

Higher Education - ASPIRE Program Concept

IRU Australia has developed this concept for a Higher Education (HE) – ASPIRE program to stimulate discussion about possible new approaches to addressing the under-representation of disadvantaged Australians in higher education.

The IRU Australia Higher Education (HE) – ASPIRE program is based on a number of factors:

- A lower level of achievement in school by pupils from low SES and Indigenous backgrounds is a precursor to lower educational aspirations and thence lower school completion rates, which in turn is a major factor underlying the low participation rate in higher education.
- Disadvantage is remarkably concentrated geographically.
- There has been no national policy or program targeting early outreach programs for disadvantaged Australians with the potential to undertake higher education.

The HE – ASPIRE program concept features elements of the UK Aimhigher and the US Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) programs which have been in operation since 2004 and 1999 respectively.

Aim

HE – ASPIRE is funded to increase participation in higher education through early outreach to young people from disadvantaged groups under-represented in Australian higher education, including Indigenous and low SES groups.

The program is aimed at making sure that human potential is recognised and fostered where it is found by increasing the number of young people who have the abilities and aspirations to benefit from higher education.

The program will be national in its coverage but will operate most intensively in areas that are identified by the Australian government as disadvantaged based on a number of relevant measures, in particular higher education participation rates.

Objectives

The objectives of HE – ASPIRE are to:

- Raise aspirations and motivation to enter HE among young people in middle primary through to secondary levels who are from disadvantaged groups.
- Raise the attainment of potential HE students, who are from disadvantaged groups, so that they gain the academic or vocational qualifications and learning skills that will enable them to enter HE.
- Raise students' aspirations to attend HE and to apply to the institution and/or course best able to match their abilities.

Region/Area delivery framework

The HE – ASPIRE program will be delivered on a regional or area basis as appropriate, with the Australian government determining the definition of regions/areas according to a range of factors including: existing methods for defining regions/areas (e.g. statistical subdivisions); measures of disadvantage; physical area; and, location of universities.

The program design and delivery for a particular region/area will be determined by a **Region/Area Partnership Committee** comprising representatives of all key stakeholders, including:

- Universities and other higher education providers;
- Schools;
- TAFE and other education and training providers;
- Adult and community education providers;
- Social services agencies or community groups.

For each partnership, the coordinating university will have specific responsibilities to ensure full accountability for funding. The coordinating university will appoint a program coordinator to: provide secretariat support to the Area Partnership Committee; draft the documentation required to access funding and meet accountability requirements; and, act as the principal coordinator of program activity.

Delivery approach

Area Partnership Committees will be required, on the basis of data provided by the government, to identify target schools, institutions and communities. Through those targeted institutions and groups, a program of sequenced and appropriately paced interventions will be delivered so that each cohort of students experience a continuity of linked interventions over a number of years.

The HE-ASPIRE program could include the following types of activity:

- Programs for parents aimed at assisting them to support their children's educational attainment and inform them about higher education options;
- Programs for students (e.g. campus visits; summer schools; student ambassadors; master classes; information, advice and guidance on topics such as scholarships, loans, learning pathways);
- Programs for teachers;
- 'Joined-up' service provision as needed (e.g. funds to engage extra tutorial support, social and family support and health services).

To assist partnerships in designing programs within the UK Aimhigher program, work has been proceeding on developing a Learner Progression Framework which identifies an appropriate sequence of activity for learners.

Funding

Each region/area will be classified according to its relative disadvantage as determined by a range of appropriate measures and this classification will determine the quantum of funding made available through the program. The quantum of funding will also take into account the distance of the region/area from a university and the consequential costs involved in university engagement with the area.

In recognition of the timeframes and continuity of programs required to achieve outcomes in overcoming disadvantage, funding will be allocated to a region/area for three years in the first instance, expanding to five years in later rounds once some experience with the program has been achieved.

National management and governance

National coordination of the HE – ASPIRE program should be located in a dedicated unit within DEEWR. The role of this unit should extend to developing support material to assist Region/Area Partnerships Committees to design and implement their programs and to meet their responsibilities under the program. It will also include identification of examples of good practice for national dissemination and evaluation of the program at the national level.

A **National Advisory Committee** should be established to provide advice to the Australian government in the design and implementation of the program.

Region/Area Partnership Committees will be required to:

- Agree a strategic plan for the three year period covered by the funding and annual operational plans;
- Devise a parallel evaluation plan for reporting on outcomes at the end of the three years and provide an annual monitoring report;
- Reach agreement on the distribution of funding in line with the strategic and operational plans; and
- Oversee the financial management of the program.

Coordinating universities will fulfil the responsibilities outlined earlier and will also agree targets with the Australian government for the participation of low SES and Indigenous students.

Getting started...

Given the unprecedented nature of the HE – ASPIRE program in Australia, the following process is suggested for getting the program underway:

1. The Australian government commissions research into early outreach programs, both in Australia and overseas, to assist it in developing the program structure and guidelines.
2. The Australian government, in consultation with State and Territory governments, determines the region/area structure of the program delivery framework.
3. The Australian government determines the funding to be allocated to each area/region on the basis of measures of disadvantage, in particular, higher education participation rates and the distance from a university.

4. The Australian government invites expressions of interest from universities to act as the coordinating university for each area/region.
5. Expressions of interest are evaluated and universities nominated as the coordinating institution for each area/region. Where there is no selected coordinating institution for a disadvantaged area/region, the Australian government will negotiate arrangements for the inclusion of that area/region in the program with individual universities.
6. Coordinating universities will be provided with preliminary seed funding to enable them to facilitate the establishment of Area Partnership Committees and support the development of strategic and operational plans.
7. Program funding for each area/region will be released by the government once it has endorsed the strategic plan and operational plan for the area/region.

This HE ASPIRE document forms part of the IRU Australia submission to the Review of Australian Higher Education 2008.

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