

# The decade of the higher education policy in Australia: Trade-off between equity and efficiency

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## ABSTRACT

This study fully examines the trade-off between equity and efficiency in the Higher Education policy in relation to aspects such as access, funding, tuition, loans and international students as are faced by individuals and institutions. It is hoped that this explanatory endeavor will help to formulate policy recommendations and be able to establish new ways to improve efficiency and decrease the gaps of inequality in Higher Education, especially in the period of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Keywords

Equity, Efficiency, Higher education policy, Australia

## Introduction

The massification, entrepreneurial transformation and the impact of new technologies are some of the challenges that higher education is currently facing (Eggins, Smolentseva & Wit, 2021; Liu, Peter & Petruzzelli, 2021). Now it is also facing a fallout from COVID-19. In general, global students believe that the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis from early 2020 on various aspects of their lives in higher education include Higher Education's increased dependency on the use of technology for teaching and learning, having face-to-face sessions switch to online, distance learning or blended alternatives, new assessment methods, different workloads, feelings of fear and living under threat of being infected, a transformation in students social lives and financial situations. etc. (Aristovnik, Keržič, Ravšelj, Tomažević & Umek, 2020; Rad, Otaki, Baqain, Zary & Al-Halabi, 2021; Guàrdia, Clougher, Anderson & Maina, 2021; Collins, 2021). Other authors also found that the impact of Covid-19 forced leaders of higher education institutions, policy-makers and other stakeholders to reflect on crisis management, in which decision making had to be swift and impactful (Mohamedbhai, 2020; McNamara, 2021).

Although students were mostly satisfied with the support provided by teaching staff and universities during the worldwide lockdown and the transition to online learning (Aristovnik, Keržič, Ravšelj, Tomažević & Umek, 2020), COVID-19 has increased an inequality in access to digital technologies and online learning, exclusion, discrimination, and a considerable increase in global unemployment. Of course, it has sharpened the rural-urban divide, and also created inequalities in digital access for those living in rural areas (Mohamedbhai, 2020; Trahar, Timmis, Lucas and Naidoo, 2020). For instance, the 93% of interviewed teachers in Australian universities have identified teachers' resistance to technology implementation as a core barrier (Watty, McKay & Ngo, 2016). Apart from causing major disruptions to teaching, learning and absence of laboratory hours, other practical activities and internships, it has also adversely affected many internationalization activities of universities, most notably regarding the mobility of students and staff, and also put at risk the funding of those Higher Education institutions and made it difficult for them to enhance their international standing, which is highly dependent on international student fees (Croucher, Zhong, Moore, Chew & Coates, 2019; Obadire, Mashau & Misumi, 2020; Birrell, 2020; Eggins, Smolentseva & Wit, 2021).

Internationalization of Higher Education has become a major industry. International students bring a significant income to their host countries, adding, for example, US\$45 billion to the American economy and US\$24 billion to Australia's (Altbach & Wit, 2021). Being heavily impacted by Covid-19, American universities have suffered the greatest decline in enrolment in a decade, with 603,000 fewer Americans enrolled in college or university than were enrolled last year (Greenfield, 2021). International students in Australian Higher Education has been borne the brunt of this pandemic, as the social distancing measures in place and travel restrictions across states in March last year has led to campus closures and job losses in regional universities (McNamara, 2021; Baker, 2021; Hemming & Power, 2021). Likewise, Higher Education leaders rushed to slash their budgets and caused growing fiscal constraints faced by Australian public universities (Jayasuriya, 2021:). Based on this wider context, this study may help to examine ethnic and economic disparities, which has important implications for equity. It is vital to formulate long-term and sustainable policies as the means to diminish the negative effect of COVID-19 on Australian universities, and establish new ways to improve efficiency and decrease the gaps of inequality in HE.

## Literature Review

### Equity and Efficiency

By definition, equity considers who benefits from a program and how resources are distributed across individuals. Efficiency takes into account not just outcomes but also resources used to achieve outcomes and seeks to produce the best results with the fewest resources. Equity and efficiency are inextricably linked, and may be influenced by the amount of resources a student has access to (Carrington, O'Donnell & Rao, 2018; Perna, Wright & Leigh, 2020; Mokher, Park & Hu, 2021). Therefore, in highly unequal societies, redistributive policies may be still worth consideration, as the net effects on growth of redistribution and reduction in inequality are more likely to be positive (Woo, 2020). Public goods are goods of

community, solidarity, tolerance, equality, capability and human rights – goods that build positive relations between people, such as equality of opportunity in higher education (Marginson, 2019). Hence every research needs demonstrate a better understanding of the effectiveness of each of the redistributive policy tools in improving resource distribution, and its potential trade-off against equity.

Literature analysis shows that the equity of a given university includes many aspects, such as the institution side and the student side respectively. The institutional aspect includes funding and resource allocation (Kenny, 2018; Croucher, Zhong, Moore, Chew & Coates, 2019; Trahar, Timmis, Lucas and Naidoo, 2020). The student aspect covers side, admission opportunities and tuition (Marginson, 2019; Norton, 2019; Perna, Wright & Leigh, 2020; Gale & Parker, 2018).

In regards to the institutional side of equality in a university, in order to provide equal access to the many benefits offered by higher education, resources should be allocated to ensure that all people have the opportunity to enroll and succeed in college, to improve the inequalities in access to resources in rural contexts. Resource allocation should recognize structural disparities in terms of students' access to high-quality academic preparation, financial resources for paying college costs (Perna, Wright & Leigh, 2020; Trahar, Timmis, Lucas and Naidoo, 2020). For this reason, resolving the contradiction between targeted financial aid and universality of the equality discourse is definitely important (Gayardon, 2019). However, Kenny (2018) also reveals a worldwide trend of the reduced self-determination of academics, a loss of influence over decision making in connection with the allocation of resources within their institutions.

