

**Social equity in a mass, globalised higher education environment:  
the unresolved issue of widening access to university**

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## Introduction

Internationally, equity is usually considered to be one of the three fundamental measures of the effectiveness of a higher education system, alongside quality and efficiency. Equity is therefore one of the enduring issues for higher education policy-makers, to be ignored at their peril. The importance attached to equity in higher education is unsurprising. It touches our beliefs about justice and our hopes for a fairer society, for social change and for national development. It also touches our hopes for our own families. For these reasons, equity is an issue on which many people have strong opinions and it is frequently the source of superficial newspaper headlines and cheap political point-scoring. From a public policy perspective, equity is a fine example of the limits of policy in creating social change, for equity in higher education is undoubtedly one of the 'wicked problems' for policy-makers, as this paper will argue.

With CSHE colleagues, in particular Dr Gabrielle Baldwin, I have been involved in a number of studies related to access and equity over the past decade. The most recent was the national study of student finances conducted by the CSHE for Universities Australia (James, Bexley, Devlin & Marginson 2007). This paper draws on these studies. The paper is broad-ranging rather than narrowly focussed. It would be possible, of course, to devote the entire paper to the equity issues around gender, or disability, or rurality, or Indigenous people's participation. But the focus in the main part is on the challenge of widening access for people from low socio-economic status backgrounds, for this is one of the persistent and seemingly intractable equity issues.

### What is equity and does it matter?

For a concept that is so widely discussed, and which has such intuitive appeal, equity is surprisingly difficult to define with precision. The various implicit and explicit conceptions of equity in higher education include the following:

- those who have the ability to go on to university are able to do so;
- there are no barriers to access to university;
- the selection for university places is on academic merit;
- the selection for university places is without discrimination on the basis of social class, gender, religion or ethnicity; and
- all people have the same opportunity to develop their talents.

The differences in these conceptions are subtle but they are far from trivial. They lead to differing sets of assumptions about policy strategies and different ways of assessing the effectiveness of interventions.

The formal definition of equity in Australian higher education derives from the landmark discussion paper *A Fair Chance for All* (NBEET 1990)<sup>1</sup>:

The overall objective for equity in higher education is to ensure that Australians from all groups in society have the opportunity to participate successfully in higher education. This will be achieved by changing the balance of the student population to reflect more closely the composition of the society as a whole.

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<sup>1</sup> *A Fair Chance for All* (NBEET 1990) also established a 'data-driven' policy framework structured around six designated equity groups and five performance indicators:

- Equity groups: people from low socio-economic backgrounds, people in rural or isolated areas, people with disabilities, Indigenous people and people from non-English speaking backgrounds and women, especially in non-traditional fields of study and higher degrees.
- Performance indicators: access, participation, success, retention and completion.

See also Martin (1994).

Internationally, the goal of achieving more parity between the composition of university populations and national populations is one of the more widespread conceptions of equity for it helps establish aspirational targets. Beyond this, the idea of equity usually involves often vague notions of merit, fairness, and equality of opportunity. It must be said that none of these concepts is straightforward, for each involves complex and problematic notions of justice and choice (see, for example, Rawls 1973 or Sen 1995). Academic merit is perhaps the most enduring idea associated with equity, though it becomes increasingly troublesome in mass or universal higher education systems — in which over fifty per cent of people go to university — to sort the people who are more deserving of higher education from those who are less deserving. I will later return to this point.

Equity in higher education *is* worth worrying about. Higher education confers significant individual benefits in terms of personal development, social status, career possibilities and, of course, lifetime earnings. But while individual social justice has been the major imperative behind many equity initiatives, there has long been an argument, especially in the USA, that improving the higher education participation of people from disadvantaged groups is essential for the long-term social and economic integration of these groups and that widening participation and intergenerational social mobility might lead to a more cohesive and more economically successful society.

### **The international patterns of participation in higher education**

Worldwide there has been massive, sometimes staggering, growth in higher education participation in the last 50 years, including in most developing nations. Despite the expansion in participation, demographic imbalances in the people going on to university continue to be striking in most nations. In some countries, women are still very under-represented while in others they are clearly in the majority, though not necessarily in all fields of study or at all levels of awards. Ethnic minorities are highly under-represented generally, though this is not always the case. But the most widespread and persistent source of disadvantage in access to higher education is low social class or low socio-economic status (SES). This is not narrow economic disadvantage but also involves the absence of Bourdieu's broader concept of social and cultural capital. In most nations, even in developed nations with strong egalitarian traditions, social class is the single most reliable predictor of the likelihood that individuals will participate in higher education at some stage in their lives. This is particularly true in developing countries, where poorer students have little chance of gaining entry into higher education, but it is also true in the most developed countries, where the people from low SES backgrounds who do reach higher education are less likely to find places in the most prestigious institutions and fields of study.

Low rates of higher education participation often reflect endemic educational disadvantage that may begin in the earliest years of schooling. Internationally, the under-representation of people from low SES backgrounds is a result of the combined effects of lower school completion rates, lower levels of educational attainment in schools — thus limiting opportunities in the circumstances of competitive entry based on academic achievement — lower levels of educational aspiration, lower perceptions of the personal and career relevance of higher education and perhaps alienation from the culture of universities in some cases. There is also a range of interrelated financial factors of course.

