Towards a better era of equity funding: perfecting policy for practice

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Abstract

Purpose – Increasing university access and success is a bipartisan policy priority for building human capital, generating economic growth and meeting the skills needs of the modern Australian workforce. Furthermore, there is an emerging social imperative that universities address the underrepresentation of equity groups in higher education. In Australia, the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) has, in part, contributed to improved representation. However, its annual funding cycle limits institutional capacity to deliver equity projects that shift the dial. This study aims to reflect on learning from the current approach to inform recommendations for the new funding model taking effect from 2026.

Design/methodology/approach – Using the University of the Sunshine Coast as a point-in-time case study, this paper draws on the reflections of an Australian early career equity practitioner and uses stakeholder theory and design thinking to critique the current annual HEPPP funding cycle's ability to fulfil stakeholder needs and enable social impact through improved equity student outcomes.

Findings – Reflections suggest that a multi-year equity funding distribution cycle is optimal for improving equity student outcomes. A three-year model has been repeatedly suggested in literature to benefit project delivery, stability and quality while enabling compliance, reporting and evaluation.

Practical implications – This paper urges the current Labor Government to engage with sector leading recommendations around the current annual HEPPP funding cycle ahead of the transition to the future equity funding model so as to best position universities to support social impact.

Originality/value – This viewpoint fills a gap in existing literature by sharing the practical perspective of an Australian equity practitioner responsible for coordinating administration of the HEPPP at their university.

Keywords Equity funding policy, Equity student outcomes, HEPPP, Short-term funding cycles, Social impact in higher education

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

Improving equitable access to education is key to both achieving social justice and building human capital. As an Australian early career equity practitioner, and a low socioeconomic status, first-in-family graduate, I have experienced not only the transformative power of

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higher education but also seen firsthand the challenges equity practitioners face in driving social impact.

For four years, I have supported the widening participation and student equity efforts funded by the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) at the University of the Sunshine Coast (UniSC). I have worn multiple hats in this time, ranging from supporting programme design, delivery and evaluation to ensuring institutional compliance with legislative and reporting requirements. This has granted me with a keen understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by others in my institution, and while I cannot claim a perfect understanding of the HEPPP, I have nevertheless suspected the current funding policies driving the equity agenda are flawed and misaligned with stakeholder needs. In this article, I offer UniSC as a point-in-time case study to explore the pain points and opportunities of the HEPPP's current funding structure as faced by its stakeholders. I aim to spark sector discussion on how the HEPPP should evolve at a time where higher education has been centred in political discourse. Crucially, this paper shares my personal views and reflections and not necessarily those of UniSC, its people or of other affiliated parties.

Since 2010, the HEPPP and its past identities have supported universities to deliver projects that improve educational outcomes for equity groups. Introduced in response to recommendations from the Bradley *et al.* (2008) review, and refined following the Napthine review (2019), the HEPPP has contributed to improved representation for people from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, regional and remote communities and those of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage. The evaluation of HEPPP-funded projects has been standardised under the Student Equity in Higher Education Evaluation Framework (SEHEEF), which assesses project impact based on changes to primary outcomes such as access, success, retention and completion (Robinson *et al.*, 2021). In 2025, the total HEPPP budget allocated across the sector was approximately $164m.

Tertiary education was a predominant focus of political discourse ahead of the 2025 Australian federal election, with both major parties engaging with the recommendations of the Universities Accord final report (O'Kane *et al.*, 2024). With the re-elected labr government now planning for the HEPPP to be evolved under their leadership, it seems timely to reflect on learnings from the past to inform the ideation and implementation of the new equity funding model that is expected to replace it. While there is still minimal information available about either funding model, what is known suggests there is to be a separation between funding for current student support (a demand-driven, needs-based funding model) and widening participation (a competitive outreach fund). Changes to other policies such as the new managed growth funding model suggests 2026 will act as a transition year. With the new legislation evidently still in development, policymakers must be open-minded to ensure it enables social impact through improved student outcomes.

