Division of Societal
Impact, Equity & Engagement
– Student Equity

UNSW SYDNEY

Widening Participation Theory of Change

The case for action

Students from educationally and socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are persistently underrepresented at university in Australia and at UNSW.

In 2024, the Australian Universities Accord recommended "parity representation" for First Nations people, people from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, people with disability, and people from regional, rural and remote communities by 2050 (Department of Education, 2024a). Falling short of the national target of 20% low-SES participation set for 2020 by the Bradley Review (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008), in 2023 the proportion of undergraduate students from low-SES backgrounds at Australian universities was only 16.7% (Department of Education, 2024b). Moreover, in 2023 low-SES students comprised only 8.7% of Group of Eight (Go8) undergraduate enrolments, with UNSW reaching just 7.8% (Figure 1). This data demonstrates that the Australian higher education system has both vertical inequity, whereby students from lower socio-economic backgrounds participate at lower rates, and horizontal inequity, whereby students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to access elite institutions and the associated educational and career outcomes (Czarnecki, 2018).

Even when access to higher education is achieved, students from low-SES backgrounds are more likely to drop out within the first two years of study (Edwards & McMillan, 2015). Further, graduates from underrepresented backgrounds may be less likely to find full-time employment and tend to earn less compared to their high-SES counterparts (Carroll & Li, 2022). These figures necessitate action. In particular, a whole-of-student-lifecycle approach is required, which supports students to access university, to succeed and to transition out of university to graduate employment.

A "pipeline of privilege"

Australia has one of the most socially segregated schooling systems among high-income countries (OECD, 2018). Such disparities in the Australian school system can result in vastly different educational opportunities and experiences available to students of different backgrounds. Disparities in educational opportunity often translate into disparities in educational attainment, perpetuating a "pipeline of privilege" which further advantages students from more privileged backgrounds, while precluding the possibility of university for many young people
(Harvey et al., 2016; Greenwell & Bonner, 2022).

To make matters worse, social segregation in the Australian schooling system has increased since the COVID-19 pandemic, with significant numbers of parents/caregivers moving their children to attend the wealthier independent and Catholic schools (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Without change, higher education will continue to be a space that endorses the potential of students based primarily on their social background (Bunn et al., 2020).

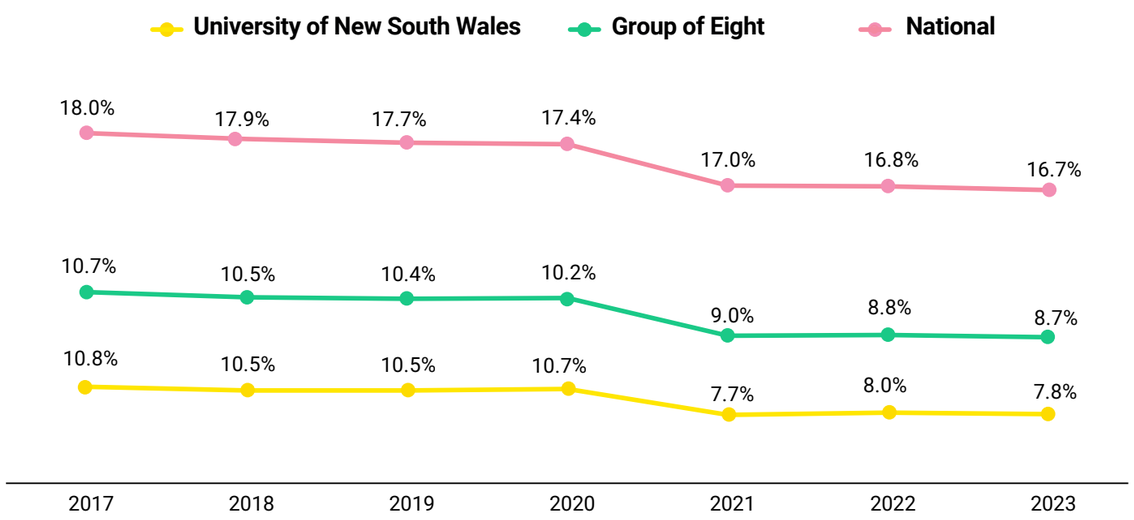


Figure 1. Participation rates of students from low-SES backgrounds nationally, at Go8 universities and UNSW 2017 – 2023 (rates in the years 2021 – 2023 drawn on 2021 census data). From Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success, 2025.

