

Evaluating Student Equity Initiatives: A Student-Centred Approach. A *Practice Report*

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Abstract

The robust evaluation of student equity initiatives is now an expected activity in Australian universities. This paper reports on the development of Swinburne's Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) Evaluation Framework in which the project team adopted a student-centred design approach. The needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were positioned at the heart of the methodology and provided the starting point of explorations of student experiences in interviews and focus groups. We found that psychosocial support activities were critical to Indigenous students and those from low socioeconomic status and/or regional or remote backgrounds and identified several additional Outcome factors of equity programs. Furthermore, we propose 'Prosperity' as a new Impact factor for evaluating equity programs to capture a broader notion of 'success'. We argue that insights from existing institutional evaluation frameworks need to complement the Student Equity in Higher Education Evaluation Framework (SEHEEF) as Australia's national framework and inform its continuous improvement.

Keywords: Program evaluation; student equity, First Nations students.

Introduction

Following the introduction of the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) in 2010, considerable effort has been invested in the evaluation of programs to support the success of students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds in Australian universities; but findings from these studies remain limited (Bennett et al., 2024). With the passing of the Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-Ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill in 2020 (commonly referred to as the Job-Ready Graduates Bill), the student equity in higher education policy focus widened to include students from Indigenous and regional and remote backgrounds as additional target groups, adding further complexity to the evaluation of the influence of HEPPP funded activities on access, participation and completion rates of target group students.

The core challenge in the evaluation of student equity programs and activities is the number of variables which need to be considered to draw meaningful conclusions about the impact of these initiatives on student outcomes. The decision-making

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processes by target group students in relation to accessing higher education (Raciti, 2019; Zacharias & Mitchell, 2020) and persisting to completion (Ajjawi et al., 2019; Norton et al., 2018) are complex and not all are within the control of universities (Bowles & Brindle, 2017). It is also evident that student success is not just a function of student or institutional characteristics (Department of Education and Training, 2017; Kahu & Nelson, 2017) and an effective evaluation framework cannot rely on the existing Higher Education Student Data Collection alone. Yet, there are student-level factors, such as motivation and resilience (Department of Education and Training, 2017) and sense of belonging (Rubin et al., 2022), which could explain the variance in student progression into and through their undergraduate courses. These need to be integrated into a coherent evaluation framework to more fully explain the progress and academic outcomes of students from diverse backgrounds.

In short, student equity program evaluation is a complex terrain to navigate. The methodological approaches most appropriate for establishing program impact on student outcomes are contested. While some call for empirical quantitative evaluations (e.g., ACIL Allen Consulting, 2017), others caution against using metrics-based evaluation and argue instead for approaches that adopt evaluation policies to link theory and practice to guide evaluations of student equity in higher education (e.g., Burke et al., 2023).

In 2021, the Australian government sought to address these challenges and commissioned the development of the Student Equity in Higher Education Evaluation Framework (SEHEEF) to support universities in building “an evidence base of what works, and to ensure that lessons are learnt once and shared often” (Department of Education, 2024). The SEHEEF was developed by researchers at the Institute for Social Science Research (ISSR) at the University of Queensland based on existing literature and stakeholder expertise (Robinson et al., 2021). The SEHEEF is underpinned by a set of principles, namely for the national evaluation framework to be credible, implementable, flexible, useful, transparent, inclusive and culturally appropriate.

The SEHEEF now guides evaluation practice in Australian higher education with regard to HEPPP-funded programs and activities. However, it is important to recognise that some universities had developed their own evaluation frameworks and that these hold significant learnings to inform the implementation of the SEHEEF and its ongoing development.

Institutional Context and Project Aims

In 2020, Swinburne University of Technology invested in the quantitative evaluation of HEPPP-funded initiatives to capture their influence on the academic outcomes of students from low SES backgrounds using matched pairs to generate a comparison group. The analysis included a narrow set of impact factors (progression and success rates as well as Grade Point Average) but showed that several programs contributed in positive and statistically significant ways to student outcomes. Other HEPPP-funded programs involved small sample sizes or sensitive data so that a quantitative approach was not the most appropriate way to evaluate them. A third group of programs was focused on outreach work and a decision was made that a national, or at least state-wide, approach to evaluation was needed to generate meaningful results.