It is extremely difficult to make direct quantitative comparisons of national patterns of access to tertiary education on the basis of socio-economic status. First, the idea of social class is highly intangible and firmly grounded in national social, cultural and economic systems. Thus when SES is measured it is done so on quite different indicators and scales. Second, higher education systems also differ significantly and what is classified as higher education differs between countries. As a result of these two factors little comparative data is available. The OECD, for

example, in the otherwise excellent *Education at a Glance* (2006a) dataset reports higher education participation only in aggregate figures, by gender and for people with disabilities.

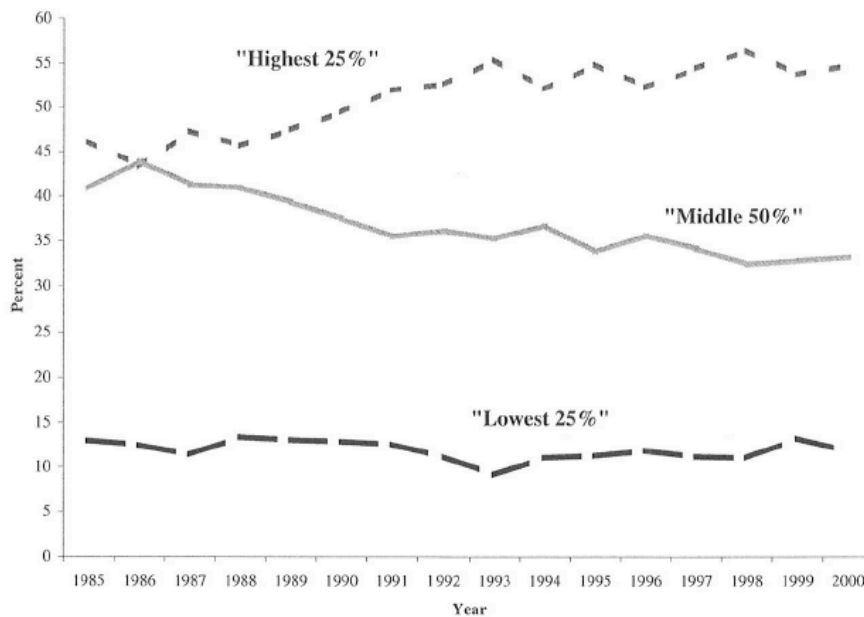
Despite these problems with comparison, the broad international situation, at least in developed nations, is illustrated by the following national vignettes. Germany is renowned for its highly stratified secondary school system, one outcome of which is sizeable imbalances in higher education participation. One study in the late 1990s (Schnitzer et al. 1999) reported that only 33 per cent of lower social background children reached upper secondary school and only eight per cent entered higher education. By comparison, 84 per cent of upper social background children reached upper secondary and 72 per cent entered higher education — a nine-fold difference.

The dubious achievement of the most socially polarised higher education system of the EU appears to go to Portugal. The Portuguese higher education system expanded after the revolution in 1974 but a firm binary divide was maintained between universities and polytechnics. The equity performance of Portuguese higher education is possibly the worst among EU nations, with people in the lowest social grouping being *ten times* less likely to attend university than people in the highest social grouping.

In the UK and USA, access to higher education for low socio-economic background people appears to be diminishing in relative terms due to the combined effects of standardised entrance testing and higher tuition costs (Layer 2005). It is of course impossible to summarise fairly the diverse US system of public and private universities, for the institutions run the full spectrum from highly inclusive to highly socially elite. There are many universities with aggressive and effective equity programs, sometimes enshrined in state legislation that specifies admissions targets. But there are also some of the most socially privileged institutions in the world in which family influence and ‘cheque-book’ admissions prevail. A powerful account of this phenomenon has been provided by Daniel Golden in *The Price of Admissions* (2006). Overall, however, the US has a fine tradition of open access and equity that has focused on the participation of minority groups, particularly after President Lyndon Johnson’s legislation for affirmative action to redress the legacy of racial discrimination, which opened the doors to universities for African-Americans. Significantly, though, affirmative action is still under sustained attack and in the past decade affirmative action programs in the United States have been successfully challenged in legal cases (ironically on moral grounds) with significant ramifications for public and institutional policies for staff and student recruitment alike (Allen 2005, Douglass 2007).

Astin and Oseguera (2004) have provided a damning account of growing inequality in US higher education (see Figure 1) following an analysis of three decades of data. They concluded the data reveal

... substantial socio-economic inequities in who gains access to the most selective colleges and universities in the United States. Further, these inequities have increased during recent decades, despite the expansion of remedial efforts such as student financial aid, affirmative action, and outreach programs. American higher education, in other words, is more socioeconomically stratified today than at any time during the past three decades. Although the underlying reasons for these trends are not clear, it may well be that they are at least partially attributable to the increasing competitiveness among prospective college students for admission to the country’s most selective colleges and universities (p.338).



**Figure 1: Trends in the parental income distributions of freshman entering the most selective (top 10%) institutions, 1985-2000**  
(Astin & Oseguera 2004)

The UK has adopted an ambitious equity agenda under the rubric of ‘widening participation’ with strategies that include the removal of upfront fees, funding incentives to universities and the encouragement of part-time attendance. The widely touted Tony Blair goal is for 50 per cent of 18 – 30 year olds to participate in higher education by 2010, to be achieved from the present base of 43 per cent. The present social imbalances in UK higher education participation are sizeable. Around half of the population in England is defined as belonging to lower socio-economic groups but these people represent only 28 per cent of young, full-time entrants to first degree courses. HEFCE (2006, 2007) has reported that young people from the most prosperous areas are *five to six times* more likely to go to university than young working class people in particular areas of disadvantage. In Ireland, the tertiary education system has expanded greatly, however the students who have benefited have been drawn disproportionately from managerial and professional classes (OECD 2006b).

