders reflecting on the evidence that shows students from LSES backgrounds may be under-prepared for study, but no less able than students from higher socio-economic backgrounds to succeed, explained the importance of HEPPP funding to bridge that gap:

Evidence shows us that they're often significantly under prepared and the work that we're able to do for them around developing their study strategies, helps them to become independent learners. I think the data shows us that this is important work and that would disappear, and I think we have an obligation to our community to be able to support those that we know are probably challenged on entry. (U4)

The impact on universities' relationships and commitment to widening participation in communities (particularly in regional and remote areas) should HEPPP funding be reduced was another strong theme emerging from stakeholder interviews. As one stakeholder shared:

So within the partnership space, we've already seen the impact of the retreat from the 2-point-something million dollars that we got in 2014 – 2013, 2014, to the \$600,000-odd that we use now in terms of raising expectations and then not being able to fulfil commitments that schools felt that we had to them. So that's a very real commitment in terms of in our region where the participation rate in higher education is so low that raising expectations about the visibility of university staff to work collaboratively with teachers and students in schools and then pulling all that funding out has been very significant in low SES student schools of which there are many in our region. And the schools that are remote, for example [town name 2], we just can't access the schools in the [region name] with the amount of funding that we have at the scale that we had there for three years. There was always a risk but you can now see that it would take another two years to get the trust back if we had funding returned. (U4)

Similarly, referring to the impact for regional communities, another stakeholder expressed the view:

If the Government is real and truthful in their desire to increase the level of educational capacity within these regional communities, then they shouldn't be cutting funds from the - what I call the sandstones of the regional areas, because we are part of a community and by cutting funds to those universities, you're actually cutting - you're cutting funds to those communities. (U1)

Another stakeholder concerned about the impact for widening participation noted:

Well, it would mean that we wouldn't be able to have the cohort that we've got, so it wouldn't just be about our enrolment numbers falling, it would also be about putting up barriers again for students from those areas, that they won't be able to participate. They're really not prepared at school. So we've got students who have come in from small schools and have said to us, they were the top [area of study] student. (U4)

Other stakeholders expressed concern about the potential impact of a reduction in HEPPP funding on outcomes for students from LSES backgrounds:

I would be concerned about the success rate of the students because while I think we've proven we can bring them up to parity, without the infrastructure and support we've put in place through the HEPPP program then I would be concerned as to whether they would come but not be successful. I think what the program has done and is demonstrated by case study that no matter what your background you can succeed at university and that's a huge strength about it but that's only - that currency only pertains the point of time that the programs and universities are still producing successful students and as soon as that changes because there aren't any support structures in an institution then that can very soon turn. My concern would be without a specialist fund that allows targeting at the equity groups or at risk students that need additional levels of support then universities are likely to provide a parity of support which isn't necessarily isn't going to lead to parity in success. (U6)

Another stakeholder reflected on the entrenched nature of disadvantage, the achievements that have been made through HEPPP support and the need for continuity in HEPPP to build on this investment over time:

Also, for students from a disadvantaged background, their reasons for low participation are complex, but also deep and stubborn. Take lack of aspiration for example, based on family, cultural influences. This can't be overturned in a five-year period; it would take substantial change for long time. The danger in withdrawing funding would be that the progress made would cease immediately. We would lose the previous five-year investment and it would be hard to recover from the loss. (U5)

4.2.8 Summary of findings from the interviews

It was evident from the stakeholder interviews that participant responses were shaped by the institutional context in which they are located and their role in the university. Stakeholders employed at universities that have a strategic, centralised approach to prioritising, managing and evaluating HEPPP funded initiatives differed in their response to those working in contexts where the allocation of HEPPP funding is based on a competitive internal bid process with greater autonomy in the way in which those initiatives are managed and evaluated. Though all stakeholders interviewed understood that HEPPP fits within a broader institutional context and that a degree of coordination and oversight at more senior levels of the university is important.

There was considerable variation in the awareness levels of staff depending on their role at the university, with more senior staff having a clear understanding of how HEPPP sits within

a broader equity context and the importance of evaluation of HEPPP funded initiatives informing future decision making concerning the way in which HEPPP funds are used. Staff at the project level were generally less clear about how the findings from evaluation would be used by senior leaders; though most stakeholders understood the value and importance of evaluation. Stakeholders leading HEPPP funded initiatives also emphasised the need for support in the evaluation of the initiatives for which they are responsible, and understood the importance of capacity-building across the university.

Some stakeholders not directly involved with HEPPP (for example university faculty) expressed the view that greater communication and sharing of the findings from HEPPP funded initiatives could help to inform mainstream practices. Several stakeholders also suggested that HEPPP reports should be published by the Commonwealth funding body, so that they could learn from the practices of other universities.

Stakeholders were consistent in the view that students should participate in the evaluation of HEPPP funded initiatives, though they had varying perspectives on the extent to which students should also be involved in higher level decision-making concerning the use of HEPPP funds. These views reflect the stakeholders' experiences within their specific university context. Despite these differences, the stakeholders confirmed the need for HEPPP programs to be student-centred, drawing on student voices in the framing, operation, and evaluation of projects.

All stakeholders were forthright in their view that HEPPP funding is critical to their work in improving access to higher education, and the participation, retention and success of students from LSES backgrounds. There was also consensus that funding cycles need to be longer than a year to enable adequate planning of initiatives that can have greater impact and be evaluated over longer periods, noting that the entrenched nature of disadvantage cannot be addressed through short-term initiatives.

5 Case Studies

As noted in the project approach section of this report, case studies were also prepared by each partner university to provide a richer understanding of the ways in which universities prioritise, manage, evaluate and act on the findings of evaluation of their HEPPP funded initiatives. The partners drew on contextual knowledge of their university HEPPP processes, relevant university documentation and the stakeholder interviews conducted by them to provide a multi-dimensional perspective (Remenyi, 2002, p. 5). The partner case studies are presented in the following sections of this chapter

5.1 Central Queensland University (CQUniversity)

5.1.1 Profile

CQUniversity is a regional-based university and Queensland's first dual sector university, providing a comprehensive approach to education, training, research and engagement in the central Queensland region and beyond. The university has 25 campuses and locations Australia-wide and provides a diverse range of training and education programs and courses to more than 30,000 students studying qualifications from certificate to post doctorate level. Of these students, 14,847 are enrolled in domestic undergraduate courses, approximately 50% of whom are from a low socio-economic background and 62% from regional and remote locations.

5.1.2 HEPPP at CQUniversity

CQUniversity has a long history of providing access and support services for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. These university initiatives have been assisted by the Commonwealth Government through a variety of equity funded program including the Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program (HEPPP). In 2015, CQUniversity received 5.1 million dollars in HEPPP funding enabling twenty-one projects to be conducted, in 2016, 5.3 million dollars was received and 19 projects were supported.

5.1.3 HEPPP funded Projects at CQUniversity

In late 2014 CQUniversity began the planning process to implement HEPPP projects for this 2015-2017 three-year period. The HEPPP planning process was guided by the 'CQUniversity Strategic plan', the 'Student Equity and Social Inclusion Management Plan (superseded by the '2015-2017 CQUniversity Access and Participation Plan') and the Naylor, Baik and James (2013), 'Critical Intervention Framework' (CIF). Figure 3 shows the alignment of the 21 projects supported through HEPPP funding in 2015 against the access, participation and completion phases of the CIF. Nineteen of the projects continued into 2016 and 13 into 2017.

Early in 2015, the Commonwealth Government made the decision to return to a one-year HEPPP funding cycle; however, CQUniversity endeavoured to maintain consistency with those projects that had indicated a two to three-year timeline in their original application for funding, continuing into 2016 providing their outcomes were met.

The following are examples of some of the HEPPP projects that CQUniversity implemented in 2015 and which continued into 2016.

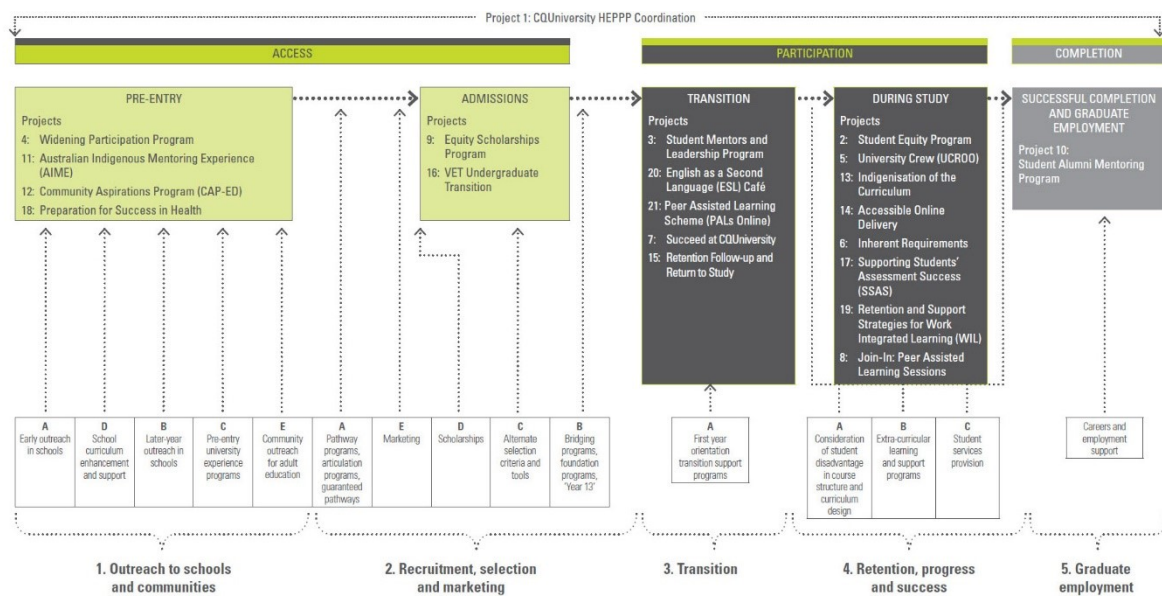


Figure 3: CQUniversity 2015 HEPPP projects mapped against the Critical Interventions Framework (CIF)*

*Adapted from Naylor, N. Baik, C. & James, R. (2013). *Developing a Critical Interventions Framework for advancing equity in Australian higher education. Discussion paper for the Department of Industry, innovation, Climate Change, Science Research and Tertiary Education.*

Community Aspirations Program (CAP-ED). This widening participation program aims to demystify university so that Indigenous people can gain the skills needed to transition into higher education. CAP-ED program provides short sessions that are practical, inspiring and focus on identity and culture. By developing a relationship with participants, the program builds self-confidence to achieve personal goals and further develop opportunities in tertiary education or employment. The CQUni CAP-ED program also hosts information sessions and network events to encourage discussion among Indigenous people within their local communities.

CQUniversity Widening Participation Project (now called CQUni Connect). This project aims to raise and support school students' awareness of career options and to encourage those from disadvantaged backgrounds to consider higher education opportunities. The project involves individual and group activities delivered over several weeks and designed for specific year levels. Students develop a sound awareness of pathways from high school to university, and university to the workforce. The CQUni Connect Program also aims to assist senior secondary students to build practical tertiary education readiness skills to improve their understanding and expectations of university and TAFE. The CQUni Connect program is offered in Central Queensland (Bundaberg, North Burnett, Central West, Rockhampton, and Mackay) and the Cairns region. The program was featured as a case study for the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education under its former name CQUniversity Widening Participation Project).

The Equity Scholarships and Grants Project. Two million dollars was allocated to approximately 1,000 students of LSE status in 2015. The academic progress rate of students assisted with scholarships and grants in 2015 showed that 83% of recipients received an

overall grade of pass or higher. The findings from the Scholarship and Grant recipient's research project (2016) attested to the value of this program for students in assisting them to remain at university.

The Accessible Online Delivery Project. This project responds to the need for an evidence-based approach to the design of curricula for online delivery, which accommodates the diversity of students and recognises the benefits and limitations of relying on learning analytics data alone to determine student engagement. While this project works closely with students with disabilities to incorporate ready accessibility it also aims to meet the diverse needs of all CQUniversity students. This project is guiding the development of a consistent approach to the structure and format of online curricula at the program level. An accessibility application was trialled in readiness for integration within the Moodle learning environment, enabling students to customise the format in which content is presented to suit their specific needs.

Supporting Students' Assessment Success (SSAS). This project involves consultation with students from LSES backgrounds across faculties about their assessment expectations and experiences in their first year of study to identify specific barriers to their success which can be mediated via improved assessment design and scaffolding. The findings are being used to develop interventions in conjunction with key lecturers to improve assessment structures and supports to increase retention and achievement for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

5.1.4 The Case Study Context

The elements that the research team used to aid the identification of approaches that each partner university employed to guide HEPPP processes and practices were defined under five headings: prioritise, select, manage, evaluate and identify how each university acted on evaluation findings to inform future planning. As noted above, the research undertook two methods of gathering data: policy and practice documents from each university were analysed and mapped against the five headings. Stakeholder interviews were conducted at each university using semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions and data analysed against the five headings while allowing for new knowledge to emerge. Participants were drawn from staff groups at each partner university where staff had some level of involvement with HEPPP/Equity and/or decision making impacting on HEPPP.

HEPPP documentation analysis

An analysis of the CQU HEPPP documents against the five project headings showed a good coverage of and alignment to these headings. The HEPPP Overview & Achievements document approved by Academic Board in September 2014 outlined the rationale for and the strategic direction for HEPPP over the 2015 – 2017 period. This document focussed on the newly developed CQU Access and Participation plan 2015- 2017 and outlined the way forward for how CQU would prioritise and select projects, the plan to evaluate funded projects and the goal of acting on findings to inform further CQU strategies. The CQU HEPPP Projects Coordinator who has responsibility for providing support and assistance to the university to undertake HEPPP funded project activities and implement strategies that improve access to undergraduate courses for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as improving the retention and completion rates of those students, developed various HEPPP management documents, including the HEPPP funding project guidelines, application

format, HEPPP project 'work and finance plan', and internal reporting templates. Each of these management documents also set out project evaluation expectations. The CQU HEPPP final year reports were then the basis of the formal annual reporting of HEPPP projects and funds acquittal to the Commonwealth Government. As flagged in the CQU Access and Participation plan (2015-2017), an institutional evaluation of HEPPP projects was conducted at the end of 2015 and 2016 to provide an overarching review of HEPPP projects and to assist with planning for the

Prioritising and Selecting HEPPP Projects

As noted above, the policy and practice documents showed good documentation coverage of the rationale for and the way that CQUniversity prioritises and selects HEPPP projects.

Stakeholders who are directly involved with HEPPP as managers or project leaders were clear that these processes were in place as reflected by the following project leader's comment:

I think it's very clear where the priorities are. In making an application for funding, we're provided with information about the target groups, the aims of HEPPP, and of course everyone's expected to be familiar with the guidelines. And, I think there is absolute clarity around who the HEPPP Program is designed for and what the expectations are.

Similarly, another project leader noted:

I'm aware of that because we've done that ourselves for our project. We went through the process of completing the application for this project. And I was also involved a little bit prior to this with some that other staff members have put in but, this one, I was very aware that there was quite a bit rigour around the application process. We did some research for ours and had to have the projected costs and time frames and those sorts of things were necessary in order to be able to be considered for the funding.

Management of HEPPP

The documentation analysis reveals how CQUniversity manages their HEPPP program; for example, HEPPP project submission guidelines and grant application, HEPPP reporting template and the HEPPP project letter of agreement. This was an aspect of HEPPP that most research participants were familiar with and supported. As one stakeholder shared:

I think it's quite regulated, it's quite regulated the way HEPPP is managed at the university, and there is a high degree of fiscal transparency from my perspective in terms of the checks and balances on my funding, and how I manage that.

Another stakeholder appeared to share that perspective and highlighted the importance of accountability in the process:

...my perception is that the university has identified that it's important to make it as transparent and streamlined as possible so that they created this position (HEPPP Projects Coordinator), which is HEPPP funded. They're using that position to streamline all the other projects, ensure that there is more - I guess more accountability when you're running a project.

Overall, from the document analysis and interviewee feedback, there was evidence that CQUniversity had sound and transparent management practices in place for HEPPP project management. Some stakeholders reflected on changes in the way that HEPPP is managed that they have observed over time:

I just think there's a lot better tracking documentation, reporting requests. I think it's the actual management of the programs now, in my experience, that is a lot better, a lot more collaborative and a lot tighter than it was a few years ago.

A HEPPP Community of Practice (CoP) was established in 2015 to provide an opportunity for HEPPP project leaders and project teams to collaborate and develop their skills in managing and evaluating the HEPPP funded projects for which they are responsible. Wenger, McDermot and Snyder (2002) describe Communities of Practice as "... groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (p. 5), and the HEPPP CoP shares the characteristics Wenger, McDermot and Snyder consider to be essential for a group to constitute a CoP; a shared domain (HEPPP funded equity initiatives), and a community of practitioners. As one stakeholder described:

...we were talking about how we could work together and how we could build on it so we're not reinventing the wheel, and how we could get some synergies while working with each other. And at that stage I thought it would be a good vehicle for us to use the community of practice. There was already admin assistance and all we needed to do was set the dates and have the meetings. And that's happened: since then we have regular meetings, which I believe are a really good opportunity. It's a closed group, and there are organised guest speakers, but it's a good opportunity for the project officers for the various HEPP projects to share what they do and to make sure that we are following some accepted procedures and that we're hearing information.

Another stakeholder explained:

We have a very strong community of practice, so that project coordinators, as in project managers like myself, we meet once a month, and that's been a really good professional development experience. So, that we can talk about our projects, and it gives us a chance to kind of stay in touch and to I guess, stay on track... there's a lot more guidance in terms of how we should evaluate projects more effectively, and that's also another benefit of that community of practice.