Social impact for universities

The role expected to be played by Australian universities in achieving student equity has shifted in past years. Higher education institutions have traditionally operated for the elite, underpinned by neoliberal policies and exclusive practices (Phillips, 2024). Yet, there is an emerging belief that supporting equitable access, participation and success in higher education forms a core part of the social licence of universities (Bolton and Landells, 2019). Australia's equity policies are often suggested to be inspired by global efforts, particular the UK (Gale and Parker, 2013); however, they are also considered advanced in their own respect (Salmi, 2018).

Social impact refers to the results of activities aimed at solving or mitigating societal challenges and creating value for their beneficiaries (Parkinson and Naidu, 2024). In the university context, equitable policy and practice creates social impact through enabling upward social mobility and improving quality of life for individuals and society (Norton and Cherastidtham, 2018; Marginson and Yang, 2022). This happens as students are equipped with the core competencies required for higher paid skilled work and general success in the modern Australian economy.

The impacts of equity also extend beyond the social imperative, as success in higher education offers economic boons for universities and industry (Harvey *et al.*, 2018; Dodd *et al.*, 2023). This lays in the forms of student fee revenue, additional government funding via HELP payments and performance or competitive funding such as the Commonwealth Grant Scheme and the HEPPP.

Sector criticisms of the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program

Unfortunately, the HEPPP's annual funding cycle is often criticised for constraining universities' ability to optimise project outcomes (ACIL Allen Consulting, 2017; Wood *et al.*, 2017; Napthine *et al.*, 2019). Sector critique of the annual cycle focusses on the challenges associated with long-term project design, delivery and evaluation. Short-term HEPPP funding allocations introduce periods of funding uncertainty, preventing universities from pursuing long-term equity objectives and create tension where economic and strategic needs adversely affect project priorities (Bennett *et al.*, 2015). Funding instability leads to a focus on seeking "quick wins", which hinders the potential depth and scope of projects and their evaluation (Haintz *et al.*, 2018). The inability to forward plan further limits the potential for scaffolded, partnership-based engagement such as widening participation activity with schools, community or industry (Sellar and Storan, 2013). The impact of this on equity student outcomes is obvious; despite increased sector commitment to the equity agenda, improvements to outcomes for equity groups have remained comparatively modest (Li *et al.*, 2022).

Annual funding also creates substantial administrative burden for universities unable to justify ongoing or multi-year HEPPP funding commitments. Project teams without long-term funding are generally required to spend more time and resources on bureaucratic processes such as funding applications, contributing to perceived funding scarcity and perpetuating a sense of competition in funding continuation (Moran *et al.*, 2016). The literature suggests that increased administrative burdens have complex implications for staff, including reducing collegiality, reducing capacity to commit to the core purpose of their role and, as mentioned, making it difficult to plan for the long-term (Woelert *et al.*, 2025). Funding uncertainty also creates job insecurity and challenges retaining staff (Wood *et al.*, 2017), which is associated with inflated recruitment and training expenses and service disruption (Kim and Lee, 2007).

This viewpoint contributes to the social impact in business research literature by examining how stakeholders interact with the current equity funding model to improve equity student outcomes in the current UniSC context. It asks: "How does the HEPPP's current annual funding cycle enable stakeholders to achieve social impact through improved equity student outcomes?" It addresses this question by presenting UniSC as a point-in-time case study, outlining the paper's approach, scope and limitations, discussing reflections and presenting recommendations for future policy development and research.

Case study

Around 40% of UniSC students belong to at least one HEPPP equity group, with many intersecting with other equity cohorts, including first-in-family students, mature-aged students and students with disability. In 2025, UniSC allocated HEPPP funding across 21 programmes and activities. Of these projects, and similarly, in previous years, approximately 45% of projects supported current students, 45% supported widening participation and 10% supported institutional development. While project funding is overseen by a HEPPP coordination team and HEPPP Steering Committee, funds are allocated across university work areas via an application-based system. In accordance with the core vision of the HEPPP, projects aim to achieve increased participation and success in university for individuals from equity backgrounds. Project budgets are determined annually as funds are distributed by the Department of Education, and consistent with current processes, the University avoids forward commitment to ongoing and long-term project funding.

