

Swinburne University of Technology

Response to the Needs-Based Funding Implementation Consultation Paper

Swinburne University of Technology (Swinburne) welcomes the opportunity to respond on the proposed implementation of a needs-based funding model as recommended in the Australian Universities Accord Final Report.

The Universities Accord underscores the imperative for universities to innovate and evolve in type, diversity, size and number over the coming decades. This is required now if we are to reach the Accord's target of 80 per cent of working-aged people with a tertiary qualification by 2050.

Swinburne commends the Minister for Education in putting under-represented groups at the heart of the Australian Government's response to the Accord including First Nations people, lower socio-economic groups, people with a disability, and those from rural, remote and outer suburban communities. We welcome the previously announced extension of demand-driven funding to metropolitan First Nations students and the end of the 50 per cent pass rule that greatly disadvantaged students from equity groups. Swinburne is eager to work with the Government to provide additional support for under-represented cohorts to succeed in their tertiary education through implementation of a new needs-based funding model.

To encourage greater aspiration, participation and success in tertiary education among under-represented groups, effective outreach programs and support will need to be co-designed and developed with the students, while leveraging the wealth of knowledge and expertise that already exist at universities across Australia. For these programs to succeed, flexibility is crucial to complement the unique cohorts and challenges at each university; a blanket one-size-fits-all approach similar to previous funding will not work. Both governments and universities need to be bold and learn from mistakes of the past.

Swinburne provides educational opportunities to over 65,000 students in Australia and overseas (20,000 undertaking vocational qualification), this includes on-campus in Melbourne to 29,000 students and to 26,000 students undertaking online studies across Australia. Regardless of where or how they access this learning, Swinburne believes it is vital that all learners have access to a range of high-quality support to succeed.

Swinburne understands that through the introduction of a new student needs-based funding model, existing equity funding programs should also evolve. It is in the interests of students and our higher education aspirations that total funding is substantially increased through these reforms, not simply reallocated from existing programs or reshuffled from the existing available funding.

Swinburne stands ready, willing and able to work with the Australian Government in this once-in-a-generation opportunity to improve the lives of those who see tertiary education as unattainable.

Swinburne makes the following recommendations:

1. That funding be calculated based on a university's total headcount of students from under-represented groups. Using the equivalent full-time student load (EFTSL) would be an ineffective measurement with students requiring support as an individual irrespective of their study load.
2. Appropriate flexibility in the needs-based funding model, acknowledging the need to tailor programs for the unique cohorts of each university. Accountability will be maintained through regular reporting and success in meeting key performance indicators.
3. Funding provided direct to universities for dedicated outreach and engagement programs to deliver more targeted, place-based and community-focused approaches to increase participation from under-represented groups.
4. Develop a co-design framework, so that development and delivery of needs-based funded programs is done working with students, academics and community representatives, while taking learnings from existing mechanisms (such as through local council and TAFE institutes).
5. Establish national consistency standards that foster greater transparency, sharing of ideas, learning and data between universities to support equity cohorts.
6. Student funding is substantially increased in its totality and that needs-based funding is not reallocated from existing programs.
7. Broader consultation with the tertiary education sector on the transition and evolution of support for student funding over time and the future integration of existing support (e.g. HEPPP, ISSP, regional loadings) into the needs-based funding model.

Funding considerations

Swinburne supports additional funding towards a modern, responsive funding model which accounts for the differing needs of students who have been under-represented in higher education. Our students are supported regardless of if they choose to study on-campus, online or a hybrid of both. The allocation of needs-based funding should reflect a student's choice, not the location of a university's campuses and EFTSL count. Of the large number of Swinburne students who study online in partnerships with Online Education Services (OES) , 20 per cent live in regional Australia, and they deserve the same status of a student that studies at a regional campus.

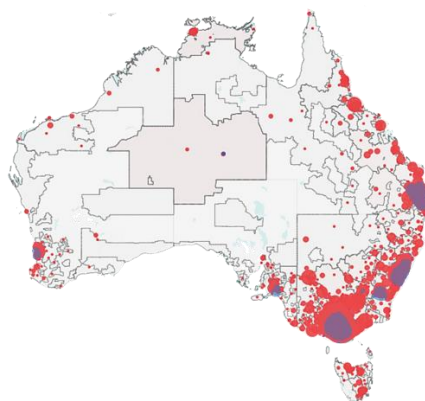


Figure 2 - Geographic spread of Swinburne Online students (Red= Equity Student / Blue= non-equity)

Through existing funding arrangements, universities are delivering a wide range of outreach, transition and support programs. With the introduction of a new needs-based funding model, it is crucial that the total funding is substantially increased not reallocated from the existing programs. With an increasing number of complex student matters, universities including Swinburne are allocating substantial resources and funding to ensure students are adequately supported.

