Just out of reach: Access to equity in Australian higher education

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Abstract

This paper provides an account of access and equity in Australian higher education, and specifically of the discourses and practices surrounding A Fair Chance For All: Higher Education That’s Worth It: An Equity Access Policy Statement for Australian higher education. The paper positions such an account within Australia’s changing national and global economic conditions, and the influence of New Right ideologies that prevail efficient and effective public sector management practices and market forces that have witnessed a privatization and pooling back of the welfare state. The paper argues that while Federal Labor has clearly established social justice on the agenda of Australian higher education, it is a mediocrity cooperated by particular economic and managerial practices which tend to limit equity issues to issues of access and place broader equity concerns for higher education just out of reach.

Introduction

Access to Australian higher education first appeared on the national agenda in 1942 when the Chifley Federal Government established that all Australian citizens were entitled to access to higher education. The scholarships were re-activated in 1944 under the Commonwealth

University Reconstruction Training Scheme and were aimed at ensuring the access of ex-service personnel to Australian university study. While seeking to redress the disadvantage of particular social groups, higher education was nonetheless considered primarily to be an activity of scholarly excellence (Browne, Carter, Layden, Venables & Williams, 1971) and secondary to national educational goals. Such scholarships were viewed purely in terms of academic merit.

With the advent of the Whitlam Government and the influence of espousals such as those chaired by Mills (1950), Murray (1957), and Martin (1956), federal support for institutions of higher education expanded, and the Commonwealth’s special and local financial grants to States. Direct financial support for tertiary students was made possible by the construction of a framework of student support through the provision of Commonwealth scholarships, awarded on the basis of high academic performance on scholarship or parental income.

In 1969 Federal financial assistance was expanded with the introduction of the Aboriginal Study Grants Scheme (ABSTUDY), giving indigenous support to Australia’s indigenous peoples to study in institutions of higher education. The following year, in recognition of the lack of a national system of education for indigenous students, the Commonwealth and State education departments agreed on a program of additional assistance for tertiary education through the provision of Aboriginal scholarships and introduced the Aboriginal Scholarship Scheme (ABSTUDY) in 1989. ABSTUDY was made available to all with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status (determined on the basis of descent, self-identification, and community recognition), access to higher education remained restricted to those who were admitted either on academic merit or through special entry provisions that gave recognition to mature age or relevant work experience. (It was not until the late 1980s that ‘special entry’ into most institutions was broadened to include Aboriginality as a priority area; institutions were encouraged to do so by federal funding under the Aboriginal Participation Initiative.)

From Federal Labor’s electoral defeat in 1975 to its subsequent victory in 1983, little was achieved by the Fraser Federal Coalition Government in redefining the social institution of higher education. Enrolment statistics[1] (1985) has illustrated in several case studies comparing the social policies of the Fraser Government with its predecessor, the Whitlam social policies, the Enrolment rates at tertiary institutions returned to the policy rates, albeit framed within economic and public sector management reforms considered necessary for the ‘national economy’ (Byng, 1989, p. 45).

Such framing of social policy was based on Federal Labor’s concern on the one hand to abandon an Australian economy in crisis—suffering from inflation, high levels of unemployment and the loss of global economic leadership and on the other, to maintain a social policy platform that was substantially different from both the Whitlam and Fraser Federal Governments then reconstituted Labor’s ‘fresh approach’ (Flinders & Kerin 1993, p. 95) appealed to a revised conservative economic wisdom—neo-classical economics—which valued minimal government intervention, that is, freedom for markets to regulate and fulfill social demands ‘naturally’, and responsibility for governments to target particular social needs, or ‘niches’, not catered for in the market. The election of Labor in the 1990s and the election approach was mediated to some degree by the length of time the government departments legitimated by their new ‘business-like’ orientation and change from forms of service to forms of delivery.

The new approach also gained public support within a notion of the ‘marketization’ of public services which, while benefiting sectional interests, and achieved in part through the reworking of the virtues of ‘marketisation’ (Flinders & Kerin 1993, p. 99): a conservative politics that was informed by a concern about ‘how to make Australia as productive as possible’ and the desire for new industries and job opportunities. The argument, ‘neither between employers, unions and government at The National Economic Foundations what was important to the public was to see as responsible and reasonable’ (Flinders & Kerin 1993, p. 98).

This change to the positioning of social policy in relation to economic policy signified what Offe (1984; 1985) describes as a structural change in the social demands made upon government, a response prevalent in times of economic crisis. According to Offe, governments that are unable or unwilling to match increasing social demands with increased political support that demand into areas they consider themselves better equipped to address or areas they find more legitimate in addressing. In order to redress political demands in contrast to traditional Laborist foundations, social justice and equity, were able to find voice even and progress, although constrained and legitimised within economic rationalism.