Finland is an important example because despite being renowned for its egalitarian public school system, its higher education participation is heavily skewed according to parental educational backgrounds. The OECD Thematic Review of Tertiary Education (Davis et al. 2006) reported that large inequalities in access persist in Finnish tertiary education:

Participation rates in university education among young students (aged 20-24) differ considerably according to the educational background of their parents. The relative chance of entering university education has remained at least ten times higher during the last decades for those coming from academic home backgrounds compared to students from less educated families. The expansion of the tertiary system appears to have narrowed the relative advantage of an academic home background to seven-fold (p. 21).

Many nations have introduced equity policies. These have taken a number of forms, including the removal or reduction of perceived barriers, through avenues such as scholarships to help meet the cost of fees or living costs, compensatory admission for students with lower levels of school

achievement and programs described as affirmative action that focus on minority group membership as the basis for admission. Policies for affirmative action or positive discrimination have been highly contentious for they have conflicted with conceptions of merit. The admission of people with lower levels of educational attainment has been seen by some to lower academic standards and to take places away from those who deserve them.

In many nations the ongoing policy issue of equity of access is interwoven with speculation about a desirable *overall* participation rate in higher education. National targets for unrelenting expansion have been driven by the idea of the knowledge society and the perhaps simplistic assumption that higher and higher rates of university participation will automatically lead to enhanced national economic performance. However, as yet there is no sound way of estimating the overall higher education participation rate needed for optimum national economic performance. Blair's UK target of 50 per cent participation has been the subject of withering criticism by Alison Wolf of the Institute of Education (2002), who argued the target has no empirical basis and was established in ignorance of the complex relationship between education and labour markets. Further, Wolf proposed that the target might lead to the gently coercive participation of students who do not really wish to be at university.

### **So how does Australia fare?**

Australia has been a leader in establishing a national equity policy framework, for which it has an international reputation. In addition to the equity framework, the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) has been a powerful equity device. The effect of HECS has been twofold: as an income contingent loan it has removed the obstacle of upfront fees, while the revenue from HECS has funded expansion in the number of places available.

The equity policy framework has generated good time-series data on domestic students, in fact an excellent dataset compared with the data available in other nations, allowing for detailed analyses (see, for example, James et al. 2004, Coates & Krause 2005, Dobson 2003). In terms of subgroup participation, Australia does not fare too badly, certainly we are doing better than some EU nations. However, the participation patterns are far from satisfactory for a nation that takes pride in its egalitarianism.

The overview to follow presents some data that are widely known but these need to be re-iterated. The Australian dataset shows we have made good progress in improving the participation of people with disabilities, people from non-English speaking backgrounds and women — women are now over-represented in most fields, but not all and certainly not at higher degree level. Arguably the group that has benefited the most from the expansion of higher education in Australia is middle-class females — at least in access to university, though perhaps not in subsequent careers.

The situation with Indigenous people's participation is mixed. For a period there was growth in access, though this has stalled in recent years and appears to be dropping. A proportion of the access to higher education for Indigenous people has been provided by sub-degree and enabling programs. Higher degree enrolments and completions are modest. The principal challenges here are in recruiting Indigenous students who are prepared for university — given that school completion rates for Indigenous people are about half of those for other Australians — and in retaining students once enrolled, for the university completion rate for Indigenous enrollees remains well below 50 per cent. There is much to be proud about in Australian higher education but it is impossible to be fully proud until we do better for Indigenous Australians. More Indigenous Australians are desperately needed in the professions and with PhDs to set up a positive cycle of aspiration in Indigenous communities.

There are two other groups for which little progress has been made: people living in rural or remote areas and people from low SES backgrounds. Both groups are highly under-represented

and for both the participation shares have not budged despite 15 years of equity policy. The policy framework uses three SES groupings (the other countries that have substantial data tend to use more categories) measured using a postcode index calculated on census data: low SES students are defined as those whose permanent home is in the bottom 25 per cent of postcodes (with medium SES and high SES people defined as representing 50 per cent and 25 per cent of postcodes respectively).

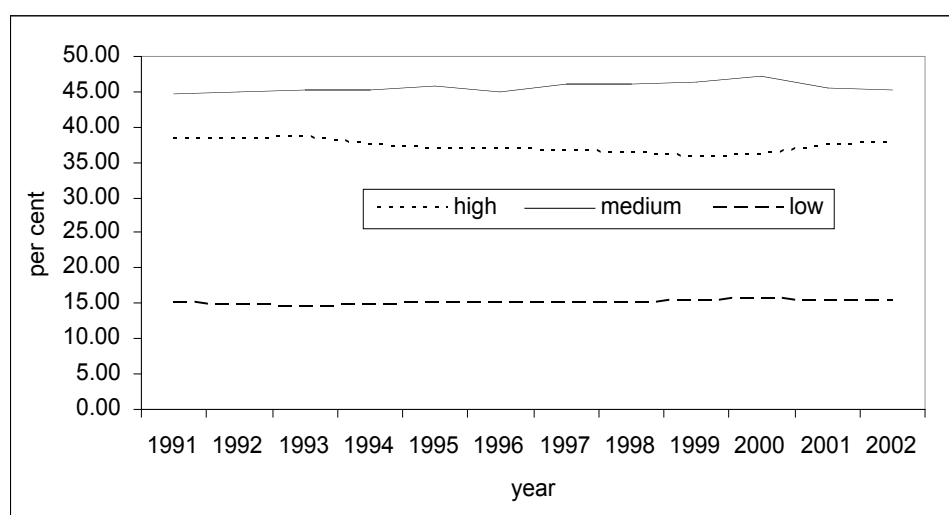
Table 1 shows the typical national participation shares of the three SES groups during the past two decades. To put these figures into concrete terms: people from high or medium SES backgrounds are twice as likely to go to university as those from low SES backgrounds. People from high SES backgrounds are close to *three times* as likely to go to university as those from low SES backgrounds. Though this is rarely mentioned, people from medium SES backgrounds are proportionally under-represented in higher education, albeit only modestly. It is worth nothing that the likelihood of medium SES Australians attending university is only 56 per cent of the likelihood of high SES Australians doing so.

