

Equity, Inclusion, Widening Participation: Impact and Evaluation Framework

September 2025

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1. Overview

This evaluation framework defines how the impact of Australian Catholic university's Widening Participation Plan 2023-2033 will be measured and strengthened over time.

The framework provides a structured approach to collecting and using evidence to assess the collective impact across three levels:

- **Program level** – funded programs or projects, or small initiatives.
- **Work area level** – faculty, school, or portfolio-wide contributions.
- **Institutional and sector level** – strategic alignment and sector impact

Grounded in the Student Equity in Higher Education Evaluation Framework (SEHEEF), institutional priorities, and systems thinking, this framework is underpinned by practical tools to guide planning, reflection, implementation, and continuous learning.

FRAMEWORK OBJECTIVES

1. Improve Program Quality

Gather and use evidence to continually strengthen equity and widening participation initiatives, ensuring they respond to student needs and evolving priorities.

2. Promote Learning and Accountability

Support reflective practice, share insights, and build a culture of learning to improve outcomes and remain accountable to our equity goals.

3. Inform Strategic Decisions

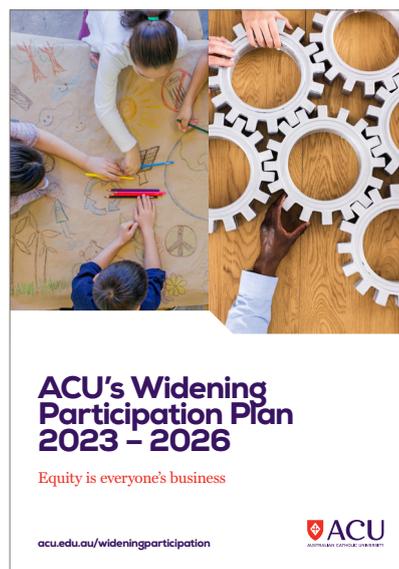
Use evaluation findings to shape planning, align efforts, and allocate resources for long-term impact across the student journey.

4. Build Evaluation Capability

Develop staff skills and confidence to embed evaluative and system thinking into everyday work and contribute meaningfully to equity objectives

