



EDITORIAL

Policy approaches, ‘problems’ and ‘solutions’: Working towards equity of access and widening participation in Australian higher education

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This Issue presents papers that explore widening participation (WP) within Australian contexts. The contributions discuss a diversity of activities, programs, disciplinary concepts, methodological approaches, challenges and opportunities in the field. However, all explore important issues relating to the contemporary challenges that policy, educational structures and dominant conceptual assumptions pose for access, equity and WP. Whilst situated in the Australian context, all contributions provide insights about issues that are important and challenging for WP across international contexts.

A common theme of the articles in this Issue is their interrogation of current policy ‘problems’ and ‘solutions’. The papers bring to mind the work of Carol Bacchi (2012) who describes such analyses as important for interrogating ‘what the problem is represented to be’ (the WPR approach) which is illuminating for ‘getting behind or beneath’ the rationale of a policy problem and solution (Southgate & Bennett, 2014) so that policy issues can be better understood and then redeveloped to suit policy contexts. The papers explore the six types of questions Bacchi (2012) outlines for better understanding a policy issue:

What’s the ‘problem’ represented to be in a specific policy or policy proposal? What presuppositions or assumptions underpin this representation of the ‘problem’? How has this representation of the ‘problem’ come about? What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the ‘problem’ be thought about differently? What effects are produced by this representation of the ‘problem’? How/where has this representation of the ‘problem’ been produced, disseminated and defended? How has it been (or could it be) questioned, disrupted and replaced? (p. 21).

First, we include the keynote address of Dr Andrew Harvey, Director of the *Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research (CHEEDR)* at La Trobe University, which he presented to the newly developed special interest group (SIG) for Research Development and Collaboration of the *National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia (NAEEA)*¹. The association brings together enabling (access to higher education) educators at the national level and a research

¹ The SIG was launched in Sydney in June by Associate Professor Seamus Fagan, Director of the *English Language and Foundation Studies Centre (ELFSC)*, and is co-facilitated by Dr Anna Bennett, Head of Research Engagement and Development (ELFSC) and Professor Penny Jane Burke, Director of the *Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE)*, both of the University of Newcastle.

focused group is particularly important at this time given policy proposals that pose challenges for the sector, which Andrew's and two other papers in this Issue discuss. Harvey argues that the current policy proposal (Australian Government, 2017) to change the funding structure of university-based access (enabling) programs from being fee-free and open access to a fee-charging and competitively tendered system, has been based on a lack of information about – and from – the enabling sector. Drawing on recent research by Pitman et al. (2016), he points out that an important reason enabling programs have been attractive to people from disadvantaged backgrounds is because they are fee-free or low-cost. Since 2004, open entry university-based programs have been available through a combination of Commonwealth funded places and enabling loading. However, according to the changes proposed by the current liberal-conservative government, students may be required to pay a substantial fee (or start their higher education debt through the HECS-HELP loan scheme). Funding is also proposed to go 'soft' (tendered on a three year basis) and programs may need to compete for funding against private providers which, unlike universities, have no specific equity mission or community obligations (Bennett, Fagan & Harvey, 2017).

Harvey makes the important point that when determining the future of enabling programs, policymakers did little to refer to existing evidence from research in the field and did not undertake adequate consultation with the universities that have a long history of provision. However, research shows that attention to evidence about the effectiveness of approaches is required (see Bennett et al., 2015) and any frameworks for program provision and assessing their outcomes should be developed according to the contexts/populations they serve. This is because these programs are diverse in terms of their reach, focus, modality and type. For example, some are offered to incarcerated populations without the aid of online technologies, whereas other large programs are offered wholly online. Some enabling programs are offered for Indigenous and other communities and are co-developed with them according to contextual needs and culture, whereas others are more general in their approach, foci and offerings. Thus, research about the impact of the different types and modes, conducted by the providers and researchers working with/in these programs who have knowledge and evaluation expertise, is required to build the evidence base (Bennett et al., 2015). Overall, Harvey's message about the importance of research on enabling programs and about equity students more generally, highlights a possible way forward for dialogue between government and universities, with high quality research having the potential to influence policy "in new and emancipatory ways".