**Table 1: University participation share by socio-economic status for domestic students and national reference points (%)**

	Low SES	Medium SES	High SES
Reference point based on postcode distribution	25.0%	50.0%	25.0%
Share of university places*	14.5%	44.5%	39.0%

\* typical figures for the entire 1991-2005 period. Note some students are not classified.

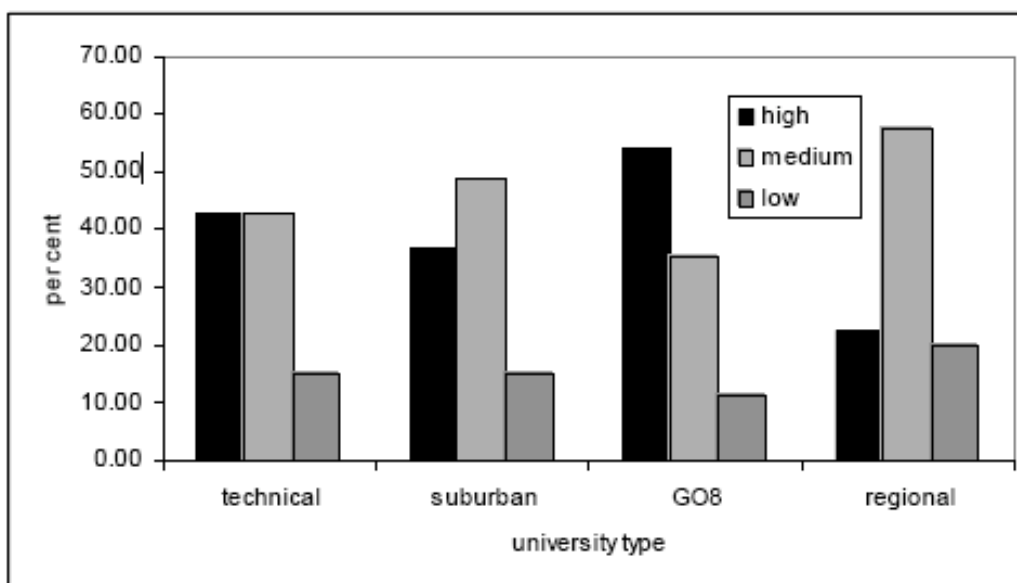
That these imbalances have remained virtually unchanged (Figure 2) — with typical variations of only tenths of percentage points annually, and no discernable overall trend — during a period of significant expansion in the number of domestic students in Australian higher education is amazing. It is tempting to conclude that university admissions/selections processes are quite resilient in reproducing a certain social order.



**Figure 2: Participation share by socio-economic group, 1991-2002 (per cent)**  
(James et al. 2004)

The contrasts between group participation shares are even more extreme if we consider the leading universities and the courses for which there is the most competitive entry. People from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less successful in gaining access to the high demand universities

and courses. In parallel with international patterns, people from low SES backgrounds are particularly under-represented in medicine, law, architecture, but less under-represented in teacher education and agriculture. Students from high SES backgrounds comprise over half of all the students in masters degrees and doctorates.



**Figure 3: Participation share of SES groups by broad university type, 2002 (from James et al. 2004)**

The Go8 universities fall well below the national mean for participation share of people from low SES backgrounds (Figure 3). In total, lower SES students have only about 11 per cent of the share of places. But it should be noted that even the institutions among most effective in enrolling students from lower socio-economic backgrounds just reach or barely exceed the notional 25 per cent reference point. For example, the 2005 figures (Table 2): Newcastle 27.4 per cent, Victoria University 23.8 per cent and the University of South Australia 24.1 per cent. Newcastle does exceptionally well, in part because of its geographical location but also due to a thriving Foundation program that is without parallel in Australian higher education.

**Table 2: Participation share for students from low socio-economic status backgrounds (all ages) for selected universities, 2005 (%)**

	Low SES (%)	State total
Victoria University	23.8	13.5
RMIT	13.3	13.5
Deakin	13.2	13.5
Swinburne	10.2	13.5
University of Melbourne	8.0	13.5
UniSA	24.1	20.5
Flinders	20.6	20.5
University of Adelaide	15.0	20.5
Griffith	14.5	17.6
University of Queensland	14.5	17.6
Newcastle	27.4	12.9
University of Sydney	6.4	12.9
University of NSW	5.5	12.9

(DEST 2006).



Importantly, there is now evidence of an *increasing* social polarisation between universities. Between 2001 and 2005 the proportion of low SES students dropped in all Go8 universities (Table 3) with the exception of the University of NSW (which began that period with the lowest proportion for its state). One factor in this trend appears to be the intensification of competition for university places in the most highly selective universities and the continuing high level of social stratification of secondary school achievement. The differences between the universities in Table 3 are largely due to locational effects and the geographical regions from which the universities draw high proportions of their students rather than university policies.

