


Managing equity in higher education

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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. To 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. Thus the characterisation of this 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, to 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 national communication of its policy expectations, understood and strengthened by its control of institutional funding (initially expressed through financial assistance to talented but disadvantaged individuals, in the early 1970s the Government's equity agenda shifted attention to the under-representation in higher education of whole groups in the community and particularly those who were to become the groups targeted by equity strategies (Ryan 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 responsibility for higher education in mid 1987, 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 1988, 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 'based 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 leverage on the system' (Williams 1992a, p. 5) 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 institutions towards congruence with government policy and priorities (1993 p. 56). Thus the annual equity funding, effectively marginal dollars in resource strapped and highly competitively environment, in combination with the equity planning and reporting requirements introduced since 1991, have produced remarkable compliance at the level of programmatic activities in higher education institutions across Australia.

The pragmatic and strategic impact of the requirement to develop equity plans for the specific 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 undeniably produced a flurry of equity-directed activity across publicly funded higher education institutions. These funding and accountability mechanisms exert 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. Pursue very factors which 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 the 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
which preclude in both public and private sector organisations in the third world, of which there are very few. It is necessary to ex- 
...ectations which have been put into place. However, their nature has been determined and their effectiveness in terms of lasting changes has been constrained by the political and social institutions that have planned and determined priorities. More attention is given to the theoretical and
...sive increase in both student enrolment and student mobility during the same period. (Also see Gale and McNamara these three themes) Moreover, these themes are closely linked with the potential to make a more lasting and widespread impact in terms of achieving longer term changes towards equity in higher education. This reduces the likelihood of an overall and longer term equity impact but emphasizes the need to have a more long term approach based on the identification of strategically significant priorities.

In addition, institutional responsibility for equity matters is gener-
...ally located with members of senior management, at a level some remote from the operational staff that overall equity leadership and co-
n...ntent with the specific needs of the institution. However, there are many different types of strategies in use. The question of how to achieve equity objectives within institutions is therefore an important one for those who are responsible for planning and implementing equity strategies within institutions. However, this challenge is not only one of identifying and understanding the nature of equity issues, but also one of developing effective strategies to address these issues. The development and implementation of effective equity strategies within institutions is a complex task that requires a combination of strategic planning and operational implementation. The institution's overall strategy should be based on a comprehensive analysis of the equity issues facing the institution and the development of a clear and comprehensive plan for addressing these issues. This plan should be developed in consultation with all stakeholders, including students, faculty, administrators, and the broader community. The plan should be reviewed and updated regularly to ensure its effectiveness and relevance. Finally, the implementation of equity strategies should be measured and evaluated to ensure their success. This will help to ensure that the institution's commitment to equity is sustained and that progress is made towards the achievement of equity goals.
indication of the level of actual commitment to equity priorities and programs in the various higher education institutions across Australia; a challenge that is well-recognized at the end of the period of government funded national growth in higher education, and of the growing awareness of the continuing growth areas of southern Queensland and northern NSW. Clearly, this will have significant implications for existing equity programs, since these have been established and designed at least partially dependent upon the significant growth in participation (see eg. Dawkins, 1998 p.21).

Documented variations in the range of equity programs in place reflects a broad proportion of the fact that programs seek to address issues within the context of the various special interest, regional, and metropolitan programs, and the different social, political, and cultural contexts of education. The structure and composition of the equity structure as a whole (Dawkins 1998, p.21) reveals a concern with the assumed status and under-utilization of the full range of ability available to the community and hence to the economic causes by the skewed higher education participation. However, the majority of current equity programs focus on a limited issue or context, and are designed to enhance access and participation in higher education, not a lack of ability. Nevertheless, some of the earlier programs have had significant, and sometimes key, educational experiences, their geographic location, their lack of confidence, or inadequacy of information. As a result, such programs could be characterized as compensatory in that they provide special assistance for those who, through lack of ability, might not otherwise gain entry into or participate successfully in higher education. What are needed are more programs which affect more than a narrow issue, and which affect the core of higher education participation. Higher education is a good thing in which some groups, unfairly and though not as yet able to access all the opportunities, are at a disadvantage. This has been identified as the basis of their under-representation within it. Amongst such programs, a minority are differentiated by their approach to the弥补 their implications, and the context and processes of the institutions themselves as a means of reducing the potential for entrenched inequality to equity programs by those who have benefited from the various arrangements. 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Mainstreaming equity activities in universities: The next challenge*

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Abstract

Since 1988, and the release of Higher Education: A Policy Statement (1988), equity has been elevated to the central policy agenda in universities. The ambiguous linking of Higher Education Equity Program (HEEP) funding to the equity of Equity Plans produced annually as part of the Educational Profile process has proved to be an effective mechanism to encourage compliance with this centrally defined policy. However, the nexus between Equity Plans and the level of equity funding will become much less apparent in the near future when mainstreaming results in HEEP funding being rolled into the operating grants for universities. The next challenge for equity supporters within institutions is to ensure that mainstreaming results in no diminution of commitment to equity and that it be viewed instead as an opportunity to establish equity as a legitimate stakeholder in the institutional planning process.