As for the student aspect of equity in a university, higher education systems need policies to distribute student places between higher education providers, courses and students. In supply-driven systems, a government and university's decisions are predominant. In demand-driven systems, student choices play a larger role (Norton, 2019). Also, the impact of student fees on the equity of access in HE as the proportional representation of 'equity' groups (i.e. groups defined by gender, socioeconomic status, disability, indigeneity, rurality or language background), although recently the focus has been on socioeconomic status (SES), especially in Australia (Gale & Parker, 2018). Like college promise free tuition programs in United States are as a potential mechanism for improving college access and affordability, whether these initiatives are an effective use of resources depends on whether programs advance societal goals for equity and efficiency (Perna, Wright & Leigh, 2020). However, in the book review of "Higher Education Funding and Access in International Perspective", Gayardon (2019) specifically points out the main concern and exposes the fact that tuition fees policies fail to solve access issues of disadvantaged population in higher education. Issues associated with access are indeed true in all countries, and are independent of whether they have no tuition fees, or whether they are running either grants or loan systems, or both. The reality is that no system to this today has found a financial solution to widening gap of students' ability to access university resources.

The efficiency of the university also includes many aspects, such as the institution side, the teacher side and the student side. As for institutions, administrative services, productivity and performance (Ciancio, 2018; Williams, 2019; Eggins, Smolentseva & Wit, 2021; Liu, Peter & Petruzzelli, 2021), resource utilization (Ziskin, Rabourn & Hossler, 2018; Carrington, O'Donnell & Prasada, 2018), internationalization and competitiveness are included (Zheng & Kapoor, 2021; Jayasuriya, 2021). As for the aspect of teachers, factors such as teaching and research are included (Kenny, 2018; Birrell, 2020; Hemming, & Power, 2021; Liyanage, Walker & Shokouhi, 2021). In regards the aspect of students, tuition (Perna, Wright & Leigh, 2020) and loans (Spies & Bryant, 2018), advising and support (Mokher, Park, & Hu, 2021) and employment are integral parts that were considered (Tran, Rahimi, Tan, Dang & Le, 2020).

In terms of institutions, researchers have identified that universities are often characterized by common institutional operational inefficiencies including overly complex and manual systems, fragmented services, inconsistent and duplicated processes. These institutions are expected to operate more efficiently, especially in the context of global competition and productivity (Ciancio, 2018; Williams, 2019; Liu, Peter & Petruzzelli, 2021). This is especially the case when the combination of marketization and stratification has increasingly led to the transformation of higher education from a public to a private good, as was noted 15 years ago. The governments provide universities with less public funding, and universities are required to achieve goals of sustainability more efficiently and conduct entrepreneurial activities to expand the amount of financial resources, such as deregulating course fees for domestic undergraduate students and further commercialization of research to disparate government initiatives (Gibb, Haskins, Hannon & Robertson, 2013; Carrington, O'Donnell & Prasada, 2018). As a result, performance-based funding (PBF) for universities has become increasingly prevalent worldwide since the 1980s, as a part of a broader pattern of marketization in public education (Ziskin, Rabourn & Hossler, 2018; Mizrahi, 2021). However, overemphasis on markets can lead to increasing the inequality and instability in the broader economy. Thus, the direct public intervention to finance higher education is motivated only by market failures. Diris and Ooghe (2018) examine the pros and cons of a number of alternatives based on incentives to invest, equity considerations, and efficiency reasons to justify state intervention. But the authority of the state has been greatly challenged by globalization. The intervention of international organizations in national policymaking can never be overlooked (Zheng & Kapoor, 2021). Furthermore, the policymakers typically prioritize a particular aspect of performance with simple indicators, but such performance schemes are rarely effective. A transparent and holistic approach of the institution is to be desired (Williams, 2019).

With regards to the aspect of teacher, neo-liberal reforms have resulted in the development of corporate managerial practices in universities and a drive for efficiency and productivity in teaching and research. As a result, there has been an emphasis on accountability and performativity in faculty members. Performance measurement was a more widely established accountability system that enables larger control over faculty performance (Kenny, 2018; Eggins, Smolentseva & Wit, 2021). Take Student Evaluation of Teaching surveys for example. To review and improve the quality of courses and teaching, they can also be used by universities' marketing campaigns and websites as a means of stressing their institution's student friendliness and responsiveness to students' needs (Hemming & Power, 2021), or the ability of the institution's academic teaching staff to embed efficient critical thinking in teaching and the learning experiences of students (Liyanage, Walker & Shokouhi, 2021).

In regards to the aspect of students, income-contingent loans (ICLs) are becoming widely adopted across higher education sectors internationally, and institutions are facilitating greater state discretion while also implementing market discipline (Spies & Bryant, 2018). In addition, the enhanced advising and support services offered through the reform may have contributed to efficiency gains, particularly for students of color. The problems that these students face from under-preparation may be further exacerbated in community colleges that provide insufficient support, such as advising and tutoring (Mokher, Park, & Hu, 2021). It means that improving cost efficiency initiatives to accelerate student success not only does it work to help students improve their educational outcomes, but it also enables them to save money in this process. Apart from this, the admission of international students will give them great access to employment opportunities, recover their investment money, or ensure immigration, thus researchers must consider HEIs as the starting point for transnational talent on complex migration journeys (Tran, Rahimi, Tan, Dang & Le, 2020; Grimm, 2019). The results found that the temporary work visas obtained by international students after graduation do not seem to provide them with a competitive advantage in the Australian labor market.

Internationalization and COVID-19 do certainly have the potential to further entrench existing inequalities (Obadire, Mashau & Misumi, 2020). However, the impact of the global pandemic on higher education has caused universities, governments, students, and teachers to reexamine all components of existing systems, including how to become more effective, efficient and self-reliant (Birrell, 2020; Guàrdia, Clougher, Anderson & Maina, 2021).