In addition to its narrow scope and quantitative methodology, the existing evaluation approach also did not speak to principles of Indigenous self-determination, cultural safety and strength-based practices drawing on Indigenous knowledges which underpin Swinburne’s Elevate Reconciliation Action Plan (Swinburne University of Technology, 2024). With the inclusion of Indigenous students as a target group for the HEPPP from 2021, this gap needed to be urgently addressed.

In response, a project which considered the policy, research and design implications of these challenges was set up by the University. The intent was to develop a holistic understanding of the interconnected social, cultural and institutional factors which influence student success in higher education and integrate them into a tailor-made institutional evaluation framework. The framework was also expected to align with the RAP principles. The project focused explicitly on the target groups of the HEPPP, i.e., students from low SES, regional or remote and/or Indigenous backgrounds enrolled in undergraduate courses at Swinburne.

This project was carried out at a similar time as the development of the SEHEEF and in close consultation with the research team at the University of Queensland. The Swinburne team also included senior representatives from the Department of Education as part of the stakeholder interviews to ensure they were aware of this work.

The approach to develop the SEHEEF started with ‘what is’ in terms of HEPPP implementation and undertook extensive stakeholder consultations with practitioners, researchers and other subject matter experts (Robinson et al., 2021). However, it is understood that putting to the side, or ‘bracketing’, existing practices in the exploratory process and engaging directly with beneficiaries, students in this context, enables project teams to gain deep understanding of lived experiences (Dorst & Watson,

2023). This evidence, in turn, informs where successful practices can be effectively leveraged and issues appropriately mitigated (Buchanan, 2001). Therefore, this project sought to engage students to understand how they define success and ascertain how HEPPP activities can be designed to help them achieve success in their university journey.

Notions of Success in Higher Education

'Success' at university is a complex and multi-dimensional concept. From a government and institutional perspective, success is often defined in terms of academic outcomes, including progression towards and completion of degree programs (O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018). While these outcomes are considered important from a student perspective (Naylor, 2017), success has also been reported to be a highly variable experience involving both emotional and structural considerations:

Success is about being empowered personally, socially and economically. Not one of these elements outweighs the other, so cannot be reduced to being only about passing all courses or being job ready. Therefore, the definition and measurement of success needs to be broadened to capture student experiences and what they value. (Rubin et al., 2022, p. 6)

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, education is not just a personal journey but one focused on family and community (Shalley et al., 2019). Narratives of success reflect whole of community aspirations. Educational outcomes for many Indigenous students are seen as more than just a personal success, as something they can give back. This is also true of some students from equity backgrounds (Rubin et al., 2022).

Education institutions should have "good systems in place to work with Indigenous learners" (Moodie, 2020). Indigenous student centres combined with a "holistic view of Indigenous participation and success at university" can provide an environment in which Indigenous students' educational priorities become central to the student journey (Hearn & Kenna, 2021, p. 243). Indicators of Indigenous student success may differ from the traditional western model, however, a 'whole-of-university' approach incorporates the diversity of what student success might look like (Uink et al., 2021).

Formulating notions of success involves a dynamic interplay between the institution and its students, especially in the early stages of their degree (Kahu & Nelson, 2017; Krause & Coates, 2008). It is necessary for the institution to provide an accessible and inclusive environment and processes to enable students to access information and support (Bennett & Lumb, 2019). This needs to include both learning and teaching practices and support services that understand and address the needs of the diverse student cohort now enrolled in Australian universities.

One attempt to develop a broader notion of success was *The Best Chance for All* (Zacharias & Brett, 2019), a proposed policy statement for student equity in Australian tertiary education. The vision was that "Australia's future depends on all its people, whoever and wherever they are, being enabled to successfully engage in beneficial lifelong learning" and that such an approach would contribute to, "A fair, democratic, prosperous, and enterprising nation; reconciliation with Indigenous Australia; cultural, civic and intellectual life" (p. 7). We have borrowed explicitly from this notion of success in the development of Swinburne's HEPPP Evaluation Framework.