Introduction

Equity activity within the higher education sector in Australia is not a new phenomenon. Many institutions were supporting equity programs for a considerable period of time prior to the release of Higher Education: A Policy Statement (1988). However, what has changed substantially since 1988 is the requirement for institutions to be more systematic in the manner in which equity activities are undertaken, and this has impacted enormously on both the quality and quantity of equity programs that now operate in Australian universities. Equity has effectively been elevated to the central policy agenda within the tertiary sector and all institutions are now compelled to regularly review their equity performance as part of the annual educational profile process. Despite the considerable change which has already occurred, further change is just around the corner, and careful consideration needs to be given to how equity practice will adapt to the new challenge of "mainstreaming".

This paper aims to examine recent higher education equity policy development with the emphasis being on identifying strategies which might facilitate the move to mainstreaming at the institutional level.

A brief analysis of equity policy

An analysis of higher education equity policy provides some useful examples of how educational policy can be effectively implemented. For equity practitioners, frequently located at a distance from policy development within their institutions, this may seem to be a purely academic exercise with little practical value. However, understanding how policy is implemented, particularly within the institution, is critical if one is to exploit the opportunities opened up by any new policy direction, including mainstreaming. Far from being irrelevant, it could be argued that it is important to locate practice within the broader context of higher education policy and its implementation at the institutional level if one is to manage equity activities most effectively "at the coal-face". The following provides a very brief analysis of higher education equity policy implementation. (No attempt will be made to analyze the context of the policy.)

Recent equity policy development has been but one element of an availability of higher education change announced in Higher Education: A Policy Statement (1988). The tertiary sector has been altered dramatically since this document was released and it is within this context that equity policy has undergone rapid development. It is interesting to note the mechanism which has allowed this rapid change to be effected in the traditionally conservative setting of Australian universities.

For a major document such as Higher Education: A Policy Statement (1988) to be successfully implemented, it was apparent that there needed to be substantial Federal Government control over the tertiary sector. In the absence of constitutional control over education, the Federal Government needed to use some other lever to obtain compliance with its radical reforms. How then did the Federal Government acquire this control in the higher education sector when constitutionality, education is a responsibility of the States? The answer lies in the historical development of higher education since the late 1950s and could be distilled down to one very potent factor: funding.

From the time of the implementation of the recommendations in the Murray Report in 1957, through to the election of the Whitlam Labor Government in 1972, Commonwealth Government intervention in the tertiary sector had been increasing. With the abolition of tertiary fees for students in the 70s, the Commonwealth accepted total responsibility for the funding of universities, thereby relieving the States of their financial obligation to the tertiary sector. With institutions then totally at the mercy of the Commonwealth for funds, "manipulation" of the tertiary system to fit particular policy agendas became feasible.

The financial control over universities was not exploited to any great extent by the Commonwealth until the late 1980s when it was used extensively to gain compliance with Higher Education: A Policy Statement (1988). Smart (1991) has pointed out this move strongly when he referred to the impact of what he described as 'corroborative federalism'. Smart argued:

In effect, the Commonwealth Minister (Dawkins) has used the ultimate power of the Commonwealth purse to strip universities of their traditional autonomy and to coerce them into undertaking the binding agreements which do violence both to the quality of their teaching and research and to the concept of academic freedom (Smart, 1991, p100).

While all would agree totally with Smart's condemnation of the outcomes of this process, it was apparent that financial control, described by Smart as 'corroborative federalism', was the primary tool used to ensure the adoption of the Higher Education (1988) policy statement. Marceaux (1993) refers to this form of control as 'streaming from a distance' and notes:

'Funding, its generality or particularity, source (public, core, specific purpose) and especially the conditions of its imposition and use are critical developments in all aspects of higher education life. Financial controls can be powerful tools for government. For example, the key to 'streaming from a distance' is to make sure that the tax is paid - the money flows into the Treasury and that in the end, is used for the purpose for which it was intended.'

The move from administrative control to funding allocation decisions and the methods devised for the allocation of funds are government's current tools encouraging a fragmented and often redundant system of enormous and increasing size to respond to new and changing public policy and socio-economic developments (Marceaux, 1993, p26).