### **Australia higher education policy**

In this fast and changing era, governments and higher education institutions must not only possess keen observation skills, have insight into the future trends and demand for technological equipment in order to respond to the teaching needs of teachers and the learning needs of students, they must also take responsibility for cultivating talented students pursuing higher education. Implementing the best methods to balance the quality of education with the pursuit of fairness in admissions, to innovate teaching models and cultivate an international vision, as well as to promote multicultural international understanding and literacy have become issues and challenges that governments and higher education institutions must face today. Just like Guàrdia, Clougher, Anderson and Maina (2021) identified, a total of 14 trends included technology-enhanced teaching and learning, leadership, institutional strategy, increasing the internationalization of higher education, and the important role of governments, etc. These trends were classified according to three broad themes: online learning and teaching, blended learning and teaching, and lifelong learning.

The Australian higher education system has 43 universities which is comprised of 37 public universities, three private universities, two overseas universities, one university of specialization and 130 other providers (StudyAustralia, 2021). Australian higher education is also a high participation system, consisting of formally homogeneous universities which primarily confer higher education degrees and technical and further education (TAFE) (Czarnecki, 2018). However, even though education as a vehicle for promoting social equity, was probably victim to both lack of political will, and fiscal issues, pursuing equity became a luxury in Australia. Nevertheless, in the beginning in the 1990s, gender and ethnic diversity began to be seen as an important driver of innovation and social benefit. Dawkins reform was committed to achieving greater equity through means other than direct government funding (Simms, 2019).

Meanwhile, Norton (2019) pointed out that over the last 35 years Australia has moved from a supply-driven to a largely demand-driven university system and then partly back again. Controls on postgraduate coursework and international student numbers were relaxed in the 1980s. With a long trend towards demand-driven enrolments, a recent return to more supply-driven policies is significant. Its principal advantage is making government spending lower and more predictable. Even so, reducing influences related to demands could reverse increases in attainment rates and make the system less responsive to labor market changes. Also, student-oriented equity policies undertaken closer to the point of transition to tertiary education have a capacity to decrease educational inequalities. Results are discussed against the background of the current higher education policy trends regarding equity in access after 2009 (Czarnecki, 2018). Therefore, the contradictions of higher education policy in Australia now, which are driven by improving students' experience being served, addressing operational inefficiencies and expanding participation in the higher education system within the context of contained public funding, have involved a wide mix of 'policy instruments', both 'direct' and 'indirect' in the form of regulatory 'sticks' and financial 'carrots' (Ciancio, 2018; Simms, 2019; Jayasuriya, 2021). Furthermore, universities are also increasingly focused on services in order to ensure operating models are viable and sustainable in uncertain policy and funding environments.

Owing to the uncertain but growing costs of higher education, there have been more debates about pricing and who should pay, and the changing role of universities in society. Researchers should possess an understanding of how higher education is financed, the cost and pricing of higher education, funding formulas, arrangements, and the returns (Croucher, Zhong, Moore, Chew & Coates, 2019). However, prior to the COVID outbreak, Australia university funding was a perennial problem. Many reviews suggest that universities had flourished despite very limited growth in Australian government funding. But the Commonwealth government has not solved the funding shortfall, and universities were forced to expand their overseas student enrolments. These two contradictions within the constraints of public expenditure that underpin the management of Australian higher education are: (1) Population growth, increased demand for highly skilled workers, and government policies that encourage exports of higher education have significantly increased the growth of enrolments since the Dawkins reform of the 1980s; and (2) the constantly shifting balance between private and public funding of higher education (Carrington, O'Donnell & Prasada, 2018; Birrell, 2020; Jayasuriya, 2021).

Domestic students value higher education for personal development and improved job prospects. International students have an extra demand for international experience, and the possibility of employment. Furthermore, international rankings will influence the destination choice of international students, both directly and indirectly by self-scholarship in developing countries (Williams, 2019). In 1986, Australia universities were allowed to charge full fees from international students. Since then, there has been a remarkable growth in the number of international students (Jayasuriya, 2021). According to Birrell (2020), in order to attract overseas students to study, the Australian government announced several reform measures in 2012. To start with, the tough rules on English language standards were softened. Next, overseas students were only required to access the funds needed for one year of study and living expenses. In addition, they are permitted to find 40 hours of paid work of employment from the time of their arrival. Finally, overseas students who complete any degree level course, can stay in Australia with full work rights for a further two years.

The Abbott Government presented legislation to implement fee deregulation in its 2014-15 budget. However, the legislation was rejected in the Senate. Therefore, the Government planned to promote the overseas student industry, both as a source of funds to finance research free from taxpayer reliance and to promote the export performance of the overseas student industry (Birrell, 2020). There are three main characteristics of international student revenue. Firstly, international student revenue has become the key driver in funding of the public higher education system. Secondly, there has been growth in the number of overseas enrolments and a boom in donations from philanthropists, especially from China. Thirdly, there has been a concentration of international students in the most research-intensive universities known in Australia as the Group of Eight (Go8) institutions (Baker, 2021; Jayasuriya, 2021).

More broadly, COVID-19 has resulted in a considerable slump in the economy and current macroeconomic policies have been more appropriately focused on stimulating demand and supporting employment. However, the Australian economy was weak pre-pandemic, and it is likely that higher education sectors will continue to face the challenge. Following the national lockdown, the unemployment rate jumped from 5.2 per cent in March to hit a high of 7.5 per cent in July 2020 (Lim, Nguyen, Robinson, Tsiaplias & Wang, 2021). Moreover, students with certain

less satisfied with their academic life during the crisis (Aristovnik, Keržič, Ravšelj, Tomažević & Umek, 2020) or suffered from a fear of infection and an existential threat (Collins, 2021). Even worse, the revenue crisis of the

overseas students will deepen for all universities over the year 2020-21. It seems likely that new offshore enrolments will be slow to pick up in 2021 because of continuing restrictions on international travel.

