

Can expanding and broadening participation in Australian universities really advance social equity?

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Abstract

It is now widely agreed that a “well-educated citizenry is the foundation of social equity, cohesion and successful participation in the global knowledge economy” as a result universities across the world are being mandated to increase in size and diversity (International Association of Universities, 2008, p. 1). Individual governments are setting goals for both increased access to higher education, so as to continue the transformation of university systems from mass to universal participation. Australian universities share this trajectory of change.

This paper investigates the history of social equity in Australian higher education policy focussing particularly on the origins and expressions of social equity and neo-liberal reform agendas. It then draws on this history to elucidate the current Australian policy ensemble consisting of the Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008) and Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). Through investigating the relative positioning of social equity and neo-liberal reform within this policy ensemble it reveals that social equity has been ‘rearticulated’ to accommodate the framework of neo-liberalism within which it is both fundamental and subordinate. The paper then draws on empirical data from the USA the UK and Australia to consider the potential impact of this rearticulation on the achievement of social equity for students from low SES backgrounds through the policy ensemble. Finally, the paper two elements, one a characteristic of the policy ensemble and one a characteristic of the university system, and suggests how these might be used to improve social equity within the confines a neo-liberal framework.

Introduction

It is now widely agreed that a “well-educated citizenry is the foundation of social equity, cohesion and successful participation in the global knowledge economy” as a result universities across the world are being mandated to increase in size and diversity (International Association of Universities, 2008, p. 1). Individual governments are setting goals for both increased and broader access to higher education, so as to continue the transformation of university systems from mass to universal participation: where open access replaces meritocratic admissions systems and compensatory equity programs (Trow, 1973, 2006). Australian universities share this trajectory of change.

Based on reforms outlined in the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, et al., 2008) and subsequently *Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System* (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009) the Australian university system is transforming into a system of universal access and participation. Expansion of the university sector is expected to fuel economic development and provide for the nation’s future labour-force needs through provision of an educated citizenry able to participate fully in, and benefit from, the global knowledge economy (Healy, 2010). Additionally, systemic expansion is espoused as a means of improving social equity through providing university access to students from groups that have been persistently under-represented in the system, particularly those from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds (Bradley, et al., 2008).

The first section of this paper outlines the history of social equity in Australian higher education policy. It focuses particularly on the origins and expressions of both social equity and neo-liberal reform agendas. The second section of the paper draws on this history to elucidate the current Australian policy ensemble consisting of the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, et al.,

2008) and *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System* (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). It investigates the relative positioning of the notions of social equity and neo-liberal reform within the policies and explores how social equity has been 'rearticulated' within the framework of neo-liberalism. The paper then draws on empirical data from the USA the UK and Australia to consider the potential impact of this rearticulation on the achievement of social equity for students from low SES backgrounds through the policy ensemble. The final section identifies two elements, one a characteristic of the policy ensemble and one a characteristic of the university system, and suggests how these might be used to improve social equity within the confines a neo-liberal framework.

Social Equity in Australian Higher Education Policy

Social equity, along with quality and efficiency are considered fundamental measures of the effectiveness of higher education systems internationally (James, 2007). For this reason social equity has become an enduring theme in Australian federal government higher education policy.

In the 1950s and 1960s the conservative governments of the time established two important committees: the Murray committee, which reported in 1957, and the Martin committee, which reported in 1964. While neither report directly considered social equity in higher education some indirect references were made (Beasley, 1997). The Murray report identified, amongst the roles of 'modern universities', the need to meet the demand for more graduates of an increasing variety (1957, p. 120). Additionally, it provided tacit recognition that many low SES people had the ability and motivation to study, but did not have sufficient financial resources by recommending that the Commonwealth Scholarship Scheme be expanded, so as to minimise the 'number of good students lost to the universities' and to reduce financially induced 'hardships and anxieties which hinder the work and progress of students' (Murray, 1957, p. 66). Similarly, the Martin report expressed concern that access to tertiary education may not be available to all who possessed the capacity to undertake it (Lamming, 2001). As a solution to the dilemma Martin (Australia., 2008) recommended bifurcating the university system into distinct types of institution so as to enable the elite nature of universities to be preserved while also meeting the needs of a labour-force that increasingly called for more highly educated workers (Laming, 2001).