ATAR: the primary barrier

The primary barrier to a university education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds in Australia is academic attainment in secondary school, measured by the ATAR or equivalent (Gale & Parker, 2013). Consequently, students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds may be less likely to gain university entry, particularly to elite institutions, such as the Go8, with more competitive ATAR entry requirements.

Because it is sensitive to the effects of opportunity, the ATAR is a flawed measure of students' potential to succeed at university. In fact, concerns that increased enrolments of students from disadvantaged backgrounds leads to declining academic standards have proven unfounded (Pitman et al., 2015). Evidence is mounting that once at university, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are performing on par, if not outperforming their more advantaged peers (Harvey & Burnheim, 2013), suggesting that the ATAR tends to inflate the academic potential of students from higher SES backgrounds to the exclusion of students with just as much potential from less privileged backgrounds (Li & Dockery, 2014).

The benefits of a university education

Because university provides critical opportunities for personal and intellectual development (Kromydas, 2017) access should be distributed more fairly on social justice grounds alone (Gale & Tranter, 2011). University also provides the basis for achieving significant individual socioeconomic advancement and intergenerational mobility and therefore plays a crucial role in levelling the socioeconomic playing field (Daly et al., 2015).

Across OECD countries (including Australia), full-time workers with a higher education qualification earn on average around 50% more than those with only secondary school attainment (OECD, 2022). According to one Australian study, the financial premium of attaining a bachelor qualification over a lifetime is $1.1 million for male graduates, and $800,000 for female graduates (Norton, 2012). This financial inequality is exacerbated by the fact that students from low-SES backgrounds remain under-represented in fields of study that lead to careers with the highest private financial return (Cakitaki et al., 2022). Given that a university education will be required to be eligible for many jobs in the foreseeable future, without improving university access and graduation rates for underrepresented students, there is a risk that the economic gap between those with and without a university education will widen further (Productivity Commission, 2022).

Impact statement

We aim to increase access to university and UNSW for under-represented students and ensure they are set up to succeed once at university.

Theory of change

Our work in widening participation is guided by a tailored theory of change that articulates the impact we aim to achieve. It identifies four evidence-based mechanisms—the map, compass, key and guide—which are described in detail on pages 7 & 8.

Complementing this are nested theories of change that set out the assumptions and conditions required for each outcome to be realised.

The map

Improving students' understanding of university to aid informed decision-making about post-school options

