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 centralised 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 quantity and quality 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 so that fair 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 analyse the context of the policy)

Recent equity policy development has been but one element of an avalanche 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 constitutionally, 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 whatever 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) pointed to three particular mechanisms which he referred to as "corroding 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 undesirable and binding agreements which do violence both to the quality of their research and teaching and to the concept of academic freedom (Smart, 1991, p 100).

While not all would agree totally with Smart's condemnation of the outcomes of this process, it is apparent that financial controls, described by Smart as "corroding federalism", was the primary tool used to enforce the adoption of the Higher Education (1988) policy statement. (See also Dwyer, 1995.)

Markers (1995) refers to this form of control as "contracting from a distance" and notes:

Funding, its generosity or scarcity, source (public, core or specific purpose) and the conditions of its oblation are critical developments in all aspects of higher education. Within regional contexts, the future of small universities is the key to "contracting from a distance". The move from administrative control to funding allocation decisions and the methods devised for the allocation of funds are themselves now 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 (Markers, 1995, p 24).
What is mainstreaming?

It would be reductive to develop this discussion further without briefly what is meant by mainstreaming. In the context of equity (i.e., the fair treatment and targeted support of individuals), mainstreaming refers to the effort of providing equitable funding, planning, and implementation.

In its crude form, mainstreaming means the absorption of equity funding into the overall operating budget and official planning. According to DDE (effective institutional management should place equity conditions to support the institutional operating resources (Higher Education Funding For The 1992-94 Triennium, 1991, p18), therefore making the rolling in of equity to the goals of the organization need not be seen as an additional constraint and is not the limiting of such a development is critical it as relies on the second element of mainstreaming.

The mainstreaming of planning, as used in this discussion, means the incorporation of equity in the central university planning process. While many institutions can exist within a single equity plan, which they figure in the central processes of institutional planning and resource allocation varies considerably. Without acceptance at the institutional level of the value of equity activities, and their legitimate incorporation in planning and resource allocation, the mainstreaming of Higher Education Equity Program funds will be detrimental. Fortunately, this fact has not escaped the Access and Equity Section of the Higher Education Division of DDE, as the following extract from the Agenda papers of an equity workshop held earlier in 1991 demonstrates.

The Commonwealth recognizes that there is little value in rolling in, or fully mainstreaming funding until the commitment to equity is mainstreamed in institutional management and resource allocation. Further, there must be in place a satisfactory system to permit the seamless rolling in of funding for equity must, in no way, be at the cost of government assurance that equity activities are viable, and that equity planning complement, and not compete with, their requirements. It is very reassuring to have this artifact unlicated so clearly by the DEC (Definance for 1992, 1991).

The final element of mainstreaming is perhaps the most difficult to achieve. It requires the integration of equity at the grass roots level of institutional planning. Higher Education Equity Program funds which ceased to be used after 1992-93. DDE makes no secret of the link between money and equity planning and the funding statement for 1992, Higher Education Funding For The 1992-94 Triennium (DDE, 1991) states:

"Funding for equity in higher education is based on performance against targets identified in the granting process of Federal Government funds under the Higher Education Equity Program for 1992, account has been taken of an institution's equity achievements during 1991, equity planning has had a significant impact on the budgeting of equity plans to increase participation, and in the proportion of disadvantaged students for the forthcoming triennium. Assistance has been limited to those institutions which have demonstrated progress towards achievement of their targets. (Higher Education Funding For The 1992-94 Triennium, 1991).

While the practice of "rewarding" or "punishing" institutions for equity performance was galling to some institutions, particularly those that had withstood years of minimal government grants of rigid requirements, the preparation of equity plans had the desired policy outcome of securing attention on institutional equity performance and reorienting the funding processes of the universities for equity.

However, "coercive federalism" may have been an effective mechanism, as the achievement of higher education policy goals have been desired. It has severe limitations in terms of securing long-term institutional commitment to equity. The funding arrangements between equity plans and the level of equity funding is presently clear, but will be more secure when equity funds are mainstreamed to become a component of the general operating budgets. How then will equity "survive" the move to mainstreaming?

There is no simple answer to this question, as the solution is likely to be quite specific to each institution and therefore needs to be determined in light of the established institutional practices for allocating resources and the resources available. A combination of the two approaches will likely be a fruit to the same extent.

Funding for equity will be closely bound up with the forwarding planning process. Logically, this should be a reflection of the mission and goals of the institution, and should be fully discussed and accepted by the governing bodies. While funding for equity should be treated in the same manner as other institutional priorities, the main goal of the approach is to provide and plan for a sustainable way to make a fair share of resources available to equity. Accepting this approach should be sufficient to encourage universities to begin planning for equity in the early stages of their development.
The way in which equity is managed within higher education institutions has a significant impact on the experiences of students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, the current approach to mainstreaming equity initiatives, which often involves the provision of targeted support, may not be sufficient to address the root causes of inequality. It is important to consider alternative strategies that can help to reduce systemic barriers and promote more inclusive practices.

Conclusion

It is apparent that a fresh approach is needed to address the inadequacies of current equity strategies. While some initiatives have been successful in promoting equity within specific groups, there is a need for a more comprehensive and systematic approach to mainstreaming equity across all levels of higher education. This requires a focus on systemic change, rather than on isolated interventions. The principles of equity and social justice should guide the development of new approaches, which need to be integrated into the core mission and culture of institutions of higher education.

Notes


Bibliography


The real barriers to participation in higher education by disadvantaged groups may not be access or support, but what is taught in university courses, and how it is taught. As suggested in the quote cited above, addressing this concern will be particularly difficult. Perhaps strategies such as including "equity performance criteria" in staff promotion processes or departmental reviews might stimulate some additional effort in terms of mainstreaming equity implementation.

The mainstreaming of equity into research activities within the higher education sector might be looking at equity and research the wrong way around. It could be argued that, instead of just encouraging more "mainstream" researchers to be involved in equity equity practitioners need to engage in more mainstream research in order to inform their own work. This would be one very practical way of moving equity issues into the mainstream research sphere. Encouraging equity practitioners to access resources and facilities such as research grants or support infrastructure could be mutually beneficial to both areas of university work. The production of more diverse and scholarly articles on equity issues, particularly to evaluate existing equity programs, could ensure maximum exposure to the results of both good and bad practice in equity activities. This was the starting point of identifying equity practitioners.

This paper is a later version of our presentation at the "Equity and Access in Higher Education Conferences", University of Newcastle, 5th October, 1993.