**Table 3: Participation share for low socio-economic status students (all ages) in the Group of Eight universities, 2001 and 2005 (%)**

	2001	2005	State/Territory total, 2005
ANU	4.6	3.5	3.5
University of NSW	5.1	5.5	12.9
University of Sydney	7.4	6.4	12.9
University of Western Aust.	7.7	7.5	12.9
University of Melbourne	8.4	8.0	13.5
Monash University	13.9	13.0	13.5
University of Queensland	15.5	14.5	17.6
University of Adelaide	16.0	15.0	20.5

(DEST 2006)

It can be concluded from the Australian data that higher education disproportionately serves high SES people in Australia, as it does elsewhere in the world. The imbalances do not seem as extreme as in some other developed nations, though this may be an artefact of a classification that uses only three categories of social class and the use of a geographical postcode index rather than, say, parental occupation or educational attainment on which other national data are based.

### **The University of Melbourne: the challenge of the excellence-equity social contract**

The University of Melbourne like other universities that confer particular social and career benefits has a highly symbolic public role in equity and its actions and achievements are watched closely. The media reaction to the Melbourne Model is an excellent case in point.

Like other Australian universities, the University of Melbourne takes equity seriously and much effort goes into it. But as can be seen from the previous table, the University does not do particularly well in enrolling low SES students in comparison with the national reference point and the average for Victorian universities. The University of Melbourne enrolls about seven times the number of students from high SES backgrounds as it does students from low SES backgrounds. This is an inescapable fact. However, the University's performance should be set in context. Over many years the University of Melbourne has implemented carefully designed equity initiatives, including:

- The Access Melbourne initiative, which reserves 20 per cent of undergraduate places for students who demonstrate educational disadvantage (formerly the Targeted Access Program).
- The MAP initiative (Melbourne Access Program) in which the University works intensively with students in the middle secondary years in a group of under-represented schools. This program has been successful in improving the transition rates to higher education. The participating schools have wished to remain in the program and many other schools have sought to join the program.

To these programs the University has added the Kwong Lee Dow Young Scholars program this year, an initiative designed in part to broaden the student profile. These and other programs have assisted in keeping the University's SES profile stable but have not broadened it. In many ways these efforts have played around the edges of the equity challenge, which is not a criticism of the programs or of the people involved in them (who include the author). Rather, the point here is that much effort is needed in universities like University of Melbourne simply to maintain a steady-state let alone create major changes in the student demography. Granted, it is too early yet to see any effects of the relatively recent Access Melbourne initiative, but the indications are that the broad participation ratios are unlikely to alter greatly.

Like most leading universities, the University of Melbourne is in a difficult position. The University has an informal, unwritten social contract because of its history and place in the institutional hierarchy. The consequences of tinkering with this implicit contract are evident in the press coverage around the Melbourne Model this year. Awkwardly, the community expects the University to stand for academic excellence and to stand for equality of opportunity in equal measure. The tensions between these two values are profound in a society in which senior school completion rates and achievement levels are so strongly correlated with socio-economic status. The bind for the University is that it is open to criticism of either elitism *or* declining standards if any changes are made to its policies for student selection, access and equity.

The strong correlation between school achievement and socio-economic status is starkly evident in the University of Melbourne case, as with many of the Group of Eight universities. It is now so very difficult for the University of Melbourne to recruit students from low socio-economic backgrounds who have suitable levels of academic attainment, at least as measured by the ranking provided by ENTER. This dilemma has been experienced most keenly in the highly competitive fields of study, such as Law. The University of Melbourne has the challenge of assessing the genuine academic potential of students to be successful in a higher education environment, for which there is obviously no suitable measurement tool at the present time.

The Melbourne Model provides a new opportunity to advance equity. The New Generation degrees will relax the pressure of the extremely high ENTER scores that have been previously needed for selection into many professional degrees. The Graduate Schools will give the opportunity for the University to have a 'second bite' at equity and the Access Melbourne initiative will operate at both undergraduate and graduate levels. Much has been done from the outset to ensure that the Melbourne Model does not compromise the University's commitment to equity, including the lobbying of the federal government to shift Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs) to graduate programs and the provision of an extensive scholarship program.

But ultimately the proof of the pudding will be in the eating. The Melbourne Model provides no guarantee of an improvement in equity. It remains to be seen whether the pedagogical philosophy of the Melbourne Model, which embodies a more liberal notion of undergraduate education and delays professional career choices and studies, will be embraced equally by all groups in the community. For some prospective students, committing to a curriculum sea-change of this order will be viewed as a risk. People with less social and cultural capital, or those who are inclined to view higher education more instrumentally, possibly will be more cautious about taking this perceived risk. This must be monitored closely, as it will be.

### **Dispelling the myths that surround equity of access in Australian higher education**

Let me summarise the argument thus far. Worldwide, people from low SES backgrounds are highly under-represented in higher education, partly because school completion rates and school achievement levels are closely correlated with social class. Many nations have had equity policies to address this problem but the effects of these are not at all clear. Certainly at an aggregate level, these policies appear to have done little to reduce the persistent, proportional under-representation

of low SES people. In fact, within the most expanded higher education systems there is evidence of a polarisation of the socio-economic profile of the student body across different universities. Competition is heightened for the places in the most prestigious universities: students compete for entry to what are perceived to be the best universities, while in turn the more prestigious universities compete for the students with the highest level of school achievement.