Similarly, a manager noted:

...we're involved in the COP and that's very regularly run and I attend quite a lot of those. I find them really beneficial for me as a new manager and the PD that's offered in them as well around the different sorts of things such as SharePoint and the report writing and those sorts of things, they've always been really valuable to me. And listening to what other people do. And I'm very aware of the interim and final reports and the need for evaluation of the project.

Although the CoP has provided an important venue for discussing and sharing information about HEPPP funded projects, tracking their progress, and identifying synergies, as well as developing the capacity of those involved in HEPPP funded projects to achieve their

outcomes, CoP members are those directly associated with HEPPP related initiatives. Some academic stakeholders who are not involved with HEPPP funded projects suggested the outcomes of the good work undertaken through HEPPP initiatives could be further enhanced with closer involvement of the academic community. One academic pointed out, “I'd be thinking about how to support Schools to deliver intervention...”. Similarly, another academic noted that “I'm sure it's discussed” but questioned “whether it's a targeted discussion on what schools should do or how we're going to assist schools to deliver”. This already happens to a certain extent when project leaders are based in schools or are academic staff leading HEPPP funded initiatives, but is an area that from the perspective of academic staff interviewed, could improve the impact of HEPPP funded initiatives.

Several stakeholders also referred to the value of SharePoint, a Microsoft cloud solution that enables individuals, teams and organisations to discover, share documentation, and collaborate on content, as a valuable platform for monitoring, managing and ensuring the security of HEPPP documentation as well as sharing and collaboration across projects. For example, as one project coordinator described:

... for my team, just having access to the HEPPP – to the communication hub SharePoint area has been really useful. And it keeps – although we have the other drives, it keeps things that little bit more secure because there are so many staff in my team and putting things in the ALC drive, it's not quite as secure. So I think it allows us to be organised and keep things stored safely and separate from some of the other material, particularly when it's around the report writing and the figures and where do I store information about contracts and proposed – the wages and the amounts that I'm needing to spend and where I'm keeping that kind of material. I think it's really useful to have that space to put it in. And, of course, the communications and the conversations that go around through it and then the little newsletter style pages that are there letting us know what's happening with other projects, too, that's all really useful.

HEPPP evaluation and implications for future planning for HEPPP and the university

The analysis of documents for processes outlining evaluation and identifying actions from evaluations to inform future planning revealed that this expectation was included in documents for example, the 2015-2017 ‘CQU Access & Participation Plan’, notes that evidence from evaluations will feed into the improvement of equity/HEPPP strategies. And, the ‘Institutional Evaluation of HEPPP at CQUniversity – 2015’ specifies the need for a rigorous, research based and coordinated approach to evaluation and the need to show that evidence from findings was incorporated into future HEPPP planning.

Generally, project coordinators understood that evaluation of HEPPP funded initiatives was important and required to demonstrate the impact of the initiative on students from LSES backgrounds. All respondents were aware that a professor had been engaged to provide guidance and input to the HEPPP program and this was universally viewed as a positive. There was the corresponding expectation that sound evaluation processes would now be implemented and that outcomes from evaluations would be reflected in planning,

We've only just started that, and until the professor came into the role we didn't have a good process for that. I know she's done an initial evaluation, and she's worked with each of the projects to do that. She's got quite a rigorous evaluation

framework that she's gone through that's very much guided by research and best practice in terms of evaluating these sorts of programs. We've tried to roll that out for each of them.

Senior managers understandably had a clearer understanding about how evaluation findings inform future policy planning and decision making. As one stakeholder elaborated:

It certainly does (i.e. evaluation evidence informing planning). We've got a small team of us that have had our first meeting in terms of looking at the evaluations and thinking through how we will then make recommendations based on what we're seeing in the evaluations to go forward for final decisions around what we'll fund next year and what we won't. The final decision around funding sits with an executive committee, but a small group of people are working to say we want to base this on the evidence from the evaluation to take forward some recommendations based on that.

Although some project coordinators were unclear about how the findings from evaluation impact on future planning, this was not always the case. For example, one project coordinator suggested:

I understand that in terms of evaluation, we are building an evidence base, and it's my understanding that some level of the organisation, that evidence is being assessed to make decisions or to make determinations about HEPPP funding for the next year, or going forward, and I am pretty clear on that.

5.1.5 Concluding Summary

The general overview from respondents was that HEPPP is an important source of funding for CQUniversity providing valuable assistance to students from LSES backgrounds and the community. Stakeholders gave examples of the positive outcomes of HEPPP funding and were emphatic about the importance of ensuring continuity of that funding, noting that any reduction in funding would have a detrimental effect as this stakeholder comment suggests:

I think that would be a terrible blow, I think we would lose credibility within the community, I think we'd lose credibility with our students if HEPPP were to vanish tomorrow and we didn't have alternative funding to keep the programs going.

And another stakeholder stated:

The reality for a university such as CQU is if we didn't have HEPPP funding, we wouldn't be able to do a lot of the things that we do with that HEPPP funding.

The analysis of documentation and stakeholder interviews demonstrate the importance of having well documented processes in place for management and evaluation of HEPPP funded initiatives, as well as the sustainability of funding.

5.2 Federation University Australia

5.2.1 Profile

Federation University Australia (FedUni) is Australia's newest university. It was created by bringing together the University of Ballarat and the Monash University Gippsland Campus. FedUni is the third oldest site of higher learning in Australia and offers higher education,

TAFE and secondary schooling. With campuses in Ballarat, the Wimmera and Gippsland in regional Victoria, the University also has partner providers in Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide and South-East Asia. FedUni has approximately 22,000 students, including 15,500 domestic students. Of the higher education students, approximately 29% are from low SES backgrounds.

FedUni is moving to become a more open access university and adopts a philosophy of inclusivity, opportunity and support. It increasingly welcomes second chance learners, mature age students, those who have not succeeded educationally in traditional ways, school-leaver students with a wider range of ATAR scores and students from a variety of pathways and backgrounds.

To assist students from low socioeconomic backgrounds succeed at FedUni, the University has developed a range of programs that fulfil the Participation component of the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP).

5.2.2 FedUni's HEPPP-Funded programs

FedUni typically funds around 20 projects per year ranging from \$1K to \$1 million. The projects highlighted below represent just a small sample.

Student Futures

This is a comprehensive and complementary group of student learning support services encompassing tutor-led tertiary preparation programs, peer-led informal drop-in advice and mentoring as well as on-demand online tutoring support. Collectively, these initiatives make it easier for students to access additional academic support thereby maximising their ability to succeed.

KickStart

This program covers the awarding and administration of scholarships, bursaries and grants. The process was recently streamlined to ensure funds are targeted to those with the highest demonstrated need. Students are provided with: direct financial assistance to help meet day-to-day living costs and/or essential resources such as laptops, internet access or nursing kits.

BA@Community Program

The BA@Community program offers university pathways to disadvantaged students by offering first year Bachelor of Arts courses in school-based locations. This alternative model of delivery has increased the accessibility to higher education for students who would not previously have considered going to university. Participating schools have also reported markedly increased tertiary rates among their students.

Pathways To Success

Conducted with 28 first year low SES Bachelor of Education students, this was a six-month action research project aimed at retaining students by providing week by week support, mentoring, advice and coaching. Of those who took part in the project, at least 74% passed first year.

Maths Drop-In Centres

As its name implies, the Maths Drop-in Centre provides a one-on-one, 'as-needed' support for students experiencing specific difficulties with mathematics and statistics in their studies across the University. Historically, students from low SES backgrounds are over-represented among those with conceptual gaps in their mathematical understanding as there is strong evidence of a link between secondary school SES and mathematics performance. The casual and friendly nature of the drop-in centres encourages participation and students are also shown how to use maths/stats software and electronic searches to enhance their ability to solve problems. Since the introduction of the drop-in centre, there has been an improvement in student outcomes. Eight of the ten courses that had students that utilised the centre experienced a reduction in the fail rates.

5.2.3 Prioritisation

FedUni adopts a multi-staged approach to deciding which projects to fund. Firstly, it funds *Student Futures* and *KickStart*. These are two key projects that it sees as fundamental in reaching its strategic objective of being a national leader retaining students from LSES backgrounds.

- Secondly, FedUni opens a competitive internal funding round. All applicants are asked to detail how their project will meet HEPPP funding guidelines as follows:
- The objectives of the project and what effect it will have on the participation and success of students from LSES backgrounds.
- Which part(s) of the low SES population the project will target.
- The components of the project including location(s), timeframe, project plan and milestones.
- How the outcomes of the project will be evaluated/measured against the objectives.
- The budget requirement and a breakdown of how the funds will be spent.

The panel prioritises and selects projects based on their likely impact as well as, where available, evaluation gathered from running the program in previous years. It may also ask for supplementary information and/or changes to the program before reaching a final decision.

Although some participants in the study were not clear on how projects were prioritised, the majority stated that funding decisions were decided by an advisory panel according to what they perceived would provide the most benefit to the target groups.

... projects are prioritised based on the purpose, the outcome, the number of students that are touched by those projects and then some sort of a ranking, priority listing and then there's normally a bit of argy-bargy around funding so if we need more money then we go back and look at where we could cut some funds from some projects to help support other projects, a manager said.

... it seems that there's a panel who assesses the individual project proposals and that that panel seems to make a judgment based on the likely value of outcome versus the amount of money that's going to need to be invested, a project officer said.

Participants suggested that samples of successful applications could be provided to assist them and the prioritisation process could be made a little more transparent.

5.2.4 Project monitoring and management

Day-to-day project management is largely decentralised and is the responsibility of the project leader. This typically involves promoting the initiative, recruiting staff to run the project, engaging students and/or partner organisations and spending the budget in accordance with the project plan.

However, FedUni has a number of safeguards in place to ensure that projects are monitored closely throughout the year. Finance staff track and monitor project expenditure on a monthly basis then alert project staff if they are over or under-spending.

I keep an eye on them monthly to make sure that they're still spending in line with their budget and what we've told them to spend it on, so if they start spending it on things that weren't in their application, I will pull them up on that and make sure they stay on track, an administrative officer said.

Project leaders are asked to submit a six-month progress update against objectives and budget. Funding for the remainder of the year is conditional on completing this report. The six-month review allows the University to identify projects that have over-estimated how much funding they need. This, in turn, enables that funding to be reallocated to another project to ensure that the funds achieve the greatest benefit.

Participants showed a strong understanding of the internal mid and end-of-year reporting cycle and how this allowed senior executives to ensure HEPPP funds were spent as intended. Several participants noted the difficulty that the annual HEPPP funding cycle creates with regard to forward planning and retaining staff.

5.2.5 Evaluation

FedUni has built evaluation mechanisms into each stage of the project lifecycle process. Doing so is beneficial in a number of ways. It focuses project leaders very clearly on delivering programs that benefit students from LSES backgrounds as well as gathering evidence that will not only enable outcomes to be measured but also continuously improved.

As outlined previously, project leaders are asked to document how they will measure and evaluate the project's success and impact against HEPPP guidelines in their original application. In addition the six-month report provides an opportunity for project leaders, in collaboration with FedUni's HEPPP panel, to review the initiative's success and make any adjustments that will further add tangible value to students from LSES backgrounds.

The vast majority of participants mentioned the need to provide evidence of a project's success in the mid and final year reports, thereby showing this requirement is well understood at FedUni.

... we had to put in reports against very specific outcomes and then the evaluation of those is done by [Member of senior executive 4] I think it is here, alongside I assume the panel that convene to consider these.

Depending on the project, quantitative and/or qualitative data is collected to measure each project's impact. Analysis has included:

- Assessing attendance rates in HEPPP-funded academic support services and whether they positively impacted on: retention rates, course pass rates and an individual's grading compared to the class average. The demonstrable success of the programs across all these markers has led to FedUni prioritising these programs when HEPPP funding is confirmed.
- Satisfaction surveys administered to program participants. These have ranged from students involved in a Leaderships Skills Program to school teachers participating in one of FedUni's many regional school engagement initiatives aimed at making university more accessible for students from LSES backgrounds. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive.
- Qualitative evaluation with students taking part in an action research project and pilot program providing intensive one-on-one support to students ranging from time management and study skills assistance to support accessing FedUni services.
- Informal feedback from school teachers involved in FedUni's STEM inreach and outreach programs in the Gippsland area. These programs upskill STEM secondary school teachers with a view to increasing STEM university enrolments among their students.

Several participants noted that they were unclear on how the panel used this data to make future funding decisions indicating that there is perhaps an opportunity for greater transparency.

Nevertheless, other participants were keenly aware that building evaluation mechanisms into their project was not only important in meeting their current year's reporting requirements but was also fundamental to gaining funding the following year.

... right from the beginning I realised that if I wanted to continue to get some funding, I would need to be trying to ensure that there was evidence and that each year further gains were being made, so there would be more, and different, types of evidence in terms of what sort of impact it would be having.

One participant also noted that there are often ongoing benefits that students derive from HEPPP programs that are more difficult to track.

...the interesting thing that we found is that a lot of outcomes happen over a period of two to three years. So we might have a student come and do the basics with us in their first or second year and, by their third or fourth year, they're running massive projects themselves. And that's the very organic part of what we are able to do but it's also quite difficult to evaluate the full impacts of what those students have achieved in the community, in the university community.

5.2.6 The Importance of ongoing HEPPP funding

Participants were forthright about the importance of HEPPP-funded programs to FedUni; there was deep and widespread concern about the impact that cutting those programs would have on student retention.

To withdraw it now, and withdraw that support to students, I think would be betray them in some ways, I think. If you've got students coming on board because maybe their sister or brother or a friend has come to Federation University and said, 'The support that we received while we were there was great,' but then next year we decide that we're not able to provide that support, I think that's betraying students.

I'm sure everybody is saying it would be a disaster if we lost HEPPP. I just think there's so much we can do, and if we're serious about giving people from disadvantaged categories, backgrounds, whatever, any chance we would - unis like ours are the ones that really need that support from government to run the stuff that we know works.

5.2.7 Summary

As a regional university with a high proportion of students from LSES backgrounds, HEPPP funding has enabled FedUni to develop strategically targeted programs that help retain disadvantaged students and enable them to succeed in their university studies. Overall, participants in the study demonstrated a good understanding of the internal HEPPP application and reporting process and the need to state clear objectives that could subsequently be measured and evaluated. All participants were positive about the difference the HEPPP-funded projects continued to make to students from LSES backgrounds. Some minor improvements were suggested that centred around enhancing increasing transparency about the decision-making process.

5.3 James Cook University

5.3.1 Overview of institution

James Cook University (JCU) is a multi-campus university with over 20,000 students. Courses are offered in Townsville, Cairns, Singapore and Brisbane, with designated study centres at Thursday Island, Mount Isa and Mackay. JCU is committed to enhancing students' access, participation and success through a 'whole-of-institution' approach to widening participation, learning, teaching and the student experience, including appropriate facilities and access to technologies. To provide strategic guidance and leverage in relation to the realisation of this agenda, JCU has authored the *Access, Participation and Success Plan (2015 – 2017)*.

In 2014, the Commonwealth Government requested an access and success plan, in order to receive the HEPPP funding. JCU's comprehensive *Access, Participation and Success Plan 2015 – 2017*, is based on the work of Naylor et al. (2013) and sets out the strategies JCU has in place to meet the needs of our 22,784 students and guides our use and evaluation of the HEPPP data. Of the domestic students at JCU, 22.8 per cent are from low SES backgrounds, 21.9 per cent of students come from rural or remote areas, over 50 per cent are the first in their families to attend university, 4.5 per cent are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and 4.5 per cent have a disability. Regional census data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics indicates up to 25 per cent of private dwellings do not have internet access.

The *JCU Access, Participation and Success Plan* is underpinned by the institution's values and beliefs that place is powerful. This plan comprises one component to addressing JCU's Strategic Intent, being to 'Creating a brighter future for life in the tropics world-wide

through graduates and discoveries that make a difference¹. The Plan draws on strategies from a range of existing University documents, as well as outlining divisional commitments to student equity. Key documents include the:

- Reconciliation Action Plan 2015-2017,
- JCU Learning and Teaching BluePrint,
- Disability Action Plan, and
- JCU Offer Strategy.

JCU serves a community where comparative indicators highlight considerable disparity between secondary school completion and participation rates in higher education. Additionally, indices of disadvantage, including the Index of Relative Social and Economic Disadvantage (IRSED) highlight that 14% of the Northern Queensland Region are in IRSED Quintile 1 – that is, they are the most disadvantaged, compared to Brisbane metropolitan indicators of a 5.3% (QLD Government Statistician, 2016).

In regions such as Northern Australia, there remains much work to do to in order to raise participation levels in higher education. In Northern Queensland, according to the 2011 census, 49.2% of the population complete Year 11/12 as compared to 68.4% in Brisbane Metro. In Northern Queensland, only 52.7% of these have a non-school qualification and of these 11.3% have Bachelor qualification. This compares to Brisbane metropolitan where 60.8% of the population have a non-school qualification and 27.6% hold a Bachelor qualification. The task of increasing participation in higher education is not, as Devlin (2013) highlights, a task for students or institutions alone, rather, it is an integrative task. Universities need to adjust to ensure success and achievement of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, and students can and will take responsibility for participating. The HEPPP fundamentally supports this integrative task.

Consistent with the literature on widening participation (e.g. Gale and Parker, 2013) at JCU we are cognizant that increasing participation in our community will require:

- The right whole of government policy settings, inclusive of adequate student income support, enabling and sub-degree places and support disadvantage represented at both state and federal government policy settings
- Institutional enablers that include a focus on high quality and high equity discourse across university strategic plans and policy architecture, adequate entry standards, and an emphasis suitable workload models and robust staff professional learning.
- Student enablers, inclusive of sustainable student services and support services reflecting the needs of the cohort, robust academic skill development and intentional design of inclusive curriculum.

In addition to existing reports, eleven interviews were conducted with staff from across programs and units at James Cook University, all of whom are involved with delivering, managing, developing, resourcing or evaluating partnership and participation programs at JCU.

