While HEPPP has contributed to increasing access for low-SES students, participation rates among regional and remote students have flatlined.

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The Higher Education Partnerships and Participation Program needs long-term policy commitment and funding stability to further tackle the systemic issues that hinder university access among disadvantaged groups, universities and experts say in submissions to a review.

Since 2010 the program has funded universities to deliver initiatives to boost participation of low socioeconomic status students, including community outreach to raise aspirations, on-campus programs and pathways to facilitate access, and scholarships offering financial support.

Earlier this year the government commissioned an evaluation of the program’s outcomes, whether it had provided “good value for money” and what changes were inquired to increase participation.
Universities Australia says HEPPP has been effective in boosting participation, with the number of students from low-SES backgrounds increasing by 45 per cent between 2008 and 2014, compared with growth in overall domestic undergraduate enrolments of 32 per cent.

Despite that expansion in access, the success and retention rates of these students have remained fairly constant, according to La Trobe University’s Access and Achievement Research Unit.

At an individual program level, the effectiveness of the outreach, scholarships and student support initiatives has been well-documented, it says.

HEPPP has enabled important and effective collaborations across universities, such as Bridges to Higher Education in NSW, the Queensland Widening Participation Consortium and Victoria’s LEAP Program, all of which helped to boost participation.

One of the benefits of HEPPP has been a new research focus and improved evidence on student equity, La Trobe says.

However, stakeholders are highly critical of ongoing cuts to the scheme’s funding, most recently in this year’s budget.

Many argue for the government to reinstate the lost funding.

“HEPPP funding has been unpredictable, insecure and declining in relative terms,” the submission from La Trobe says.

“These factors inevitably mitigate the effectiveness of institutional programs and partnership building, which rely on the capacity to plan and implement programs with confidence over time.”

While HEPPP has contributed to increasing access for low-SES students, participation rates among regional and remote students have flatlined and several submissions call for them to be included as a target group.

The Regional Universities Network argues for HEPPP funding to be concentrated in areas where participation rates and university access are low, covering regional students as well as those from low-SES backgrounds.

“Regional universities provide the only realistic option for many regional students to attend university,” it says.

Other proposals for improvements to the program include a thorough evaluation framework, with La Trobe calling for annual institutional HEPPP reports to improve the evidence base and support shared practice.

Submissions to the evaluation closed on Monday.