Access and Equity in Australian Higher Education: The Equity Initiatives Framework Version 2.0. *A Practice Report*

Anna Bennett
The University of Newcastle, Australia
Ryan Naylor
The University of Sydney, Australia
Jo Hanley
The University of Newcastle, Australia
Cheryl Burgess
The University of Newcastle, Australia

Abstract

Australia's higher education sector has seen substantial developments in equity and inclusivity as a result of initiatives which work to improve the numbers and experiences of students from a wide diversity of backgrounds. This practice report shares learnings from a recent national project about the impacts of a wide range of access and equity programs and services, shedding light on effective strategies throughout the student life cycle. The study, known as the Critical Interventions Framework Part 3 (CIF 3), analysed published studies which provide details about the impact of initiatives, highlighting the mechanisms which have enabled students to gain access to and succeed in higher education. The focus here is on a key outcome of the CIF 3, the updated Equity Initiatives Framework (EIF), designed for utility as a quick reference guide to aid equity practitioners and others working to support students in their educational endeavours.

Context and Background

This practice report shares learnings from a study commissioned by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE and now known as the Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success [ACSES]) to identify equity initiatives across Australia's higher education sector that demonstrate effectiveness through published impact studies. The study, known as the Critical Interventions Framework Part 3 (CIF 3), produced three major tools/outputs: an *Equity Initiatives Impact Studies Guide*, which provides an overview of the impact studies across the student life cycle stages; the *Equity Initiatives Framework 2.0,* which updates the original framework produced as part of the Critical Interventions Framework Part 2 (Bennett et al., 2015) and widely cited and used across the sector; and an *Equity Studies Library* housing the impact studies identified and other useful literature, and which can be filtered by student life cycle, equity group, and so on; all of which are intended for use by providers to enhance the provision and evaluation of equity programs.[1]

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[1] These resources are available through the ACSES website

It is hoped that the insights and ideas provided in these resources serve to further inspire and stimulate ideas and continuous improvements for those funding, designing, developing, delivering and evaluating interventions. The focus here is on the updated *Equity Initiatives Framework* (EIF) designed for utility as a quick reference guide to aid equity practitioners and others working to support the access, transition, and successes of students in their educational endeavours.

An equity intervention is defined as a specific program, initiative or service which seeks to enhance the opportunities, access, participation, successes, retention and outcomes of students from targeted equity groups and other people who are under-represented or marginalised in Australian higher education. Equity is not about treating everyone the same; the concept of equity enables recognition and understanding of the deep-seated complexities of inequality and the valuing and appreciation of difference. Recognising the diverse strengths and capabilities of all people is essential.

Education systems, including schooling and tertiary education, are implicated in complex and historically stubborn wider socioeconomic inequalities. These systems do not provide equal chances for all people. That is why initiatives in education which strive to ameliorate structural and other forms of disadvantage, are crucial. Embedding inclusivity into higher education will increase the participation and successes of all peoples.

Equity groups in the Australian higher education context are based on the Equity and General Performance Indicator framework (Martin, 1994). The six defined groups are:

- people who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (First Nations/Indigenous);
- people who are from low socioeconomic backgrounds (low SES/LSES);
- people with disabilities;
- people from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB/CALD);
- people from regional, rural and remote areas (RRR); and
- women in non-traditional areas (WINTA).

There is some varying language in the literature about different sub-groups related to these categories, as well as discussion about the significance of intersectionality and the historical impacts of social, economic and educational inequalities on people, which are often significant, prolonged and limiting when not recognised and addressed. Thus, whilst this review was based on available sector data groupings, we highlight that such categories are limited, complex and contested, and emphasise the importance of both equity and inclusion, in the attempt to convey the importance of continuously striving for a higher education system that clearly includes and values all peoples. This makes it better for everyone.

The four higher education student life cycle stages used in this report include:

- Pre-Access – interventions within schools and communities
- Access – pathways and admissions (including Enabling pathways)
- Participation – transition, engagement, progression and completion (undergraduate and postgraduate)
- Attainment and further transition – employment or further study

Collectively, the literature identified in the CIF 3 study highlights that to progress student access and equity into the future, 'interventions', 'initiatives' and 'programs' need to be embedded in an equity-focused, inclusive higher education system. Every unit of study and all of the pedagogies, curricula and approaches utilised across universities, need to be informed about and focused on equity. Too often, it has been the other way around, with students simply having to conform and change to survive in an unchanging and inequitable system. An inclusive higher education system benefits everyone in teaching and learning, as well as through the increased diversity and equity produced as a result of more people introducing knowledge and innovations through research and practice.

