

The red tape returns: HE Reforms create a three year plan for participation

The proposal outlined by the Department of Education (25 June 2014) that there be three year Access and Participation Plans as part of the revamped Higher Education Participation Program (HEPP) indicates that the Government is on the verge of failing an early test of its capacity to carry through its undoubted commitment to reduce unnecessary reporting, pointless acquittals and ineffective accountability.

Rather than unleash the bonds around the previous Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) the Government on current plans will merely alter the shape of the knots.

To provide universities with a clear incentive to improve enrolments of students from low socioeconomic status (Low SES) backgrounds the Review of Higher Education (Bradley Review) recommended in 2008 the creation of a reward funding element. In accepting the proposal the then Government defined the element as “a financial incentive to expand the enrolment of low-SES students, and to fund the intensive support needed to improve their completion and retention rates.”¹

The payment replaced a long standing, moderately funded, equity program that focused at support for particular equity initiatives with extensive reporting and limited integration with mainstream university operations.² Participation by some target groups had improved; participation by students from low SES backgrounds was on a slow and steady slide.

Unfortunately HEPPP was implemented with the reporting accountabilities of the previous, Higher Education Equity Program (HEEP), rolled over, ignoring that it was created to be more effective than HEEP not replicate its limitations. Those accountabilities include an ongoing focus on reporting specific activities and acquittal of the funds, both of which discourage an integrated approach to student services delivery that ensures all students gain needed support.

As an incentive program the key issue is whether universities respond in the way expected. A successful participation outcome will be where people from all backgrounds do enrol in similar proportions, with universities’ services effectively supporting all enrolled students.

The objective is to enrol more Low SES students. The funding that rewards doing so successfully, and the risk of losing funding if numbers drop, removes the need to monitor the specific activities and expenditure a university may undertake to achieve a positive result.

Effective action needs to be whole of university. If universities are forced to demonstrate how funds are used they will be less likely to integrate them with base funding and be more likely to engage in distinct, easily marked projects.

The new HEPP is an opportunity for the Government to show it understands how to use funding incentives to reduce resources lost to reporting. A three year cycle tied to a formal plan and demands for strategies is not a significant change, it is a wasted opportunity. It is not as if the Department is able to assess the strategies to say they are not suitable – the proof lies with the enrolments and retention, nothing else.

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¹ Australian Government, *Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System*, 2009, p14

² See IRU, “Why Acquitting the Low-SES loading is a Waste”, November 2012, <http://www.iru.edu.au/news/executive-director's-comment/why-acquitting-the-low-ses-loading-is-a-waste.aspx><http://www.iru.edu.au/news/executive-director's-comment.aspx>