A familiar debate about quality and equity in Australia’s universities has recently flared up again. Some people seem to be suggesting that there is a choice between quality and equity. This is a false dichotomy. Quality is essential to genuine equity in higher education: any policies or practices that widen participation without maintaining quality standards serve universities and students badly—especially students from traditionally under-represented social groups. Equality of opportunity to go to university is an important goal. If this is not followed, however, by equity in outcomes for those who do attend, it is a false promise.

The current round of the debate started when the new Minister for Higher Education, Senator Carr, publicly asked important questions about how best to manage the demand-driven funding system into the future. Demand-driven funding removed caps on student numbers, and guarantees Government funding to universities for as many students as they choose to admit. Not surprisingly, this open-ended funding commitment imposes high and increasing costs on the Commonwealth Budget. At a time when the Government faces serious fiscal challenges, it is inevitable that questions are asked. Over the past 12 months, Government has sought to contain costs through arbitrary savings around the edges of university funding (witness last year’s deferral of promised increases in research funding, and the 2013-14 Budget’s ‘efficiency dividends’ and arbitrary caps on tax deductions for education expenses).

This is not a sound or sustainable approach.

Some have suggested that anything less than a blank cheque for further unconstrained growth would scotch the equity agenda that the Government and the sector adopted in response to the Bradley Review of higher education. This is an exaggeration.
Demand-driven funding was not intended primarily as an equity measure: its main rationale was to increase participation in university study and supply of graduate skills to the labour market (in this context, it is important to note that the Bradley Review did most of its work before the GFC). In increasing overall participation, the uncapped system has also increased enrolments by low SES, Indigenous and regional students. While domestic undergraduate commencements increased by 32 per cent between 2008 and 2012, commencements by low SES students have increased faster (40 per cent).

This is great news for an equitable and inclusive higher education sector. But increases in the number of students from equity groups come off a low base. Low SES students account for only a fifth of the total increase in participation. In absolute terms, domestic undergraduate commencements grew by 59,197 between 2008 and 2012.

Low SES commencements grew by 11,965 – 20 per cent of the total. As a share of undergraduate commencements, this is an increase of only one percentage point. Between 2009 and 2012 absolute growth in offers to high SES students was higher than growth in offers to low SES students.

While demand-driven funding has contributed to improved equity and access, it is not primarily an equity policy.

If demand-driven funding is the main policy lever for increasing low SES participation, it is an expensive and inefficient way of doing it.

A more sustainable – and more effective – solution would be to recognise that demand-driven funding has achieved its initial goal, namely to meet unmet demand for university places, and to make provision for more targeted growth in identified areas of need. These could include particular skills needs, but also growth in low SES, regional and Indigenous enrolments, and lifting participation in parts of the country where it is too low. A more deliberate approach to equity and access, combined with a sharper focus on diverse and appropriate admissions procedures and effective student support services to maximise students’ success will contribute more to higher education equity than simply removing the sector’s front gates.

Such a change could be managed through a more meaningful Compacts process, in which Compacts ceased to be pro formas and became genuinely mission based. Universities could be funded to do different things, and to do them well. Through Compacts, universities would be more accountable for their performance. Under these arrangements it would be clear that quality and equity are complementary, rather than antithetical, goals.

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The Go8 participated on Monday 17 June in the inaugural Research Summit, the first time Australian research bodies, representing hundreds of thousands of Australians, have come together to urge for non-partisan support for science and all forms of research.

The Summit called on all of our political leaders to put short-term politics aside and back a strategic national research policy to build a stronger, smarter nation. This starts with all parties making a commitment to the fundamental value of research in the physical, biological and social sciences, through to engineering and humanities.

The research alliance has a broad base, including researchers across business and industry, universities and medical research institutes. The call comes from peak bodies from across the research spectrum, in science, education, social sciences and humanities and from our most eminent scientists and engineers, including Australia’s recent Nobel Laureate.

Participants in the Research Summit included the Academy of Science, the Science and Technology Australia, Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering, Association of Australian Medical Research Institutes, Cooperative Research Centres Association, Universities Australia and Nobel Laureate, Professor Brian Schmidt.

