

Reform Package Spells Fee-Free Death of Enabling

The Higher Education Reform Package announced last week, decimates a pillar of Australian higher education equity by imposing fees upon those who can least afford it. Plans to replace the long established loading for enabling places with a student contribution rate from 1 January 2018 will ensure that the most financially needy higher education students are significantly deterred from enrolling in higher education. While the reform is cushioned by amendments to the provision of Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program (HEPPP) and the movement of sub-bachelor courses into the demand-driven system, those intending, aspiring students who require additional preparation prior to undertaking undergraduate studies, will now face the prospect of an increased burden of debt to achieve their educational goals.

The reforms to enabling courses will particularly harm those regional institutions, who are often the major providers of enabling programs; institutions that serve demographic regions with high proportions of low SES, Indigenous and regional and remote students. The reform package makes no mention of the likelihood of increasing the fixed number of enabling places from the current 9686, but does introduce the allocation of these places across all university and non-university providers on a three-year cyclical competitive tender basis. As a result, in the 'rush to the bottom' of a tender process, existing providers of enabling courses look set to suffer from a significant decline in serving many of their current constituents.

Justification for the introduction of fees is based upon DET statistics that argue only 52 per cent of Commonwealth support students continue study in the following year, compared to 61 per cent of fee-paying enabling students. However, this argument is flawed as student who enrol in fee-paying enabling programs are already adequately financially endowed to be able to afford to do so. As mentioned previously, these reforms will most significantly impact upon those intending students who require greater social and economic support to ensure the opportunity to improve their education and life circumstances.

Some further consideration of the impact upon low SES, rural and remote and Indigenous enabling program students, and the institutions that serve these students, is required. At the very least, the government should reconsider its implementation date for these reforms, as most institutions already have recruitment and delivery plans well established for 2018.

David Bull

President, National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia, Inc.

Website: <http://www.enablingeducators.org/>