5.3.2 Prioritising and selecting programs for HEPPP funding

The *JCU Access, Participation and Success Plan 2015-2017* (establishes a four-domain framework across the student lifecycle with indicators (outcomes) for each area. The

framework draws on work by Naylor et al. (2013) and is informed by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's (2014) articulation of equity performance indicators. **The focus on prioritising expenditure is on sustainable, collaborative, and evidence informed actions.**

In relation to **improving access**, the HEPPP program at JCU has played a very considerable role. JCU has been an active participant in the Queensland Widening Tertiary Participation Consortium which formed in 2009. Between 2009 and 2015 this consortium included all of Queensland's eight Table A universities who collaborated to design and implement activities aimed at stimulating interest in tertiary study and widening tertiary participation of low SES background and Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders. The consortium mapped low SES schools to each of the 8 Queensland Universities and this collaboration saw significant improvements in applications for tertiary study. The collaborative nature of this consortium was undermined in 2016 when two universities decided that a more market driven approach to school engagement was preferable.

Since 2014, JCU HEPPP funded **success** initiatives are organised to meet the following principles: Each program must be

- whole of institution, that is adopted by a range of areas across the university with consistent role descriptions, evaluation frameworks etc.
- research informed, guided by the best available research on efficacy.
- data driven, having a clear rationale and imperative from JCU's comprehensive business intelligence data.

As distinct from a 'project based' approach, HEPPP funds to promote student success at JCU form part of a sustained approach to addressing student disadvantage – as endorsed by the United Nations. Short term, fragmented projects do little to interrupt generational disadvantage.

An annual forum with University stakeholders, the Associate Deans of Learning and Teaching reviews the relevant data on access, participation and success including retention and since 2014 this process has led to the identification of 20 focus courses where student services and curriculum enhancement are in focus. These 20 courses have over 100 EFTSL and high levels of diverse students. College Support Officers and a range of other HEPPP funded intervention including increased learning support are focussed on these courses.

This whole-of-institution agreement is then formally endorsed by the Vice-Chancellor's Advisory Committee annually alongside the evaluation of the previous year's initiatives. The HEPPP funds are considered then as part of a comprehensive equity strategy – moving away from a 'project' or 'bidding' based approach to the use of HEPPP to embed sustainable initiatives, or trial innovations.

Table 2 provides a summary of the activities funded by HEPPP and their alignment with the HEPPP guidelines.

Table 2: Indicative JCU Key HEPPP funded activities

| AREA OF ACTIVITY | SAMPLE ACTIVITIES |
|--------------------------|--|
| Outreach and partnership | Get Into Uni: in school and on-campus outreach delivery; academic encouragement awards; Year 10 residential camps; STEM development (Illumin8 science club); student ambassadors; school travel subsidies. Partnerships: High Resolves, a non-profit group, for the 'Global Citizens' program, as well as working with Northern Pride to support Indigenous engagement. |
| Transition activities | Equity Scholarships Conversion activities targeting students from LSES backgrounds Preparatory programs Student Mentor Program |
| Academic Skills | Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) Skill building workshops Learning advisors |
| Successful participation | Student Wellbeing Officers AccessAbility Advisors Student Support Officers Inclusive curriculum reform |

In addition to the summary table above, at JCU, HEPPP programs provide employment opportunities for students. Paid student employment, which in itself has a retention impact, is a component of the following HEPPP funded programs at JCU:

- Student Ambassadors
- Student Mentor Coordinators
- Peer Assisted Study Session Leaders
- Learning Advice Desk Officers
- Unistart preparatory program leaders.

HEPPP funding at JCU also provides for the employment of Student Wellbeing Officers who support students with financial counselling and mental health issues. This front-line service provision supports the region's allied health capacity, where there is an acknowledged skill shortage. It should be noted that the data shows that across regional areas of Australia, there is increased requirement for mental health services. ABS data shows that the population who live outside Major Cities are significantly more likely to report that they have a mental health or wellbeing issue. As such, HEPPP funds facilitate crucial services for students that are otherwise in short supply in regional Australia, and the sense of removal of HEPPP funds creates a sense of shifts in purpose and resourcing and sectoral responses to reframed imperatives:

HEPPP we have been able to introduce what's called, student well-being officers, which provide welfare support for students. These are positions that we only introduce through HEPPP in 2012 that have been able to, I guess, expand their level of personal support that we can offer students, so counselling is one that we still provide for students that need more of that therapeutic support, but we have that extra layer for students who are, you know, facing financial difficulties, homelessness, domestic and family violence; where before potentially our scope

was a little bit more limited, so in terms of measure and how we evaluate it has been a little bit difficult in terms of seeing the connection between the students seeing a well-being officer and maybe getting a high distinction for example, but definitely in terms of the support that we are able to provide students - we've been able to expand that.

Prior to 2012, and the allocation of HEPPP funds to this service, access to well-being support was limited to appointments with psychologists at the university, which also meant that:

Wait time for services was a lot longer, so we were looking at waiting lists from four to six weeks, which is comparative with people seeking support in community, but you know, four to six weeks for a student who is potentially pre-census date trying to make decisions about enrolment loads etcetera, it's a long period of wait. With the implementation of student welfare officers, we can usually get a student in the same week, and if not the following week, so we have dramatically reduced that. And we've also been able to do a little more of outreach in terms of workshops band, you know, trying to mental health, first aid, etcetera, so it's given us a little more capacity as well.

5.3.3 Coordinate and manage

At JCU, the distribution of HEPPP funds is overseen by Learning, Teaching and Student Engagement (LTSE) Directorate across the four key areas of activity: Outreach and partnership, Transition Activities, Academic Skills, Successful Participation (see Table 1). Staff interviewed have described processes to distribute and evaluate the effectiveness of HEPPP activities, which are both now routinised in the work of both professional and academic staff, and is considered rigorous due to the requirement of evidence-led decision-making and evaluation measures.

5.3.4 Evaluate

Evaluation has drawn on feedback from school students, staff, principals, parents, community members, and other stakeholders as well as equity practitioners and Student Ambassadors. Complementing university based evaluations, the Consortium has undertaken three joint evaluation tasks that drew on common program elements and which were able to be undertaken with limited resources available. These joint tasks are:

- monitoring Year 12 tertiary applications;
- a common survey question for students attending on-campus events; and
- investigations with Student Ambassadors employed on Widening Tertiary Participation projects.

Evaluation work done by the Queensland Widening Tertiary Participation Consortium notes that the most highly engaged schools are showing higher growth in application rates, (since 2012, a 3 per cent increase compared to 0.1 per cent for all Queensland schools). These results align with the proposition that long-term, deep engagement effectively builds student demand and Queensland's long-term vision and coordinated approach is vital for the development of a knowledge economy.

The perception of staff interviewed at JCU, indicates as strong awareness of the robust evaluation of programs that occurs:

We're pulling apart programs at [an] holistic level, how they interact with each other, as well as pulling apart individual programs and seeing if they're running over a number of courses or a number of subjects, are they being similarly affected ... Are they attracting the types of participants from all levels of the university, all different types of students? So the three key questions have been is the participation evenly spread across the university community? Is it equally attracting male, female, Indigenous, non-Indigenous, young, old, etc.? Then, are the impacts of the programs evenly spread across the university community? Is it helping Indigenous as well as non-Indigenous students, for example? Is it helping disabled and non-disabled?

The regular evaluation of HEPPP is evidence by a second staff member's perspective:

We evaluate our program constantly and continuously. That information is fed into the JCU internal report. We've also done several reports on different projects and other funding buckets that have come through in the last couple of years straight to federal government. So they're developed, the VC signs off on them, they go to the department.

Robust evaluation of each program demonstrates the following impact in HEPPP funded initiatives for example:

- **Equity scholarships** – In 2015, a total of 222 students from low SES backgrounds received a scholarship, award or bursary with retention rates of 79 per cent compared with 69 per cent of those who did not receive scholarship support.
- **Student mentors** – with retention for participants at 82 per cent, compared to 62 per cent for non-participants in 2015
- **Unistart** – university preparatory program, 78 per cent retention for participants, compared to 70 per cent for non-participants in 2015
- **Peer Assisted Study Sessions** – PASS: 82 per cent retention for participants, compared to 66 per cent for non-participants in 2015.

In each case above, not only did the programs have a retention effect, but also improved student mean Grade Point Average. JCU staff provided their perceptions on each of these initiatives through interviews:

Two of the things that I clearly see that have been very successful is the PASS program that was supported through HEPPP, that has been supported through HEPPP, and the first year support officer. The [academic skills program name] program it has been good because it's not a normal tutorial since they are really led by the students who are really excelling in that subject and the students I think feel more comfortable going to those sessions and asking any questions.

JCU staff also noted the importance of the HEPPP funding enabling the success of programs to develop and expand, through responding to contextually significant student need and research informed programs:

[JCU] has had a long tradition of peer mentoring - I think what HEPPP has done is enable it to be taken to the next level through funding coordinators and allowing us to deploy to the changing demographics. So, for example, Indigenous students, there was an Indigenous peer mentoring program, it was in [city name]

1] and it's been brought to [city name 2], and looking at distance, peer mentoring and things of that nature. So that was something already existing, so I think we sort of leveraged off that with the further injection of funds, and then we have something like PASS, which there was no history before I came to JCU and we've used HEPPP funds quite strategically again, I think, to invest in PASS initiatives. You can anticipate you're on a winner with PASS because there's robust decades of evidence from the US and works for supplemental instruction about the efficacy of it across all disciplines and all demographics. So [academic skills program name], I think, has been very successful. And again, we've got the data, we've evaluated to show that the increase in retention, not as significant as peer mentoring, but the increase in retention and also in students' success is quite considerable with some now that miss out because they're not perceived to be as attractive in terms of student recruitment.

5.3.5 Informs future planning

At JCU, there are a number of examples of HEPPP funded activities becoming 'business as usual'. Thus the use of Learning Analytics, which was initially funded as a pilot to investigate whether data from the learning management system could be used to proactively identify students in need of support, is now funded as core infrastructure:

We used HEPPP to dabble with Blackboard Analytics, which came from the institution had quite a sophisticated approach to monitoring the students' success. We just didn't have the infrastructure in many ways, IT, physical human, to embark on that sort of activity, but we did invest some money provided by HEPPP in analytics and I think that's worked out quite well for us. As I said, we've moved on to VC strategic funding arrangement now, because we certainly needed to do something in that space, track the online patterns of behaviour.

A further example is a current trial of provision of learning skill support to remote students through a designated portal. This trial will be evaluated to determine whether retention and success of students is enhanced, with a report provided for the University to consider priority budgeting.

Nevertheless, the funding parameters of the HEPPP grant currently dis-incentivise long-term activities. The 2015 reduction of funds for partnership activities have diminished outreach in remote areas of Queensland, with flow on impacts for the relationship between the university and the regional and remote communities that it serves:

So within the partnership space, we've already seen the impact of the retreat from the 2-point-something million dollars that we got in 2014 – 2013, 2014, to the \$600,000-odd that we use now in terms of raising expectations and then not being able to fulfil commitments that schools felt that we had to them. So that's a very real commitment in terms of in our region where the participation rate in higher education is so low that raising expectations about the visibility of university staff to work collaboratively with teachers and students in schools and then pulling all that funding out has been very significant in low SES student schools of which there are many in our region. And the schools that are remote, for example [town name 2], we just can't access the schools in the [region name] with the amount of funding that we have at the scale that we had there for three

years. There was always a risk but you can now see that it would take another two years to get the trust back if we had funding returned.

Additionally, many JCU staff members also recognised the centrality of HEPPP funds in supporting the on-going success of traditionally under-represented students through participation programs currently funded using HEPPP funds, referring to a removal of HEPPP funds as “crippling”, “catastrophic” on the work on the university in supporting success, access and participation of non-traditional students; perceptions which are emphasised the in following interview extract:

I think unfortunately, or fortunately, the university has based most of its support services now around HEPPP funding, and they've moved, increasingly off core funding over the years to shuffle things around and funding has contracted Australia-wide ... And we've gone down a road where we've encouraged wider participation, so we've got a lot of people here who now need a lot more support from a lot of different support services areas that probably back in the days before massification, it may not have been as big an issue, whereas now we've invited a lot of people and we've encouraged a lot of people in through that awareness raising and aspirational work at the high school level and the community level. So I think that ... the whole of the Australian university sector would have to really reframe how they market themselves to the wider Australian population.

Further, a JCU staff member notes that the impact of reductions in HEPPP funding would be on student attrition, and on undoing the work to ‘normalise’ support-seeking behaviour of students:

I think the impact would be on attrition. Scholarships, would definitely have an attrition effect because we already see with the student experience survey data that mental health and wellbeing and financial – need for paid work are the most significant reasons that students drop – are the most likely reasons for students to leave from [institution name]. And that would be a particular travesty in our community with the high levels of unemployment to not be able to provide scholarships of \$1500 to \$5000 that actually make a real difference to students being able to eat or not. And we have a food pantry, all of those kinds of things not funded by HEPPP but – that are well utilised, you can see the need. We've also done a lot of work in terms of normalising student support because we've had services that are relatively stable. Withdrawing HEPPP would potentially destabilise the access to those services or the provision of those services and interrupt our discourse around normalising students attending support services.

Moreover, a JCU staff member recognises the value of HEPPP funds to enabling the institution to serve the people and communities of the region it serves:

I refuse to problematize the students that come to our regional institution. It's not that they're incapable of being successful, but they come with different levels of preparedness, and different aspirations and expectations, or uninformed expectations about what university might be. HEPPP provides the smoothing of that and creates a little bit more of a level playing field.

5.3.6 Conclusions

Given the student demographic characteristics at JCU, and the complex socio-economic conditions facing regional Queensland, the removal of HEPPP funds would undermine years of investment made to encourage remote, rural, and regional people to aspire to undertake university study. Moreover, removing systemic and structural support to facilitate student success, would damage the capacity of regional Queenslanders to transition into a knowledge-led economy.

5.4 La Trobe University

5.4.1 University profile

La Trobe currently accommodates more than 36,000 students and has one of the most diverse cohorts in the sector.

La Trobe has the highest number of undergraduate low SES enrolments of all universities in Victoria. The University reported an undergraduate low SES participation rate of 20.8 per cent in 2015 (postcode measure), which was an increase from 18.6 per cent in 2011.

La Trobe is also the largest provider of higher education in regional Victoria, with campuses in Albury-Wodonga, Bendigo, Mildura, and Shepparton.

The University has many programs and initiatives to increase higher education participation rates among Victoria's disadvantaged communities. HEPPP funding is used to support major equity initiatives across the University, including school partnerships, outreach activities, mentoring, and scholarships.

HEPPP programs run across both the College of Science Health and Engineering and College of Arts, Social Science and Commerce, as well as in areas such as Learning and Teaching, the Office of the PVC (Educational Partnerships and Quality), and the Equality and Diversity Centre.

5.4.2 HEPPP priorities and selection approach

The Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor has responsibility for HEPPP, and the Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research (CHEEDR) oversees the University's HEPPP funds on behalf of the SDVC. The Centre works extensively with the SDVC, the College Pro Vice-Chancellors, the Executive Director of Educational Partnerships and Quality, and the Executive Director of Student Services to establish HEPPP priorities and budgets. Priority is given to larger HEPPP initiatives that influence systemic change.

All HEPPP projects are assessed against Commonwealth eligibility criteria and the University's strategic objectives. Program evaluation is an inherent component of all initiatives.

Program managers and members of senior management have a good understanding of the selection approach. One program manager, for example, stated:

My understanding is that the Director of the central unit and the SDVC select those initiatives based on the guidelines that the Commonwealth provides, and the University's strategy documents, and prioritise which projects are aligned to best meet the objectives.

Table 3: Major HEPPP-funded projects at La Trobe University

| INITIATIVES | DESCRIPTIONS AND OBJECTIVES |
|--|---|
| School Partnerships Program | Collaborate with 32 low socio-economic status schools to deliver activities that provide extra curriculum support, academic preparation, and awareness of university courses and future careers. |
| Science, Health and Engineering (SHE) Outreach programs | Stimulate interest in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) disciplines, particularly for students from low socio-economic status and regional schools. |
| Arts, Social Sciences and Commerce (ASSC) Outreach programs | Development and pilot of new outreach opportunities for students from low socio-economic and regional schools. |
| Academic Early Warning System, Succeed@La Trobe | University-wide communication and referral strategy designed to identify and engage commencing undergraduate students at risk of disengagement. |
| Peer Learning Advisers (PLAs) | Provide academic information, maths and literacy advice, and basic resume checking to students. |
| Equality and Diversity Centre (EDC) | The EDC promotes equal participation of all students and staff of La Trobe and fosters an environment free of discrimination and harassment. |
| Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research (CHEEDR) | The CHEEDR leads research, analysis and evaluation to inform University strategies for improving access and achievement levels of under-represented students. |
| Equity scholarships and bursaries | <i>Employability Bursaries:</i> Awarded on the basis of financial disadvantage to assist low socio-economic status students with placement. <i>Student Mobility Assistance Scholarships:</i> Awarded on the basis of financial disadvantage to assist low socio-economic status students participating in an overseas exchange. <i>Care Leaver Bursary:</i> Awarded to all commencing, domestic undergraduate students at the University who spent time in formal out-of-home care (i.e. foster care, residential care, kinship care, ward of the State). |

5.4.3 Coordination and management

The Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor has responsibility for HEPPP, and the Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research (CHEEDR) oversees the University's HEPPP funds on behalf of the SDVC. Within the Centre, the HEPPP Coordinator is responsible for:

- Liaising with managers of HEPPP programs about budgets, expenditure, and progress against objectives;
- Liaising with the University's Finance Division regarding HEPPP revenue and expenditure, including the monitoring of monthly HEPPP financial reports;
- Preparing and submitting regular progress reports and financial acquittal reports to the Commonwealth Government's Department of Education and Training;
- Coordinating HEPPP-related communications to the University and external community;
- Contributing to university-wide HEPPP strategies;
- Preparing and submitting proposals for competitive HEPPP funding e.g. the National Priorities Pool.