In their contribution to this Issue, Rosalie Bunn and Annika Westrenius explain that "currently the quality of enabling programs and courses are often measured pragmatically by the successful entry of its 'graduates' into undergraduate study rather than to a formal standard". They argue that while diversity may appear as problematic according to the discourse of 'quality assurance' or 'quality improvement' applied to undergraduate programs, the current enabling model recognises "diversity and encourages innovative practices and approaches to achieving quality and tertiary standards" in a contextualised manner, depending on where, for whom and how the program is offered. For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander entrants from regional and remote communities entering undergraduate programs supported by Indigenous units and pedagogies have different needs to students entering university from other backgrounds who are studying in urban areas within programs focussed on specific discipline areas like engineering. These differing requirements exist because structures, pedagogies, curricula and foci are diverse and differ, as do areas of employment. Bunn and Westrenius' point about the current contextualised, flexible model of enabling program structures is therefore of critical importance for ensuring contextually appropriate programs.

Bunn and Westrenius' main point is that "to understand the increasingly complex relationships in HE, including those concerning enabling programs, identifying how different stakeholders with a vested interest in enabling education contribute to the field is important" for examining education and equity more thoroughly. Their analysis utilises conventional stakeholder theory to think beyond views about access to HE only in terms of being a way of achieving an individual credentials and commodity for trade. They instead consider the various stakeholders involved, which makes it clearer that programs offer opportunities for multiple stakeholders. Bunn and Westrenius argue that:

...some entities are neither entirely market orientated nor entirely non-market orientated. Relationships with educators, particularly those which enabling students have in higher education, are not typically transactional in nature. The consequences, for example, for students completing an enabling program and continuing on to an undergraduate degree and further, can be life changing and therefore move beyond just educational delivery.

Furthermore, rather than enabling and higher education being considered an individual commodity, as is often presumed, Bunn and Westrenius argue that stakeholder theory can help to illuminate where and how education can be understood as a collective investment.

At the end of the Issue, Paul Chojenta's viewpoint article continues the focus on the policy proposal to charge a fee for university enabling programs and to make them subject to competitive tender. Chojenta's contribution explores the challenges, benefits and everyday experiences of students in open entry university-based enabling programs, arguing that current attrition and completion measures of 'success' are inadequate. He asserts that these metrics do not capture the positive changes many students experience, having faced significant challenges in continuing their education. In conventional program performance metrics, students are often misrepresented as not benefitting from programs because there is no recognition of diversity in conventional reporting of educational journeys, durations, outcomes and types of employment (Skeggs, 2011).

As Chojenta's article reveals, there is much diversity in access programs, and this Issue of the journal attempts to convey their important role as an alternative pathway into HE for students whose journeys are not linear and conventional, but instead take more time to develop (Bennett & Burke, 2017; Harvey & Szalkowicz, 2016). As his and the other papers concerned with enabling programs in this Issue point out, difference and multiple outcomes are important to recognise and value, given the increasing demand for sameness and uniformity that contradicts what WP access and equity programs are about in the first place – engagement, inclusion and diversity. As Burke, Crozier and Misiaszek's (2017) argue, it is important to interrogate the demand for standardisation because it can operate to reduce opportunities, and overlook the importance and appreciation of difference.

In their paper, Matt Lumb and Sheena Roberts reflect on past, present and future problems, challenges and possibilities in working meaningfully and ethically with participants in university school outreach and refugee transition programs. Drawing primarily on Burke et al.'s (2017) 'Pedagogical Methodology', Lumb and Roberts theorise their activities in order to develop deeper, more attuned understandings of the importance of reflexive, collaborative and dialogical approaches to WP in order to create those same opportunities for program participants. Emphasising Burke's (2012; 2017) focus on the importance of 'praxis as action informed by reflection' in an iterative process, Lumb and Roberts employed a distinctive method of self-reflective analysis by recording and then reviewing shared conversations about their WP practice,

which they contextualised with reference to the literature, including theoretical (Freirean, feminist and post-structural) works. Their emphasis on reflexivity (critical reflection on self/other action, looking ‘inside’ and ‘outwards’ at broader contexts), is intended to ‘make time’ to consider and be considerate of program participants.

The authors argue that despite extensive critique in the UK and Australia, the discourse of ‘raising aspirations’ in WP work persists and, in an attempt to redress this shortsightedness, their paper is underpinned by resisting and deconstructing this deficit positioning of people. They argue that the poverty of aspiration label entirely misrepresents the strong individuals and communities that experience underrepresentation in further and higher education with whom they have both extensively worked. Lumb and Roberts’ commitment to overturning this view echoes Whitty and Clement (2015) who in a previous article published in *International Studies in Widening Participation* asserted:

The positioning of underrepresented groups as somehow lacking in aspirations has been a key feature of widening participation and fair access initiatives to date. Yet research in London found that most first year secondary school pupils knew about university, 75% wanted to attend one, and this did not vary as much as might be expected by socio-economic background (Atherton et al., 2009). This work stands in contrast to the ‘poverty of aspiration’ thesis, which is popular with politicians. Similar findings have been reported in Melbourne and Central Queensland (Prodonovich et al., 2014). (p. 49)

