POLICY REVIEW

Beyond 'skills through equity' and 'the hope of redemption': Contesting neoliberal Australian widening participation policy and hegemonic evaluation practices

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This article problematises established rationales for widening participation in Australian higher education which pursue neoliberal national economic agendas. Rather than valuing the subjectivities of those it seeks to include, widening participation practice and evaluation has predominantly fashioned individual agency in terms of the skills required to compete in a globalised economy. This discourse is punctuated by regular higher education policy reviews which have informed government efforts to improve access to university for key equity cohorts, including students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. Culminating in the 'skills through equity' logic of the Australian Universities Accord, widening participation's success has as a result been progressively measured against national economic outcomes guided by hegemonic evaluation practices. This has placed an unnecessary burden upon the students widening participation aims to support, determining the legitimacy of their university aspirations within a narrow frame of national economic success or failure. Students from underrepresented backgrounds are thus cast as redemptive figures in the pursuit of a more 'inclusive' (and competitive) society. To fully understand the experience of higher education for students from underrepresented backgrounds in their own terms, this article advocates for, evaluation practice which embeds social justice commitments and prioritises researcher reflexivity.

Keywords: Widening participation, neoliberalism, evaluation, meritocracy, qualitative inquiry

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Introduction

> *Indigenous people are used to create a counterpoint against which the dominant society can critique itself, becoming living embodiments of the romantic ideal, which offers a desolate society the hope of redemption and of recapturing what it feels it has lost in its march forward. Those who wish to present a critique of individualism point out that Aboriginality is about community; those who wish to highlight the detrimental effects of industrialisation on the environment point to Indigenous people as the original conservationists. We present a remaining, though strategically distant image of what has been lost, and what could be regained.*
>
> (Dodson 1994 p. 8)

In using the 1994 Wentworth lecture to explore the construction of 'Aboriginality' in the Australian national imaginary, Mick Dodson exposed the social and cultural positioning of Indigenous Australians as 'other', whether that be to reify modernity or lament its regression as a 'desolate society'. Speaking on behalf of Indigenous Australians, Dodson lamented how '[o]ur subjectivities, our aspirations, our ways of seeing and our languages have largely been excluded from the equation, as the colonising culture "plays with itself"' (Dodson 1994 p. 9). Contributing to broader post-structuralist critiques of colonialism (e.g. Said 1978), this redemptive casting of Indigenous Australians can be understood through critical theory's sustained engagement with what Karl Marx understood in terms of 'alienation', the dialectical tension inherent to modernity whereby the exercise of state sovereignty denies civil society's collective power of self-determination (Flohr 2024). Where Dodson refers to Indigenous Australians being 'excluded from the equation' as Australia negotiated its national identity, Marx's central critique of emerging theories on modernity was that the state relied on the competitive tendencies of capitalism to objectify civil society from its own collective agency to maintain a system of private property and the accumulation of wealth by a governing elite (Flohr 2024).

The aim of this paper is to unpack the relevance of this critique in the context of Australian Government policy discourse regarding efforts to support the participation of students underrepresented in higher education (widening participation) and how it has been facilitated by hegemonic evaluation practices. The first section of this paper foregrounds this analysis by tracing the persistence of neoliberal discourse throughout key policy review documents which have set national benchmarks for widening participation practice. In exploring what appears to be an inclusive project which promotes social mobility, this paper contends that the evolution of widening participation policy in the Australian context has cast specific underrepresented cohorts, such as students from low-socioeconomic status backgrounds, in a similar redemptive role to Dodson's critique of 'Aboriginality'. The consequences of this are that rather than fully exploring students' motivation to access higher education pathways and the challenges they may face (their subjectivity), widening participation policy has persistently submerged the agency of students from underprivileged backgrounds within a discourse of international economic competitiveness. As these policies have been adopted in countries such Australia and the UK which have simultaneously embraced neoliberal governmentality, they suggest an ongoing tendency on the part of the state to calibrate socioeconomically marginalised subjectivities within a narrow frame of market-based logics. The fragility of this dialectic inheres within an unsteady assumption that the promise of social mobility offers sufficient incentive to participate in a narrative of national