The election of the Whitlam Labour government in 1972 marked a change in the status and conception of social equity in higher education as this was adopted as 'a guiding principle for social reform' (Macintyre cited in Beasley, 1997). Most notably, in 1974, the Whitlam government assumed responsibility for tertiary education, abolished tuition fees in all Australian public tertiary institutions and replaced the Commonwealth Scholarship Scheme with the needs-based Tertiary Education Assistance Scheme (Beasley, 1997; Lamming, 2001). The abolition of fees was based on a growing understanding that lack of access to higher education was strongly associated with the reduced educational opportunity afforded low SES groups (Karmel, 1973; Williams, 1987). These reforms did achieve some improvement in access to higher education for people from low SES backgrounds. However the effect, in terms of proportional representation, was relatively small and fell short of expectations (Anderson, Boven, Fensham, & Powell, 1980). On balance it was concluded that despite 'mushrooming growth' in higher education the system, and in particular universities, remained socially elite institutions dominated by the most advantaged social groups who used it to maintain and enhance their position (Anderson & Vervoorn, 1983, p. 170). Further, it was argued that the 'real beneficiaries of the period came from the new middle class, since it was they who took full advantage of the opportunities' (Jamrozik, 1991, p. 234).

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, fiscal policy began to tighten in response to the recession and economic rationalism rose to the fore. The Fraser government, now in complete control of university funding, began an era 'characterised by cuts, rationalisation and amalgamations in higher education' (Smart, 1989, p. 304). Expenditure was significantly decreased and social equity initiatives were negatively impacted. Overall, and particularly in the case of education, the legacy of the Fraser government was to privilege the private sector over the public sector (Jamrozik, 1991).

When Hawke won office in 1983 'equity and participation' were soon were instated as the foundation of the Labour government's higher education policy, (Beasley, 1997). Under the

ministerial leadership of Dawkins, higher education was restructured through re-unification of the system and introduction of the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS). HECS was celebrated nationally and internationally as an equitable strategy that reduced the tax burden created by burgeoning student numbers but did not disadvantage those from low SES backgrounds (James, 2007).

The Dawkins era saw Australia become an international leader in setting social equity policy in higher education through the release of *Higher Education: a policy statement* (Dawkins, 1988), shortly followed by the discussion paper, and subsequent policy, *A Fair Chance For All* (Department of Employment Education and Training, 1990). This policy ensemble formalised a national social equity framework based on the identification of six 'equity groups' as targets for support and reporting and funding. The aim of social equity became to change the balance of the student population to reflect more closely the composition of the society as a whole, thus proportional representation became the measure of social equity. The policy ensemble also shifted accountability for achieving equity outcomes to individual institutions and linked Commonwealth funding directly to the achievement and reporting of 'equity group' goals (Department of Employment Education and Training, 1990). In contrast to their commitment to improve social equity these reforms were steeped in the rhetoric of human capital theory and arguments for market reform in education (Marginson, 1993). It has been convincingly argued that this policy era instigate the subordination of social equity to economic rationalism (Stilwell, 1993).

In 1996 the report, *Equality, Diversity and Excellence: Advancing the National Framework* (Higher Education Council, 1996) signalled problems with social equity achievement. This report found that although some progress had been made towards achieving proportional representation for four of the six 'equity groups', the participation rates of people from low SES backgrounds and those from rural and isolated areas had not increased. It was widely held that in practice people from more affluent backgrounds had appropriated the opportunities, provided through the policy ensemble (Beasley, 1997). No governmental or departmental response was made to this report, as the Labour government was not returned to office in 1996.

In 1996, under Howard's leadership, the conservative government substantially decreased university funding and increased HECS. Minister Kemp, an ardent supporter of economic rationalism and its concomitant dedication to reduced government involvement, oversaw *Learning for life: review of higher education financing and policy* (West, 1998). This report recommended the continued funding of targeted 'equity groups', but also recommended allowing institutions to set fees and strongly aligning government funding to student demand. In 2003 Minister Nelson released *Our Universities Backing Australia's Future*. This policy again maintained the targeted 'equity group' approach and strengthened the link between funding and increasingly specific eligibility criteria. More importantly it sanctioned fee deregulation and the provision of more full-fee-paying places in universities. Under conservative leadership, higher education was increasingly characterised as a private good to be chosen and paid for by the individual (Laming, 2001).