### Research questions

After studying existing literature, we concluded that many studies have focused on the link and trade-off between equity and efficiency in higher education (Perna, Wright & Leigh, 2020; Woo, 2020). But some of them have focused on the inequity (Obadire, Mashau & Misumi, 2020), and the others only on the efficiency (Ciancio, 2018; Guàrdia, Clougher, Anderson & Maina, 2021), or emphasis on impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic (Aristovnik, Keržič, Ravšelj, Tomažević & Umek, 2020; Rad, Otaki, Baqain, Zary & Al-Halabi, 2021). In research subjects, some research aims at the access (Czarnecki, 2018; Norton, 2019; Trahar, Timmis, Lucas and Naidoo, 2020), cost of courses (Mokher, Park, & Hu, 2021), funding (Diris & Ooghe, 2018; Ziskin, Rabourn & Hossler, 2018; Carrington, O'Donnell & Prasada, 2018; Jayasuriya, 2021), tuition and loans, leadership and international students (Gale & Parker, 2018; Lim, Nguyen, Robinson, Tsiaplias & Wang, 2021). While others chose a different country for research, like the United States, South Africa, England and China (Grimm, 2019; Gayardon, 2019; Croucher, Zhong, Moore, Chew & Coates, 2019; Seah, 2021; Zheng & Kapoor, 2021; Eggins, Smolentseva & Wit, 2021).

Notably, none of these prior studies have fully examined differences on the higher education policy in access, funding, tuition, loan and internationalization that students from racial or social-economic backgrounds are subject to. There are also few studies that examine these subjects to meet two societal goals: efficiency and equity. Of course, existent research doesn't cover aspects such as how students have experienced the unexpected and unprecedented crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on the future higher education policy will maintain a balance between equity and efficiency in Australia.

Thus, two research questions guide this study:

- (1) Does the policy of higher education in Australia weaken inequalities in social stratification or has it worked to improve efficiency this decade?
- (2) How has the higher education policy in Australia changed/evolved since the COVID-19 pandemic?

According to literature review and content analysis, this study developed an equity and efficiency model of higher education policies in Australia (Figure 1), and it has fully examined the trade-off in the higher education policy in relation to aspects such as access, funding, tuition, loans and international students as are faced by individuals and institutions. And hope the explanatory endeavor will help formulating policy recommendations and can establish new ways to improve efficiency and decrease the gaps of inequality in higher education, especially in the period of COVID-19 pandemic.

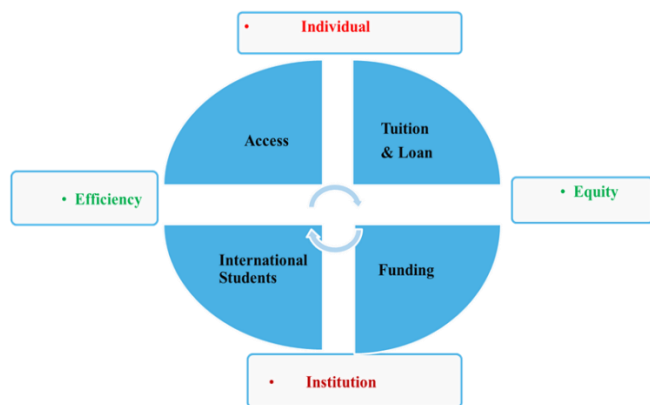


Figure 1. The proposed research model.

### Materials and Methods

The research design used in the study was qualitative. This was an appropriate research design for this study to describe the equity and efficiency of policy used during a decade of higher education in Australia. Data was collected from the purposive samples which consisted of contents from secondary sources. The secondary data contained Australia governmental documents, online newspapers, non-governmental organizations reports and articles.

### Results and Discussion

#### ACCESS: Expand the opportunity of equal access, and efficiently adjust the definition of remoteness and disadvantage

As higher education participation expands, there is a tendency for social inequality in distribution of educational outcomes to increase (Marginson, 2016), such as the theory of effectively maintained inequalities. There had been a reverse trend in the inequalities of access to qualitatively different outcomes, especially to elite universities. In 2008, the Bradley review of higher education policies recommended a

quasi-market that lifted controls on student places but not on student fees. Horizontal inequalities in education should increase, since Australia has experienced a growth of nearly 30% of domestic enrolment in university between 2009 and 2015 (Czarnecki, 2018; Norton, 2019). Although the growth of enrolments has been lower 14.3% in Go8 (the Group of Eight), the total growth rate was 26.6% between 2009 and 2013 and the growth was not equally distributed among non-elite universities (Larkins, 2015). Since 2010, Australian policy-makers have been substantially funded through the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP), with total related funding of just over \$1 billion during this period, to increase participation in higher education. Based on this, Koshy, Dockery and Seymour (2019) point out the factors that have an impact upon actual higher education participation, such as parental education and remoteness. Then, Czarnecki (2018) contends that as participation expands there is a tendency for social inequality in distribution to increase, but vertical inequalities have decreased with respect to parental education. Furthermore, regarding elite universities, the socioeconomic differences in probability of enrolment either have remained stable or have risen. Turner (2020) also highlights the lower higher education application and participation rates of young people from rural areas compared to those from metropolitan areas in 2018, only 23% of applications to universities were from non-metropolitan Australians.

