



ACU's Widening Participation Plan 2023 – 2026

Equity is everyone's business

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Message from the Vice-Chancellor and President



The Widening Participation Plan (2023 – 2026) is born out of the outstanding cross-institutional work undertaken by the ACU community in 2022. Driven by the desire to amplify our mission and build a brighter future for our communities, we embarked on an institutional journey to rethink our approach to equity and widening participation at ACU.

We recognised the collective impact of our equity initiatives could be greater, more tangible, and longer lasting for the diverse communities we serve nationwide. As such, we set out to transform how we inspire, welcome and enable individuals across Australia to pursue and realise their lifelong aspirations through higher education—regardless of background.

The Widening Participation Plan is a product of this institutional journey. It prescribes, with clarity and rigour, the way forward by embedding equity into every element of the student lifecycle at ACU.

Our goal: to be a catalyst of possibilities for all.

Our success: the flourishing and empowerment of all who embark on a journey with us — at one or many junctures of their lifelong learning endeavour.

There is much to do in the journey that lies ahead. The Widening Participation Plan is not our telos, but rather a blueprint to transform ACU into a community that is ever more inspirational, equitable and welcoming to all.

Sustained commitment and shared ownership are foundational to our success, and I encourage everyone to proactively engage with the initiatives established by this plan.

Let our Catholic ethos and unwavering commitment to service guide us as we work together in creating a flourishing future for all.

Professor Zlatko Skrbis
Vice-Chancellor and President
Australian Catholic University

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge and pay our respects to the First Peoples, the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waterways. We recognise their spiritual and ongoing cultural connection to Country. We respectfully acknowledge Elders past and present and thank them for their wisdom and guidance as we walk in their footsteps.



Introduction

Australian Catholic University (ACU) proudly launches its inaugural Widening Participation Plan, articulating the university's genuine commitment to improving access, retention and experience for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students from under-represented groups. In creating this plan, we have taken a unique whole-of-institution approach to reducing systemic social, economic, cultural and structural barriers to ensure equitable access, participation and success of students from all backgrounds.

*"[People] of every race, condition, and age, since they enjoy the dignity of a human being, have an inalienable right to an education."*¹

Educational equity is central to our mission and is underpinned by Catholic social teaching. As a Catholic university, we play an important role in working for the common good and upholding the dignity of the human person by providing equitable access to higher education. We are committed to making higher education inclusive

and providing greater opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students from under-represented groups to flourish in society.

*"...Informed by ACU's mission to uphold the dignity of every person, our Widening Participation Plan recognises the diverse lived experiences and celebrates the unique perspectives of students experiencing disadvantage to enable equitable access, participation and success in higher education."*²

In undertaking the Widening Participation Plan, we are working towards equity through the development of an institutional culture of enquiry to bring to the surface and address any problematic and deep-rooted structures and practices that result in educational outcome disparities. We have commenced an iterative process to embed equity into the very fabric of the university to increase opportunity and reduce disadvantage by examining our institutional culture, structures, practices and processes and shift towards equity-enabling policies, systems and pedagogical approaches.

The Widening Participation Plan is guided by the following principles:

- Equity is about creating opportunities for equal access.
- Everyone is valued and engaged while we address systemic barriers that exclude Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and people from under-represented groups.
- Making a conscious decision to work in a way that challenges societal inequalities.

The Widening Participation Plan is a research-informed, whole-of-institution approach that focuses on what we can do as an institution to change and how we can do better, which have been articulated in the university's performance targets and institutional change targets for 2026. This differentiates this plan and our approach from others in the sector and reflects the recommendations of the ACIL Allen Review in 2021.

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Embedding equity within and across the University

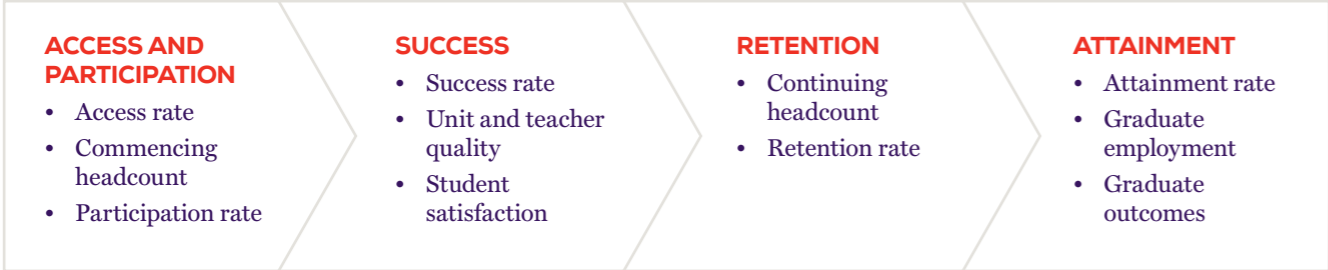
The Widening Participation Plan aims to create an inclusive, strengths-based and student-centred environment that enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students from under-represented groups to equitably access, participate and succeed in every facet of their academic, social and personal lives at ACU. The Widening Participation Plan comprises five focus areas of pre-access, access, participation and success, with the overarching area of governance and culture intertwined throughout the plan. Each focus area is supported by several strategic priorities and is further operationalised in the Implementation Roadmap, which outlines the specific actions, outcomes and measures.