economic redemption, whether or not this aligns with the intentions of underrepresented students. On this incentive alone there is a tension in how governments have framed widening participation as a path to social mobility, persistently failing to acknowledge the struggle inherent to one's social positioning within unfamiliar educational and career fields (Friedman 2013; Bunn, Threadgold & Burke 2020; Sandel 2021b) and alarming evidence of growing inequality under neoliberal, market-based policies (Piketty, 2024). A further troubling aspect of widening participation's adherence to neoliberalism and market-based logics is the potential blame which may await those whose aspirations, or lack of 'merit', preclude their anticipated contribution to national economic ends.

In building these arguments, this paper draws on well-established critiques of neoliberalism's influence upon governments across the world under the pretence of addressing stagnant economic growth from the 1970s. As Harvey (2005 p. 19) explains, neoliberalism is fundamentally 'a political project to re-establish conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites.' Mixed with discourses of meritocratic striving which present individual agency and abilities as the key to social mobility, in enshrining market principles neoliberalism has been a means through which the state can present a solution to social inequality while maintaining governance by a wealthy elite – what Littler (2013 p. 69) refers to as 'an alibi for plutocracy'. Shifting outside traditional Marxist theories of power and the state, in his account of biopolitics Michel Foucault maintained that the market economy is the dominant principal of neoliberal governmentality which structures 'the way political power itself works' (Littler 2013 p. 62). Touted as a political ideology which prioritises freedom of the individual, this vigilant mode of governmentality and the entrepreneurial spirit it prioritises in fact captures only a narrow frame of market-based human motivation.

As this paper will demonstrate, a consequence of this narrow framing in the context of Australian widening participation discourse has followed neoliberalism's tendency of staking national economic 'survival' with the choices made by individuals (Davies & Bansel 2007). By way of outline, since the publication of *A Fair Chance for All* in 1990, followed by the Bradley Review two decades later (Australian Government 1990, 2008), widening participation discourse in Australian higher education policy has progressively misplaced the agency of those it seeks to include with anxiety for the health of the national economy. In 2024, the relationship between widening participation and economic needs was sharpened by the Australian Universities Accord's (Accord) 'skills through equity' agenda, which frames students from under-represented backgrounds as the 'answer' to Australia's anticipated skills shortfall by 2050 (Australian Government 2024 p. 2). The social justice potential of the Accord's laudable recommendations regarding representational parity are thus subsumed in language which projects widening participation's failure as risking 'lasting damage' to Australia's economic success (Australian Government 2024 p. 2). As it has evolved over the last several decades, widening participation policy has consistently placed students from underrepresented backgrounds within a compromising dialectic of economic success. Driven by neoliberal logics of elite accumulation, it remains unclear what their role in redeeming such success will amount to in terms of a more just and equal society.

Against the backdrop of this instrumentalist framing of widening participation across key policy documents, the second section of this paper aims to contribute to a growing segment of widening participation literature drawing attention to the epistemological and ontological shortcomings of the hegemonic evaluation practices increasingly relied upon to determine the impact of outreach initiatives (Burke & Lumb 2018, 2024; Lumb, Burke & Bennett 2021; Gordon et al. 2022). In Australia's case this has shaped an evaluation practice focusing on quantitative data in the hope of

arriving at 'objective' conclusions regarding program impact, a focus on the 'measurable' which risks perpetuating deficit notions of equity cohorts failing key metrics such as 'aspiration' and 'ability' (Gordon et al. 2022). In addition to problematising the 'certainty' that quantitative, experimental methods prescribe, this article shares Burke and Lumb's (2024) concern regarding hegemonic policy and programme evaluation's tendency to 'embed neoliberal capitalism in contexts and institutions of higher education' and its role in constructing certain demographic groups 'as a problem demanding a solution' in the interests of capital.

