STRIVING FOR JUSTICE, EQUALITY
AND THE AUSTRALIAN WAY:

A Political Analysis of
Higher Education Access and Equity Bridging Courses

P.J. McNamee
Department of Higher Education Studies
University of Southern Queensland

November 1992
Introduction

Since the introduction of the Commonwealth Higher Education Equity Program in 1985, there has been a proliferation of higher education access and equity bridging courses. Nearly every institution of higher education in Australia offers at least one such course. Access and equity bridging courses are often portrayed by policy makers and practitioners as having an important social justice role in contemporary Australia. Generally, these courses aim to improve the lot of disadvantaged persons by equalizing access to higher education and by equalizing the benefits and outcomes associated with participation in higher education.

This paper explores the two expressions of equality - equality of opportunity and equality of outcomes - that underwrite the Higher Education Equity Program and the policies and practices of higher education access and equity bridging courses. This paper argues that these expressions are disparate and competitive. Further, it is demonstrated that access and equity bridging courses are designed to play a role that seeks mediation between these two discourses. Finally, this paper investigates the tensions in the policies and practices of these courses, that subsequently emanate from their mediatory role.

Access and Equity Bridging Courses

Higher education has long been recognized as one of the principal means by which individuals achieve independence, economic advancement, social mobility and personal growth (DEET 1988). Under-representation in higher education by groups marginalized in Australian society serves to further reinforce their marginalization within society. By not being able to participate in higher education, they are precluded from enjoying the associated benefits (the social, economic and personal rewards) of higher education. Participation in higher education is nearly always a prerequisite for participation in the professions.

Access to higher education is neither natural nor neutral. It is guided by systemic forces that favour certain groups of people over others. In the 1970s the long standing meritocratic access arrangements, which were thought to be fair and equitable, became recognized as loaded towards the "cream" of society, the privileged classes. Since then, numerous studies have been conducted (e.g., Giles & Woolfe 1977, Anderson & Vervoorn 1983, Power et al 1987, Abbott-Chapman et al 1991), which demonstrate the extent of this bias. These studies have demonstrated that groups marginalized in Australian society do not participate in higher education to the same degree as more dominant, upper and middle class groups. Aside from class,
studies have shown that some other factors important in the determination of participation in higher education include gender, cultural background and linguistic background.

Since the 1970s a number of government Programs have sought to influence the forces that guide the systems that control access to higher education. With emphasis on equity, access, equality and participation, the Hawke Labor Government, and continued by the Keating Labor Government, announced a commitment to improving access to and success in higher education for all Australian social groups (DEET 1990). As articulated recently in Higher Education: a policy statement (DEET 1988), the federal Government considers higher education to be a "legitimate aspiration for all those who satisfactorily complete 12 years of schooling or can demonstrate an equivalent capacity as mature-aged students" (DEET 1988); and, all people should have an equal opportunity to access it (DEET 1985). All Australians, regardless of background, should be able to compete in a fair race for higher education places, in which failure to finish is located in differences between individuals rather than extrinsic factors or conditions of disadvantage.

A number of federal policies and Programs have sought to alter the system by redressing the imbalance in the accessibility of Australian higher education. Since 1985 the Higher Education Equity Program has had two principal goals: to equalize the opportunity for all people to maximize their level of education and training, and to ensure more equal outcomes across all social groups in Australian society (DEET 1988, 1990). Specifically, the Program has sought to improve the participation in higher education of persons from groups traditionally under-represented, especially women studying in non-traditional areas (e.g., physical sciences and engineering), indigenous peoples, people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, those suffering rural isolation, people with disabilities, and people from non-English speaking backgrounds (DEET 1990). The Program's purpose is to change the balance of the student populations of higher education institutions so that the Australian higher education student population reflects more closely the composition of Australian society as a whole (DEET 1990).