In 2008, under a new Labour government, Bradley, Noonan, Nugent and Scales published the *Review of Australian Higher Education*. The rationale and impetus for this review were strongly rooted in the neo-liberal agenda promoted by the OECD (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, 2011). The mandate of the review committee was to examine the preparedness of the Australian University sector to respond to the demands of the global economy, while its scope had been to investigate the organisational, financing and regulatory frameworks of Australian universities (Bradley, et al., 2008). Predictably, in alignment with other OECD countries, the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, et al., 2008) issued a call for reform of Australia's higher education system as a means for improving the nation's economic competitiveness. Embedded within the reforms was the need to augment university access and participation rates for people from low SES backgrounds. In this way the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, et al., 2008) articulated a dual agenda for social equity and enhanced economic competitiveness that resonated with past Labour policy themes and strongly aligned with global policy shifts towards universal access to higher education and neo-liberal governance.

The Review of Australian Higher Education and Transforming Australia's Higher Education System

The *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, et al., 2008) put forward 46 recommendations intended to expand of the university sector so as to increase the overall education level of the Australian citizenry. The key targets identified within its recommendations were: recommendation 2 that 'the Australian Government set a national target of at least 40 per cent of all 25- to 34-year-olds having attained a qualification at bachelor level or above by 2020' (Bradley, et al., 2008, p. 21); and recommendation 4 that 'the Australian Government set a national target that, by 2020, 20 per cent of higher education enrolments at undergraduate level are people from low socio-economic status backgrounds.' (Bradley, et al., 2008, p. 45). It was recommended that adequate funding support these targets. Recommendation 41 is that 'the Australian Government provide funds of \$130 million over four years towards the cost of implementing these reforms' (Bradley, et al., 2008, p. 176).

The *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, et al., 2008) was translated into policy in 2009 with the release of *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System* (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations). This policy outlines a decade long reform agenda for higher education in Australia that is considered 'integral to achieving the Government's vision for a stronger and fairer Australia' (Department of Education Employment & Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 5; Healy, 2010). The policy accepts the majority of the 46 recommendations proposed in the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, et al., 2008). However, it is worth noting that some important changes were made to the three key recommendations identified within in this discussion. Firstly, the time line for achievement of recommendation 2 that 'the Australian Government set a national target of at least 40 per cent of all 25- to - 34 year olds having attained a qualification at bachelor level or above by 2020' (Bradley, et al., 2008, p. 21) was extended to 2025 (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 64). Recommendation 4, that 'the Australian Government set a national target that, by 2020, 20 per cent of higher education enrolments at undergraduate level are people from low socio-economic status backgrounds.' (Bradley, et al., 2008, p. 45) was accepted unchanged (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 64). Interestingly, recommendation 41 that 'the Australian Government provide funds of \$130 million over four years towards the cost of implementing these reforms' (Bradley, et al., 2008, p. 176) was not accepted and the Government opted to provide additional funding through structural adjustment funding arrangements that were already established (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 64).

The *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, et al., 2008) was celebrated by Professor Craven, Vice-Chancellor of Australian Catholic University, as "...one of those rare points where morality and economic efficiency come together in a grand way..." (Trounson, 2011a). Craven's words echoed the thoughts of many who embraced this report, and its policy translation, as the next stage of the social equity agenda for higher education: an agenda traditionally advanced under Labour governments. However, a recent analysis of social equity as it is represented in the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, et al., 2008) by Rizvi and Lingard (2011) suggests a more measured stance may be called for.

Rizvi and Lingard (2011) argue that the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, et al., 2008) articulates a notion of social equity which is congruent with social-democratic traditions of Labour governments. In the social-democratic tradition 'need' is emphasised as the primary focus of public policy and on that basis the state is required to intervene against market forces to ensure the needs of all are met (Lingard, 1999). This tradition is evidenced in the *Report's* stated intention to improve access for, and support the participation of, students from low SES backgrounds. It is further underwritten by the *Report's* call for this access and participation to be supported through significantly increased public funding. In spite of this call being noticeably diluted in *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System* (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations) its mere existence stands in stark contrast to other OECD influenced policies, such as those of the UK and USA that argue for increased private contributions by students and business sectors.