Every HEPPP-funded program has a project manager. Project managers are responsible for: tracking program budgets and expenditure; organising program evaluations; monitoring progress against objectives; and producing a mid-year progress report in June and a final report in December.

5.4.4 Evaluation and improvement

As part of the annual HEPPP quantum, the University dedicates resources to a specific research and evaluation unit: the Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research (CHEEDR). The Centre regularly conducts evaluations of major HEPPP-funded programs and also provides an advisory role, including provision and analysis of relevant institutional data, and consultation with program managers on the development of methodologies for internal program evaluations. In overseeing HEPPP programs, the Centre encourages all program managers to allocate specific budgets for evaluation and improvement purposes.

HEPPP programs have contributed to an increase in the proportion of enrolments of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds at the University. The proportion of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds increased from 18.6 per cent in 2011 to 20.8 per cent in 2015, exceeding the University's 'Future Ready' Strategic Plan target. La Trobe has the highest number of undergraduate low socio-economic status enrolments of all universities in Victoria and is ranked 8th for undergraduate low socio-economic status enrolments nationally. The HEPPP Coordinator reported that: "The central unit frequently monitors the access, retention, and completion rates of low SES students".

5.4.5 Examples of successful programs

The School Partnerships Program

The School Partnerships Program works collaboratively with specific disadvantaged schools to raise awareness of higher education and inform career aspiration by providing access to a range of activities that engage students and their school communities.

Since 2011, biennial surveys of staff and students at the partner schools have been conducted to evaluate the program. The most recent evaluation was conducted by the Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research in 2015 and included surveys of staff and 6,000 students across constituent schools.

Regular evaluations have informed program strategy and implementation, for example the expansion of the Program from 15 to 32 schools. Evaluations have also found improved outcomes for students at participating schools. For example, enrolments from SPP schools increased by 38 per cent, compared to 19 per cent for comparator schools.

The program manager has used evaluation data to identify opportunities for improvement. The program manager stated:

They did benchmarking with over 800 students and 200 staff, and baselined so they could then evaluate the program moving forward. This showed there was a difference between metro and regional, and between individual schools even though all were low SES. They found there was a mismatch between student and staff expectations of students' post-school aspirations.

Employability Bursaries

The Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research found that students from regional areas and low SES backgrounds are less likely to participate in work experience opportunities that are vital in improving graduate employability. To address this issue, the Centre proposed implementing Employability Bursaries for disadvantaged students valued at \$2,000 per student. The Centre worked with the Colleges, Student Services, and the Academic Services Management Office to develop an employability bursary scheme for students from LSES backgrounds. The proposal was accepted and the HEPPP-funded bursaries were launched in 2015.

The success of the first year of the program has resulted in this program being HEPPP-funded again 2016. The Centre continues to conduct research into employability, and has been awarded a \$76,000 research grant for 2016 from the National Priorities Pool.

Mobility Assistance Scholarship

The Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research highlighted that both low socio-economic status and regional students are less likely to enrol in a language unit and less likely to travel internationally for study. To address this issue, the Centre proposed implementing Mobility Assistance Scholarship for disadvantaged students valued at \$1,500 per student. The Centre worked with Student Services, the Academic Services Management Office and La Trobe International (LTI) to develop the Mobility Assistance Scholarship to assist low socio-economic students to participate in overseas study programs. The proposal was accepted and the HEPPP-funded scholarships were launched in 2015. The success of the first year of the program has resulted in this program being funded through HEPPP again in 2016.

La Trobe University's care leaver strategy

Supported by the Office of the SDVC, the Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research worked to develop a holistic strategy to attract and support care leavers at the University. The strategy aims to:

- raise the higher education aspirations for young people in out-of-home care and care leavers;
- increase enrolments of care leavers at La Trobe University;
- increase support for care leavers attending La Trobe University to encourage their success in higher education; and
- continue leading the national research agenda and influencing national policy.

In December 2016, 163 people identified themselves as care leavers through the VTAC SEAS application form.

La Trobe University has received funding to conduct further research into care leavers as part of three externally funded projects:

- Tsorbaris, D., Wilson, J., Harvey, A., McNamara, P., Snow, P. & Corrales, T. (2015), Improving education outcomes for young people in out of home care, Myer Foundation large grant, \$724,000.

- Harvey, A., Andrewartha, L., Wilson, J., Beckley, A., & O'Brien, G. (2015). Attracting and supporting care leavers from low socio-economic status backgrounds, Australian Government, Department of Education National Priorities Pool, \$127,000.
- Harvey, A., McNamara, P., Brett, M. & Andrewartha, L. (2014). University Access and Achievement of People from Out-of-home Care Backgrounds, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, \$64,000.

Academic Early Warning System, Succeed@La Trobe

Succeed@La Trobe is a program for commencing undergraduate students with the goals of: identifying triggers of student attrition and strategies to minimise future occurrences; and facilitating the provision of student support. The Program reaches 6,600 students annually. More than half of these students are first-in-family, low SES, remote, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and/or have a low ATAR.

5.5 University of Newcastle

5.5.1 Equity and widening participation at UON

The University of Newcastle (UON) is a research intensive institution currently ranked in the top 250 universities world-wide¹ and included in the top ten Australian universities for research income². UON operates at multiple sites with campuses based in Newcastle, the Central Coast, Port Macquarie, Sydney and Singapore. It offers 198 undergraduate and postgraduate coursework programs and 173 research masters and PhD programs across five faculties, including: Business and Law, Education and Arts, Engineering and the Built Environment, Health and Medicine, and Science and Information Technology. In 2015, UON had 38,239 enrolments of which 2,960 students were enrolled in enabling courses. Almost 25% of UON's undergraduate enrolments in 2015 were students from low SES backgrounds, an increase from 23.5% in 2011.

Equity is at the forefront of UON's current strategic direction *NeW Futures*, which commits the university to working to achieve parity between the proportion of UON students who enter and graduate from diverse socioeconomic, cultural and disability backgrounds with the proportion of people who are from those backgrounds in its regions. The communities most directly served by UON, including greater Newcastle, the Hunter Valley and the Central Coast, are characterised by households with incomes and educational qualifications significantly below the NSW average and the national average³.

According to the 2015 Annual Report:

UON stands as a global leader distinguished by a commitment to equity and excellence and to creating a better future for its regions through a focus on innovation and impact. For 50 years, UON has demonstrated that equity of access to higher education and excellence of education and research programs are the foundations of a world class university. UON has been clear that a first rate education should be available to any individual with the talent and commitment to succeed, independent of their social, cultural or financial

¹ Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2016 and QS World University Rankings 2016.

² Higher Education Research Data Collection 2014.

³ ABS 2011.

background. This commitment to equity and social justice is a core UON value and part of our 'institutional DNA'.⁴

The Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education

This notion of equity in the DNA stems from UON's long history of commitment to widening participation, which the establishment of the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE) in 2013 aims to strengthen. Under the directorship of globally recognised equity scholars, CEEHE provides strategic and research leadership at UON. Using a praxis-oriented framework that generates dialogue between theory, research and practice, CEEHE draws on international expertise and UON's extensive experience of equity initiatives to understand the complex field of widening participation in higher education.

Under the management of CEEHE, UON's school outreach programs are coordinated by the widening participation (WP) unit, which endeavours to increase the understanding of higher education among schools and communities by offering a suite of tertiary education experiences to primary and high school students from under-represented backgrounds. In 2015, the WP unit worked with over 10,000 young people through partnerships with more than 60 schools across the Hunter, Central Coast and mid-North Coast. Notably, UON is one of only three universities in Australia to run a Children's University. Launched in 2015, the *Children's University Newcastle* recently graduated nearly 300 children aged between 7 and 14 years at its inaugural graduation ceremony.

Along with CEEHE, there are a number of centres contributing to the university's strong track record as a national leader in improving equity of access to higher education, including the English Language and Foundation Studies Centre (ELFSC), the Family Action Centre (FAC), and the Wollotuka Institute.

The English Language and Foundation Studies Centre

ELFSC is a teaching and research unit that oversees UON's enabling programs and provides additional support and services for enabling students. Through ELFSC, UON is the largest provider of alternate entry pathways in Australia. Since 1974, UON has supported over 45,000 students from diverse backgrounds to access higher education through its free enabling programs. The Open Foundation program has been operating for over 40 years and is a tertiary preparation program for people aged 20 years and over. Newstep, which commenced in 1990, is a one-year program designed for 18-20 year olds who did not complete the Higher School Certificate or who did not gain sufficient marks for entry into university. Yapug is a pathway program designed to help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people gain skills for entry into undergraduate degrees at the University of Newcastle. Approximately 3,000 students enrol in UON's domestic enabling programs every year and about 90 per cent of those who are successful go on to study in an undergraduate degree program with Newcastle. In partnership, CEEHE and ELFSC have established the academic journal, *International Studies in Widening Participation*, which publishes two volumes of peer reviewed papers per year.

⁴ UON Annual Report 2015.

The Family Action Centre

The Family Action Centre is a research, teaching and practice centre focused on families and their communities. The centre has had a 30 year commitment to addressing the factors that affect the health, wellbeing, social and educational paths of families, particularly for those challenged by increasingly complex vulnerabilities. FAC delivers family support services, parenting programs, health evaluation initiatives, and several outreach programs for enabling purposes, including Uni4You and Deadly Streaming.

The Wollotuka Institute

Since 1983, the Wollotuka Institute has been at the centre of UON's commitment to Indigenous education and research. Wollotuka is an all-Indigenous staffed unit overseen by an all-Indigenous Board, which manages all of UON's Indigenous activities under one strategic and operational body. Its management and governance structures set it apart from all other higher education Indigenous units in Australia. In 2015 Wollotuka received Australia's first World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium accreditation, recognising its strong outcomes within Australian Indigenous Higher Education. As testament to Wollotuka's role in Indigenous Higher Education, in 2014 UON had the highest number of Indigenous students of any university in Australia with a participation rate of 2.9 per cent compared with the national participation rate of 1.5 per cent. This participation rate increased to 3.2% in 2015. Nearly half the Indigenous medical practitioners in Australia have graduated from UON.

5.5.2 HEPPP at UON

As illustrated through its longstanding historical commitments, UON demonstrates a strong commitment to widening participation and to supporting students from under-represented backgrounds through higher education from access to graduation and beyond. Much of the equity work undertaken by UON has been strengthened through funding provided by the federal government's *Higher Education Participation and Partnerships* (HEPPP) scheme.

UON's HEPPP allocation for 2016 was \$7,093,119, making it the third highest recipient of Commonwealth funding, after the University of Western Sydney and Charles Sturt University, respectively. HEPPP has a strong strategic presence at UON because of its regional location where it serves many disadvantaged communities and also as a result of its long standing enabling agenda.

Perceptions of HEPPP allocation according to key staff

Twenty staff whose work informs and utilises HEPPP funding were interviewed for this case study, with interviewees ranging from members of the executive to project officers. All staff interviewed considered the HEPPP scheme beneficial to the sector and UON. There was also broad general consensus of understanding about the nature and purpose of HEPPP. Most interviewees explained HEPPP in terms of higher education and social justice. For example, a member of the executive spoke of UON's HEPPP budget as a reflection of its obligation to support the high proportion of commencing students from equity groups:

... this institution has a large number of [students] that need more support in order to make sure that we as an institution deliver the success that we're almost kind of promising them at the point of admission, so the principle ... I'm looking

at is how I can get parity of equality both at the point of admission and to make sure that once they are in the institution that they are successful.

Executive decisions about specific allocations were recognised as based on the various historical successes in widening participation at UON.

The development of a HEPPP framework over time

The use of HEPPP funds at UON has been approached in several different ways since the scheme commenced in 2010. In the first few years, UON implemented an internal grant program overseen by a steering committee, chaired by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic).⁵ This grant program consisted of staff applying for small, medium or large grants to pursue 'innovative activities' that significantly enhanced UON's "efforts to promote access and retention for people from low SES backgrounds".⁶ However, this approach was deemed administratively intensive and proved difficult in terms of monitoring outcomes. For instance, one executive commented: "the allocation...was quite ad hoc. So money was basically going to whatever people thought was a good idea, and there wasn't a framework for allocation of funds at all."

Since 2013 when the *NeW Directions Strategic Plan 2013-2015* was operationalised, HEPPP funds have been allocated in line with strategic priorities and to address key areas of the student life cycle: including pre-access, access, participation, and attainment and transition out. Around this time, CEEHE was also established as a key component of UON's equity agenda in providing strategic equity advice to the university's Executive Committee and with managing HEPPP funding allocations and reporting.

HEPPP allocations are also informed by the annual UON Student Equity Performance Report. This approach has continued under the most recent strategic plan, *NeW Futures*. Under the current UON model, HEPPP funding is invested across five strategic areas, including:

- School and community outreach - a widening participation agenda
- Support services for enabling students
- Equity and hardship scholarships
- Student transition and retention support initiatives
- Equity research - building the evidence base (i.e. CEEHE)

This strategic approach of allocating funds was explained by one interviewee who has worked in equity roles at UON for many years as follows:

... we did look across the different life cycle stages of students, and have allocated funding across those areas. And in line with some of the work that came out of the Critical Interventions Framework⁷ and now the Equity Initiatives Framework⁸, as well as looking at the pre-access stage, so the awareness area, so the school outreach ... and it's really about creating awareness, creating an expectation to participate in higher ed, because by the time students have got to

⁵ University of Newcastle: Executive Committee - Establishment of HEPPP Steering Group, 25 July 2011.

⁶ University of Newcastle: HEPPP Grants 2012 - Guidelines for Applicants.

⁷ Naylor, R., Baik, C., and James, R. (2013). *Developing a Critical Interventions Framework for Advancing Equity in Australian Higher Education*.

⁸ Bennett, A., Naylor, R., Mellor, K., Brett, M., Gore, J., Harvey, A., Munn, B., James, R., Smith, M., and Whitty, G. (2015). *The Critical Interventions Framework Part 2: Equity Initiatives in Australian Higher Education: A Review of Evidence of Impact*.

Year 11 or 12 it's not about creating it. So there's funding for that area. There's then funding for the pre-undergraduates, so support for students to participate in enabling programs, so there's some specific embedded support within enabling, there's also a pre-enabling program, so preparing people to participate in higher ed. Part of the money goes to that pre-access school and community work, part of it is around enabling, so not the delivery of enabling programs, but support for the students to participate in enabling. Then there's the transition and retention area, scholarships and then the research-informed practice, which is the work of [CEEHE] - trying to develop better awareness of what does and doesn't work. Where's the evidence for what's working.

These allocations are also in line with meeting the strategies that are outlined in the UON Access & Participation Plan 2015-2017.⁹ As shown in this document, the focus at UON is on increasing the participation and success of students from low SES backgrounds, students who have a disability or students who identify as Indigenous.

Prior to HEPPP, as noted above, UON had a long history of supporting outreach and enabling pursuits. Some staff explicitly explained how the activities and successes of these areas of practice at UON have been broadened and strengthened by HEPPP monies. For example, when discussing UON's outreach history, one senior manager stated:

... the University of Newcastle started doing that before the HEPPP scheme was introduced and had strong relationships with the Department of Education and with schools. And so HEPPP's really allowed the University of Newcastle to build on those and really amplify the outcomes that we were seeing a decade or so ago, and build on those.

An executive staff member had a similar opinion about HEPPP enabling the important opportunity to build on, and develop new approaches, based on aspects of what have become considered effective over time:

I think HEPPP has very often given us the opportunity to trial initiatives that otherwise would never have happened because the university's budgeting model doesn't have an innovation stream that we can access. As we get feedback from students, as things evolve, the need to do things differently, to have access to technology that helps engage differently and so on, there are a whole number of ways that we would identify the need for fresh approaches and initiatives that HEPPP has allowed us to trial. Things which have subsequently become mainstream activities but we've been able to demonstrate the value of something and then to embed it in our business as usual practice, so I think it has that very particular value that would be hard to replicate internally.

As reflected in the above comments, HEPPP funding has provided the means for UON to further create supportive pathways into university and through to graduation. Apart from scholarships, which directly benefit students from under-represented backgrounds, much of the HEPPP budget is spent on staffing initiatives and projects.

⁹ See <https://docs.education.gov.au/documents/university-newcastle-2015-2017-access-and-participation-plan>.

Notably, all staff interviewed were of the opinion that if HEPPP were withdrawn, the effect would have a devastating impact on equity at UON, with the loss of key widening participation programs and services for students from under-represented backgrounds.

5.5.3 Details of HEPPP initiatives and programs

As noted above, UON directs HEPPP funding into five key areas. Interview data gathered for this case study are drawn on to provide details about initiatives and programs in the following sections.

School and Community Outreach

A key area of equity practice and use of HEPPP funds at UON is school and community outreach, which is primarily overseen by the widening participation (WP) unit in CEEHE. Across the interviews with outreach staff there was a strong sense of higher education awareness-raising and a number of staff were careful to point out that UON's outreach work has nothing to do with recruitment to the university: that HEPPP investment in this area is a social good and it matters not where individuals end up studying.