Table 1

2011-2019 Equity performance data for Access

Year	Regional/Remote	Indigenous	Disability	Low SES
2011	71,501 (22.38%)	5,206 (1.63%)	13,484 (4.22%)	48,705 (15.25%)
2012	76,180 (22.16%)	5,663 (1.65%)	15,480 (4.50%)	53,821 (15.65%)
2013	79,196 (22.00%)	6,066 (1.69%)	17,113 (4.75%)	57,186 (15.89%)
2014	83,382 (22.27%)	6,570 (1.75%)	18,639 (4.98%)	59,835 (15.98%)
2015	81,768 (22.06%)	6,979 (1.88%)	19,747 (5.33%)	60,114 (16.22%)
2016	82,769 (21.95%)	7,856 (2.08%)	21,228 (5.63%)	65,018 (17.24%)
2017	82,967 (21.71%)	8,251 (2.16%)	23,077 (6.04%)	65,942 (17.25%)
2018	80,150 (21.26%)	8,330 (2.21%)	24,307 (6.45%)	64,947 (17.23%)
2019	80,529 (21.46%)	8,913 (2.37%)	25,232 (6.72%)	63,978 (17.05%)

Source: DESE, 2021a

(<https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoiOTljMTY5YzYtYzYwNS00YjFjLWElYtEtZTg2ZmMwNWU0MzRiIiwidCI6ImRkMGNmZDE1LTQ1NTgtNGIxMi04YmFkLWVhMjY5ODRmYzQxNyJ9>)

According to the equity performance data for access from 2011 to 2019 (see Table 1), we can find the number and rate of people for equal access rose yearly in general. Regional/Remote students increased from 71,501 to 80,529, indigenous students rose from 5,206(1.63%) to 8,913(2.37%), disability students leapt from 13,484(4.22%) to 25,232(6.72%), students from low socioeconomic background grew from 48,705(15.25%) to 63,978(17.05%).

Based on the above data which is used to realize the goal of equality in enrollment, the Australian government has established relevant organizations or projects to assist regional/remote, indigenous, disabled students as well as those who come from a low socioeconomic background with enrolment. The Rural and Regional Enterprise Scholarships (RRES) is investing \$62.6 million and has offered more than 3,000 scholarships since 2017. In addition, 26 of Regional University Centres have been able to help students in regional and remote areas access higher education without having to leave their community since November 2018. They provide student support and campus-style facilities for students who study online. Finally, Access and Participation programs are available on June 2020 to help Australians who want to attend university, regardless of their circumstances, background or location. The Australian Government also provides \$17.1 million over 4 years to help Indigenous students from regional and remote areas access university places. The Disability Support Program (DSP) provides funding to eligible higher education providers, to assist disability students to gain access to university (DESE, 2021b). The Job-ready Graduates Package will also create up to 30,000 new university places and 50,000 new short course places from 2021, and provide additional support for students in regional and remote Australia (StudyAssist, 2021a). However, policy ambiguities in defining rurality make it difficult to determine the exact number of student entrants from rural communities (Trahar, Timmis, Lucas & Naidoo, 2020). In addition, widening participation policies should be flexible enough to consistently applicable to the most disadvantaged students with time, contexts and cultural change (Gayardon, 2019). In accordance with this policy, more than 8,100 students will benefit from the Tertiary Access Payment (TAP) from 2021. The TAP means their choices are not restricted by their location, and the government should aptly and efficiently adjust the definition of remoteness and the disadvantages that come with it.

**FUNDING: The government's grant proportion has fallen, the tuition proportion has increased, and shifted to the demand driven and performance funding system.**

Higher education has expanded considerably over the last decades, through both increases in the number of domestic students as well as increased inflows of international students. As a consequence, it was accompanied by major reductions in public budgets and government support, which subsequently has led to reforms in the financing of higher education (Diris & Ooghe, 2018; Mizrahi, 2021). Traditionally, the governments saw higher education funding as a way to distribute resources and provide public goods in the context of the welfare state. However, since the 1980s, higher education funding has been regarded as a possible mechanism of management and control. Therefore, just like the analysis carried out by Jayasuriya (2021) collated, there are three crucial mechanisms in the higher education market. First, there is displacement of the costs of higher education to students and stakeholders. The second is the having the costs of the system be off-loaded on to international students. The final element is institutional austerity, which refers to the way in which submerged privatization of the higher education system has shifted pressures to impose market disciplines on their institutions.

Based on the above knowledge/information, this article integrates the financial reports for funding sources from 2011 to 2019 (see Table 2), and divides the funding sources into four categories. Government Grants include the federal grant and HECS-HELP, FEE-HELP payments, states and local government financial assistance, upfront student contributions. Investment Revenue includes consultancy and contracts. Other income includes royalties, trademarks and licenses and the share of the net result of associates and joint ventures. From 2011 to 2019, the Government Grants ratio dropped from 61.99% to 51.93%, and the Fees and Charges ratio rose from 23.03% to 32.29%. These results mean that the government's grant proportion has fallen, and the tuition proportion has increased. The Investment Revenue was rose slightly from 7.88% to 10.29% for the consultancy and contracts revenue, and Other income reached 5.49% in 2019.

Table 2  
 2011-2019 financial ratio for funding

Year	Government Grants	Fees and Charges	Investment Revenue	Other income
2011	61.99%	23.03%	7.88%	7.10%
2012	63.65%	22.18%	7.77%	6.40%
2013	63.30%	21.98%	7.63%	7.09%
2014	62.21%	22.85%	8.01%	6.93%
2015	61.24%	24.63%	7.42%	6.71%
2016	60.07%	26.46%	7.17%	6.30%
2017	57.30%	28.55%	7.97%	6.18%
2018	53.60%	31.40%	6.55%	8.45%
2019	51.93%	32.29%	10.29%	5.49%

Source: DESE, 2021c (<https://www.dese.gov.au/higher-education-publications/finance-publication>)

According to the 2017 Universities Australia Student Finances Survey, more than four in five domestic undergraduate students (82%) are in paid employment. Full-time undergraduate students who work do a median of 12 hours per week. Nearly a third (30%) of full-time domestic undergraduate students work more than 20 hours a week and more than 10% work more than 30 hours. The share of students working more than 20 hours has increased steadily since earlier surveys (Hemming & Power, 2021). Thus, the current funding arrangements in higher education result in students being self-funders of their tertiary education. The result is similar to table 2, the tuition proportion has climbed from 23.03% to 32.29%. Students' voices will play a powerful role in bringing about institutional change in many ways, like consumer rights and teaching assessment, and affect the drive of funding allocation which is shifted to the "demand driven" and "performance" funding system. For example, in 2014 Review of the Demand Driven Funding System (Kemp-Norton Review), it considered the effectiveness of implementation of the demand driven funding system and its outcomes to date. It found the demand driven system was generally performing well and was meeting the demand for skills in the economy (DET, 2015).

