

6.4 Embedded Equity Program at the University of Western Australia

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Name and weblink of Higher Education Institution

The University of Western Australia. Weblink.

Main Contacts and Sources of Information

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This case study draws on a large research project completed in 2016 as part of the Fellows Programme funded by the Australian Government through the National Priority Pool, which was published in a research report by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. It also includes the latest available outcome data for the program (2020) as well as information from background documents and contemporary reflections from key project personnel.

Type of initiative

An embedded equity program at an elite university

Introduction

Widening access and participation in higher education has been on Australia's national policy agenda for over thirty years, since the government white paper *A Fair Chance for All*³⁷ articulated a focus on six equity target groups that are still in place today. However, it took the 2008 Review into Australian Higher Education³⁸ to see the Government commit significant funding to equity programs that meant institutions could and did implement major initiatives purposely designed to raise awareness, aspiration and capacity of students from underrepresented groups in higher education. The introduction of the *Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program* (HEPPP) was a major catalyst for The University of Western Australia (UWA) to significantly scale up tailored and multifaceted programs addressing the underrepresentation of students from equity cohorts³⁹.

UWA is a small, selective, research-intensive institution situated in the vast and sparsely populated state of Western Australia (WA). It has a main campus

37 Commonwealth of Australia (1990). *A Fair Chance for All: Higher Education That's Within Everyone's Reach*. Canberra: AGPS.

38 Bradley, D., Noonan, P., Nugent, H. & Scales, B. (2008). *Review of Australian Higher Education Final Report*. Canberra: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

39 Skene, J., Pollard, L., & House, H. (2016). *Aspire UWA: a case study of widening access in higher education*. *Student Success*, 7(2), 11-20. doi:10.5204/sss.v7i2.337

in metropolitan Perth and a regional campus in Albany, 420 km southeast of Perth. It has a traditional undergraduate student cohort of approximately 25,000 students. In 2020, approximately 68% of students were from metropolitan Perth, 6.5% were from regional and remote WA, and 24% were international students.

In its mission statement, the University articulates a strong commitment to equity and merit as well as to its region, the state of Western Australia. Just over 50% of students articulate directly from high school, with the majority using an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR), which comprises school scores and state-wide examination marks. In 2012, the University instigated a new course model introducing four main generalized undergraduate degrees that articulate into an expanded set of Master's and Doctoral programmes. The undergraduate programs had standard entry scores with the opportunity for students with high ATARs to secure postgraduate places in professional courses, including in medicine.

Description of program

The reality of being a selective institution in a large state provided the context for the design of a layered outreach and transition program that spans the pre-access, access and transition phases of the student lifecycle⁴⁰. The UWA model combines long-term, sustained engagement with students, schools, communities, and internal partners in the University's flagship pre-access program - *Aspire UWA* - with addressing locational disadvantage and individual disadvantage in three major access schemes that provide pre-access and transition support - *Fairway UWA*, *Broadway UWA*, and the *Mature-age Access Pathway (MAP)*.

Aspire UWA works in close partnership with schools to challenge low educational expectations, creating a school culture where university pathways are embraced and students are supported through the university. This is achieved through whole-cohort engagement from Years 7 to 12 and immersive on-campus experiences, including residential camps. Three-year partnerships are formalized through a Memorandum of Understanding between the school and university, outlining the opportunities and roles of both parties.

Fairway UWA provides an alternative entry pathway to UWA for students completing Year 12 facing financial hardship and challenging circumstances. Students form a strong network of peers through on-campus residential and day events prior to starting university and are provided with rigorous academic support once they enroll at UWA.

Broadway UWA is a positive ATAR adjustment scheme for schools located in low socioeconomic communities, and the **Mature Aged Access Pathway**

40 Bennett, A., Naylor, R., Mellor, K., Brett, M., Gore, J., Harvey, A., Munn, B., James, R., Smith, M., and Whitty, G. (2015). Critical Interventions Framework Part 2: Equity Initiatives in Australian Higher Education: A review of evidence of Impact. https://www.newcastle.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0018/261126/UN001_Equity-Initiatives-Framework_Part-2_A3_AW.pdf

(MAP) provides entry and support for students aged 20 and above who do not have an ATAR. These programs engage and build relationships with students during the preaccess and transition stages of the student lifecycle.

The program also works closely with the **School of Indigenous Studies**, which provides targeted outreach and entry pathways, such as a provisional entry scheme and an enabling course, for Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

The core objectives of the outreach and access initiatives were to support aspiration, build academic attainment, and demystify the university experience. The approach was based on a deep understanding of the systemic disadvantage created by poverty and geography and a belief in the transformative power of (higher) education. All initiatives explicitly targeted individual students, secondary schools and communities who experienced socioeconomic disadvantage.