Over the years, UON outreach staff have experimented with different approaches to school engagement. Whilst some of the initiatives have evolved or grown, others have been retired. For instance, the Summer Residential Program for Year 9 students, which has been running for ten years, concluded in 2016. However, new ones have emerged, such as the recent adoption of the Children's University initiative. School outreach activities undertaken by CEEHE's widening participation unit in 2016 included the following:

Table 4: School outreach activities undertaken by the WP Unit in 2016

| PROGRAM | TARGET GROUP | LOCATION |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|
| Careers through Science | Year 4 | Partner schools |
| Careers through Reading | Year 5 | Partner schools |
| Digital Days Out | Year 6 | UON campus |
| Hour of Code | Years 7 & 8 | Partner schools |
| Children's University Newcastle | Years 2 through to 7 | Various 'learning destinations' and an on-campus graduation day |
| Skills for Success | Years 7 & 9 | UON campus |
| AVID | Years 7, 8, 9 & 10 | Partner schools & UON campus |
| Journeys to Success | Years 8, 9 & 10 | Pilot school |
| Girls' Choices | Year 9 (girls) | UON campus - Summer Residential |
| Live It! | Year 9 (boys) | UON campus - Summer Residential |
| My Big Tomorrow | Years 9 & 10 | Online - UON website Supported by in-school workshops (AIM HIGH schools) |
| Resilience and HSC Coach Workshop | Years 11 & 12 | Online - UON website Supported by in-school workshops (AIM HIGH schools) |
| Live, Learn, Grow | Years 10, 11, 12 & enabling/undergraduate | UON campus |

The Family Action Centre also receives a portion of UON's HEPPP funding to conduct outreach work, which in 2016 included two initiatives that have been running for some time: Deadly Streaming and Uni4You (delivered in cooperation with ELFSC). Deadly Streaming is aimed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in primary and secondary schools with the explicit purpose of improving school attendance, supporting connection to culture, and encouraging cultural sensitivity in schools. The Uni4You initiative aims to encourage adults in communities historically under-represented in higher education to consider enabling studies.

Support Services for Enabling Students

According to UON enabling programs staff, HEPPP funding has provided an opportunity to improve student experiences and completions. The key shift implemented in this space has been to 'embed' support and information into both online and face-to-face programs, which in the past have had high rates of non-completion. The aim of this funding is to assist enabling students, particularly those from low SES and non-standard backgrounds, to successfully complete their enabling and transition to undergraduate study. The value of HEPPP-funding to improving support for enabling students is explained by an ELFSC executive as follows '[HEPPP] has enabled us to move in directions that we may have struggled with trying, just using UON funding. So for example over the last about five or six years we've embedded our support ...' This executive emphasised the importance of embedded support which in the enabling space goes beyond support for the development of academic skills and supports the individual to navigate complex information and institutional systems.

Equity and hardship scholarships

UON is committed to providing scholarships to help students from LSES backgrounds study at university, the costs of which are often a significant barrier to students from backgrounds of financial disadvantage. Using HEPPP funding, UON is one of fifteen Table A universities that provide Institutional Equity Scholarships, through a UAC application process. The Equity Scholarship Scheme University of Newcastle (ESSUN) assists financially disadvantaged undergraduate students. ESSUN scholarships are \$3000 per annum for a full year of full-time study (30 units or more in each semester), payable as two instalments of \$1500 after each semester census date. In 2015, 416 students held ESSUN scholarships including 135 new scholarships awarded that year. Based on the ESSUN applications received, a further 63 students received a one-off hardship payment to assist with commencing costs or to meet urgent needs such as work placements. According to comparative data, the academic performance of ESSUN recipients in 2015 was similar to that of non-ESSUN students; this is a reassuring outcome given that the cohort includes higher proportions of mature age, first in family, indigenous, and disabled students.

Student transition and retention support initiatives

HEPPP funded transition and retention strategies at UON include a number of smaller projects aimed at supporting students from under-represented backgrounds to successfully complete their studies. These support strategies are particularly aimed at those individuals

who are at risk of not completing their degree.¹⁰ Recent HEPPP funded initiatives in this domain, for instance, include a Peer-to-Peer intervention, designated case management support for students who register with a mental health disability, and the design and implementation of e-learning materials. The Peer-to-Peer intervention, which involves targeted students being contacted by another student who is employed and trained for the initiative, reached over 13,000 students in 2015.

An executive working closely on student care and equity explains the current UON focus on students with a disability:

... we've got a project officer in disability support who's been doing a number of different projects looking at in-class exams and quizzes for students with disabilities, a few other smaller projects as well, and a program that we trialled from the middle of about last year which is going really well for students with autism spectrum disorder and enduring mental health conditions where they get a lot more intensive support through the disability services and a lot of life skills, and that's been successful for a...group of students who have the potential to do really well if they're assisted in that way.

Equity Research - CEEHE

Along with providing strategic equity advice to the university's Executive Committee and managing HEPPP funding allocations and reporting, UON's Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE) is building a research-informed framework for widening participation at UON and across the sector. CEEHE does this through conducting, commissioning and supporting research and evaluation that improves understanding of the challenges faced by under-represented groups in higher education and how best to develop equitable and inclusive practices to support students across the different stages of the student life cycle. CEEHE also has a focus on developing the professional capacity of academics and practitioners to critically reflect on their work and to develop research informed equity practice. Under the leadership of international experts in the field of equity in higher education CEEHE is developing equity research, evaluation and practice capacity through a range of strategies and approaches.

One of CEEHE's executives explained the approach of the centre at UON as a dialogue between research and practice:

[CEEHE] brings together research and practice, and was developed really because the university has such a long-standing history around providing programs for equity in higher education including the 40 year old enabling program. A wonderful profile but very little research to speak to that profile so the idea was really to provide a research framework around that practice and to also create the capacity around an international profile of research in the area of equity in higher education. A significant proportion of funding for the centre comes from HEPPP funding and that goes both to the work that we do mainly around outreach, so the variety of different programs around outreach, but also some of the other work that we do around seed funding for research ...

¹⁰ Although it is important to note that institutional data shows that socioeconomic background alone does not determine a student's retention or 'success'. Instead, it is previous educational background and performance, closely correlated with SES and parity of educational opportunities (or lack of them), that is considered to influence 'success'.

She went on to discuss the broader goals of CEEHE as a research framework as follows:

This is one of the things that I've found is so powerful about creating this framework is that all of these people who are so passionate about equity and so passionate about making a difference to their students' lives but have had to work quite individually suddenly have a community to articulate their concerns and develop and enrich their practice through that space. So work like that around teaching and then just being able to begin to have a conversation about some of the other surrounding HEPPP funded mechanisms that are put into place such as study skills and counselling support and have conversations ... Bringing the research into the conversation so again that can be refined and developed but it's a process ... Building opportunities for collaborative work, collaborative projects, collaborative writing, collaborative research and to really then, again, provide the resources to develop deeper understanding around how we can refine our practices around equity across all stages and contexts of higher education and beyond just schooling and outreach and broader communities.

As this interviewee explains, HEPPP funding has been important to the development of building on the successes of the long history of equity programs and initiatives at UON. HEPPP is a critical aspect that enables learning about the details of activities, successes, challenges, insights of researchers/practitioners, best practice and opportunities for improving equity in higher education across the sector.

5.5.4 HEPPP coordination and management

CEEHE, which sits within UON's Academic Division (along with ELFSC and Wollotuka), reports directly to the Executive Committee. CEEHE oversees the distribution of HEPPP funds that enable the provision of programs and initiatives across five key areas as outlined in the section above. According to interview data, once annual HEPPP funds have been apportioned, executive staff in those areas whilst accountable have relative independence as to how they coordinate and manage programs, as explained in this account by the executive in charge of overseeing HEPPP at UON:

I think the advantage of having that kind of fairly stable [approach to] the funding being split across those five areas, is that it allows people, even though the HEPPP funding is 12 months and we have this eleventh hour rush on the day of Christmas close-down sorting out contracts, it has allowed for some consistency of program deliveries. And while we make those allocations, and while I keep an overview of what's happening in those areas, it's up to each of those individual areas where there is that localised expertise, to work out how will they exactly spend their allocation. And those decisions are taken at senior level, so the Pro-Vice Chancellor for Teaching and Learning, she has responsibility for allocating the transition and retention share. The Director of Enabling Programs, he has responsibility for allocating the enabling support share [and so on].

The following comment made by another interviewee on the current approach to allocating larger pots of money across strategic areas is illuminating:

My comment on that [approach] is generally very good. There was before, I wouldn't say before CEEHE but the way it was done one time and I know it's been done at other universities is everybody puts in for projects and what you ended up with was 50 projects and some people used it just to keep staff and move staff around and keep them in. And then there was, 25,000 to do this project, they did the project and nothing was sustainable. So I think the way we are using ours in larger tranches of money and trying to ensure there's continuity and an outcome [is very good].

This staff member went on to assert that a close understanding of equity issues improves the use of HEPPP funds:

And [CEEHE] probably, along with us [i.e. Enabling], have a better knowledge of what the equity issues are. And if you'd given it to an administrative area of the university they may use different guidances to make that decision while I believe CEEHE is guided by a strong equity principle.

As demonstrated by some interview responses, the system at UON is not without confusion or criticism as the following comment suggests:

Just an example, I guess, with ESSUN scholarships, I've never been asked, I've never been involved in how that pot of money is determined or any analysis of whether it's actually working to achieve the university's goals. I tend to get handed a pot of money at some point in time and told, "Well, you have this to fund ESSUN" ... And it's a mystery to me how that pot of money has been decided, who decided it, on what basis, and we just have to make it work ... so I'm being really frank in this regard that I don't know that - obviously at a strategic level from the Vice Chancellor's conversations that she has publicly and so on, [...], we have a great track record in lots of ways, but ... it's not translated well.

However, as reported in the sections above, most interviewees noted improvements in UON's administration of HEPPP monies based on a combination of good oversight and evidence of impact over time:

I think I've seen a more consolidated approach in the last year or two, and I think that that is a good thing, that there's a bit more consistency ... it's to do with the planning of it. Yeah. There seems to be a little bit more of a coordinated approach to it. And some of those projects are now building up a fair bit of evidence of impact, and also, they've trialled things because HEPPP funding has been used to trial things. And then if they're not scalable or they're not working so well, then they have not been pursued the next year. So having had five years of it now, I think that the projects that are ongoing are in good shape.

Indeed, most interviewees asserted that UON's developing evidence-based approach to managing HEPPP spending was valuable.

5.5.5 HEPPP evaluation and reporting

HEPPP funded projects and activities at UON are subject to internal reporting and evaluation requirements. Each area of expenditure is evaluated by the project leader with a progress

report and an end of year report, which are forwarded to the staff member overseeing the allocation of HEPPP funds, who then uses the internal reports to compile annual reports to both UON's Executive Committee and the federal government.

The reporting on individual projects was explained by one interview participant:

... so individual projects provide reports on their outcomes against their objectives, and so some of their evaluation is based on surveys - so, for example, some of the [Partner] schools will do pre- and post-surveys, and then some of them do testimonials, so talking to principals or parents ... [Another example] so enabling - track, you know, which students come to career sessions and how many are delivered, and a lot of that quantitative data they report on. And then they all report against their project objectives, their budget. Everybody provides a report at the end of each...calendar year.

UON has also prioritised building the evidence base and evaluating HEPPP activities at the institutional level through the establishment of a dedicated data analysis role. The data analyst is employed using HEPPP funding, and has the specific role of assisting with evaluation of projects and activities funded by HEPPP. She explained how her work is at the institutional level:

... so projects are evaluated at the project level. And then I'm involved in more the supporting those evaluations with data as needed, so if they need to know how many first-in-family students or things like that. And then I do reporting at an institutional level on equity group performance. And then with HEPPP evaluation, do things like the annual project summaries ... I've often collated them, sent them back to [the staff member overseeing the allocation of HEPPP funds], and then she's done the final report to EC [i.e. Executive Committee].

This same staff member pointed out that her independence from widening participation efforts was a positive:

I think what is good too is having me separate or sort of be seen as a bit independent. I think [the Reporting and Analytics unit] in general at the institution is seen as being a little bit independent and that the data is of quality and reliable.

The interviewee's supervisor explained that 'we see the value in the HEPPP analysis because [the Project Officer] can really be across all of this and apply a fairly consistent knowledge and approach to it, whereas otherwise it would've been a lot more piecemeal.' Her colleague clarified further: 'we don't evaluate specific HEPPP projects, we evaluate the overall patterns of success, retention, success, and so in that context it does. As for how individual programs or grants are awarded, I can't say.'

The data analyst explained how her work also contributes directly to student retention efforts:

... each year, [the Reporting and Analytics unit] helps to identify students that are at risk of attrition, and then we work with Student Central to identify those students. And the model is revised each year according to information that we

get. And then Student Central used student mentors to ring the students and refer them to various support services.

5.5.6 Moving forward

According to an executive (research), a stronger evaluation framework is currently being developed:

There are processes of evaluation which are probably steeped in very conventional evaluation strategies around surveys, around questionnaires, around some kind of checking of participation, of participants' experiences of those programs. We're actually through CEEHE, and because CEEHE is relatively new, we're developing a richer evaluation framework to deepen that process and to ensure that the evaluation methodology is rigorous and that is actually going to be able to improve the processes and the practices around equity. We're in that process at the moment ... It's a rigorous process that's informed by theoretical perspectives so a much deeper evaluation process is already being put into play. We're actually working on something that is taking a step further, a very explicit set of methodologies and concepts that will help inform the evaluation process in the future. The idea is to cement this relationship between research and practice so that the area of practice is able to participate actively in the evaluation to work together with the communities in which the HEPPP is actually embedded to ensure that all of the perspectives come to play to help understand what the purpose of the HEPPP programs are from those different perspectives and to be able to then understand how you best evaluate that based on the understanding of why they're in place and what different mechanisms have been put into place to create change in those communities.

The same research participant explains that this involves:

... decision-making at all levels. So it's decision-making across the CEEHE team which means everybody who's involved in the design of those programs but it also will feed up, if you want to think of it that way, to the understanding at the university level about the value of those programs and what actually creates the most effective equity practices across those different contexts that we were just talking about. I imagine that the evaluation will feed directly into decision-making about what's valued, why it's valued and how we can create programs that make a change, make a difference in terms of widening participation ... It's not only about collecting data and having evidence but it's actually about analysing that evidence and making sense of it and making sense of it in relation to a rather extensive research history around equity in higher education that already exists ... Globally, yeah, so it's actually making the connections between those so that the evaluation is able to shed better light on the kind of work that needs to be done and how you refine that work and how you develop it to make sure that the use of resources is more effective and strategic.

5.5.7 HEPPP planning and project sustainability

Staff also provided insights about the value of the current UON approach, sustainability and issues associated with the government's reduced HEPPP funding model. An executive explained that:

I think that's the value of CEEHE is we've now got Practice and Research talking together in the one physical location with institutional backing, and I think we will see. And we are making decisions, partly as a result of being in a Research Centre. Our school [outreach] program, our AIM HIGH Program, has been funded from HEPPP for the last six years. Last year we worked with 10,000 young people across 100 schools. But now, being surrounded by more evaluators and researchers, we've gone back to look at school profiles in terms of their performance and retention and transition to university. We're looking at what schools mention AIM HIGH in their school plan, if the team is critically reflecting on their practice, then the chances are we are going to do that program very differently next year.

Another executive explains the sustainability of enabling support programs:

... the other key thing is sustainability. So we try to do a lot of stuff online because ... there's been a lot of uncertainty every year about HEPPP. I hate from now onwards because it's always, "Will we get HEPPP funding. How much will it be?" And of course in the foreseeable future it's going to be cut. So we now know that, but it looks like at least it's continuing for a period of time. So my mantra to my staff has been, "If you develop something I want to make sure it's sustainable." The only thing of course that's not sustainable are people.

Many of the staff interviewed highlighted the problems with funding, especially with staffing, under the one year HEPPP funding model.

In terms of consideration about what kinds of initiatives might not be working well, one executive (administration) said:

... because one of the other things that we're increasingly trying to do is identify initiatives that are going to have sustainable long term change, rather than just using HEPPP to prop up operating costs, trying to look at the issue around student disability, if part of the issue is that academics aren't equipped to deal with issues in the classroom. There's no point us keep pouring money into the Disability Support Service, when you need to upskill academics.

5.5.8 Conclusions

CEEHE oversees the distribution of HEPPP funds at UON that enable the provision of programs and initiatives across five key areas, as outlined in previous sections of this report. According to interview data, once annual HEPPP funds have been apportioned, executive staff in those areas, whilst accountable, have relative independence as to how they coordinate and manage programs.

All staff interviewed argued that if HEPPP was withdrawn this would impact on the long-standing commitments to, and significant achievements in, gaining greater equity in higher education at UON. All the key staff involved in the study across all levels of employment,

presented as deeply committed and proud of their work in striving to achieve equity of access and opportunity at UON.

As illustrated by the interview excerpts and analysis provided in this case study, there was a mix of important insights shared by participants about HEPPP funding and their work at UON. Differences in opinion about funding needs and priorities varied according to the area and activities staff worked. A clear pride, enthusiasm and dedication to their work and to the students it is ultimately intended to serve was expressed by all staff interviewed.

As emerged from the interviews, continuing improvements in communication and collaboration across the university are important so that high quality service, practice, pedagogy and research (to both establish impact and to inform them) is considered critical.

5.6 University of the Sunshine Coast

5.6.1 Introduction

This case study report is one of six studies which contribute to the project entitled: A comparative study of the efficacy of equity strategies employed by Australian universities. The project aims to build evidence about the efficacy of equity strategies (with an emphasis on the Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program (HEPPP)) employed by six Australian universities to improve opportunities and success in higher education for people from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds. Information for this case study report has been drawn from the University of the Sunshine Coast's (USC) contributions to phases 1 and 2 of the project; during the first phase interviews were conducted with 13 USC Stakeholders, whilst the second phase involved an audit of documents relating to USC's equity strategies. This case study report provides an overview of equity strategies currently in place at USC, highlights examples of good practice and identifies areas for future development.

