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Enabling Futures: Equity and Innovation in Higher Education

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Abstract

Widening participation (WP) in higher education (HE) remains a global “wicked problem,” marked by persistent structural inequities despite decades of reform. This editorial introduces the *Fostering Inclusion in Higher Education: Global Approaches to Widening Participation* special issue, situating Australia’s experience within an international dialogue on equity and innovation. In Australia, WP has evolved over more than 80 years, driven by intersecting imperatives of social justice and national economic development. Enabling programs, fee-free, preparatory pathways, represent a cornerstone of this agenda, providing accessible routes into university for students from low socioeconomic, Indigenous, regional, and other equity backgrounds. Rather than being simply remedial, these programs function as sites of social innovation, fostering confidence, capability, and transformative agency through pedagogies grounded in care and critical engagement. Their success in improving access, retention, and graduate outcomes underscores their role in meeting ambitious national targets, including those outlined in the Australian Universities Accord, and advancing global commitments such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. International comparisons reveal shared challenges, including deficit discourses and entrenched barriers, alongside common strategies that prioritise inclusive pedagogy and holistic support. By amplifying diverse perspectives and evidence-based practices, this special edition contributes to consolidating the knowledge base of Enabling education and its equivalents worldwide. Ultimately, WP is not merely about access but empowerment, transforming higher education into an engine of equity and sustainability.

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Introduction

Across the globe, widening participation (WP) in Higher Education (HE) for underrepresented students remains a complex and enduring social challenge. James et al. (2024) and Larsen and Emmett (2021) highlight this as a “wicked problem” which is characterised by interwoven causes and persistent inequities. Despite decades of reform and investment, higher education systems continue to reproduce social and cultural advantage, leaving some groups structurally marginalised and deprived of participation and success (Alford & Head, 2017; Bunn et al., 2020; Pitman, 2015).

In Australia, WP has long been a central policy concern, motivated by both humanist ideals of fairness and the pragmatic recognition that a diverse and skilled population is essential to the nation’s economic future (Sellar & Gale, 2011). For example, in the most recent major government policy document, the Australian Universities Accord, O’Kane et al. (2023) state that meeting Australia’s future skills needs will require “much higher participation among groups historically underrepresented in higher education” (p. 2). While such pragmatic consideration of workforce requirements has clearly intersected with and underpins the importance of WP, the Australian Government’s attitude is also representative of the global commitment to inclusive education enshrined in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG4, which calls for “inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all” (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2023).

This editorial for the *Fostering Inclusion in Higher Education: Global Approaches to Widening Participation* special issue explores global innovative practices, highlights successful strategies, and offers insights into current efforts to support equity groups within the higher education sector. It has its origins in the National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia (NAEEA) Conference, held in Darwin in December, 2024.

Enabling education is a term that has been used in Australia to describe fee-free preparatory pathways that expand access to university study. As such, the Enabling sector [capitalised to reflect its status as a distinct equity-focused sector] represents one of the nation’s most significant contributions to educational equity (NAEEA, 2024). While it is, unsurprisingly, often conflated with ‘foundation’, ‘bridging’, ‘access’ or ‘preparation’ programs, Enabling education programs are understood as primarily policy-driven equity mechanisms, rather than simply remedial programs (NAEEA, 2024). They are thus not simply compensatory measures; they are sites of social innovation that address the complex challenge of inequality by building students’ capability, confidence, and transformative agency (James et al., 2024).

By tracing the development of WP in Australia, highlighting the distinctive pedagogical and social impact of Enabling programs, and drawing on international perspectives that showcase diverse approaches to supporting equity students, this editorial positions the Australian experience within a broader global dialogue on inclusion, equity, and innovation in higher education. In doing so, it provides a foundation for the articles in this special issue, which collectively demonstrate how institutions across the world are not only designing programs to bridge persistent equity gaps, but also reimagining teaching practices, learning environments, and support structures to strengthen outcomes for disadvantaged students. Together, these contributions extend and enrich the conversation on how higher education systems can more effectively meet the needs of those historically underrepresented.

