



Professor Andrew Parfitt FTSE, FRSN, FIEAust
Vice-Chancellor and President
Chancellery
15 Broadway, Ultimo NSW 2007

T: +61 2 9514 1333
Andrew.Parfitt@uts.edu.au

PO Box 123
Broadway
NSW 2007 Australia
www.uts.edu.au

UTS CRICOS PROVIDER CODE 00099F

12 June 2026

Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Education
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
By email: edu.reps@aph.gov.au

Dear Secretary

RE: Inquiry into the factors driving educational attainment

The University of Technology Sydney (UTS) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry into the factors driving educational attainment.

Our response is covered in **Attachment A**.

Additionally, we commend to the Committee the submissions of:

- Mr Luke Sheehy, Chief Executive Officer, Universities Australia
- Professor Sally Cripps (UTS Human Technology Institute), Professor Rebekah Grace (WSU), and Dr Gilad Francis (UTS Human Technology Institute) of *Thrive: Finishing School Well*, working in partnership with the NSW Department of Education, and
- Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Association, authored by Sonal Singh, Head of Equity at UTS.

Should you have any questions regarding this submission then please contact Professor Kylie Readman, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) (kylie.readman@uts.edu.au).

Professor Andrew Parfitt
Vice-Chancellor and President

Attachment: UTS response to the House Standing Committee on Education Inquiry into Factors Driving Educational Attainment

The University of Technology Sydney (UTS) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry into the factors driving educational attainment.

The broad private and social benefits of educational attainment are well recognised. These extend beyond the graduates themselves to their immediate and extended family members, as well as the wider communities they serve, highlighting the urgency of strengthening equitable access to higher education to meet both social and economic imperatives.

Recognising this challenge, the recent Australian Universities Accord review proposed ambitious growth targets to increase the number of places in the tertiary education system to meet Australia's skills needs, including lifting the tertiary attainment rate of all working age people (with at least one Certificate III qualification or higher) from 60% currently to at least 80% by 2050. The Accord review also noted that raising tertiary education attainment to these levels will only be achieved by making the higher education system far more equitable to underrepresented cohorts (such as First Nations people, people with low socioeconomic backgrounds, people with disability, and people from regional, rural and remote communities).

The Australian Government responded with a range of measures, including the *Support for Students Policy* introduced in November 2023, which requires universities to provide 'appropriate, sufficient and effective' services and supports to students at risk of not completing their studies. UTS readily adopted this policy framework, aligning it with existing student support systems and reporting annually on its implementation and effectiveness.

Based on data collected by the Australian Department of Education, UTS is pleased to report that our attrition and retention levels are third best in NSW (after the University of Sydney and the University of NSW), however we lead on success in the state, coming second nationally behind Monash University. In this data set, success is defined as the ratio of the equivalent full-time student load (EFTSL) of units passed compared with the EFTSL of units attempted.

A student-centred university

UTS's commitment to being a student-centred university, as outlined in our UTS 2030 strategy, directly supports improved participation, completion and attainment outcomes. By prioritising a high-quality, inclusive student experience, UTS seeks to create a dynamic atmosphere that fosters innovation and creativity, encourages collaboration, and enhances the learning environment so that everyone can contribute and thrive. UTS's approach is articulated through our Student Experience Framework which identifies academic engagement, belonging, wellbeing and partnership as critical enablers of success.

Identifying students at risk

Building on the Student Experience Framework, and in alignment with the expectations of the *Support for Students Policy*, UTS employs a range of measures to support our students in their studies and proactively seeks to identify students at risk of not completing one or more units of study.

For example, we identify students who have not engaged with the learning management system (LMS) by Week 2 of session for a pre-census intervention. Our modelling shows that non-engagement with the LMS is a key predictor of subject failure. We also leverage predictive modelling that is trained on past student data and uses extensive subject, cohort and behavioural data points to help us identify students who may be at higher risk of attrition or failing a subject. This helps us to direct outreach efforts to the students in greatest need of support.