5.6.2 Context and student enrolments

The footprint of USC extends from Fraser Coast in the north to central Brisbane. USC is headquartered on the Queensland Sunshine Coast, one of Australia's fastest growing regions. Other campuses are located to the north and south at Gympie, Fraser Coast, and SouthBank in Brisbane. In addition to these main campuses USC has teaching locations at the Sunshine Coast University Hospital, the Thompson Mind and Neuroscience Institute, Noosa, Caboolture, and North Lakes and managed campuses in Melbourne and Sydney. At the time of writing this case study USC had 11,602 students enrolled, of which 88.2% are domestic and 11.8% are international. The vast majority of students (99.1%) study on campus. The average age of USC students is 25 years with 57.2% of students aged 21 years or over; 63.6% of USC students are female and 36.4% are male. Of the students undertaking a Bachelor Pass, Bachelors Graduate Entry, Bachelors Honours, Associate Degree or Diploma, 49.1% are the first in their family to attend university. Of the total number of students enrolled, 20% are from low socioeconomic backgrounds, 24% are from regional backgrounds and 0.3% are from remote backgrounds. Between 2014 and 2015 there was a 0.9% increase in Indigenous student enrolments, and the total number of Indigenous students currently represents 3.1% of all domestic students. The percentage of students with disabilities also increased between 2014 and 2015 from 6.2% to 6.7%.

5.6.3 Types of initiatives undertaken

USC prioritises increasing access to higher education for all equity groups, in particular students from LSES backgrounds, Indigenous Australians and students with disabilities. Strategies include school-based and community-based aspiration building and academic preparation programs targeting low SES and Indigenous students, particularly in the STEM disciplines, and a range of activities including on-campus experiences and USC's undergraduate enabling program - the Tertiary Preparation Pathway (TPP). Specific strategies are also in place to address the needs of current USC students from equity groups, these strategies include equity bursaries and additional support services for students with a disability, however all support services are designed with the overall aim of increasing participation of the cohorts of students who enrol at USC.

USC is committed to a wide range of outreach programs with primary and secondary schools within the region, particularly those schools located within low socio-economic areas. To ensure the University targets its resources in the most effective manner as well as carrying out its obligations under the Widening Participation (WP) Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), a number of secondary schools from each region within the USC cluster have been identified as a priority for concentrated WP work. These secondary schools were selected according to the proportion of students from LSES backgrounds at their feeder primary schools. The secondary schools fed by greater numbers of primary schools with a higher proportion of low SES pupils were prioritised. This selection process supports the scaffolded nature of USC's WP activities which take a long-term approach to maximising opportunities to pupils throughout their school careers. As resources permit, programs and activities offered at these schools (and as relevant, their feeder primary schools) will be expanded to others. A joint Pathways and Access Strategy exists to ensure student recruitment and WP activities are synergistic. The USC Marketing and External Engagement team offers all schools within the USC region opportunities to participate in a range of activities throughout the year, a number of these complement the WP agenda or are linked to particular pathways programs.

The current outreach programs for schools include:

- Creative Writing for Excellence Program**
- Young Scholars Program*
- Explore* (widening career aspirations for primary pupils)
- Emerge* (widening career aspirations for secondary pupils)
- Work Inspirations (The Smith Family)**
- Science and Maths Excellence Program
- The Green City Robotics Challenge
- The Science and Engineering Challenge
- Science and Engineering Discovery Day*
- Science and Engineering Technology Expo
- Science Research Awards
- The Western Desert Art Program (online resources)*
- MyTED (My Tertiary Education Day) (online resources)*

USC is also established in community-based programs which aim to raise awareness of academic pathways amongst people who may not have considered tertiary education in the past. These programs include:

- Uni Skills in the Community*
- Learning for Life (in partnership with the Smith Family)*

Ongoing support for current USC students includes the following initiatives:

- Academic skills support
- Unify (Mental Health Mentoring)
- Equity scholarships, emergency relief bursaries and financial management workshops*
- Mentoring transition support
- Disability support**
- Promotion of student engagement through:
 - Integrating Indigenous knowledge into the curriculum
 - Supporting the adoption of inclusive pedagogies
 - Enrichment of the quality of campus life by developing a campus where staff and students are more knowledgeable and supportive of diversity through programs such as:
 - Diversity Week*
 - USC Ally (promoting understanding of LGBTI issues)*
 - Cultural awareness initiatives*

* Projects wholly funded by HEPPP

** Projects partly funded by HEPPP

In addition to the strategies outlined above, Student Services and Engagement at USC implements a comprehensive approach for monitoring student learning engagement with early and proactive intervention for high priority students. Key features of these Student Success interventions include:

- Integration into the USC Student Services and Engagement Transition Plan via the implementation of the Starting@USC Toolkit and Welcome calls
- Co-creation of initiatives with support aligned to teaching and learning imperatives
- Objectives negotiated with academic partners
- Integration with targeted courses
- Opportunities for multi-channel and learner-led support
- Interventions are measured, evaluated and the findings are reported to partners

5.6.4 Prioritisation and Selection of Projects

Since January 2016 a new process has been in place to prioritise and select which projects will receive HEPPP funding, this process is set out in the USC Pathways and Access Strategy and is also outlined on the USC HEPPP Funding Internal Request Form. The process comprises four stages:

1. Proposals for new initiatives to raise aspirations are considered in the first instance by the Coordinator, Access and Diversity. This enables any proposal to be scoped prior to it being presented to the Pathways Management Working Group (PMWG).

This scoping involves consideration of factors such as which groups are being targeted in order to avoid duplication of outreach work. Proposals are submitted using the USC HEPPP Funding Internal Request form which outlines the Department of Education Guidelines, USC's Access and Participation Plan, and the requirement for the staff member responsible for the program to provide end-of-year evaluation and reporting. The use of this form provides a framework which identifies how the proposed projects align with the guidelines on how HEPPP funding should be used.

2. The PMWG considers new proposals or issues impacting current arrangements. The PMWG comprises:
 - Director, Marketing and External Engagement
 - Head, Indigenous Services
 - Director, Student Services and Engagement
 - Director, Northern Campuses
 - Head of Tertiary Preparation Pathways
 - Coordinator, Access and Diversity
3. The PMWG makes recommendations to the Student Engagement Leadership Team which is chaired by the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Students).
4. The Pro Vice-Chancellor (Students) advises University Executive of the planned activities approved by SELT, and seeks endorsement.

In addition to the above, the Pathways and Access Strategy provides specific guidance on the prioritisation and selection of WP initiatives with reference to the MoU. The strategy also states that the prioritisation and selection of new WP initiatives is done on the basis of the following criteria:

- Alignment with, and capacity to add value to existing programs
- Evidence base for design
- Resource implications
- Sustainability in terms of long-term commitment to community

The Pathways and Access Strategy includes the USC Marketing and Widening Participation Synergy Model which outlines the progression of aspiration building work from Grade 3 onwards, and how it is complemented by work on myth busting, academic preparation and marketing activities. This model helps to guide the selection of projects and ensure a streamlined approach to USC's work with community stakeholders. The strategy also seeks to systematically rationalise and/or expand the current entry points through which prospective students might enter, in addition to the standard QTAC application process. A number of these access points are linked to pathways programs, such as 'Headstart', TPP, Integrated Learning Pathway (ILP), and others enable direct entry, such as the Early Offer Guarantee and Indigenous Direct Entry Access (IDEAS).

It was indicated by some of the participants interviewed for the present study, particularly those who are Project Officers, that they were unsure about the processes for selecting and prioritising which projects will receive HEPPP funding, or that their knowledge was limited to how priorities are determined within their area of work. However, most of the participants understood that the process was driven by discussions at the executive level and decisions were considered within the context of the Access and Pathways Strategy and

annual budgets. They also identified that the projects selected serve purposes such as building career aspirations, breaking down barriers to tertiary study and supporting current students from equity groups. It is anticipated that as the new process outlined above becomes further embedded in practice it will provide greater clarity for all stakeholders about the specific steps involved in project prioritisation and selection.

5.6.5 Project monitoring, maintenance and management

The success of the suite of equity outreach strategies is evaluated on the basis of relevant student equity data and QTAC data including changes in trends on retention to Year 12 and conversion to university applications. Individual programs incorporate evaluative measures such as participant surveys, and the findings of these are used to inform future policy and the direction of services. A new module has been established in the Customer Relationship Management System (CRM) which will record details of all engagement activities taking place at schools across the region. This module ties in with the Marketing and Communications school module and provides USC with a collaborative approach to recording WP, academic and Marketing and Communications recruitment and engagement activities.

Recent examples of good practice in this area include the piloting and evaluation of 'Emerge', a new WP program for secondary schools. The project was evaluated on the basis of feedback from participating pupils, school staff and the USC Graduate Diploma of Education students who assisted in its delivery. Through this process of evaluation five recommendations were identified and these will be used to inform the implementation of the program in 2017. A similar evaluative process was recently used to review the Young Scholars program on the basis of feedback from participating pupils, school staff and other stakeholders, and the resulting recommendations have been incorporated into planning for future iterations of the project. One of the participants interviewed for this case study report noted the importance of being responsive and communicating with schools about how their feedback has been actioned in order to strengthen partnerships. This was echoed by another participant who commented on the importance of being responsive to specific needs within the wider community, particularly now that USC has multiple campuses and is therefore engaging with an increasingly diverse range of community groups and stakeholders.

All of the participants interviewed for the case study report indicated that they understood how the projects within their work areas were managed and evaluated but some of them were less aware of the systems in place at a higher level. Several participants commented that with regards to the management of HEPPP projects, they found having one person responsible for overseeing the projects was very useful and helped to ensure funds were used efficiently. Participants were less clear on the evaluation processes which are currently in place, and several participants noted the challenges involved in trying to obtain longitudinal data on WP projects in schools and the wider community due to issues relating to confidentiality. Several of the participants also noted that there was scope for greater involvement of current USC students in evaluating projects, and that current evaluations focussed on participant satisfaction rather than the effectiveness of the projects. Project evaluation has been identified by USC as an area for further development, in particular to

establish more consistent processes across projects and ensure evaluations inform future policy and direction. As such, a new role has been created for an evaluation officer who will coordinate this process, this role will commence at the start of 2017.

5.6.6 Conclusion

USC currently delivers a wide range of equity strategies both internally for current USC students, and externally for schools and community groups. These strategies target students from LSES backgrounds, Indigenous Australians and students with disabilities with the aim of widening participation, they are delivered in accordance with the conditions of the MoU and a number of the strategies are either fully or partially funded by HEPPP. The prioritisation and selection of projects is carried out using a four step process which was introduced in early 2016, this systematic approach is applied consistently across projects. Interviews with participants in this case study report identified that some were unfamiliar with this process, however it is anticipated that as it becomes more embedded in practice it will provide greater clarity for all stakeholders. Projects are monitored and evaluated on the basis of data from a wide range of sources including QTAC, participating school pupils and external stakeholders. An audit of documents relating to USC's equity strategies and the findings from participant interviews identified that there is scope to improve the consistency of the evaluation process across projects, evaluation has been identified as an area of development and a new role has been created for an evaluation officer.

6 Implications for Good Practice Guidelines

The preceding sections of this report document the findings from analysis of relevant institutional policy documentation, stakeholder interviews and case studies written by the six partner universities participating in this project. The collective evidence from these sources have implications for the higher education sector about the types of strategies that can facilitate effective prioritisation, management and monitoring, and evaluation of HEPPP funded equity initiatives. The findings have informed the following proposed good practice guidelines, which can be used to guide other institutions in applying similar approaches to their practices within their own organisational contexts.

6.1 Aligning HEPPP initiatives with institutional strategies and values

HEPPP funded initiatives are situated within a broader institutional equity context and are most effective when they align with institutional mission, strategy and culture (Bennett et al, 2015). As Thomas (2011) outlines, engaging a diverse student body requires an institutional strategy characterised by senior leadership, policy alignment, and a facilitating infrastructure, in addition to an enabling policy and funding context. The case studies across the partner universities participating in this project demonstrate how university approaches are situated within the broader equity context, and highlight the importance of the external policy and funding environment and alignment of HEPPP funded initiatives to institutional values and policies, accompanied by sustainable student support services as exemplified in the JCU case study, which describes an approach that is research informed and recognises the need for:

... the right whole of government policy settings, institutional enablers including high equity discourse across university strategic plans and policy architecture, and student enablers, such as sustainable student services and support services reflecting the needs of students from LSES backgrounds, academic skill development and inclusive curriculum. (JCU Case Study, 2017)

Such an approach is consistent with the view that equity objectives should be an inherent aspect of institutional quality (Harvey et al, 2016) that reflects a commitment to inclusive excellence (Williams et al. 2005). As Harvey et al (2016) argue, “re-conceptualising equity in this way would help to reduce its long-standing marginalisation within institutional and sectoral policy” (p. 15).

Fostering effective communication and collaboration across both horizontal and vertical staffing lines within the university is critical in ensuring that initiatives are consistent with institutional policies and plans, coordinated in ways that contribute to the institutional mission and equity targets, and that the delivery of services and the design of curricula is informed by evidence arising from evaluation of equity initiatives.

6.2 Embedding evaluation into HEPPP prioritisation, management and strategy

Evaluation of equity related initiatives should consider the extent to which those initiatives are consistent with institutional strategic objectives in relation to equity and social inclusion (Naylor, 2015). The importance of evaluation in demonstrating the impact of equity

initiatives and guiding future planning is well documented. As the findings from Bennet et al (2015, p. 8) suggest, an effective embedded approach to evaluation:

... is stakeholder-centred, context-specific and iterative; is undertaken most frequently through mixed methods approaches that utilise quantitative and qualitative data; reports multiple effects and outcomes, including: increased access, retention and performance; improved student experiences, connectedness and engagement; informing aspirations for higher education and awareness of pathways; and is informed by those with experience in program provision and evaluation. Collaborations that join program providers' specialist knowledge with evaluation and research expertise promote rigorous forms of evaluation and high quality provision.

An embedded approach to evaluation ensures that evaluation is considered during the initial planning of initiatives and that formative evaluation is conducted throughout the life of the initiative as well as summative evaluation at the end of the program. The case studies reflect the ways in which universities participating in this project have embedded evaluation within their processes for prioritising and selecting, managing and evaluating, and using evidence to guide future planning. For example, as the FUA case study describes:

... FedUni has built evaluation mechanisms into each stage of the project lifecycle process. Doing so is beneficial in a number of ways. It focuses project leaders very clearly on delivering programs that benefit students from LSES backgrounds as well as gathering evidence that will not only enable outcomes to be measured but also continuously improved. As outlined previously, project leaders are asked to document how they will measure and evaluate the project's success and impact against HEPPP guidelines in their original application. In addition, the six-month report provides an opportunity for project leaders, in collaboration with FedUni's HEPPP panel, to review the initiative's success and make any adjustments that will further add tangible value to students from LSES backgrounds. (FUA Case Study, 2017)

It is also important for evaluations of individual initiatives to be considered at the institutional level to ensure that the outcomes contribute to and complement institutional strategies aimed at improving access, participation, retention and pathways to further education and employment of students from LSES backgrounds.

6.3 Providing institutional support to build capacity for evaluating HEPPP initiatives

Given the importance of an embedded evaluation approach to measuring the impact of equity initiatives "... institutions should be encouraged to invest in developing evaluation capacity and specific expertise within equity programs" (Bennett et al, 2015). The need for such capacity building is evident from the concerns expressed by a few HEPPP project leaders when asked to describe the way in which equity initiatives are evaluated within their institution. As one project leader shared:

... professional staff don't necessarily have the skillset required to evaluate. Because I think we can all agree it takes a skillset to research... a lot of the

projects, would be finding it difficult and they don't have the funds in order to do that. (U1 stakeholder)

There are some excellent resources available to guide practitioners in undertaking evaluation of equity initiatives (see for example Naylor, 2015; Wilkins & de Vries, 2014), however, building the capacity for sustainable evaluation also requires policies and plans that embed evaluation into the institutional strategic direction, leadership support, adequate resources and opportunities. Such evaluation capacity building (ECB) as described by Preskill and Boyle (2008, p. 444) involves:

... the design and implementation of teaching and learning strategies to help individuals, groups, and organizations, learn about what constitutes effective, useful, and professional evaluation practice. The ultimate goal of ECB is sustainable evaluation practice—where members continuously ask questions that matter, collect, analyze, and interpret data, and use evaluation findings for decision-making and action. For evaluation practice to be sustained, participants must be provided with leadership support, incentives, resources, and opportunities to transfer their learning about evaluation to their everyday work. Sustainable evaluation practice also requires the development of systems, processes, policies, and plans that help embed evaluation work into the way the organization accomplishes its mission and strategic goals.

The findings from interviews and the case studies demonstrate a variety of ways in which the partner universities participating in this project endeavour to build the capacity of staff engaged in HEPPP funded initiatives to undertake evaluation. For example, as the LTU case study outlines:

As part of the annual HEPPP quantum, the University dedicates resources to a specific research and evaluation unit: the Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research (CHEEDR). The Centre regularly conducts evaluations of major HEPPP-funded programs and also provides an advisory role, including provision and analysis of relevant institutional data, and consultation with program managers on the development of methodologies for internal program evaluations. In overseeing HEPPP programs, the Centre encourages all program managers to allocate specific budgets for evaluation and improvement purposes. (LTU Case Study, 2017)

Such an approach ensures that not only is an embedded evaluation strategy built into the life cycle of equity initiatives, but also that evaluation is appropriately resourced and institutional leadership and guidance is provided to those responsible for overseeing or implementing HEPPP funded initiatives.

