

International Comparators of Widening Participation to and through Higher Education – Policy and Practice

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*Australian universities, their
students and social equity*

Mary Stuart, Geoff Layer
and Rhiannon Evans

Series Editor: Mary Stuart

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1. Series Summary – the research project

Context

Widening participation in higher education remains a Government priority in the UK. Each country in the UK has taken a slightly different approach; Scotland particularly focusing on progression, Wales specifically on community engagement, and England especially on young people's access to HE. Widening participation in higher education is therefore a diverse field with many different issues to be addressed. When international comparators are examined the field becomes even more diverse.

Action on Access is the national co-ordinating team for widening participation for the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). The team comprises a dispersed team of researchers and practitioners in the field of widening participation in England. As part of our contract with the HEFCE, the team planned to undertake international comparator research into widening participation practice.

The purpose of this research is to inform policy and practice in England by learning from other similar situations (e.g. OECD countries¹) to build the research capacity of practitioners in the field of widening participation so that they can understand their practice context in relation to other practice contexts and to develop a broader base of research material for future use in the field.

Rationale - globalisation, widening participation and learning from others

Since the 1960s, inclusion in HE learning has been highlighted by different policy initiatives, most of which were concerned about equality of opportunity, whether that be equality for Black students as in the USA and South Africa, or greater equality for working classes as in the UK. The global imperative to create more qualified workforces grows out of a concern for economic competitiveness. High-modernity or late- or post-modernity means that the industrial heartlands of countries such as the UK and USA have been devastated and, in order to compete in an increasingly tough global market, knowledge and professional skill development are important to the future of our societies. Jobs are more uncertain and individuals take risks as they move through their employment career. Higher education is seen to be one element of insurance and protection against risk (Beck, 1992). Globalisation impacts on countries but more importantly on the people within countries and it affects their experience differently. What is certain is that the poorest face the most risks in our society. In the UK, attempts to ensure social equity in higher education have not been very successful. Despite the Robbins Report, (Committee on Higher Education, 1963) creating a new form of HE, the Polytechnics and the rapid expansion of HE numbers in the 1980s, the proportion of people from lower socio-economic groups has not increased. This means that they remain at risk of unemployment, of a less secure lifestyle, of less favourable life chances than their graduate peers, and their position in society remains focused on need rather than their ability to contribute. In England, a range of initiatives has been put in place in HE, from the Universities Funding Council in

¹ Although there are similarities between countries, there is no direct comparator, and it is important to take 'lessons learnt' with a degree of scepticism. It is not always applicable to transfer practice from one setting to another, though it is possible with caution to gain a better understanding of process, especially where countries have concerns about widening access.

1991 providing funding for work with 'educationally-disadvantaged groups of adult returners', through to the current funding for Aimhigher for school-age young people and Lifelong Learning Networks focusing on vocational routes into and through HE. Many of these ideas have been tried in other parts of the world and, while it is always difficult to make comparisons, it is worth investigating how others have tackled issues of equality in higher education. This research project attempts to do just that; to explore competitor countries' approaches to widening access and participation, their successes and their challenges. We hope that the reports will provide cautionary tales, suggestions and inspiration to try to develop policy and practice that can provide answers for the future.

Research methodology

The project is led by Mary Stuart, Associate Director: Research and Curriculum for Action on Access. The project methodology consists of a series of research visits to comparator countries to examine practice in relation to the areas outlined above. Each visit had a team of researchers from Action on Access and each team took a specific area of interest to widening participation policy or practice, while keeping an overview of all areas of the student lifecycle.

The research questions that were examined were based on a typology drawing on current UK government policy for widening participation using the student lifecycle model (Action on Access, 2003), which highlights stages of widening participation practice such as:

1. Pre-HE interventions Policy/Practice
2. HE Experience
3. Post-HE Employment/development/lifelong learning

At all times the central focus was on what can be learned from other countries' experiences. Five visits are being undertaken² and the teams are as follows:

- South Africa: Chris Duke, Bill Jones
- Australia: Geoff Layer, Mary Stuart, Rhiannon Evans
- Canada: Sue Hatt, Phil Harley
- Sweden: John Harvey, Beth Scott, Pat Rayfield
- USA: John Storan, Liz Allen, Lucy Solomon, Liz Thomas

All teams named a visit leader who was responsible for ensuring that the visit is successful and that the report was written. The visit plan was agreed between Mary Stuart and the visit team to ensure consistency and assure the quality of the research. Key contacts were identified in each country to ensure that appropriate interviewees were identified.