AREAS	PRE-ACCESS	ACCESS	PARTICIPATION	SUCCESS	GOVERNANCE AND CULTURE
Outcomes	The university is committed to providing inclusive outreach programs that reflect ACU's mission and core values of educational equity and social justice, and foster students' sense of belonging and connection to ACU.	The university is committed to ensuring equitable access to higher education for all students by providing engaging and impactful pre-university programs, enabling pathways, and scholarships that are supported by equitable systems and administrative processes.	The university is committed to providing equitable education opportunities through inclusive learning and teaching models to enable the full participation, equitable retention and success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students from under-represented groups.	The university is committed to ensuring equitable graduate and employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students from under-represented groups.	The university is committed to embedding equity and inclusion principles into its core processes, such as its planning, data and insights, staff professional development, and work practices.
Strategic priorities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Implement and embed ACU's Equity Partnerships Model to foster and better leverage its partnerships with schools and communities. 2. Increase engagement with schools and communities to provide outreach programs that foster a sense of connection and increase access to higher education. 3. Improve the preparedness, participation and retention of students through the provision of more accessible and inclusive University Preparation Programs. 4. Provide students with inclusive spaces, facilities, programs and services that foster their sense of belonging and connectedness to ACU. 5. Ensure ACU's mission, values and commitment to widening participation underpin its engagement and communication with students, schools and communities. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Implement mechanisms and adjustments in ACU's application and admission processes that prioritise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students from under-represented groups. 2. Enhance ACU's scholarship policy, processes, systems and communication to improve awareness, process efficiency and transparency on the awarding of scholarships. 3. Ensure equitable access to ACU through its pathway programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students from under-represented groups. 4. Enable students to successfully transition into ACU through inclusive, purposeful and evidence-based transitions, orientation and student experience programs. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Embed equitable and inclusive practices within ACU's learning and teaching, curriculum design and pedagogy to enable full participation, equitable outcomes and a culturally respectful learning experience. 2. Recognise, value and celebrate diversity by ensuring different knowledges, perspectives and experiences are embedded within ACU's student experience, activities, curriculum and learning resources. 3. Enhance ACU's student feedback mechanisms to develop a more comprehensive understanding of students' experience, which is used to inform the design, review, and improvement of units, programs and initiatives. 4. Enable equitable access to ACU's co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, programs, clubs and societies, and services. 5. Minimise any financial or other unintended barriers that may impede access and the full participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students from under-represented groups in university life. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Review ACU's support services to ensure they meet the needs of students and have a meaningful impact on their experience. 2. Earlier identification, engagement and support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students from under-represented groups that are at risk of failing units. 3. Improve re-engagement strategies for students who have withdrawn, deferred or interrupted their studies. 4. Improve the awareness, accessibility and use of careers and employability services by embedding industry expertise within curriculum and unit design. 5. Enable equitable access, participation and success in higher degree by research by ensuring equity and inclusion principles are embedded within ACU's policies, guidelines, processes and programs. 6. Strengthen ACU's relationships with industry, partners and alumni to provide leadership and alumni network development opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students from under-represented groups. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Embed equity targets into ACU's strategic, operational and enrolment planning processes at all levels of the university. 2. Implement and refine the university's approach to data and analytics to establish more robust and automated reporting, enabling ACU to be more responsive and impactful with its support, services and programs. 3. Foster staff capability, understanding and confidence in embedding equity and inclusion principles into ACU's policies, programs, systems and pedagogical practices. 4. Strengthen inclusivity and access through the elimination of any structural, systemic and administrative barriers in ACU's policies, procedures, systems and processes. 5. Recognise and celebrate staff achievements and improvements to work practices that strengthen ACU's inclusive teaching and learning.