Stakeholder theory as an organising lens

Under the stakeholder theory, I evaluate the stakeholder functions and needs currently involved in improving equity student outcomes through delivery of HEPPP-funded equity projects at UniSC. Stakeholder theory applies where businesses look beyond capitalist views of achievement and adopt a communal view of value creation and success (Parmar *et al.*, 2010). I draw on personal and sector experience and use techniques used in design thinking to understand how the current annual HEPPP funding cycle addresses stakeholder needs. Design thinking is a human-centred approach to innovation that responds to user needs through compassionate solutions that are both technologically and financially viable (Brown, 2008). While a holistic design thinking approach ends with the testing and evaluation of solutions, this is not in scope for this paper due to my capacity within the institution. Thus, I acknowledge this as a limitation and recommend further consultation and testing of all solutions to government proposed later in the article. I also emphasise that as a viewpoint article, my views should not be interpreted as empirical research.

The evaluation began by mapping out the actors most impacted by HEPPP-related policy and legislation at UniSC. Included stakeholders were determined based on my personal assessment of those most involved in the actualisation of HEPPP-funded work. Therefore, the relationships of excluded stakeholders such as political parties, policy makers and taxpayers are not explored in this paper and are an opportunity for future research.

Stakeholder mapping and reflections

I identified eight stakeholder types falling within three categories: strategists, who set direction and priorities for their institutions in response to regulation; enablers (to which I belong), who moderate processes facilitating project funding, delivery, reporting and evaluation; and users, who deliver, partner on, co-create and even participate in projects. Each stakeholder's functions are summarised in Figure 1, and my reflections on their needs are explored after.

Strategists

Department of Education: Disburses HEPPP funding to eligible universities, ensures compliance with legislation and coordinates institutional reporting on project outcomes, financial acquittal and case studies. The Department currently ensures compliance and flexibility for project teams to respond to report outcomes but lacks a long-term understanding of project outcomes due to the short-term focus of the outcomes that are reported. HEPPP reporting templates are intended to capture a holistic view of work, but this is limited by the current model. The Department requires robust reporting dissemination channels and fiscal accountability from institutions.

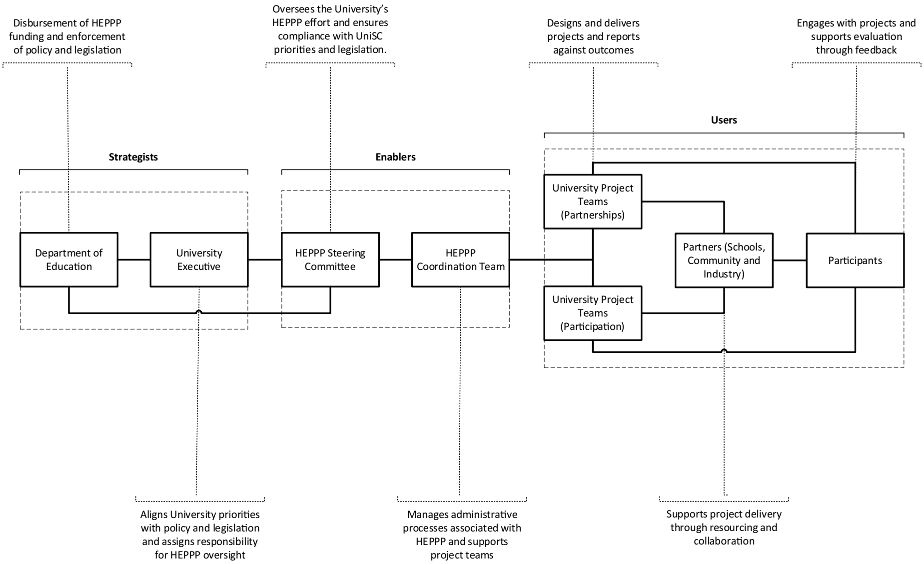

Figure 1. HEPPP funding stakeholder map at UniSC
Source: Author's own work

University Executive: Aligns UniSC's mission-based compact (MBC) with its strategic priorities, national and community directives and legislation and communicates its priorities across the university. The Executive also sets expectations for how funding should be spent and assigns responsibility for the distribution and reporting of HEPPP funding to the HEPPP Steering Committee. Ongoing receipt of HEPPP funding is a critical enabler of UniSC's equity, diversity and inclusion strategy; however, non-guaranteed funding continuity limits the university's ability to align the use of the funds with its long-term institutional planning. The Executive has a low risk appetite to operate outside of the limitations of the annual cycle, and this has impacts for project resourcing and delivery. The University Executive seeks earlier confirmation of funding continuity, open dialogue with policymakers in decision-making and improved capability to align operations with strategy.

