



Media release

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Policy options for improving equity in higher education

Low SES enrolments in higher education are still 25,000 short of the target of 20% of total, according to analysis from the Innovative Research Universities (IRU).

In the second of a series of discussion papers designed to help inform the Universities Accord process, the IRU has analysed policy options for improving the participation and success of students from low-socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds.

As demand for higher education grows between now and 2030, a priority must be to improve opportunities for people from low SES backgrounds across Australia.

To meet the target by 2030, 35% of all new enrolments between now and then will need to be students from low SES backgrounds, more than double the current rate of 17%.

The IRU analysis maps growing demand for higher education to 2030 due to demographic trends and focuses on participation by students from low SES backgrounds to examine the changes in policy, funding and practice that will be required to meet demand while also improving equity. The IRU analysis also shows that different universities play significantly different roles in supporting the participation and success of students from low SES backgrounds.

IRU Executive Director Paul Harris said that the focus on equity highlights the existing diversity across the higher education system, with 15 “equity intensive” universities already meeting or exceeding the 20% low SES target.

“Our vision for the Universities Accord is a system with greater equity in both education and research. But it is clear from the evidence that a one-size-fits-all approach will not work,” he said.

“Targeting funding to the institutions and regions that have the best chance of increasing the participation and success of students from low SES backgrounds will require a more sophisticated understanding of the geography and intersectionality of disadvantage.”

Mr Harris said the IRU, which celebrates its 20th anniversary in 2023, has a proud history of constructive contributions to public policy.

“The universities in the IRU were established to open up access and opportunity for more Australians. We are committed to working with government through the Universities Accord process to improve the evidence-base to underpin future policy and programs for student equity and success.”

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iru.edu.au

Attachments

IRU discussion paper: *Meeting the demand for higher education and the 20% low SES target by 2030*, April 2023. Available on the IRU website [here](#).

IRU contact

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About the IRU

The IRU is a network of seven comprehensive universities across Australia committed to inclusive education and research with impact that advances our communities. Its members are Flinders University, Griffith University, James Cook University, La Trobe University, Murdoch University, University of Canberra, and Western Sydney University.