



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY

Green Guide

*Enhancing the
learning experiences
of students from
equity backgrounds*

Developed by the Office of the
Pro Vice-Chancellor (Educational Innovation)

Please note: this resource is designed primarily to be accessed digitally. We recommend that staff of the University bookmark this resource and access it online. If you have a hard copy or have chosen to print the document, it is important to revisit the source location regularly to check for updates.

The resource is located:
<https://bit.ly/GreenGuideUSYD>



The Green Guide will be updated annually, and your feedback is appreciated. Please provide us with your feedback by scanning the QR code or following the [feedback link](#).

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We recognise and pay respect to the Elders and communities – past, present, and emerging – of the lands on which the University of Sydney’s campuses stand. For thousands of years they have shared and exchanged knowledges across innumerable generations for the benefit of all.

Green Guide

Enhancing the learning experiences of students from equity backgrounds

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Foreword

The University of Sydney's *Sydney in 2032* Strategy sets a bold vision for our University's future, with a strong focus on ensuring 'our community thrives through diversity'. Pursuing equity and supporting students from all backgrounds to access and succeed in higher education is not only the right thing to do, it is essential to enrich learning, advance knowledge, and shape a positive future for all.

This timely Green Guide, *Advice for Educators: Supporting students from equity backgrounds*, directly aligns with our strategic aspirations. It provides a valuable, evidence-based resource for our educator community to understand who our students from equity backgrounds are, the barriers they face, and most importantly, what we can do to support their learning journeys and success.

It complements our Red Book, *Specialist advice and support for students: A guide for staff to assist students to access the right support at the right time*, and is part of a suite of aligned resources and initiatives, developed through the Teaching and Learning Strategy 2023–25, aimed at fostering inclusivity across our University.

The recently released [Australian Universities Accord Final Report](#) clearly highlights the need for action on equity in higher education. It reveals significant disparities in participation and attainment for students from low socio-economic backgrounds, students from regional and remote areas, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and members of other under-represented groups. As a sector, we have a responsibility to address these gaps. Going beyond Sydney's aspirations and those in the Accord, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals ask us to provide transformational education that improves the quality and range of possible career and life choices, networks, and capacity to lead positive change, and enhances aspirations, health outcomes and mental wellbeing for everyone in our community as a global priority.

At Sydney, our academic and professional staff are well placed to contribute to this effort. By applying the practical strategies outlined in this guide – valuing diversity, adopting a strengths-based approach, reducing barriers, and grounding our work in meaningful relationships – we can deliver education that is truly transformational for all our students, now and in the future.

I encourage you to engage with this guide, discuss it with colleagues, adapt the strategies to your own teaching contexts, and share your own insights and innovations. Enhancing equity is a shared, ongoing endeavour. Together, by taking concrete actions underpinned by empathy, respect and high expectations for our students, we can bring the University's equity aspirations to life.

On behalf of the University, I thank the Educational Innovation team, along with the Library and Student Life teams and those in the faculties who have contributed to this work. I would also like to thank our student readers and student voices, who are central to this work. Your efforts in producing this valuable guide and your ongoing commitment to inclusive education are deeply appreciated. I look forward to seeing the positive impacts this resource will have on our students, as we work together to ensure that every learner can thrive and achieve their aspirations.

Professor Joanne Wright
Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Education

Introduction

Students from diverse backgrounds and who have varied experiences strongly enrich our learning community for the benefit of all.

By valuing their unique strengths and perspectives, and removing structural barriers to their academic success, we create an equitable environment that celebrates diversity and fosters an outstanding student experience that empowers every learner to reach their full potential.

The University of Sydney is committed to improving access, participation, and success for students from equity backgrounds. The term **students from equity backgrounds** refers to students who face specific structural and systematic barriers to accessing and succeeding in higher education. Students who face specific challenges – such as students from low socioeconomic status locations; students from regional, rural or remote areas; and students living with disability – are nominated by the Australian Government as ‘equity groups’, students from other under-represented or non-traditional backgrounds (with respect to participation and success in higher education) are recognised as being ‘equity-like’ in the ways in which existing structures can preclude or disadvantage their participation.

This ‘Green Guide’ is for all university teachers and educators, whether you are a permanent academic staff member, a casual tutor, an educational support team member, or otherwise involved in teaching or supporting student learning. It is written in accessible language, making it practical and practice-oriented, and is designed to be a first point of call for educators, providing case-based examples to illustrate key concepts and strategies. Using evidence-based approaches, this guide helps you to effectively and confidently address the unique needs and challenges of students from equity backgrounds, providing a starting point for the resources, guidance, and support that will assist our students to achieve their educational goals and aspirations.

We acknowledge that there are differing views on some of the language used in this space, and our intention at all times is to be respectful and accessible, and to focus on what can be achieved in our classrooms. To this end, the Green Guide uses person-first language (e.g. ‘students from equity backgrounds’), but we acknowledge that

this approach does not suit everyone, and many people prefer identity-first language (e.g. ‘equity students’). It is up to each individual how they choose to identify, and we encourage you to listen and hear what each individual student prefers.¹ We also acknowledge that language is never neutral; inherited terminology has utility but often brings a complex history.¹

How to use this guide

In this guide you will find evidence-based strategies and actionable steps for engaging students from equity backgrounds throughout all stages of the teaching and learning process, including learning design, teaching methods, assessment, and the design of learning environments and support structures. The guide uses the term ‘semester’ in recognition of the University of Sydney’s dominant teaching period, however these strategies can be applied and adjusted to meet the needs of those teaching into intensives, placements, and other formats, including those adopted by other universities (e.g., trimesters, short courses).

Accessibility: This guide is designed for all university educators, and is available digitally at: <https://bit.ly/GreenGuideUSYD>

Flexibility: Feel free to focus on those sections relevant to your needs – there is no need to implement everything at once. Treat these as evidence-based suggestions, not as strict rules.

The +1 approach: Try implementing just one new strategy from this guide each semester. Small changes can have a big impact.

‘Green Guide AI Agent’: This publicly available chat-based AI agent, based on the advice provided in this guide, allows you to engage in conversations about specific topics of interest to you. It’s an easy way to access tailored information and apply the content more effectively. To start chatting with the Green Guide AI Agent, visit: <https://bit.ly/GreenGuideAgent>



Part 1: Setting the scene

Are we 'student-ready'?

The myth of the 'typical' student

This myth is based on the flawed assumption that there is a 'typical' student for whom education should be designed.^{1,2} It assumes that if a curriculum or teaching method works for the 'typical student', then it should work for all students. However, this myth ignores the diversity and complexity of students' backgrounds, experiences, needs, goals and aspirations.^{3,4}

The danger of this myth is that it leads to 'one size fits all' approaches to education, which can neglect the unique needs and potentials of individual students who don't fit the assumed 'typical'.⁵ For example, students who learn at a different pace or in different ways from the assumed "typical" may be labelled as slow or lazy learners.⁶ On the other hand, students who excel in certain areas may not be adequately challenged.²

The myth of the typical student can:

- create barriers and challenges for students who do not fit expected perceived norms⁷
- create unrealistic expectations for these students and lead to feelings of inadequacy and failure⁸
- lead to expectations that students enter university with a common level of prior knowledge, skills, and priorities⁹
- create an unrealistic belief that all students have a similar amount of time, resources, and support to devote to their studies, disregarding the multiple roles and responsibilities they may increasingly have outside university, such as work, family, health, and community-related roles¹⁰
- result in certain students being viewed as 'lacking' or 'in deficit' in terms of their abilities, prior knowledge, and/or backgrounds¹¹
- fail to provide adequate challenges and opportunities for growth for students who exceed the assumed 'typical' level of knowledge, skills, and abilities
- shift the responsibility for student success from the institutions to the students themselves¹²

Challenging the myth of the typical student helps us to refocus on how we can make *university* more 'student-ready', recognising the unique needs of each student and promoting an environment that fosters personalisation and student success, rather than expecting *students* to be 'university-ready'.^{1,13}

STUDENT VOICE

"I feel like a lot of times we kind of fly underneath the radar, and teachers don't fully understand that we had different experiences from other students."

Science/Arts student from equity background

"My university journey has always been as much for my community as it has been for myself. It always reminded me of the proverb: 'It takes a village to raise a child.' I feel as if it's my turn to pay it back and develop the skills needed to help bridge the gap for Indigenous Australians."

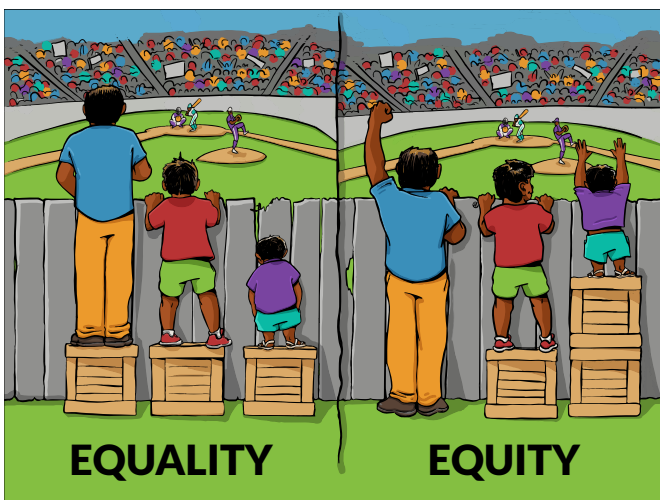
Arts/Law student from equity background



What is equity?

What does 'equity' mean?

The terms 'equity' and 'equality' have distinct meanings in education. Simply put, **equality** means that every student is given the same resources and opportunities, and is expected to meet the same standards, while **equity** means that students' individual strengths, interests and aspirations are recognised and valued, and that they are given the appropriate opportunities and resources to develop and apply their talents in the process of learning and achieving their goals.¹⁴ The image below is often used to illustrate the difference between equality and equity. This visual metaphor has been widely discussed, debated, and modified over time, and has been expanded to explore social justice¹⁵ and liberation.



Above: Equality vs equity
Source: Angus Maguire, Interaction Institute for Social Change¹⁶

Equality is aligned with the idea of sameness, while equity is aligned with the idea of fairness.¹⁶ Equity in higher education is important, because it can help to reduce the gaps and disparities that exist between different groups of students, along lines such as ethnicity, gender, disability and socioeconomic status.¹⁷ Equity can also promote social justice and economic growth, by ensuring that everyone has access to quality education and opportunities for personal and professional development,¹⁸ and can help to reduce the kind of 'structural stratification' that can perpetuate disadvantage at institutional and societal levels.^{19,20,21}

For example, equality in higher education would mean that every student pays the same tuition fee, regardless

of their financial situation. Equity in higher education would mean that students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds receive financial aid or scholarships to reduce their financial burden and increase their chances of completing their degree.²²

As another example, equality might involve having a clear but rigid learning schedule. However, an equitable approach acknowledges that students, especially those juggling work, family responsibilities, or facing other challenges, may need more flexible options. This could involve offering adaptive learning schedules, online learning resources, or asynchronous learning activities that provide students in diverse circumstances the opportunity to successfully complete their studies.

Who are students from equity backgrounds?

In Australian universities, students from equity backgrounds are students from groups that have been nominated by the Australian Government as being under-represented in higher education.²³ These groups, listed below, are now the focus of government objectives aimed at increasing their participation and success in higher education.¹⁴ Students from equity backgrounds are also often included within other defined student groups, such as 'students from under-represented or diverse backgrounds' or 'students from non-traditional backgrounds'.

Many students from the nominated equity groups will also be the first in their family to attend university,²⁴ and/or may belong to multiple equity groups or to 'equity-like' groups, which are also associated with educational disadvantage. While not officially recognised under government definitions, members of 'equity-like' groups face educational disadvantage due to a variety of factors, such as family background, socioeconomic status and/or personal circumstances.¹⁴ Examples of these groups include mature-aged students, carers, and members of the LGBTQIA+ community. In this guide, we consider all of these students to be 'students from equity backgrounds', although recognise that this is not an exhaustive list.

For a brief definition of each equity group listed below, please see the Glossary on page 48.

‘Official’ equity groups²³

These are groups that have been identified by the Australian Government as being under-represented in higher education in Australian universities.²³

- Students from low socioeconomic status (low SES) locations
- Students with disability
- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students
- Women in non-traditional areas (WINTA)
- Students from regional areas
- Students from remote areas
- Students from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESBs)

‘Equity-like’ groups

Members of these groups, while not officially nominated under government definitions, also face educational disadvantages due to a variety of factors.¹⁴

- First-generation (or first-in-family) university students
- Pasfika students
- Students who are carers
- Students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds
- Students who are mature-aged
- Students from refugee backgrounds
- Students who are members of the LGBTQIA+ community
- Students who are veterans of the Australian Defence Force

Students from equity backgrounds often face intersecting challenges, including geographical, financial, emotional, and sociocultural barriers to their access and success at university. The complexity and severity of these challenges are amplified when students belong to multiple equity groups, which may affect their access to resources, ability to manage living costs and work–study balance, wellbeing, and navigation of the sociocultural nuances of university life.^{25,14} Such factors may be associated with lower familiarity with higher education environments and culture, and lower academic expectations.²⁶

In the Glossary, you will find a summary of some of the key characteristics of the various equity and ‘equity-like’ groups in Australian universities, based on Australian Government definitions²³ and broader categories. It’s important to note, however, that some students might align generally with these descriptions, but not meet the strict official criteria for inclusion. This discrepancy highlights just one aspect of the complexity in understanding the diverse student body in higher education.

It should also be noted that while much of the literature conceptualises equity groups as comprising of students who experience educational disadvantage, many equity-minded educators are very much aware of the strengths and advantages of such students (e.g., persistence, multilingualism). It is important to recognise that students themselves may not identify as needing extra assistance or being disadvantaged, and some may find such labels insulting. This guide’s focus is less on helping students to overcome disadvantage (a deficit-focused approach) and more on practising teaching and learning with a view to updating the curriculum by adapting to the experiences and insights of students from equity and equity-like backgrounds (a strengths-based approach).

An example of ‘intersecting challenges’

Sahra grew-up in rural NSW as the daughter of immigrants. Her first language is Arabic, which she uses when she is at home. Her parents’ English has got better but she remains the family’s translator for more complex tasks. Sahra is the first in her family to go to university and she sits in multiple equity groups. Despite her scholarship, she faces multiple financial, geographic, and emotional challenges in her transition to university. Sahra’s parents are very supportive and are proud of her but they struggle to know how to advise Sahra on a university that is unfamiliar, and sometimes intimidating, to them. Sahra often feels isolated, especially in comparison to some of her peers.

Find out more

If you are interested in reading more about what equity is and how equity groups are identified and defined in Australia, we recommend starting with the very readable Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success (ACSES) guide 'Equity' in higher education: What does this term mean and what are the practical implications for students in equity groups? (pages 1–3), and the ACSES Briefing Note Equity Student Participation in Australian Higher Education: 2014–2019 (page 3).

Students from equity backgrounds at the University of Sydney

At the University of Sydney, students from equity backgrounds may or may not enter their degree through the Educational Access Scheme (EAS)²⁷ or through one of our alternative entry pathways, which include:

- MySydney Scheme – a scheme that enables students from eligible areas of socio-economic disadvantage to access the university with a reduced ATAR requirement, an annual scholarship, and a range of additional support
- Regional and Remote Entry Scheme – a scheme that enables students from regional and remote areas to access the University with a reduced ATAR requirement and a range of additional
- Gadigal Program – the University's Indigenous student pathway, which supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to study at the University of Sydney.