Thus growth in overall participation in higher education almost invariably leads to institutional stratification. There are strong social forces for this. Part of the private benefit of higher education is in the social differentiation it provides. This hinges on exclusiveness: the value of higher education as a private good is relative to the 'other'; that is, the people without higher education. The more people who have higher education, the less positional value it has. As overall access to higher education expands, the desire for social differentiation is therefore increasingly sought in choice of institution, course and higher degree studies. The expansion of participation leads to overtly tiered systems and elite universities can be expected to do very well in mass higher education systems, which they do, but equally they tend to become highly socially polarised.

So, do we give up on the problem of equity or should we aim to do better? People can live good, happy lives without going to university, of course, and few would argue that it is socially or economically desirable for everyone to undertake higher education. But the unacceptable problem, in my view, is the extent of the social stratification of university participation in Australia, particularly in some institutions and courses, given the benefits that higher education confers on individuals and their communities. This stratification is easily overlooked on a day-to-day basis for it is largely invisible on campus, but for the more overt manifestations of social class. The social stratification of university participation is partially because Australia's education systems fail to serve some Australians well rather than because of differences in intelligence or in the potential to benefit from higher education. To argue that the present participation imbalances are acceptable or inevitable would be to concede defeat on our capacity to improve our school systems unless it is assumed that intelligence is unequally dispersed across the social strata.

How much better do we need to do? This is a very difficult question to which there are no definitive answers. What is needed to do better? This is perhaps an easier question. An initial step towards more effective equity policies is better theorising on the precise character of the problem. I'd like to debunk six myths or misconceptions that surround equity in higher education and that limit the capacity to imagine more effective policies and initiatives. I begin with the two most prevalent myths.

*Myth 1 'Expanding participation will improve equity'*

Whether or not this assertion is a myth is admittedly the subject of some debate. A common international strategy to advance equity has simply been to fund the expansion of access. While it is true that expansion can allow more people from lower socio-economic backgrounds to attend university, it is also the case that the benefits of higher rates of participation in higher education are spread roughly equally across social strata — this effect appears universally true in developed nations. So expansion alone does not improve the participation share of people from lower socio-economic backgrounds — thus, whether there are social equity gains is debatable. Almost paradoxically, expansion can lead to greater social inequality. As has been argued, mass or universal higher education systems invariably become highly stratified and access to the elite universities and most highly sought after courses becomes heavily skewed towards the higher social classes.

*Myth 2 'Free or low cost higher education will improve equity'*

This is the second most prevalent myth. 'Free higher education' is the mantra in protests about the rising costs of higher education. But there is no evidence at all that free or low cost higher education widens participation on a grand scale. In fact, during the Whitlam era of free higher

education the social composition of the university student population was largely the same as it is today.

This myth is based on the assumption that cost is the principal barrier to access. Cost is a factor, but it is not the only factor. All the evidence points to lower levels of school achievement, lower aspirations, and lack of perceived personal relevance being far more potent factors. In any case, it is probably a ‘pie in the sky’ hope to argue for free higher education. Governments seem unwilling or unable to provide the resources to fund appropriate quality higher education in an era of mass or universal participation. Free higher education is likely to lead to far fewer people going to university or very low quality provision, or both. In the current context free higher education would create a regressive tax situation in most nations for the middle and upper classes are over-represented compared with the lower classes. However, targeted reduction in the cost of higher education is definitely essential for the successful participation of some people, as the recent CSHE study of student finances for Universities Australia has shown. Everything possible must be done to achieve minimal costs for students who otherwise would not be able to participate or whose quality of study would be seriously compromised by their financial circumstances.

*Myth 3 ‘Improving equity involves the removal of barriers to access’*

The third myth involves an important conceptual shift. It is closely related to myth two. It is naïve to think only in terms of removing barriers, or even to think in terms of the popular rhetoric of ‘expanding choices’. The challenge is not only to remove or reduce barriers, where they exist, but also to *build* possibilities and choices: to raise aspirations, to raise perceptions of relevance, and to boost personal educational achievement. Many young people do not even get to the point of confronting barriers or having ‘choices’ — education is a *precursor* to informed choice. So here’s the rub: building possibilities is far more costly and needs far more imagination than removing barriers and it needs a long-term commitment. It requires improvements within all education sectors and a coordinated policy approach.

*Myth 4 ‘The onus is with universities to resolve equity problems’*

No, not entirely. The die has been cast for many students well before the point of transition to higher education at which universities have the most influence. Differential school completion rates are a significant factor in the differential rate of transfer to higher education, as are differential levels of school achievement. Putting aside mature-age entry, universities in the main part play out their low SES recruitment initiatives around a relatively small, though nonetheless very important, target group of prospective students — those who have stayed at school and successfully completed secondary schooling, whose academic attainment is at a suitable level, and who see relevance in higher education and have confidence in their ability to succeed at university. For these students much of the equity concerns are quite reasonably focused on financial issues. But these students represent a narrow slice of the participation imbalances. Focussing solely on these ‘survivors’ is to work on the margins of the equity problem. Again, the improvement of equity in higher education requires improvements within all education sectors.

*Myth 5 ‘Widening participation will lower standards or lower retention and completion rates’*

The belief that widening participation will lower university standards is one of the most pernicious myths, reflecting a deeply pessimistic view of human potential and the capacity of education to develop people. The idea of standards in higher education is too conceptually complex to be examined properly here, but it is sufficient to say that using student achievement on entry as a measure of standards or a safeguard of standards is shallow thinking in a mass higher education system. The notion that ‘inputs’ safeguard academic standards is a relic of elite era thinking but it will persist until there are better ways of measuring ‘outputs’, that is graduate capabilities. There is some truth that widening participation will lower retention and completion rates, but the drop is unlikely to be dramatic. The current data show here are few significant problems with the retention rates, success rates and completion rates for people in the designated equity groups once

they enrol in higher education with the significant exception of Indigenous people (DEST 2002, Devlin & James 2006).