Equity and the National Imperative

From the mid-1940s, when the Commonwealth assumed responsibility for Australia's higher education sector, successive federal governments have pursued various strategies to widen participation. These efforts have been driven by a combination of workforce and equity considerations, with the focus on developing national capacity often working in support of equity goals (Anderson & Eton, 1982; Baldwin, 2019; Twomey & Boyd, 2016). The current wave of reform has its roots in the late 1980s, when structural reforms were initiated following the Dawkins White Paper (Dawkins, 1988). These reforms went even further in defining higher education as both an instrument of national development and a vehicle for social mobility (Gale & Tranter, 2011). The subsequent policy *A Fair Chance for All* (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1990) established equity as a measurable target, identifying specific groups for whom participation lagged. In the 2000s, the Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley et al., 2008) then refocused national attention on equity by linking it explicitly to workforce development. Its recommendation that 20% of undergraduate students come from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds by 2020 catalysed new funding streams, most notably the *Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program* (HEPPP), which provided targeted support for access and retention (Department of Education, 2020). These reforms coincided with the expansion of fee-free Enabling programs, embedding them as a core component of the national equity architecture (Baker et al., 2021, 2022). The 2024 *Universities Accord* (O'Kane et al., 2023) continues this trajectory, reemphasising WP as not only as a moral obligation but as a national economic necessity. It stresses that Australia's future prosperity depends on harnessing the potential of learners from historically underrepresented groups, including those from low SES, regional and remote, Indigenous, and non-English speaking backgrounds (O'Kane et al., 2023). In this context, Enabling programs play a vital national role by expanding access to talent, developing key skills, and linking equity with the goals of productivity and sustainability.

Understanding the Challenge: Who Is Left Behind?

Despite sustained policy attention, structural inequalities remain entrenched in Australian higher education (Tomaszewski et al., 2019). The government formally recognises several equity groups as disadvantaged in access and participation: low SES students, Indigenous Australians, students from regional and remote areas, people with disability, those from non-English speaking backgrounds, and women in non-traditional fields (Department of Education, 2017). While participation rates have improved for all groups since the 'massification' of higher education (Koshy, 2016; Tight, 2019), affluent students still remain overrepresented (Tomaszewski et al., 2019). Financial barriers, lack of cultural capital, and limited social networks often restrict the capacity of underrepresented students to navigate complex university systems (Arid et al., 2010; Harvey et al., 2016; Webb et al., 2017). Many possess strong aspirations but face intersecting disadvantages, including disrupted educational pathways and competing life demands (Devlin & McKay, 2017; James, 2024). The persistence of deficit discourses, narratives that frame these students as 'lacking' in ability, preparedness, or suitability, also remains a fundamental obstacle (Devlin & McKay, 2017). Such discourses obscure systemic inequities by individualising responsibility and privileging assimilation to dominant academic norms (Bourdieu, 1974; Habel & Whitman, 2016; Webb et al., 2017).

A shift away from these perspectives is essential for genuine equity. From a Bourdieusian perspective, Enabling programs can be understood as sites of capital conversion, where students' diverse social and cultural capitals, often undervalued within traditional university

settings, are recognised and transformed into resources that support academic success (James, 2024; Webb et al., 2017). Rather than functioning as remedial spaces, these programs create transformative learning environments in which students learn to navigate the 'field' of HE, developing new dispositions and competencies that reshape their relationship to learning and opportunity (James et al., 2015). Bourdieu (1986) contends that educational institutions tend to valorise the cultural capital of dominant social groups, reinforcing existing structural hierarchies. In contrast, Bourke et al. (2016) argue that enabling approaches actively challenge such phenomena by focusing on students' capabilities and potential.

Building on this, Enabling education can be understood as operating at the intersection of economic and social-justice imperatives, working simultaneously within and against the hierarchies that shape students' educational trajectories (James et al., 2024). As 'demystifying' spaces, Enabling programs help students recognise and value their own capabilities and potentials, while also making visible the often-unspoken forms of social and cultural capital that structure participation in higher education (Habel & Whitman, 2016; James, 2025). Through explicit teaching of academic conventions, transparent expectations, and supportive learning relationships, these programs translate the tacit rules of the university into accessible and navigable practices (Hattam et al., 2024; Larsen & James, 2022). In doing so, they equip students not only to enter the field of higher education but to move within it with increasing confidence and agency (Willans & Seary, 2008). This dual project, supporting students to negotiate existing hierarchies while also opening possibilities for their transformation, sits at the centre of Enabling education. It is within this context that the articles in this special issue situate their contributions, offering diverse national and international perspectives on how programs and pedagogical approaches can disrupt deficit framings, widen participation, and meaningfully expand opportunities for students historically excluded from higher education.

Enabling Programs as Social Innovation

Enabling programs, also known as foundation, pathway, bridging, access or university preparation courses, provide structured, fee-free entry pathways to university study (Australian Government, 2017). Enabling programs have expanded across more than 34 Australian universities, reflecting national policy priorities around equity and access (Baker et al., 2022; NAEAA, 2024). A defining feature of these programs is their accessibility: most operate on an open-access basis and do not require formal prerequisite qualifications or prior academic achievement. This openness affords students with lower levels of academic preparation, and those who may have been excluded or discouraged by traditional entry routes, the opportunity to explore university study in a supported environment. Students enrol in Commonwealth Supported Places, enabling them to trial higher education without financial risk (Chojenta, 2017). This structure is especially critical for low SES and mature-aged learners who may otherwise be deterred by debt concerns (Norton & Cherastidtham, 2018). Approximately half of all Enabling students identify with one or more recognised equity groups (James & Andrews, 2024), compared to about 30% across undergraduate enrolments (Department of Education, 2017).