6.4 Focusing on program sustainability and longevity

The reasons for the persistent under-representation of people from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, those in regional and remote locations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people and people with disabilities are complex (Universities Australia, 2016). Therefore, effective equity initiatives aimed at redressing these inequalities need to be long-term and sustained (Gale & Parker, 2013). The need for sustainability and longevity of equity initiatives to improve access, participation and retention of under-represented groups in

higher education is widely acknowledged across the sector (Australian Business Deans Council, 2016; Australian Technology Network of Universities, 2016; Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, 2016; EPHEA, 2016; National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, 2016; Universities Australia, 2016). As the Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) submission to ACIL Allen evaluation of HEPPP argues:

Embedding impactful social change requires a holistic, committed, systemic approach rather than short-term initiatives. It takes time to shift long-standing and deep social, cultural and economic barriers to access, participation and retention in higher education. A longer-term approach enables better effective stakeholder engagement, resourcing and establishment of clear pathways to close the gap from school into higher education and on into the workforce.
(ABDC, 2016)

The sustainability and continuity of funding to support equity initiatives is also closely linked to the capacity of universities to demonstrate impact over time. As the regional universities network submission to the review of HEPPP argues, “it will take a generation to fundamentally lift the aspiration of students in relevant groups, and address the embedded, significant, inter-generational, multi-faceted, educational disadvantage that many face” (2016, p. 12). This has been the case with the experience of widening participation in the UK, which took 10 years for the indicators to confirm that the work of higher education funding council’s work to widen access to higher education was having a real impact (Rammell, 2008).

6.5 Developing collaborative multi-partner initiatives that benefit students from LSES backgrounds and their communities across geographical regions

The partnerships component of HEPPP is designed to assist universities to develop activities in partnership with primary and secondary schools, VET providers, other universities, State and Territory governments, community groups, and other stakeholders to improve opportunities for people from LSES backgrounds to access and participate in higher education. Since 2013, funding has been allocated to universities by formula based on the number of students from low SES backgrounds enrolled at each university. Previously most Partnerships funding was allocated through competitive grants rounds (Australian Government, 2017).

An example of a successful partnership initiative funded under the previous model of partnership funding (pre-2013) is the *Queensland Widening Participation Consortium*, designed to improve the participation of students from LSES backgrounds and Indigenous people in higher education by activities undertaken by the eight partner universities working with a cluster of local LSES schools, aimed at demystification and awareness-raising through on-campus experiences, curriculum enrichment, career development, and information on access, scholarships and financial support. The evaluation findings demonstrate the value of such collaborative widening participation initiatives. As the JCU case study describes:

[The partner universities] collaborated to design and implement activities aimed at stimulating interest in tertiary study and widening tertiary participation of low SES background and Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders. The consortium mapped low SES schools to each of the 8

Queensland Universities and this collaboration saw significant improvements in applications for tertiary study. (JCU case study, 2017)

As the case studies show, partnering universities are undertaking a variety of widening participation initiatives in collaboration with education providers in their communities. For example, the USC case study describes outreach programs with primary and secondary schools, particularly those located within low socio-economic areas. The university has identified secondary schools from each region within the USC cluster have been identified as a priority for concentrated widening participation (WP work). As the USC case study describes:

These secondary schools were selected according to the proportion of students from LSES backgrounds at their feeder primary schools. The secondary schools fed by greater numbers of primary schools with a higher proportion of low SES pupils were prioritised. This selection process supports the scaffolded nature of USC's WP activities which take a long-term approach to maximising opportunities to pupils throughout their school careers. As resources permit, programs and activities offered at these schools (and as relevant, their feeder primary schools) will be expanded to others. A joint Pathways and Access Strategy exists to ensure student recruitment and WP activities are synergistic. (USC case study, 2017)

These examples highlight the importance of the partnership component of HEPPP.

6.6 Disseminating and sharing project findings across the institution and wider sector

The findings from this project have highlighted HEPPP funded initiatives that have had an impact on improving outcomes for students from LSES backgrounds both within the university and in the case of partnerships, across regions. However, it is also important that findings from such initiatives are shared and disseminated widely to build capacity within the university and across the sector. The importance of sharing the findings within the university to build capacity and services were articulated by a faculty stakeholder who shared:

I'd just love to know that, given that this [HEPPP] has been going for six years, there's been countless examples of those types of things that I could do something with or at least I could go 'I know that that's important' and I could say to my staff 'these are the types of things that are important'. And as a Dean, particularly, if I'm thinking about the activities that my staff are involved with and volunteering time and other aspects of their service, what are the things that they should be spending time on, and what are the things that make a difference? What are the things that they brought to our students and to our future students? I've probably seen any number of reports at any number of high level meetings across the years... That's nice and I've heard that, but what can I do with it? (U1 stakeholder)

And in relation to the sharing of the outcomes of HEPPP funded initiatives across the sector, this same stakeholder suggested:

I'd be interested to know ... what are the things that have worked well at other universities and what can we learn from them as well? I think that would be really interesting, and that's the thing that I don't know. I'm very much into always benchmarking, and I like to learn from others. (U1 stakeholder)

Partner universities describe various strategies that they have employed to share the findings from HEPPP funded initiatives both within the university and across the sector. For example, CQUniversity has established a HEPPP communities of practice (CoP), which provides a facilitated venue for HEPPP project leaders to come together to discuss initiatives and the outcomes arising from HEPPP funded initiatives. However, that model is limited in that those attending the CoP are HEPPP stakeholders rather than staff from the broader university community. The University of Newcastle's Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE) aims to both build internal capacity based on research arising from HEPPP funded initiatives and other equity work and contributing the knowledge gained to advance understanding of widening participation more broadly. As the UON case study describes:

... the CEEHE has a focus on developing the capacity of practitioners to critically reflect on their work and to develop research informed practice.... Using a praxis-oriented framework that combines a dialogue between theory, research and practice, CEEHE draws on international expertise and UON's extensive experience of equity initiatives to understand the complex field of widening participation in higher education. (UON case study, 2017)

6.7 Promoting students' voices in the design of programs

Providing a student-centred learning environment, one that engages students as partners in their higher education communities, is increasingly recognised as one of the important issues facing the sector in the 21st century (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014). As Vardan et al (2016) argue, engagement requires authentic inclusion of student views, and they emphasise the importance of ensuring students' voices make a difference.

Students can be authentically engaged within a university in various ways. The findings from this study show a variety of ways in which students may be engaged with or partner on HEPPP funded initiatives. For the majority of stakeholders interviewed, the most common approach to engaging students is through formal evaluation of an initiative whereby students are invited to complete an online evaluation survey or participate in semi-structured interviews or focus groups to give feedback about the initiative. Some stakeholders referred to students as being active partners in the design and delivery of HEPPP funded initiatives, still others describe students as co-designers of solutions. For example, at Central Queensland University, students from LSES backgrounds and who identify as having a disability, are invited to guide the redevelopment of selected units by participating in usability and accessibility testing and reporting on any issues that the unit coordinator needs to address to ensure the unit is more inclusive of the needs of students from diverse backgrounds. At JCU, students engaged with the [transition activity program name] are overseen by two student [job title] coordinators who are paid. As a JCU stakeholder described:

... those students have – including the student coordinators – have a very large say in how that program has evolved including initiating an Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander [job title] program. So they have a say in terms of the way the training goes, the way the budget is spent, the types of celebration events that they would have, so the design of the t-shirts, all of those things.

As McLeod (2011) suggests, “Giving attention to student voice can constitute a valuable acknowledgement of student point-of-view and experience” (p. 186), and as the examples cited in the findings section of this report show, the level of engagement might vary according to the initiative and the institutional context. What is critical, is that students are respected as partners in the process and that students, particularly those who are underrepresented, are given the opportunity to engage in ways the result in “meaningful and practical recognition” (McLeod, 2011, p. 188). 2011, p. 188).

7 Recommendations to the Australian Government

The collective evidence presented in the preceding sections of this report demonstrate the importance of HEPPP funding in improving access, participation and outcomes for students from LSES backgrounds. The findings suggest strategies that higher education institutions can adopt to strengthen institutional processes for prioritising, managing and evaluating HEPPP funded initiatives. The findings also highlight some of the challenges that limit the capacity of universities to maximise the impact of the work they are undertaking to enable students from LSES backgrounds to access and succeed in higher education and ensure community structures and relationships that support this. The following recommendations suggest ways that the Australian Government could respond to these challenges to improve the impact of HEPPP funding at the national level.

- Support the community structures and relationships that enable students from LSES backgrounds to access and succeed in higher education by ensuring continuity of funding over longer funding cycles.
- Continue HEPPP funding support for initiatives aimed at improving access for people from LSES backgrounds and underrepresented groups, and ongoing funding support for students already enrolled, who are financially disadvantaged.
- Establish and monitor the implementation of a national framework for evaluating equity initiatives to build the evidence base.
- Extend the scope of how the impact of HEPPP initiatives are assessed recognising the unique differences across university contexts and the importance of mixed methods evaluation approaches.
- Promote student equity research through continuing support for the National Centre of Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE); continuing and extending National Priorities Pool (NPP) research grants; publishing NPP research reports on the NCSEHE website; disseminating and publicising NPP research reports and NCSEHE reports in mainstream media.
- Increase transparency and visibility of HEPPP, by publishing institutional HEPPP reports on a clearinghouse web page, similar to the publication of institutional access agreements by the Office for Fair Access in the United Kingdom
- Increase accountability of institutions for HEPPP funded use by moving evaluation criteria from a project level approach to more strategic understandings of efficacy.

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Appendix 1. Human Research Ethics Approval

Secretary, Human Research Ethics Committee
Ph: 07 4923 2603
Fax: 07 4923 2600
Email: ethics@cqu.edu.au



9 May 2016

Dear Prof Wood

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE OUTCOME PROJECT: H16/04-082, *A COMPARATIVE EVALUATION OF THE EFFICACY OF THE EQUITY STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES*

The Human Research Ethics Committee is an approved institutional ethics committee constituted in accord with guidelines formulated by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) and governed by policies and procedures consistent with principles as contained in publications such as the joint Universities Australia and NHMRC *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research*. This is available at http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/publications/synopses/_files/r39.pdf.

On 26 April 2016, the committee considered your application. The project was assessed as being greater than low risk, as defined in the National Statement. On 6 May 2016 the committee acknowledged compliance with the conditions imposed on your research project *A Comparative Evaluation of the Efficacy of the Equity Strategies Employed by Australian Universities* (Project Number H16/04-082) and it is now APPROVED.

The period of ethics approval will be from 6 May 2016 to 30 March 2017. The approval number is H16/04-082; please quote this number in all dealings with the Committee. HREC wishes you well with the undertaking of the project and looks forward to receiving the final report and statement of findings.

The standard conditions of approval for this research project are that:

- a) you conduct the research project strictly in accordance with the proposal submitted and granted ethics approval, including any amendments required to be made to the proposal by the Human Research Ethics Committee;
- b) you advise the Human Research Ethics Committee (email ethics@cqu.edu.au) immediately if any complaints are made, or expressions of concern are raised, or any other issue in relation to the project which may warrant review of ethics approval of the project. (A written report detailing the adverse occurrence or unforeseen event must be submitted to the Committee Chair within one working day after the event.)
- c) you make submission to the Human Research Ethics Committee for approval of any proposed variations or modifications to the approved project before making any such changes;

- d) you provide the Human Research Ethics Committee with a written “Annual Report” on each anniversary date of approval (for projects of greater than 12 months) and “Final Report” by no later than one (1) month after the approval expiry date; (A copy of the reporting pro formas may be obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee Secretary, Sue Evans please contact at the telephone or email given on the first page.)
- e) you accept that the Human Research Ethics Committee reserves the right to conduct scheduled or random inspections to confirm that the project is being conducted in accordance to its approval. Inspections may include asking questions of the research team, inspecting all consent documents and records and being guided through any physical experiments associated with the project
- f) if the research project is discontinued, you advise the Committee in writing within five (5) working days of the discontinuation;
- g) A copy of the Statement of Findings is provided to the Human Research Ethics Committee when it is forwarded to participants.

Please note that failure to comply with the conditions of approval and the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* may result in withdrawal of approval for the project.

The Human Research Ethics Committee is committed to supporting researchers in achieving positive research outcomes through sound ethical research projects. If you have issues where the Human Research Ethics Committee may be of assistance or have any queries in relation to this approval please do not hesitate to contact the Ethics Officer or myself.

Yours sincerely,



A/Prof Tania Signal
Chair, Human Research Ethics Committee

Cc: Prof Marcia Devlin, Prof Karen Nelson, Prof Angela Hill, Dr Anna Bennett, Prof Geoff Whitty, Dr Andrew Harvey (partner researchers) Project file.

Appendix 2. Recruitment Letter

Dear [name],

We would like to invite you to participate in a National Priorities Pool study, funded by the Australian Government and submitted by CQUniversity, in partnership with Federation University Australia, University of the Sunshine Coast, University of Newcastle, La Trobe University and James Cook University. The topic of the research is “A comparative evaluation of the efficacy of the equity strategies employed by Australia universities” with an emphasis on the Higher Education Participation & Partnership Program (HEPPP) equity initiatives.

This study aims to explore the processes that each participating university currently uses to prioritise, select, manage and evaluate the findings from HEPPP initiatives. You have been approached because you are involved in some manner with the HEPPP at your university and it is staff such as yourself who will be able to give the most accurate observations from a particular organisational location.

The research undertaken and data collected during this study will be used to comparatively evaluate the efficacy of HEPPP funded equity strategies. This evaluation will support the creation of resources including case studies and a good practice guide as key contributions, which will inform future initiatives across the sector.

Participation in the project would entail a 40-50 minute face-to-face or telephone interview and/or focus group on a day and time that suits you. Participation is entirely voluntary. If you decide to participate, and then change your mind, you can withdraw from the project at any stage before the start of data analysis.

If you are interested in contributing to this research, please read the attached Plain Language Information Statement (PLIS), which gives more details about the project. If you are interested in participating, please hit REPLY and inform the research team of your interest. If not, please just ignore this email.

Kind regards,
The research team.

Appendix 3. Consent Form

A comparative evaluation of the efficacy of equity strategies employed at Australian universities

I have read the participant plain language information statement and I hereby consent to participate in the interview and/or focus group as part of the research project on “A comparative evaluation of the efficacy of the equity strategies employed by Australia universities” with an emphasis on HEPPP initiatives:

- I have been given clear information, both written and verbal, about the study, and understand what is required of me.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary. I may refuse to answer any question and I remain free to withdraw from the study at any time without explanation.
- I understand that the interview and/or focus group will be voice recorded and that all identifying information will be removed before the interview is transcribed.
- I understand that all information from the interviews and focus groups will remain confidential to the research team and that all information will be securely stored with all identifying information removed and stored separately in the research office of the chief investigators of this project.
- I understand that the information disclosed by members of the focus group will be treated as confidential and I will not disclose any part of this discussion outside the focus group.
- I understand that none of the information that I provide will be described or portrayed in any way that will identify me in any report on the study.
- I am aware that I may ask any further questions about the research study at any time.
- I am interested in participating in the interview [Tick box if YES]
- I am interested in participating in the focus group [Tick box if YES]

Participant Name **Participant**

Signature

Date

This project has been approved by the CQUniversity Australia's Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any ethical concerns about the project or questions about your rights as a participant, please contact ethics@cqu.edu.au

Further information can be obtained from Kerri Viragh or Mary Macleod at equity-npp@cqu.edu.au

Appendix 4. Stakeholder Interview Questions

What is your understanding of the higher education participation program, or HEPPP scheme?

How did you become involved in the HEPPP program at <name of institution>?

What is your understanding of the processes that are in place to prioritise and select the projects which will get HEPPP funding?

Could you explain to me how HEPPP programs are coordinated or managed at <name of institution>?

Can you just tell me a little more about your understanding of how the HEPPP projects are evaluated at <name of institution>?

Could you just tell me, from your perspective, what are some examples of HEPPP projects that you see as successful, and why would you see them as successful?

What's your understanding of how evidence from the evaluation of HEPPP is used to inform future decision making?

Are students involved in the planning or development of HEPPP initiatives at <name of institution>?

If HEPPP funds were withdrawn tomorrow, what would be the impact at <name of institution>?

Appendix 5. Case Study Guidelines

‘A comparative evaluation of the efficacy of the equity strategies employed by Australian universities’

Structure of the individual case study for final submission should include an overview of the institution which could include information such as: The profile of the university which may include information such as the:

- number of enrolments
- mix of students / students from LSES backgrounds at the university
- types of initiatives undertaken at the university
- how these projects are funded
- HEPPP context of these projects and initiatives

Ensure the case study incorporates information and examples under each of the key project headings:

1. Prioritise & Select
 - How the university prioritises initiatives
 - How do those priorities filter into a selection approach to guide which projects will be supported with HEPPP funding?
2. Coordinate & Manage
 - How the institution monitors, maintains and manages across the lifetime of the project?
3. Evaluate
 - What processes are in place for formative and/or summative evaluation and examples how these processes?:
 - Lead to implementation
 - Align with guidelines of how HEPPP should be used
4. Informs future planning
 - How knowledge gained from previous projects:
 - is translated and used to inform future policy and direction for services to support students from LSES backgrounds; and
 - examples of how this leads to implementation and
 - provides evidence which supports applications for future HEPPP funding.
5. Evidence of projects which have become more sustainable and embedded as a result of the HEPPP projects

Note: The collective contribution of the case studies will be to identify what has been learned from each of these case studies which will help us develop best practice for future initiatives. These examples may come from information gained in phase 1 and/or 2 of the project.

Appendix 6. National Forum Flyer



A comparative study of the equity strategies employed by Australian universities

National Forum

21 April 2017 1:00 - 4:30pm

QUT, Gardens Theatre Foyer

2 George St, Brisbane

Lunch and afternoon tea provided

You are invited to participate in our National Forum, which will focus on effective strategies for evaluating and implementing equity related initiatives in higher education. The forum will include presentations by project team members from CQUniversity Australia, Federation University Australia, James Cook University, La Trobe University, the University of Newcastle, and the University of the Sunshine Coast reporting on the findings of a Commonwealth National Priorities Pool (NPP) funded project. The project focuses on effective strategies for planning, managing and evaluating Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) funded initiatives.

The forum will also include a panel discussion exploring what we know about the relationship between equity and evaluation in higher education contexts in Australia.

