

## Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success **SUBMISSION**

*This submission from the Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success (ACSES) responds to aspects of **Charting Australian Education Research Priorities and Future Directions – A consultation paper for the Decadal Plan for Australian Education Research 2025-36.***

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### **ACSES OVERVIEW**

#### **Background and context**

- The Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success (ACSES or the Centre) is based at Curtin University and funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, with additional support from Curtin.
- ACSES is a respected national research and policy **What Works** centre with recognition and authority across Australia's universities (primarily the Table A and B Providers). It undertakes projects that significantly extend evidence-based programs and evaluative capacity in the sector.
- The Centre assists universities to improve outcomes for disadvantaged students and communities. This is a key hallmark of not just inclusive higher education but also delivering better outcomes for students and contributing to enhanced national prosperity and social cohesion.
- It manages three programs: **Research and Policy; Trials and Evaluation; and Data.**
- More information on ACSES is available on its website: <https://www.acses.edu.au/>

#### **Key points of relevance**

- ACSES is data driven and factually oriented. It has the expertise to design, advise, oversee, and report on effective policy and practice in universities backed by robust measures of student experience and outcomes.
- The focus of ACSES's work is student-centric. It includes an examination of the student journey – recruitment, student experience, retention, success and employability – using evidence that builds a rounded, accurate picture.
- Through its **Research and Policy Program**, ACSES currently funds research grants, fellowships, HDR research stipends, and visiting scholarships, while through its **Trials and Evaluation Program** the Centre funds trials of evidence-based approaches, including research-based approaches, to improve student access and outcomes in Australian higher education.

## **Charting Australian Education Research Priorities and Future Directions: *A consultation paper inviting input into the* Decadal Plan for Australian Education Research 2025-36**

This submission from ACSES on the consultation paper **Charting Australian Education Research Priorities and Future Directions** focuses on two questions in the *Justice, Quality and Equity for All* priority area:

**5. What research focus areas should be prioritised to improve quality and equity for all learners? Briefly describe the specific research investments, capabilities and relationships that would make this possible.**

**7. How would a more integrated approach to research across sectors, disciplines and institutions benefit the experiences and outcomes for all learners?**

In answering these questions, ACSES also provides contextualised responses to Questions 4 (current policies and practices that constrain equity and justice for all) and Question 6 (embedding First Nations perspectives and practices in curriculum) of the Consultation Paper.

The Centre undertakes and funds research on issues affecting equity in higher education across the student life-cycle, from pre-access to post-graduation outcomes. This work necessarily includes other education sectors as well and extends beyond the educational setting. For instance, research on the transition from school to higher education requires work on secondary school student performance, as well as family, social, and cultural background, as well as geographic location. For this reason, the Centre is highly supportive of initiatives to promote the integration of Australia's higher education research system across all education levels.

In addition, ACSES's impact as a primary grant giver in the higher education research space would be enhanced through increased opportunities to collaborate with other funders and researchers outside the higher education space, where such initiatives supported research to inform policy and practice in higher education.

ACSES is providing this response to further these aims. It draws on the Centre's work as both a national centre for research on student equity in higher education, its role as a core funder of research on equity issues in Australian higher education, and its position as a disseminator and translator of equity research.

## ACSES Response

### 5. What research focus areas should be prioritised to improve quality and equity for all learners? Briefly describe the specific research investments, capabilities and relationships that would make this possible.

ACSES recommends the Decadal Plan prioritise the following research areas:

- **Equity Status**

The capacity of people to access and thrive in education settings is influenced by a range of factors, including geographic location, socioeconomic status, cultural background, and disability status. In higher education, these factors that contribute to the definition of disadvantage or “equity status,” and by extension, the identification of formal equity groups<sup>1</sup>. Given the established equity lens for viewing disadvantage in Australian higher education is that of equity groups, an immediate area of focus for the Decadal Plan should be the delineation of a consistent data framework to characterise **equity status** across **all levels of the Australian education system**, from early childhood learning to higher education.

A common approach to a data-informed characterisation of equity status across the Australian education system would serve to promote approaches to policy and practice that draw on an evidence base that captures the longitudinal and compounding nature of disadvantage in education.