This *Equity Initiatives Impact Studies Guide* focuses on studies about both interventions and impacts. Thematic and conceptual works without specific information about particular interventions and their evaluations were not the main focus. The literature included provides details about both the intervention or program identified and details about the evaluation and impacts. A more comprehensive bibliography of the field is provided in the Guide and the Library covering a broader scope of literature. This includes thematic, descriptive and conceptual work identified through the literature search, in addition to the impact studies. This enables readers to gain a more detailed understanding about relevant concepts and issues and to contextualise interventions discussed in the Guide.

Consistent with the previous two iterations of the Critical Interventions Framework review series (see Bennett et al., 2015; Naylor et al., 2013), we have found there are common, underlying factors that contribute to impact, which are summarised below in 'Overarching Findings'.

Methodological Approach

The CIF 3 involved a rapid literature review, with the aim of identifying equity programs with strong quantitative and/or qualitative evidence of impact. Building on the Critical Interventions Framework Part 2 (Bennett et al., 2015), but without the national survey and follow-up interviews, the goal was to update the EIF for classifying and understanding equity interventions. The study using the same rigorous review methodology (Kingdon et al., 2014; Oketch et al., 2014), which follows the principles of systematic reviewing, but enables "the incorporation of evidence that might not pass the stringent standards of a full systematic review" (Oketch et al., 2014, p. 20). It is important to highlight that the *Equity Initiatives Impact Studies Guide* does not provide a complete outline of all interventions across the sector. Many studies have not provided sufficient details of evaluation and have not had this work published in peer-reviewed publications, which may be due to the significant amount of time and cost required for translating the details of interventions into published works.

The project took place between April and August 2023, with the literature review aiming to be comprehensive but not exhaustive, and intended to capturing impact studies between June 2015 and May 2023. A total of 118 studies which provided either evidence of impact of equity interventions or offered useful data for informing decision-making were selected for inclusion in the *Equity Studies Library* and for synthesis in the project report (see ACSES website). This included 89 peer reviewed journal articles and 29 research reports. These studies were subsequently reviewed for details of program implementation, evaluation methodology, and evidence of impact. Information about each study was then analysed in terms of: equity target group(s), stage(s) of the student lifecycle, program type or description, program aims, implementation details, distinct features, evaluation methodology, type of data collected, sample size, impact data and any other important outcomes or recommendations.

In the CIF 2, 63 impact studies were captured, using a sector survey and a literature review, with the majority of that literature published during 2013-2015. In this study, 29 interventions from 20 Australian universities were captured that provided clear evidence of impact, using the project methodology. Across the included studies it is clear that there are common methods employed to understand and measure impacts of the interventions, which point to best practice evaluation approaches, including that they:

- utilise mixed methods research, including both qualitative approaches and quantitative methods that reflect the norms of wider institutional and national higher education data collection methodologies (which provide student counts and rates elucidating student experience, participation and learning outcomes). Note that the literature did not include descriptions of the types of counterfactual approaches used in other sectors (such as health), which compare groups participating in an intervention with a control group that did not receive the intervention;
- base their analysis and findings on systematic reviews of literature;
- embed ongoing evaluation in their practice and design, to ensure continuous development and timely responsiveness to changing student and stakeholder needs;
- aim to meet a wide diversity of participants' needs through embedding critical and gap analysis, and include consideration of diversity across geographical areas and community demographics; and
- ensure that students' experiences and community needs are at the forefront of both provision and evaluation.

The Guide provides detailed insights and recommendations at each stage of the student life cycle. From pre-access initiatives targeting school students to free enabling pathways for access and participation, to attainment strategies, we outline specific enablers and challenges at each stage. The Guide underscores the need for a more comprehensive, inclusive approach to the higher education system, which does not relegate equity to only some areas or programs and services, but improves the experiences and outcomes of all students. Policies and principles should guide institutions to prioritise and embed equity in every aspect of education.