Within this context, a number of Commonwealth policies incorporate the central role of education in the process of social exclusion and inclusion, including the Higher Education Equity Program (1985) which sought to ensure and maintain, and to increase access and participation in higher education. The Commonwealth’s contributions to higher education were deemed unfair. ‘Disadvantage’ under the definition was widened from those of low socio-economic status and non-English speaking background to students from the rural isolated, and people from non-English speaking background, to include those with physical disabilities, and women entering seeking entry into traditionally male-dominated areas of study.

Essentially, the Higher Education Equity Program was an incentive based scholarship scheme designed to encourage students who would normally be excluded from tertiary education due to financial constraints to continue their studies. The program was administered directly by the Commonwealth and the Federal Government’s funding contribution to the program was directed towards encouraging all institutions to provide similar courses and to extend the client group to include a wider notion of disadvantage.

In practice, the scholarship endowment in the program resulted in the generation of a consistent equity outcome across Australian higher education. As Brown suggests, ‘although some universities had well established equity programs prior to 1998, many other higher education institutions made little effort to accommodate the needs of those who were under-represented in the tertiary sector’ (1993, p. 2). Furthermore, although higher education institutions engaged in equity education courses did not always guarantee their equitable educational treatment (Gale & Naiman 1993).

Labor’s social justice agenda in higher education, post 1996

Following Labor’s successive electoral victory in 1987, the Government moved to make equity more visible in its social policies and to make explicit Labor’s commitment to ‘making social justice both a primary goal of economic policy and an indispensable element in achieving economic policy objectives’ (p. vii).

The document heralded a collection of integrated economic, social justice and human rights policies that sought to rebalance the social distribution of resources, including, the ‘fair and equal access to essential services such as education’ (p. 2).

Here education in particular became a central link between social and economic policy domains. It was seen to hold the potential to produce workers more suited to the changing needs of industry and business, necessary for the revamping of Australia to become more competitive in the global economy (cf. Labor’s social justice objectives, understood in terms of access and participation, could be addressed in this it was a view of social justice that equated access with participation. For example, justification for federal government financial support of higher education was reworked to include ‘education’s potential contribution to solving the country’s economic problems, while in very general terms, the significance of education as the economic rationalism for a socially just higher education system was clear.’

The larger and more diverse the post which we draw our skills and prior experience, the greater our capacity to take advantage of opportunities as they emerge. The current barriers to participation in higher education programmes are that students limit our capacity to develop the skills that are necessary for the labour market and for economic rationalisation for a socially just higher education system was clear.’

Labor’s social justice agenda

A Fair Chance For All: Higher Education Equity: A Policy Statement formed an important part of this more integrated social and economic policy package. While explicit about the Government’s commitment to a higher education for equity, the document also framed higher education concerns generally within participation in the labor market. For example, justification for federal government financial support of higher education was redefined to include ‘education’s potential contribution to solving the country’s economic problems, while in very general terms, the significance of education as the economic rationalism for a socially just higher education system was clear.’

To make higher education more accessible, the program included linking education to help students to make higher education more accessible, and increased the funding for student assistance programs. One such program was the Commonwealth Scholarship and Learning Assistance Scheme (CSLAS), which provided financial support to students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, to undertake tertiary study.

Despite the introduction of a unified national system (UNIS) of higher education, and institutionally developed educational policies that were required to extend higher education for equity, the program’s goals were less clear and, despite the introduction of improved efficiency and effectiveness’ (DEET 1998, p. 30). In effect, the government introduced a performance-based funding system, and education with the intention of achieving less than the goals set out in the White Paper on higher education equity.

In this context it was clear that a Fair Chance for All: Higher Education
That's Within Everyone's Reach (1990), the Government's most recent policy on equal access to Australian higher education, was criticized because it 

wrongly assumes that participation in higher education is a right which should be accessible to all. The Government's approach to higher education was seen as a "solution" to the problem of unequal access, rather than a means of addressing the underlying issues. The policy was also criticized for its lack of detail and the lack of consultation with the education sector.

However, the document also introduced the higher education sector to the need for more equity and participation. The policy was seen as a step in the right direction, although it was acknowledged that further work was needed to address the inequalities in the system.

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Abstract
This paper identifies and explores the practical and theoretical implications of the means by which the Federal Government has pursued its higher education equity agenda in Australia. An analysis is made of the impact of the funding and accountability mechanisms, which have stimulated a range of equity-directed activity across publicly funded higher education institutions, upon the nature of the resulting equity initiatives and, indeed, upon how equity itself has been conceptualised. The significance of the absence of any analytical or theoretical basis for the planning and prioritisation of equity initiatives in explored, particularly the limitations this has placed upon their effectiveness in terms of longer term and more wholesome change towards enhanced equity of access, participation and outcomes in higher education.