Each visit consisted of semi-structured interviews with key policy makers and practitioners involved in WP activities and visits and observations of WP work. Each team gathered data from the country concerned including policy documents, mission statements and relevant statistics, all of which are used in producing their reports.

² The chosen countries and the number of visits is based on comparability in relation to UK HE systems and approaches. These vary but all have a desire to widen access as well as to address practical matters such as time, affordability etc and therefore there is sufficient connection to the UK system to make comparison appropriate.

After each visit teams were required to complete a report on the visit and participate in a seminar to share their learning from the visit. This report forms the first of these international comparisons; further reports will follow later in 2005 and early 2006.

Mary Stuart, 2005

References

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2. Abstract

Australian higher education has been used as one of several models to reshape higher education in England. The report-based on a study visit conducted in March 2005, draws out HE practice in Australia with particular reference to social equity. It examines the income-contingent fee policy which has been operating in Australia since 1989 and assesses its impact on social equity. It also draws comparisons between British HE outreach and student success strategies and those employed in Australia. The research suggests that income-contingent fees do not seem to affect student decisions in taking on or not taking on HE-level study. However the report also highlights that numbers of people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, while they have not decreased in Australian HE, they have not increased either. The report argues that the equity agenda has not significantly moved forward in Australia, and retention is a real concern. The report suggests that lessons from the UK could provide some solutions for issues facing HE in Australia.

3. The Study Visit to Australia

As part of the international comparator research project to examine widening participation practice and policy in different countries, a study tour was conducted over a two-week period in March 2005 by Mary Stuart, Geoff Layer and Rhiannon Evans from Action on Access. The focus of the visit was on institutional leadership, social equity and government policy.

Five states and twelve universities within Australia were visited. A joint presentation was given to a hundred academic and administrative staff on retention and student success in the UK at Griffith University in Brisbane. Several other presentations were undertaken by members of the team at other universities. As well as visiting universities, one member of the team visited the Association of Australian Vice Chancellors' Committee to discuss government policy for social equity in Australian universities.

The three team members met senior managers in HE, raising questions about institutional practice, student fees and debt and equity across Australia. Information was gathered about policy development, strategic decision-making in institutions and social equity in institutions.

4. The Background of Higher Education in Australia

Australia is a group of 6 states and 2 territories which have come together in a federation to form one country. There is a strong history of state autonomy and discrepancy in policies and practices between states are much more marked than in the UK even though recent moves to devolution and regionalism are changing this.

Australia developed its higher education system within the framework of the Commonwealth of Australia, in other words the government of Australia is federal and states differ in terms of their policies and practice. This means that universities' governance and structures differ in different states but there are significant similarities as well. In particular the system of a three-year degree (with a fourth year for honours), similar to the Scottish system, is common across all states. Therefore the structure, management and accountability of universities in Australia has been determined by the history of the country and its development.

Australian universities were established under state legislation and the state gave them degree-awarding powers, self-accreditation and some autonomy. However, the state does not directly fund higher education places or research. That is the role of the Commonwealth, which determines policy and funding for higher education from Canberra. There are 40 Australian universities, including three private ones.

As in most countries, Australian universities have expanded in number and also in size. Typically institutions are much larger than in the UK, with a 25 thousand student body seen as medium-sized. There is also considerable differentiation within the sector. While the university sector has an overarching body to represent the HE sector, the Australian Vice Chancellors' Committee, universities have established groupings of similar institutions to protect their interests in an increasingly difficult international market. These groupings are the group of eight (similar to the Russell Group in the UK), the Innovative Research University group, the Australian Technology Network and the New Generation Universities (DEST, 2004). However, as in the UK, not all universities 'fit' within a group.

Nearly all universities recruit students³ from within their own state. Students gain access to universities based on their percentage score on completion of their schooling. Australian universities have doubled their overseas student numbers in the last twenty years, largely from Asia. Most senior managers saw aggressive engagement with the overseas market as crucial to their institution's financial health. Total student numbers have increased to nearly a million in 2003.

