

## EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND TRAINING

### SENATE LEGISLATION COMMITTEE - QUESTIONS ON NOTICE 2003-2004 BUDGET ESTIMATES HEARING

**Outcome:** 2  
**Output Group:** 2.4 – Funding for higher education

#### **DEST Question No. E304\_04**

Senator Harradine asked on 5 June 2003

#### **Question:**

There were a number of measures announced by the Minister in the *Our Universities [Backing Australia's Future]* plan to assist students from under-represented backgrounds to participate in higher education. These are, I understand, measures which require the potential student to seek assistance. What is the Department doing to reach out to and to engage potential students from disadvantaged backgrounds?

#### **Answer:**

##### *Engaging Potential Students from Disadvantaged Backgrounds*

The Commonwealth has a continuing commitment to promote equity in higher education. Institutions receiving funds under the *Higher Education Funding Act 1988* have an obligation to support equity of access and will continue to do so under the new Commonwealth Grants Scheme.

The Commonwealth monitors the achievement of equity objectives by institutions and provides funding for equity initiatives through the Higher Education Equity Program (HEEP) and the Indigenous Support Funding (ISF) component of base operating grant. However, institutions determine the strategies they will use to reach out to and engage disadvantaged students.

Some of the strategies employed by institutions to meet their equity objectives include:

- the provision of flexible admission and support for students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds;
- outreach activities, ranging from the provision of information kits to liaison with schools, the provision of 'taster' programs and the organisation of comprehensive on-campus university experiences;
- orientation, mentoring and buddy schemes to ensure that students from equity groups have the skills, confidence, networks and support to complete their studies;
- scholarships, bursaries, loans and other assistance for those experiencing financial hardship.

From 2005, HEEP funds will be increased by \$2.3m pa (from \$6m in 2003), the funding allocation method will be based solely on performance and institutions will be required to meet minimum eligibility criteria in order to receive HEEP funds. The criteria will require institutions to:

- run an outreach program to attract equity group members to higher education;
- offer specialised support for equity group members to assist their progression through higher education;
- offer Commonwealth Learning Scholarships; and
- offer institutional equity scholarships.

HEEP also supports the network of Regional Disability Liaison Officers hosted by universities in ten regions of Australia. Their role is to help facilitate the transition of students with disabilities from school to higher education or vocational education and training, and from study to work. The network has been extended with the establishment of the Disability Coordination Officer Program, which commenced in 2002.

Institutions may claim funds under the Additional Support for Students with Disabilities Program to assist with the costs of providing educational support and/or equipment for students with disabilities. From 2005, annual funding for this program will increase by \$1.1m (\$3m in 2003).

Higher education enabling courses are intended to assist students from disadvantaged groups who do not have the academic preparation to enrol directly in award courses to undertake award level study. Enabling courses are HECS exempt.

As part of the higher education reform package, Commonwealth Learning Scholarships will be introduced from 2004 to assist students from low socio-economic status backgrounds, Indigenous students and students from rural and isolated areas to participate in higher education. There will be two scholarships – one for educational costs and one for accommodation costs.

A number of initiatives targeted to improving Indigenous participation in higher education were announced as part of the higher education reform package:

- the amount of funding through ISF will be increased by a total of \$10.4m over three years from 2005 to 2007;
- an Indigenous Staff Scholarships program will be established for Indigenous staff in universities to study full-time for one year; and
- an Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council will be established, to commence operations in the second half of 2003, and will provide advice to the Minister and the Department.