The extent to which the benefits of higher education have been the exclusive preserve of a social elite, determined not by ability, but by such factors as socio-economic status, ethnicity, regionality, gender, Aboriginality, and English language proficiency has been discussed in a range of studies. In the period which is the focus of this issue of Australian Universities Review, the Federal Government has consistently communicated its policy intention to alter this situation towards more equal access, participation and outcomes for all members of the community and has put into place funding, program and accountability arrangements intended to achieve this across all publicly funded higher education institutions. During the same period the expectations of the wider community shifted in fundamental ways, placing demands upon higher education to accommodate not only greater numbers, but a wider diversity of students in social and educational terms. This characteristic period of change in Australian higher education, commencing in the early 1970s and not yet completed in the middle 1990s, as its transformation from an elite to a mass system refers to not only the massive increase in participation in higher education but also, and more significantly in terms of social and political change, the achievement of more broadly based participation including by those groups in the community which previously have had least access to and benefits from this level of education.

The Federal Government began the process of setting its higher education policy directions and national priorities in the early 1970s through direct and explicit communication of its policy expectations, understood and strengthened by its control of institutional funding, (intensely expressed through financial assistance to talented but disadvantaged individuals, in the early 1980s the Government’s equity agenda shifted attention to the under-representation in higher education of whole groups in the community and particularly those which were to become the groups targeted by equity strategies (Kynas 1983); that is, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people from non-English speaking backgrounds, those with a disability, people from lower socio-economic backgrounds or living in remote and geographically isolated locations, and women with respect to so-called non-traditional areas of study, including research degrees. In response and on the basis of advice from the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission, in 1983 the Higher Education Equity Program and the Aboriginal Participation Initiative were put into place, and a million dollars annually was allocated to them between 1983 and 1987.

The Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) took over responsibilities for higher education in mid 1997, and the Green and White papers of 1987 and 1988 established the Government’s framework for public accountability in higher education, including the need to change the balance of the student body to reflect more closely the structure and composition of the society as a whole” (Dawkins 1989, p. 21). A Fair Chance for All (DEET 1990) spelled out the Government’s equity policy and program intentions in more detail and individual institutions were made administratively responsible for achieving its equity objectives. From 1991 higher education institutions have been required to develop and implement an annual Equity Plan and an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy, targeting increased access, participation and outcomes for the groups already identified as disadvantaged, with the allocation of equity funds ‘biased directly to individual institutions on the basis of reported outcomes against identified objectives, including numerical targets. In the period 1988-92 approximately three million dollars was allocated on this basis (DEET 1989), “a powerful lever on the system” (Williams 1999 p. 51) in which “the strategic resource role played by the marginal dollar” (Matignon 1993, p. 56) is increasingly important. In the context of enhanced institutional (including financial) autonomy, Matignon refers to the “small but significant zone of comparatively based public funding” established between the (relatively) core of public funding and independent, market-based income in terms of its influence on instututions towards congruence with government policy and priorities (1993 p. 56). Thus the annual equity funding, effectively marginal dollars in a resource strapped and highly competitive environment, in combination with the equity planning and reporting requirements introduced since 1991, have produced remarkable compliance at the level of programmes in activities in higher education institutions across Australia.

The pragmatic and strategic impact of the requirement to develop equity plans for the specified groups of students, to report publicly on targets and outcomes within an annual cycle and the funding which has been made available to support these processes, has undoubtedly produced a flurry of equity-directed activity across publicly funded higher education institutions. These funding and accountability mechanisms have considerable influence on the means by which equity initiatives are put into place in higher education institutions, the nature of those initiatives and, indeed, upon how equity itself is conceptualised.

Purposes vary: factors that have stimulated equity planning and equity initiatives in higher education institutions have also produced some theoretical dilemmas and operational issues which are explored below. Relevant matters include structural and staffing matters, particularly with respect to the expected mainstreaming of equity funding and responsibility (see Brown in this volume), lack of institutional co-ordination and leadership, an emphasis on short-term and identifiable outcomes, and the absence of any serious or consistent attempts to analyse the causes and nature of the current inequities in higher education which the equity program has been established to change.

Equity planning and reporting have occurred as part of the interaction between higher education institutions of what Matignon (1993) refers to as the technical tools of corporate management, such as corporate planning, quality assurance processes, performance indicators, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Indeed, the equity planning and reporting processes required by the Government and put into place by DEET are clearly derived from the corporate planning methodologies...