It is important to note that our risk modelling is done at a whole of cohort level, rather than by gender, cultural and linguistic diversity, or socio-economic status and suggests that non-academic factors are less impactful in contributing to a student being at risk than are the academic factors.

Nevertheless, some of the emerging non-academic factors include:

- Study/life balance challenges (increase in paid work due to cost-of-living);

- Cost of study and financial pressures; and
- Mental health and wellbeing challenges.

The top three academic factors for our continuing cohort are:

- Credit points remaining;
- Performance relative to cohort in prior session; and
- Performance in assigned work in the subject

Based on these insights, a new onboarding communications strategy commenced in 2025 targeting the domestic undergraduate commencing cohort with curated emails to students designed to equip, guide and empower students as they start their learning journey at UTS.

As a result, we saw a 15% increase in Orientation attendance compared to 2024, a reduction in enquiry volumes, and an 11% increase in Orientation registrations, with record engagement and waitlists for many face-to-face events. In recognition of this work, the student onboarding communications optimisation project was named a finalist at the Australian Marketing Institute Marketing Excellence Awards.

Supported pathways to participation

Universities play a critical role in removing structural barriers that currently prevent capable students from progressing to, and through, higher education. A key element of our work is the strategic use of targeted interventions in secondary schooling, including academic enrichment programs, outreach and partnerships with schools, particularly those serving low socio-economic communities. When designed effectively, such interventions help to expand students' aspirations, improve readiness for university, and create clearer, supported pathways into higher education.

Students from Low Socioeconomic Backgrounds

Socioeconomic status is the strongest predictor of educational outcomes in Australia. New research from the Mitchell Institute at Victoria University, drawing on 17 years of NAPLAN data, finds that by Year 9 the reading gap between the most and least advantaged students has reached nearly six years of learning and is widening, not closing. By the time students from low-SES backgrounds consider university, they have often navigated years of accumulated disadvantage that no single admissions reform can undo.

UTS responds to this evidence by investing in relationships with schools before students make post-school decisions. The U@Uni Academy has, since 2020, offered more than 1,000 students from low-SES backgrounds a two-year intensive pathway into UTS, with an 82.6% success rate that matches the national average for the cohort. This demonstrates a point the national evidence consistently confirms, that is, that students from disadvantaged backgrounds succeed at university when properly supported. The question is not whether they can, but whether the system will give them the conditions to do so.

The Schools Recommendation Scheme (SRS) reduction to ATAR 60 is also significant. Data shows that 39% of low-SES school leavers and over half of First Nations students access higher education through non-ATAR pathways. Reducing the matriculation threshold and removing adjustment point caps are direct structural responses to the evidence that ATAR has functioned as a proxy for advantage rather than a measure of potential.

Notable successes of this approach include:

- 82.6% success rate for U@Uni Academy students (comparable to national average)
- 87% conversion rate from U@Uni Academy offer to UTS enrolment
- 93% student success rate through the Schools Recommendation Scheme (2024)

First Nations Students

First Nations students remain among the most underrepresented groups in Australian higher education, and UTS's own data reflects the national pattern. UTS seeks to address this failure to meet First Nations participation targets through a suite of coordinated measures including:

- guaranteed entry across all courses,

- an expanded U@Uni Academy with dedicated First Nations outreach in partnership with Jumbunna, and
- the UniReady enabling program.

These structural interventions, designed to enable First Nations students to stay, succeed and thrive, are complemented by culturally responsive student support through the Jumbunna Institute, including a support package to help students start strong at UTS (scholarships and start-pack) and 1:1 tutoring.

At the national level, the 2024 National Report on Schooling confirms that Year 10–12 retention for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students stands at just 57%, far below the Closing the Gap target of 96% attainment by 2031. Without urgent intervention at every level of the educational continuum, the trajectory will produce a pipeline of students who never reach the door of a university.

UTS's experience confirms that once First Nations students access enabling programs and guaranteed entry pathways, their academic success rates are comparable to the broader cohort. For example, in 2025 Indigenous students experienced a success rate of 89% compared to 95% for the non-Indigenous cohort. The barrier is in the system before the university door, not in the students.

