

A manifesto for equitable and responsive student support in Australian higher education



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The opportunity: Rationale for a new frame of reference for supporting students

For decades, multiple stakeholders – institutions, individuals, government, industry and think tanks – have endeavoured to respond to the social, economic and democratic imperative to widen participation of underrepresented students to engage and succeed in higher education (HE), whatever their background or circumstances. Yet the goal of an inclusive HE sector remains elusive, and no more so than for First Nations peoples and communities, for whom better educational outcomes must be advanced and focused on equitable opportunity and self-determination.

The Universities Accord final report reiterates these objectives in its vision for an expanded sector that delivers learning, teaching and support for more diverse student cohorts, focussed on:

- 🍷 Ensuring that First Nations are central to HE;
- 🍷 Recognising educational disadvantage over the lifecycle;
- 🍷 Increasing diversity within the HE population;
- 🍷 Increasing the visibility and availability of supports for students.

The last of these objectives is now underpinned by legislative requirements that all HE providers have an explicit [Support for Students Policy](#) to ensure support that enables successful completion of study is readily available to students.

As such, we have the opportunity now to carefully reimagine how student support services might be broadened and better deployed to improve student participation and success for all learners.

This will demand significant coordinated effort across all HE actors: students, academics, practitioners, researchers, evaluators, policy makers and senior leaders, working with greater collaborative intent alongside communities, government and industry.

To deliver equity and success within HE, we first must acknowledge the current state of play: articulate where, what, and how we seek to make change, and then chart progress towards those outcomes via whole-of-institution and whole-of-sector approaches. The reality is that inequity is endemic in Australia's current educational ecosystem; there are enduring disparities in the opportunities and experiences that individuals can and are enabled to access.

Even so, we should acknowledge that, through these differences, various forms of capital are built (Yosso, 2005) that provide value to the individual, their families and communities, and the future potential they hold. The remit is to reconceptualise what 'disadvantage' is, understand how it compounds, work to remove the barriers associated with it, and clarify the value that comes from all types of capitals possessed. This allows us to celebrate the strengths and opportunity that all students bring to their physical and virtual learning communities in a "strong, dynamic and efficient tertiary

education system that has the capacity, capability and infrastructure it needs" (Universities Accord, Recommendation 1) to enhance social equity and mobility.

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Acting in the public good in this way, HE can be enabled to reaffirm its purpose and values, and reassert its social licence to operate as a purveyor of lifelong learning that is open and responsive to all; where individuals from diverse backgrounds and experiences can find their place, the freedom to be themselves, and feel safe and supported knowing they are valued, matter and belong. Moreover, wider inclusion of students and their diverse perspectives, identities, cultures, interests and abilities, enhances everyday student wellbeing, creativity and adaptability for longer-term active citizenship in a more equitable, compassionate and cohesive society.



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Delivering equitable and responsive student support

We should not continue to praise the resilience of individuals who achieve despite needing additional assistance; this ignores Tinto and Engstrom's (2008) famous warning that 'access without support is not opportunity'. Students who are disproportionately underrepresented in HE are entitled to expect timely, targeted and personalised support from institutions that is responsive to their specific needs.

However, institutions often fall into a paternalistic trap of assuming they know what this support could and should look like, which is often not the case (Tronto, 2013). We need to develop whole-of-institution approaches to listening and being attentive to what students tell us they need, to enable relationship-rich engagements (Felten & Lambert, 2018) for integration and coherence between learning and the broader student experience. We also need to be clear that all of us – students included – have a shared responsibility to ensure that we are competent to proactively monitor for, respond to and seek assistance if there are gaps in understandings or skills (Baker & Burke, 2023).

Careful and responsive co-design with diverse students as partners of supports across institutional silos can assist in identifying

and removing systemic barriers to access, participation and success via the coordinated delivery of meaningful, just-in-time, just-for-me support. This is particularly important for equity-bearing students who continuously transition over and across a broad spectrum of institutional interactions through the lived experience of their shifting identities and circumstances (Kift, 2024).

Educational equity requires that contextualised discipline-specific support should be systematically and routinely delivered to places we know students will be: in the curriculum to build connection, competence, capability, trust and belonging (May & Thomas, 2010; Kift, 2009, 2015). We need to change the institutional culture, structures and systems themselves, in ways that facilitate the validation of the range of student experiences and capitals. Rather than students being required to 'fit in', institutions need to adapt and proactively engage substantively with student diversity in caring, strengths-based ways. This involves providing wrap-around support, universally available to all, in a student support ecosystem orientated towards individual success.



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Principles of support

Taking an ethics of care lens to student supports can ensure a focus on relationships and situations, as well as foregrounding the value of empathy – taking a standpoint from the view of the other, from their lived experiences and from the needs of others, leading to action (Baker & Burke, 2023). Care scholar, Joan Tronto (1993, 2013), identifies five elements of an ethic of care that are useful when considering how students can be best supported:

- 🍯 *Attentiveness (caring about):* noticing/anticipating needs; being empathetic.
- 🍯 *Responsibility (caring for):* responding to needs.
- 🍯 *Competence (care giving):* having the skills, knowledge, and resources to provide support.
- 🍯 *Responsiveness (care receiving):* listening to how people respond.
- 🍯 *Solidarity (caring with):* acknowledging and assuming collective responsibility for supports.