The social democratic rhetoric of the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, et al., 2008) is however weakened by the continuance, within both the *Report* and *Policy*, defining social equity, in terms of proportional representation by under-represented groups, and the utilisation of numeric targets to create accountability (Bradley, et al., 2008, pp. 44-45; Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). Rizvi and Lingard argue that quantification in this way serves to both 'narrow' and 'de-politicise' the notion of social equity (2011, p. 17). These strategies are consistent with neo-liberal ideology and governance methods as they facilitate a reduced role by the state and sanction market-competition as the preeminent means for achieving the optimum allocation of resources (Beeson & Firth, 1998). The *Report* and *Policy* further evidence their coalition with neo-liberal ideology and governance methods through their intention to utilise the 'deregulation' of student enrolments and increased institutional 'accountability' to underwrite expansion and the social equity targets (Rizvi & Lingard, 2011, p. 16).

In summary, the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, et al., 2008) and *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System* (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009) articulate a dual agenda of social equity and neo-liberal reform. Within this policy ensemble it is clear that the social equity agenda is firmly framed within a larger neo-liberal agenda (Rizvi & Lingard, 2011). However, as Rizvi and Lingard (2011, p. 8) argue the duplicity of the agenda is neither particularly unusual or problematic *per se*, rather it is the relative positioning, of the agendas which influences their potential for fulfillment.

The Rearticulation of Social Equity within the Neo-liberal Reform Agenda

To further explore the relative positioning of the social equity and neo-liberal reform agendas it is helpful to consider the relationship between the two key recommendations mentioned earlier: recommendations 2 and 4. Importantly, achievement of recommendation 4, 'that, by 2020, 20 per cent of higher education enrolments at undergraduate level are people from low socio-economic status backgrounds' (Bradley, et al., 2008, p. 45) is fundamental to the achievement of recommendation 2, that 'the Australian Government set a national target of at least 40 per cent of all 25- to - 34 year olds having attained a qualification at bachelor level or above by 2020' (Bradley, et al., 2008, p. 21). Recent calculations, factoring in Australian's current university completion rate of 72% (Bradley, et al., 2008, p. 10), indicate that the achievement of recommendation 2 would require the enrolment of an additional 25,000 students, under the age of 25 years-old, per year from 2010 to 2021 (Sellar, Gale, & Parker, 2011, p. 41). In contrast, unmet student demand in Australia, which has recently ranged between 36,100 unsuccessful eligible university applicants in 2004 and 12,600 unsuccessful eligible university applicants in 2008 and stood at 18,500 unsuccessful eligible university applicants in 2009, is well short of this figure (Sellar, et al., 2011, p. 42). On this basis it is apparent that engaging more people from low SES backgrounds in university is imperative to achieving the 40 per cent degree attainment rate.

The embedding of recommendation 4 within the context of recommendation 2 points to the parallel positioning of the social equity agenda within the neo-liberal reform agenda. The overall effect of the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, et al., 2008) and *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System* (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009) then has been to 'rearticulate the meaning of (social) equity in terms of an underlying focus on market efficiency' (Rizvi & Lingard, 2011, p. 19). This 'rearticulation' is clearly endorsed by the current Tertiary Education Minister, Chris Evans, who sees the current reforms as a 'fundamental economic reform' that will transition the system into a 'truly democratic level of opportunity for higher learning' with 'universities at the centre of the profound demographic change' (Trounson, 2011b). However, while this 're-articulation' may appear to offer an eloquent and expedient solution to both the historic dilemma regarding social equity and the persistent under-representation of students from low SES backgrounds in Australian universities and the modern desire for global competitiveness through investment in human capital, the subordination of the social equity agenda to the neo-liberal reform agenda raises questions about the capacity of this policy ensemble to contribute to the Government's vision for a 'fairer Australia' (Department of Education Employment & Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 5; Healy, 2010).

The rationale for 'rearticulating' the concept of social equity and 'nesting' it within the framework of neo-liberalism is premised on two, increasingly familiar, beliefs: that optimum allocation of resources, including access to university education, is best achieved through market forces (Beeson & Firth, 1998); and that increased access to goods, including university education, will naturally result in increased opportunity which, if utilised successfully, will improve social mobility for students from low SES backgrounds (Beeson & Firth, 1998). However, in spite of decades of economic rationalisation replete with discourse positing the value-neutral logic of cost calculation, which would have the citizenry accept these notions as 'common sense', it is important to recognise that they are not. These beliefs need to be questioned so that the impact of neo-liberal policy framing on the achievement of social equity in higher education can be better understood.