As much as this is a theoretical problem for evaluation practice, the final section of this paper also considers the very real political, and certainly emotional, harms of widening participation policy's neoliberal orientation in the Australian context. Arguably the greatest concern with measuring widening participation outcomes against a calculus of national economic success is neoliberalism's unfailing belief in reward reflecting merit, what Michel Sandel refers to as meritocratic hubris (Sandel 2021b, 2021a). A nation's failure to satisfy projected skills needs can all too easily be attributed to a lack of merit or aspiration on the part of those widening participation seeks to include, eliding vast imbalances in educational opportunity and how this frames the realities of higher education participation (Sandel 2021a). The political consequences of this alignment between personal and economic success are all too clearly being played out across a geopolitical context in which belief in democratic principles is fracturing, contributed to by alarming increases in economic inequality (Davidson et al. 2024; Piketty 2024; Sandel 2021b).

This article concludes that the presiding economic rationale of widening participation discourse and evaluation practice fails to value the subjectivities and challenges of those it claims to represent. Neoliberal notions of individual success and failure misconstrue the social justice imperatives that widening participation intends, and offer little scope to address the inequalities which perpetuate underrepresentation in higher education (Burke & Lumb, 2024). Widening participation must exist beyond a national 'hope of redemption' which prefigures marginalised subjectivities within narrow, instrumentalist economic goals with disregard to individual motivations and goals. Evaluation strategies that provide insights into the higher education goals people hold and how initiatives support their navigation of concrete barriers to higher education such as academic attainment will help us more democratically orient widening participation goals. In practice, this means questioning the viability of hegemonic evaluation practices which are neither equipped nor motivated to understand the richness and complexity of individual lives and how this shapes their engagement with widening participation initiatives and the challenge of accessing higher education (Lumb, Burke & Bennett 2021; Gordon et al. 2022). Doing so opens widening participation to more reflexive evaluation approaches with an embedded commitment to social justice , which are less concerned with establishing causality and certainty as they are with understanding *why* and *how* an intervention may have achieved its intended outcome and for whom.

From *A Fair chance for All* to 'skills through equity'

As Hannah Forsyth writes, 'the story of Australian higher education chronicles both the creation and maintenance of privilege and a vehicle for social mobility.' (Forsyth 2014 p. 201). To be sure, the question of 'Who gets to go to uni?' has received legitimate attention by Australian governments and institutions and there is lasting evidence that gradually expanding access to university on gendered, racial and class grounds has afforded educational and career opportunities to many Australians (Forsyth 2014). The point of the following section is not to contest that social

justice has a demonstrable presence in the history of Australian higher education. It is rather to demonstrate that in its neoliberal guise, widening participation policies have been progressively motivated by narrow economic goals rather than a more expansive interpretation of what accessing higher education might mean for underrepresented cohorts. This leads into discussion regarding the consequences of hegemonic evaluation practices and alternative methods which prioritise qualitative inquiry and how this allows for deeper insight into the experiences and motivations of students from equity backgrounds.

A Fair Chance for All

> *"Access to education is vital. Education is one of the principal means for individuals to achieve independence, economic advancement and personal growth. But in the past, the benefits of higher education have been enjoyed disproportionately by the more privileged members of our community. Those benefits need to be share more widely and more equitably in the future."*
>
> (Australian Government 1988a p. 6)

The social justice origins of Australian widening participation policy are explicit in John Dawson's foreword to *A Fair Chance for All* as a 'keystone of Labor Policy' and the Government's intentions to achieve 'a fairer and more just society', drawing on the connection created between education and equality established by the Whitlam Labor government in the 1970s (Australian Government 1990; Gale & Tranter 2011). This policy document was written just as Australian economic policy was beginning to adapt to neoliberal and globalised frameworks which would come to complicate attempts to address social inequity. Perhaps because of this there is a clarity to this initial roadmap for achieving the more equitable distribution of economic growth and its relation to educational opportunity, accompanied as it was by a broader government agenda based on 'fairness' (see Australian Government 1988). *A Fair Chance for All* was also informed by the *Higher Education: a Policy Statement* White Paper which clearly identified for the first time 'significant barriers' to higher education participation for specific groups: people with disabilities, people from non-English speaking backgrounds, people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, people from low-income families, people from rural or isolated areas and women (Australian Government 1988a).

