

Equitable Access to Higher Education – Australia

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A number of government policies and programs ensure equitable access and success in higher education in Australia. These apply to all public higher education institutions (40 higher education providers), which receive the majority of their public funding from the Australian Government. The main programs supporting equity in higher education are in the areas of disability, widening participation (social inclusion), and Indigenous student support. The Higher Education Support Act 2003 sets out the details of the Australian Government funding and its associated legislative requirements, full details of the Act are available from the Australian Government ComLaw website www.comlaw.gov.au.

Support for students with disabilities is allocated to higher education institutions to assist with the costs involved in providing educational support and equipment for students with disabilities to enable them to participate in higher education, and to promote inclusive practices. A nationally coordinated website is also maintained, the Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training (ADCET), with information and resources to support inclusive education, and the work of disability practitioners and teachers.

Widening Participation strategies in Australia largely focus on students from lower socio-economic backgrounds to enable those with the ability to study at university to have the opportunity to do so. Government funding is provided to assist universities to undertake activities and implement strategies that improve access to undergraduate courses, as well as improving retention and completion rates for people from low SES backgrounds. This includes funding of partnership activities with primary and secondary schools, vocational education and training providers, community groups, and other universities, that build aspirations and preparedness for higher education.

Indigenous Australian student support funding is provided to universities to assist them in meeting the needs of their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and to advance national goals to increase the participation and outcomes of Indigenous Australian people in higher education. The enrolment ambition is to see Indigenous Australian student representation that is proportionate to the percentage of the Indigenous population in Australia. Supplementary tuition is available for Indigenous students, scholarships, and alternative admission pathways. Universities aim to continually build the cultural capability of their staff and student community, and raise the prominence and awareness of Indigenous culture on campus, with Indigenous knowledge and perspectives increasingly being embedded in the curriculum of all degree programs. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student associations have been established within many professions, with a focus on priority discipline areas such as teaching, STEM and health professions. Most Australian universities have a dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student centre providing support services along with a combination of teaching and research activities.

The Australian Government also supports student tuition fees, to address barriers to study that may be caused by financial commitment. Enrolments are substantially subsidised so that students only pay a contribution towards their units of study. Government supported places are available at all

public universities and at a handful of private higher education providers in some national priority areas. Normally, private providers only offer fee paying places. Eligible students are also able to borrow money through the Australian Government student loans scheme to assist with paying their fees. The amount that a student pays in contributions depends on the courses they enrol in.