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## What are enabling programs? How do they help Australians get to uni?

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One of Education Minister Jason Clare's top priorities for the Universities Accord is encouraging more Australians to go to university. As he notes, "more jobs are going to require a university qualification in the years ahead".

Alongside this call is the recognition we need to improve access for people from equity cohorts - including Indigenous Australians, those from low socioeconomic and regional and rural backgrounds and people with a disability.

As the accord's interim report notes, we need a higher education system that no longer prevents "talented people from attaining life-changing qualifications".

One way to do this is through enabling programs.

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## **What are enabling programs?**

Enabling programs are run by universities and taught by academics and are also known as “foundation” or “bridging” programs. They are non-award courses (meaning they don’t lead to a degree or other qualification) and aim to prepare students for undergraduate study.

They are not part of secondary school and can run for anywhere between about four weeks to two years. Most students study for about six months.

Many are available both on campus and online, with the option of full-time or part-time study.

The accord interim report calls for funding stability for the university sector for 2024 and 2025. It also says university funding for these years should be “directed towards a range of assistance, such as increased support for students in enabling courses”.



Enabling programs are also known as ‘foundation’ or ‘bridging’ programs. Shutterstock

## **What do they teach?**

The programs are designed to build a range of skills and knowledge students need to succeed in further study.

Courses cover a wide range topics, from generalised study skills to preparation for a specific degree.

Enabling programs can teach academic writing, library research, foundational mathematics, study skills and discipline-specific knowledge.

For example, if a student is interested in gaining entry to a nursing degree, they will need academic communication skills, mathematics, anatomy and digital skills. A future psychology student could benefit from skills and knowledge in social science and statistics.

## **Who are they for?**

Enabling programs are for anyone who needs further preparation before starting university. Commonly, this includes students who left school early, did not get a university entrance rank or did not do as well as they hoped in Year 12.

When applying to university, students can preference enabling programs as a viable “plan B” if they don’t receive an undergraduate offer.

Enrolments in enabling programs have grown from 6,490 students in 2001 to 32,579 in 2020. A large proportion of students come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

For example, 32% of students in enabling programs are from low socioeconomic backgrounds, which is double the proportion of undergraduate students.

Of the 48 enabling programs in Australia, 15 are explicitly for Indigenous students, who represent approximately 6% of all enabling program enrolments. This is more than double comparative undergraduate enrolments.

More than a third of enabling course students are from regional and remote areas.

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## **How can you access one?**

Universities have enabling programs on their websites and in their program guides for future students.

They are supported by federal funding so they can be offered free to students.

Depending on the program, you can apply directly to the university or through state-based tertiary admissions centres, at the time when you nominate your university preferences.

## **Why are they so important?**

Australian studies show students who complete enabling programs do just as well in undergraduate study as students who enter via traditional pathways, such as directly from high school.

Enabling programs are effective because they are designed to meet the needs of students who want a university qualification but have experienced educational disadvantage. They focus not only on academic skills but also on building confidence to study.

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As [@Gwil\\_C](#) ([@UniMelb](#)) writes, it talks of a 'seamless' transitions for students, and more consistency around recognising prior learning.

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## How can we improve them?

In the final Universities Accord report due in December, enabling educators want to see several changes to the way the system works, to make sure anyone who needs this help to go to university can access it.

This means fee-free places need to be demand-driven, with flexible funding to match fluctuations in student enrolments and allowing universities to increase enabling places as demand grows.

In addition to existing payments such as Austudy and ABSTUDY, there should be further financial support for disadvantaged students doing these courses. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are over-represented in enabling programs, and struggle find adequate study time while balancing family and financial commitments.

We would also like to see enabling qualifications included in the Australian Qualifications Framework, which regulates education and training qualifications.

This would ensure formal recognition of a student's achievement and then give them flexibility about which university they enrol in, because it would be recognised Australia-wide.

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***Read more: [Uncapping uni places for Indigenous students is a step in the right direction, but we must do much more](#)***

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