- **Education and Career Expectations**

A key source of inequity in education is the variance in education experience across households. Parental expectations of their children’s success is a critical factor in tertiary education participation and are shaped by parent’s social and education background.<sup>2</sup> Research has shown that children’s education aspirations and expectations are shaped by parental expectations which are shaped by and their own academic performance and access to information about education and career opportunities.<sup>3</sup> Areas of future research include:

- Education Expectations
  - Parental education achievement and occupation and education outcomes of their children
  - Parental knowledge and expectations of education and occupation choices of their children
  - Determinants of children’s education aspirations and expectations
- Equity status and parental/children’s expectations

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<sup>1</sup> ACSES (2024). *Student Equity Data Guide: Defining Equity Groups*.

<https://www.acses.edu.au/publication/student-equity-data-guide-defining-equity-groups/>

<sup>2</sup> Dockery, A. M., P. Koshy, and I. W. Li. 2022. "Parental expectations of children’s higher education participation in Australia." *British Educational Research Journal* 48 (4): 617-639. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3786>

<sup>3</sup> Bennett, D., Coffey, J., Bawa, S., Carney, D., Dockery, A. M., Franklyn, K., Koshy, P., Li, I., Parida, S. & Unwin, S. (2022). *Ameliorating disadvantage: Creating accessible, effective and equitable careers and study information for low SES Students*. <https://www.acses.edu.au/publication/ameliorating-disadvantage/>

- Curriculum and First Nations parents' knowledge of tertiary education

- **Education Performance and Transition**

Academic background and overall education performance at the school level are shaped by a variety of enablers and barriers flowing from considerations of equity status. More broadly, the transition from secondary to higher education is also determined by decisions in secondary school, such as pathways (ATAR, enabling, portfolio entry etc.)<sup>4</sup> which intersect with equity issues. Areas of research focus could include:

- School performance and pathways
  - Equity status, education achievement and pathways to tertiary education
  - Education attendance and performance post COVID-19
  - Digital technology, AI and school performance
  - Equity implications of harmonisation between the VET and the higher education sectors
  - Making curricula relevant to students through delivery and the inclusion of diverse perspectives, including those of First Nations Australians

- **Performance and Retention in Higher Education**

Evidence on performance and retention in higher education is currently being generated at the institutional level through the systematic analysis of data from student learning systems and the conduct of trials of initiatives and programs to support students.<sup>5</sup> This evidence base would aid replication of initiatives in new settings. Key areas of research are:

- Participation, Performance and Retention
  - Barriers to retention in higher education
  - Work, study, and life responsibilities (carer's responsibilities, etc.) and higher education success
  - Institutional programs to support student retention
  - AI, assessment, and higher education academic learning
  - Student wellbeing and success in higher education
  - Equity and First Nations student background and performance in university

- **Post-Graduation Outcomes in Higher Education**

A central finding of the Australian Universities Accord Review of Higher Education was the link between tertiary qualifications (via university and/or VET) and the growing skill requirements of the Australian economy, underpinning its goal that 80% of the workforce hold a tertiary qualification by 2050. The efficacy of this target depends on the extent to

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<sup>4</sup> Li, I. W., Carroll, D. R., & Jackson, D. (2022). Equity implications of non-ATAR pathways: Participation, academic outcomes, and student experience. Perth: National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University. <https://www.acses.edu.au/research-policies/equity-implications-of-non-atar-pathways-participation-academic-outcomes-and-student-experience-2/>

<sup>5</sup> Peirce, P.V. (2025). Widening Participation: Are we backing the right strategies? *Needed Now in Learning and Teaching*. Substack. <https://needednowlt.substack.com/p/widening-participation-are-we-backing>

which graduates are obtaining relevant qualifications which lead to desirable outcomes from their studies.<sup>6</sup> Key areas of research focus for the future include:

- Measuring graduate outcomes
- Equity and First Nations status and post-graduation outcomes
- Matching job market requirements and graduate supply
- Integration and harmonisation of higher education and VET qualifications

- **Education Research Data**

Education research is dependent on the availability and sound analysis of timely and relevant data. A current barrier to research on education issues in Australia, particularly relating to transition between levels in the education system, is the availability of data sets spanning the entire education life cycle. Key areas of focus to address this include:

- Education research data
  - Research on approaches to linking data between levels in the Australian system, including the use of the Unique Student Identifier (USI)
  - The integration and linkage of education and other data sets, including data from health, income support, and tax data collections
  - Administrative, ethical, and cultural issues relating to the collection and use of education data sets

- **Education Policy and National Program Evaluation**

Research on education policy itself is an important area of focus, as is the systematic review and research-based assessment of government programs designed to support students.