For more information about these access programs and admissions pathways, visit:
sydney.edu.au/study/applying/admission-pathways.html

Taking an equitable approach to teaching and learning

An equitable approach to teaching and learning is a pedagogical strategy centred on creating a learning environment that values diversity and embraces the strengths of every student.

Key practices this approach include:^{28,9,13}

- getting to know and respecting your students
- offering flexibility, variety, and choice, and using examples and contexts which are representative of all students
- making expectations clear through accessible language
- scaffolding students' learning
- being available and approachable
- fostering a sense of belonging among students
- practising reflective teaching

These practices provide a strong foundation for the equitable teaching for all students.^{28,9,13}

In Part 2 of this guide we will unpack how you can start to apply these approaches within your teaching context.



Part 2: Creating equitable learning experiences – practical advice for educators

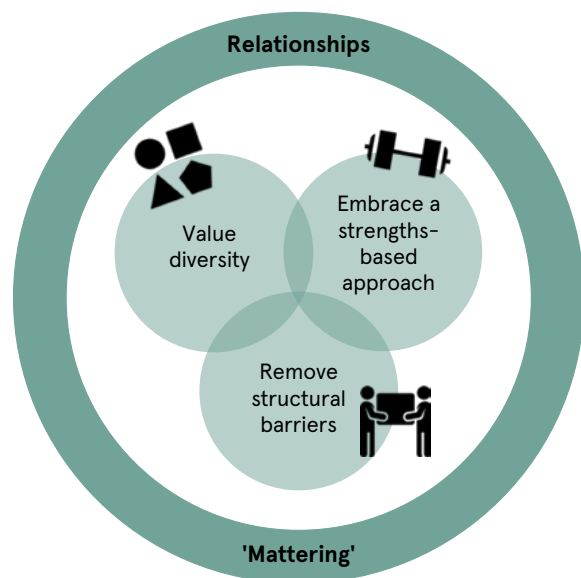
Introduction

This section provides evidence-based teaching strategies that support and enhance the learning of students from equity backgrounds. It also provides examples of how different strategies can be applied in a variety of teaching practices and contexts. We encourage you to consider these suggestions as jumping-off points for your own teaching practice.

Four core principles

Four core principles underlie the approaches included in this guide:

1. Valuing diversity
2. Embracing a strengths-based approach
3. Remove structural barriers to academic success
4. Grounding all interactions with students in relationships and ‘mattering’



Above: The relationship of the four key principles of (1) valuing diversity, (2) embracing a strength-based approach, (3) removing structural barriers to access success, and (4) grounding all interactions with students in relationships and ‘mattering’.

1. Valuing diversity

When we as educators create an atmosphere that encourages open communication and collaboration, our students recognise that they are valued and included in the academic community. Valuing diversity in higher education acknowledges that diverse backgrounds, experiences and perspectives enrich the learning environment for everyone involved.^{1,2,3,4} This approach challenges assumptions or stereotypes that may be associated with equity groups, such as assuming they lack academic preparedness or have limited aspirations.

In practice, an approach that values diversity might involve using inclusive teaching strategies, such as providing learning materials that reflect a variety of cultural and social perspectives^{5,3} or designing group projects that encourage interactions between students from different backgrounds.^{2,6}

This helps to foster a sense of belonging and respect among students, and enhances their ability to understand, communicate, and work effectively in a multicultural world.

2. Embracing a strengths-based approach

By focusing on the unique abilities, skills and assets that students from equity backgrounds bring to the classroom, we as educators can encourage academic success, personal growth and a sense of belonging among all students.^{7,8,9} A strengths-based approach – as opposed to a deficits-based approach – is crucial for fostering an inclusive and empowering learning environment.

In practice, a strengths-based approach might involve highlighting the value of students’ cultural backgrounds and/or personal experiences in class discussions, and offering tailored support that builds on students’ existing strengths.

STUDENT VOICE

“Growing up in a working-class family in a working-class suburb, the idea that higher education was worth pursuing was drilled into my head by my parents; a way to move forward, learn, and constantly progress. When I first stepped into the Great Hall, I was mesmerised. It was also overwhelming, but it was a challenge I wanted to embrace!”

Commerce/Law student from equity background

This helps to dismantle stereotypes and negative assumptions about certain student groups, and empowers students to recognise and leverage their potential – ultimately leading to a more equitable and successful learning experience for all.

3. Removing structural barriers to academic success

By structuring our learning resources and activities, assessments, and learning environments in ways that ensure fairness, access, and a clear pathway to academic success for all students, we as educators can remove many of the structural barriers to academic success.¹⁰

This approach integrates principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), such as equitable use, flexibility, simplicity, and perceptibility, to reduce barriers such as academic inequities, resource disadvantages, and cultural discrimination for students from equity backgrounds.^{11,12} It aims to alleviate the structural elements within teaching and learning environments that contribute to exclusion or disadvantage, providing all students with the opportunity to succeed.

Three key factors underlie these structural barriers: inequitable academic opportunities, disparities in material resources, and instances of cultural bias or discrimination.¹³

In practice, removing structural barriers might involve offering flexible one-on-one meetings to students (in person and online) to accommodate their work or caring responsibilities, or providing students with multiple options to demonstrate learning in assessment so that they can take ownership of their own learning outputs.

This cultivates an inclusive learning environment, and enables all students to engage fully in their learning and succeed in their educational journey.

4. Grounding all interactions with students in relationships and ‘mattering’

By focusing on intentional, meaningful relationships between students and their peers, teachers, and the wider academic community, we as educators can create an environment where every student, regardless of their background or experiences, feels significant and important. ‘Mattering’ underscores the importance of individual relationships and meaningful interactions between students, educators, and the institution,^{14,15} and emphasises the perception of being noticed, appreciated, and cared for by others. It is more nuanced than the more commonly considered notion of ‘belonging’, which tends to involve fitting in with a group or institution and implies assimilation into set culture or norms. Students from equity backgrounds can sometimes feel distanced by conventional notions of belonging, due to their differing backgrounds or experiences. Yet, they can – and should – experience mattering.

In practice, this might involve leveraging students’ diverse experiences and networks as part of class discussions, or fostering positive group projects where team member diversity is considered a strength.

This becomes the conduit through which students from equity backgrounds can access, build, and leverage their social capital. When students from equity backgrounds recognise that they are appreciated and valued – that they matter – they are more likely to thrive both academically and personally.

STAFF VOICE

“We take students from what they know when they come in – with all of their experiences – a whole rich tapestry bringing incredible contributions from the time they first step in the classroom.”

Educator from Sociology

2.1 Using data to understand equity in your context

The right data can help illuminate students' needs

Accessing data about your students can help you understand those students from equity backgrounds in your class, unit, program, school or faculty, or more broadly. Armed with these insights, you can tailor your teaching, support, and resources to foster a more equitable learning environment.

Accessing data about students from equity backgrounds at the University of Sydney

At the University of Sydney, all teaching staff can access [centrally-held information](#)¹ and detailed reports relating to relevant student cohorts, teaching and learning, including:

- **Knowing Your Students**, provides detailed information about the student cohort in each unit of study (including specific data about students from equity backgrounds), to help inform your design of a tailored learning experience. You can access [Knowing Your Students](#) from the Help menu in [Canvas](#). (If you are off campus, you will need to [connect to the University VPN](#) first.) You can also read more [about Knowing Your Student on Teaching@Sydney](#)² and on the [intranet](#),³ including about the types of data you can access and how you can use it.
- **Knowing Your Unit**, which provides detailed information about the performance of each unit of study over the years, which can also help you in providing a tailored learning experience. You can access Knowing Your Unit using the same instructions described above.
- **Student Diversity** data reports for courses specific to Australian domestic students who are classified as belonging to an equity or diversity group. These reports include current and historical data that can be compared by faculty, school, and course. These reports, as well as links to related guides, can be accessed through the [Advanced Analytics Planning and Enterprise Data](#)¹ page on the intranet. A report titled [‘A Snapshot of Diversity at Sydney’](#)⁴ has also been published annually since 2021 by [Teaching@Sydney](#).



Above: The Knowing Your Students report uses centrally held information to provide a detailed description of the student cohort in each unit of study, reporting across 17 different demographic criteria. This figure shows an example of a Knowing Your Students report, with boxes highlighting proportion of domestic and international students, the breakdown of 'home languages', courses students are enrolled in, other units students are enrolled in, and the numbers of low SES students, Indigenous students, students with disability, and first in family students enrolled in the unit.

Using data to make informed decisions in and out of the classroom

Leverage student cohort data to tailor learning experiences and adopt proactively equitable teaching approaches

Knowing Your Student can show you data about the students from equity backgrounds in your specific cohort, allowing you to adapt your teaching accordingly, as suggested in the examples below.

- Steph uses the Knowing Your Student dashboard and finds that, in her first-year unit, 75 students come from low SES backgrounds and 193 students are the first-in-family to attend university. To support these students, she proactively her Canvas site and learning materials to clearly explain any 'jargon' terms that might be barriers to learning or understanding, preventing her students from engaging in the unit.
- Pat observes that the Knowing Your Student dashboard shows they have 162 students with disabilities in their second-year cohort. Given this, they proactively review their learning materials and activities to ensure that they are accessible to and inclusive of all students. This could involve enabling auto-captions for lecture recordings, providing accessible document formats, and using clear, logical headings to structure the content (see the [Teaching Resources Hub](#) for more suggestions). They also reached out to their Faculty or School Disability Liaison Officer or [Inclusion and Disability Services](#) to inquire about any students with Academic Plans and specific adjustments they need to implement to support these students' full participation in the unit.

Did you know...?

You can get support with running student focus groups by submitting an Educational Design Accelerator (EDA) request. EDAs are mini-projects that address specific teaching challenges, by working closely with designers and developers to implement quick, sustainable solutions.

<https://bit.ly/ei-eda>

Compare equity and non-equity student cohorts' achievement in your unit

You can use data from Knowing Your Unit and other sources to benchmark and track the overall achievement in your unit of students from equity backgrounds compared to non-equity cohorts. This data can help you to identify any achievement gaps that exist between equity and non-equity cohorts in your unit, and target your efforts to reduce any barriers to learning.

- The Knowing Your Unit report for James' second-year unit shows that the overall success for regional and remote students is on average 10 to 20 percentage points lower than for the non-equity cohort. To help address this gap, he provides more online resources for students (see Sections 2.2-2.7) and runs a focus group with regional and remote students in his unit to learn more about the specific barriers that are affecting their achievement.



Left: This image shows an example of a Knowing Your Unit report with bar graphs and line graphs illustrating data available on (1) grade distribution, (2) success by student's faculty, (3) number of enrolments by time, (4) distribution of Annual Average Mark (AAM), Semester Average Mark (SAM), and Weighted Average Mark (WAM), (5) success by regional status, and (6) students progression stages at the end of semester.

Explore national and institutional resources to understand equity trends and inform your teaching practices

There are some key data sources that offer insights into the participation of students from equity backgrounds in higher education, both nationally and by individual institution. These include the national [Department of Education Research Division Analysis and Data Division](#)⁵ and the [Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success \(ACSES\) data platform](#), as well as annual publications such as Teaching@Sydney's [A Snapshot of Diversity at Sydney](#)⁴ and ACSES's Briefing Notes.⁸

These resources can help you to gain a broader understanding of equity trends and their implications for your own teaching practices.

- e.g., Charlotte checks the National reports which predict there will be a growth in enrolment numbers of students from low SES backgrounds and this reflects what she has noticed recently in her Knowing Your Students reports. In response, she decides to adjust parts of her curriculum to incorporate different perspectives (see Section 2.3), and changes how she runs one-on-one meetings with students in her unit (see Section 2.2).
- By exploring the [Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success \(ACSES\) data platform](#)⁸ to national trends in the participation of students from equity backgrounds (e.g. increasing enrolment of students from regional and remote areas), and reviewing recent reports about broader systemic issues affecting these students (e.g., in the [Australian Universities Accord](#)!), Charles applies for a [strategic education grant](#) to make specific changes to his unit, and approaches his head of school to gain support for resources to make these changes.

Seek out (and act on) more specific student data to guide your teaching

To gain more specific insights into the experiences and perceptions of students from equity backgrounds in your teaching and learning environments, consider collecting other forms of data, such as direct feedback from students. You can do this through targeted focus groups and/or anonymous surveys.

- To help understand more about the barriers facing students from equity backgrounds that Harry has identified using the Knowing Your Unit report, he hosts a focus group with current students from equity backgrounds to understand more specifically about their learning experiences in his unit. He then uses this feedback to make informed and targeted changes to his teaching to address the identified barriers.

STAFF VOICE

“Know Your Student helps me understand the diverse backgrounds of my students...it’s a great reminder to keep these considerations in mind as I design my teaching materials. This information provides an excellent high-level understanding of their needs, which I further refine using tools like the Student Relationship Engagement System (SRES).”

Educator from Engineering

Accessing data on students from equity backgrounds in Australia

For a national overview of the participation of students from equity backgrounds in Australian higher education, we recommend starting with the following key data sources.

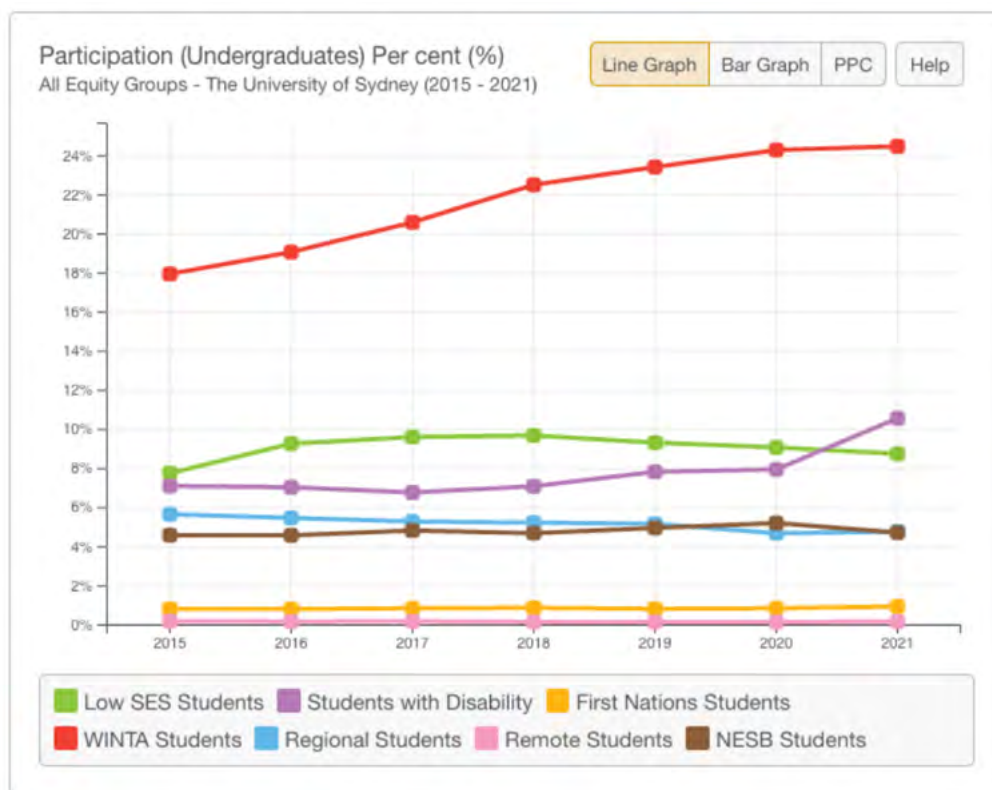
- The Department of Education Research Division Analysis and Data Division, which provides national [statistics on higher education](#),⁵ including [Student Statistics](#)⁶ on equity cohorts
- Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success (ACSES), which offers an [interactive platform](#)⁷ that provides information about equity group participation in higher education nationally, and allows users to break down data by individual institution
- ACSES's annual [Briefing Notes](#),⁸ which provide additional context and analysis of these trends

Find out more

Find out more about the data available on students from equity backgrounds in Australia – and how to access and use ACSES's interactive data platform – in this short, easy-to-read guide:

[Student equity in higher education: research, policy, practice and data](#)⁹

The Australian Centre for Student Equity (ACSES) provides public access to data on equity cohorts among Australia's undergraduate population. The figure below shows the participation rates of students from various equity backgrounds in higher education at the University of Sydney, from 2015 to 2021.