Enabling programs have demonstrated significant success in both access and retention. Students who transition through these programs are more likely to persist and achieve in their subsequent studies (Lisciandro, 2022; McKay et al., 2018). Beyond academic metrics, these pathways cultivate higher-order cognitive capabilities such as critical analysis, reflective reasoning, data interpretation, and disciplinary literacy (Syme et al., 2022). These critical literacies are foundational not only for university success but also for the evolving skill

demands of Australia's knowledge economy. NAEAA (2024) highlights that if the Accord's ambitious aspirations to increase university enrolments by 900,000 people by 2050 are to be met, 86% of those new enrolments need to come from underrepresented groups (Department of Education, 2023).

Recent analysis by James et al. (2024) highlights that the accessibility and design of Enabling programs do more than widen participation: they also operate as catalysts for social and educational change, addressing the complex and interrelated barriers that underrepresented students face in accessing university. By providing open-entry pathways, structured support, and learning environments that deliberately challenge deficit narratives, Enabling programs disrupt the entrenched inequities that characterise higher education access. James et al. (2024) argue that these programs are particularly effective because they respond to what they conceptualise as a "wicked problem," the systemic and historically persistent barriers experienced by equity students, through practical, human-centred solutions that enhance student capability, confidence, and agency (Larsen & Emmett, 2021). In this way, the open-access and preparatory design of Enabling programs both expands opportunity and fosters the conditions necessary for broader social and educational transformation.

By nurturing these competencies, Enabling programs contribute directly to national and international development agendas. In alignment with the United Nations SDGs, particularly SDG4 (quality education), SDG8 (decent work and economic growth), and SDG10 (reduced inequalities), these programs function as catalysts for social and economic sustainability (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2023; James et al., 2024). The educational, social, and workforce benefits generated by these programs extend beyond individual graduates to their families, communities, and regions, amplifying their transformative reach (James et al., 2024; Johnston et al., 2018).

Transformative Pedagogies: From Care to Capability

The distinctive strength of Enabling education lies in its pedagogy. Educators in this sector employ approaches grounded in care, connection, and transformation (Motta & Bennett, 2018; Seary & Willans, 2020). These "pedagogies of care" foreground the emotional and relational dimensions of learning, creating environments that validate students' experiences and build their confidence as learners (Lynch, 2010; Seary & Willans, 2020). Pastoral care and holistic support are integral to this pedagogy. By valuing prior learning and lived experience, educators help students to "debunk deficit notions of self" (Willans & Seary, 2008, p. 52). This validation fosters belonging, self-efficacy, and resilience, factors strongly associated with retention and success (Larsen & James, 2022; Seary & Willans, 2020). Central to this process is the development of self-efficacy and agency (Bandura, 1997). Enabling programs intentionally cultivate these attributes by providing opportunities for mastery, vicarious learning, and self-reflection (Larsen & James, 2022; Willans & Seary, 2008). The student–educator relationship becomes a conduit for transformation, enabling learners to reconceptualise themselves as capable, competent, and intellectually engaged (Larsen & James, 2022).

This process aligns closely with Freire's (1970) concept of critical pedagogy, which positions education as a practice of freedom, enabling students to critically engage with structures of power and inequality. Embedded Enabling pedagogy (Hattam et al., 2024), grounded in principles of social justice and progressive education, seeks to achieve participatory parity by fostering inclusive practices that recognise and value diverse forms of knowledge and experience. In doing so, Enabling programs function as sites of social innovation, generating new practices and perspectives that empower individuals and institutions to respond to

complex social challenges (Howaldt & Schwarz, 2017; James et al., 2024). Graduates frequently describe their experiences as transformative, not only in gaining access to university but in reimagining their potential to participate in and contribute to society (Syme et al., 2022; Willans, 2010).

Shared Challenges, Shared Solutions: A Global Perspective

While Australia's Enabling programs represent a unique model, their ethos and challenges resonate globally. The pursuit of WP has shaped higher education policy in the United Kingdom, and other developed nations for decades (Davis & Bull, 2023). In the United Kingdom, Access programs provide alternative routes to university, paralleling Australian Enabling pathways (Hinton-Smith, 2012). Despite expansion, persistent class-based disparities in participation demonstrate the enduring nature of structural inequality (Boliver, 2010; Bourke, 2012). In New Zealand, the legacy of settler colonialism, rooted in centuries of political, cultural, social, and economic dominance, has led to the systematic undervaluing of Indigenous knowledges and ongoing inequities for Māori and other non-Pākehā communities (Fonua & Saavedra, 2025). Recent initiatives, such as the Ministry of Education's *Statement of National Education and Learning Priorities* (NELP) and the *Tertiary Education Strategy* (TES), along with institutional *Learner Success Plans*, signal efforts to redress these inequities, though further resourcing and deeper professional learning are needed to achieve genuine change (Fonua & Saavedra, 2025).

