



Tim Payne, Director, Higher Education Policy and Projects
Office of the Vice-Chancellor and Principal

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Mr Luke Sheehy
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Office of the Deputy Leader of the Opposition
By email: luke.sheehy@aph.gov.au

Dear Luke,

Further feedback on Labor's September 2018 higher education equity announcement

I write in follow-up to the Deputy Leader of the Opposition's recent letter to vice-chancellors outlining Labor's additional funding commitment to boost equity in our higher education system.

The University of Sydney shares Labor's deep commitment to increasing access, participation and success in higher education by people from under-represented backgrounds. With the assistance of funding from Labor's landmark Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program (HEPPP) we are continuing to pursue an integrated university-wide strategy to lift access to post-school education.

Our strategy is outlined in the University's [2018 Access and Participation Plan](#) and comprises a suite of school and community outreach programs; targeted pathways and admissions initiatives; transition, academic, well-being and financial support services for students once enrolled; service learning, mentoring and volunteering programs; and research and evaluation to improve program delivery and outcomes.

Recent research such as David Earle's '[Tertiary Sector Performance Analysis](#)' (New Zealand Ministry of Education), suggests that a student's success in school is the strongest determinant of whether he or she will transition to post-secondary education and succeed. As the Mitchell Institute highlighted in '[Counting the cost of lost opportunity in Australian education](#)' (June, 2017), the lifetime costs to individuals and society of young people not transitioning successfully from school to further study or work are enormous. We therefore strongly support Labor's proposal that this new funding will be directed towards mentoring, support and other specialised programs designed to increase aspiration, confidence and opportunity in disadvantaged communities.

Specifically, our assessment is that the extra funding Labor has announced will have the greatest positive impact if, alongside the achievement of needs-based funding for schools, it is targeted to support the reinvigoration of the 'Partnership' element of the HEPPP. As the 2017 ACIL Allen Consulting evaluation of the HEPPP found, two Partnerships projects – one in Queensland and one in NSW (for which we were key partner) – provide valuable insights into the benefits of universities working collaboratively on school and community outreach.

The NSW [Bridges to Higher Education](#) Partnership project received \$21.2 million in HEPPP funding from 2011 to 2014. Bridges brought together the collective resources and experiences of the widening participation, equity and social inclusion programs and staff at Western Sydney University, the University of Technology Sydney, Macquarie University, the Australian Catholic University and the University of Sydney.

The partnership then extended to include NSW DEC, TAFE NSW, the Universities Admissions Centre (NSW & ACT), local government organisations, education offices, Indigenous organisations and other community, philanthropic and social enterprise organisations. This collaborative and targeted approach allowed universities to identify gaps and coordinate approaches to outreach activities with disadvantaged students and communities.

For a comprehensive, independent analysis of the outcomes and impacts of the Bridges program, see KPMG's [Bridges to Higher Education Final Report](#) released in April 2015. By way of summary, the KPMG evaluation concluded that even though Bridges had been running for a relatively short period of time (3 years) it was *'clearly contributing to its objectives and promoting outcomes for students, parents and teachers alike'*. For example, in relation to Bridges' four key objectives the KPMG evaluation found:

Improving students' academic preparedness and outcomes

91% of students surveyed self-reported they had better study skills as result of participating in Bridges.
92% said they felt better prepared for university as a result of participation.
99% of participating teachers surveyed noted improvements in the academic performance of participating students' relative to prior to Bridges.
94% of parents surveyed said they had a better capacity to support their child/children with higher education goals.

Increasing students' awareness, confidence and motivation toward higher education

90% of students had greater awareness of what universities offer.
89% of students had greater awareness of their potential career paths.
79% parents indicated that they knew more about their child's university options.
90% had better understanding of the benefits associated with higher education.

Building school and community capacity

97% of teachers who participated in the Bridges' professional development and learning activities reported that it had helped them to expand their teaching practices.
95% of teachers who participated in the Bridges' professional development and learning activities could better apply their learning to their teaching practices.
98% of teachers who participated in Bridges professional development and learning activities improved knowledge in their discipline of focus.

Increasing capacity to access higher education

University acceptance rates among schools in low socio-economic areas were improved by the Bridges program. The average increase in rates of Bridges applicants receiving an offer was significantly higher than that of non-Bridges schools. The size of the difference (5.13 per cent) was substantial and supported the conclusion of a Bridges specific effect among schools in low socio-economic areas.
Credit transfers and articulation arrangement between TAFE and universities increased to 186 in 2014, from nil in 2012.
87% of participants in alternative pathways projects noted improvement in awareness of alternative pathways to higher education.

We recommend that Labor consider using the knowledge gained from the consortium partners responsible for the Queensland and NSW Partnership programs to help develop and support future innovations in collaborative outreach partnerships between universities, vocational education providers, schools and communities and other stakeholders.

We also strongly support the continuation of the HEPPP National Priorities Pool (NPP) to provide funding to support research, evaluation and pilot projects that support the more effective implementation of widening participation strategies nationally. With support from the NPP we are currently partnering with Western Sydney University on a research project into how universities identify students from low SES backgrounds. This research will help universities nationally to better understand and address their students' needs.

We would be delighted to discuss these issues further with you at your convenience if that would be of assistance.

Yours sincerely,

(Signature removed)

Tim Payne