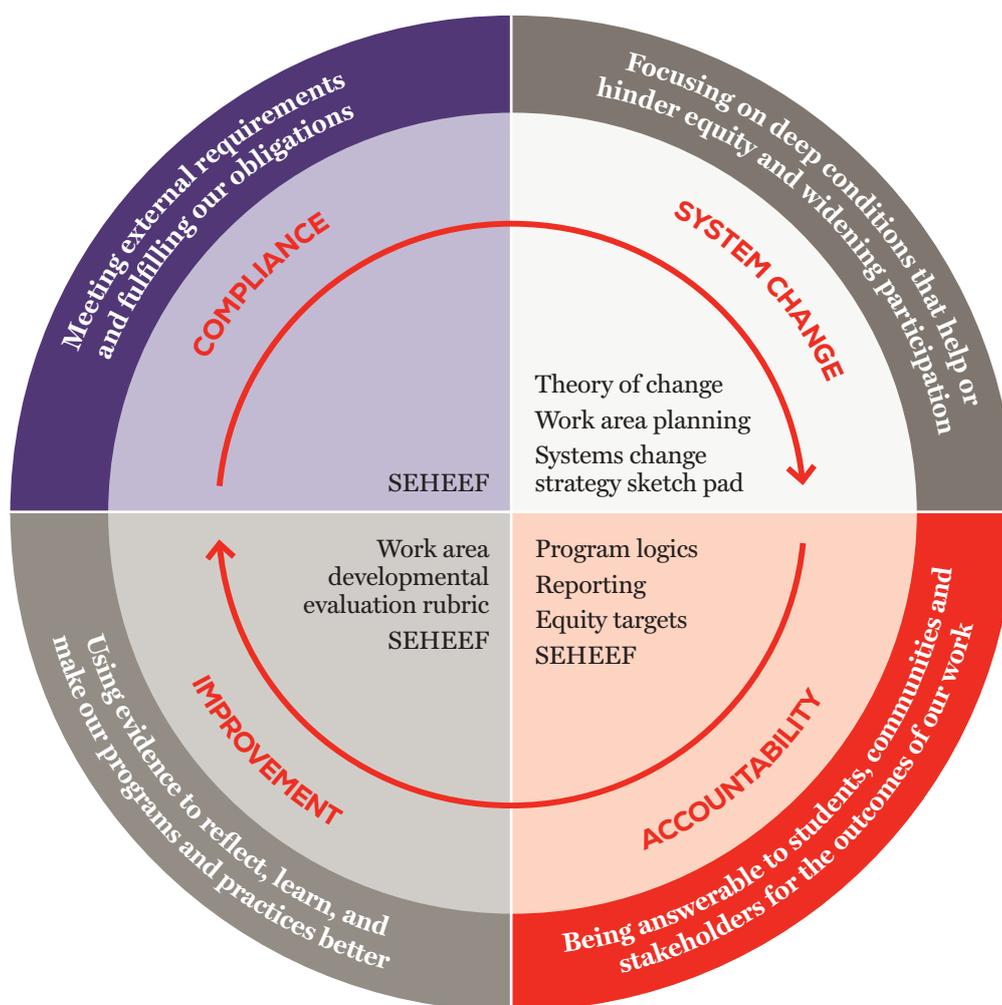
5. Support Systems Change

Take a big picture view to identify and address systemic barriers – driving cultural, structural, and procedural change for a more equitable higher education system



2. Multiple purposes, one goal: Equity

This evaluation framework is purposely designed to balance multiple aims – compliance, accountability, continuous improvement, and systems change – so that no single purpose overshadows ACU’s equity goals. It draws on a coherent set of tools and processes that work together to support learning, decision-making, and the effective implementation of the *Widening Participation Plan 2023-2033*.



3. Theory of change

The evaluation framework is grounded in an overarching theory of change that provides a clear structure of evaluating both the effectiveness of programs and the university's progress towards broader systems change.

STUDENTS Students from underrepresented backgrounds succeed at rates equal to or exceeding the broader cohort			INSTITUTIONAL SYSTEM AND CULTURE A more equitable and inclusive higher education institution				Impact
Improved access, participation, retention, and completion for equity cohorts	Consistently inclusive and supportive student experiences	Greater student engagement and academic achievement	Equity embedded in governance, planning and operations	Structural and cultural barriers reduced	Cross-unit collaboration embedded in practice	Long-term funding and resourcing secured	
STRUCTURAL CHANGES		RELATIONAL CHANGES		TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGES		System outcomes	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduction in procedural and relational barriers (e.g., admissions, financial support, service integration). More targeted, coordinated, and sustainable student support services. Enhanced data capability for evaluation and improvement in institutional capacity to use disaggregated data. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved staff understanding and collaboration on equity priorities. Stronger community and school engagement. Improved student awareness of university pathways and confidence in navigating higher education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Greater institutional awareness and prioritisation of WP. Staff more capable of embedding inclusive, strengths-based practices. Students feel more supported, valued, and a sense of belonging. 	System changes				
STRUCTURAL CHANGE ACTIVITIES	RELATIONAL CHANGE ACTIVITIES	TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE ACTIVITIES		Leverage points for change			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deliver targeted WP and equity programs and initiatives to address access and participation barriers. Reform policies and systems to support inclusive admissions and alternative entry. Embed WP objectives into strategic plans and performance frameworks. Implement the WPP and work area plans. Strengthening support services and inclusive teaching practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthen internal collaboration and shared ownership of equity goals. Co-design and co-deliver outreach and transition initiatives with schools and communities. Enable student voice and leadership through advisory and co-design structures. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deliver equity-focused professional learning. Build leadership capability to shift mindsets and drive system-level change. 					
ASSUMPTIONS			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Equity remains a strategic priority, planning across leadership transitions. Inclusive practices embedded through sustained staff development and accountability through all work areas. WP initiatives are equitably and sustainably resourced, with funding, staff time, and data infrastructure in place. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Internal collaboration and external partnerships are authentic, valued, and drive shared equity goals. Students and equity leaders influence decision making. Leadership for WP is distributed and supported at all levels. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Programs alone are not enough; systemic change is essential for long-term change. Equity is normalised as a shared institutional responsibility. 		
<p>If a university undertakes meaningful transformation to remove structural, cultural and institutional barriers faced by underrepresented students – including those from low SES, First Nations communities, and regional and remote area- and provides targeted equity programs and support, then these students are more likely to access, participate in, and succeed in higher education. This success contributes to a more equitable and inclusive institution in which students from underrepresented backgrounds achieve outcomes at rates equal to or better than the broader cohort.</p>							

