

Facilitating student equity in Australian higher education

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Abstract

Equity in higher education is vital to promote social inclusion and social justice. It is therefore imperative that current knowledge is reflected in policy and practice. This body of work is innovative in that a diverse range of knowledge, approaches and discussions including gaps in research, policy and practice have been compiled. The 'Facilitating Student Equity in Higher Education' compendium provided to participants at this session makes a contribution to a reinvigorated public policy dialogue for equity in higher education in three ways: by summarising some of the key lessons learned from 24 research reports sponsored by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE); demonstrating the achievements of future equity leaders emerging from the Equity Fellows Program; and taking the 'Ten Conversations' in equity in Australian higher education to progress a process for coalescing different perspectives on equity into more focussed narratives in which all stakeholder have shared ownership to influence equity research, policy and practice.

Background

There is overwhelming evidence that a society based on social mobility and social justice reduces economic and social disadvantage. Equity in education is instrumental to this process because it is transformative for individuals, families and communities. It leads to greater social cohesion and a widening of the skills and knowledge base which are also facilitating features of the Innovation Economy.

There is a growing knowledge base as to what constitutes, impedes and best advances equity in higher education. But there is also a patchwork of well-intentioned policies and programs to improve equity outcomes with often inadequate program-specific or system-wide evaluation of those policies and programs. In addition, there are competing interests and perspectives on education and equity held by different stakeholders whose objectives are not always aligned.

This has led to a policy conundrum for advancing equity in higher education. While advances have been made in equity in higher education, there remains a need to develop a positive feedback loop so that all stakeholders can participate in creating a shared narrative with agreed goals and a common purpose. We need to continue to close the gap between equity research, policy and practice.

Since its inception, the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) has been producing a growing body of evidence-based information that is attempting to close the gap between equity policy, research and practice. This research is making an increasingly significant contribution towards clarifying the real trends and issues that permit informed debate and analysis.

The NCSEHE flagship publications demonstrate the breadth and depth of the coalescing body of evidence promoting the way forward for equity group support in higher education in Australia and includes for example:

- *Access and Participation in Higher Education: Outreach-Access-Support* which examines 39 case studies which illustrate the range of HEPP funded initiatives occurring around Australia;
- *Partnerships in Higher Education* which provides 31 additional examples of working partnerships across Australia's 37 public universities; and
- *Informing Policy and Practice I, II and III* are annual reviews covering 37 NCSEHE-sponsored research grant projects inquiring into equity issues and programs.

With this growing body of evidence promoting equity is immensely important to Australia's future in ways that go well beyond the immediate positive impacts on individuals; it goes to the heart of breaking disadvantage, increasing social mobility and securing better futures for Australia's society and economy.

To succeed in these goals we need to understand the complexities and dimensions of disadvantage; evaluate and assess the efficiency and effectiveness of support initiatives; and, most importantly, promote and disseminate information that informs policy and practice.

In promoting equity, policy analysts are critical in leading the way; higher education institutions are the enablers of positive change; and equity practitioners are the front line troops to make it happen as is a national narrative based on evidence.

Our approach

The National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) *Facilitating An Innovation Future Through Equity* Forum, held at the National Press Club in Canberra on 28 November 2016 brought together some of Australia's most prominent researchers, policy analysts and equity practitioners with the goal of advancing equity in higher education.

This was an attempt to fill the gap through a number of outcomes compiled for the National Forum held with key stakeholders. This included 1) compiling and disseminating lessons learnt from research funded 2) disseminating reports from the 2016 Equity Fellows' research; and 3) holding *Ten Conversations* by which a knowledge base about equity, research, policy and practice have been captured.

This session provides participants with the hard copy compendium *Facilitating Student Equity in Higher Education* which is a summary of significant research to date by summarising some of the key lessons learned from 24 research reports sponsored by NCSEHE; demonstrating the achievements of future equity leaders emerging from the Equity Fellows Program; and taking the *Ten Conversations* in equity in Australian higher education to progress a process for coalescing different perspectives on equity into more focussed narratives in which all stakeholder have shared ownership to influence equity research, policy and practice. This session provides an opportunity to discuss some of the key findings and to elicit further

discussion on the *Ten Conversations* we need to progress to influence research, practice and policy in Australia.

Lessons from NCSEHE research reports

From the meta-analysis of the 24 NCSEHE research reports the lessons have been synthesised into five areas of Low Socio-economic status (SES), Indigenous, Disability, Scholarships and Graduate Outcomes. The five reports present a wider research perspective of discrete areas of equity policy, summarising:

- what research has been conducted;
- highlighting key trends and issues; and
- making recommendations for policy and practice.