Above: Undergraduate student participation rates (%) at the University of Sydney, 2015-2021

2.2 The importance of structure

Giving students a clear map of the journey ahead

Equity-focused teaching recognises that the university landscape is shaped by invisible rules, expectations and cultures – known collectively as the ‘hidden curriculum’ (see Section 2.4 and the Glossary) – and that these can act as barriers to inclusion and learning for students who are less familiar with academic culture. Making the how and why of learning transparent by providing visible structure helps to improve student outcomes¹ and reduce the unintentional penalties imposed on students unfamiliar with the hidden curriculum. Providing students with a clear structure also gives them transparency with respect to critical milestones (e.g., the census dates, ‘hurdle tasks’) and cultural norms (e.g., what is expected in a tutorial discussion).

While the concept of structure is often associated with the sequencing of content – such as through modules in Canvas or PowerPoint slide decks – in equity-focused teaching, structure goes beyond the ordering of information. To cultivate engagement and trust with our students, the structures we adopt must exist in response to our students’ intellectual, social and emotional realities.² Just as we might factor in time to run in-class quizzes, so too we might intentionally design structures that help students to feel that they belong and matter, such as making time to greet students, or providing protocols for class discussion to ensure that traditionally marginalised voices are heard. Structure for equitable teaching is more than imposed schedules, but instead it is one way we can actively recognise students, their needs and their place in the wider world.³

Before and between classes

Make the teaching and learning calendar visible ‘at a glance’

New students and those from equity backgrounds may not be familiar with university norms relating to timetabling and unit structure. A context-specific unit outline that includes key dates, times, and places allows students from equity backgrounds to plan and envisage the teaching period ahead through a single, consolidated source of information. This outline can be presented on a Canvas page linked from your unit’s homepage, making it easy to access and update.



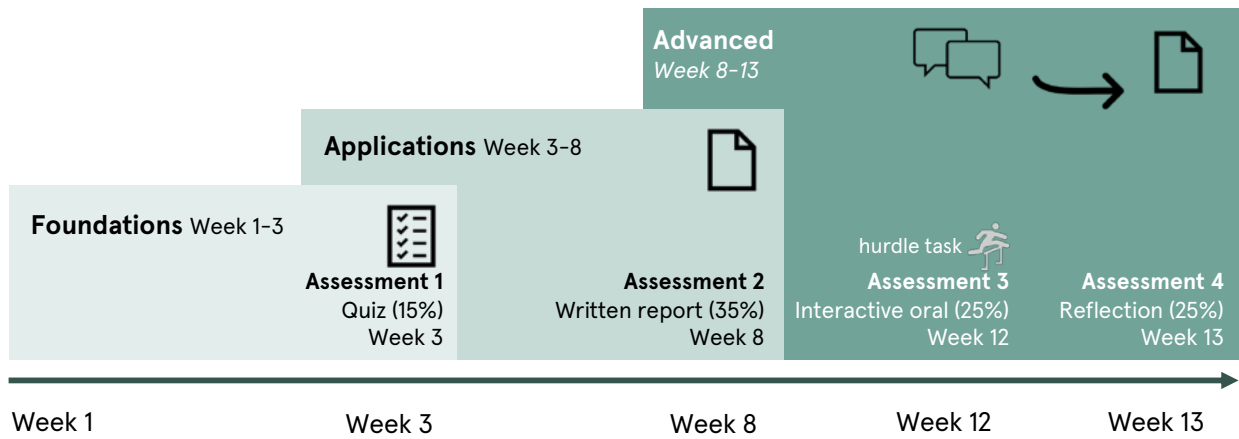
Use learning technologies to make information easier for students to access and action

Your Canvas site should be structured so that students can navigate easily to important information. You might use a school, faculty, or University template for broader consistency. Your homepage should always feature high-level navigation links to common and important pages, including classes, assessments and available supports. Provide maps and clear directions to any physical venues, including fieldtrips and placements; including links to purpose-built tools such as maps.sydney.edu.au, [Lost on Campus](#) and [Google Maps](#) can help to remove the barriers posed by building codes and names (e.g., F03.02.230, the Madsen Building), which can be unfamiliar and uninformative in themselves.

- Two weeks before the semester begins, Marie publishes her Canvas site. In it, she creates a Canvas module called 'Getting started', which provides an overview of the unit as a semester planner, maps and directions to physical venues, and some details about how to prepare for each week and how learning will occur together in classes. She makes sure that this key information is available from a clear link on the homepage of her Canvas site. Marie then emails her students a [personalised welcome email using the Student Relationship Engagement System \(SRES\)](#),⁴ and prompts them to review the semester planner.

UNIT:XXXX PLANNER			
Lectures [repeat - only attend one]			
- 9:00-11:00 Mondays [Building, Room]			
- 13:00-15:00 Thursdays [Building, Room]			
Tutorials [only attend your group] click here to find out which group you are in			
- Group A: 11:00-12:00 Monday			
- Group B: 13:00-14:00 Tuesday			
- Group C: 18:00-20:00 Thursday			
	Pre-work or reading	Lecture and tutorial	Assessment
Week 1	Review the Canvas site [15min]	Lecture topic: XXXXX	
	Post a welcome to the discussion board [15min]	Tutorial work: XXXX	
Week 2	Read Chapter X [60min]	Lecture topic: XXXXX	Week 2 - Quiz (10%)
	Extra: Activities on p.29 of Textbook	Tutorial work: XXXX	Due: Thu 12th Aug 23:59
Week 3			
...			
STUVAC			
No class			

Above: Sample unit planner showing a weekly schedule for lectures, tutorials, pre-work, and assessments. This consolidated view helps students easily understand the unit structure and important dates at a glance.



Above: An example of a scaffolded assessment timeline across a 13-week semester.

Provide students with the organising principles of the curriculum and its key points and workload

Do not assume that students who are new to your unit, discipline, field, or profession will understand its logic or conventional organising principles.⁵ Organising principles include both the standard curriculum building blocks of topics, themes, skills and competencies, and the sequencing rules that govern the order in which students develop these. Providing high-level structures that make both the intended learning outcomes and the pathways to achieving them explicit can make the curriculum more accessible through visibility. This can be achieved by provided images or diagrams that demonstrate how concepts tie together and indicate key points in the curriculum. These might be threshold concepts, hurdle tasks, ‘sticky’ or difficult topics or specific themes and how they relate to each other. Revisit this structure regularly throughout the semester, to remind students where they are and how far they have come.

- Elyse is coordinating a first-year unit of study. The teaching and assessments build sequentially through short weekly assessments that cover grammar, speaking, listening and writing through in-class tests and short written assessments. The teaching builds towards two final hurdle assessments that bring these skills together in a grammar and translation evaluation worth 25 percent. Elyse creates a diagram to show students how each topic and assessment links to the unit learning outcomes.

STAFF VOICE

“One of the things that we’ve tried is scaffolded assessments, for example we’ve had an assessment where it has multiple iterations where students can build on their skills each time, leading towards either a final exam or a skills test...”

Educator from Science

Plan and schedule your communications in advance to build relationships and support academic goals

Planning your communications ahead of time allows you to design how you’ll foster teacher presence, social connection and information sharing across the semester. In your plan, identify your objectives (e.g. welcoming students to class), time frames (e.g., week 0), modes (e.g., a welcome video) and channels (e.g., a [personalised email](#),⁶ and [Canvas announcement](#)⁷). Set aside time in your diary to draft and send these out. Remember when scheduling any communications that may be sensitive or distressing to some students (e.g., revealing low marks or assessment feedback) to avoid doing so on weekends, evenings or other times when the University is closed and students might struggle to find support or help. Also schedule in time to reply to student queries and offer support as required.

- Zhu is the Unit Coordinator of a large first-year unit, and uses a communication plan to support his students. He has mapped the key aims of his communications across the key points of the semester. He now puts ‘holds’ in his calendar to ensure he has time to draft and send the messages through the right channels and at the appropriate times. He uses a combination of personalised targeted emails using the Student Relationship Engagement System (SRES) and the unit’s discussion board.

STUDENT VOICE

“For me, the most useful thing is being able to reach out to an educator or tutor through email, letting them know how I’m doing and getting a response. I’ve found this to be the most helpful - educators who are responsive and supportive when I need advice or help.”

Science student from an equity background

UNITXXXX Communications plan

Intended message for student							
Week	Date Time	Aim and goal	Target group	SRES email	Canvas announcement	Discussion board	Video
Week 0	Mon 09:00	<p>Welcome all students to the unit and introduce the teaching team share:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Canvas site - Getting started module and welcome video - Unit of study outline 	All students	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Week 1	Mon 09:00	<p>Remind students of the week's lectures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Warm welcome for the week - Lectures - how to find the room - What to expect 	All students	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
		<p>Same message as above but with additional message: "We have noticed you have not yet logged onto Canvas, is everything ok? Please try so here <link>"</p>	Students who have not logged into Canvas	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Week 2	Mon 09:00	<p>Notify students about the week 3 Quiz assessment (15%) and provide information about simple extensions and special considerations</p>	All students	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Week 3	Mon 09:00	<p>Welcome to week 3 and introduction to the discussion board for questions</p>	All students	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Wed 09:00	<p>Reminder the quiz is due in tomorrow - good luck & resources to support.</p>	All students	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Fri 09:00	<p>Follow up with students who have not completed the Week 3 quiz:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Check-in ("everything ok") - We have noticed you haven't submitted this, - Please contact us - Reminder on late penalties and link to Assessment Procedures (2011) 	Students who did not complete the quiz	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
				<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Above: An example communication plan template, outlining weekly messages to students across different channels. It details the timing, content, and target audience for announcements, reminders, and follow-ups, utilising various communication methods such as email, Canvas announcements, discussion boards, and video.

Provide targeted 'just in time' reminders through multiple channels that offer support and clarify rules and processes

'Just in time' reminders can help students to stay on track before they are penalised for failing to complete a required or expected task. For example, you might target students who have not logged in to Canvas by Week 1, or students who have not submitted a particular assessment and do not have a simple extension or special consideration. Write these communications in a kind and supportive tone, and outline key actions that students can take to rectify the situation. For example:

- Matilda emails all the students in her unit five days before the assessment submission due date. She reminds them of the due date and how to apply for a simple extension or special consideration if required. After the due date, Matilda sends an email to all students who have submitted, to thank them for submitting and let them know they will receive their marks and feedback in two weeks' time. Matilda notes that four students have yet to submit their assignment and have no approved extension, so she emails these students individually to check in and reminds them of the mark penalties outlined by the Assessment Procedures 2011. Two students reply with circumstances that warrant a special consideration, allowing Matilda to respond personally to each with guidance on special consideration submissions and student services. The third student writes back to say they had forgotten to submit, but will get it in soon. The fourth student writes back to say they will be withdrawing from the unit.

Structure equitable out-of-class support times to encourage help seeking

Students from equity backgrounds may face additional barriers to seeking help or support from their teachers. Structuring set out-of-class support times throughout the semester can help. Traditional 'office hours' are often poorly understood by students from equity backgrounds, who may perceive these as unfamiliar or intimidating.⁸ Structures that might better serve students from equity backgrounds⁹ include scheduled individual appointments, which can better suit students who need to plan ahead, and informal group drop-in sessions, which can be less intimidating than one-on-one appointments. Online options can also increase accessibility and uptake, as can renaming your 'office hours' to something more descriptive, explanatory and inviting (e.g. 'Exam Prep Chat', 'Tom's Weekly Group Q&A'). Support these offerings with clear and welcoming statements (both in and out of class) that encourage students to 'reach out' to you through these consultation periods. Tools like [Microsoft Bookings](#)¹⁰ and [Canvas Calendar](#)¹¹ can be used to make scheduling and booking easier.

- Priya schedules group drop-in sessions for Week 11 to support her students as they prepare for their final exam. She offers a choice of in-person sessions after the lecture, or online sessions. Students attend both individually and in small groups. The informal environment is more efficient and effective than formal one-on-one meetings, as students often find that they have the same questions as each other and feel less anxious discovering that they are not the only one who needs support.

STUDENT VOICE

"In my Chinese class, our teacher has consultation time as well, and sometimes after class I would stay and ask questions and talk about my concerns... Having a teacher that would listen to me was really helpful in my learning."

Commerce/Advanced Studies student from equity background

Create consistency between classes by using shared templates, resources and communication in teaching teams

Equity-focused teaching ensures that students do not receive any unfair advantage or disadvantage for being in a particular tutorial group or class. Preparing shared lesson plans, PowerPoint templates, and other resources, and having regular meetings with the other members of your teaching team, can ensure that all classes are taught equitably by reducing variability and ensuring consistency and equitable support across all classes (see Sections 2.4 and 2.5.)

- Xavier coordinates a large second-year engineering unit, and provides tutors with a space on Canvas where they can download lesson plans and suggested PowerPoint files for each tutorial. Tutors are welcome to make modifications to these, and are encouraged to share these improvements with others. This helps to ensure that all students in the unit have a consistent experience, even if they need to switch tutorial groups temporarily in extenuating circumstances.

Consistently structure class time to help students manage surprises and focus on learning

Maintaining consistent and predictable class-time structures – such as consistent opening and closing activities, presenting of class outlines, group discussions and other routines, and regular breaks – can allow the procedural aspects of the classroom environment to feel familiar and predictable. Highly structured classes, combined with active learning, have been shown to

‘close the gap’ between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students.

- Sarah opens her tutorial each week with the same tasks. Students are instructed to set up their name tents,¹² answer the opening question on the board, and wait for others to arrive and be seated. This has built good habits, and students now attend to the question without prompting. Sarah also ensures that the instructions for all activities are outlined clearly and sequentially on the slides. She indicates how much time students have to spend on each task, both on the slide and verbally (‘Time to move on to the next task’). She finds that students are more willing to contribute if the expectations are clear.