A Collaborative and Student-Centred Development Approach

The project team brought together researchers and practitioners from Swinburne as well as external strategic design consultants from The Growth Drivers (TGD). The project was supported by a governance group of senior Swinburne stakeholders with knowledge of the HEPPP, its implementation and evaluation. Drawing on the skills and expertise of the TGD design experts, this project adopted human-centred design methods and strategic design frameworks to tackle well-known evaluation challenges by placing diverse student experiences at the centre of the research. These experiences were synthesised into six Student Personas and Journey Maps for the purposes of communicating student perspectives to multiple audiences and allowing the project team to identify insights relevant to emergent cohorts, accounting for variances in their requirements and definitions of success.

Co-design methods were deployed to both the project activities and the design of the project team and governance bodies. Weekly standup sessions enabled all team members to contribute their knowledge and expertise to evolving project activities. Data collection, analysis, and reporting were shared tasks. The governance group was regularly engaged to ensure senior leaders were actively involved in the co-development of the project and kept abreast of findings from the earliest stages. The research team sought to embed the three key principles of Swinburne's RAP, namely self-determination, cultural safety and Indigenous knowledges, as well as data sovereignty, in all activities, outputs and outcomes designed by and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, academics and staff of the organisation. To achieve this goal, the project team worked

closely with the Moondani Toombadool Centre (MTC), which is responsible for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander matters at Swinburne. The team worked primarily with the Indigenous student services team to co-design approaches and methods for engaging with students. The executive director of the MTC was a member of the project's governance group. Associate Professor Sadie Heckenberg, then the Academic Director (Indigenous Research), was included in the research team and participated in Core Design Team (CDT) meetings. Members of the Indigenous Governance Committee, RAP Working Group and the Indigenous Research Committee were invited to stakeholder interviews. The stakeholder interviews also included representative bodies for Indigenous undergraduate and postgraduate students. All non-Indigenous members of the research team undertook cultural awareness training before data collection commenced.

Project Design and Implementation

Informed by various strategic design methods, this project was carried out in four stages which generally followed the patterns of the 'design diamonds' and allowed for multiple phases of divergent evidence gathering.

Stage 1 focused on confirming the purpose and scope of the project through exploration of the current state and intended outcomes from a range of expert perspectives. This involved the CDT developing an Intent Statement and Research Protocol with members of the project team and the governance group providing their knowledge of the current context and unique drivers for change. This information enabled the CDT to determine which research and design activities would best enable achievement of the outcomes, define research lines of enquiry, regularly check progress against stated goals, and inform ethics applications (Buchanan, 2019).

Following ethics approval for Stage 2, the team undertook secondary data analysis of existing Swinburne student records and service use data to gain a baseline understanding of the current state of program participation and the outcomes for students who were using the programs. Insights from the quantitative analysis were used to shape the engagement activities, such as the selection of participants and further refinement of interview lines of enquiry.

During Stage 2, the team undertook interviews with key stakeholders (n=15, up to one hour each), including Swinburne staff, student representative bodies, representatives from the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE), and researchers in the field of student equity and program evaluation. We engaged these individuals to explore and understand their unique perspectives and/or understanding of different student cohorts on topics including evaluation objectives, enablers and opportunities, planning and implementation issues (i.e., use of resources), fulfilment of program objectives, the impact of the HEPPP program on participants (i.e., difference the program has made to a particular cohort), and behavioural shifts related to program activities.

Building on the preliminary insights that were generated, the project team developed methods for further student engagement in Stage 3, working closely with Indigenous colleagues to ensure these engagements were culturally safe and appropriate. This process necessitated a second ethics application submitted before the commencement of Stage 3.

Stage 3 aimed to further build on and validate insights of Stage 2. The CDT conducted a series of interviews with Swinburne students (n=20). These informed the development of Student Personas, Journey Maps and an Experience Map. The project team then recruited a second group of Swinburne students from the target cohorts (n=11) to participate in 3 focus group sessions. Participants were provided with draft Journey Maps and asked to shed light on how HEPPP funded initiatives can support students to achieve increased access, participation and completion outcomes. They were also asked to identify in the maps where additional support is required. Refined outputs were then discussed during a workshop with Swinburne HEPPP project managers (n=14) which was the final step in Stage 3.