Firstly, are market forces the best way to achieve the optimum allocation of resources if the resource is access to university and optimum allocation is assumed to mean equitable allocation? Within the neo-liberal paradigm the market is conceived as a value-neutral entity with no arbiter beyond the market forces themselves and no limit to achievement beyond the individual participants' capacities (Clarke, 2004). However, this ignores the reality that markets are social constructs that operate according to rules. Market forces are not impartial; they are created through competition and driven by consumer choices. To participate equally in a market the consumers must have an equal ability to make choices based on assessment of their possible outcomes. There is good reason to believe that students from low SES backgrounds, due to their lack of familiarity with the higher education system and its potential outcomes, are not equally able to make informed choices. Empirical studies from the USA and Australia indicate that students from low SES backgrounds often begin university with less encouragement, guidance and preparation than other students (Atweh & Bland, 2007; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996; Tranter, 2005) and feel less confident in their readiness and ability than other students (Bui, 2002). Additionally, for many students from low SES backgrounds constrained resources limit their freedom and agency in decision making about higher education. Studies from the USA and Australia clearly show that students from low SES backgrounds are often less academically prepared for university study (Ballantyne, Madden, & Todd, 2009; James, Krause, & Jennings, 2010; Terenzini, et al., 1996); have multiple life roles in addition to being a student, including those related to having a family (Devlin, 2010; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Nomi, 2006); commonly work many hours in paid employment (Engle, 2007; Engle & Tinto, 2008; James, et al., 2010; Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian, & Miller, 2007; Nomi, 2006); and frequently live further from university campuses and therefore must spend more time and money to commute (Engle, 2007; Lundberg, et al., 2007; Nomi, 2006; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Terenzini, et al., 1996).

Secondly, does increased access to goods, specifically university education, naturally result in increased opportunity, which if utilised successfully, improves social mobility for students from low SES backgrounds? Over two decades of census data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics confirms that a four-year degree is likely to result in a higher income (Wei, 2010). Between 1981 and 2006 graduates could expect to receive a lifetime rate of return on their investment in education of between 13 and 20 per cent annually. On this basis it is reasonable to assume that students from low SES backgrounds who successfully complete a university degree would be likely to achieve increased social mobility through better job opportunities. However, there is also strong evidence to suggest that as access to academic qualifications increases, simply holding a degree may not be enough to obtain either opportunity or social mobility (David, Hayward, & Ertl, 2010).

As Marginson (2004) suggests the value of a degree is, at least in part determined by its scarcity. Therefore as degrees become more accessible, it becomes increasingly important that students earn degrees of the 'right kind', from the 'right kind of institution' and 'preferably accompanied by the right kinds of social and cultural capital' if they capitalise on opportunities which lead to social mobility (Brennan in Keane, 2011). This holds because once the number of individuals who have earned a specific degree is greater than the number of employment opportunities open to degree holders, the degree operates as a prerequisite and other factors become the determining criteria (Brown, 2003). Unfortunately, these other factors, such as 'the right kinds of social and cultural capital' are precisely the resources that are differentially conferred through social differentiation. It becomes clear then that market forces neither recognise nor value the outcomes of social

differentiation (Clarke, 2004) and so act as a disabling structure to students from low SES backgrounds.

Evidence from the UK and USA higher education systems, both of which are significantly further along the continuum of transformation to universal access than Australia, attests to increased polarisation of the student body, based on SES background, across different institutions (James, Blexley, & Maxwell, 2008). In the UK low SES students are most likely to study at a less prestigious local university while prestigious institutions enrol far fewer (by 10-15 percentage points) low SES students than the UK mean (James, et al., 2008). Similarly, in the USA student SES composition is closely tied to institutional prestige (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Despite sustained efforts, through state legislation and specific admissions targets, low SES students in the USA are increasingly concentrated in the least selective institutions (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Bui, 2002; Eckel & King, 2004). In the USA proportional representation by students from low SES backgrounds has been steadily decreasing relative to institutional selectivity since 1971 (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Tinto, 2006). Further, amongst students with similar levels of academic achievement, low SES students are less likely to attend more selective institutions (Tinto, 2006). As Brown (2003) warns, it would appear that for many students the opportunity offered through increased access to higher education may become a trap which is costly and fails to deliver either increased opportunity or social mobility.