It appears that employers are still not aware of the difference between honours degrees and general degrees and a high percentage of employees have a general degree. 21% of the workforce (25-64) has a degree compared to 29% in the US and 19.8% in the UK.

The Australian Government policy over the last 10 years has been to increase selectivity in research and diversity in mission through promoting an open market for recruitment and fee levels. Australia introduced fee-paying (HECS) for undergraduate fees in 1989. This development was part of an overall package of reform, which highlighted social equity as a significant issue to be addressed by universities. The reforms increased the number of student places overall, and suggested that Australia should 'change the balance of the student population to reflect more closely the composition of society' (Yerbury, 2005). Six disadvantaged groups were established, (equity target groups) and universities were

³ This is apart from Melbourne University which is now actively recruiting nationally.

expected to increase the proportion of students from these groups (James et al., 2003)⁴. These reforms were implemented by a Labour government. Since then Australia has changed its national government and is now led by a conservative nationalist government. While the federal government funds HE, the states fund TAFE, (rather like the UK's FE) which include some vocational higher education courses. However, because of its role in establishing universities the state is often represented on university councils. This is particularly the case in New South Wales where state representatives have places on all university councils in the state as a matter of right. The state has an interest in terms of participation from its communities, the local economic strategy and seeing workforce development plans achieved. Consequently the various states have invested in capital development of new sites/campuses in areas they promote. There is considerable build and development across all HE in Australia.

The Commonwealth (central government) funds universities through a student load contract. This is achieved through negotiation and is based on historic patterns of delivery and Commonwealth needs. There are 10 academic subject areas or clusters plus two shortage areas (teaching and nursing). Load is determined across these clusters and there is no cap on teaching and nursing numbers. Each university is required to meet their load target or will have funding reduced the following year.

The Commonwealth has a planning function at a marginal level as it will intervene if there are plans to close shortage subject areas or reduce certain provision so that it becomes unavailable in a state. There is however considerable evidence that universities collaborate to avoid such closures. However the current Conservative government is increasing its planning function much to the dismay of universities.

⁴ For more detail on the groups see Section 6 on social equity

5. Recent Policy Changes

In December 2004 Brendan Nelson, the Minister for Education in the coalition Government of the National party with the Liberals, introduced a number of new higher education reforms. In summary these have resulted in:

- Partial deregulation of fees allowing universities to charge up to 25% more than the existing fees in the two higher bands for HECS places. Nursing and teaching are exempt from this rise but fees for Law, Veterinary Science, medicine etc have risen to a maximum of A\$14000 and middle band fees for arts and humanities have risen to A\$6-7000. Nursing and education courses remain at A\$3700.
- Opportunities for universities to register more students on fee-paying only places (in effect an opportunity for universities to take more students on very popular courses such as Medicine or Law).
- The offer of "greater flexibility" or "student choice" in payment of fees or type of debt incurred. For example, the introduction of a FEEHelp⁵ scheme which would be available to HECS students, to fees-only students and students in private institutions. It was anticipated that this would be very popular but critics are concerned that it will further deter students from poorer backgrounds.
- The introduction of Commonwealth scholarship schemes⁶. These are means-tested and are administered by universities. Scholarships up to A\$2000 can be awarded per annum for living expenses and a further A\$4000 for accommodation for rural students. Universities with populations of 30000 students were typically receiving only 270 scholarships for the former and 120 for the latter.
- Encouragement to universities to provide additional university scholarships as well but unlike the UK no requirement to do so.
- The introduction of the notion of 'learning entitlement' which assumes the right to university over time: i.e. up to 7 years to complete in recognition that students will take longer than hitherto.

Impending changes:

- The abolition of compulsory student union fees, which average A\$300 per student per annum. The presenting argument is that many students do not use these facilities and it represents an unfair burden on all students, including mature students who represents 25% of the total student body. Universities see this legislation as an attempt by the Howard Government to ensure that universities can never again breed left-wing activists and to stamp out collective trade union thinking at a formative period in students' lives. Furthermore, they anticipate picking up the cost of providing a wide range of services from sport to counselling, in particular for their overseas students.
- Legislation which would enable overseas universities to open campuses in Australia thereby increasing competition for domestic and overseas students.