In taking a broader view, these summary reports provide a more holistic view of the five areas of research which may facilitate the identification of further areas for research.

The 2016 Equity Fellows reports

The three inaugural 2016 Equity Fellows reports provide an overview of their research as an important Australian Government initiative, funded through the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) and managed by NCSEHE. The goal of the Equity Fellows Program is to produce future equity leaders as well as significant research projects which will advance equity in higher education. Summaries of the work of the three Equity Fellows for 2016 appear in this compendium:

- Dr Nadine Zacharias - The Australian Student Equity Program and Institutional Change;
- Dr Cathy Stone - Opportunity through Online Learning; and
- Dr Erica Southgate - Fair Connection to Professional Careers.

***Ten Conversations* in equity in higher education**

The *Ten Conversations* is an initiative of developing dialogues to unravel complex and often multidimensional issues and forge a consensus through 84 equity expert's opinions assembled at the Forum. The subsequent summary document coalesces the perspectives and turn them into focussed narratives in which all stakeholders have a shared ownership. The *Ten Conversations* selected are: 25 Years of Equity in Australia; Students from Low SES backgrounds; Students from Regional and Remote Areas; Students with Disability; Students from Indigenous backgrounds; Scholarships and Support Systems; Defining Success; Evaluating Performance of Equity Programs; Higher Education Data and Equity Policy; and Re-defining Equity Groups. These are not the only 'conversations we have to have' but they have enabled the *Ten Conversations* to be the start of building a collective narrative.

The collective narrative has been categorised into four key areas of 'up-to-date training and resources'; 'transparency and engagement in higher education'; 'data collection and use'; and 'graduate outcomes' with innovative directions noted in the final column (see Table 1).

Policy Areas	Policy Ideas		Key Messages
Up-to-date training and resources	1	There is a need to raise awareness of key issues amongst Vice-Chancellors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training and awareness of equity issues is needed across all university staff; from the bottom to the very top • Resources and programs must be continually updated, especially for those engaged with local communities and external stakeholders • Cooperation and coordination between institutions is needed to take advantage of evidence based training resources already developed • Evaluating the efficacy of resources and programs is essential to ensure equity objectives are achieved
	2	Enabling and sub-bachelor programs: what are they delivering? They should be included in the Demand Driven System so that universities move beyond historical funding	
	3	Provide up-to-date training and resourcing to careers' advice providers to ensure that students and communities have access to the latest information. Career advice personnel are too busy undertaking numerous roles and the focus should be on the whole school/community providing access to vital information.	
	4	Universities should make use of free online Disability Standards for Education training programs for academic and administrative staff, available from University of Canberra	
	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embed cultural competence in universities among all relevant staff and stakeholders. • Clarify administrative and policy arrangements for Indigenous higher education – it's not all about schools and early childhood. • Embed place-based learning for all students across universities 	
	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scholarships should also be offered on a needs basis to supplement Commonwealth income support • Institutional equity scholarships should target financial poverty and time poverty, assessed through a multi-factor approach • Continue to use equity scholarships and the Commonwealth income support in outreach work to address the myth of unaffordability of university study 	
	8	We need minimum standards and a rigorous evaluation framework in all applications for program support. NCSEHE could act as a critical friend and support institutions in this	
	10	Recognise the barriers to equity and social mobility up front and this will then assist with the way equity groups are defined and aspirations and outcomes are recorded	
Transparency and outside engagement in higher education	1	Change metrics/indicators to make them more accessible to people from low socio-economic status backgrounds, e.g. school type. Can we push universities to increase diversity, especially in high status courses, and educate academic staff to have a better understanding of the pedagogical needs of low SES students? To this end, the return of the Office for Learning & Teaching might be useful.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transparency in higher education is needed to improve the profile of universities within industries, workplaces, and the community • Capabilities developed through sub-bachelors