Provide explicit structures that help students interact with each other

Planning regular opportunities for students to actively participate and interact with each other – such as ‘think-pair-share’ activities, polls, or small-group discussions – promotes engagement, fosters a sense of mattering, and allows you to gauge understanding. Include written instruction for all activities, either on slides or on printed worksheets.

- In their class, AJ asks their students to answer a question using the polling tool Mentimeter.¹³ Before revealing the correct answer, AJ then asks each student to turn to their neighbour and explain to them why their own answer is correct. AJ then has students answer the question again. They cover any remaining misconceptions. This technique, called ‘peer instruction’, helps students to deepen their understanding and connect with those around them.

STUDENT VOICE

“I did choose Sydney university originally for the aesthetics, but later it was for the environment, the academic rigour. Though this can be challenging, as long as I have teachers, tutors, and students to interact with and get help from, it’s possible. It’s important that there is a “class,” not just a lot of people sitting in a classroom – there needs to be active participation, active engagement, including group work.”

Advanced Computing student from equity background

Use protocols to support more equitable small-group discussions

Without a sound structure to facilitate equitable small-group discussions, dominant voices will crowd out marginalised or minority voices. Methods such as the ‘circular response method’, ‘start-up sentence completion’, and ‘chalk talk’¹⁴ are conversation protocols that aim to democratise discussion. Interactive polling tools can also help to structure wider class conversations and avoid individual spotlighting. You can use established protocols or design your own. The aim is to guide turn-taking, focus both talk and listening, and value diverse voices. Written instructions can be provided on slides and/or worksheets, and perhaps supplemented with Post-it notes, stickers, whiteboards and other tools that may provide other modalities and structures to support discussion.

- Sal uses the circular response method to structure small-group discussions in her breakout rooms. He provides clear written instructions on the slides, outlining the rules: each person has three minutes to speak; no speaker should be interrupted; no speaker should speak out of turn; each person must respond to the previous speaker’s comments and add to the conversation themselves. After completing one round, the group summarises their discussion and reports back to the room.

Scaffold any ‘sticky’ concepts that students tend to struggle with

‘Sticky’ is a term used to describe any concept that many students tend to struggle with. Sometimes these are ‘threshold concepts’ that act as a barrier to learning progression.² Scaffolding such concepts can help students to build connections between their existing knowledge and the concept they need to understand. To scaffold a sticky concept for students, break class activity down into incremental steps that slowly reduce educator support, as illustrated in the example below.

- Every year, students in Erin’s class struggle with the same key concept and its application. So in class, she scaffolds this sticky concept through four steps. First, she explains the concept in a mini-lecture. Next, she works with the class to apply the concept to a concrete example. Then, students work in pairs or groups to apply the concept to another example. Finally, students work on a task individually and receive feedback from Erin.

Plan to and leave space for questions

Dedicate time, such as at specific points throughout a class, to pause for students to ask questions. This can be done through verbal invitation, through the chat function in Zoom, or through an anonymous Q&A tool such as

Mentimeter.¹³ Allowing time and space for questions in class both normalises help seeking and allows you to clarify any misunderstandings. When inviting questions, also allow time for them to be answered fully, recognising when you will need to adjust the teaching of that class to respond to a broadly held misconception, or follow up after class – whether in person or by email, online discussion board or other means.

- Throughout semester, Trent invites the students in his seminar to post questions to Padlet,¹⁵ an anonymous digital note board. Trent checks the questions after each section of the seminar and addresses them before moving forward. For each question, he identifies insightful elements or perspectives, emphasising a strengths-based approach that encourages further question asking.

Assessment and feedback

Clarify assessment expectations early

Make assessment requirements clear from the outset, by providing detailed information in your unit outline and on Canvas. Include specifics about what is required, relevant dates and, importantly, the rationale behind each assessment task. If possible, also provide exemplars of work at different quality levels, to demonstrate expectations.

- Simone understands that many of the students in her marketing principles unit are new to the discipline and therefore may be unfamiliar with the types of assessments they'll encounter. To help them succeed, she creates a comprehensive 'Assessment Overview Guide' in Canvas that includes all the key information for each assessment. In it, she provides a breakdown of what the students need to do for each assessment, the required word count, the formatting requirements, and due dates. She also indicates how each assessment task relates to the unit learning outcomes, and how it will help students to develop the practical skills they'll need in their future careers. To further clarify her expectations, she includes annotated excerpts of past student work as exemplars, highlighting the strengths and areas for improvement at different grade levels.

Break major assessments down into smaller components with interim deadlines

Doing this can reduce the cognitive load, anxiety and academic risk for students, as well as help them to manage their time and apply the feedback they receive along the way. This can reduce significant structural barriers around familiarity, time management, and lifeload.

- Recognising that a final assessment worth 60 percent can be daunting for students, Pania breaks it down into three clear stages: data collection and analysis; report drafting; and final report writing. On the

assessment page she provides clear instructions and interim deadlines for each stage, allowing students to pace their work and receive and apply feedback throughout the process to correct small misconceptions which can compound over time. By breaking down the assessment in this way, Pania reduces the cognitive load, anxiety and academic risk associated with a large, high-stakes assessment and helps her students to manage their time effectively.

STUDENT VOICE

“Challenges were the overwhelming workload – especially towards the end of semester. Sometimes it’s just too much to think about, so I put it off to the last minute – there’s just too much to do. All the assessments are due at the same time. Ideally, we would stagger them a bit.”

Advanced Computing student from equity background

Use early feedback tasks to provide guidance on potential enrolment decisions that can help students to avoid academic and financial penalty

Make sure you are aware of and communicate both the census date¹⁶ and other provisions for late discontinuation,¹⁷ to support students who may need to withdraw from the unit to avoid any associated academic or financial penalty. Early feedback tasks¹⁸ can 'help students to understand their strengths, areas for improvement and strategies for academic success'.¹⁸ Combined with structured communications, early feedback tasks can provide students with the information they need to make informed enrolment decisions. Early feedback tasks must take place before census date, and must have a 'no-to-low' weighting. The tasks themselves may be completed either in class or online. Examples of early feedback tasks include short quizzes and written reflections. Feedback should be appropriate for the assessment type.

- Henrik embeds an early feedback task into his first-year design unit. The task is worth 10 percent, and requires students to observe a site on campus and outline how people use the space through a drawing or diagram and a short piece of explanatory text. Henrik uses SRES to email students their feedback. Students who have submitted and passed the task receive a comment from the marker and feedback from the rubric. Students who have failed the task through either non-submission or poor performance are emailed separately. Students who need support in making decisions about their progression are directed to further guidance and also referred to the Program Director.



2.3 Assessment and curriculum

Building equity into the heart of assessment and curriculum

Assessments can be the most powerful, but also the most stressful parts of the semester. This section considers how we can support students from equity backgrounds to succeed through the curriculum, focusing on the immediate unit of study. It considers all the elements that make up the curriculum, including the unit content, assessments, and the resources that help us and our students make sense of how it all fits together.

Be explicit about your curriculum design

The unit of study outline published through Sydney Curriculum is a high-level description of your unit. Helping students to understand why you have designed the unit in the particular ways you have can powerfully invite them into your design. Forming a shared understanding of the curriculum helps students to appreciate the learning outcomes that they will achieve by the end of the semester. With students today studying within the context of increasing life-load demands, the ability to plan ahead is crucial.

Clearly define the learning outcomes, why they are important, and how your students can expect to achieve them

Sharing some of the thinking about how the unit is constructed helps the curriculum to stay transparent and allows students to see how they will attain their learning goals throughout the semester. Providing this clarity removes structural barriers around perceptibility.

- Isabel, who teaches a unit in data analytics, talks with her students about why they are enrolled in the unit, what they would like to achieve through the semester, and how this unit fits with their broader aspirations. She spends time working through the unit design, showing students where the unit outcomes might align with their goals and where there is flexibility in working on things of personal interest.

Talk to your students about how to navigate the curriculum

Most students will be undertaking multiple units simultaneously, each with different designs and expectations. Showing them how to navigate your unit's design will help to reduce any access barriers early.

- Bob starts each semester by working through the Canvas site as well as the unit outline, highlighting

where students can expect to find information. For example, he points out the assessment descriptions, and explains how the assessments are designed to meet diverse perspectives. He also shows students how to access various academic and non-academic supports throughout the semester.

Check in with colleagues about the workload in other units your students are likely taking alongside yours

Program Directors will be able to provide information about the timetabling of other assessments in the program. The Knowing Your Student report (see Section 2.1) also shows your students' most commonly co-enrolled units. Consider timing your assessments in conjunction with co-enrolled units to avoid heavy simultaneous workloads. This will also help student advisors in directing students through pathways that are intentionally designed to spread out workload.

- Henry, a molecular biology Unit Coordinator, discovered that the organic chemistry unit had a major lab report due the same week as his mid-semester exam. The two units share a considerable number of students so, to help students manage the workload, he reached out to Polly, the chemistry Unit Coordinator, to discuss rescheduling one of their assessments

STAFF VOICE

“Knowing Your Student report showed that students were doing another unit that had a thesis due. Having this visibility was useful because I was able to adjust a couple of my own assessment deadlines away from this completion deadline and be attuned their stress levels as they got closer to submission time.”

Educator from Engineering

to avoid the overlap. They agreed to stagger the assessments between the two units, significantly reducing student stress and improving performance in both units. This proactive approach also helped student advisors in guiding students to better plan their studies, enhancing their overall academic experience.

Make it clear to your students when they might expect to have higher workloads

The capacity to plan ahead is particularly important for students who are juggling a number of commitments. If they know when to expect a particularly high workload, students can plan ahead to take on fewer hours of work, organise childcare or even settle in for a ‘tough few weeks’, alleviating important structural barriers.

- Frankie shares with the students in her maths unit some estimates of how long he expects them to spend on each assessment. She points out Assessment 4 as the one that will take the longest, and encourages her students to set aside time in Week 10 to work on it.

STUDENT VOICE

“Also, the overlapping of assessment types and due dates – even units within the same disciplines, e.g., [...], [...], [...], they all have their assessments due in the same week – then Stuvac and exam period – there’s nothing due. We are still learning in weeks 12 and 13, but we have our final assessments due then too.”

Liberal Arts/Science student from equity background



Use language that helps your students to feel included, making it clear that the curriculum is there to support their learning and their success in the unit

Inclusive language such as ‘we’ and ‘us’ can help students to feel that the curriculum is meant for them. This helps to build stronger relationships and help students feel like they matter.

- Hua intentionally uses first- and second-person language throughout her unit to reinforce that it is about ‘us’ as a group and how ‘we’ might proceed through the semester together. For example, she might say, ‘Next week we will be working through Chapter 9 together ...’ Hua knows that using inclusive language in this way can send a message to her students about the nature of the relationship she seeks to develop between the teaching team and the students in the unit.

Supporting diversity in a rigorous curriculum

Allow the curriculum to encourage rigour and have high expectations of students, whilst acknowledging areas that are challenging and making it clear what support is available.

Identify and create opportunities for students to share their experiences

One of the most powerful ways to reinforce students’ sense of mattering and demonstrate the valuing of diversity is to validate the relevance of a broad range of individual experiences.

- Preet teaches ancient history seminars to second-year students. As they cover topics relating to ancient European civilisations, some students enjoy sharing their experiences of having visited Athens and Rome, the Acropolis and the Pantheon. Preet is aware that these stories can be alienating for students who have not had the opportunity to travel in this way. Therefore, for his first icebreaker activity, Preet asks students to share spaces that they feel connect them to the past. In this way Preet is seeking to ground all future stories in the connection we all have with time. This is something concrete to return to when he would like to reinforce that all of us have had experiences that connect us to the past in various meaningful and personal ways.

Encourage rigour, emphasising that it does not need to be easy – it just needs to be achievable

Acknowledge when learning activities or assessments are intentionally challenging, and help students by providing support when the difficulty ramps up. This emphasises students' strengths and what they *can* do to succeed.

- Ben teaches a third-year law unit that has a high 'germane cognitive load' (i.e. inherently complex content). From experience, he knows that this point in the semester is usually when students begin to get lost in the content and feel like they are falling behind. To navigate this, Ben has set up a multipronged approach. In class, he sets activities in which students explain concepts to each other, and he intentionally leaves time for additional questions and explanations. For asynchronous support, he has set up a dedicated discussion thread that he encourages students to use when they tackle the case studies on their own. He explains to students that he will be checking the discussion boards daily at 4 pm for the next two weeks. Acknowledging that the content is difficult while ramping up the available support, Ben has normalised asking for help in his otherwise quite competitive cohort.

STUDENT VOICE

“I like to think of myself as a work in progress, so just getting a pass, I don't beat myself up. It's about self-reflection, understanding that your transcript is not your worth as a human being. In one of the units I studied on leadership, we learned the difference between a fixed and growth mindset. So just getting 60, I see that this is not all I am – it's a period of growth.”

Liberal Arts/Science student from equity background

Help your students to reframe the experience of struggling from 'I'm falling behind' to 'This is difficult and requires more effort'

Equity-focused teaching aims to remove structural barriers. However, it cannot remove the productive struggle necessary as part of learning. As the inherent difficulty of the semester's learning increases it is important to highlight that this is endemic to the knowledge or skills being learnt and not a fault of the student. As the unit difficulty ramps-up, acknowledge that

this is the case, and normalise the need for additional effort and help-seeking.

- Julie has noticed that when the semester gets to about Week 5 and the topic switches to learning about the brainstem – a notoriously tricky bit of neuroanatomy – a lot of students become frustrated and stop coming to the prac classes. When she asks them what happened, they tell her that they have fallen behind and 'don't get it', so they don't see the point of coming to pracs. Julie introduces 'mini-pracs' into her lecture sessions, where she takes 'time out' to pause working through the content and asks students to note down, and ideally also draw, the structures that they will look for in the prac classes. By the time students get into the lab, they should have a handful of notes and diagrams with their own personal questions to work on with the help of their tutors.

Consider what parts of the unit need human connection and what parts need focus time

Recognise that different students will have different needs to think, to process, and to engage with new ideas. This demonstrates that you value the diverse ways of engaging that resonate with different students.

- Iman teaches a writing class on Zoom. He likes to use breakout rooms to help students make connections, brainstorm ideas and learn through discussion. But he often also sets up a 'quiet room' for students who are not yet ready to discuss their ideas. He is signalling that it is okay for them either to process their ideas silently or to chat through them with others.

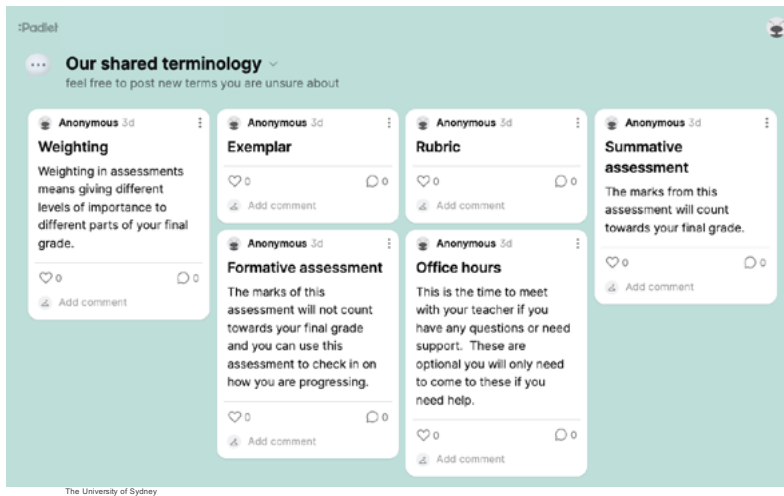
Scaffolding and supporting assessment

For your students, assessments direct learning behaviour and demonstrate the progress made through the semester.^{1,2} Recognising this dual purpose, the strategies below support students from equity backgrounds to learn through assessment.