For enrolled students, however, the university had made a decision to adopt an inclusive approach to student support rather than a deficit model that identified individual students based on their level of financial disadvantage. The approach was summarized with a metaphor: “We [Student Support] are not the Rolls Royce for a few; we’re the bus for the many.” The aim was to develop effective support mechanisms that could benefit all students while providing equity students with a ‘bridge’ into mainstream services.

All funding, program development, and the coordination of delivery were centralized in the Student Support area in a deliberate decision by the leadership to keep a small institutional allocation in the same portfolio rather than dispersing it across the university. Building off a pilot project that began late 2009, UWA secured a 3-year AU\$6 m Competitive Partnership Grant through the HEPPP in 2011, which enabled a major expansion of the equity program.

In 2012, Aspire UWA was substantially scaled up and taken to new regions of WA, and an additional access program, Fairway UWA, was introduced alongside Broadway UWA and the Mature Age Access Pathway. Between 2012 and 2015, programs were refined, and opportunities were identified for sustainability in the future. From 2016, the program was beginning to be culturally and financially embraced as a strategic initiative by the university. 2019 marked a decade of Aspire UWA, and despite internal and external funding challenges, the ongoing long-term commitment and reputational success of the program saw the University continue its investment.

Identification of linkages with national/regional/local policies

The university’s mission is to serve the entire state, and its charter articulates equity and merit as fundamental principles and dual goals. Despite this, students from low SES backgrounds had not traditionally been a key target group of the university and, in 2009, made up a very small proportion of the domestic undergraduate cohort (6.1%). It took some conscious realignment of equity

strategies and initiatives to respond to the focus adopted by the government following the Bradley review⁴¹.

The institutional commitment to the dual goals of equity and merit was operationalized by a committed group of senior individuals who had lived experience of the transformative power of education. This group turned the commitment to equitable outcomes into a strategic priority and ‘university ambition’ and, thus, ascribed its value. The key enabler of strategic changes, however, was seen in the availability of external competitive funding for equity initiatives:

We always had a reputation as being a university that had a focus on equity, and our previous VC was seen as an equity champion. But the funding wasn’t there to run these kinds of programs. The funding gave us the opportunity to show that this was something that the university could do well and should have been doing well beforehand. (Equity Director)

Since 2009, when competitive equity funding first became available, the University had expanded its equity and access activities considerably, recognising its ‘patchy’ performance against national equity indicators. The new initiatives were evidence-based, including learning from selective institutions in the UK. When HEPPP was introduced, the university was able to build on existing programs and expertise generated by earlier competitive funding. These initiatives were significantly expanded again with institutional and competitive HEPPP funding, the latter secured between 2011 and 2016.

Moreover, the equity leadership was very skilled at leveraging energy generated elsewhere in the university to advance its own agenda. Because the equity strategy was driven out of one organizational area by a well-connected group of senior change agents, it could take full advantage of changes brought about by the new course model, which was introduced at the same time as HEPPP for full implementation in 2012. This enabled changes to the curriculum, established a centralized admissions system, and resulted in an equity strategy that became deeply embedded in the academic enterprise rather than being established as an add-on programme. One of the Executive sponsors reflects on the approach:

The university used [HEPPP] funds to truly drive its diversity and equity programs. I think a key aspect of [the University’s] approach, and how this came about, not because of the demand-driven [funding] system but because of the curriculum change. Undergraduate admission is completely centralized. [...] It has made it very easy to have the entire equity program driven centrally.

These structural changes at the institutional level were an important success factor for UWA’s equity program.

41 Australian Government (2009). *Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System*. Canberra: Australian Government.

Obstacles encountered and mitigation measures during implementation

On the whole, practitioners, the university leadership and its partners regarded the approach taken by the UWA as having exceeded expectations. The University had made the national program work in its context to near-universal acclaim. The most obvious and discussed challenge was the small institutional HEPPP allocation in the context of very high costs of delivery in a geographically vast state.

HEPPP design: The constraints of a small institutional allocation

Between 2010 and 2020, the HEPPP formula was based on the number of undergraduate students from low SES backgrounds enrolled at an institution. This did not account for a university's geographic location and the disproportionate cost of delivering outreach activities in large states. The challenge inherent in the funding formula for UWA was described in its 2010 HEPPP progress report:

By way of illustration, a university visit to a school in regional New South Wales, three or four hours' drive from Sydney, could expect to pay \$100 a night for standard accommodation in a country town. In some regions of WA, accommodation of a similar standard costs \$350 per night, needs to be booked two months in advance and is reached only after a three-hour flight costing upwards [sic] of \$1,000 return.