The two principal goals of the Higher Education Equity Program - to equalize opportunity and to equalize outcomes - are derived from different discourses of equality and social justice. Equality of outcomes is a discourse that emphasizes collective attitudes, community responsibility for the powerless, and socialist or egalitarian persuasions of social justice, power and social structure (Smith 1985, Rousseau 1964). Equality of higher education outcomes is located within this discursive framework. It stresses the importance of all people sharing equally in the benefits and privileges that flow from higher education. Typically champions of this expression of equality support egalitarian (or "democratic") conceptions of social justice. Phillips (1979) describes these conceptions of social justice as ones which do not permit social privileges such as income and wealth to be "determined on the basis of natural abilities and
talents. ... The accidents of natural endowments and the contingencies of social circumstances must be nullified." Rawls' (1971) Difference Principle is an example of a democratic social justice principle:

"all social goods - liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the bases of self-respect - are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any or all of these goods is to the advantage of the least favoured."

An implication of this principle, which seeks justice in distributional patterns, is the justification of redistribution of resources - taking from the rich to give to the poor. Hence, it follows that proponents of equality of higher education outcomes support mechanisms which increase the participation of those under-represented in higher education (e.g., women in non-traditional fields, indigenous people and those suffering socio-economic disadvantage), at the expense of the advantaged.

There is internal tension within this expression of equality. Adherents to egalitarian models of social justice are quick to point out that egalitarianism does not necessarily mean the establishment of a bland, featureless society in which everyone loses individual freedom and become the same. The tension is between meeting the demands of egalitarian distributive patterns, and preserving individual freedoms. Egalitarians seek to resolve this conflict through the application of their principles on social groups rather than individuals. This ensures general uniformity while permitting points of individual difference.

This tension and resolution is represented in the Higher Education Equity Program. While hardships are felt by individuals, the Program refers to hardships and disadvantages experienced by disadvantaged groups of society, and proposes treatment to equalize outcomes for these groups.

Equality of opportunity has as its basis an ideology of inequality (Smith 1985). While equality of outcomes emphasizes sameness, equality of opportunity is a discourse that seeks fairness and equity while maintaining individual differences. Smith (1985) noted that there are two dominant forms of equality of opportunity: equality of means and equality of prospects. Equality of means emphasizes the treatment given to individuals: equal opportunity exists if the same treatment (instruments, equipment, facilities and other resources) is applied to all people. Equality of prospects is attained when the probability of an individual's success is not linked to personal attributes (Smith 1985). That is, all people should have the same chance of succeeding within society, regardless of their background.

Equality of opportunity does not guarantee the creation or evolution of an egalitarian state. It gives preference to individual differences and freedoms, over equality in distributional patterns. As with other egalitarians, Norman (1987) and Smith (1985) argue that "equality of opportunity" is an expression of equality that is weaker than "equality of
outcomes". This is because equality of opportunity fails to deliver equality of benefit and power as might be found within a cooperative community (Norman 1987).

The Higher Education Equity Program's equal opportunity goal is aligned with equality of prospects. The Program seeks to provide unequal treatments (means) to ensure that disadvantaged individuals are able to access higher education to the same degree as advantaged groups. However, it does not follow from this goal that there should be equal participation in institutions of higher education. This position is sympathetic to the ideals of multiculturalism, in which pluralism of values is accepted. While equality of opportunity may exist, various social groups may not value participation within the system; and, to insist on making the value of higher education uniform, independent of cultural background, demeans the cultural values held by those groups.

The yardstick by which the Higher Education Equity Program measures equality in higher education is proportional participation. This assumes that when the proportional participation in higher education of each social group matches its proportion in the Australian population at large, equal opportunity to access higher education exists (DEET 1988). However, this attempts to combine the two disparate discourses of equality. Equal opportunity to access higher education does not necessarily lead to equalization of outcomes. That is, an access system that is independent of background does not necessarily lead to equal participation in higher education by all social groups. For example, a person from a disadvantaged background who gains access to higher education, could well fail in institutional culture because of a lack of awareness of that culture's rules or norms.