Overarching Findings

Key Enablers of Equity

The Guide identifies several critical enablers that contribute to equity in higher education:

➢ **Partnerships and collaborations**: in Pre-access, Access and Participation stages, strong university partnerships and collaborations with schools, VET, and communities and industry, are shown to work to redress the significant impacts of inequalities which exist within and persist across the systems and employment sectors.

➢ **Flexibility**: in initiatives and learning design is required, including through engaging online resources.

➢ **Inclusivity**: in all programs, courses and pedagogy (including for employability), which need to be strengths-based and clearly value First Nations Australian knowledges. This is also important for enabling new knowledge to be produced (through research and innovation) in order to better serve all people's needs. Free and open-access enabling pathways are shown to be particularly impactful.

➢ **Embedded academic and other support**: academic and other support embedded within courses and programs of learning ensure all students have the information, opportunity and assistance to succeed.

➢ **Financial support**: is effective for attracting and retaining students. Financial barriers and related impacts, such as having enough time to attend to study, appear to be the most consistently reported barrier to equity participation, progression and completion particularly during the Access and Participation stages.

Key Design Principles and Approaches

To achieve equity, the Guide suggests the following key principles:

• Ambitious Institutional Strategies: Institutions must develop ambitious strategies for equity and inclusion, particularly in pedagogy, but equally in program, curriculum and assessment design, understanding that inclusive design and pedagogy makes learning better for all students at all stages of the higher education journey.

• Deep Embedding of Equity in Student Services: Comprehensive institutional approaches that deeply embed equity in student services are essential.

• Structures for First Nations Students: Dedicated funding and institutional structures designed by, with and for First Nations students, staff and communities are vital.

• Equitable Employability Strategies: Further development of inclusive and equitable employability strategies, with focussed and widely inclusive student consultation, is necessary.

• Challenge Stereotypes: Interventions challenging stereotypes about the capabilities of students from disadvantaged backgrounds make a significant difference. Clearly recognising that all students are capable of learning and contributing is essential.

• Role of Mentors and Peers: Mentors, peers, and role models play a crucial role in influencing successes and completion across various stages of the student life cycle.

• Limiting academic and career self-concept and associated lack of confidence come from strong stereotyping and cultural biases (which are often taken-for-granted in society and unintentionally conveyed through education systems and by significant others): This needs to be recognised, addressed and prevented.

Equity Initiatives Framework 2.0

The original EIF (Bennett et al., 2015) was conceived as a quick reference guide outlining the stages of the student life cycle, according to target groups, aims and principles of equity initiatives, intervention types and evaluation methods along with other important information. It has been updated based on findings from the current study and discernible sector trends (see Table 1 below and at https://www.acses.edu.au/publication/the-critical-interventions-framework-part-3-programs-and-approaches-that-enable-equity-in-higher-education/). Some mechanisms are included which are emerging and require more attention and investment, such as pre-access and access for non-school leavers, and transitions and support for postgraduate study.

The Framework has been revised in a range of ways with key changes as follows:

- Reconceptualisation of the student life cycle stages, particularly 'Participation' and 'Attainment' stages (as discussed below);
- Some minor changes to rows and headings to improve the utility of the Framework;
- The addition of Key Indicators (including quantitative and qualitative) for measuring impact; and
- Updated content to reflect a more developed understanding of access and equity initiatives and student need.

In the Pre-Access life cycle stage focused on outreach and engagement initiatives, the target groups have been broadened beyond schools and communities to include VET[2], organisations and industry.

A key change involves the reconceptualisation of how the Participation and Attainment stages are understood. Participation in the revised framework is conceived as commencement, progression and completion – and can refer to undergraduate or postgraduate degrees – where the three sub-stages should be recognised as important moments in the equity student journey that may require interventions. As part of this, Work-Integrated Learning (WIL), Placement and Employability have been included as a new explicit column which visualises the substantial growth in this area but also to highlight the challenges identified for students, particularly where these are conditional for completion. It is clear from the literature reviewed in this study that equity and inclusion in this space is underdeveloped and of critical importance.