The Australian Government provides basic operating grants to universities and imposes a productivity offset to encourage improvements in university productivity. However, funding allocation is not adequate for a substantive implementation and isn't transparent. Thus, universities have little incentive to improve performance (Carrington, O'Donnell & Prasada, 2018; Obadire, Mashau & Misumi, 2020). In view of this, DESE (2021d) stipulates the amount of funding growth will be linked to performance requirements from 2020. The performance indicators and performance targets may relate to improvements in student attrition, low SES participation and the level of graduates' preparedness for the workforce. Linking funding growth to performance outcomes will encourage universities to provide a better student experience and introduce new initiatives to improve their performance, support student retention and employment opportunities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the underlying weakness in the management of higher education by exposing the invisible threads for resourcing higher education where public funding has been constrained (Jayasuriya, 2021), especially in regards to the sharp drop of international student income. After that, just like Minister Dan Tehan said last year, the universities can look forward to the fulfilment of the recent Government promises to expand the funds it will provide for taking on more students and that it will index this funding in order to maintain the real value of funding for domestic students (DESE, 2020).

**TUITION AND LOAN: Effectively adjust tuition bands and contribution amount, increase loan diversity and relief, and reduce bad debts**

Within 15 years, the Australian Labor Party shifted from a commitment to abolish university fees in 1974, but more substantially from 1989 when they were re-introduced (Spies & Bryant, 2018; Gale & Parker, 2018). In a Commonwealth supported place (CSP), the Australian Government pays some of fees and the students pay the rest of amount of their tuition fees. Every year, the Australian Government determines the amount of student contribution required for the units enrolled in. The exact cost of student contribution depends on the units taken, not the overall course. However, new student contribution bands and ranges from 1 January 2021 have varied (DSES, 2021e; StudyAssist, 2021b). In Table 3, the new student contribution bands change from eight bands to four bands, and the student contribution for a full-time student studying society and culture substantial increases to \$14,500 per EFTSL, and \$14,630 in 2022. But, the student contribution for the same courses would have been

**Table 3**

***New student contribution bands and ranges in 2021-2022***

Student contribution band	2021 maximum amount (perEFTSL)	2022 maximum amount (perEFTSL)
Band 4: Law, accounting, administration, economics, commerce, communications, society and culture	\$14,500	\$14,630
Band3: Dentistry, medicine, veterinary science	\$11,300	\$11,401
Band 2: Other health, allied health, built environment, computing, engineering, surveying, science, environmental studies, pathology, visual and performing arts, professional pathway psychology, professional pathway social work	\$7,950	\$8,021
Band1: Agriculture, English, mathematics, education, clinical psychology, Indigenous and foreign languages, nursing, statistics	\$3,950	\$3,985

**Source: DESE, 2021e**(<https://www.dese.gov.au/higher-education-loan-program/approved-hep-information/funding-clusters-and-indexed-rates>)

In order to achieve the goal of equity, reduce the burden on students in remote areas, and effectively protect the rights of students in regards to the amount of tuition they must pay, the Australian government has also announced many related measures. From 1 January 2021, if students are eligible for HECS-HELP and make an upfront payment of \$500 or more, or make an up-front payment equal to 90 per cent of student contribution amount, students will receive a 10 per cent discount (StudyAssist, 2021c). The discount is an incentive to pay up-front, and will decrease student debt. Meanwhile, on 19 June 2020, the Australian Government announced the Job-ready Graduates Package. The changes proposed in this package affect student contributions and provide additional support for students in regional and remote Australia. Around 60 per cent of students will see no change or a reduction in their contributions. Australia’s HECS-HELP loans system continues to ensure that eligible students don’t face any cost barriers to accessing a higher education (DSES, 2021e). Furthermore, the Tuition Protection Scheme (TPS), which gives the protections and assistance available to support students when education provider defaults, has been extended to domestic higher education students who pay their course fees upfront from 1 January 2021 (DSES, 2021f).

Domestic undergraduate places in public universities are financed by a mix of Federal Government funding and private contributions through an income-contingent loans scheme (ICLs) (Williams, 2019). Income-contingent loans, originally known as the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS), was first implemented in 1989, and the income threshold was reached before repayment (Spies & Bryant, 2018). In addition, the Higher Education Loan Program (HELP) provides financial help for students to pay in 2005, consists of Student contributions (HECS-HELP), Tuition fees (FEE-HELP) and Overseas study expenses (OS-HELP). In 2011, the VET FEE-HELP was added. Also, the new Student Service and Equipment Fee Loan Program (SA-HELP) was implemented in 2012 (DESE, 2021f). In 2016, the bad debts of loans were \$60 billion. In order to reduce the amount of bad debts and increase the repayment ratio, the income threshold was lowered from \$55,000 to \$42,000, and the loan upper limit was \$150,000 in July 2018. The HELP loan limit is \$108,232. If students study medicine, dentistry, or veterinary science leading to initial registration, or eligible aviation courses, the HELP loan limit increase to \$155,448 in 2021. However, a qualified teacher who has taught in a remote area since the 2019 school year, including early childhood teachers, and remains teaching for at least four years in six, may be eligible to have their HELP debt remitted (DESE, 2021g). This measure only encourages teachers to teach in remote areas, but also increases the retention rate of remote teachers.