The resilience of many of these categories in subsequent higher education policy documents is testament to both the lasting influence of *A Fair Chance for All* and the challenge of addressing educational inequities given disparities in educational attainment (Gale & Tranter 2011; Harvey Burnheim & Brett 2016). It also foreshadowed widening participation as integral to strengthening Australia's 'economic base', recognising the growing diversity of its economic profile which required 'a well-educated, skilled and flexible workforce' (Australian Government 1990 p. 7). Herein lies the recent genesis of 'disadvantaged groups' as 'under-used resources', who via higher education had the potential to contribute to 'a more highly skilled and efficient workforce' (Australian Government 1990 p. 7). Among the objectives established to achieve this broader economic goal was an increase in the participation of people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds to a level that 'more closely resembles the mix of the general population' (Australian Government 1990 p. 14).

The Bradley Review

With added urgency given evidence of declining educational standards and little signs of levelling demographic participation, the 2008 Review of Australian higher Education led by Denise Bradley (Bradley Review) drew upon 'international consensus' to highlight the connection between higher education and the state of the national economy (Australian Government 2008). Reflecting ensuing years of economic globalisation under neoliberalism, the tone of the Bradley Review is far more concerned with international competitiveness in higher education and the Australian economy than *A Fair Chance for All*. Although referencing the importance of maintaining a just society, addressing the issue of underrepresentation is framed squarely in relation to economic risk: 'the failure to capitalise on the abilities of all Australians is a significant economic issue to the nation' (Australian Government 2008 p. 10).

Rather than drawing on substantive political imagination or reference to social justice, the recommendations received by the Gillard Government from the Bradley Review relied specifically on external analysis which framed skills shortfalls as the main reason to address the issue of educational attainment and access to university. These recommendations included raising the rate of 24–34-year-olds holding a bachelor degree or above by 2020 to 40% and setting the access rate target of 20% for the proportion of students from low-socioeconomic status backgrounds enrolling at university by 2020 (Australian Government 2008). This recognised that increases in raw numbers of students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds seen since *A Fair Chance for All* had not shifted the proportional representation of these students (Harvey et al. 2016)

However, the significance of setting such clear demographically-based enrolment targets was undermined by a policy imperative to make 'greater use of human capital' to increase global competitiveness (Australian Government 2008). This rationale is elaborated under the starkly worded heading 'Providing opportunities for all capable students to participate' (Australian Government 2008). Capable or not, the Bradley Review deepened the neoliberal logic of widening participation policy in attributing a lack of awareness among underrepresented student cohorts regarding the benefits of higher education to their low aspirations (Australian Government 2008). As was the case in other countries such as the UK, this justification established aspiration raising as the key rationale for widening participation practice rather than recognise structural barriers which excluded specific cohorts from accessing higher education (Sellar 2013). Drawing on neoliberal ideas of individual success, widening participation's impact could thus be measured in part by the extent to which it was able to lay responsibility for underrepresentation at the feet of the cohorts it was aiming to support (Rainford 2021). This misattribution in part contrasts with *A Fair Chance for All* which at least recognised the importance of institutional commitment to achieving equity goals by 'working towards behavioural changes on the part of academic and administrative staff' (Australian Government 1990 p. vi). This hints at an early awareness that widening participation requires institutional shifts embodying 'recognitive justice', approaches which seek to appreciate the strengths and values students from underrepresented backgrounds bring to higher education rather than what they are perceived to lack (Gale & Tranter 2011).