The Summit called on Government to work with the sector to build a long-term, strategic vision that makes the most of our natural talent and helps the nation flourish economically and socially. It called on all politicians to take action in line with the six fundamental principles:

- **Investing strategically and sustainably**

  Governments must support planned, stable and appropriate investment in research over the long term, which is essential if we are to tackle large, complex problems and opportunities facing Australia. This will yield better results and ensure the best use of every dollar spent.

- **Building our research workforce – getting and keeping the best**

  To ensure we attract and retain the best researchers we must offer appropriate conditions. Many of the nation’s world class researchers are stuck in a cycle of one- to three-year grants for their salaries and research materials. This career uncertainty means many leave research or leave Australia to seek a stable future. The nation is the loser every time uncertainty impedes discovery, prevents planning and inhibits fruitful partnerships.

- **Building a productive system and getting the most out of it**

  Governments must set a stable and sustainable funding framework for infrastructure (buildings, equipment and the technical experts to keep them operating), especially for national facilities without which critical work cannot continue or even begin. This must be backed with resources that keep valuable facilities running once they are built. A central research infrastructure investment framework, such as National Research Investment Plan (NRIP), is essential.
Being among and working with the world’s best

Global collaboration is more necessary than ever with the rise of international research, commerce, communication and other systems that transform our lives and opportunities. Our best researchers must be able to work with the best globally, building on the credibility Australian researchers already have across a wide array of disciplines. This will require a strategic investment that can facilitate international engagement at a government to government level, as well as support for collaboration on specific research projects.

Bringing industry and academia together

When industry and researchers work together effectively we innovate and multiply our strengths. We must ensure there are clear and reliable policy incentives that facilitate deep and sustained collaboration between industry, public sector, university and research institutes. This not only ensures that the benefits from basic research are translated into practice in Australia, but also harnesses national talent and creates knowledge, opportunity and new jobs.

Expanding industry research

Governments need to create an environment which encourages industry to invest more in research and which makes Australia an attractive place for international companies to undertake research. Improving industrial productivity has become critical to ensuring strong growth and innovation underpinned by research and development and investment plays a key part in meeting this objective.

Further information on the Research Summit can be found at http://science.org.au/policy/researchalliance.html

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Australian researchers call for all-party, non-partisan backing. Back row (L-R) Catriona Jackson, CEO Science and Technology Australia; Greg Mullins, Research Australia; Professor Tony Peacock, Cooperative Research Centres Association; Professor Les Field, Group of Eight Australia; Dr Caroline Perkins, Executive Director, Regional Universities Network (RUN); Professor Robert Williamson, Australian Academy of Science; Belinda Robinson, Chief Executive, Universities Australia. Front row (L-R): Professor Brendan Crabb, President, Association of Australian Medical Research Institutes; Robyn Porter, National Secretary, Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists and Managers Australia; Professor Brian Schmidt, Australian Nobel Laureate.
The Go8 hosted a delegation from the Canadian U15 Research-intensive universities in July. President Amit Chakma (Western Ontario), current Chair of the Canada U15, with President Feridun Hamdullahpur (Waterloo) and President David Naylor (Toronto), held discussions with senior executives of the Universities of Sydney, NSW, Melbourne, Western Australia, and Monash University.

The three Canadian presidents were guests of the Go8 Board at its recent meeting and dinner at UWA. The Canadian High Commissioner to Australia, Mr. Michael Small, also attended these discussions.

Australia and Canada have much in common, and the Presidents agreed to build on these similarities, the existing relationships and deepening ties, through additional student mobility, more joint programs and broader research collaboration.

The Presidents agreed on plans for a further meeting to explore effective ways of building collaboration and establishing a framework to enable academic staff to work together in areas of mutual interest. The Go8 and U15 secretariats will work together on identifying relative academic strengths, in preparation for the next joint meeting.

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Go8 2014 European Fellowships – A Call for Applications

Global partnerships enable our universities to remain at the cutting edge of research and innovation. With this, we now open the 2014 European Fellowships.

Information and application pack may be downloaded here.