- Education policy
  - ATEC and government policymaking capacity to promote equitable outcomes in higher education
  - Income support for students (Austudy; Youth Allowance; Prac Payment; Tertiary Access Payment)

This program would both contribute to and necessitate the establishment of a larger, more integrated education research system in Australia.

## **7. How would a more integrated approach to research across sectors, disciplines and institutions benefit the experiences and outcomes for all learners?**

ACSES supports a more integrated approach to research in Australian education. This is required to support policy and practices that necessarily are most effectively implemented in coordination with measures across levels of the education system and related areas (e.g., health, income support, and job-matching systems).

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<sup>6</sup> Li, I.W., & Carroll, D.R. (2019). Employment and study outcomes after graduation: An Australian higher education equity perspective.

[https://www.acses.edu.au/app/uploads/2019/04/Li\\_UWA\\_FINALACCESSIBLE.pdf](https://www.acses.edu.au/app/uploads/2019/04/Li_UWA_FINALACCESSIBLE.pdf)

An integrated approach to education research in Australia would have three distinct benefits:

- **The Promotion of Research Scale and Capacity**

Education research continues to lag health research in terms of the scale and capacity of its institutions and scope of its research programs. This disadvantage is manifested in two ways:

- Education research institutes do not operate at optimal scale and therefore cannot engage in longer-term and larger-scale research projects
- Compartmentalisation across areas in education (secondary vs tertiary) reduces the opportunity for researchers to engage in whole-of-system projects

Higher levels of integration in education research would allow for increased scale (resourcing) and scope (across levels of the education system) in the design of research projects, enabling more ambitious projects to be undertaken, strengthening the case for higher levels of resourcing in education research.

- **Data**

The creation of both scale and integration in Australian education research would serve to promote the collection, integration, analysis, and reporting of data on all aspects of the system, as well as providing data sets and assets to enable researchers to answer critical questions in the research areas identified above.

Currently, education data in Australia is fragmented across jurisdictions and sectors. This limits the ability to understand learner pathways, conduct research, and identify where and when inequities arise and persist. A more integrated approach would address these gaps by enabling data that are:

- collected across education levels (from early childhood learning to postgraduate study at university), promoting linkage for the analysis of transitions and articulation between levels and offering up potential for the construction of longitudinal data sets
- linked across levels and collection sets, enabling the increase in the number of explanatory factors that can be considered when evaluating research questions, including influences from health, income support and employment
- sourced at the individual level and so improving the granular analysis of equity issues in education.

The Unique Student Identifier (USI) provides will be a critical component integration going forward. The USI follows learners across education providers and sectors and enables secure linkage of records over time to capture the full learner journey. Strengthening the use of the USI across schooling, VET, and higher education would significantly enhance our ability to analyse learner pathways, identify and monitor equity gaps, and evaluate the long-term impact of research and policy interventions.

This integration of data directly benefits learners by supporting more targeted and timely research and providing stronger evidence that informs policy and practice. Achieving this requires consistent data standards, secure linkage infrastructure, and governance that support responsible sharing across sectors and jurisdictions.

- **Translation to Policy and Practice**

An integrated and better resourced education research sector would provide timely and easily disseminated findings to inform policy and practice in Australian education. ACSES's function as a what works centre in higher education sees it integrate research, trial, evaluation, and capacity building activities to translate educational research into practice through initiatives such as its [equity hub](#). Potential extensions to this work across the educational sector include:

- the establishment of more robust and easily accessible research libraries
- better opportunities for translation into practice
- creation of scale and capacity to conduct trials in education settings.