Remember that confidence is key

Consider how you can build confidence in your students so that they have the capacity to do well on assessments. Helping students to feel confident and competent is a key motivator for engagement.

- Ali has noticed that whenever he coordinates his first-year writing unit, any students who do poorly on the first assessment withdraw from the unit. He recently met one of these students in a different unit, and



Left: Padlet showing some common terminology that might be used in a unit to describe assessments.

the student commented that since she had done so poorly on that first assessment, she had assumed that writing was not for her. Ali and his tutors now include practice activities in tutorial classes in the lead-up to the first assessment to build students’ familiarity with the task, and provide forward-looking feedback on the assessment to emphasise developmental momentum.

Introduce assessments gradually, and scaffold progression

Start with low-stakes tasks to ease anxieties and build confidence, then gradually increase difficulty, prioritising long-term development of competency over immediate results.

- Matt has five assessments in his third-year physiology unit. The final assessment is a capstone task, which requires students to submit a scientific report on their chosen topic. Matt knows that the scientific report format might be new to some of his students, and that the length and complexity can be intimidating. He has therefore included elements of report writing in his first three assessments, so that by the time his students attempt the capstone assessment they have already completed assessments involving writing aims and hypotheses, completed in-class exercises on creating figures in Excel, and spent the semester engaging with the literature that will inform the introduction and discussion sections of their final report. While writing a full scientific report from scratch might seem near impossible to students, all of these scaffolds throughout the semester help them to prepare for their final task.

Use clear and consistent assessment language

Clarifying assessment terminology, and then using that terminology consistently, can help to alleviate confusion and stress in students who may be unfamiliar with key assessment terms. This helps to address a key structural barrier that especially face first-in-family students.

- Feng creates a [Padlet](#) board each semester that acts as a glossary of terms that students can expect to come across in his unit (and in other units). Common terms that end up on the Padlet board include formative, summative, rubric, exemplar, weighting, feedback, feedforward, grade, mark, outcome, barrier, quiz, test and exam. Even the term ‘assessment’ might be unfamiliar to some students, as they may be used to other terminology. Students are encouraged to add their own terms to the list if they come across something unfamiliar. He also links to the University glossary for students, <https://www.sydney.edu.au/students/glossary.html>. Together, these help Feng to ensure that all his students share the same understanding of this language, especially since many of his students are often straight out of high school and/or the first in their family to attend university.

STAFF VOICE

“...I try to scaffold the learning academic and scientific language; ...explaining things in plain language where possible, breaking down scientific terms into understandable chunks...”

Educator in Science

Leverage authentic assessments

Authentic assessments connect learning to real-world relevance and future careers, helping to maintain student engagement during challenges and amplifying the value of diverse perspectives.

- Alex has noticed that when it comes to writing their final marketing plan for a hypothetical company, some students struggle to put into action the ideas they have learned during the semester. Students seemed to be spending too much time learning about their hypothetical company and not enough time developing practical marketing strategies. Alex has therefore changed this final assessment, and now asks students to create a marketing plan for a company or other organisation that they have actually worked for, such as their current employer, or a school, sports team, or other organisation they are familiar with. This change in assessment design has freed up students to talk about something they know well, and to focus on the key goal of the unit: developing competence in marketing approaches. Alex has also enjoyed marking these assessments more.

Consider what are we actually assessing

Assessments should support students towards attaining the learning outcomes of the units and programs, not test their skills in following instructions. Evidence suggests that students from privileged educational backgrounds tend to have developed proficiency in the art of ‘exam taking’, which usually is not the desired learning outcome. Ask yourself whether your assessment instructions are clear. Have previous students been able to understand and follow them? Have many students previously missed the point of the assessment? Are there exemplars available to students? Are students clear about exactly what you expect from them? Have you spent time with your students ensuring that they understand what the assessment requires? Have you supported your students in being able to successfully undertake the assessment task?

Joe Feldman’s¹ work on equitable grading might be of interest – there is a short 5-minute quiz that can help you to assess how equitable your current assessment and grading practices are, and offers insights, perspectives and ideas that you might not have considered: <https://gradingforequity.org/resources/take-the-quiz>

Providing feedback

Providing feedback that invites students into a dialogue about their work helps to develop feedback literacy.² This might be feedback about a particular assessment, or more generally about their progress through the unit or program.

Make feedback a normal part of learning

This helps students to develop positive practices with respect to seeking feedback and being able to deal with the emotional aspect of engaging with feedback.

- In Thom’s first-year sociology seminar, students engage in a structured group feedback session after each research paper submission. In these sessions, students share their research insights and critique each other’s methodologies in small groups, while also receiving feedback on their own work. This is complemented by individual feedback from Thom. As the semester progresses, students begin to see these feedback cycles not as a source of judgement but as an essential part of academic growth.

Emphasise that feedback is about the work, not the person

This important distinction can be communicated through repeated reminders, as well as through how we deliver our feedback to students.

- Lee teaches an advanced creative writing workshop. Given the personal nature of creative writing, students often feel vulnerable sharing their pieces. To emphasise the distinction between work and self, Lee introduces every critique session with this reminder: ‘Feedback today focuses solely on the current written piece, not on the writer. We’re looking at structure, style and narrative, not at personal attributes. Remember, critiques help to refine the work, not to define the individual behind it.’ Over the semester, students grow more comfortable sharing and receiving feedback on their work, understanding that critiques are tools for growth, not personal judgements.
- Annie is careful to give feedback that clearly addresses the work and not the person. After completing a Master’s degree herself, she recognises the damaging nature of careless language. She now reframes feedback comments from ‘You have failed to meet criterion 3’ to ‘This analysis could be improved by taking into account criterion 3, which states ...’

Example sentence starters for actionable feedback

- You have mentioned xxx, one way to improve this argument is through xxx...
- Have you thought about doing xxx to help address xxx?
- I would encourage you to...because...
- As you start to think about the next assessment...
- We encourage you to consider ...
- I was curious to know more about how you have arrived at...

Check out the [Matrix of Feedback for Learning](#) for more examples.³

Provide clear opportunities to apply the feedback received

When giving feedback, make sure it is clear how and when students can apply the lessons learned from the feedback. This is also known as providing 'feedforward', because it focuses on how the student can improve in the future, rather than on how they performed in the past.

- Fred has designed his assessments to make sure they inform or 'feed into' each other. This makes it easier for him to give practical feedback tips, and gives his students a clear pathway to implement his suggestions after each assessment. For example, he often explicitly refers to subsequent assessments in feedback comments, such as, "As you start to think about assessment 3...". As students see the clear connection between assessments, it makes it possible to try again, applying their previous feedback, watch themselves improve, and have transparency in how skills are developed across time.

Clearly point out where the student is doing well, as well as where and how they need to improve

This helps to develop students' feelings of competence, emphasises their strengths, and helps them to understand the next steps on their learning journey.

- In Janet's graphic design studio classes, students often present their design portfolios for critique. In one particular session, a student named Amelia presents her work and requests Janet's feedback. Rather than using the typical 'sandwich' method, which softens any negative feedback by 'sandwiching' it between an opening and a closing piece of positive feedback, Janet directly comments on the contrast and readability of one of Amelia's designs, suggesting specific improvements. She then shifts to discussing the strengths of the layout choices in another of Amelia's pieces, and provides alternative perspectives. By addressing each point directly, without trying to cushion her critiques with praise, Janet ensures that Amelia receives clear, actionable feedback that will help her to improve.

STAFF VOICE

"Authentic assessment is really important "we're doing this because when you graduate you need to do this in the workplace" - and that helps students realise, "oh yes, this is part of the journey. This is why I'm doing this ."

Educator in Business

STUDENT VOICE

"I don't think I've ever been taught how to use feedback. I think it would really help. "

Arts/Science student from equity background

2.4 Kicking off your teaching (before and at the beginning of semester)

Setting the stage: Equitable beginnings for a semester of success

Embarking on a new semester presents an opportunity to set the tone for equitable teaching and learning. First impressions gained in those initial days can significantly affect the sense of belonging, confidence and success experienced by students from equity backgrounds throughout their learning journey. This section offers tools to shape an equitable start, enhancing your ability to support all your students, regardless of their background, to thrive through feeling valued, empowered, and equipped for success.

Teaching and learning

Fostering an inclusive environment where students feel safe and empowered to learn is a key element in inclusive teaching, as it begins to build strong interpersonal relationships with and among students. A positive class climate leads to a higher sense of mattering and better outcomes for all students.¹

Build a strong learning community by welcoming students to the unit and providing key information and access to their unit site before semester starts

A positive class climate is built on a strong sense of community. A friendly message connecting students with you, the unit content, and practical advice will help them to feel engaged and confident as they start their studies. This is particularly important for students who may not have a generational history of going to university, and may find it difficult to navigate their way through the higher education system.

- In her first-year business unit, Nia publishes a Welcome Week module that includes a video in which she warmly welcomes students, explains the unit and its relevance to them, and provides a clear outline of expectations and requirements. She also provides all the key information on a single page in the unit site, and includes links to other [resources to help students transition to university](#).²

STUDENT VOICE

“And he would know everyone’s name on the first day. I’ve never known any other university tutor to do that. I was like, oh my god, I can really see he cares for the students. That was amazing”

Arts student from equity background

Build relationship-rich educational environments by showing students they matter

Starting in your first class, learn to use students’ names (make an effort to pronounce them correctly, but don’t labour over getting it perfect!) and say hello in the language of your students, or a language other than English that is meaningful to you.

- In a very large biology unit, Unit Coordinators Sofia and Amir ask their tutors to provide [name tents](#)³ or stickers in the practical classes, and to practise using their students’ names in class.
- Akiko, a psychology tutor, asks her students to complete an [SRES form](#)⁴ to help her get to know them. The form includes a place where they can [record the pronunciation of their name](#)⁵ so she can use them confidently.
- Farah, a teacher in education and social work, checks the main languages of her students in Know Your Student (see Section 2.1) and learns some basic words such as ‘hello’, ‘please’, ‘good’, ‘thank you’ and ‘goodbye’ in these languages.

Foster trust by trusting students with your own stories

Sharing a story from your own life to explain a key concept can be a good way to foster trust in your classroom. You could also use this to emphasise the diversity found in your own experiences.

- In Week 1, all the tutors in Rami’s human geography unit share their own journey to university, talking about important events that have helped to shape it. Students are then given the opportunity to share their own journeys. This helps students to form personal connections with each other and with their tutors.

Alleviate students' anxiety and support their self-efficacy by giving them opportunities to learn from each other and to connect to the broader campus infrastructure

Providing spaces for students to share their knowledge and experiences of the unit and build connections with others is particularly important for those who may not have family members with the background to help them understand the language and systems of an Australian university.

- In their first-year biology unit, Tariq and Elena build a class glossary by sharing a [Padlet](#) board where students contribute terms they found difficult, along with definitions and translations.
- In his computer science unit, Samir encourages students to answer each other's questions on the discussion board. Tutors then go in to endorse appropriate answers.
- In their legal studies unit, Luca and Mel collaborate with their Academic Liaison Librarian to build students' legal research and digital literacy skills in line with unit learning outcomes.

The screenshot shows a digital form titled "Enter data" with a hamburger menu icon in the top right. The form content includes: a greeting "Hi Samantha" and a prompt "Tell us about yourself"; a "Set data" section with a "Clear record" link; a text input field for "What is your preferred name?"; a text input field for "Pronouns (e.g. she/her, he/him, they/them, ze/hir)"; a section for "How do you pronounce your name?" featuring a "Record audio clip" button and a "Delete all" button; a text input field for "What are you most looking forward to in this unit?"; and a text input field for "Is there anything we can do to help you succeed in this unit?". A large blue "Save" button is at the bottom.

Above: Example of an SRES form asking students to share the pronunciation of their names.

Encourage students to tap into support services and resources from the beginning

Emphasise that seeking help is a normal and important part of the learning process, and provide clear information on how to access support within the context of your unit (see Sections 2.2, 2.5 and 2.6.).

- Priya, a lecturer in business, includes information about support services in her first lecture and unit outline. She invites representatives from Student Life and the Learning Hub to introduce themselves and explain how they can help students. Priya also shares her own experiences of seeking help during her own studies, normalising help-seeking behaviours.

Meet with your teaching team before semester to ensure they are well prepared to support diverse learners

Discuss the needs of students from equity backgrounds with your teaching team, and collaborate to develop strategies and resources that promote inclusive teaching practices. By fostering open communication and a shared commitment to equity, you can create a cohesive teaching team that is better equipped to support all students. (Find out why this approach is important in equity-focused teaching in Section 2.2, and how you can build on this approach throughout the semester in Section 2.5.)

- Javier, the Unit Coordinator for a large philosophy unit, runs a pre-semester briefing with his teaching team. Drawing on institutional data and insights from previous semesters, they discuss the diversity of the current cohort, brainstorm strategies to support the students from equity backgrounds, and create a bank of inclusive teaching practices and resources. This is followed up with regular team check-ins to discuss challenges and successes.

STUDENT VOICE

“you know, I much prefer seeing people in person and talking to people, but I tend to email because I don't know where they are. I've tried finding the offices once and then I got lost because it's a really confusing building. And then I showed up and the coordinator wasn't even there.”

Arts/student from equity background

Set expectations for how you, your teaching team and your students will communicate

A major hurdle to students seeking help in knowing who to ask and where to go. This can be a particularly challenging in units with large teaching teams and multiple channels for communications (e.g., discussion board, email). Unit coordinators can create a communication plan the unit (see Section 2.2.) and student-facing guidance that sets expectations for how students can seek help and support for specific issues. Establish guidelines with your teaching team for communicating with students including the use of discussion boards and when to refer students on to the Unit of Study coordinator or other services. Setting and meeting expectations builds trust and rapport with students.

- Amira, the Unit Coordinator for a large first-year psychology unit, works with her teaching team to develop a communication plan for the semester. They agree on key channels for interaction, such as the unit’s discussion board, email, and virtual office hours. Amira and her team commit to checking the discussion board at set times and responding to student queries within 24 hours during the week. They also create a shared document that lists common questions and their answers to maintain consistency in their responses. During the first week of classes, Amira sends a welcome video to all students, clearly outlining the communication plan and setting expectations for engagement.

Who to contact		
I need help on...	How do I get help?	Time to respond
Health and wellbeing	Access 24/7 help via phone and chat - https://www.sydney.edu.au/students/health-wellbeing.html#support	Immediate
Tutorial attendance	Email your tutor - Find your tutorial and tutor’s email and contact hours <link>	Tutor’s in-semester contact hours here
Unit enrolment	Email your Unit of Study Coordinator - <amira.kohl@sydney.edu.au>	within 24hrs (Mon-Fri)
Personal circumstances that affect your study or assessment	Email your Unit of Study Coordinator - <amira.kohl@sydney.edu.au>	within 24hrs (Mon-Fri)
	Assessment - Special Consideration Service portal	within 24-48hrs (Mon-Sun)
Questions on the week’s content	Canvas discussion board - Questions will be answered by Tutors every Tue, Thu and Fri from 3-5pm - Students can also answer questions at anytime	Weeks 1-12 (Tue, Thu & Fri) 3-5pm
Exam prep	Canvas discussion board - Questions will be answered by the teaching team every day from 3-5pm	Week 13 Daily 3-5pm

Above: An example of how you can set expectations around communication with students using a ‘Who to contact’ guide, detailing support needs, contact methods, and response times.