The small institutional allocation, commitment to covering the whole state and disproportionate costs per student reached meant that the university continually needed to apply for significant amounts of competitive funding to increase capacity, especially in the pre-access phase. This created an extra workload and employment insecurity for staff as well as challenges for program sustainability.

Addressing educational disadvantage as an elite institution

For a selective university in a large state, the focus on low SES communities enforced by HEPPP provided particular challenges due to the correlation between the distance of communities to major centers, the quality of schooling, which was reflected in attainment levels of students, the low number of students finishing high school, and the cultural capital that students and parents could draw on in their decision-making about post-school options. The Equity Director described the original challenge:

So, if we were going to look at the groups of people who would fall under low SES disadvantage, a lot of them were going to be a long way away. They were also going to be in very disadvantaged communities, and it was going to be a long-term process to raise aspirations and then a long-term process to lift

academic standards to a level that they would get entry to a Group of Eight [university].

The university was conscious of multiple disadvantages that put students at a disadvantage, particularly in a selective institution. This awareness underpinned the decision to adopt inclusive approaches to retention support rather than a deficit model and was thought to benefit all students.

Over time, the university had to pay more attention to the retention of equity students. As the university's demographic profile started to shift, and especially the mature age cohort was increasing, there are now more students with financial difficulties and complicated lives who need targeted support. With more recent admissions changes introduced in response to COVID as well as new progression policies introduced recently by the Australian government, new work is being undertaken on identifying students and providing early intervention strategies to support success.

Protecting an embedded equity strategy during times of organizational change

In 2015, the integrated strategy came under real threat in an institutional context of large-scale structural and personnel change within a tight financial situation.

The widening participation agenda was known across the university by a collection of high-profile initiatives in the (pre)access phase rather than being understood as an integrated equity strategy that addressed systemic educational disadvantage and spanned pre-access, access and transition phases. Because of its embedded nature in the Student Support area, the retention program in particular had low visibility. In addition, the efficiencies and economies of scale generated by grouping all equity activities within the same organizational area were largely unknown to people outside of the division.

Taken together, these factors made the equity program vulnerable to being split up in a change process or having funding withdrawn, with potentially serious ramifications for the program's effectiveness and efficiency. While equity practitioners across the sector were very conscious about the vulnerability of HEPPP funding, their colleagues at UWA were aware that institutional equity funding was not necessarily any more secure.

However, in the end, the embedded nature of the program acted as a protective factor and allowed for continuous adaptations and improvements while core initiatives were preserved.

Results of the innovative equity approach

The embedded approach to equity strategy and programs adopted by the UWA translated into demonstrable success in attracting and retaining increased numbers of students from low SES backgrounds over time. The national equity data show that the participation rates of the undergraduate low SES cohort

have almost doubled over the past decade, from 5.43% in 2011 to 9.33% in 2020.

The national focus of HEPPP and the availability of competitive funding made the difference to the university. It extended capacity and broadened existing offers so that the scale of the flagship pre-access initiatives rivaled that of much larger and more diverse universities. The introduction of the new course model and a standard university entry cutoff score (ATAR) made a significant difference in the ability of equity students to access high-status professional degrees, especially in medicine.

In 2015, the success of the access programs was easily demonstrated in admissions data: most of the students participating in the intensive access program - Fairway UWA - had gone on to university, and just under half of them enrolled at UWA. More recently, participation numbers have fallen due to the introduction of additional alternative pathways and scholarships in response to the COVID pandemic. In response, the Fairway program is currently being reviewed and is likely to change focus in 2023.

School partners: changes in attainment, attitudes and culture result in successful transitions to HE

UWA has demonstrated consistently positive outcomes to the school partners involved in pre-access and access initiatives since the programs' inception. There is evidence that Aspire UWA, the flagship outreach program, enhanced students' motivation and engagement with learning, increased their awareness of HE options or specific areas of study and that teachers became more proactive in encouraging students to consider the university as a postschool pathway.

Furthermore, school partners reported that the embedded activities increased attainment levels and changed attitudes and school culture. The latter was mainly brought about by growth in the school's ATAR cohort, for which the flagship outreach initiative was seen as a key factor. Moreover, the equity programs were perceived as being entrenched in the school's culture, which had lifted expectations of students by teachers and themselves:

- It mattered that the partnership was with an elite university that contributed to the cultural changes at the school.
- The long-term commitment by the university had been noted as a success factor, but it was also crucial to sustained outcomes for the school.
- The achievement focus of the programs made a difference to school partners in that it enabled the schools to foster high achievers and be outcome focused.
- The ongoing support provided by the integrated widening participation model was credited for the successful transitions of students to university and UWA in particular.