These underpinning principles help conceptualise a view that support is most effective when it meets the following ten indica.

Attentiveness

- 🍯 Design for inclusivity, personalisation, flexibility and accessibility in an integrated, whole-of-institution ecosystem based on Universal Design and lifelong learning principles. The organising device, harnessed to assure student engagement, belonging and contextualised learning support, should be student learning in inclusive curriculum.
- 🍯 Address systemic barriers across all potential loci of institutional structural inequality – get the context right for staff (structure, culture, policy) to get the context (Tinto’s ‘educational conditions’) right for students.

Responsiveness

- 🍯 Resist the use of labels to describe heterogenous cohorts, many of whom are affected by cumulative disadvantage. Instead, provide agency for students to self-describe,

self-disclose and achieve personalised aspirations for success over the student lifecycle.

- 🍯 Validate and value students’ backgrounds, experiences, needs, cultural practices and strengths to support students’ shifting identities and continuous fluid transitions in, through, across, and out of learning.

Responsibility

- 🍯 Commit to clear, consistent and coherent communications that are segmented, affirming and timely across multiple channels to meet students where they are.
- 🍯 Assure inclusive, high quality, data-informed and data-led supports, that are continuously monitored, iteratively evaluated and longitudinal tracked.

Competence

- 🍯 Invest in staff who are trained, supported, valued, enabled and celebrated.
- 🍯 Normalise and learn from diversity and difference and commit to wellbeing and safety in an educational environment that is freed from stigma, harassment and discrimination.

Trust

- 🍯 Assure relationship-rich education that affirms an individual’s sense of belonging and mattering and mental wellbeing.
- 🍯 Enable trusting partnerships between academic and professional staff engaging with diverse students as partners, to bridge the silos between administrative, support and academic work/life/schedules/agendas.

Stakeholder Provocations

Students		Educators	
Practical	How well do you know yourself and your learning needs?	Practical	How well do you know your students? What can you do to get to know your students better?
Partnership	Do you know what supports are available, and who to ask for guidance?	Partnership	Who can help you to develop more responsive teaching and learning strategies? How can you partner with students to create more inclusive, student-centric learning environments?
Advocacy	How can we build a culture that embeds genuine engagement with diverse students as partners (for example, in co-design, reference groups and decision-making processes)?	Advocacy	How can we resist the ‘coded and loaded’ language and co-create affirming terminology that makes sense to students, especially new arrivals?



Practitioners		Senior executives	
Practical	How do we know that the supports we are providing are working?	Practical	What capability and inclusive data analytic expertise do senior staff have to ensure that there is ongoing engagement with issues of equitable participation and responsive student support provision?
Partnership	Who can you work with to create evidence-informed, sustainable and responsive supports?	Partnership	How do we ensure there is trust among stakeholders, especially student-staff, staff-staff, student-student, student-university, staff-leadership?
Advocacy	How can we ensure that practitioner perspectives are valued and taken into account in designing and refining student supports?	Advocacy	How can you leverage your engagements with other senior executive members, peak bodies and government to advance the case for more inclusive, student-centred supports?

Leadership and governance		Evaluating impact	
Practical	<p>Who are you listening to when designing support systems?</p> <p>What mechanisms can you (co-)design to bring in more diverse voices, and centre students in the conversations?</p> <p>What do you need to provide to ensure these groups are equipped to participate meaningfully?</p>	Practical	<p>What data are you gathering and are you using them ethically and responsibly?</p> <p>How are you balancing quantitative and qualitative accounts?</p>
Partnership	<p>How do we enable partnerships among stakeholders to share responsibility for inclusive support provision, taking a collective approach rather than working in institutional silos?</p>	Partnership	<p>How are you ensuring that the data are used responsibly for beneficial/ improvement/ advocacy purposes, and that there is a closing of the feedback loop?</p> <p>How well do students understand why their data is being collected and how it is being used?</p>
Advocacy	<p>How can you ensure that your approach to supporting students is driven by an ethic of care, rather than a compliance approach?</p>	Advocacy	<p>What training is needed to bring data analysis and equity into line, to recognise intersecting challenges and needs for which students require support?</p> <p>How can we become better and more trustworthy data stewards and assure fairness, accountability and transparency in data analytics?</p>



Researchers		Staff development	
Practical	<p>How are you identifying the gaps for your research and assuring your data analytics techniques are responsible, fair and transparent?</p>	Practical	<p>What professional development training about student needs and support already exists to which you can direct your colleagues (academic and professional)?</p>
Partnership	<p>How are you bringing students into your research as active co-contributors?</p>	Partnership	<p>What training needs do all staff have to be competent in supporting diverse students?</p>
Advocacy	<p>How can you communicate your research to better leverage policy advocacy?</p> <p>What tools do you need? Who can help?</p>	Advocacy	<p>How can we encourage professional development about universal design for all staff, especially educators, in ways that are meaningful and ongoing, rather than optional ‘tick and flick’?</p>

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