Assessment and feedback

Set your students up for success by giving them a clear understanding of your unit's learning outcomes, assessment tasks and requirements, and submission processes

Reduce stress by making sure students have enough information early to start planning their assessments. This is particularly beneficial for students with Academic Plans, who may need to manage a separate set of due dates, and for students who are not yet familiar with different assessment types and/or how to manage their time effectively.

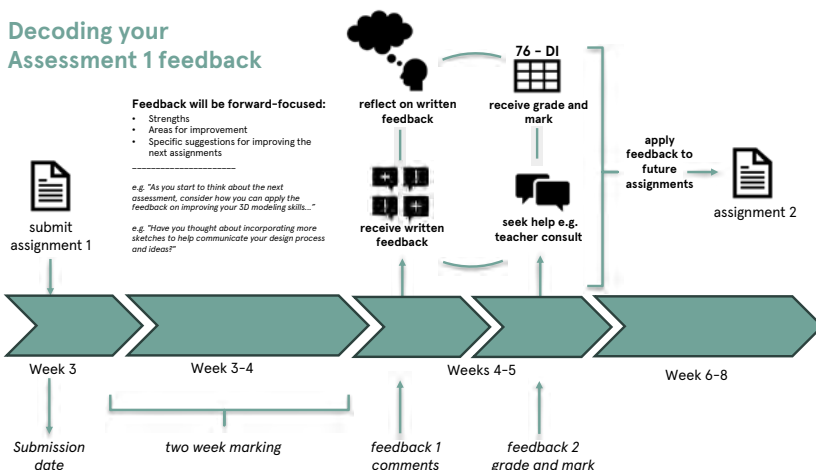
- In the first week of his project management class, Rajesh has his students work together to unpack the unit outline, checking that they understand the assessment tasks and due dates. He does this by devoting 15 minutes of the first lecture to reading through the outline with the students, who then answer some questions about it on [Mentimeter](#), and can ask for clarification if needed.

Explain your feedback practices

As well as letting students know what you expect from them, let them know what they can expect from you in the way of feedback.

- In his architecture unit, Jiro explains to students that they will receive their feedback comments a few days before their grade is released, so that they can focus on reflecting on the comments. He also emphasises that the comments will be forward-looking, and will help them prepare for the next assessment.

Decoding your Assessment 1 feedback



Find out more

For more simple ways to support student wellbeing and create autonomy-supportive learning environments – right from the start of the semester, and even when pressed for time – check out [Lifhacks for teaching](#)⁶ from [Enhancing Student Wellbeing - Resource for University Educators](#).⁷

Check for Academic Plans at the beginning of semester, and review the required adjustments

Make your students' lives easier by letting them know you have their Academic Plans and are ready to make the adjustments without their having to ask each time.

- Whenever Samia receives an Academic Plan, she contacts the student directly to ask if there is anything she can do to support them in addition to any adjustments listed in the plan. She also applies the time extensions to the assessment due dates, so the student knows their adjustments have been taken into account.

STUDENT VOICE

“She reached out about my academic plan, asked how she could support me. I know teachers have a lot on, especially in large cohorts, but it really made a difference... She automatically included the extension in Canvas assignment due dates. It's a small thing, but it helps. Without it, assignments show up as “missing” which is stressful, even when you know it's not really due yet”

Occupational Therapy student from equity background

Left: Example/sample infographic decoding staged assessment, describing the process from submission day in Week 3 to receiving, reflecting and acting on feedback in weeks 4 to 8.

2.5 Everyday teaching strategies (during semester)

Enabling students to create, test, and share knowledge

The classroom, lab, lecture hall and Zoom room are all sites where students can be either connected to or marginalised from the content, the curriculum, their teachers and each other. The formats we use for conversation, knowledge-sharing, discovery and learning send powerful signals to our students about the voices, perspectives and ways of understanding that are valued. Designing in-class activities and spaces to facilitate participation in a diverse cohort can draw in a wide range of perspectives that improve the relevance of the curriculum for everyone.

The classroom presents an opportunity for you to model respect and open-mindedness in a way that is instructive to all students. This can be done through your own inclusive practice and facilitating inclusive practice with other students through the use of protocols, awareness raising and explicit discussions of empathy and respect. Facilitating connections between a student's own experiences and the curriculum inspires other students to develop their own relationships with the unit content. This section offers examples of in-class practice that encourage students to strengthen their personal relationships with each other and the learning materials.

Teaching and learning

Include an Acknowledgement of Country, and connect it to the class

It has become commonplace to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the Country on which our teaching takes place. This acknowledgement is an opportunity to show respect to Indigenous peoples and knowledge traditions, to recognise inequality and our commitment to overcoming it, and to model openness to diverse knowledge traditions. Students often find an Acknowledgement of Country more relevant if we find a way to indigenise the content, such as by mentioning an Indigenous scholar who has worked on the topic, or how Indigenous communities might relate to the content.

- In his class about AI, Jeevan reads out a template-based Acknowledgement of Country before adding a statement of relevance: 'We will talk later about how generative AI can fabricate information, an occurrence I have noticed in AI-produced text about Indigenous peoples. We have a responsibility as users of such tools to uncover such misinformation by, for example, checking what we read against resources produced by Indigenous people themselves, such as Marcia Langton's Welcome to Country¹ or Anita Heiss's Growing Up Aboriginal in Australia.²

Consider the dynamics created by room design and layout

How we arrange the tables and chairs (and ourselves) in a room sends a message about whose voice is important and where knowledge comes from. Rearranging the classroom furniture (where possible) can position students as equal participants, by providing a room layout that fosters open relationships.

- Margaret asks some of her students to help move some tables and chairs in the few minutes before each class. Together, they move the tables to the periphery of the room and arrange the chairs in a circle in the middle of the room, emphasising responsibility to one another and the equal weighting of contributions from anywhere in the circle.
- At the start of each class, Zusia arranges the tables into small groups. As students work on activities together, she moves from group to group, sitting with them and offering her perspective when invited. This sends a message that she is available, but that the responsibility for learning rests largely with the students.



Normalise silence

Some students take longer than others to process questions and develop responses, and might only feel comfortable speaking once they have ‘drafted’ an answer in their minds (or in writing). Fast-paced, noisy conversation can be a barrier to learning for some students. Consider normalising silent time following a question.

- In her first tutorial with a new class, Kal asks a question and says, ‘Don’t answer straight away, take some time to think individually. Let’s wait 2 minutes before we share our ideas’. She also uses this approach if a student asks her a question – instead of answering straight away, she asks the class to think about the question individually and then asks students to contribute their thoughts.

STUDENT VOICE

“I found it quite intimidating, talking in a class where I felt like I was an imposter and that I didn't even know what I was talking about.”

Science student from equity background

“having that small group discussion and having the tutor facilitate by going to each group, encouraging students who are a bit quieter to speak and contribute to the group.”

Art student from equity background

Facilitate equal participation

It is often the case that an over-confident student can unintentionally shut down wider participation. Creative teachers can use classroom management techniques to limit talking time and share responses more equally around the classroom. One strategy is to regularly use ‘think, pair, share’ activities, where teachers schedule time for students to draft their thoughts quietly and individually, before they share them with a partner, and then with the larger group.

- Donna has noticed that a few confident students dominate open-class discussions in her medical sciences unit. So she brings a stethoscope to class, and tells her students that whoever is holding the stethoscope will be the next to answer a question. Students then randomly pass the item to someone else in the room after their turn.
- Jeff’s class is covering a contentious topic, and a few opinionated students are taking turns to state their own opinions without listening to others. Jeff asks every student to write their own thoughts on a piece of paper, scrunch it up, and throw it to someone else in the room. Students take a moment to read the opinion they receive, and then must share it in good faith with the class.

Develop routines for wider language participation

Students from non-English speaking backgrounds can struggle to interpret some of the language used in a classroom, or to compose an answer and translate it quickly. Without routines that enable participation for such students, classroom teaching strategies can perpetuate stereotypes about shy multilingual students. To support these students, you can plan preparation time, flag key terms and concepts early in the lesson, and/or allow online translators to be used.

- Marcus notices that two Chinese students in his class are pointing at the current PowerPoint slide. One student looks confused, while the other appears to be whispering an explanation in Mandarin. Marcus speaks to the entire class, acknowledging that the terminology is difficult and asking everyone to take two minutes to think of different ways a key term on the slide could be explained. He encourages students to use a translator or a thesaurus, and then invites students to share their interpretations.

Check in with your teaching team throughout the semester

Especially in large units of study, it can be difficult for a Unit Coordinator to be aware of the range of student experiences in tutorials or labs run by various demonstrators or tutors. Holding teaching-team meetings with time set aside for sharing observations about student learning can provide important information for coordinators. Small tweaks to the unit content or tutorial plans during the semester can help students to engage or improve their motivation (see Section 2.4.).

- Claire’s unit invites students to connect their own experiences with the critical theories set for weekly discussion. At a mid-semester check-in with her teaching team, she hears that students are rarely connecting the theoretical material to experiences from their personal lives. She tweaks her lecture structure to include a weekly anecdote, and asks her tutors to share their own examples of how the theories relate to their own everyday life.

Assessment and feedback

Offer multiple pathways to every outcome⁵

Many assessment tasks provide limited options for students to measure their progress towards the unit outcomes. Students from equity backgrounds often have unrecognised skills that can help to demonstrate their learning in non-traditional ways – such as speaking rather than writing, or demonstrating rather than describing. Where possible, providing choice in the way an assessment task is completed avoids limiting which students have an advantage due to experience with skills that are not relevant to the learning outcome.

- Greg wants his students to present an argument about a unit reading. It is not important whether the argument is written or presented in another medium, so he allows students to choose from three options: write a 500-word mini-essay; create an A3 poster; or deliver a five-minute speech. All tasks have the same rubric that assesses their argument based on the reading.

Provide multimodal feedback to engage different cohorts

Students from equity backgrounds will benefit from experiencing a wide range of feedback. This can take the form of multiple modes and be delivered online through technologies and tools in Canvas and SRES, or in-person by the educator as spoken or written commentary, or through quiz and audience response systems. In large classes where lecturers or tutors cannot provide 1:1 feedback to all, students can benefit from witnessing other students receive feedback.

- Cass has two major assessment tasks in her unit. There are strict time limits for marking, so she is unable to use multimodal feedback for each assessment. Instead of writing feedback comments for the first task, she records a short audio comment. For the second task, she asks students to submit a request for feedback with their assignment – ‘What would you most like feedback on from your assignment?’ – fostering a dialogic mindset around feedback.
- Hanh is grading lab reports about a short experiment conducted in class. He keeps his comments to a minimum, but also creates a short video in which he validates some aspects of lab report writing that he has noticed many students succeeded at, and shares the video for discussion in his next tutorial.

Help students to see the relevance of their assessments

While it is true that students from equity backgrounds can be motivated by a sense of relevance in their assessments, there are diverse forms of relevance for any given task. Communicating with students about vocational, educational and specific disciplinary relevance can both resonate with a student’s goals and help them discover other forms of motivation.

- Cian is teaching computer science, and has reformatted his assessment task instruction sheets. To support students from equity backgrounds, he has added the subheading ‘Relevance’. For each task, he drafts three sentences: ‘This task prepares you for future learning in computer science by ...’, ‘This task also helps with tasks you might complete in other disciplines by ...’ and ‘This task also helps with skills that many employers value, such as ...’

Framing feedback as ‘more than just a mark’⁴

Because some students from equity backgrounds have had negative experiences with feedback in the past, and some wonder whether they belong in a discipline or at university, feedback can play an important role in validating their efforts and building their confidence.

- Leigh wants to improve the experience of students from equity backgrounds in her geography unit. She changes the design of a multiple-choice question task so that it includes one low-weight open question about how the material relates to students’ previous studies in geography. Markers validate any connections that students are able to make to the content.
- Navi coordinates a large cultural studies unit with many first-time tutors. Her experience tells her that tutors often ‘perform their expertise’ in feedback (under the impression that feedback is a kind of performance review). She creates a training session for markers that highlights the importance of focusing feedback on supporting student learning, and provides suggested comments for her tutors in a shared document that demonstrate a balance between explaining grades and supporting future improvements.

Final essay: rhetorical analysis

Due date: Friday 6 October 2024 23:59
Length: 1500 words
Submit: via Canvas Dropbox

Main question

Expectations

1. Define _____
2. Apply _____
3. Present _____
4. Use and adapt _____
5. Engage _____

Outcomes

- Learning Outcome 1 _____
- Learning Outcome 2 _____
- Learning Outcome 3 _____
- Learning Outcome 4 _____
- Learning Outcome 5 _____

Professional relevance

Professional relevance

While an academic essay might seem to be a relic of university assessment, it can also test skills that are important in professional settings. An effective essay requires planning, organization, anticipation of likely audience responses, clear communication, and persuasiveness. These are all valued skills in the workplace, whether communicating in writing or addressing an audience in other formal and informal settings (presentations, conferences, web guides, pitching proposals).

Above: Infographic of an example relevance statement articulating the professional relevance of an academic essay.

2.6 Finishing up well (*towards and after the end of semester*)

More than grades: Finishing strong and making the end of semester matter

As the semester draws to a close, the pressure ramps up – for you and for your students. This period can be particularly challenging for students from equity backgrounds, who are often managing various life responsibilities alongside study. Don't underestimate the impact of fostering relationships and promoting a sense of mattering during these crucial weeks. The semester's conclusion isn't just an academic milestone – it's a pivotal moment to reaffirm each student's unique value and contributions to the learning environment.

This is a time for us as educators to help students recognise their inherent strengths and how they enrich our academic communities. It's an opportunity for them to build and leverage social capital as they plan for the future. Making students feel that they genuinely matter can be as important and motivating to them as good grades – if not more so. This section offers practical strategies to navigate this period, ensuring that you can empower students from equity backgrounds and set them on a course for continued success.

Teaching and learning

Address end-of-semester or exam-related anxiety through multifaceted support

By openly and proactively addressing end-of-semester anxieties and providing concrete solutions, you create a less stressful and more supportive learning environment.

- Jamie fosters open dialogue in her anthropology class, actively encouraging students to share their concerns about the upcoming final assessments through an anonymous [Padlet](#) board and validating their feelings in response. She then pivots the discussion by giving examples from the semester where the students have demonstrated disciplinary competencies and personal resilience, reinforcing students' confidence in their abilities to tackle upcoming challenges.
- In his economics unit, Stephen includes a section dedicated to 'Stress management and exam preparedness'. In it, he provides students with evidence-based techniques to handle exam-related stress ([Preparing for exams website](#);¹ [5 ways to manage stress during exams](#)²), such as [guided mindfulness](#)³ and [downloadable time-management planners](#).⁴ He also sends out regular reminders about these resources through Canvas announcements leading up to the exam period.