Because the HEPPP-funded initiatives spanned pre-access to transition phases, the positive outcomes for school students accrued further for those who enrolled at the university.

Current students: improved study outcomes through personalized support

HEPPP-funded activities were also seen as having strong benefits for current students in terms of retention, progression and grades. There was anecdotal evidence of the pathway programs channeling disproportionate numbers of equity students into high-status degrees, especially medicine.

The UWA case study illustrates the benefits to the individual and their communities when equity students have the opportunity to access high-status degrees.

Positive outcomes for current students also included employment in student-led or peer programs and volunteering opportunities to build a profile of community engagement. Employment had the direct benefit of payment but also the more intangible benefits of enhancing graduate attributes and employability.

Assessment of potential for replication and scaling up

The model of HEPPP implementation at UWA was built on a sequence of targeted, high profile components that were part of a coherent and embedded equity strategy and, thus, codependent. As a whole, they effectively addressed different challenges of widening participation to a selective university. There were three key success factors that relate to the design, funding and staffing of the program and should be addressed by any institution trying to replicate the approach.

1. Pearls on a string: A tailor-made program for a selective institution

The program design had three core components: layered outreach, alternative admission processes, and personalized transition support. The consistent focus on attainment was critical to translating outreach efforts into increased participation rates at an elite university. Together, the component parts appeared like pearls on a string that reinforced each other and provided a clear pathway for prospective students to access a selective institution. The approach also had advantages for the institution in that the programme was more than the sum of its parts: the centralized operating model fostered collaboration across teams, which created economies of scale and learning for equity practitioners. Finally, the tight control of funding and targeting of interventions resulted in an efficient, expert-driven and low-conflict model of implementing HEPPP.

2. Diversification of funding sources as a conscious strategy for growth and sustainability

UWA only received a very modest institutional HEPPP allocation due to the university's low number of students from low SES backgrounds. A deliberate

funding strategy was developed that combined central control of institutional allocation with strategic diversification of equity funding sources, including institutional, donor and corporate funding. The equity directors consciously leveraged HEPPP-funded initiatives to access other funding sources as years of scaling up the program on competitive government funding with associated reporting requirements had demonstrated its success. By the time the final external grant ran out, the program had proven itself and was seen as a sensible investment by university executives. Continuing to adapt and find efficiencies has kept the program relevant and feasible within an increasingly fiscally constrained environment.

3. Success is a team effort: Investing in teams

The equity programs were people-rich and demonstrably able to attract volunteers among students as well as academic and senior staff by embedding the program into the core business of the university. For external stakeholders, the university was seen as an important and trusted partner because it placed young people at the center of the partnership, was prepared to work within the constraints and preferences of the school partners, was willing to listen, and worked through problems to come up with the best possible solution. The partnership model was also identified by practitioners as a key success factor.

While the key success factors can be replicated in selective institutions elsewhere, it is important to recognize that there were significant changes in both national and institutional policy that coincided with the UWA's establishment of an embedded equity strategy and were critical to its success.

The university introduced a new course model and centralized undergraduate admission, which enabled the development of a highly centralized and deeply embedded equity strategy. At the same time, the Australian government provided significant equity funding through the HEPPP, including substantial amounts of competitive partnership funding, and implemented a demand-driven funding approach for higher education, which meant that universities were funded for as many undergraduate students as they could attract. These significant policy changes at the institutional and national levels provided the vehicle to carry the equity agenda across the university and embedded it in the new strategic priorities, operational structures and institutional culture that emerged.

Concluding Comments

The University of Western Australia developed a targeted, integrated and demonstrably effective equity program with benefits to its community, prospective and current students, school partners and the university itself. It was driven by a group of senior equity leaders and champions at all levels of the university who leveraged the energy generated by large-scale institutional and policy change to advance the equity agenda at a selective university. The UWA

model is noteworthy for its investment of HEPPP funds into the access phase as well as the consistent attainment focus in all its programs. The metaphor that best describes the approach is that of pearls on a string: a tailored and layered equity program provided a clear pathway into an elite university. For a selective institution, the approach taken seems entirely fit-for-purpose.

UWA has prioritized and invested in its equity programme that supports students from diverse backgrounds across the student lifecycle. This investment has seen the suite of initiatives continue for over a decade and become leading examples of widening participation initiatives in the sector, often being singled out among the Group of Eight universities. It has also attracted corporate and philanthropic support and subsequently enabled meaningful engagement opportunities with industry and alumni.

This case study is an inspiring story of how an elite institution can create effective access routes for equity students and be a valued and trusted partner to the most disadvantaged communities in its realm of influence.

To download the entire publication, *Transforming lives at the Institutional Level*, please [click here](#).