⁵ Linked to the CPI but incurring a 20% administrative charge that equates to a real interest rate of 1.8% per annum over 10 years and developed with comprehensive scholarships alongside

⁶ Commonwealth scholarships are allocated based on post code analysis although this is considered to be an inadequate proxy for low income or social class

6. University Entrance and Equity

Entrance

There is very little inter-state movement of students except near the territorial borders. There is no Australia-wide entrance system as it is organised on a state-by-state basis through bodies owned and managed by the universities in that state. These bodies generally use a scheme known as Tertiary Entrance Record (TER), which seeks Year 12 assessment scored out of 100. Queensland uses a different scheme and scores differently. The state bodies do have a conversion scheme to allow for inter-state transfer. The TER and its equivalent only assess entry from Y12 and do not provide a mechanism for inter-university transfer for adult students.

Students apply for up to 9 HEIs in order of priority. Once exam results are known the university will know how many places they need to meet the Commonwealth funding target. They will then develop a 'cut-off score' that enables them to achieve that target. Once that target is filled those that have missed the 'cut-off' can be offered a full-fee place. From 2005 this full-fee place also comes with the income-contingent loan, capped at A\$50,000, so full-fee payers do not have to pay upfront fees either. High 'cut-off' scores equate to the highest quality universities or courses, for example Law or Medicine will attract high scores in most institutions.

A number of universities offer targeted schemes aimed at the equity target groups. In such instances they may allocate a target number of places for such students and then go below the 'cut-off' to meet the target. This, along with full-fee paying students being below the 'cut-off', has led to the Minister seeking to develop a public 'capability' score. This would require the university to say what the minimum score would be to enter its degrees. This would be a minimum standard for academic achievement rather than the supply and demand model of the 'cut-off'.

Students can enter HE at 17 on completion of their schooling. There is a significant number of students who defer entry to university for a year from as a means of earning money prior to study. For this group, entry is still by the TER as it is relatively recent.

For adult learners the approach is similar to that in the UK, through life achievement and interview or portfolio.

Another key distinction with the UK is that significant transfer between universities takes place. Students are more likely to take breaks and return to another university. In these cases it is performance in higher education rather than the TER score that matters.

The area of apparent greatest difficulty in admission to university is progression from TAFE courses. There is no natural system of progression and essentially it is focusing on advanced professional courses and the amount of credit they may or may not receive from the admitting universities. This area appears to be fraught with difficulty, even for internal progression within dual-sector universities that run their own large TAFE programmes.

Across Australia in 1997, only 38 percent of TAFE students admitted to Bachelor degrees were admitted on the basis of their prior TAFE study alone. Within the HE sector, like in England, there are differences in which institution is more likely to accept such students. The 'Group of Eight' institutions, similar to our Russell Group, only admitted 2.4 percent of their students from TAFE backgrounds while former institutes of technology admitted 10.3 percent of such students. The figure had not changed in 2001 (Griffith University, 2003).

There is a group of universities that is seeking to develop articulation agreements with TAFE colleges as a means of securing the supply chain and providing greater access.

Social Equity

Widening participation to higher education is termed 'social equity' in higher education in Australia. It has been an important part of the higher education landscape since 1989. The fees package that was developed in 1989 was part of an overall strategy to widen access for specific groups (Yerbury, 2005). The Labour Government at the time recognised that certain groups were not participating in higher education at the same rate as others. Consequently it developed the groundbreaking 'Fair Chance for All' programme, which identified specific equity groups that required additional support to engage in higher education.

These groups were:

- Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders
- Non-English Speaking Background
- Low Socio-economic status
- Rurally Isolated
- Disabled Peoples
- Women in non-traditional subject areas.

The Labour Government in the UK would argue that the introduction of so-called 'top-up' fees, with the re-introduction of grants for students from very poor backgrounds, is a similar package. Universities received relatively small grants to develop activities with the particular target groups. While many of these groups are recognisable as the UK 'under-represented groups', a key difference between the UK and Australia is the emphasis on the indigenous population of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. Aboriginal peoples' rights remain an important issue for Australia, by no means only in higher education. However, all universities have developed programmes for indigenous students.