Empower your students to help themselves and each other

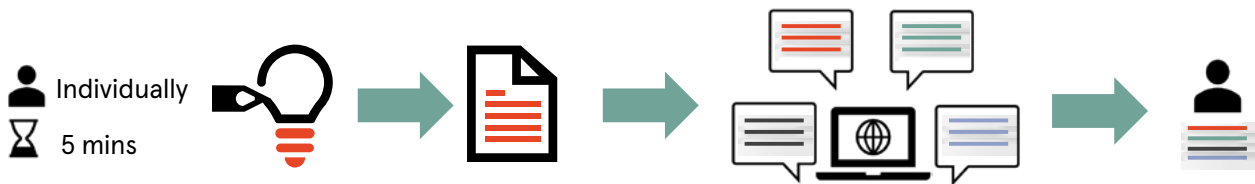
Encouraging students to reappraise their exam anxiety as a natural response can improve their academic performance and sense of wellbeing.⁵ The simple task of writing about their exam anxiety can help students to reduce their anxiety, cope with exam pressure and achieve better academic results.⁶ Remind students of their unique abilities, and guide them towards leveraging these strengths in their academic endeavours.

- In her end-of-semester lecture, Leah includes a brief section called 'Understanding and Using Exam Anxiety.' In it she presents a summary table that differentiates between performance worry and physiological feelings of anxiety, based on research^{5,7,8} (see table). She then asks students to individually write a short piece about their own exam anxiety, and then share one coping technique they use to help reduce exam pressures, encouraging them to focus on managing performance worry, which has been shown to improve academic outcomes.
- During his tutorial classes in the final weeks of semester, Aaron runs an in-class 'strength-mapping session'. In this session, students engage in activities designed to help them pinpoint their unique strengths and talents. They then brainstorm ways to integrate these strengths into their final capstone project and final exams. This approach not only boosts student confidence but also cultivates a strengths-based mindset for approaching academic challenges.

Types of exam anxiety	What it looks like	How it impacts exam performance
Performance worry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Worries about thinking and performance - Negative thoughts about failure - Self-doubt and lack of confidence 	Strongly linked to reduced academic performance
Physiological feelings of anxiety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased heart rate - Sweating - Butterflies in the stomach - Tension headaches 	Less consistently related to poor test performance compared to performance worry

Above: Example table for communicating the types of exam anxiety to students.

Understanding and utilising exam anxiety



Step 1: Your exam anxiety

- On a blank page or document write about your own anxiety about the upcoming exam.
- Use one of the sentence starters:
 - *"I worry most about..."*
 - *"My biggest fear is..."*
 - *"I don't think I can..."*

Step 2: Coping techniques

- Write coping technique(s) that you use or would like to use to help reduce exam pressures
- Focus on techniques for managing performance worry

Step 3: Share your favourite coping techniques to Padlet

- Anonymously share your favourite coping technique(s) to Padlet
- We will review as a class

Step 4: Use techniques

- Pick a few techniques to help you through the exam period.

Above: Diagram illustrating steps of an activity designed to encourage reflection on exam anxiety and strategies to address performance worry.

(Re)normalise the use of support services

Remember to continue actively promoting the use of available support services right through to the end of semester – especially during the final assessment and exam period – ensuring that students see them as standard tools for academic success.^{9,10}

- In his final week of history lectures, Bogdan integrates examples of how resources from the [Library](#)¹¹ and the [Learning Hub](#)¹² (see Section 2.7) can effectively be used for research and assessment preparation. He highlights success stories of past students who used these ‘just in time’ services to enhance their own academic outcomes.
- In the weeks leading up to exams, Jin sends out a weekly written or video testimonial from past students, reminding her current students that successful students often make the most of the available resources, and emphasising that using these resources is not only normal but a proactive approach taken by many high-achieving students. After the semester, she reaches out to some of her students to ask for testimonials to share with the next cohort.

Remind students of their options regarding flexible deadlines

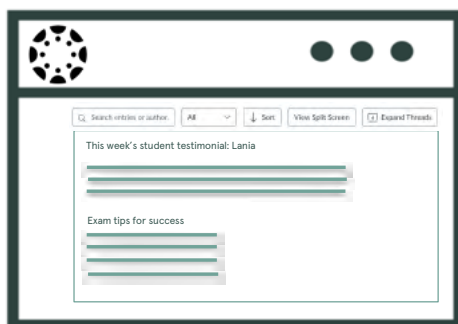
Prioritise understanding and flexibility, ensuring that students are aware of how extensions work.

- In his literature class, Nathan starts the first and last session of each semester with a brief overview of the flexible deadline options available (e.g. simple extensions and special considerations). He ensures that students have direct access to applying for these by embedding the relevant links in his slides and on Canvas. Nathan emphasises that using these options is a sign of self-awareness and responsibility, not a reflection of low capability or worth. He also shares a story of how he has been saved by a recent deadline extension in his own work.

Keep the lines of communication open, even after classes have ended

This helps students stay connected and supported as they prepare for exams and final assessments.

- Layla sets up biweekly Zoom sessions in the lead-up to final assessments, offering structured times for students to bring forward any last-minute questions or concerns. She also establishes a dedicated online Q&A forum, and actively monitors and contributes to it to ensure that any misconceptions are addressed promptly.



This week's student testimonial: Lania

As exams approach, I wanted to share our first ‘weekly testimonial’ from past PYC100 students. This week we hear from Lania, a second-year student who successfully passed PYC100 last year.

- "When I took PYC100, I was feeling pretty overwhelmed with all the content and the pressure of exams. I wasn't sure how to study effectively and was a bit nervous about asking for help. But then I decided to check out the **revision sessions during Stuvac** and the Library's **'Exam Ready' resources and workshops**, and I'm so glad I did!
- ...

Above: Illustration of a Canvas announcement where a previously successful student is reflecting on how they accessed support.

Offer accessible and flexible review sessions and resources

To accommodate varying schedules and preferences, consider offering multiple formats for any additional review or study sessions you run. This enables students to engage with the material in a way that best suits their needs, whether in real time or at their own pace.

- Naomi runs three live [review sessions](#)¹³ during stuvac – two in person and one on Zoom – on different days and at different times to cater to different student schedules. She also records and then uploads these sessions to Canvas, allowing students who couldn't participate live – as well as those who wish to review the content again – to access the materials when it's most convenient for them.
- Jose curates a series of brief video summaries that break down complex topics into manageable chunks. Some of these he finds online, and some he makes himself. He links to these videos from Canvas, supplementing them with targeted guiding questions designed to weave together various concepts from throughout the semester. This not only offers students an asynchronous revision option but also aids in synthesising and reinforcing their understanding of the unit material.
- Mariam, aiming to facilitate deeper understanding and collaborative learning, shares a [Padlet](#) board where she provides a curated list of relevant articles, video lectures and practice sets under subheadings for each module. She also invites students to add resources they've found valuable. This community-driven approach ensures that the resource bank remains relevant, diverse, and reflective of the collective student experience.

STUDENT VOICE

At the end of the unit, she had said to us 'if you ever need any help, or if you ever need me as like an academic referee, or you know any sort of advice in your kind of journey to becoming a secondary science teacher. Just email me, I will always reply.'

Student from equity background

Conduct post-semester check-ins

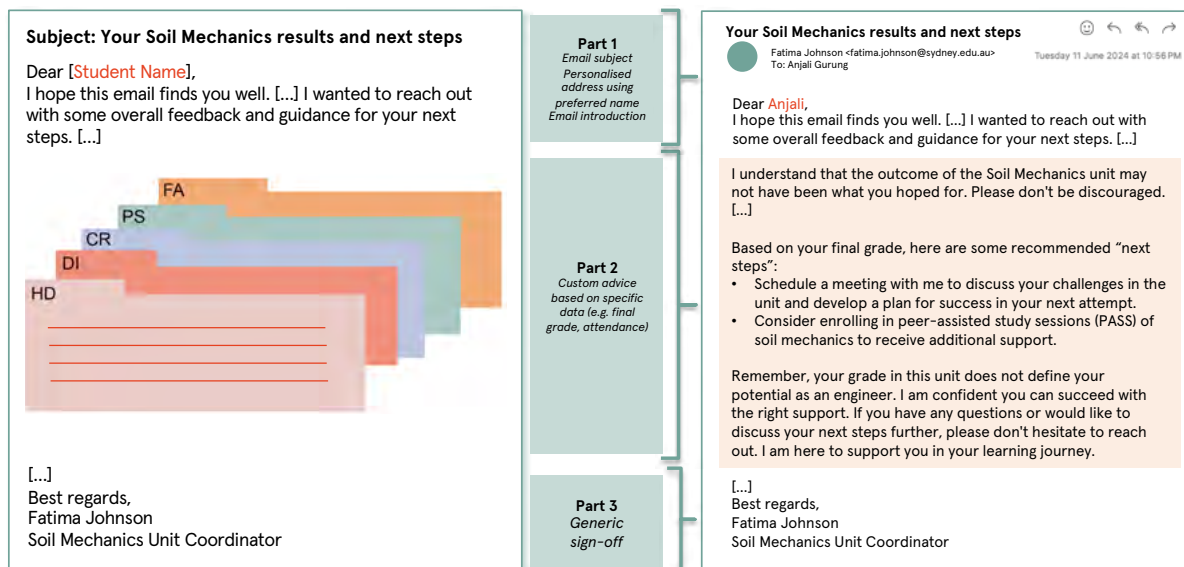
Continue your support of students even after the semester has wrapped up. This extra touchpoint emphasises particularly to students from equity backgrounds that they are valued beyond just the duration of the unit. It aids in their transition to subsequent academic pursuits and underscores your genuine concern for their success.

- Julia dispatches a thoughtful email three weeks after the end of semester, enquiring about students' wellbeing and seeking insights into their upcoming academic endeavours. This gesture often serves as a bridge for students who might be navigating uncertainties about their next steps.
- Once the final grades have been made available, Kimberley sends out an email to all her students sharing a reflective note, touching on the semester's learnings and highlights, and expressing gratitude for the shared journey – effectively 'closing the loop' and building continuity for future engagements.

Reflect on your own and your teaching team's experiences across the semester

Understanding areas of success and areas for potential improvement helps you to foster more equitable outcomes in future.

- John maintains a document in which he collects student observations and feedback throughout the semester. After exams, he reviews this document and identifies any patterns and recurring themes, planning modifications to the unit content and teaching methods based on these insights.
- Alice organises a teaching team debrief at the end of each semester. At it, each member shares their most meaningful teaching moments, student feedback, and suggestions. They focus on unpacking barriers to learning, especially those faced by students from equity backgrounds, leveraging the team's diverse perspectives to suggest changes for the subsequent semester.¹⁴



Above: Infographic demonstrating how SRES filters can be leveraged to provide personalised feedback to students following exams. The body of the email is unique to groups of students who are receiving different grades.

Assessment and feedback

Clarify the 'why' around your end-of-semester assessments

Clarifying the significance of the semester's final academic tasks enhances their understanding, relevance and value for students.¹⁵ This connects with the 'relevance statements' discussed in Section 2.5.

- As the semester concludes, Liz organises a wrap-up session titled 'Decoding the Final Assessments', in which she breaks down the major components of the final assessment and exam. For each task, she emphasises its relevance, tying it back to the overarching unit objectives and its potential real-world applications. This equips students with a map for their revision and helps them to see the importance of their learning.

Clearly explain post-assessment/post-exam processes, grading decisions, and options for review

Making these processes clear reduces uncertainty and empowers students for future success.

- Cameron provides his first-year students with a Canvas page outlining how the final exam, grading and final marks processes work, what his own responsibilities are, what each student's responsibilities are, options for informal post-exam feedback and/or formal grade reviews, and how students can request these. This helps to unpack the 'hidden curriculum', which is especially important for students who are the first in their family to attend university.

Provide post-semester feedback and connection points

Allow opportunities for feedback even after final grades have been submitted. This helps students to understand their performance, alleviates some anxiety, and empowers them to succeed in future pursuits.

- After the final exam for a large first-year physics unit, Andres uses the SRES to send students individualised feedback on the exam (at scale), providing some suggestions on what sections of the exam they completed well and any areas for improvement (including links to relevant resources) that will help as they move into their second-year physics units.
- Nazli clearly labels part of all her feedback as 'actionable next steps', providing specific recommendations as to how students can improve in future units or retake opportunities. To make these more personalised, she uses the SRES to tailor them to different achievement levels based on final exam results.



2.7 Supporting equity outside the curriculum

Guiding students to the right extracurricular support

Students from equity backgrounds often face challenges to their learning due to elements beyond their immediate learning environment. This section covers extracurricular supports available for students from equity backgrounds, to help you direct your students to appropriate supports and create a more equitable learning environment.

The majority of extracurricular support services available for students from equity backgrounds are delivered by our [Student Life](#),¹ [Library](#),² and University of [Sydney Student Union \(USU\)](#)³ services. Postgraduate students also have access to the [Sydney University Postgraduate Representative Association \(SUPRA\)](#).⁴

Knowing what support is available, and being proactive about promoting it

Ensure you are familiar with the support services available to your students and how they can access them

As educators, we are often the first people within the university to connect and establish a relationship of trust with students, so are in a unique position to be able to inform, recommend and refer students to appropriate resources and services. These include:

- 'Support' access points through Canvas and the USYD Student Mobile App (sydney.edu.au/students/support.html)
- The Canvas 'support' button is located at the bottom of the navigation menu on every Canvas page (see image).
- The USYD Student Mobile App is downloadable from the App Store.

These support access points provide direct access to:

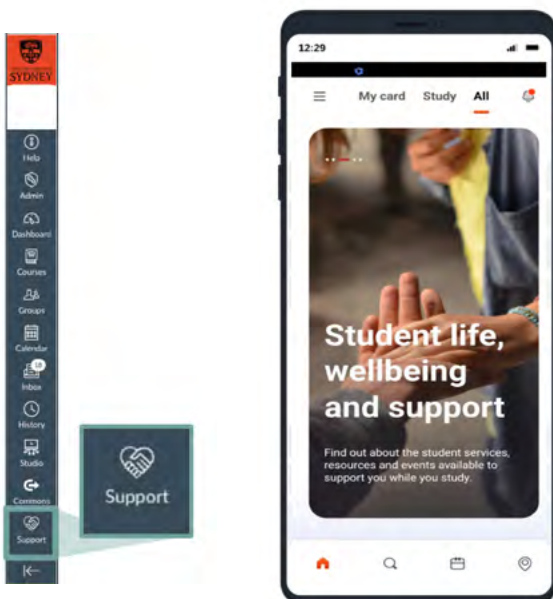
- information for emergencies
- health and wellbeing services
- academic support, including degree planning and academic advice
- personal support
- getting connected to clubs, societies and other services.

The Library offers a variety of learning spaces and equipment that [students can book](#),⁵ including:

- informal learning spaces, including 24/7-available spaces
- wi-fi-connected computers, laptops available for loan, design software, 3D printers, desktop carving machines, sewing machines, vinyl cutters, 3D scanners and Arduinos
- an assistive technology lab on [level 3 of the Fisher Library](#)⁶
- [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander support and safe spaces](#) (in Fisher and SciTech).