4. Driving equity outcomes across the system

The *Widening Participation Plan 2023-2033* generates impact across three interconnected levels: funded equity programs, organisational work areas, and broader institutional and sector goals. Through its evaluation framework, the University captures evidence of how these efforts contribute to equitable student outcomes, inform strategic decision-making, and advance national equity and inclusion priorities.

THREE INTERCONNECTED LEVELS			EVIDENCE
3	SECTOR AND INSTITUTIONAL IMPACT	Educational parity Vision 2033	National performance data
2	WIDENING PARTICIPATION PLAN AREA PLANNING	9 Outcomes Shifts in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policies • Practices • Resource flows • Relationships & Connections • Power dynamics • Mental models 	Institutional performance data
			Organisational practice data
1	EQUITY FUNDED PROGRAMS, PROJECTS AND INITIATIVES	Reach and delivery Outcomes	Program evaluations
			Equity data
			Students experience data
			Organisational practice data
			Equity funding and infrastructure data
			Work area plan review
			Work area developmental evaluation rubric
			SEHEEF
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuous Quality Improvement Evaluation • Quantitative Impact Evaluation • Theory-based Impact Evaluation
			Progress and evaluation reports

5. Shifting the system

The evaluation framework sustains momentum for the *Widening Participation Plan 2023-2033* by supporting staff to work collaboratively across the student lifecycle to transform institutional systems and cultures that sustain inequity.

Grounded in *The Water of Systems Change*, the framework identifies key system shifts needed for lasting change. Applying a systems lens not only helps track progress toward a more inclusive and equitable institution – it will also surface critical barriers that limit the impact of programs, projects, initiatives and strategies.

Progress will be assessed through regular reviews of Work Area Plans, using a developmental evaluation rubric to capture evidence of change across teams and functions.

SYSTEM SHIFTS	DEFINITION	WHAT THIS MIGHT LOOK LIKE
Policies:	Government, institutional and organisational rules, regulations, and priorities that guide the entity's own and others' actions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Equity embedded in strategic plan Equity impact assessments for new policies Admissions and outreach aligned with equity goals
Practices:	Espoused activities of institutions, coalitions, networks, and other entities targeted to improving social and environmental progress. Also, within the entity, the procedures, guidelines, or informal shared habits that comprise their work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Co-designed equity programs Inclusive teaching practices Built-in equity evaluation in planning
Resource Flows:	How money, people, knowledge, information, and other assets such as infrastructure are allocated and distributed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dedicated equity funding and staff Access to infrastructure for remote students Shared data and capacity building
Relationships & Connections:	Quality of connections and communication occurring among actors in the system, especially among those with differing histories and viewpoints.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cross-unit equity working groups Strong school and community partnerships Student voice in program design
Power Dynamics:	The distribution of decision-making power, authority, and both formal and informal influence among individuals and organisations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Equity reps on decision-making bodies Equity leads in senior roles Inclusive governance structures
Mental Models:	Habits of thought – deeply held beliefs and assumptions and taken-for-granted ways of operating that influence how we think, what we do, and how we talk.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Challenging deficit thinking Equity in staff development Normalising structural equity narratives

6. Evaluation questions

Evaluation questions are designed to test core assumptions, assess progress across structural, relational and transformative domains, and guide continuous improvement.

INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL QUESTIONS	PROGRAM LEVEL QUESTIONS
3. SECTOR AND INSTITUTIONAL IMPACT	
Systems impact: To what extent are equity and widening participation strategies contributing to institutional transformation and student equity outcomes?	
Q1: How well are equity and widening participation strategies embedded in institutional planning and aligned with Vision 2033 and national priorities?	
Q2: How effectively are these strategies driving change and contributing to students, community, and system-level outcomes?	
2. WIDENING PARTICIPATION PLAN (WHOLE-OF-INSTITUTION LEVEL)	
Outcomes	System shifts
Student outcomes: What evidence shows improved experiences, outcomes, and belonging for students from equity backgrounds?	
Systems change: How have institutional systems, structures, relationships and mindsets shifted to embed equity?	Systems to maintain or change: What institutional or systemic factors are enabling or constraining program, project, or initiative outcomes?
1. EQUITY FUNDED PROGRAMS, PROJECTS AND INITIATIVES	
Reach, delivery, outcomes	
Program impact: How, and to what extent are targeted equity programs improving access, participation and success for students from underrepresented backgrounds?	Systemic barriers being addressed: To what extent is the program, project, or initiative addressing structural, relationship, or transformative barriers to student access, retention, or success?

7. Translating evaluation into action: Reporting insights across three levels

Changing systems is gradual and often non-linear. Annual reporting is designed as a structured, reflective process -guided by evaluation questions and grounded in evidence, insight and dialogue.

It captures progress towards equity goals, identifies system-level barriers and enablers, and informs learning, accountability and strategic decision making across the university.

3. SECTOR AND INSTITUTIONAL IMPACT

Insights will include:

- Alignment of equity strategies and Vision 2033 and national goals
- Institutional progress towards systemic equity transformation
- Contribution of equity work to broader sectoral change
- Strategic priorities for investment and leadership attention

2. WIDENING PARTICIPATION PLAN (WHOLE-OF-INSTITUTION LEVEL)

Insights will include:

- Student experiences of inclusion, belonging, and success
- Progress in shifting systems, structures, relationships, and mindsets
- Enablers and barriers affecting the impact of strategies
- Cross-unit trends and areas for collective action

1. EQUITY PROGRAMS, PROJECTS AND INITIATIVES

Insights will include:

- Evidence of reach, participation, and outcomes for students from underrepresented backgrounds
- Program strengths and challenges
- What's working to address structural and relational barriers
- Lessons to inform future program design and delivery

8. Annual monitoring and evaluation cycle

The cycle provides a practical, collaborative approach to tracking progress, generating insights, supporting continuous improvement, and shared accountability. It is designed to suit current resources and capacity, using low-cost tools that embed evaluation and systems thinking into routine practices.

As capacity and resources grow, the approach can be scaled to support more comprehensive data collection and deeper forms of evaluation – strengthening institutional learning and systems change.

PHASE	TIMING	LED BY	FOCUS AND KEY ACTIVITIES	
1	Monitoring & Activity Logging	Ongoing (Quarterly)	Work Area & Program teams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Track activity and outputs Gather student and stakeholder feedback Log partnerships, engagement, and service reach
2	Self-Assessment & Work Area Reporting	August (Mid Q3)	Work Area & Program teams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use the WAP Rubric to assess progress across six domains Submit updated Work Area Plans outlining current stage of development, key activities, the problem or need being addressed, intended outcomes, underlying assumptions, contribution to strategic goals, relevant system domains, engaged, roles and responsibilities, indicators, data sources, and lessons learned
3	Synthesis & Meta-Evaluation	September–October (Late Q3–Early Q4)	Equity & Inclusion Lead	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review all Work Area Plans and rubric self-assessments. Conduct consistency checks using the rubric Identify patterns, contributions, and gaps Produce synthesis report and recommendations
4	Governance & Strategic Dialogue	October (Early Q4)	Equity & WP Plan Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review synthesis findings Reflect on institutional progress and barriers Identify cross-unit learning and opportunities for systems change
5	Planning & Capacity Building	October – November (Mid-Q4)	Equity & Inclusion Lead + Teams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use feedback to provide targeted support and coaching Refresh Work Area Plans and evaluation priorities Optional: Convene communities of practice to share learning

