

ACU's Widening Participation Plan 2023-2026



Widening Participation

Equity is everyone's business

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 that 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.

1. Introduction

Australian Catholic University (ACU) proudly launches its inaugural Widening Participation Plan, which articulates 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 accessible for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students from under-represented groups and giving people the opportunity to reach their full potential and contribute to 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 project, 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 articulates the University's targets for 2026 as well as the institutional change targets that focus on transforming its approach, processes and practices. 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 of these students will fall into more than one category);
- Participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to 3%, low SES students to 20%, and regional and remote students to 14%;
- Success and retention rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students from under-represented groups to be on par with 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.

2. ACU’s Widening Participation Plan

The Widening Participation Plan aligns with and supports the achievement of the [ACU Strategic Plan 2020-2023](#), in particular, ensuring the University’s endeavours are grounded in Mission, and providing a distinctive, inclusive, dynamic, and student-centred education. 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 is a research-informed, whole of institution approach, which focuses on what we can do as an institution to change and how we can do better. This differentiates this Plan and our approach from others in the sector and reflects the recommendations of the ACIL Allen Review in 2021: *“Widening participation requires a significant change and transition to a whole-of-institution approach to equity... This will necessitate the embedding of equity considerations into university processes, programs and pedagogy.”*³

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.



Figure 1. ACU’s Widening Participation Focus Areas

FOCUS AREA 1: PRE-ACCESS

The University is committed to providing equitable and 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.

Strategic Priorities

- 1.1 Ensure partnerships are strategically aligned and embed an institutional approach to the management of partnerships.
- 1.2 Increase outreach with targeted school and community partners to strengthen students’ sense of connection to ACU.
- 1.3 Improve the preparedness, participation and retention of students through the provision of more accessible and inclusive University Preparation Programs.
- 1.4 Provide students with inclusive spaces, facilities, programs, and services that foster their sense of belonging and connectedness to ACU.
- 1.5 Strengthen ACU’s marketing, communication, and messaging to foster students connection to ACU’s Mission, social justice, equity and inclusivity perspectives.

Leads: Deputy Chief Operating Officer; Faculties; First Peoples; Libraries; Marketing and External Relations; Pathways; Identity and Mission; Student Administration; and Student Support Services.

Measures

- Number of school and community partners from Indigenous, regional, remote and low socio-economic areas
- Number of students participating in outreach programs
- Number of students participating in University Preparation Programs

FOCUS AREA 2: ACCESS

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.

Strategic Priorities

- 2.1 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.
- 2.2 Enhance ACU's scholarship policy, processes, systems, and communication to improve awareness, process efficiency, and transparency on the awarding of scholarships.
- 2.3 Ensure equitable access to ACU through its Pathways Programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students from under-represented groups.
- 2.4 Enable students to successfully transition into ACU through inclusive, purposeful, and evidence-based transitions, orientation, and student experience programs and ensure success through enabling transition pedagogy in Pathways and first-year study.

Leads: Advancement and Alumni; Faculties; First Peoples; Marketing and External Relations; Pathways; Sport, Wellbeing and Residential Life; Student Administration; and Student Support Services.

Measures of Success

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students from under-represented groups:

- Increase access rates
- Number of applications, offers and enrolments
- Number of scholarships awarded
- Number of Creating Opportunities Fund scholarships awarded
- Participation and articulation of students in Uni Step Up, Step Up into Teaching, and Pathways Programs

FOCUS AREA 3: PARTICIPATION

The University is committed to providing equitable education opportunities through inclusive learning and teaching models to enable the full participation, retention and success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students from under-represented groups.

Strategic Priorities

- 3.1 Embed equitable and inclusive practices within ACU's learning and teaching, curriculum design, and pedagogy to provide students with a culturally respectful learning experience.
- 3.2 Recognise, value, and celebrate diversity by ensuring different knowledges, perspectives, and experiences are embedded within the selection of resources, texts, reading lists and collections.
- 3.3 Enhance ACU's student feedback mechanisms to develop a more comprehensive understanding of students' experience and satisfaction, which is used to inform the design, review, and improvement of units, programs, and initiatives.
- 3.4 Enable equitable access to ACU's co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, programs, clubs and societies, and services.
- 3.5 Minimise any financial 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.

Leads: Centre for Education and Innovation; Faculties; First Peoples; Identity and Mission; Libraries; Pathways; Sport, Wellbeing and Residential Life; Student Administration; and Student Support Services.

Measures of Success

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students from under-represented groups:

- Student satisfaction as measured by the Student Evaluation of Learning and Teaching (SELT) and Student Experience Survey (SES)
- Proportion of units that include diverse authors and perspectives in reading lists
- Number of students participating in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities
- Number of students accessing disability, counselling and support services and resources
- Number of students in student roles

FOCUS AREA 4: SUCCESS

The University is committed to ensuring equitable outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students from under-represented groups across all stages of study and course levels.

Strategic Priorities

- 4.1 Review and enhance ACU's support services to ensure they meet the needs of students and have a meaningful impact on their experience.
- 4.2 Improve re-engagement strategies for students who have withdrawn, deferred or interrupted their studies.
- 4.3 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.
- 4.4 Improve the awareness, accessibility and use of careers and employability services by embedding industry expertise within curriculum and unit design.
- 4.5 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.
- 4.6 Strengthen ACU's relationships with industry, partners, and alumni to provide more engaging and relevant leadership and alumni network development opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students from under-represented groups.

Leads: Advancement and Alumni; Centre for Education and Innovation; Faculties; First Peoples; Pathways; Research Portfolio; Student Administration; and Student Support Services.

Measures of Success

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students from under-represented groups:

- Improve success and retention rates
- Number of re-engagements with students on study leave
- Number of students accessing careers and employability services
- Progression of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students from under-represented groups into Higher Degree by Research studies
- Number of Alumni engaged in story creation, mentoring and coaching programs
- Graduate employability as measured by the Graduate Outcomes Survey (GOS)

FOCUS AREA 5: GOVERNANCE AND CULTURE

The University is committed to providing ongoing professional learning and capacity building opportunities to ensure staff embed equity and inclusion principles into their work practices and within all levels of the University's planning and decision-making.

Strategic Priorities

- 5.1 Embed equity considerations and targets into ACU's strategic, operational, and enrolment planning processes at all levels of the University.
- 5.2 Leverage the University's data, analysis, and insights into its strategies, programs, and interventions to ensure they are evidence-based and measurable in a meaningful way.
- 5.3 Improve staff capacity, understanding, and confidence to implement and embed equity and inclusion principles into their processes, services, projects, curriculum, and pedagogical practices.
- 5.4 Strengthen inclusivity and access through the identification and removal of structural, systemic, and administrative barriers in ACU's policies, procedures, systems, and processes.
- 5.5 Recognise and celebrate staff achievements and improvements to work practices that strengthen ACU's inclusive teaching and learning.

Leads: Centre for Education and Innovation; Data Analytics and Strategic Insights; Faculties; First Peoples; Human Resources; Pathways; Portfolio Strategy and Operations; and Student Administration.

Measures of Success

- Evidence of improved data usage, analysis, and insights across ACU
- Number of staff undertaking and completing professional development modules
- Increase in the staff onboarding completion rates
- Development of an Equity and Inclusion Framework
- Number of staff applying for awards and grants
- Increase in funding available to support equity projects and initiatives

3. 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 measure all of the University’s activities and further measures have been identified in the Implementation Roadmap, which will be embedded within the University’s operational plans.

4. 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 that will support the ongoing reporting by organisational units throughout the year.

5. 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 Executive Board (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Governance Model for the Widening Participation Plan

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.