In Stage 4, the project team synthesised the insights to develop Swinburne's HEPPP Evaluation Framework and drafted the final report in consultation with priority stakeholders and the project's governance group to seek their feedback and commentary on the ease of application of the Framework within their context.

Overall, 31 students engaged in the research activities representing a small cluster of students from the three HEPPP target cohorts. As with all qualitative research outcomes, it is acknowledged that the findings from this project are indicative only and should not be considered representative of the target student cohorts at Swinburne or beyond.

Iterative Data Analysis and Synthesis

To ensure effective research processes were deployed and information communicated effectively, the project team utilised design methods to continually gather information, reflect and respond (Buchanan, 2019). After every interview and focus group, team members individually noted key insights and observations before a group reflection took place to further flesh out the findings. These insights were then synthesised by the team and cross-referenced to each line of enquiry pursued, and themes began to emerge.

The CDT conducted half-day synthesis sessions at the conclusion of each engagement stage to further build on those patterns, themes and insights. Through these collective sensemaking activities, team members began to collaboratively shape project outputs and link information together (i.e., literature review, HEPPP participation data, interview and focus group materials), to develop a coherent narrative regarding drivers, values and requirements of students.

A co-design workshop utilising all the synthesised materials generated, led to the creation of the final evaluation framework. This aligned the institutional effort with the sector vision identified in *The Best Chance for All* (Zacharias & Brett, 2019), the HEPPP objectives as outlined in the 'Other Grants Guidelines', the available literature on student success, and findings from the primary data analysis. Together, this formed a blueprint for future HEPPP program design and evaluation at Swinburne.

Key Insights on Student Success and Support Needs

The student interviews and focus groups produced six major insights in terms of students' definitions of success as well as their needs for support as they transition into and through university. These were common to all student groups we engaged with but also had particular dimensions for some of our target group students. Our findings are broadly in line with the existing literature around student success and support needs with one major exception.

As others found before us (e.g. Rubin et al., 2022), success means many different things to students and can change over time. Indigenous students often had culturally informed notions of success which should be recognised by the University. Our findings also showed that, first and foremost, students were seeking meaningful connections to peers and with teaching staff at university. Regardless of study mode, regional and remote students in particular sought opportunities to connect with peers. Fostering community for Indigenous students was a strength of the MTC, especially for on-campus students.

In terms of student needs, information provision was critical, including access to structured and practical information about course requirements and career opportunities. Students said that transition activities were important, needed to be immersive and could be made mandatory. Transition support, including understanding the range of financial supports available to them, was seen as especially important by students from low SES backgrounds.

However, it was not just the type of information required, mode and frequency of communication were also important factors. We found that communication with students needed to be diverse, direct and abundant. The communication and advertisement of student services played a major role in their perceived helpfulness and relevance. The perennial question is how universities might engage students who will not proactively seek out support, using communication approaches and content across all relevant channels.

Finally, we found that every student experienced university life in a unique way and required different levels of support and engagement. For students studying remotely, the teacher was the prime conductor of the learning experience. The MTC played a critical role in Indigenous student experiences, largely because their service provision adapted to individual needs. The valued model of the MTC raises the question of how the University might employ an empathetic and high-touch approach across all its student services. These questions were explored further in a case study developed for an international collection of good practice student equity initiatives (Zacharias et al., 2023).

There was one anomalous set of findings in our study. While the literature indicates that financial, housing and food concerns are common for university students, and students from HEPPP target groups in particular, the participants in our research did not highlight these as core concerns. These issues might have been de-emphasised during the period of the project as all students who participated in this study were in extended lockdowns, due to COVID-19, and many were living with family or in relatively stable home environments, received additional financial support from the federal government, and/or reduced spending due to restrictions in social engagements and travel. We argue that it is important to not lose the insights of that

moment in time. In particular, how a whole category of relevant issues can reduce in prominence when the environment changes dramatically.