The compass

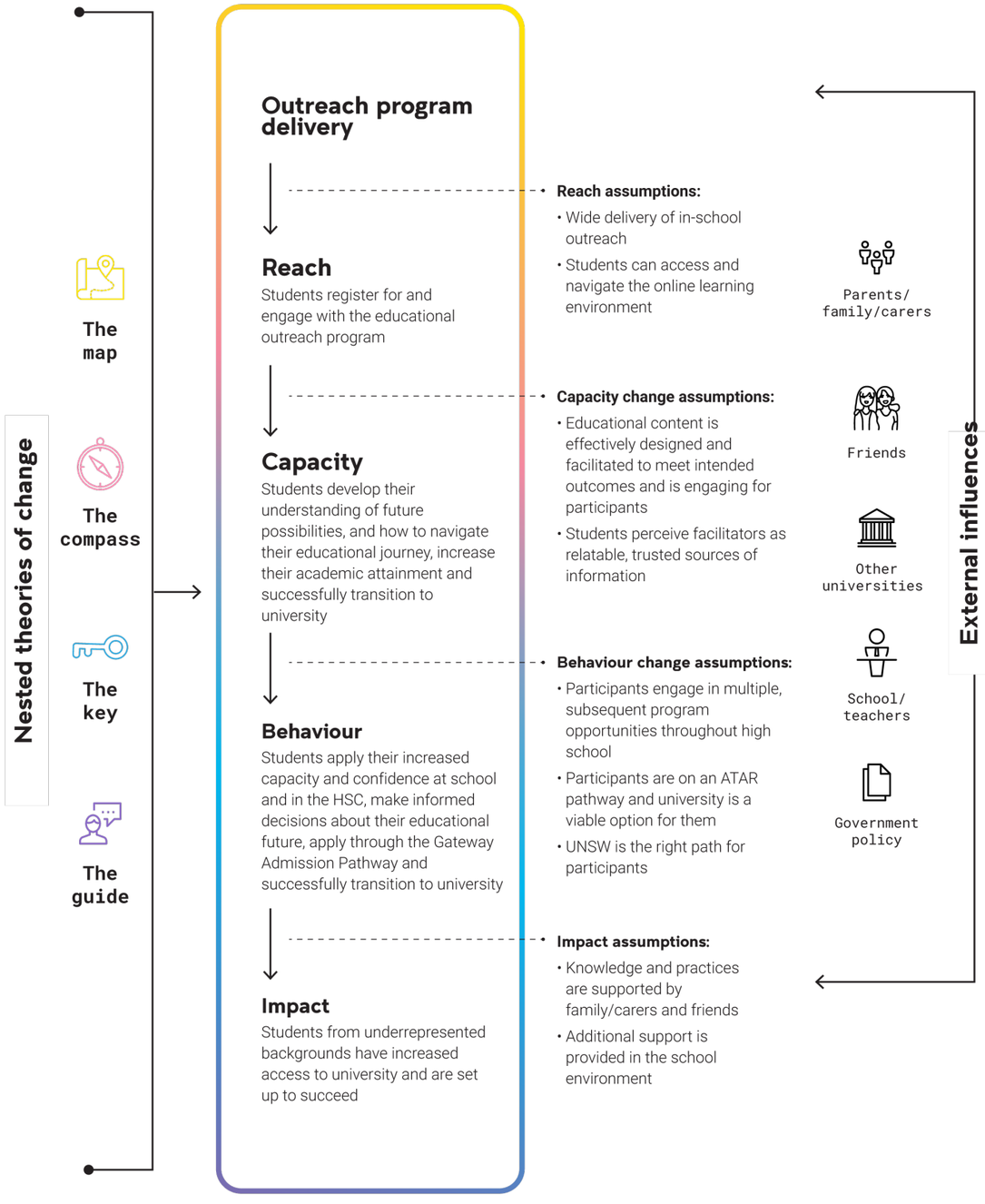
Enhancing students' learner identity and confidence to successfully navigate their educational journey

The key

Enhancing students' academic attainment and reducing barriers to entry for expanded post-school study options

The guide

Providing students with trusted information from current university students from equity backgrounds



The map: possibilities

Unlike their more advantaged counterparts, students from disadvantaged backgrounds may not have access to accurate knowledge about higher education in their social networks (Andrews, 1999; Harvey-Beavis & Robinson, 2000; Young, 2004). Many of these students will be the first in their families to go to university, which makes it difficult to obtain first-hand insights and leaves them feeling less equipped to make decisions about their post-school futures (O'Shea et al., 2024). Further, a lack of first-hand information may lead to difficulties adapting to university life, academic culture, and connecting with students and staff (Fleming & Grace, 2014; McKay & Devlin, 2014).

By providing a reliable source of information about further education and career possibilities, we will support students to make informed decisions, increase motivation and perceptions of control, and reduce uncertainty surrounding transition to university.

The key: academic attainment

Academic attainment in high school represents the primary barrier to higher education for underrepresented students (Gale & Parker, 2013). By providing educational opportunities to students that may not otherwise have access, we aim to enhance educational outcomes so that a range of tertiary study options are available to them.