These concerns are echoed across other global regions. In Canada, widening participation efforts has focused on addressing barriers facing Indigenous learners, rural students, and recent immigrants, with bridging and access programs emerging as key mechanisms for educational equity (Bégin-Caouette, 2023; Kirby, 2009). In the United States, federally funded programs such as TRIO and Upward Bound have targeted first-generation and low-income students, though significant racial and socioeconomic disparities in access and completion persist (U.S. Department of Education, 2025). Across Europe, the Bologna Process has intensified efforts to close attainment gaps, yet social stratification remains strongly patterned by class, ethnicity, and migration backgrounds (European Commission, 2024). In parts of Asia, massification has expanded access dramatically, but widening participation remains uneven, with rural and low-income students continuing to face substantial structural and financial barriers to entry (Hawkins, 2018).

These international comparisons reveal both shared challenges and common successes. As massification increases diversity across global higher education systems (Marginson, 2016), the persistence of deficit discourses and structural barriers remains a universal issue (Burke et al., 2023). Across these contexts, enabling programs have emerged as sites of pedagogical innovation, experimenting with curriculum design, inclusive pedagogy, and holistic student support (Stokes, 2025). Enabling education thus contributes to a broader, transnational conversation about educational equity and sustainability. By connecting local practice to global goals, Australia's experience offers valuable insights for other nations seeking to align inclusion with social and economic development.

Building the Knowledge Base: The Role of This Special Edition

This special edition positions itself as an entry point into that global dialogue. By presenting insights from different national contexts and highlighting convergences in both challenges and solutions, it begins to build the foundation for a more coordinated international effort. The intention is not only to map what is currently happening, but to invite future collaboration,

bringing together researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to develop a stronger collective voice capable of influencing government agendas across countries. In doing so, this special issue aims to foster cross-border partnerships that advance shared responses to the enduring, global wicked problem of inequity in higher education.

The field of Enabling education has matured significantly over the past two decades, generating a growing body of empirical and conceptual scholarship (Baker et al., 2022; Syme et al., 2021, 2022). Yet, as with all emerging areas of practice, ongoing consolidation is vital to ensure its contributions are fully recognised within the broader higher education landscape. This *Fostering Inclusion in Higher Education* special edition responds to that need by bringing together researchers and practitioners who are advancing our understanding of how inclusion, equity, and social innovation can be enacted through Enabling and foundational programs. Collectively, these articles showcase how the field is diversifying its research methodologies, deepening theoretical engagement, and broadening its global relevance. By documenting innovative teaching practices, evidence-based interventions, and conceptual advances, this special issue extends the knowledge base and strengthens the legitimacy of Enabling education as a scholarly field. The collective insights presented here highlight that inclusion is not merely a policy goal but an ongoing, relational practice that requires imagination, reflexivity, and courage.

Conclusion

Widening participation in higher education remains a profound global challenge, one that demands sustained innovation, collaboration, and political will. As this editorial has shown, Australia's Enabling programs provide a compelling example of how fee-free, open-access pathways can offer transformative opportunities for learners historically excluded from university. These programs cultivate the confidence, skills, and agency necessary for success in higher education and beyond, serving as practical expressions of social innovation in response to entrenched inequalities. Their alignment with national priorities, including the ambitious targets set out in the Universities Accord, as well as international commitments such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, underscores their significance not only for individuals but for broader social and economic futures.

Yet the challenges Australia confronts are not unique. Across the United Kingdom, Aotearoa New Zealand, Canada, the United States, Europe, and Asia, higher education systems grapple with persistent inequities shaped by class, race, Indigeneity, migration status, and geography. The global resonance of these challenges highlights the need for coordinated international efforts and shared learning. The *Fostering Inclusion in Higher Education* special edition positions itself as an early step toward such collaboration, bringing together researchers and practitioners who are advancing inclusive pedagogies, equity-focused policies, and enabling practices across diverse contexts.

Collectively, the contributions in this volume reaffirm that widening participation is not simply about opening the doors to HE: it is about ensuring that all who enter can belong, thrive, and succeed. Enabling education plays a vital role in realising this vision. Moving forward, sustained policy commitment, ongoing research, and deep cross-border collaboration will be essential for transforming higher education into a genuinely equitable and socially just system. This special edition marks not the culmination of that effort, but the beginning of a broader global conversation and a shared agenda for the future.

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