*Myth 6 'Students can be selected for higher education on academic merit'*

Well, yes, but only to a point. In mass or universal higher education systems in which perhaps half the population will undertake higher education the idea of merit has less salience than it did in the elite era. Yet our hopes for meritocratic entry to university are still largely pinned on ENTER rankings (and the counterparts in other states), at least for school-leavers and the Go8 institutions. Clearly ENTER is not a measure of intrinsic individual intellectual ability. ENTER partly measures the cumulative advantage or disadvantage of family, school and community circumstances. ENTER measures preparedness, perhaps, and certainly not ideally, but it is a less than perfect proxy for the potential of individuals to thrive in and benefit from university study. Investing too much trust in ENTER as a fair and just indicator of merit for higher education is a mistake in a mass system.

The point here is that equity and merit, as they are currently conceived, are in significant tension. The concept of equity in elite systems of higher education was partly based on the meritocratic principle that certain people were deserving of higher education on the basis of 'untapped' intellectual potential and these people needed compensatory access. Equity was simply an appendage to merit. Martin Trow (1973, 2006) speculated that as systems moved from mass to universal participation, access would move from being a right to an obligation, and that meritocratic admissions coupled with compensatory programs for equity purposes would be replaced by more open access. Internationally, there is little evidence of this occurring on a large scale, even in the most expanded systems.

**Taking bold steps: Some ideas on the conditions for advancing equity in Australian higher education**

I would like to offer a set of interrelated ideas that I believe would allow the problem of the under-representation of people from low SES backgrounds to be tackled in a more active way and on a larger scale. I do so to illustrate the major change in thinking and policy that would be needed. I do not suggest that the sector is ready to, or ought, take these steps. However, if new approaches are not adopted we must reconcile ourselves to continuing with well-meaning initiatives that have limited impact and periodic hand-wringing over the seemingly intractable nature of the problem.

***Frame policy around a multi-causal understanding of the factors underlying under-representation***

The problem of educational disadvantage will be addressed in only a piecemeal fashion while it continues to be depicted almost solely in terms of financial disadvantage and financial barriers. The limited and simplistic theorising that narrowly equates socio-economic educational disadvantage with financial hardship needs to be eliminated. Similarly the persistent concepts of external 'barriers to access' and the 'deserving poor', despite the appeal of the latter, need to be downplayed. The cost of higher education (real or perceived) is only one inhibiting factor. Boosting the encouraging or enabling factors is as necessary as removing barriers, including the barrier of cost. Scholarships and other forms of financial incentive and support are essential for removing financial deterrents and hardship but are only part of the solution — these are a necessary but not sufficient condition.

***Improve the definition and measurement of socio-economic status***

Ironically, while SES is perhaps the most important demographic characteristic for equity purposes its measurement is the most fraught. Considerable work needs to be done to improve the way in which socio-economic status is defined and measured. The present postcode index has been a useful and inexpensive way of estimating aggregate participation shares and trends but it is not an appropriate way to identify individual socio-economic status or educational disadvantage. It is

likely that the use of the postcode index under-estimates the social stratification in Australian higher education.

The idea of social classes or social strata is relatively unproblematic but the identification of individuals with particular social classes is highly problematic. By and large people do not self-identify with social classes and there may be some stigma in doing so. Thus one of the main problems for universities in implementing access programs is in targeting prospective students and in distinguishing between individual educational disadvantage and the patterns of disadvantage experienced by particular groups. Here the postcode index fails us almost totally. The postcode index is rarely, if ever, used by universities to explicitly target postcode regions. This non-alignment of monitoring measures with intervention strategies is an obvious shortcoming of the equity policy framework. Measurement alternatives need to be considered, including parental occupations, educational levels and income levels. Of course these alternatives are not without limitations of their own and to collect data on any of them would be intrusive and more costly than the present approach. But advancing an evidenced-based approach to policy certainly requires improvement in the measurement of individual socio-economic status.

#### ***Set targets and provide more incentives for universities***

The Higher Education Equity Program (HEEP) provides modest financial incentives in return for what has become a ritualised annual reporting of institutional equity plans. The government might employ new policy devices that establish incremental targets and financial incentives. These might have a particular focus on the Sandstone universities where there is a pressing need to more effectively recruit low SES students, especially from the most under-represented schools. The measurement dimension of equity policy is critical. In modern higher education what is measured counts, thus what is measured and the way in which it is measured can drive university behaviours in powerful ways.

#### ***Reach back into schools, well before the school-university transition***

As has been argued, equity initiatives will have limited impact if they operate only at the point of transition to university. Yet there is a tendency within universities for equity of access to be perceived primarily as a student *selection* issue. The present participation inequities might be reduced if there was a commitment to focusing more energy on the early stages of the creation of educational ambition. This would require programs in under-represented schools and communities to build aspirations, raise confidence in the relevance of higher education and to contribute to higher levels of academic achievement early in students' secondary schooling. This would require universities to establish stronger partnerships with disadvantaged schools, districts, regions and communities to build aspirations among students in middle secondary, or earlier. In some cases this may mean establishing preferential pathways into university.

