

Policy note

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GROUP OF EIGHT

The principal priorities for the Go8 with regard to higher education policy are coherence and sustainability. Good public policy is based on principle and backed by evidence. This, the first in a new series of Go8 Policy Notes offers an inter-linked set of principles for the development of higher education policy in Australia. Forthcoming Go8 Policy Notes will consider principles relating to university research, the interdependencies of research and higher education, and international education. Other Go8 Policy Notes will assess the available evidence relating to anomalies in the policy framework and options for addressing them.

Guiding policy principles for higher education

The Go8 believes that policy coherence should be guided by the principles of opportunity, fairness and choice in respect of student participation, and by the principles of quality, financial sustainability, structural diversity and institutional flexibility in respect of higher education provision.

Opportunity: Participation in higher education should be open to all who can benefit and wish to do so. It should not be limited arbitrarily, for instance, by government policy settings and funding constraints that restrict privately funded options.

Fairness: Access to higher education should be fairly available, without systemic barriers to participation. Students should neither be deterred by up-front costs nor denied the opportunity to pay what they can afford.

Choice: Students should be free to select the higher education opportunities that best suit their needs and interests. The growing diversity of learner needs and circumstances requires greater opportunity for students to determine the trade-offs that suit them best in terms of quality, convenience, ways and means of learning, and cost.

Quality: Higher education should meet acceptable threshold standards of quality. Higher education performance may well vary above the threshold. Quality should be evaluated with reference to the different missions of higher education institutions. Institutions should be publicly accountable for verifying their delivery of higher education of the quality they claim.

Financial sustainability: Higher education of acceptable quality should be affordable for the nation on a long-term basis. The provision of higher education should be financed at levels which at least cover costs.

Structural diversity: The structure of the nation's higher education system should cost-effectively accommodate the diversity of student needs and circumstances. While different higher education institutions may play different roles, such as in graduate education and research, there should be paths and bridges between them that enable continuous learning.

Institutional flexibility: Higher education institutions should have the organisational and operational flexibility they need to respond competitively to change.