In collaboration with our partner OES, Swinburne has created a new outreach and learning model to support the success of a substantial group of mature aged students to gain a degree online while managing full-time employment and family commitments. It is crucial funding takes into account the needs of these under-represented cohorts, many of whom are women mid-career, returning to study during or after raising children.

Future considerations

As one of six dual sector universities, Swinburne understands the need for a seamless relationship between vocational training and higher education. Bridging the gap will foster unique lifelong learning pathways and allow learners to gain both practical and knowledge-based skills, essential for their likely trajectory between industries and careers. This is also evident in the need for future consideration for a more joined-up tertiary system to support greater participation from under-represented cohorts.

National consistency to support students will make the system more efficient. Our students do not differentiate between vocational or higher education when it comes to needing support, so why should state and federal governments make this distinction. An example is Disability Transition Support Officers, funded through the Victorian State Government. These officers provide personalised support for students with disability transitioning from secondary school (including specialist schools and alternative education settings) to Vocational Education (TAFE). This support would be as useful to students transitioning from high school to higher education, however is not available. Another example is opportunity for future funding to be allocated enabling cohorts to more readily move between vocational and higher education.

National consistency will foster greater participation and mobility for future students. Post-secondary education is complex enough without navigating siloed support services through a complex framework of what is accessible at what level. Once implemented, future iterations can benefit from sharing ideas, learnings and data between universities that make supporting equity cohorts easier. This has already been undertaken in some pockets of tertiary education but is not nearly widespread enough. As the Accord rightly points out – the sector needs to collaborate to problem solve and this must be driven by the Commonwealth without perverse incentives.

Needs-based funding should be evaluated within the first two years rather than five of implementation, to measure if it has increased success and completions by equity cohorts but also how it can evolve to integrate with other tertiary support offered through state and territory governments.

Implementation and transition arrangements

The existing higher education support system for students is broken, confusing to navigate and highly regulated. Both the Government and sector can and need to do better if we are to reach the Accord's ambitious target of 80 per cent of working-aged people having a tertiary qualification by 2050. Each university will have their own unique cohorts with specific needs relevant to their circumstances; only through a flexible model will needs-based funding result in a lift in commencement, but more importantly, completions.

Swinburne understands that for a student to succeed they need to be prepared for the workforce. Through our 2025 Strategic Plan we have developed four moon shots:

- Moon shot 1: Every Swinburne learner gets a work experience (WIL)
- Moon shot 2: Every Swinburne graduate gets a job
- Moon shot 3: Every Swinburne partner gets a tech solution
- Moon shot 4: Swinburne is the prototype of global best practice.

In relation to moon shot 1, Swinburne is delivering WIL and mobility scholarships to enable students from equity cohorts to undertake high-value educational opportunities such as internships and global experiences to build capabilities and connections that will foster positive post-graduation outcomes. Swinburne has initiated the development of such programs as part of its commitment to a program of scaffolded WIL for every Swinburne student. This is just one example of a suite of tailored programs unique to Swinburne, that has been developed and delivered using an evidence-based framework, contributing to lifting the attainment rates of under-represented cohorts.

Swinburne agrees that any needs-based funding needs to be spent effectively with high-quality evidence and accountability mechanisms for outcomes. As referenced in the Universities Accord Final Report, *"introducing a student needs-based funding model with equity at its heart means existing equity funding programs such as the HEPPP and ISSP should also evolve"*. Swinburne supports Universities Australia's recommendation that the Government establish a working group of departmental officers and sector experts to begin development of needs-based funding. We recommend that through the establishment of a working group they develop an accountability framework. This framework will also ensure development and delivery of needs-based funded programs is done working with students, academics and community representatives, while taking learning from existing mechanisms (through local councils and TAFE institutes, for example).

It is crucial that with the introduction of a needs-based funding model, universities receive a clear understanding of the transition process and impact on existing support programs. For example, will outreach programs to support and inspire future students from under-represented groups still be eligible for funding under a new model.