As part of their work to encourage social equity, each university had to develop an Equity Plan, setting targets for each group in return for the funding (HEEP Grant), and progress was monitored on an annual basis. There was a number of innovative schemes developed as universities sought to assist particular groups.

Although the HEEP Grant was relatively small compared to the overall Commonwealth funding it was a key influence and shaper of behaviour. Universities appointed Equity Officers, often with specific roles. One role was to work with the indigenous community where the appointment of staff from those backgrounds was seen as crucial. The other distinctive group was disabled students, who required very specific support on course once they entered university, meaning that part of the focus was on support measures on courses. For the other groups the focus was on gaining entry to university generally.

Reviews of progress with the Equity Targets was a regular feature of HEEP and the general view expressed from universities was that progress had been made with the participation of women from non-traditional groups and with disabled students. A government-commissioned review (James et al., 2003) concluded that 'special emphasis should be given within the equity policy framework to people from low socio-economic backgrounds

due to the continuing extent of under-representation of this group'. They also suggested that people from non-English speaking backgrounds should be removed from the equity group list and that women in certain subject areas should also be removed (3).

This review led to the introduction of a number of changes. The support for disabled students and indigenous communities has been moved into different funding mechanisms and sits outside the funding allocation called HESP, thus recognising their distinctiveness.

The funding under HESP is now based on new criteria. Previously each university received floor-level funding of A\$80,000 plus a multiplier based on enrolment from specific groups. The floor-level minimum payment has been removed and now only two categories are used to determine funding:

- Low Socio-Economic Groups
- Rurally-isolated groups

with a multiplier based on enrolment from those groups.

This has led to a redistribution of funding away from metropolitan universities that traditionally had significant numbers of students from non-English speaking backgrounds.

There was evidently a lack of understanding or acceptance of the changes amongst equity practitioners with many believing that they could only target low socio-economic groups and not focus on the targets they wanted to prioritise. Whereas, in reality, universities are free to develop their own approach, with targets with the lower socio-economic status SES simply being the mechanism to determine funding against a plan.

7. Fees and the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS)

With the introduction of HECS in 1989, which was a highly political decision, the similarities with the approach of the English system are evident. Labour minister Dawkins introduced income-contingent loans to secure a contribution to tuition costs. In order to secure the passing of the legislation, amendments were made to ensure that there was independent research into the impact on low-income families and commitments were made that special programmes would be developed to support improved participation from under-represented groups. The similarity with the UK's Higher Education Act 2004 does not stop there, as will be reported later.

In 1989 the concept of income-contingent loans was ground-breaking. The nature of such schemes challenges the traditional views of debt aversion and provides an equitable way to secure financial contributions. The evidence coming out of focused research and institutional studies is that the income-contingent loan framework of HECS has not prevented or inhibited access from low socio-economic groups. Studies that have surveyed young people and monitored their changing values as they grow up all show that access has not been restricted by HECS (Chapman and Ryan, 2003;).

There are many features that prevent or inhibit participation from low-income groups and the key issues are similar to those in England:

- Aspirations
- Attainment levels
- Knowledge of higher education.

HECS enables a student to contribute to the cost of their higher education. This contribution can take one of the two forms:

- Pay upfront and receive a 25% discount.
- Pay back after completion at a percentage of income earned over a period of years, once earning above the required salary.

In 2003 79% of students deferred payment of fees and in 2004 75.6 per cent deferred. Twenty-three per cent paid upfront with a 25 per cent discount. The two variables within HECS are the amount of contribution required and the salary level at which payback commences. Unlike the English system to be introduced in 2006 there is no 'tuition forgiveness for the poor'. In Australia there is no evidence of it inhibiting participation: the percentage of participants from lower SES groups has not fallen since the introduction of, or recent changes to, HECS and aspiration within these groups has not altered either (Chapman and Ryan, 2003). However low socio-economic targets are not being met (James et al., 2003).