Tuition fees have been increased in several countries. Consequentially, income-contingent loans (ICLs) have been introduced to provide

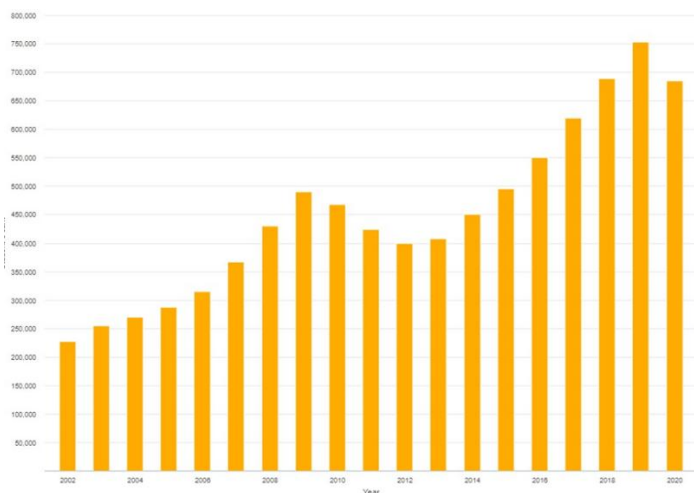
students with the necessary resources, while limiting the risk of loan default. It also can enhance the efficiency of educational spending under conditions of students having access to imperfect information and capital markets, and also promote equity (Diris & Ooghe, 2018; Spies & Bryant, 2018). It means that, on one hand, by reintroducing fees with the loan scheme, it will prevent poor students from being denied entry simply because they cannot access funds.

On the other hand, repayments are contingent on income and inflation, and can ensure that students are protected against unsustainable debts. Nonetheless, the policy falsely separates the personal troubles of individuals from the public issues of societies, and often shifts a substantial share of the costs and risks onto students and their parents. Insofar as student loans are not fully repaid, the quantity of education provided to domestic undergraduates can be greater than the funding by students and government if the higher fees charged to international students are used to subsidize domestic students (Gale & Parker, 2018; Williams, 2019). Just like Marshman and Larkins (2020) reminded, the Government's announcement of new fee structure from 2021 combines a disdain for the humanities and social sciences with a privatization agenda that shifts the burden to students and increases debt. Students undertaking a social science degree will pay the full cost, and the changes will decrease the overall government contribution to funding the sector. As the economic pressure from COVID-19 grows, there is obviously a further increase in unpaid debt and more pressure of incurring a debt in a context of economic recession and deflation on the student (Jayasuriya, 2021). The impact of COVID-19 on economic conditions and the ongoing financial crisis in the public university sector means that the use of this fee and loan mechanism to manage the ongoing crisis is limited.

### **INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS: Immigration and visa policies can stimulate enrollment performance, but still should demonstrate concern for problems of mental health and the employment equity**

Internationalization of HE is a process that includes international and intercultural dimensions into the HE system. Cross-border HE is only a part of Internationalization. There is considerable literature on various aspects of international students, such as their diverse backgrounds, market revenue driven, consumer rights, efficiency, quality and equity, mental health and employment issues. As a result of increasing flows of transnational migration, the composition of 'the student body' in higher education in Australia has changed significantly, with people entering university from many diverse backgrounds or ethnicities, like refugees or short-term abroad programs (Baker, Ramsay, Irwin & Miles, 2018; Bell, Cash, Boetto & Thampi, 2021). Among these, international student mobility has become an important part of higher education, hence the role of the state has not decreased and the attitudes of the government towards internationalization have become controversial. Internationalization has become more market revenue driven and placed more stress on consumer rights, rather exclusively focusing on student mobility, regardless of the content of the activity (Marginson, 2019; Arkoudis, Dollinger, Baik & Patience, 2019; Nyland & Tran, 2020; Eggins, Smolentseva & Wit, 2021). Instead, Zheng and Kapoor (2021) maintain that government policy-makers should further deepen their understanding towards the international society, and also balance efficiency, quality and equity in policymaking on internationalization.

According to the latest statistics of the Australian trade and investment commission (2021), as shown in Figure 2, in 2002, only 226,824 full-time, self-financed foreign students obtained visas and were studying in Australia. In 2009, the skilled migration quota removed the technical and vocational school (TAFE) vocational courses and transferred to information technology and accounting. The number of international students increased to 489,725, but due to attacks on Indian students that year, that number fell considerably to 399,462 in 2012. After the Australian government committed to maintaining the safety of international students and the quality of international education, it reached a peak of 758,154 in 2019. Affected by the COVID-19 epidemic in 2020, the number of international students slightly declined 684,600, which was a decrease of 9% from 2019 (DESE, 2021h).



**Figure 2. 2002-2020 The number of international students**

**Source: Australian trade and investment commission , 2021**

([https://austrademip.getoslo.com/sandboxes/make\\_chart/gCTLiKpn\\_6BdtVb0oLtr8Q](https://austrademip.getoslo.com/sandboxes/make_chart/gCTLiKpn_6BdtVb0oLtr8Q))

Although, Australia's first National Strategy for International Education 2025 sets out a 10-year plan for developing its role as a global leader in education, training and research in 2016 (DESE, 2021i). It enables Australia's international education sector to be more innovative, future-focused and globally engaged. It also provides effective quality assurance and regulation for education and training, drives collaboration in education and research, and increases opportunities for Australian providers and communities. However, with the disruption in HE created by

Covid-19, several lapses in the system have been exposed and a number of challenges have been witnessed which were unexpected. Obadire, Mashau and Misumi (2020) also pointed out the specific impact the pandemic has had on different aspects of internationalization of HE, which range from educating global citizens, building capacity for research, generating income from international student tuition fees, the quest to enhance institutional prestige, mobility, internationalization at home, to international research and others. As such, the problems of HE system cannot be simply papered over with funding or more regulatory changes (Jayasuriya, 2021).