Lumb and Roberts argue that outreach approaches must resist the discourse that attempts to reduce WP challenges to being about people’s lack of aspiration and instead should work to develop and maintain ‘a critical awareness’ to “challenge our own imaginations, and those of practitioners operating across the field of access ... which can be developed through praxis-based methodologies”. The authors put into question their own approaches and taken for granted assumptions about participants, time, choice, self as practitioner/researcher and their imagining of others who work and participate in the field. Taking their ‘dialogic data’ as an example, Lumb and Roberts discuss important concepts for analysing WP.

In another contribution, Ian Cunninghame explores WP in higher education in relation to issues of social mobility in the Australian context. He presents findings from a scoping study seeking to understand what might be done in higher education to better facilitate mobility for equity groups, being cognisant that when decontextualised, social mobility discourse is deeply problematic. Cunninghame argues that opportunities for social mobility for those who seek to pursue it are stratified and complex, but may be enabled by continued funding of specific programs and activities “aimed at ensuring equity students are adequately represented in student cohorts, and have the support necessary to complete their studies”. His paper provides an overview of the context, challenges and opportunities for Australian higher education “in a number of directions which may be taken to further study concerning the conceptualisation of social mobility, its relation to higher education public policy, and the competing priorities widening participation agendas pose to current concepts of social mobility in neoliberal democratic discourse”. Drawing on a wide range of literature and current conceptual problematisations of social mobility, Cunninghame argues that social mobility policy discourse must be considered within broader policy commitments, such as social welfare and taxation, and when considering issues of equity:

Along with the increased likelihood of high positive mobility for those who participate in higher education through improved employment outcomes, there is the capacity for

non-participation to result in low or even negative mobility for those without degrees if their wages are unable to match the returns on investment associated with higher education (even with the effect of raising aggregate wages for all described earlier).

Cunninghame's discussion of the scoping study is important in working towards better understandings of the complex issue of equity, WP and social mobility through HE.

In their paper, Jack Frawley, James A. Smith, Andrew Gunstone, Ekaterina Pechenkina, Wendy Ludwig and Allison Stewart also explore the complexities of WP and outcomes of HE, with a focus on Vocational Education and Training (VET) 'pathways' to HE for Indigenous peoples. These contributors focus on VET pathways because more Indigenous students enrol in VET than HE, and they investigate the reasons why very few Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students transition from VET to HE. Their research utilised a combination of integrative and scoping review methodologies to build a picture of the complexities of the field and to make recommendations for further work. One practical solution, they assert, involves embedding free university enabling programs within VET studies to help transition students from lower level VET programs, that focus on building multiple competencies and generic skills, to enabling programs, that develop critical thinking and discipline focussed forms of enquiry; understanding required for transitioning through to undergraduate study.

Frawley et al. draw on literature to argue that both improvements in Indigenous community engagement and sector (as well as institutional) commitment and clarity, could help to establish more contextually-attuned aims and outcomes in determining what the purpose of further and higher education is in different contexts, especially in remote communities. As it stands, these authors point out that the transitional education 'pathway' metaphor is Western-centric, decontextualised and disconnected from community. In addition, despite credit transfer arrangements intended to facilitate entry to university, the authors argue that VET to HE transitions are so complex and convoluted that they are not amenable to navigation by people unfamiliar with the language and culture taken for granted within those fields.

As all the scholars contributing to this Issue argue, ensuring equity of access to higher education through policy and broader educational commitments and understandings, is critical to providing a fair chance for all, a commitment enduring in Australia since the Green and White papers of the late 1980s (Dawkins, 1987, 1988; DEET, 1990). This issue of *International Studies in Widening Participation* offers research that seeks to uncover the taken for granted within the dominant presumptions, concepts and structures that impede the right to higher education for all who wish to engage in it. There remains much work to do in the HE sector for equity and the policy framings around it. More effort is needed in working in culturally and contextually appropriate and respectful ways. Otherwise, fuller community engagement and participation will continue to lag.

Important note

International Studies in Widening Participation has undergone a change in management, with Helen Cameron leaving to take up another position, and Dr Jo Hanley taking over as journal manager. Jo is a sociologist with a long history of teaching in higher education and a passion for conducting research on local communities. She is currently employed as Research Manager, *English Language and Foundation Studies Centre* at the University of Newcastle. Thank you to Helen for her foundational work in the journal's early days and a warm welcome to Jo.

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