Attainment as a life cycle stage now constitutes a transition period either into career employment or further study, which may involve a range of postgraduate study options in higher education (where the Participation cycle equity initiatives can repeat) or other study with private or public tertiary providers, either consecutively or as students return after a period of employment in their chosen career or other area. Attainment is a significant transition point where career preparedness and competitiveness for postgraduate places or in the job market are critical. With regard their movement out of education and into employment, it must be noted that students are no longer supported by equity initiatives relevant to this Framework; however, given that universities prepare students for professional careers/employment and through alumnus engagement, the Employability and Career Destinations sub-column in Attainment identifies where providers may be able to influence equity in this post-attainment space as follows:

- Careers and employment activities, including professional networking, resources and support
- Inclusive alumni programs
- Developing understandings of graduate equity for employers
- In terms of Intervention Types, some overarching initiatives have been noted across all four life cycle stages as essential:
- Mentoring and role-modelling, particularly by students, employers and industry from similar backgrounds/locations
- Partnerships and collaboration
- In community, on-campus, online and blended activities and interventions
- Careers and industry education and engagement

Across the latter three (Access, Participation and Attainment-Postgraduate and Other Study) financial support and accessible and affordable housing/accommodation have been identified as critical.

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[2] In the Australian context, Vocational Education and Training (VET) provides workplace skills, technical knowledge and qualifications.

Table 1

Revised Equity Initiatives Framework

Equity Initiatives Framework 2.0 (2023)						
This framework is a sector-wide guide that should be adapted according to the context, participant, and stakeholder needs.						
STUDENT LIFE CYCLE	**PRE-ACCESS:** Engagement with Schools, VET, Communities, Organisations and Industry	**ACCESS:** Pathways and Admissions (including Enabling Pathways)	**PARTICIPATION:** Transition, Engagement, Progression and Completion (Undergraduate and Postgraduate)			**ATTAINMENT AND FURTHER TRANSITION:** Postgraduate and Other Study, Employability and Careers
FOCUS	Outreach, Development and Information	Pathways and Admissions	Transition and Engagement	Engagement, Progression and Completion	WIL, Placement and Employability	Postgraduate and Other Study	Employability and Career Destinations
STAGE & TARGET GROUPS	• Primary school students • Teachers and other school staff • Parents/carers • Communities • Secondary school students • Teachers, careers and other staff • Parents/carers • Communities • Non-school leavers, community and industry	• School students and school leavers • Non-school leavers including mature-age • Collaborations with employers and organisations • VET students	• Commencing/first year students	• Continuing and later year students	• All undergraduate students • Industry and other organisations	• Graduates • Industry, organisations, employer groups and professional associations	
MAJOR PRINCIPLES & AIMS	• Increase awareness of higher education pathways and associated careers • Improve learning outcomes and access • Develop sense of belonging and preparation • Professional development for careers advisors and teachers • Build collaborations and partnerships	• Provide access • Develop preparation and sense of belonging	• Provide academic, social, wellbeing and financial support • Develop peer and staff connections • Develop sense of belonging and successes • Provide flexible and inclusive modes of delivery and teaching, curriculum and assessment • Develop competencies in discipline area/relevant knowledges		• Support employment equity and outcomes	• Enhance employability • Provide professional and career mentoring/advice • Increase employment equity and outcomes • Inform and support further learning	
KEY INDICATORS	• Application and admission rates from targeted communities • Intent and confidence measures from participants • Participant experience and learning outcomes	• Rates of admission for students without traditional entry • Application, completion and conversion rates for enabling education and VET transfers • Student experience and learning outcomes	• Retention, pass and completion rates (including in specific education types, such as WIL/placements) • GPA • Student experience and learning outcomes • Confidence and sense of belonging measures			• Articulation and employment rates and outcomes (in field and overall) • Intent and confidence measures • Employer satisfaction • Graduate feedback and experience	
		• Nb. Any key indicators for student performance must be contextualised to student equity group and study mode					
INTERVENTION TYPES	• Interventions for primary schooling • Interventions for early secondary schooling • Interventions for senior secondary schooling • Pre-university information, academic skills, preparation and immersion programs • Community and industry activities and engagement • Career and pathway education • University and subject tasters • In-school outreach and pathways	• Inclusive access and admission strategies • Alternative selection criteria, pathways and schemes for school leavers and non-school leavers • Open access Enabling pathways for preparation and entry • Engagement with VET/non-school leavers • Bridging and taster programs (for community members, undergraduates and postgraduates)	• Orientation and bridging programs • General and academic support services • Peer learning and activities • First Nations centres and supports • Inclusive and First Nations educational design and pedagogy • CPD for staff in equity • First Nations cultural competency training • Disability competency training	• Re-engagement strategies for participation, completion and exit qualifications • Support and program information, including bridging, postgraduate study, including graduate certificates and diplomas	• Equity focused, responsive and supportive employability activities • Financial considerations, support and flexible arrangements for students on placement • Developing student employability and professional networks	• Inclusive access, bridging and transition to postgraduate study • Inclusive and culturally aware learning support services • Engaging more diverse supervisors • Equity informed supervisors and staff	• Careers and employment activities, including professional networking, resources and support • Inclusive alumni programs • Developing understandings of graduate equity for employers