Students with disability

This year we launched our sixth disability action plan: *Access and Inclusion Plan 2025–2030*. The plan continues the work of our earlier plans and affirms our commitment to eliminate, as far as possible, direct and indirect disability discrimination. Our aim is to remove barriers to full participation in education, employment and social activities by incorporating access and inclusion into planning and delivery and providing reasonable adjustments where required.

The plan contains 5 key focus areas with associated actions and was informed by a formal evaluation and research study that explored how best to engage people with lived experience of disability in the planning process:

- Accessible environments, such as ensuring our policies and practices deliver built and digital environments that are accessible to students.
- Culture, such as providing opportunities for students with disability to participate in the cultural life of UTS, including art and sport.
- Learning and education, such as providing opportunities for students to experience authentic disability related learning and undertake work integrated learning projects with community-based disability organisations.
- Employment, such as ensuring the needs of students with disability are included in UTS employability initiatives.
- Research and innovation, such as creating a career development strategy to strengthen support for higher degree research students and researchers with disability at UTS.

We've seen a steady increase in participation of students with disability; from 3% in 2017 to 8.6% of enrolments in 2025. Success rates for students with disability have also steadily increased from 85.5% in 2016 to 91.8% in 2025.

Students from Refugee and Humanitarian Backgrounds

UTS supports the largest cohort of asylum-seeker students of any Australian university. In 2024, 43 students were supported through the UTS Humanitarian Scholarship Program, with scholarships increasing to 26 places per intake from 2026 in response to displacement crises including the conflict in Gaza. Since the Program began in 2017 with two students, UTS has welcomed over 120 scholarship recipients, and 36 have now graduated across a wide range of disciplines.

The Humanitarian Scholarship provides full tuition fee coverage and a minimum \$1,000 annual contribution to living expenses. It is open to students holding Bridging Visas A–E, Temporary Protection Visas (subclass 785), Safe Haven Enterprise Visas (subclass 790), and Temporary Humanitarian Concern Visas (subclass 786) - visa categories whose holders are classified as international students under current federal policy and therefore excluded from Commonwealth Supported Places and HECS-HELP. The Scholarship exists because federal policy creates a gap that UTS has chosen to fill through philanthropic means.

UTS is also a founding member of the Australian Refugee Welcome University Sponsorship Consortium (ARWUSC), the 22-university coalition that has been co-designing with the Federal Government the Refugee Student Settlement Pathway (RSSP). RSSP is an education-led complementary resettlement pathway that in 2025 began resettling young refugees from Malaysia, India, and Thailand through Australian universities. This pilot represents a scalable model of what universities can contribute to refugee settlement when structural policy supports it.

The Priority Student Success Program (PSS) supports students from the Humanitarian Scholarship Program, U@Uni Academy, and UniReady enabling program as they transition into their first year. It demonstrates UTS's whole-of-journey model by providing academic bridging, peer mentoring, workshops, and social transition support from admission and throughout the first year of study.

Conclusion

Based on these insights and experiences, the Committee may wish to consider the following initiatives to influence the learning approaches and pathways in the education system:

- Fully fund the Schooling Resource Standard for all public schools, with loadings for disadvantage calibrated to current evidence. Universities cannot widen participation if the pipeline from school to higher education is structurally impoverished. The Mitchell Institute evidence that the SES attainment gap has widened to six years by Year 9 represents a systemic failure that no university admissions reform can compensate for.
- Remove the international student classification for asylum seekers and refugees on temporary visas who are enrolled in, or accepted to, Australian higher education institutions, granting them access to Commonwealth Supported Places and HECS-HELP. The Committee is encouraged to recommend that the Departments of Home Affairs and Education jointly examine an Education Protection Visa or equivalent reclassification mechanism.
- Invest in the whole-of-journey model of student support from outreach in schools through enabling programs, transition support, academic preparation, peer mentoring, and ongoing financial and pastoral support. UTS's experience across U@Uni Academy, the Priority Student Success Program, and the Humanitarian Scholarship demonstrates that access and success are inseparable. Programs that widen admission without redesigning the support model will not produce the equity outcomes the sector needs.

12 June 2026