Countering this deficit approach which has characterised widening participation practice, it is now well understood that it is not low aspirations which function as a barrier to higher education participation but rather the expectation of being able to gain access given the challenges faced by educationally disadvantage students (Bok 2010; Cakitaki et al. 2022; Rainford 2021). The clearest challenge to widening participation is addressing academic attainment, hampered by Australia having one of the most socioeconomically segregated schooling systems in the OECD (Greenwell

and Bonner, 2022). Reified in the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR), educational attainment has become a function of relative socioeconomic advantage which builds throughout students' lives (Smith, Parr & Muhidin 2019) reflecting ongoing political unwillingness to reform the schooling sector on a needs-based funding model (Bonner et al. 2021) rather than allow it to drift according to neoliberal market imperatives of individual choice.

Aligned with human capital theory's influence upon economic policy and the role of higher education, the neoliberalisation of secondary education since the 1970s has meant that the decision of choosing between an under-resourced public school and higher quality private alternatives, and ultimately the chance of attending university, is largely determined by socioeconomic status (Edeji 2024). There is thus a contradiction in widening participation's adoption of the idealised neoliberal aspirational citizen epitomised by market driven higher education decisions and employment goals (Sellar 2013), given the education gap exacerbated by the same market-based mechanisms. Regardless of aspiration, the actual prospect of higher education participation is shaped by the realities of educational disadvantage in Australian high schools and how this shapes students' expectations of attending university. This is but one manifestation of 'cruel optimism' that widening participation in its neoliberal guise fails to recognise, engendering objects of desire without acknowledging factors that simultaneously undermine them (Berlant 2011; Sellar 2013).

The Australian Universities Accord

Raising and capitalising on aspirations is nevertheless framed as an integral mechanism towards achieving the Accord's 'skills through equity' agenda outlined in 2024. Like the Bradley Review before it, the Accord uncritically observed the distributive rather than redistributive dynamic inherent to widening participation in Australia (Gale & Tranter 2011) in that observed increases in participation of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds since 2008 had been matched by 'higher-than-expected growth in the total undergraduate population' (Australian Government 2024 p. 119). While this may have served national economic interests by producing more university graduates, it did little to make access to higher education more equitable overall as the proportion of undergraduates from low socioeconomic grew but marginally. Falling short of the 20% participation target set by the Bradley Review, the proportion of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds rose from 16.3% in 2008 to just 17.1% in 2021. Given the raw increase in representation overall, the Accord frames the failure to meet the 20% target as 'not a bad thing' before setting the target of parity representation by 2050 for First Nations students, students from the lowest quartile SES backgrounds and regional, rural students (Australian Government 2024 p. 119).

These targets follow logically from previous demographic metrics which have framed widening participation practice and evaluation. Along with recommending better support to help students succeed at university via a needs-based funding model, parity representation is a laudable goal. However, the Accord missed a clear opportunity to move the Australian widening participation agenda away from an aspiration model which fails to genuinely recognise the barriers which surround these aspirations, beyond claiming that students from low-SES backgrounds 'lack opportunities to develop a more concrete expectation that they will engage in higher education, or to broaden their perception of what is possible' (Australian Government 2024 p. 124). Without clearly acknowledging concrete barriers such as educational disadvantage, the Accord endorses outreach strategies that 'nurture aspiration and help people convert aspiration into action' (Australian Government 2024 p. 125). Once again it is the agency of socioeconomically

disadvantaged students that is faulty, a neoliberal strategy which merges potential students' higher education goals within the economic imperatives and redemptive casting of 'skills through equity'. The following section will explore how this policy platform has developed alongside hegemonic evaluation practices within the field of widening participation.