Whilst there is considerable evidence that a number of communities, groups and individuals are averse to debt this is typically formulated on the basis of traditional debt patterns. These are typically found in bank loans, mortgages and credit cards where the borrowed amount of money plus interest has to be repaid according to the need of the loan and the lender. With income-contingent loans the position is radically different as the risk has changed. The repayment profile is based on what the individual can pay at any point in their life, so insurance is provided against low income, sickness and unemployment as contributions will then not be paid. Similarly, as the amount repaid on an annual basis is set as percentage of income after graduation through the internal revenue system, it is

easily collected. The nature of the scheme places the risk on the state rather than the individual. It would appear from the Australian experience that the aversion to debt is not as significant with income-contingent loans as is claimed with debt generally.

There has been a number of stages to the HECS and associated funding developments.

- In 1988 when the scheme was launched it applied to all university places and the level of contribution was A\$2,300 and the income level that triggered the payback was A\$35,000.
- In 1993 the Government raised the basic contribution level to A\$2,600 and amended the income level back to A\$21,334 (Chapman and Ryan, 2003:7)
- In 1998, as a means of increasing the participation levels, the Howard Government allowed universities to recruit full-fee paying home students. These additional students had to be able to afford to pay for the cost of study.
- In 1999 the Howard Government, with its emphasis on free market economics, decided that the contribution level should change dependent on the course of study as some courses led to higher earning potential, the government introduced banded HECS. Band 1 included Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, Band 2 sciences and Business and Band 3 Law, Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Science. Each band could command a different fee level with Law and Medicine being the highest. This expansion of full-fee paying targets simply 'mopped up' the in-built over-recruitment forced on the system by the funding methodology in the first place.
- In 2005 the system was amended again although HECS was left unchanged. Universities were able to raise tuition fee levels by up to 25% to increase the number of full-fee paying students to 35% of their Commonwealth load. For the first time the full-fee paying students were able to secure an income-related HECS called FEEHelp and therefore not have to pay upfront. Most universities increased their fees by the full 25%, some by less and some not at all. The evidence to date is that this has not created a market place for fees. Although enrolments generally are 5% down there is no apparent correlation between fee level and impact on enrolment. The reasons for the decline in enrolments are many and varied, including the impact of 'full employment' and a technical skills shortage. The decline tended to be in groups other than school leavers, such as those with credit already seeking to move around the system, and adults who had not participated before. In 2005 28 HEIs increased their fees and 7 propose to do so for 2006.

The reason for the decline of applications from those with credit was that they would need to transfer from the protection of the previous HECS scheme to a possible open market. From 2009 all will be in the new system. Changes to the pattern of study are being observed which may impact on developments in the UK as the new regime gets underway. In Australia the following are being detected:

- An increasing trend of deferred entry. Now 10% of the age group defer entry directly from school (it was 4% in 2000). Until recently young people have been encouraged to defer entry by the availability of 'AUS study', which means that after 2 year's work the student get independent status and is not regarded as a dependent for financial purposes.

- Demand for dual degrees, i.e. vocational degree plus arts, perhaps studied over 5 years
- Severe competition to get on the most favoured courses.

Further anticipated responses, which have been noted, are:

- Fewer students pursuing honours degrees
- Smaller demand for post-graduate courses but a significant extra demand for CPD[AU13], i.e. short professional courses
- Greater demand for distance learning or hybrid learning (e.g. through the type of Open U[AU14]niversity provision developed by University of Southern Q[AU15]ueensland)
- Current cap on personal debt is A\$50000 and concern that this may have to be lifted. Significant concerns have been raised about the future impact on the economy resulting from significant debt built up by young people in their 20's e.g. on home ownership, access to private finance, future capacity to save for retirement and children's education.

The evidence from the research into HECS and participation demonstrates that whilst there have been changes in participation levels, particularly for the middle-income earners and women in general (Chapman and Ryan, 2003), and growth in the sector HECS has not deterred individuals from any particular group in society. However, the recruitment from low socio-economic groups has stood up well, although not increased as required. Currently participation is 15% against representation of 25% in the population.

The research by Andrews (1999) looks at different mechanisms of exploring the relationship of participation and cost. It looks at the surveys of intentions and views of the loan amongst young people. This is similar to Callender's work in the UK (2003) but crucially Andrews is also able to look at those participating in higher education as opposed to predicting the possible impact[AU16] on students.