The panel presenters will explain why it is important to strengthen evaluation processes in policy and practice contexts to improve higher education outcomes for priority equity groups. The discussion will draw on evidence relating to a detailed analysis of HEPPP projects; the development of an equity initiatives framework; and an exploratory study about evaluation in Indigenous higher education contexts.

Please join us at this forthcoming national event to engage in robust and stimulating discussion, and contribute to the final recommendations and good practice guidelines of the NPPP funded project prior to submission to the Commonwealth.

RSVP by 9:00 am (EST) Monday, 17 April 2017, to

d.bradford@cqu.edu.au

See attached details for parking

Appendix 7. National Forum Agenda

National Forum

A Comparative study of the equity strategies employed by Australian universities

Date: Friday, 21 April 2017

Time: 1:00pm – 4:30pm

Venue: Theatre Foyer Venue at QUT Garden Point Campus in Brisbane

MC: Professor Denise Wood, Director of the LEAP Research Centre, CQUniversity Australia

Agenda

| | |
|---------------|--|
| 1:00-1:30pm | <i>Networking Lunch</i> will be provided at the venue. |
| 1:30-1:35pm | Welcome to Country by Shannon Ruska and Aaron Martin on the Didgeridoo |
| 1:35 -1:45pm | Welcome |
| 1:45 - 2:00pm | Overview of the Project (Professor Denise Wood) |
| 2:00 - 2:20pm | Case Study: CQUniversity (Professor Denise Wood) |
| 2:20 – 2:40pm | Case Study: Federation University Australia (Professor Marcia Devlin) |
| 2:40 – 3:00pm | Case Study: La Trobe University (Dr Andrew Harvey) |
| 3:00 – 3:20pm | <i>Afternoon Tea</i> will be provided at the venue. |
| 3:20 – 3:40pm | Case Study: University of Newcastle (Dr Anna Bennett and Dr Jo Hanley) |
| 3:40 – 4:00pm | Case Study: University of the Sunshine Coast (Ms Sarah Glencross and Ms Veronica Sanmarco) |
| 4:00 – 4:20pm | Moderated Panel Discussion with James Smith (Indigenous evaluation and policy), Nadine Zacharias (HEPPP practice and policy) and Anna Bennett (Equity Initiatives Framework) highlighting their current research plus discussing further directions. |
| 4:20 – 4:30pm | <i>Wrap Up</i> (Professor Denise Wood) |
| 4:30pm | <i>Finish</i> |

Appendix 8. Good Practice Guidelines

Good practice 1: Aligning HEPPP initiatives with institutional strategies and values

Rationale

HEPPP funded initiatives are situated within a broader institutional equity context and are most effective when they align with institutional mission, strategy and culture (Bennett et al, 2015). As Thomas (2011) outlines, engaging a diverse student body requires an institutional strategy characterised by senior leadership, policy alignment, and a facilitating infrastructure, in addition to an enabling policy and funding context.

Case studies

The case studies across the partner universities participating in this project demonstrate how university approaches are situated within the broader equity context, and highlight the importance of the external policy and funding environment and alignment of HEPPP funded initiatives to institutional values and policies, accompanied by sustainable student support services. For example, the JCU case study describes an approach that is research informed and recognises the need for:

... the right whole of government policy settings, institutional enablers including high equity discourse across university strategic plans and policy architecture, and student enablers, such as sustainable student services and support services reflecting the needs of students from LSES backgrounds, academic skill development and inclusive curriculum. (JCU Case Study, 2017)

Such an approach is consistent with the view that equity objectives should be an inherent aspect of institutional quality (Harvey et al, 2016) that reflects a commitment to inclusive excellence (Williams et al. 2005). As Harvey et al (2016) argue, “re-conceptualising equity in this way would help to reduce its long-standing marginalisation within institutional and sectoral policy” (p. 15).

Fostering effective communication and collaboration across both horizontal and vertical staffing lines within the university is critical in ensuring that initiatives are consistent with institutional policies and plans, coordinated in ways that contribute to the institutional mission and equity targets, and that the delivery of services and the design of curricula is informed by evidence arising from evaluation of equity initiatives.

Good practice 2: Embedding evaluation into HEPPP prioritisation, management and monitoring strategy

Rationale

Evaluation of equity related initiatives should consider the extent to which those initiatives are consistent with institutional strategic objectives in relation to equity and social inclusion (Naylor, 2015). The importance of evaluation in demonstrating the impact of equity initiatives and guiding future planning is well documented. As the findings from Bennet et al (2015, p. 8) suggest, an effective embedded approach to evaluation:

... is stakeholder-centred, provision and evaluation context-specific and iterative; is undertaken most frequently through mixed methods approaches that utilise quantitative and qualitative data; reports multiple effects and outcomes, including: increased access, retention and performance; improved student experiences, connectedness and engagement; informing aspirations for higher education and awareness of pathways; and is informed by those with experience in program. Collaborations that join program providers' specialist knowledge with evaluation and research expertise promote rigorous forms of evaluation and high quality provision.

An embedded approach to evaluation ensures that evaluation is considered during the initial planning of initiatives and that formative evaluation is conducted throughout the life of the initiative as well as summative evaluation at the end of the program.

Case studies

The case studies reflect the ways in which the universities have embedded evaluation within their processes for prioritising and selecting, managing and evaluating, and using evidence to guide future planning. For example, the FUA case study describes:

... FedUni has built evaluation mechanisms into each stage of the project lifecycle process. Doing so is beneficial in a number of ways. It focuses project leaders very clearly on delivering programs that benefit students from LSES backgrounds as well as gathering evidence that will not only enable outcomes to be measured but also continuously improved. ... In addition, the six-month report provides an opportunity for project leaders, in collaboration with FedUni's HEPPP panel, to review the initiative's success and make any adjustments that will further add tangible value to students from LSES backgrounds. (FUA Case Study, 2017)

It is also important for evaluations of individual initiatives to be considered at the institutional level to ensure that the outcomes contribute to and complement institutional strategies aimed at improving access, participation, retention and pathways to further education and employment of students from LSES backgrounds.

Good practice 3: Providing institutional support to build capacity for evaluating HEPPP initiatives

Rationale

Given the importance of an embedded evaluation approach to measuring the impact of equity initiatives "... institutions should be encouraged to invest in developing evaluation capacity and specific expertise within equity programs" (Bennett et al, 2015). The need for such capacity building is evident from the concerns expressed by a few HEPPP project leaders when asked to describe the way in which equity initiatives are evaluated within their institution. As one project leader shared:

... professional staff don't necessarily have the skillset required to evaluate. Because I think we can all agree it takes a skillset to research... a lot of the projects, would be finding it difficult and they don't have the funds in order to do that. (U1 stakeholder)

There are some excellent resources available to guide practitioners in undertaking evaluation of equity initiatives (see for example Naylor, 2015; Wilkins & de Vries, 2014), however, building the capacity for sustainable evaluation also requires policies and plans that embed evaluation into the institutional strategic direction, leadership support, adequate resources and opportunities. Such evaluation capacity building (ECB) as described by Preskill and Boyle (2008, p. 444) involves:

... the design and implementation of teaching and learning strategies to help individuals, groups, and organizations, learn about what constitutes effective, useful, and professional evaluation practice. The ultimate goal of ECB is sustainable evaluation practice—where members continuously ask questions that matter, collect, analyze, and interpret data, and use evaluation findings for decision-making and action. For evaluation practice to be sustained, participants must be provided with leadership support, incentives, resources, and opportunities to transfer their learning about evaluation to their everyday work. Sustainable evaluation practice also requires the development of systems, processes, policies, and plans that help embed evaluation work into the way the organization accomplishes its mission and strategic goals.

Case studies

The findings from interviews and the case studies demonstrate a variety of ways in which the partner universities participating in this project endeavour to build the capacity of staff engaged in HEPPP funded initiatives to undertake evaluation. For example, as the LTU case study outlines:

As part of the annual HEPPP quantum, the University dedicates resources to a specific research and evaluation unit: the Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research (CHEEDR). The Centre regularly conducts evaluations of major HEPPP-funded programs and also provides an advisory role, including provision and analysis of relevant institutional data, and consultation with program managers on the development of methodologies for internal program evaluations. In overseeing HEPPP programs, the Centre encourages all program managers to allocate specific budgets for evaluation and improvement purposes. (LTU Case Study, 2017)

Such an approach ensures that not only is an embedded evaluation strategy built into the life cycle of equity initiatives, but also that evaluation is appropriately resourced and institutional leadership and guidance is provided to those responsible for overseeing or implementing HEPPP funded initiatives.

Good practice 4: Focusing on program sustainability and longevity

Rationale

The reasons for the persistent under-representation of people from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, those in regional and remote locations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people and people with disabilities are complex (Universities Australia, 2016). Therefore, effective equity initiatives aimed at redressing these inequalities need to be long-term and sustained (Gale & Parker, 2013). The need for sustainability and longevity of equity initiatives to improve access, participation and retention of under-represented groups in

higher education is widely acknowledged across the sector (Australian Business Deans Council, 2016; Australian Technology Network of Universities, 2016; Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, 2016; EPHEA, 2016; National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, 2016; Universities Australia, 2016). As the Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) 2016 submission to ACIL Allen evaluation of HEPPP argues:

Embedding impactful social change requires a holistic, committed, systemic approach rather than short-term initiatives. It takes time to shift long-standing and deep social, cultural and economic barriers to access, participation and retention in higher education. A longer-term approach enables better effective stakeholder engagement, resourcing and establishment of clear pathways to close the gap from school into higher education and on into the workforce.

The sustainability and continuity of funding to support equity initiatives is also closely linked to the capacity of universities to demonstrate impact over time. As the regional universities network submission to the review of HEPPP argues, “it will take a generation to fundamentally lift the aspiration of students in relevant groups, and address the embedded, significant, inter-generational, multi-faceted, educational disadvantage that many face” (2016, p. 12). This has been the case with widening participation in the UK, which took 10 years for the indicators to confirm that the work of higher education funding council’s work to widen access to higher education was having a real impact (Rammell, 2008).

Case studies

The case studies demonstrate the ways in which universities plan for the longer term sustainability of HEPPP funded initiatives. For example, the USC case study shows the relationship between the Pathways and Access Strategy, which provides guidance on the prioritisation and selection of widening participation initiatives, which takes into account the following criteria:

- Alignment with, and capacity to add value to existing programs
- Evidence base for design
- Resource implications
- Sustainability in terms of long-term commitment to community

The JCU case study provides examples of HEPPP funded activities that have become ‘business as usual’, such as:

... the use of Learning Analytics, which was initially funded as a pilot to investigate whether data from the learning management system could be used to proactively identify students in need of support, is now funded as core infrastructure. (JCU Case Study, 2017)

However, several partners also identified the impact of reductions in HEPPP support on the sustainability of some equity initiatives. As the JCU case study also highlights:

... the funding parameters of the HEPPP grant currently dis-incentivise long-term activities. The 2015 reduction of funds for partnership activities have diminished outreach in remote areas of Queensland, with flow on impacts for the relationship between the university and the regional and remote communities that it serves. (JCU Case Study, 2017)

The findings of this project therefore identify strategies universities can adopt to embed a sustainable approach to the planning and implementation of equity related initiatives, as well as how universities are working to ensure the sustainability of effective strategies for improving outcomes for people from LSES backgrounds. At the same time, however, the findings reinforce the vital role that HEPPP plays in supporting the long term viability and impact of initiatives that have demonstrated positive impact for people from LSES backgrounds and their communities.

Good practice 5: Developing collaborative multi-partner initiatives that benefit students from LSES backgrounds and their communities across geographical regions

Rationale

The partnerships component of HEPPP is designed to assist universities to develop activities in partnership with primary and secondary schools, VET providers, other universities, State and Territory governments, community groups, and other stakeholders to improve opportunities for people from LSES backgrounds to access and participate in higher education. The cases studies show the variety of ways in which universities are undertaking widening participation initiatives in collaboration with education providers in their communities, and highlight the importance of collaborative multi-partner initiatives that benefit students from LSES backgrounds and their communities across geographical regions. The cases studies show the variety of ways in which universities are undertaking widening participation initiatives in collaboration with education providers in their communities, and highlight the importance of collaborative multi-partner initiatives that benefit students from LSES backgrounds and their communities across geographical regions. Since 2013 funding has been allocated to universities by formula based on the number of students from low SES backgrounds enrolled at each university. Previously most Partnerships funding was allocated through competitive grants rounds (Australian Government, 2017).

An example of a successful partnership initiative funded under the previous model of partnership funding (pre-2013) is the *Queensland Widening Participation Consortium*, designed to improve the participation of LSES and Indigenous people in higher education by activities undertaken by the eight partner universities working with a cluster of local LSES schools, aimed at demystification and awareness-raising through on-campus experiences, curriculum enrichment, career development, and information on access, scholarships and financial support.

Case studies

As the case studies show, partnering universities are undertaking a variety of widening participation initiatives in collaboration with education providers in their communities. The JCU case study describes the value of partnerships such as the *Queensland Widening Participation Consortium*:

[The partner universities] collaborated to design and implement activities aimed at stimulating interest in tertiary study and widening tertiary participation of low SES background and Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders. The consortium mapped low SES schools to each of the 8

Queensland Universities and this collaboration saw significant improvements in applications for tertiary study. (JCU case study, 2017)

The USC case study describes outreach programs with primary and secondary schools, particularly those located within low socio-economic areas. The university has identified secondary schools from each region within the USC cluster as a priority for concentrated widening participation (WP) work. As the USC case study describes:

This ... process supports the scaffolded nature of USC's WP activities which take a long-term approach to maximising opportunities to pupils throughout their school careers. As resources permit, programs and activities offered at these schools (and as relevant, their feeder primary schools) will be expanded to others. A joint Pathways and Access Strategy exists to ensure student recruitment and WP activities are synergistic. (USC case study, 2017)

These examples highlight the importance of the partnership component of HEPPP and the benefits of developing collaborative multi-partner initiatives that benefit students from LSES backgrounds and their communities across geographical regions.

Good practice 6: Disseminating and sharing project findings across the institution and wider sector

Rationale

The findings from this project have highlighted HEPPP funded initiatives that have had an impact on improving outcomes for students from LSES backgrounds both within the university and in the case of partnerships, across regions. However, it is also important that findings from such initiatives are shared and disseminated widely to build capacity within the university and across the sector. The importance of sharing the findings within the university to build capacity and services were articulated by a faculty stakeholder who shared:

I'd just love to know that, given that this [HEPPP] has been going for six years, there's been countless examples of those types of things that I could do something with or at least I could go 'I know that that's important' and I could say to my staff 'these are the types of things that are important'. And as a Dean, particularly, if I'm thinking about the activities that my staff are involved with and volunteering time and other aspects of their service, what are the things that they should be spending time on, and what are the things that make a difference? What are the things that they brought to our students and to our future students? I've probably seen any number of reports at any number of high level meetings across the years... That's nice and I've heard that, but what can I do with it? (U1 stakeholder)

And in relation to the sharing of the outcomes of HEPPP funded initiatives across the sector, this same stakeholder suggested:

I'd be interested to know ... what are the things that have worked well at other universities and what can we learn from them as well? I think that would be really interesting, and that's the thing that I don't know. I'm very much into always benchmarking, and I like to learn from others. (U1 stakeholder)

Case studies

Partner universities describe various strategies that they have employed to share the findings from HEPPP funded initiatives both within the university and across the sector. For example, CQUniversity has established a HEPPP communities of practice (CoP), which provides a facilitated venue for HEPPP project leaders to come together to discuss initiatives and the outcomes arising from HEPPP funded initiatives. The University of Newcastle's Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE) aims to build internal capacity based on research arising from HEPPP funded initiatives and other equity work and contribute the knowledge gained to advance understanding of widening participation more broadly. As the UON case study describes:

... the CEEHE has a focus on developing the capacity of practitioners to critically reflect on their work and to develop research informed practice.... Using a praxis-oriented framework that combines a dialogue between theory, research and practice, CEEHE draws on international expertise and UON's extensive experience of equity initiatives to understand the complex field of widening participation in higher education. (UON case study, 2017)

Good practice 7: Promoting students' voices in the design of programs

Rationale

Providing a student-centred approach, one that engages students as partners in their higher education communities, is increasingly recognised as one of the important issues facing the sector in the 21st century (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014). As Vardan et al (2016) argue, engagement requires authentic inclusion of student views, and they emphasise the importance of ensuring students' voices make a difference.

Case studies

Students can be authentically engaged within a university in various ways. The findings from this study show a variety of ways in which students may be engaged with or partner on HEPPP funded initiatives. The most common approach to engaging students for the majority of stakeholders interviewed is through formal evaluation of an initiative whereby students are invited to complete an online evaluation survey or participate in semi-structured interviews or focus groups to give feedback about the initiative. Some stakeholders referred to students as being active partners in the design and delivery of HEPPP funded initiatives, still others describe students as co-designers of solutions. For example, at CQUniversity, students from LSES backgrounds and who identify as having a disability, are invited to guide the redevelopment of selected units by participating in usability and accessibility testing and reporting on any issues that the unit coordinator needs to address to ensure the unit is more inclusive of the needs of students from diverse backgrounds. At JCU, students engaged with the [transition activity program name] are overseen by two student [job title] coordinators who are paid. As a JCU stakeholder described:

... those students have – including the student coordinators – have a very large say in how that program has evolved including initiating an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander [job title] program. So they have a say in terms of the way the training goes, the way the budget is spent, the types of celebration events that they would have, so the design of the t-shirts, all of those things.

As McLeod (2011) suggests, “Giving attention to student voice can constitute a valuable acknowledgement of student point-of-view and experience” (p. 186), and as the examples cited in the findings section of this report show, the level of engagement might vary according to the initiative and the institutional context. What is critical, is that students are respected as partners in the process and that students, particularly those who are underrepresented, are given the opportunity to engage in ways that result in “meaningful and practical recognition” (McLeod, 2011, p. 188).