Enablers

HEPPP Steering Committee: Oversees the use of HEPPP funding by allocating and monitoring project budgets, ensures projects are aligned with institutional priorities and relevant legislation and submits financial acquittals, outcome reports and project case studies to the Department of Education and other parties. While the current funding cycle enables internal routines set by the Committee, ongoing funding uncertainty results in a lack of long-term direction being set and introduces duplication associated with the need to regularly review project funding applications, particularly for those related to core projects. The Committee would benefit from a funding model enabling long-term strategic direction, good governance and lowered bureaucratic requirements.

HEPPP Coordination team: Manages processes related to applying for and reporting on HEPPP projects and compiles outcome reports for the HEPPP Steering Committee. They liaise between project teams and other stakeholders in response to requests or concerns and to ensure clear direction and availability of support. The current funding model supports routine execution of project reporting and evaluation but imposes inefficiencies in a higher administrative burden to manage project application and budgeting processes and unclear communication with project teams about long-term priorities. This results in project teams needing to be autonomous in the presentation of their funding requests and therefore the HEPPP Steering Committee needing to respond reactively rather than proactively. HEPPP Coordination teams would benefit from clear communication channels, refined reporting processes and reduced administrative burdens.

Users

Project teams: Designs and delivers projects and participates in routine application, reporting and evaluation processes for the HEPPP Steering Committee. Projects engage with either current or school students and/or their parents and communities or build institutional capacity to better enable achievement of equity student outcomes. While HEPPP funding enables project activation, funding insecurity has ramifications for outcomes such as increased staff turnover, inability to form long-term partnerships, a focus on achieving short-term outcomes and the need to commit resources to duplicative processes. They are also limited by a lack of communication about strategic priorities. Project teams could optimise outcomes with budget continuity, endorsement to pursue long-term partnerships and reduced administrative burdens.

Project partners: Provides resources to project teams, collaborates on project ideation and development and assists with participant recruitment and project delivery. Projects may include any number of partners, including, but not limited to, primary and secondary schools, community organisations, parents and carers and industry. Project partners appreciate the potential for collaboration under the current funding model but are unable to engage in long-term, scaffolded partnerships with the university. This leads to scenarios where external parties may be shuffled “in” or “out” of a partnership on an annual basis, inhibiting long-term benefit and creating a risk of reputational harm. Partners want a funding model that facilitates project continuity as well as the ability to contribute to long-term planning that aligns with their needs.

Project participants: Engages with one or multiple projects throughout the student lifecycle and provides pre- and post-delivery feedback to support evaluation and project continuous quality improvement. Participants may also contribute to the design and delivery of the project through co-design. Participants benefit from the current suite of projects but have limited experience with the benefits of long-term, scaffolded engagement. Essential HEPPP-funded services cannot be reliably integrated into a multi-year engagement strategy, and thus, the overall engagement effort is inconsistent and inhibited. Participants would benefit from engagement in scaffolded, place-based engagement from projects that meet their individual needs.

Discussion

This paper examined how stakeholders interact with the HEPPP’s annual funding cycle to achieve social impact through improved equity student outcomes. I reflect that stakeholders both benefit from and are challenged by it: stakeholders find value in the existing model as it permits project delivery backed by good governance; however, this is at the cost of stakeholders’ ability to forward plan and align efforts with strategic priorities. It also demands resource-intensive, duplicative processes to resecure funding, reducing the capacity of project teams to deliver the actual work.

What benefits one stakeholder group may challenge another and the benefits or challenges faced by one group may unintentionally extend to another indirectly. The challenges to planning a long-term university equity strategy caused by Department's annual confirmation of funds and preference for an annual acquittal process is an example of the former, whereas the increased administrative burden placed on project teams due to the low risk appetite of the Executive is an example of the latter.