	2	Enabling and sub-bachelor programs: what are they delivering? They should be included in the Demand Driven System so that universities move beyond historical funding	<p>and partial completions need to be articulated to students and workplaces</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development with communities (especially in regional and remote areas) can ensure the survival of regional unis and towns • Student cohort data should be collected and reported frequently, particularly in forms more accessible to the public
	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rather than a generic model, the focus should be on building 'specific regional development' – where all key community level stakeholders (e.g. local councils, schools, businesses, libraries, rotary) are coordinated and resourced to promote access and success for higher education of regional and remote students • Currently the higher education policy arena is 'metrocentric' which requires the regions going to the city. This requires a flip to policy-making for regional places, by using and building up existing infrastructure as part of a learning community hub (e.g. La Trobe - Silicon Valley). This may involve librarians and libraries who are seeking to grow their responsibilities in the community by providing information on HE access and funding of scholarships. 	
	4	We need higher education standards that provide the opportunity to ensure compliance	
	5	Provide supplementary assistance to universities to support accelerating building Indigenous academic workforce from professions	
	7	There is a risk of narrowly defining success as 'universities and degrees'. We need to look across the tertiary sector as a whole – if it's too narrow it distorts how we perceive what we need	
	8	Data needs to be made public – more transparency is needed, e.g. a data dashboard	
	9	Data access and discoverability needs to be improved – across government departments; universities; and at the unit record data level	
	10	Revise the conceptual framework of equity groups in a way that allows broad level equity groups to be defined and changed, while using individual level data as the basic unit of information. This will allow definitions of groups to change as well as deal with the challenge of multi-disadvantage among some students	
	Data collection and use	1	
4		We need data collection standardisation and coordination amongst institutions	

	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We need better measures of learner intent and achievement that links to intent. We also need more information on non, slow and irregular completions (maybe a survey, but this is not to replace institutional reporting) • We need much better use of big data and data matching, including the ATO if possible. Or we need to extend longitudinal surveys. Current surveys are too close to graduation. Better sharing of information is also needed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current data collection avenues are missing critical aspects of student experience, performance, and outcomes • Sharing of data across institutions and government needs to be addressed • Tracking and data linkage needs attention
	8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We need to track people, e.g. by using an identifier number like CHESSN. • Greater rigour and standardisation is needed to enable comparisons of programs. There is a need for a stocktake of current reports to provide a national framework of evaluation. We need to avoid being rigid and acknowledge flexibility. We need national and nuanced data. We may need to align the framework with the Australian National Audit Office? 	
	9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data linkage and integration and data sharing of administration datasets – acknowledge the work that the DET is doing to link the HEIMS and ATO; also the Multiagency Data Integration Project. • There is a need to adopt new options: Unique Student Identifier is covering all education sectors; COAG in 2012 covered VET intentions to expand; useful analysis of pathways through systems including relationship between prior participation; and better data on graduate outcomes, equity program evaluation and the release of annual completion data. A definitive review of equity groups is also proposed 	
Graduate outcomes	1	The Graduate Outcomes Survey needs to be reshaped. We need more accurate data on graduate outcomes and to consider if we can link to Australian Taxation Office data. We also need to improve the utility of QILT as a tool to assist prospective students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Graduate outcomes are inconsistent at best, and need further research • Outcomes needs to be realigned as a core focus of teaching in higher education
	2	Graduate outcomes are at historic lows, but we need more research on what works and what doesn't in terms of getting employment	
	9	There is a need to adopt new options: Unique Student Identifier is covering all education sectors; COAG in 2012 covered VET intentions to expand; useful analysis of pathways through systems including relationship between prior participation; and better data on graduate outcomes, equity program evaluation and the release of annual completion data. A definitive review of equity groups is also proposed.	
	10	Develop a new focus on outcomes so this will identify issues within equity groups and possibly help define them	

Innovative directions	International students	1. Consider equity in relation to international students; 25% of students are international and there are equity issues amongst this group 4. International students with disability are lacking access to adequate disability support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International students require research focus • Needs-based scholarships previously scrapped should be reintroduced • Virtual reality technology could be of use to higher education. • Indigenous alumni presence and networks within university structures could go a long way to addressing low representation
	Scholarships	6. The Commonwealth should retain scholarships, i.e. the re-location grant and reinstate 'start up' as a grant to provide a cash based equitable grant at the start of the university journey which is the most critical time of financial need	
	Indigenous alumni	5. Develop an Indigenous alumni network	
	Virtual reality	3. Use of virtual reality technologies is encouraged to provide students with career experiences	

Table 1: Collective narrative of policy ideas collated from forum.

Discussion

The common themes running through these research report summaries, Equity Fellows research reports and the *Ten Conversations* positions us for constructive dialogue that informs strategic policy decisions and equity practices, with all stakeholders sharing and owning a narrative that promotes equity in higher education.

In small groups the participants will be asked to consider the *Ten Conversations* Policy summary collation sheet themes of 'up-to-date training and resources'; 'transparency and engagement in higher education'; 'data collection and use'; and 'graduate outcomes'; and the five research areas of 'low socio-economic status (SES)', 'Indigenous', 'Disability', 'Scholarships' and 'Graduate Outcomes' and provide feedback on any issues they feel are missing after their group discussion.

References

NCSEHE (2016). *Facilitating Student Equity in Australian Higher Education*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education: Perth. Available at: <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/facilitating-student-equity-in-australian-higher-education/>