	• Teacher professional development and parent/carer education about developing and supporting all students' capabilities and aspirations • Open access tutoring		• Accessible and equitable online learning and technologies • Inclusive student societies and social clubs and activities			
		• Financial support • Accessible and affordable housing/accommodation				
	• Mentoring and role-modelling, particularly by students, employers and industry from similar backgrounds/locations • Partnerships and collaboration • In community, on-campus, online and blended activities and interventions • Careers and industry education and engagement					
SECTOR STRATEGIES & APPROACHES	• Equity strategy and lens for policies and procedures • Continuing professional development for equity • Embedded inclusive practices, educational approaches (program, course and assessment design) and pedagogies • First Nations cultural safety, competency and structures • Inclusive, non-stigmatising and non-deficit approaches and language • Data collection/monitoring and contextualised analysis for provision and evaluation • Institution-wide research and evaluation for all student life stages					
EVALUATION	Programs that demonstrate impact use evaluation that is participant and stakeholder centred and context and equity group specific. Rich information is gained from mixed methods approaches which enable identification of program efficacy and participant experience. Quantitative and qualitative data enables understanding of outcomes for all participants, including gaps and challenges. The following are examples of evaluation methods and data sources which could be utilised to understand equity interventions: • Literature reviews • Datasets from national and institutional systems • Surveys of student and other stakeholders for information about demographics, experiences and outcomes (using qualitative and/or quantitative designs) • Focus groups with students and other stakeholders (for eliciting targeted feedback and information) • One-to-one interviews with stakeholders (for exploring more detailed or complex issues) • Yarning circles and individual yarns • Community, industry and stakeholder consultation and feedback • Program logic analysis (including plausibility analysis, needs analysis and input/output requirements) • Documentary/narrative/discourse analysis of program information and resources • Documented reflective activities, which may be conducted before and after an initiative to explore its impact • Creative forms of feedback from participants (via journal entries, illustrations, responses to narratives, mentors and other stimuli) • Participant observation of programs in action (e.g. in learning contexts) • Benchmarking (through external program review or comparisons with other interventions or sectoral and/or institutional norms) • Case studies of specific interventions (which may involve comparisons between different interventions) • Analysis of input/output measures (e.g. numbers of participants, qualifications, numbers of scholarships awarded, etc.) • Longitudinal tracking of individual student experience and outcomes • Cohort analysis (comparing program offers, admissions, enrolments, attrition, retention, successes, and completion rates) • Service process tracking (e.g. changes in contact waiting times) • Web analytics (using the increasing amount of online data to track and analyse student and/or program performance) • Market analysis • Randomised control trials • Economic modelling					

Conclusion

The focus of this paper has been on one of the key outputs of the *Critical Interventions Framework Part 3* (CIF 3) project, which is the updated Equity Initiatives Framework (EIF). We hope that the EIF continues to inform and guide readers engaged in the endeavours of enabling and supporting future points of access as well as enriching the experiences and outcomes for students engaged in the different initiative types. Inclusive educational approaches that draw on the types of approaches highlighted in the Guide, which clearly include and value all people, make our higher education system and its community impacts (including the research generated from it) better for everyone.

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