It is important to recognise that these insights were not seen as ends in themselves. Instead, we used them to develop Student Archetypes and Journey Maps to better understand a diverse student cohort, represent their thoughts and behaviours, and guide program design to meet student needs. This process and the resulting tools have been described elsewhere (Zacharias, 2022). However, the insights from the focus groups did raise a number of questions on how we define and evaluate the success of equity programs, acknowledge and incorporate student concepts of success in evaluation approaches, and adopt holistic approaches to student engagement. These are explored in the remainder of the paper.

A Student-Centred Set of Outcome Factors

Swinburne's HEPPP Evaluation Framework adopts a similar structure to the SEHEEF and shares key components. The Framework relies on Program Logic Models and defines, Inputs (Resources in the SEHEEF) Activities, Outcomes (Supporting Outcomes in the SEHEEF), and Impacts (Primary Outcomes in the SEHEEF). It identified many outcome factors that have equivalents in the SEHEEF, including Academic Attainment, Employability Skills, Food & Housing Security, Life Skills, Self-Efficacy and Sense of Belonging (see Table 1 below).

Table 1

Swinburne Outcome Factors and Definitions vs SEHEEF Supporting Outcomes

Swinburne Categories	Definitions	Relevant SEHEEF Supporting Outcomes
Academic Attainment	Weighted average mark and/or GPA.	<i>Primary outcomes factor</i>
Active Participation in Cultural, Civic & Intellectual Life	Students report active engagement in academic, family, social and cultural life domains.	-
Cultural Safety	Ensuring an environment in which students feel empowered, comfortable and connected.	-
Employability Skills	Students gain skills which allow them to navigate and obtain career opportunities.	<i>Improved competencies, job readiness and employability</i>
Food & Housing Security	Students have reliable access to housing and food which is sufficient to meet their needs and lifestyle and dietary requirements.	<i>Enhanced resources that make continuing HE study a viable option</i>
Health & Wellbeing	Students report a greater level of mental, physical and emotional wellbeing.	-
Help-Seeking	Students access services, especially following a referral.	-
Life Skills	Students acquire competence in skills that are useful in everyday life.	<i>Improved soft and hard skills that support academic attainment</i>
Self-Efficacy	A combination of motivation and confidence measures. Students feel confident in their academic abilities and are motivated to study.	<i>Improved capability and motivation to participate in university</i>
Sense of Belonging	Students feel they are a valued part of the university community.	<i>Improved social networks and sense of belonging</i>

However, Swinburne's HEPPP Evaluation Framework departs from the SEHEEF in three important ways, which, together act to broaden the concept of success of student equity initiatives in higher education and position the student at the centre of the evaluation approach:

1. The additional Impact factor of Prosperity which we derived from *The Best Chance for All*.
2. Outcome factors that capture Active Participation in Cultural, Civic & Intellectual Life, Cultural Safety, Health & Wellbeing, and Help-Seeking developed based on the insights generated from the primary data and existing literature.
3. The additional activity category of Psychosocial Support to capture activities designed to facilitate social connections and social wellbeing in students.

We argue that insights from Swinburne's HEPPP Evaluation Framework complement the SEHEEF and should inform its continuous improvement to capture a more holistic definition of success. As it stands, we posit that the SEHEEF approach to student success is too narrow and not sufficiently sensitive to the distinct needs of the target student cohorts, especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The Australian government should explicitly encourage regular reviews of the effectiveness of the SEHEEF as universities are starting to implement it comprehensively. These reviews should aim to capture current gaps and limitation as well as opportunities for improvement.

Concluding Thoughts

The insights and tools generated by this project are relevant to practitioners and evaluation leads in multiple ways. By placing the experience of diverse students at the heart of the investigation, this project has identified sets of challenges and opportunities that can be addressed through targeted interventions which, in turn, can result in meaningful improvements for the three student groups targeted by HEPPP.

Building on our experience, we encourage other institutions to bring together researchers, evaluators, designers and practitioners with senior decision makers to enhance program design in holistic ways and continually improve the evaluation framework and tools. Evaluation leads should co-design and implement student equity program evaluations with Indigenous research colleagues and the dedicated staff employed by Indigenous student centres. At the national level, the SEHEEF should be updated to include a Psychosocial Support activity category and student-centred Supporting outcomes as well as introduce the notion of Prosperity as an additional Primary outcomes factor.

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