9. Appendix: Developmental evaluation rubric

Transformational change begins with collaborative, critical reflection on what is shifting – and what remains resistant – within systems. The developmental evaluation rubric provides a share language and framework for assessing progress towards equity.

It enables work areas to self-assess their contribution to systems change and equity goals, while also offering the University a structured lens to evaluate collective progress at the institutional level.

STREAMLINED VERSION				
Key areas of change	Emerging Minimal or fragmented efforts; equity & WP is not structurally embedded.	Developing Some progress in embedding equity & WP, but efforts remain inconsistent or siloed.	Established Equity & WP are integrated into structures, but continuous improvement is needed.	Transformational Equity & WP are fully embedded, sustained, and driving systemic cultural change.
STRUCTURAL CHANGE				
Policies: Structural alignment and institutional commitment	Equity and WP considerations appear in some policies, or separate WP policies exist but are peripheral or compliance driven. There is limited awareness of how broader institutional policies impact equity. No clear accountability mechanisms.	Some institutional policies (e.g. admissions, student support) incorporate equity principles, but application is inconsistent across faculties and work areas. Accountability mechanisms are limited.	Equity and WP principles are embedded within key strategic and operational policies across the institution. Policies are regularly reviewed for inclusivity. Clear accountability structures ensure implementation.	Equity and WP are central to all university policies and governance. Ongoing policy development and review are supported by strong accountability. Equity and WP drive planning, decision-making, and program design.
Practices: Embedding equity in core practices across services, teaching, and student support.	Equity-focused practices are ad hoc and often rely on individual staff commitment. There is limited training or support to build staff capability in equity and inclusion.	Some faculties, services, and operational areas implement inclusive practices, but these are not consistent. Equity-related professional development exists but is not embedded or required.	Inclusive practices are embedded across teaching, student support, and operational areas. Equity focused professional development is widely accessible and integrated into staff development and performance expectations. Institutional systems reflect a commitment to equity-informed practice.	Equity and WP are embedded in all aspects of teaching, service delivery, operations, and decision-making. All staff are trained, supported, and expected to apply inclusive practices. Equity principles shape everyday practices, systems, and cultures across the institution.

Resource flows: Sustainability and strategic investment in WP initiatives	Equity and WP funding is sporadic and reliant on short-term external grants. There is limited dedicated resourcing and little shared understanding of how equity funding should be prioritised.	Some investment exists, but resource allocation is inconsistent. Strategic functions enabling institution-wide equity engagement are not well supported. Recognition of the need to align funding with purpose is emerging.	Dedicated equity and WP funding streams are in place, with consistent investment in student support, professional learning, and strategic functions. Resources are aligned with strategy, regularly reviewed, and supported by clear accountability and transparent reporting.	Equity and WP are resourced through core budgets and planning cycles. Funding is proportional to need and supports institution-wide systems change. Allocation is transparent, strategic, accountable, and continually reviewed to drive sustainable impact.
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RELATIONAL CHANGE