Access and equity bridging courses are a mechanism by which the Higher Education Equity Program attempts to mediate between its two disparate goals, equalizing opportunity to access higher education and equalizing higher education outcomes. These courses can be conceptualized as providing an avenue by which equality of opportunity can lead to equality of outcomes. In this conception it is assumed that disadvantaged groups need more than opportunities to access institutions of higher education if they are to participate in higher education to acquire the associated benefits. The Higher Education Equity Program adheres to a deficit model of disadvantage. A central assumption of this model is that by suffering conditions of disadvantage, persons from disadvantaged backgrounds have deficits, especially knowledge deficits. The role of access and equity bridging courses is to compensate individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds with knowledge, providing them with opportunities to learn the "specific knowledge and skills for higher education" (DEET 1990). In doing this, access and equity bridging courses seek the assimilation of their students into mainstream higher education culture. The Higher Education Equity Program considers such courses as important for each of its targeted groups except for people with disabilities. For example, women are considered to need access and equity bridging courses so that they will
have the knowledge and motivation to participate in courses such as engineering; and, people suffering socio-economic disadvantage, who by their class background tend to be recipients of "working class" schooling are thought to be in need of such courses to learn the knowledge and norms valued by a higher education system that is more closely aligned to the upper and middle classes than the working class (Connell et al 1982).

Typically, most Australian access and equity bridging courses provide curricula that emphasize knowledge within disciples and the skills required for successful participation in higher education. For example, the Access and Equity Program of the University of Southern Queensland (USQ-AEP) incorporates units of study in Mathematics, English, Chemistry and Physics. It also provides opportunities for students to learn something of the values and norms accepted within the University through counselling and within a unit on Study Skills. The curriculum of USQ-AEP seeks to enhance the prospects of continued participation in higher education of its students.

By the compensatory nature of access and equity bridging courses, the Higher Education Equity Program is not radically reconstructive. It seeks social justice and equity without challenging the essence of the dominant hegemony of higher education. It does not seek to change fundamentally the values and practices by which institutions of higher education select students, govern, determine curriculum and pedagogy, etc. Rather, the Program seeks liberal amelioration of inequities through "fine tuning" of existing social structures (Smith 1985) by providing systems by which disadvantaged persons can gain access to higher education. Also the Program seeks the assimilation of these disadvantaged persons into mainstream higher education culture.

While tensions within access and equity bridging courses arise from their role to mediate between the discourses of equality of opportunity and equality of outcomes, which have been shown here to be disparate, limited resources of the Higher Education Equity Program to fund such courses creates a further tension. The demand for access and equity bridging courses exceeds the resources available. For example, while USQ-AEP received enough funding from the Higher Education Equity Program to enrol and "treat" 250 students per year, the number of applicants for the course was 750 per year. Such a condition drives the access and equity bridging courses to adopt selection procedures. Further, as continued Commonwealth funding for access and equity bridging courses from the Higher Education Equity Program appears to be dependent upon the course's efficacy in meeting the Program's social justice objectives, courses are predestined to employ selection procedures that maximize the passage of students into institutions of higher education. Typically, courses like USQ-AEP employ meritocratic procedures (e.g., prior school performance, and performance on pre-course diagnostic tests) are employed to select the best of the applicants. It is ironic that, while the Higher Education Equity Program seeks to equalize opportunities and outcomes for disadvantaged groups, its limited resources and funding mechanisms drives access and equity bridging
courses to select for the most advantaged of the disadvantaged groups. An effect of this may be to establish an underclass, a collection of individuals too disadvantaged for help by the Program.

Conclusion

Higher education access and equity bridging courses and the Higher Education Equity Program play a unique and important social justice role in contemporary Australia. By their participation in such courses, there are now persons from disadvantaged backgrounds who would not normally have had access to higher education, studying in institutions of higher education and participating within the more privileged sectors of Australian society.

It has been argued that the role of higher education access and equity bridging courses is to mediate between the two disparate and competing discourses of equality anointed as goals within the Higher Education Equity Program (equality of opportunity and equality of outcomes); leading to tensions in the policies and practices of these courses. These tensions are caused by attempting to assimilate people within a multicultural society, treating groups while disadvantaged individuals feel the effects of their condition, seeking equality of outcomes for groups while maintaining individual freedom and inequalities, and seeking social justice without significantly altering existing social structures and patterns. A further tension was identified as emerging from limited resource funding for these courses which leads to the adoption of meritocratic student selection procedures.

It is possible to ease this tension by increasing funding so that access and equity bridging courses can meet the demand for them. However, since the first four tensions are inextricably tied to the goals of the Higher Education Equity Program, they could only be alleviated by rethinking the Higher Education Equity Program.

REFERENCES


DEET - Department of Employment, Education and Training (1985), Extract