This process has validated my suspicions that while the current funding model serves its primary purpose, it remains limited, misaligned with stakeholder needs and in need of reform to optimise equity student outcomes. The following recommendations are made to the government; however, it is essential that they are informed by other institutions and equity practitioner organisations, with representation from the various stakeholder groups identified to empirically validate. I encourage the government to action to follow a design thinking approach, involving understanding the needs of stakeholders, developing and testing mitigations and implementing the most effective solutions.

Recommendation 1: Sector benchmarking of equity funding stakeholders and processes

The government should conduct a benchmarking exercise with universities to identify the various governance models and stakeholder roles that engage with HEPPP funding. Universities are granted a deal of autonomy in how they approach the spending and governance of HEPPP funds (Robinson *et al.*, 2021), and while this is not inherently problematic, the lack of standardisation means recommendations informed by the UniSC context may be inappropriate or damaging elsewhere. Just as the UniSC stakeholder map highlighted the interplay between stakeholder need fulfilment and project efficacy, analysis of the wider sector will help to reveal both common challenges as well as examples of effective mitigation strategies. The Critical Interventions Framework Part 3 (Bennett *et al.* 2024) has already developed key project design principles through a study of equity project impacts, and this paper identifies an opportunity to leverage that work in the policy design context. I recommend this exercise be initiated similar to the HEPPP funding acquittals with responsibility for data collection and analysis granted to the Department of Education and supported institutionally by university HEPPP funding custodians.

Recommendation 2: Rationalise equity funding distribution cycles and timelines

The government should leverage the findings of the benchmarking to explore change to the equity funding distribution cycle. My reflections support numerous existing recommendations to pursue a three-year equity funding strategy (ACIL Allen Consulting, 2017; Zacharias, 2017; Group of Eight Australia, 2019; Napthine *et al.*, 2019), with funds transferred annually. HEPPP allocations are calculated based on the most recently available data through the Tertiary Collection of Student Information (TCSI). A three-year funding cycle would therefore involve confirmation of a projected baseline allocation for each year after the first, with each allocation subject to revision after each TCSI student data update. There is a precedent for this, as universities received an indicative 2024 HEPPP budget alongside confirmation of 2023 funding, and this proved beneficial to UniSC in enabling much earlier planning of 2024 project activation. This model would offer a more realistic balance between improved project stability and partnership, reduced bureaucratic processes and promotion of impact evaluation whilst facilitating robust reporting and evaluation processes expected by the government. Budget confirmation must also occur much earlier than at present to minimise periods of funding uncertainty. Alternatively, the duration of a funding cycle could be equivalent to the effective years of an institution's MBC, given it is a key enabler of any institution's overall equity strategy, and equity is already considered in most MBCs.

While I do not claim this as an original recommendation, it is important that it is explored fully by the government in the transition period. Many of the referenced works were created in consultation with a range of stakeholders, including peak education bodies and networks, equity organisations and practitioners, policy specialists, university leaders and academic and professional staff. Past governments have insubstantially engaged with these recommendations, and thus, consultation on the needs of stakeholders must be held going forward.

Recommendation 3: Alignment of equity funding with mission-based compacts

I recommend that the distribution of equity funding be more closely aligned with MBCs. Earlier, I reflected that project teams lack a strategic "north star" to guide their efforts, and project funding decisions were often reactive to the applications received rather than commissioned in pursuit of long-term strategic objectives. MBCs should fill this gap by requiring universities to commit to measurable goals against equity student outcomes as a condition of funding and to regularly evaluate progress against them. Evaluations should be conducted in line with the SEHEEF, such as by developing program logic models demonstrating how projects will contribute to achieving those goals and by conducting both impact evaluations and continuous qualitative improvement. This approach would clarify priorities for stakeholders, enable more coordinated project planning and support and improve accountability processes.

Recommendation 4: Further research

While the reflections provided in this paper are informed by multiple years of experience, they do not contain the rigour of empirical research. Therefore, I recommend that researchers empirically replicate my approach at their own institutions to understand how a broad range of stakeholders interact with the current funding environment and its effect on equity student outcomes in their context. A synthesis of salient criticisms of the current funding model beyond the annual cycle is also encouraged to assist with developing a co-designed policy design framework.

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