Widening Participation and Evaluation Practice

Government frameworks

In publishing *A Fair Chance for All,* the Australian government forecast a combination of yet to be determined system-wide and institutional measures to evaluate the performance of actions designed to support the higher education participation of underrepresented students (Australian Government 1990). Recognising the difficulty of identifying socio-educational disadvantage, the document states 'it may be necessary to use a range of factors to adequately define social and/or economic disadvantage' to inform the design of performance indicators (Australian Government 1990 p.55). Although it pointed to the possibility of using qualitative evidence to measure the impact of programs supporting equity students, *A Fair Chance for All* primarily foreshadowed that the objectives of individual institutional programs would be measured in 'quantitative terms' (Australian Government 1990 p. 56). The Federal Government subsequently relied on the Equity and General Performance Indicator Framework, which since 1994 has consistently informed reporting to track higher education access, participation and completion for six equity groups: students from a non-English speaking background (NESB); students with disability; women in non-traditional areas of study; students from Indigenous backgrounds; students from low socio-economic status backgrounds; and students from regional and remote areas (Martin 1994). Other than recommending the 20% low SES national enrolment target by 2020, the Bradley Review advocated the ongoing use of existing performance measures to monitor sector-wide and institutional performance (Australian Government 2008).

The task of measuring the specific impact of programs designed to support the participation of students from equity backgrounds was not a clear focus of government policy until the development of the Student Equity in Higher Education Evaluation Framework (SEHEEF) in 2021 (Robinson *et al.* 2021). The object of the SEHEEF is to provide a means to monitor and understand the effectiveness of the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) which was established in 2010 following the Bradley Review to support institutions to undertake activities to support the access, participation and success of students from low-SES backgrounds. The HEPPP was expanded in 2021 to refocus the funding of outreach initiatives to support students from Indigenous backgrounds as well as students from regional and remote areas (Robinson et al. 2021).

The development of the SEHEEF was prompted by the first systematic evaluation of the HEPPP in 2017 which recommended its continuation given evidence of its effectiveness, but also the need for a 'rigorous' framework from which 'robust' evidence could be accumulated to better understand the effectiveness of equity programs (ACIL Allen Consulting 2017; Robinson et al. 2021). In addition to supporting institutions to develop Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) practices in program evaluation, the SEHEEF responded directly to ACIL Allen Consulting's endorsement of experimental or quasi-experimental evaluation designs to establish a Quantitative Impact Evaluation model to provide estimates of equity program effectiveness (ACIL Allen Consulting 2017; Robinson et al. 2021). The SEHEEF also recommends the use of theory-based

evaluation methods which it rightly recognises are better equipped to understand the contextual complexity of equity interventions, as well as why they might be having purported impacts (Robinson et al. 2021).

The challenge of certainty and hegemonic evaluation practice

However, it is unclear whether the differences between experimental and theory-based methodologies can be so easily reconciled by their inclusion in a single evaluation framework. The adoption of quantitative methods to measure the impact of equity initiatives in Australia as recommended by ACIL Allen Consulting's report, follows international recognition regarding the lack of causal evidence for the impact of widening participation activities (Baines et al. 2022; Martin 2024). As with the framing of the SEHEEF, causal evidence is prized for the 'certainty' that it insinuates given the well-worn application of experimental methods such as randomised control trials (RCTs) in fields such as medicine. Yet the language of 'counterfactuals' and 'control groups' these disciplinary origins lend to the application of experimental methods in fields such as education should immediately pose caution to widening participation researchers and practitioners, predicated as they are on the notion that there is a 'treatment' for the challenges that underrepresented students face (Burke & Lumb 2024). Attending to such solutions may appeal to rationales for widening participation founded in neoliberal economic goals, but they do not extend our understanding of the barriers students face in accessing higher education or necessarily ground their investigations in ways that correspond with the subjectivities of those involved. What matters most to the evaluation process and the evaluator may not align with community interests and needs (Burke & Lumb 2024). This fundamental disconnect speaks to broader concerns regarding the ethical and ideological fit of RCTs in educational and social research (Hayton & Bengry-Howell 2016; Gale 2018; Parra & Edwards Jr 2024).

Theory-based methods and qualitative inquiry

Building on the ontological complicity of hegemonic evaluation practice in supporting neoliberal forms of governmentality in the widening partition space are considerable theoretical issues of epistemological authority. Alluding to the fundamental scientism of experimental methods when applied outside clinical settings, Hayton and Stevenson (2018 p. 1) point out that in applying such methods widening participation practitioners and researchers risk 'pursuing a chimera of certainty'. The eager pursuit of counterfactual analysis in the context of interventions which engage young people as they consider their futures and present academic challenges fails to address the epistemic challenges of understanding 'what works' in such complex social settings (Harrison 2022).

