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# Has the push to get more disadvantaged students into universities been a success?

Between 2008 and 2015, the number of disadvantaged students enrolled at Australian institutions increased by 50.2%.



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The Department of Education has commissioned an evaluation of the [Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program](#) (HEPPP), which [helps to](#) improve access to university for disadvantaged students – and also increase retention and completion rates of these students.

[The evaluation](#) will look at how effective the program has been, who's benefited, what changes may be required and whether it provides good value for money.

Given the program is already scheduled for a [\\$152 million funding cut](#) from 2017, and given the rapid rise in [higher education expenditure](#) which has increase by 40% over the 11 years to 2013-14, many are nervous about the [potential outcome](#).

## What does HEPPP do?

HEPPP was introduced in 2010, alongside the [demand-driven system](#) that uncapped undergraduate places.

In 2016, [A\\$155 million](#) was distributed across the sector, according to low SES enrolments.

Western Sydney University [received](#) \$11.5 million, for example, while Australian National University received just under \$400,000.

Typically funds are used to broaden access and support existing students.

Outreach activities include university staff travelling to low-SES secondary schools to deliver workshops and masterclasses. School students also visit campuses and experiencing a day in the life of a university student.

For current students, universities also spend HEPPP funds on scholarships and bursaries, peer-mentoring programs, support services and learning analytics systems.

## Is HEPPP effective?

Research shows that HEPPP activities work.

Between 2008 and 2015, the [number of students](#) enrolled at Australian institutions from low SES backgrounds increased by 50.2%, compared with growth in overall domestic undergraduate enrolments of 36.8%. Much of this increase is doubtless [due to the demand-driven system](#) itself.

However, more [specific studies](#) suggest that HEPPP is also partly responsible for the low SES enrolment increase.

To date, the largest single HEPPP project involved a consortium of New South Wales universities working with disadvantaged schools across the state.

[“Bridges to Higher Education”](#) cost \$21.2 million and was independently evaluated by KPMG, which found a 6% increase in university offers made to school leavers at the Bridges project schools (compared with a 1% increase at non-Bridges low SES schools).

The total economic return to the targeted low-SES areas was estimated at \$54 million.

The second largest HEPPP project, involving the [Queensland Widening Participation Consortium](#), also found significant increases in university aspirations and applications. These findings are likely to be replicated across the country.

HEPPP scholarships and bursaries have also clearly [improved opportunities](#) for low SES students to succeed at university.

A [recent cross-institutional study](#) found:

equity scholarships are effective in retaining recipients, across the three universities Deakin University, Queensland University of Technology, and the University of Sydney, across demographic groups and across different scholarship products.

## Other factors at play

The program was introduced at the same time as the demand-driven system. Separating the effects of each cause in raising low-SES participation rates is therefore difficult.

[Other factors](#) such as vocational education and training (VET) policies and broader economic factors also complicate causation.

Moreover, HEPPP is a long-term strategy to address structural inequity.

It includes outreach to primary schools, with many participants unlikely to complete university for a decade or more.

After just six years of insecure annual funding at unpredictable levels, any conclusions reached will be tentative.

It is also important to mention that no national evaluation framework was established from the outset. Consultants [are now seeking](#) student level data from universities in the ambitious hope of retrospectively finding causation across the nation.

## Why is HEPPP important?

HEPPP activities work because they are evidence-based.

One of the most [common themes](#) for underrepresented groups in higher education – from boys in regional areas, to people transitioning out of foster care, to new migrants, to first in family students, to people from low SES backgrounds – is that they believe university is not for people like them.

Outreach activities address this belief by normalising university and increasing its visibility and accessibility to under-represented groups.

Outreach also [demystifies careers](#), which is critical. For enrolled low SES students, [financial support](#) is of obvious value to success and retention.

The value of widening participation activities is [well established internationally](#).

## **How could it be improved?**

While the general effectiveness of HEPPP activities is clear, more specific evidence is still needed.

Questions that need answering include: which universities' outreach programs are the most effective? Which student support programs are better than others?

[As required in the UK](#), we need better comparisons, more randomised control trials, and a national evaluation framework.

Explicitly targeting regional students, whose participation rate [remains low and flat](#), and including other equity groups, could also strengthen the program.

The [annual university HEPPP reports](#) could also be published as they are in the UK to share evidence and practice. The Australian government currently does not publish university HEPPP reports so it is difficult to identify innovation across the sector.

Student equity is not marginal. While HEPPP is a relatively small program, systemic under-representation limits the quality as well as the equity of Australian higher education. Equity therefore also needs to be included within mainstream higher education funding, accountability, policies and metrics.