Student events focused on academic support include:

- [USYD Library Events](#)⁷ such as exam-ready events
- [USYD Learning Hub workshops](#)



Left: Canvas navigation panel highlighting the 'Support' section. Right: Image of the University of Sydney Student Mobile App.



Events that support belonging include annual and recurring events such as:

- [USU events](#)⁸
- [SUPRA Events](#)⁹
- [USYD Events](#)¹⁰
- [events organised by over 200 USYD clubs and associations.](#)

Proactively make support services visible, and promote how students can connect with them throughout the semester

Throughout the semester – not just in Week 1 – actively promote available support services, the Canvas ‘Support’ button, relevant events, and other resources.

- Diego is a Unit Coordinator for a first-year chemistry unit. He has previously promoted the Canvas ‘Support’ button in his Week 1 welcome lecture, but has noticed that the students who might most benefit from this support often don’t join his unit until Week 2 or 3. To address this, Diego continues to promote the Support button in his welcome lecture but has also included the link in his email signature, referred to it in his Canvas welcome video, linked to it from the front page of his Canvas site, and added it to his lab slides, especially around exam and assessment times.

Connect students of concern with available support services promptly and effectively

As educators we are often the first to observe or suspect that a student may be at risk outside the academic context. While it is beyond the scope of our role to resolve these challenges, we do have a duty of care to ensure such students are referred to appropriate support services.

- Mick, a student in Mei’s tutorial group, was behaving erratically during the Week 9 tutorial and then didn’t attend the Week 10 tutorial, which was concerning as the group assessment was due in Week 11. After speaking with his fellow group members, and confirming that they hadn’t heard from him all week either and were also concerned as this behaviour was uncharacteristic for him, Mei consults the university’s ‘Red Book’ for advice and submits a [Student Wellbeing Care Report](#)¹¹ so that the appropriate services could reach out to Mick.

Staff resources to support students of concern

Red Book: Specialist advice and support for students

This guide provides staff with the information needed to assist students in accessing the right support at the right time. You can access it through:¹²

- [the staff intranet](#)
- [a PDF download](#) (2024 version)
- [the Specialist Advice and Support for Students \(Red Book\) AI assistant](#)

Student support on the staff intranet

This page provides staff with direct access to information for connecting students with key support services, including wellbeing care reports, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student support, career guidance, financial aid, and health and learning support.

Students of concern and critical incidents¹³

This page provides guidance on what to do when you encounter a student with complex personal or academic needs whose circumstances or behaviour give cause for concern.

Referring a student of concern via care report

This page provides a platform for notifying the University about situations in which a student might require support to enhance their experience and learning.

Support for staff wellbeing¹⁴

This page provides information on the range of supports available to staff who might experience emotional and/or physical responses to the stress of supporting students of concern or handling critical incidents.

Embedding support and support services directly into the curriculum

Co-design unit materials and activities with extracurricular support services

By familiarising yourself with the extracurricular support services available to you as an educator, you will be able to identify where [the Library](#) and [Student Life](#) may be able to collaborate with you to develop unit materials or learning activities to build equitable learning environments.

- Amina is the Unit Coordinator for a first-year, first-semester postgraduate Marketing unit. Typically, her students tend to be inexperienced with accessing and using the academic literature. Amina contacted [the Library](#) to develop a specific ‘How to Conduct Research in Marketing’ workshop. The workshop is held early in the semester, recorded and uploaded to Canvas so students can access them throughout the semester as their assessments are due. By co-designing the workshop with the Library rather than trying to develop these resources herself, Amina has saved time and helped to improve learning especially for first-in-family students who tend not to have other people’s experience in this area to draw on.

Normalising the use of support services

(Re)normalise the use of support services

Remember to continue actively promoting the use of extracurricular campus support services – especially during the final assessment and exam period – ensuring that students see them as standard tools for academic success. You can support the normalising of support services by integrated and contextually relevant reference to these throughout the semester.

- Fernando knows that the assessment periods are challenging for students, however they are also opportunities to normalise support services. Fernando mentions specific support services as they relate to each assessment. For example, for the written assignment Fernando puts links to the Library services and reminds students verbally to access these when they prepare for their assignment. In the lead-up to exams he recognises that exams are stressful and links to student support services.



Part 3: Glossary

General equity-related terminology

- **Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success (ACSES):** an evidence-based research and public policy centre funded by the Australian Government Department of Education and based at Curtin University in Perth, that focuses on connecting higher education research, policy and practice to improve participation and success for marginalised and disadvantaged students, including those from low socioeconomic status locations, those from regional and remote areas, and Indigenous Australians; formerly known as the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE)
- **cultural norms:** the unwritten rules, values and expectations that shape behaviour and interactions within a specific cultural context, which may differ from those in the university setting and can affect students' experiences and success at university
- **equitable assessment:** assessment practices that are fair, flexible and designed to enable students from all backgrounds to effectively demonstrate their learning, considering the diversity of students' previous experiences and providing appropriate support as required
- **equity-focused teaching:** an approach to teaching that prioritises creating inclusive and supportive learning environments for students from diverse backgrounds, addressing potential barriers to their success and ensuring that all students have equal opportunities to achieve their academic goals
- **equity-like groups:** groups that are not officially recognised under government definitions of equity groups, but whose members may also face educational disadvantages and similar barriers to accessing and succeeding in higher education, due to a variety of factors such as being the first in their family to attend university, being mature aged, or being from a refugee background
- **equity students:** see *students from equity backgrounds*
- **hidden curriculum:** the unwritten norms, values, language and expectations that shape the university landscape that are not explicitly taught but can act as barriers to inclusion and learning for students who are less familiar with academic culture; also referred to as 'college knowledge'
- **hurdle task:** an assessment task that requires students to meet a minimum standard of performance in order to pass the unit, regardless of their overall grade; hurdle tasks are designed to ensure that students have achieved essential learning outcomes or competencies
- **inclusive teaching:** an approach that values diversity and proactively considers the needs of all students, aiming to create learning environments and experiences that enable all students to participate fully and achieve their potential
- **intersectionality:** the recognition that students' experiences in higher education are shaped by the complex interplay of their multiple social identities, including ethnicity, gender, class and disability status; students who are members of multiple equity or equity-like groups may face compounded barriers and disadvantages that affect their educational opportunities and outcomes; an intersectional approach to equity in higher education acknowledges and addresses the unique experiences and needs of students with overlapping marginalised identities
- **jargon:** any specialised language or terminology used within a particular setting that may be unfamiliar or confusing to students, particularly those from non-traditional backgrounds; understanding and using academic jargon is often part of the hidden curriculum that students are expected to navigate to succeed in higher education
- **matterng:** a concept that emphasises the importance of students feeling noticed, appreciated, and cared for by others within the educational environment; matterng goes beyond the notion of belonging, as it focuses on the individual relationships and meaningful interactions between students, educators, and the institution, rather than simply fitting in with a group or assimilating to set norms
- **National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE):** see *Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success (ACSES)*

- **non-traditional backgrounds:** students who come from backgrounds that are historically underrepresented in higher education or whose life experiences and pathways differ from the assumed 'traditional' student population; this may include mature-aged students, students who are the first in their family to attend university, students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and students with significant work or family commitments
- **'official' equity groups:** groups that are formally recognised by the Australian Government as being under-represented in higher education in Australian universities; these groups, which include students from low socioeconomic status locations, students with disability, and Indigenous students, are the focus of government initiatives aimed at increasing their participation and success in higher education
- **sense of belonging:** a feeling of being valued, accepted and connected within the educational community, which is essential for student engagement, motivation and success
- **social capital:** the networks, relationships and resources that students can draw on to support their educational pursuits and personal development, which may vary depending on their background and life experiences
- **strengths-based approach:** an approach to education that focuses on identifying and building on students' existing unique talents, knowledge and experiences, rather than viewing differences as deficits to be overcome
- **structural stratification:** the systemic inequality in access to resources, opportunities and power within higher education based on social categories such as ethnicity, class, gender and disability status that perpetuates disadvantages faced by students from marginalised backgrounds, as it is often embedded in the policies, practices and cultural norms of educational institutions; addressing structural stratification is crucial for promoting equity in higher education, which aims to ensure that all students have access to quality education and opportunities for personal and professional development, regardless of their background
- **student-ready:** an approach that challenges the myth of the typical student and focuses on making the university environment adaptable to the unique needs of each student, fostering personalisation and student success, rather than expecting students to conform to a narrow set of expectations in order to be 'university-ready'
- **students from equity backgrounds:** students who are members of particular groups that face systemic barriers to accessing and succeeding in higher education due to their circumstances; these include students from low socioeconomic status locations, students with disability, Indigenous students, and students from regional or remote areas
- **threshold concepts:** key concepts within a discipline that, once understood, transform a student's perspective and open up new ways of thinking and understanding; they are often initially challenging for students to grasp but are crucial for progressing in their field of study
- **Universal Design for Learning (UDL):** a framework for designing curriculum, instruction and assessments that are accessible and effective for all students from the outset, minimising the need for individual accommodations
- **university norms:** the implicit expectations, values and practices that guide behaviour and interactions within the university environment, which may be unfamiliar or challenging for students from equity backgrounds to navigate

‘Official’ equity groups and ‘equity-like’ groups

‘Official’ equity groups

- **Students from low socioeconomic status (low SES) locations:**^{1,2} Students who come from locations with limited access to social, economic and cultural resources, which may affect their educational aspirations, opportunities and achievements
- **Students with disability:**^{2,3} Students who have a long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment that might hinder their full and effective participation in higher education on an equal basis with other students
- **Students who are Indigenous (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students):**^{2,4} Students who identify as being Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander
- **Women in non-traditional areas (WINTA):**² Female students in disciplines such as natural and physical sciences, information technology, engineering and related technologies, architecture and building, agriculture, environmental and related studies, management and commerce, and economics and econometrics
- **Students from regional areas:**^{2,5} Students who live in or come from areas that are not major cities and who may therefore face challenges such as limited local study options, higher costs of relocation, and lower educational aspirations and attainment
- **Students from remote areas:**² Students who live in or come from areas that are geographically isolated and who may therefore face additional challenges in accessing and succeeding in higher education compared to those from regional areas
- **Students from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB):**^{2,6} Students who primarily speak a language other than English at home and who may therefore face challenges such as language difficulties, cultural differences and/or discrimination in accessing and participating in higher education; see also *Students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds*

‘Equity-like’ groups

- **First-generation (or first-in-family) university students:**^{7,8} Students who do not have a parent, carer, or other close family member (such as an older sibling) with a university-level qualification and who may therefore face challenges such as lower educational aspirations, attainment and support compared to their peers who have a family history of attending university
- **Students who are from the Pacific peoples:**^{9,10} Students who identify with or have heritage from the Pacific Islands, including Polynesia (e.g., Samoa, Tonga, Cook Islands, Niue, Tokelau, Tuvalu), Melanesia (e.g., Fiji, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu), and Micronesia (e.g., Kiribati, Nauru)
- **Students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds:**¹¹ Students who come from diverse cultural, linguistic and/or religious backgrounds, including students from non-English speaking (NESB) backgrounds as well as those who might speak English at home but have cultural backgrounds that differ from the majority of the Australian population; while the terms NESB and CALD are often used interchangeably, CALD is generally considered a more inclusive and respectful term that acknowledges the diversity within these student populations and emphasises their cultural and linguistic assets, rather than focusing solely on English language proficiency
- **Students who are carers:**¹² Students who provide unpaid care and support to a family member or friend with a disability, illness or other care needs, and who may therefore face additional challenges such as time pressures, financial hardship and lower wellbeing in accessing and participating in higher education
- **Students who are mature-aged:**¹³ Students who are 21 years of age or older at the commencement of their course and who may have diverse educational backgrounds, work experiences and personal circumstances that may affect their access to and success in higher education

- **Students who are from refugee backgrounds:**^{14,15} Students who have been granted humanitarian protection in Australia or who are currently seeking asylum here and who may therefore face barriers such as language difficulties, cultural differences and/or discrimination in accessing and participating in higher education
- **Students who are members of the LGBTQIA+ community:**¹⁶ Students who identify as being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual or any other non-heteronormative sexuality or gender, and who may therefore experience stigma, harassment and/or exclusion in higher education settings
- **Students who are veterans of the Australian Defence Force:**¹⁷ Students who have served in the Australian Defence Force and have transitioned to civilian life
- **Padlet:** An online collaborative platform that enables students and educators to create digital bulletin boards or walls where they can share and organize various types of content, such as text, images, videos, and links. Padlet promotes interactive learning and collaboration by allowing users to comment on and react to each other's posts. It can be used for brainstorming sessions, group projects, resource sharing, and reflective activities in both synchronous and asynchronous learning contexts; find out more: <https://educational-innovation.sydney.edu.au/teaching@sydney/padlet-and-collaborative-learning/>
- **Student Relationship Engagement System (SRES):** A web-based tool that enables educators to efficiently collect, analyse, and act upon student data such as attendance, grades, and other relevant information. SRES allows educators to personalise feedback, send reminders, and engage with students via email using customisable filters; sign up for a workshop here: <https://educational-innovation.sydney.edu.au/events/sres>

Some university technologies referred to in the text to support the approaches covered

- **Canvas:** Canvas is the University of Sydney's Learning Management System (LMS) for learning and teaching, with tools to share multimedia content and to collaborate and interact on any device; user workshops are held regularly, sign up here: <https://educational-innovation.sydney.edu.au/events/canvas>
- **Mentimeter:** A web-based interactive presentation software that allows educators to create engaging and interactive presentations by incorporating real-time polls, quizzes, word clouds, and Q&A sessions. Mentimeter facilitates active participation and instant feedback from students, making it a useful tool for formative assessment and fostering student engagement in both in-person and online learning environments; find out more: <https://educational-innovation.sydney.edu.au/teaching@sydney/maximising-student-engagement-connection-and-learning-with-mentimeter/>

Part 4: Resources and supporting materials

Chat with the Green Guide AI Agent to support your equitable teaching

We've created a user-friendly chat-based artificial intelligence (AI) agent to make the content of this Green Guide more accessible and easier to understand and apply. The Green Guide AI Agent is a publicly available generative AI-powered tool designed to help you quickly find the information and strategies you need to support students from equity backgrounds in your context.

Chat with the Green Guide AI Agent

Whether you have a specific question about equitable teaching practices or simply want to explore the Green Guide's content in a more interactive way, chat with our Green Guide AI Agent. It will provide you with personalised responses based on the evidence-based strategies and principles covered in this Green Guide, helping you apply the content more easily and effectively.

To start chatting with the Green Guide AI Agent, visit: <https://bit.ly/GreenGuideAgent>



Get support for equitable teaching at Sydney

At the University of Sydney, you can access support from to help you implement equitable teaching practices.

The Educational Innovation team offers a range of options, including:

- Workshops focused on using technology effectively and designing inclusive learning experiences. Register at <https://bit.ly/ei-events>.
- Schedule a 1:1 consultation with an educational designer by visiting <https://bit.ly/ei-consults>.
- Submit a request for a mini-project to address a specific teaching challenge at <https://bit.ly/ei-eda>.

You can email the authors directly at educational.learning@sydney.edu.au.

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Introduction

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A guide for educators to effectively teach and support the learning experiences of students from equity backgrounds, including students from underrepresented groups and students from diverse backgrounds



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