The closure of international borders had immediate negative repercussions on the flow of overseas students. The education sector responded by adopting online teaching, although it has still suffered severe income losses (Lim, Nguyen, Robinson, Tsiaplias & Wang, 2021). The value of Australia's education exports was a total of \$40 billion in 2019, this included \$17 billion in tuition fees paid by international students and \$23 billion in international students' living expenses (Grozinger & Parsons, 2020). But, the dependence of the higher education system by international students and the extent of the crisis generated by COVID-19 are so great. Thereafter, University of Sydney predicted a 17% drop in overseas students and a \$470 million loss in 2020 (Jayasuriya, 2021; Baker, 2021). For this reason, there has been a substantial fall in revenue which is due largely to the loss of income acquired from international students.

In addition to the impact of the epidemic, the mental health and employment issues of international students are also a major concern. Nevertheless, the Australian government regularly reports students' high levels of satisfaction with their educational experiences. Howbeit,

international students have even poorer mental health than their domestic counterparts, especially in relation to safety and security, educational success/failure, health insurance and help-seeking (Forbes, 2019), challenges posed by racism, discrimination and unjustified stereotyping (Nyland & Tran, 2020), lack of social integration and belongingness (Arkoudis, Dollinger, Baik & Patience, 2019), or the need to slow-down the orientation phase and time plan (Bell, Cash, Boetto & Thampi, 2021). Subsequently, the impact of the lockdown was compounded for international students in Australia who were geographically separated from their support networks and faced significant financial and housing stress (Collins, 2021). Not surprisingly, undertaking employment also is one of the important factors influencing the mental health of international students.

Therefore, a connection between opportunities for employment and immigration has emerged for international students. As the global mobility of students has continued to grow, many of them are seeking opportunities to stay after obtaining their degrees. Upon graduation, most international students are eligible to apply for a post-study work rights visa (Subclass 485). The growth of the Temporary Graduate Visa (TGV) (Subclass 485) holders in Australia, which begun in 2007, is even more drastic. In response to the Knight Report, the TGV was revised in 2013 to allow them to work in Australia for a specific duration depending on their qualifications (Grimm, 2019). Moreover, there are no visa sponsorship costs for them to pay when recruiting applicants who hold these new visas. Bachelor's degree holders or holders of Masters by coursework degrees may remain for two years, holders of masters by research degrees can stay for up to 3 years, and Doctoral degree students are able to enjoy visa validity for up to 4 years. On 1 July 2016 the Simplified student visa framework (SSVF) was implemented replacing both Streamlined Visa Processing arrangements and the Assessment Level Framework. In the 2020-21 program year to 31 December 2020, there were 133,139 student visa applications lodged, a decrease of 41.3% compared with the previous year. Then, there were 120,962 student visas granted, a decrease of 39.8%. But, there were 104,629 Temporary Graduate visa holders On 31 December 2020, an increase of 17.1% compared with the previous year (DHA, 2020).

Researchers believe that temporary work visas still bring a number of ancillary benefits, including opportunities for employment and English proficiency, and return on investment from studying abroad. Even though the Australian work visa system has been reformed, many international graduates still regard work visas as the main channel for obtaining permanent residency (Jing, Ghosh, Sun & Liu, 2020; Tran, Rahimi, Tan, Dang & Le, 2020). But in fact, Australian employers usually prefer to hire local graduates because local graduates have an understanding of Australian workplaces, legal rights, local culture and employer expectations. In addition, because of concerns about the complexity and uncertainty of visa status, and the unskilled workplace culture and English proficiency of international graduates, employers often hesitate to hire international students.

## Conclusion

Globally, widening participation seems to have been thriving with the massification of higher education. It needs to make spaces available for all those students who are last in the queue of higher education demand (Gayardon, 2019) or raise the education attainability for students in regional Australia (DESE, 2020). However, more effective reforms aiming for the reduction of educational inequalities would involve changes on the supply side of tertiary education, like Czarniecki (2018) suggests. According to the equity performance data for access from 2011 to 2019, we can observe that, in general, there is an annual increase in the number and rate of people who have equal access. Furthermore, has established relevant organizations or projects to assist regional/remote, indigenous, disabled students as well as those who come from a low socioeconomic background with enrolment. Thus, the Australian government should expand the opportunity of equal access, and efficiently modify the definition of remoteness and disadvantage.

From 2011 to 2019, the results show that the proportion of the government's grant has fallen, and the proportion of tuition has risen. Students' voices will play a powerful role in bringing about institutional change in many ways, like consumer rights and teaching assessment, and affect the drive of funding allocation which is shifted to the demand driven and performance funding system (DET, 2015; DFES, 2021d), the same as Jayasuriya (2021) and Hemming & Power (2021). It also promotes fairness in the higher education system because domestic undergraduate students should not pay for university inefficiencies (Carrington, O'Donnell & Prasada, 2018). The process of using productivity to offset grants for the basic operation of universities must become transparent and allow for public discussion.

The Higher Education Loan Program (HELP) can provide financial help for all kinds of students, and the new loan remitted measures from 2021 will also encourage teachers to teach and remain in remote areas, and improve the equity of education for students in secluded areas. At the same time, in order to reduce the amount of bad debts and increase the efficiency of repayment, the income threshold was lowered from \$55,000 to \$42,000 as of 2018, an upper limit on loans was set. The Australian government is dedicated to effectively adjusting tuition and repayment structures, as well as increasing diversity and relief of loans, and reducing bad debts.

Immigration and visa policies can stimulate enrollment performance of international student, but it still should be considerate of students' mental health and the employment equity in the workplace. But due to the sharp drop of international student income, universities need to re-focus their attention on domestic students, enhance ability of students to obtain equal access to online Regional University Centres (DESE, 2021b) and educational resources, and offer greater alignment with industrial needs (DESE, 2020), especially in the post-COVID world. Eventually, like the suggestion of Birrell (2020), Marginson (2019) and Nyland & Tran (2020), the Australian government should provide the access, funds and

employment direction in a new vision, especially for the sharp drop of international student income. Further research could focus on exploring issues such as mental health, employment and visa policy concerns that international students are confronted with in the context of universities striving to maintain a steady rate of international student enrolment.

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