Relationships & Connections: Collaboration within and beyond the university	Equity and WP efforts are siloed, with minimal collaboration between work areas or with external partners.	Some collaboration exists internally and with WP teams, but it is inconsistent and lacks strategic coordination. Partnerships with schools, communities, and industry are often transactional. Shared responsibility for equity is emerging.	Work areas collaborate across the institution and with equity and WP teams to support equity goals. Strong partnerships with external stakeholders are well established and support both student engagement and transitions. Strategic alignment is increasing.	Equity and WP are shared responsibilities. All work areas engage in coordinated collaboration internally and externally. Long-term partnerships with schools, communities, and industry drive systemic and sustained impact.
Power dynamics: Inclusion of students from underrepresented backgrounds and staff with equity expertise and/or lived experience in decision making	Students from underrepresented backgrounds and staff with equity expertise or lived experience have little or no presence in decision-making. Equity and WP initiatives are developed without meaningful input.	Some advisory roles or consultations include students and staff with equity experience, but participation is inconsistent, and influence is limited.	Students and staff with equity expertise or lived experience are consistently represented on governance, policy, and program committees. Structures support their involvement, and their perspectives begin to shape key decisions.	Students and staff with equity expertise or lived experience are embedded across governance and decision-making structures. Their contributions demonstrably influence institutional policies, funding, and strategy. Their input shape inclusive leadership and drives cultural change.

TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE

Mental models: Embedding institutional learning practices that surface, and challenge deeply held beliefs and cultural norms contributing to persistent disparities	There is limited awareness of how assumptions, beliefs, or norms influence equity outcomes. Equity is primarily framed through individual, not systems, lenses. Structural, cultural, and belief-based change is not prioritised.	There is growing recognition that beliefs and assumptions share student experiences. Reflective learning practices are emerging (e.g., professional development), but they are not yet embedded or widespread.	The institution demonstrates commitment to critical reflection. Structures such as communities of practice and evaluation processes support ongoing examination of beliefs. Mental models are increasingly recognised as central to systems change.	Reflectivity and critical inquiry into mental models are embedded in decision-making, policy, and practice. Deep assumptions about merit, capability, and deficit thinking are actively challenged, resulting in visible shifts in leadership, culture, and inclusive practice.
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NUANCED VERSION

Key areas of change	Emerging Minimal or fragmented efforts; equity and WP is not structurally embedded.	Developing Some progress in embedding equity and WP, but efforts remain inconsistent or siloed.	Established Equity and WP is integrated into structures, but continuous improvement is needed.	Transformational Equity and WP is fully embedded, sustained, and driving systemic cultural change.
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STRUCTURAL CHANGE

Policies: Structural alignment and institutional commitment	Equity and WP considerations appear in some policies, or separate WP policies exist but are peripheral or compliance driven. There is limited awareness of how broader institutional policies impact equity. No clear accountability mechanisms.	Some institutional policies (e.g. admissions, student support) incorporate equity principles, but application is inconsistent across faculties and work areas. Accountability mechanisms are limited.	Equity and WP principles are embedded within key strategic and operational policies across the institution. Policies are regularly reviewed for inclusivity. Clear accountability structures ensure implementation.	Equity and WP are central to all university policies and governance. Ongoing policy development and review are supported by strong accountability. Equity and WP drive planning, decision-making, and program design.
Practices: Embedding equity in core practices across services, teaching, and student support.	Equity and WP considerations appear in some policies or separate WP policies exist but are peripheral or compliance driven. There is limited awareness of how broader institutional policies may impact equity. No clear institutional accountability mechanisms.	Some institutional policies (e.g. admissions, student support) incorporate equity principles, but application is inconsistent across faculties or work areas. Limited accountability measures.	Equity and WP principles are embedded within key strategic and operational policies and operational frameworks across the institution. Policies are regularly reviewed for inclusivity. Clear accountability structures ensure implementation across the institution.	Equity and WP are central to all university policies and governance, with continuous development, review mechanisms and strong institutional accountability. Equity and WP are core drivers of planning and decision-making and are reflected in both systemic policy frameworks and program design.
Resource flows: Sustainability and strategic investment in Equity and Widening Participation	Equity and WP funding is sporadic and dependent on short-term external grants. Limited dedicated resources. Little shared understanding of how equity funding should be prioritised or aligned with institutional equity goals.	Some investment in equity and WP programs, but resource allocation is inconsistent, and support for strategic functions that enable institution-wide engagement remains ad hoc or emerging. There is growing recognition of the need to align funding with purpose, and ensure resources support access, participation, and success.	Dedicated equity and WP funding streams are in place, with consistent investment in student support, professional learning, and strategic functions that enable whole-of-institution engagement and embedding of equity into core operations. Resource use is aligned with strategy, reviewed for impact, and guided by shared responsibility. Accountability mechanisms and transparent reporting processes support effective and equitable use of resources.	Equity and WP funding is embedded in core budgets and planning cycles. Equity work is resourced proportionally to need, with sustained investment in strategic functions that drive system-level change, enable whole-of-university engagement, and embed equity into core operations and culture. Resource allocation is transparent, strategically aligned, accountable, and continually reviewed to drive systemic and sustainable change.