#### ***Select students more flexibly by being less reliant on ENTER, encourage and support mature-age entry***

Continuing improvement in the pathways into higher education that bypass competitive selection procedures is essential, and this includes through mature-age entry. Competitive entry based on school achievement is a major stumbling block for young people from low SES backgrounds: in their personal assessment of their possibilities; in their actual chances; and in their assessment of the labour market value of courses to which they might realistically gain access.

As has been argued, there is a gridlock, of sorts, at the point of selection for entry to university. Admission is conceived largely in meritocratic terms to which is coupled a suite of special admissions or compensatory mechanisms for equity purposes. Typically, equity policy initiatives attempt to influence the compensation side of this equation. The merit-compensation monolith might equally be softened if the present belief in merit, narrowly construed around senior secondary achievement, is confronted.

The challenge of loosening the alignment of ideas about merit with ENTER rank is the greatest for the Go8 universities of course. These universities might, for example, preserve a higher proportion of higher education places and create alternative entry schemes for prospective students who are unlikely due to their circumstances to be unsuccessful in securing the high grades needed for competitive entry. However, any programs of this kind will likely elicit concern about ‘falling standards’. Rarely is ENTER not the ‘bottom-line’ for admissions and the litmus test of standards — a rise in the clearly-in-rank for courses appears to be celebrated in most universities.

### ***Renew first year curricula***

Equity policies and programs are closely related to choices about the curriculum and approaches to teaching and learning, though this is rarely recognised. The student selection and recruitment stance adopted by institutions influences first year curriculum decisions, for universities are required to teach students who are more diverse and perhaps less well-prepared in conventional terms. So the widening of participation, especially in the Go8 universities, invites a re-conceptualisation of first year curricula to accommodate students from different backgrounds with different types of preparedness. While ENTER is not an ideal measure of individual ability it is probably a reasonable indicator of the immediate preparedness for higher education, albeit for some fields of study more so than others.

### ***Develop better ways of measuring graduate outcomes***

This final suggestion might look odd at first. However, a value-added measure of the outcomes of university education might help break down the vertical stratification of Australia universities. Without better information on what graduates have learned and what they are capable of doing, institutional positional status based on reputational effects will prevail. In turn, the competition for places in the institutions offering the most positional status will continue to be fierce, and so the cycle will go on.

This suite of suggestions demonstrates that widening participation in a major way would be costly and there are no quick fixes. Non-traditional students are more costly to attract to university and require more academic support and other forms of support once enrolled. But this is what is required if serious inroads are to be made into the present participation imbalances.

### **Global student flow ... can a new conception of equity be developed?**

I wish to conclude by mentioning one major gap in the analysis thus far. One quarter of students in Australian universities are international students and Australian universities intensively recruit students throughout South-East and East Asia, including more recently through the establishment of off-shore campuses in a number of countries. Yet with regard to this large group of students there has been no discussion of equity of access and of what this might mean in the international context. Much of the analysis of internationalisation and student mobility has focused on standards and the quality of provision, competition between countries and university rankings. There has been some research into the student experience and some discussion on the effects on curriculum but little detailed research on this. But there has been virtually no examination of the composition of the student body participating in international higher education. Here the data available to us are very poor. Most nations do not have good data on the numbers of students travelling overseas for higher education purposes let alone data on their demography. In Australia we have no data on the socio-economic composition of international students and it is difficult to imagine how we might collect such data given the present measures of SES do not translate across borders.

Equity policy and the thinking around equity is embedded within national policy frameworks. International student mobility confounds assumptions about merit and equity for the conceptualisation of social class and indeed the measurement of school achievement are relative and firmly grounded in particular national social, economic and educational frameworks. There are presently no studies that explore equity across national borders. An international project is

needed to consider the equity issues in international higher education, in particular to examine how more comprehensive and more refined databases might be collected to monitor student demography in the context of global cross-border student flow. There are indications that the European Union might take steps in this direction.

With the cross-border flow of students and the personal, social and economic benefits inherent in achieving a university education, equity in higher education should be a significant international issue particularly for developing nations (Naidoo 2007). A scenario can be imagined in which international social elites are increasingly mobile for higher education, especially graduate education, and a wealthy group of people will have access to highly prestigious institutions and premium quality education. Issues of access and equity in higher education surely will need to be addressed globally as well as nationally.

### **Concluding remarks**

The recent history of equity in Australian higher education highlights the triumph of social complexity over policy aspirations. Despite the apparently limited effects of the equity policy framework it has been persisted with largely unchanged. Partly this is because equity policy simply plays a symbolic role; that is, it is important to maintain an espoused commitment to equity even if the policy is achieving seemingly modest gains.

Overall, the equity discourse in Australia needs re-invigoration. Universities Australia is presently commissioning a new national scoping study on equity of access, with a focus on people from low SES backgrounds in rural and metropolitan areas and Indigenous people. This investigation is welcome and may offer the hope of fresh approaches and renewed commitment within the sector. The UA study is timely. As higher education systems have massified the focus of concern for equity is changing. Whereas the interest was once primarily on aggregate patterns of access to higher education, there is now more attention being given to the nature of the particular universities and courses to which people gain access, and indeed more interest in the nature of outcomes too. Clearly all higher education is not equal, and this is increasingly true. The consequences of these trends for Australia need to be examined.

Australia has an international reputation for innovation and quality in higher education, perhaps tarnished just a little by challenges in relation to international education in recent years. If Australian universities were to develop a reputation for cracking the problem of widening participation, people worldwide involved in higher education policy and leadership would beat a path to our door.

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