These critiques mirror arguments developed within the field of evaluation more broadly which highlight pitfalls in adherence to positivist beliefs that social change can be easily attributed to specific interventions (Picciotto 2012). This scepticism was preceded by the development of theory-oriented approaches which recognised the limitations of quantitative methods in investigating the 'black box' of *how* an intervention leads (or doesn't) to its intended outcome (Chen & Rossi 1989; Weiss 1995; Pawson & Tilley 1997). The examination of causal linkages between an intervention and its outcomes is a particular strength of theory-based evaluation (TBE) developed by Weiss (1995). TBE involves the development of a theory of change through which specific mechanisms of change can be articulated in terms of assumptions i.e. what needs to happen for an outcome to be realised (Stame 2004). Theory of change models are in turn being adopted by widening participation practitioners and researchers to provide insight into the context of

interventions and to suggest how they are leading to intended impacts (Harrison & Waller 2017; Barkat 2019; Thomas 2020; Hanson, Brown & Crockford 2022; Schulte & Benson-Egglenton 2025).

One promising theory of change approach for the evaluation of widening participation interventions that has not received significant attention is contribution analysis. Developed by John Mayne (2001), contribution analysis directly addresses the difficulty of establishing causality in complex socioeconomic settings by considering the interplay of external factors and assessing the possibility that an intervention is contributing to a desired outcome rather than attributing this impact directly. A further strength of this method is its anticipation of revisions to theory according to emerging evidence (Mayne 2012), meaning that an intervention can be more accountable and not expressly bound by the question of 'what works'. As with other theory-oriented evaluation models, contribution analysis allows for flexibility in evaluation design and how data is collected and analysed as it is 'methods-neutral' (Bohni Nielsen & Lemire 2025).

This methodological flexibility is of great advantage to widening participation practitioners and researchers, given it can prioritise qualitative inquiry to generate understandings of an intervention's impact within the bounds of individual experiences and multiple realities (Creswell, 2013; Fetters, Curry & Creswell 2013). When combined with practices such as reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006, 2023), qualitative inquiry also equips program evaluators with the means of examining their own role in knowledge production, allowing them to be mindful of the epistemological conceit that can characterise evaluation practice (Gordon et al. 2022). This goes some way in allowing the impact of an intervention to be considered in students' own terms, deepening engagement with individual subjectivities and students' experiences of pursuing higher education. How thematic insights align with intended outcomes, or not, can thus be calibrated with critical insights which may question the very 'theory' upon which an intervention is based. Take on-campus experiences as an evidenced-based intervention which supports students transition to university as an example (Martin 2024; Zacharias et al. 2018). Analysing qualitative data regarding these experiences will help us understand why they are helpful and for whom, or alternatively how they can be improved if they did not successfully meet intended outcomes. Receptive to revision (Mayne 2012), a theory of change can be refashioned to integrate alternative or additional assumptions and outcomes which are better aligned with student need, which may or may not align with the aims of broader widening policy agendas.

Challenging meritocratic hubris

Qualitative inquiry is crucial to ensure that the 'change' theories of change are hoping to affect does not emulate the practice of remedying capacities students are perceived to lack for successfully accessing and participating in higher education, and thus prioritising evaluation as a tool to affirm political goals (Gordon et al. 2022). Encouraging such 'misrecognition' via maintaining the legitimacy of specific forms of capital perceived to be essential for higher education 'success' is precisely what widening participation needs to avoid (Bunn, Threadgold & Burke 2020). Thoughtful access to students' narratives can provide researchers and evaluators a much richer understanding of individual motivations for seeking higher education beyond what human capital they may provide and insight to the barriers they face.