Performance targets

The Widening Participation Plan has a series of targets that are designed to aid the ongoing monitoring and measuring of performance. These targets are not intended to reflect all of the university's activities as further metrics have been identified in the Implementation Roadmap, which will be embedded within the university's operational plans.

- By 2026, ACU aims to achieve:
- access and the representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to 443, low socio-economic status (SES) students to 2,485, and regional and remote students to 1,837 (noting that some students will fall into more than one group);
 - participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to three per cent, low SES students to 20 per cent, and regional and remote students to 14 per cent;
 - success and retention rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students from under-represented groups to be on par with or above the university's overall domestic student cohort; and
 - attainment rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students from under-represented groups to improve annually, with the university committed to reforming its systems and processes to enhance its internal monitoring and reporting capabilities.



Implementation roadmap

The Widening Participation Implementation Roadmap outlines the associated responsibilities, actions and initiatives that are linked to each of the five focus areas and collectively contribute to the achievement of the Widening Participation Plan. It also includes a series of more granular outcomes and measures that provide a tangible and practical way of monitoring progress. This will be an iterative process with the plan and roadmap being continually reviewed and revised to ensure they reflect and adapt to ACU's internal and external context.

Governance and accountability

The Widening Participation Plan introduces a distributed governance and leadership framework, which recognises staff and students as partners whose shared responsibility is integral to the success of the plan. This model is designed to oversee the implementation of the roadmap and facilitate the ongoing monitoring and bi-annual reporting of performance and progress to the Widening Participation Steering Group, Provost and Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic), and the Vice-Chancellor's Advisory Committee (Figure 1).

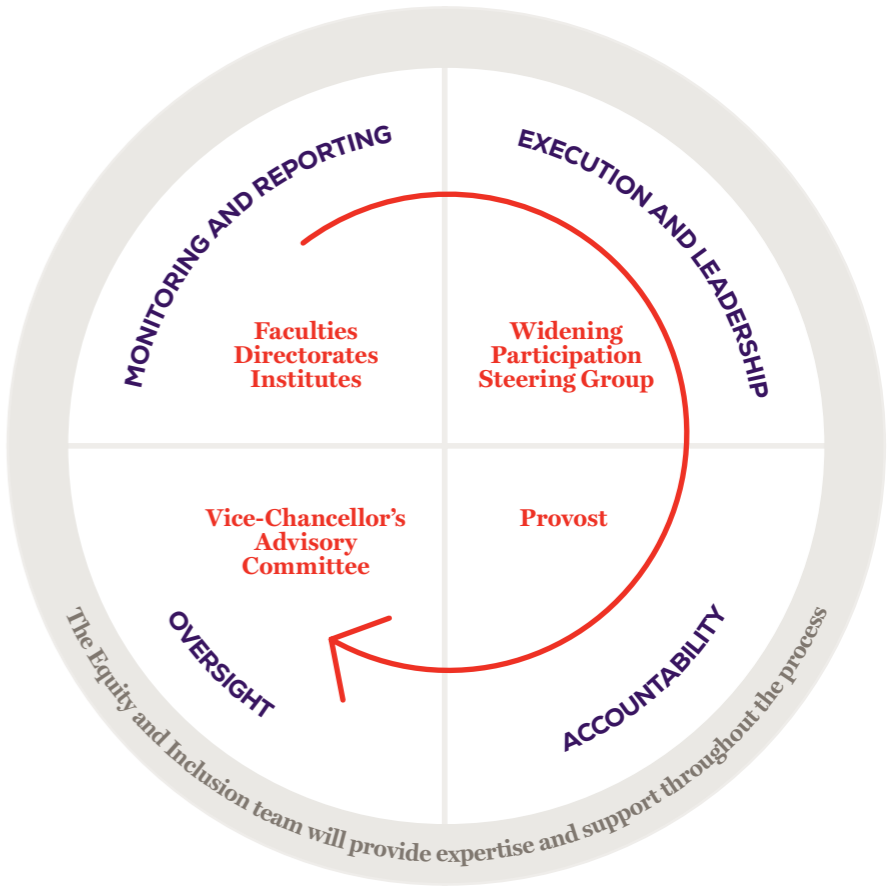


Figure 1. Governance model for the Widening Participation Plan



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- ¹ Gravissimum educationis, Declaration on Christian education proclaimed by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on October 28, 1965.
- ² ACU's Widening Participation Working Group, 2021
- ³ ACIL Allen Consulting, Widening Participation Review: Final Report, February 2021.