In addition, we acknowledge that the ATAR is not the only measure of a student's potential to succeed at university. By providing an alternative pathway to UNSW with a reduced ATAR requirement, we make UNSW more accessible to students with the potential to succeed.

The compass: navigational capacity

The development of a positive learner identity is an important contributor to success in secondary school, higher education and for lifelong learning. A positive learner identity refers to how students perceive themselves as learners, including their beliefs, attitudes, and self-concept in relation to their academic abilities, their understanding of their learning strengths and weaknesses and of the curiosities, passions and interests that motivate them to learn (MacFarlane, 2018). Students with a strong learner identity are motivated, resilient, confident in their skills, and engaged in their learning which leads to positive educational outcomes and a strong sense of belonging at university (Lawson, 2014; Bliuc et al., 2011). The development of a positive learner identity is strongly influenced by academic and social contexts, meaning that students from disadvantaged backgrounds may experience greater challenges in developing and maintaining positive learner identities when they have fewer opportunities to positively experience educational settings and learning success (Verhoeven et al., 2019; Lawson, 2014).

By supporting students to build a positive learner identity, we will provide them with the tools to successfully navigate their education journey and build confidence, motivation and a sense of belonging in higher education settings.

The guide: university ambassadors

University Ambassadors act as a trusted and reliable source of information for students who can identify with them (Austin & Hatt, 2005). They act as a critical source of 'hot' knowledge, in contrast to 'colder' information resources such as websites or brochures (Slack et al. 2012). In addition to being a trusted source of information, University Ambassadors can support students to develop a positive learner identity, spark curiosity in specific academic areas, and expand students' thinking about the future through modelling their own education journey (Cupitt et al., 2015). By engaging current university students from equity backgrounds to facilitate our programs and provide authentic information, we aim to provide information that can be trusted by students and support them to see themselves at university.

Nested theories of change

The Map

Engagement

Capacity

- Students develop their knowledge of available degrees and the opportunities and benefits of higher education
- Students develop an understanding of what studying at university is like and the expectations of university
- Students develop an understanding of how to apply for the Gateway Admission Pathway and what makes a good personal statement
- Students feel confident that they can access university and their desired degree and achieve their educational goals

Capacity change assumptions

- Effective collaboration with internal and external partners produces engaging, clear, non-overlapping and well-aligned content

Behaviour

- Students choose post-school options that suit their learning strengths, interests, values and career goals
- Students write strong early offer applications
- Students successfully transition to university

Behaviour change assumptions

- Students understand why the information being provided is important and don't already have the information
- The information presented is relevant to the interests, values and goals of the students
- The options presented are accessible and achievable for students
- Students are not limited in making decisions by non-informational barriers, such as financial barriers
- Students are adequately supported as they transition to university

The Compass

Engagement

Capacity

- Students develop their understanding of their learner identity and how it links with higher education and career options
- Students develop their ability to write about and present themselves persuasively and with confidence
- Students can make informed decisions about their future and begin to map out their personal path from school to higher education to career
- Students develop a sense of belonging at university and at UNSW and identify as a future university student

Capacity change assumptions

- Students see University Ambassadors as relatable and relevant and see themselves in their stories
- Facilitators are welcoming and demonstrate understanding of and care for the experiences of and barriers faced by students from underrepresented backgrounds

Behaviour

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Behaviour change assumptions

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The Key

Engagement

Capacity

- Students develop their motivation for HSC success
- Students develop study strategies to support their HSC performance
- Students feel less stressed and more confident about their HSC

Capacity change assumptions

- HSC support is delivered by experienced HSC teachers and is pitched at the right level

Behaviour

- Students apply new knowledge and strategies to achieve increased attainment at school and achieve their required adjusted ATAR
- Students apply new knowledge and strategies for study at university

Behaviour change assumptions

- Students are on an ATAR pathway
- Students have access to additional HSC support in and outside of school
- Students are accepted to university

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gateway.unsw.edu.au

unswgateway@unsw.edu.au

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