Separate from the often technocratic goals of government widening participation policy, qualitative inquiry allows for engagement with the 'deeply personal nature' of students' journeys to, through and beyond higher education (O'Shea et al. 2024 p. 13). This means coming to terms

with the 'price' that can be exacted by social mobility given processes of misrecognition within higher education which prescribe essential capacities to 'play the game', logically seen as lacking among students from underrepresented backgrounds (Friedman 2013; Bunn, Threadgold & Burke 2020). At once qualitative inquiry is a valuable tool for understanding the extent to which students may have internalised (or resisted) the individualised, competitive impetus of neoliberal discourse (Nairn & Higgins 2007). Both examples are tied with embedding greater reflexivity in widening participation practice. Students can help point us away from the redemptive role that widening participation policy and hegemonic evaluation practice has cast them, encouraging us to stay with the 'trouble of equity' and interrogate ways that higher education can contribute to a more just society which understands difference as a 'necessary and valuable difficulty' (Burke & Lumb 2024 p. 175, 180).

Failing to integrate such a considered understanding of the challenges underrepresented students can face as they confront the meritocratic logic of neoliberalism is more than academic. It has urgent political resonance in an increasingly unequal society aligned with meritocratic beliefs which blind it to the realities of educational and other forms disadvantage, just as it casts individuals in a dialectic national economic success (Sandel 2021a, 2021b). Neither outcome holds hope to address inequality as that is not the aim of neoliberalism, which is rather to increase the wealth of economic elites through the arbitrariness of market demand.

The political danger of this ideology's lingering influence upon educational policies through mantras such as 'skills through equity' extend further into the risks they pose to the health of democracies worldwide. To the extent that such policies favour technical and scientific disciplines seen as necessary for economic growth, it has encouraged policymakers to view other disciplines such as the arts and humanities as 'useless frills' unaligned to profit-making (Nussbaum 2010). The goals of neoliberalism run counter to the collective exercise of critical thought. As Martha Nussbaum (2010 p. 2) writes, '[i]f this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticise tradition, and understand the significance of another person's suffering and achievements.'

Conclusion

There will always be a need to track progress against access, participation and completion metrics for students from underrepresented backgrounds against the proportional targets set by reviews such as the Accord. These provide governments, institutions and the higher education sector motivation to address equity given the stark social injustices posed by demographic under-representation. However, at the program level, quantitative-based experimental methods should not be pursued at the sake of misunderstanding why people are pursuing higher education as well as being blind to their experience of socio-educational disadvantage. 'Success' in the context of widening participation interventions is not a simple matter of ensuring that students have the 'capabilities' to more equitably access higher education in the pursuit of increased national skill capability. Hidden within such notions of success are potential injuries of students having internalised neoliberal conceptions of meritocracy which devalue subjectivities that are not tied to relentlessly aspirational attitudes and material gain.

Notwithstanding initiatives which seek to make access to higher education more equitable, the hubris of meritocracy demands that students from underrepresented backgrounds out-perform their more privileged social counterparts who cleave to the belief that educational success reflects

individual effort on a level playing (Sandel 2021b). If this extra effort is lacking, or if there is an absence of aspiration to attend university at all, meritocratic thinking relies on all too simple measures of success or failure. The same can be said of the long-running economic justification for widening participation in Australian higher education policy, which hinges national economic success on underrepresented students' ability, and willingness, to access an education system historically underwritten by exclusive sentiment. This redemptive casting fails to properly recognise the challenges people from underrepresented backgrounds face in accessing higher education, beyond a perceived lack of aspiration, and risks cultivating a national polity which scapegoats 'non-aspirational' subjectivities for failing to meet global standards of competitiveness. The political consequences of this are clear, not least of which is a failure to arrest growing economic inequality and social marginalisation. Adopting a more reflexive, theory-based and adaptive approach to evaluation has the potential to guide us towards widening participation practice which incorporates a critical awareness of false narratives of neoliberal meritocratic inclusion and genuine appreciation for students' educational challenges and aspirations.

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