Using a Double-Edged Sword

Taken together, the positioning of social equity as a necessary factor in the nation's progress towards global economic competitiveness and its subordination to the neo-liberal reform agenda presents as double-edged sword for social equity in Australian universities. Based on current research it seems unlikely that expansion of the Australian university system, through evoking market forces will, *per se*, improve social equity for students from low SES backgrounds (James, 2007). However, opportunities for improvement may exist if practitioners, advocates and academics work together to focus the spotlight of attention currently shining on the need to improve social equity so as to achieve national goals. The spotlight needs to be directed towards elements within the Australian higher education system that differentiate it from systems undergoing expansion. Selectively illuminating and growing these elements may provide ways to work towards the achievement of greater social within the confines of the 'neo-liberal imaginary' (Rizvi & Lingard, 2011)

For example, the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, et al., 2008) clearly identifies low SES as the unifying characteristic of the cohort that is under-represented in Australian higher education. Furthermore, *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System* (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009) demonstrates significant political impetus and a commitment to resourcing university access by this cohort of students (Sellar & Gale, 2011). This unique combination of political attention and unequivocal identification has the potential to enable a very precise targeting of resources. Resource targeting would act as a remedial solution in redressing inequities advanced through market forces, institutional structures and historic practises (Jamrozik, 1991). However, to take advantage of the opportunity available within the parameters of the current policy ensemble a more precise, robust and unambiguous definition and measure of socio-economic status is required (McMillan & Western, 2000). The current measure, based on postcode, is imprecise and is not valid at the individual level (James, 2007). To actualise the full potential of the funding available through *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System* (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009) both the funding and the students for whom it is intended need to remain identifiable within the system. As previously discussed the history of social equity in higher education clearly demonstrates that the middle SES classes have been the major beneficiaries of previous efforts aimed at improving social equity through expansion, largely because these efforts have not been sufficiently targeted (Beasley, 1997). Social equity may be advanced if the funding available to support this policy ensemble is precisely and deliberately targeted through improved identification of the students for whom it is intended to provide opportunity: students from low SES backgrounds.

Another possibility is located in the structure of the system. The Australian university sector is a unified system within which the federal government refuses to recognise differential institutional status (Marginson, 2011). Moreover, *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System* (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009) outlines funding linked strategies that distributes the responsibility to provide access to students from low SES backgrounds across all institutions. These two elements can be utilised as allies for the social equity agenda. Within most expanded higher education systems the student body is polarised according to SES (James, 2007). Where the system is horizontally stratified according to institutional status this becomes particularly problematic as students from low SES backgrounds tend to be relegated to low status institutions (Astin & Oseguera, 2004), which ultimately provide less opportunity for social mobility (Brown, 2003). To reduce the potential for students from higher SES background to gain a qualitative positional advantage it is critical that the university system resist calls for structural changes that could promote horizontal stratification.

Conclusion

This paper has investigated the history of social equity in Australian higher education policy to illuminate the genesis and development of two themes permeate current higher education policy in Australia; social equity and neo-liberal reform. Despite the seeming incongruence of these two ideas this paper reveals how they have been drawn together in the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, et al., 2008) and *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System* (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). Through investigating the relative positioning of social equity and neo-liberal reform within this policy ensemble it becomes clear that social equity has been 'rearticulated' to accommodate the framework of neo-liberalism within which it is both fundamental and subordinate. The potential impact of this 'rearticulation' of social equity, and the ascendancy of neo-liberal notions and practices, was explored through discussion of empirical data emanating from the USA the UK and Australia. This data suggests that market-forces, the cornerstone of neo-liberal reform, may not be capable of providing social equity for students from low SES backgrounds. The final section of the paper conceptualised the policy settings outlined in the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, et al., 2008) and *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System* (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009) as a double-edged sword, and briefly considered how it could be used to fight for social equity by harnessing elements specific to the Australian context and using them to work constructively within the confines of a neo-liberal imaginary.

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