RELATIONAL CHANGE

<p>Relationships & Connections: Collaboration within and beyond the university</p>	<p>Equity and WP efforts are siloed, with minimal collaboration between work areas, and external partners.</p>	<p>Some collaboration exists between work areas, and with equity and WP teams, but it is not consistent or strategically coordinated. Partnerships with schools, communities, and industry remain inconsistent or transactional. Shared responsibility for equity outcomes is emerging.</p>	<p>Work areas collaborate across the university and with equity and WP teams to support equity goals, Faculties and student services work in alignment. Strong partnerships with external stakeholder's support both student engagement and student transitions. Increasing strategic alignment guided by shared goals.</p>	<p>Equity and WP is a shared responsibility across the institution. All work areas engage in strategic, coordinated, collaboration with one another and with equity and WP teams. Long-term partnerships with schools, communities, and industries drive systemic and sustained impact.</p>
<p>Power dynamics: Inclusion of students from underrepresented backgrounds and staff with equity expertise and/or lived experience in decision making</p>	<p>Students from underrepresented backgrounds and staff with equity expertise and/or lived experience have little or no presence in decision-making forums. Equity and WP initiatives are proceed without meaningful input from those with lived experience or practitioner knowledge.</p>	<p>Some advisory roles or consultation processes include students from underrepresented backgrounds and staff with equity expertise and/or lived experience, however participation is inconsistent and influence on decisions is limited.</p>	<p>Students from underrepresented backgrounds and staff with equity expertise and/or lived experience are consistently represented on governance, policy, and program committees. Institutional structures support their involvement, and their perspectives begin to inform key equity and WP policies and initiatives.</p>	<p>Students from underrepresented backgrounds and staff with equity expertise and/or lived experience are embedded across governance and decision-making structures, with demonstrable influence on institutional policies, funding, and strategic direction. Their contributions are recognised as essential to inclusive leadership, shaping cultural change and institutional effectiveness and outcomes.</p>

TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE

<p>Mental models: Embedding institutional learning practices that surface and challenge deeply held beliefs and cultural norms contributing to persistent disparities</p>	<p>Limited awareness of how assumptions, beliefs, or norms influence equity outcomes. Mental models are largely unexamined, and equity work is primarily framed through individual rather than systems lenses. Structural, cultural, and belief-based change is not widely discussed or prioritised.</p>	<p>Some recognition that institutional beliefs and assumptions shape student experiences and outcomes. Initial efforts, such as reflective professional learning are underway to build staff understanding of mental models and cultural biases, however these practices are not yet widespread or embedded.</p>	<p>Institutional commitment to critical reflection and development is evident. Structures (e.g., communities of practice, evaluation processes, equity-informed teaching practices) support ongoing examination of beliefs and assumptions. Mental models are seen as central to systems change work, and these conversations are increasingly normalised.</p>	<p>Reflexivity and critical inquiry into mental models are embedded in institutional decision-making, policy, and practice. Equity is understood as requiring cultural and structural transformation. Deep assumptions about merit, capability and deficit thinking, are actively challenged leading to visible shifts in institutional culture, leadership narratives, and inclusive practices.</p>
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**EQUITY, INCLUSION,
WIDENING PARTICIPATION:
IMPACT AND EVALUATION
FRAMEWORK**

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