The student-funding scheme provides considerable flexibility as students have an entitlement through HECS once they are admitted. As a means of ensuring greater completion rates limits have now been placed on the length of time students can have to complete their degree. Students now have seven years of funding in which to complete the degree, demonstrating the increased flexibility to take more time than in the UK. It also allows students the opportunity to complete two degrees on a funded basis. Rurally-isolated groups, for example, have particular difficulties with the costs of higher education as travel to the city and accommodation are additional factors on top of their fees that they have to consider. There is now help with the cost of accommodation for such students.

Concern in the UK about debt on leaving university remains high. In studies in Australia there are indications that on the fee rates in 1999 a male science graduate would be able to pay his HECS back within 9 years while a female science graduate would take 12 years (Chapman and Ryan, 2003). This highlights the gender inequalities in employment in the sciences but does suggest that repayment is not that significant an issue [AU17]for science graduates as their earning potential is much higher for graduates. However for Humanities and Social Science students where income is much lower, debt remains a difficulty. It is clear that students are making instrumental choices about their subjects in HE, with a decline in traditional arts-based subjects becoming evident.

Clearly, raising fees through the HECS scheme has been beneficial for institutions. Many institutions are able to grow and develop in ways that have not been possible for UK

institutions from the income received through the scheme. It is also the case that social equity in higher education does not seem to have been negatively affected by the introduction, or even the increase, in HECS.

Examples

Melbourne University offers Access Melbourne programmes which both provide financial support, through the University's own scholarship scheme, and pre-entry programmes to familiarise potential students with the University culture. The Access Melbourne scheme is a good example of what Universities could develop through the OFFA agreements. Melbourne University developed the scheme as part of their decision to expand full-fee paying places. Twenty five per cent of their HECS places will now go to under-represented groups and 200 of these students will be able to gain scholarships to study.

Victoria University offers a range of scholarships and support for its students on a low income, with dependent children, from indigenous communities or disabled students. As Victoria is a dual-sector institution, this means that students are eligible to receive support through their TAFE and into and through their HE. Victoria also offers scholarships for students wishing to study a semester at a university abroad to help with travel and living costs.

8. Universities and Outreach

Outreach activity with schools and in some cases community groups was a major feature of the equity programmes of all the universities that were visited. The programmes were typically aimed at targeting groups that are under-represented in higher education. The programmes primarily focus on aspiration-raising and attitudinal change among young people, predominantly in the mid-teenage years. The universities tended to have equity admission schemes in which the target groups were allocated a number of places as they performed well in the Tertiary Entrance scores. One significant difference between UK 'outreach' programmes and Australian programmes is that in Australia it is virtually unknown for universities to work together on outreach programmes. Most programmes are based around one university and partner schools, TAFE and community groups. Colleagues were surprised when the team described the partnership models that operate in the UK. In other words, the partnerships developed in Australia are about developing a supply chain, or, if supply is not needed, a philanthropic concern, rather than jointly building capacity for higher education. Of course, despite partnership working in the UK, these same tendencies are evident in UK HEI marketing.

The programmes are based on a philosophy of recognising social differences and inequalities and that the biggest determinant of whether young people participated in higher education was whether their parents had participated. There is therefore a recognition that opportunities needed to be created to establish a more level playing field. The evidence appeared to demonstrate that as long as their admission was handled carefully and sensitively the students tended to be as successful as others.

There were also numerous examples of programmes aimed at taking higher education to the community, given the difficulties involved in rural participation. One of the key issues facing enhancing the engagement of ruraly-isolated groups was that, although HECS was not a deterrent, the actual costs of moving to where the HE was located were off-putting. Some of the issues relating to rural isolation though are very similar to aspects of certain types of urban development. These are often found in the margins of the city and have a traditional working-class community, often with growing numbers of refugees and a recent immigrant population. In such instances there is little movement to HE campuses given the absence of role models, traditions and a culture of engagement.

Examples

The Logan Campus of Griffith University is a new investment to support marginal communities in the city. Programmes have been designed that meet community needs. There is therefore a focus on programmes relating to Human Services and Education as these are often the type of professional that individuals will most commonly come across.

Logan is a town bordering the Brisbane suburbs. It is predominantly a 'blue collar' town with a large migrant population, a high number of refugees and relatively high unemployment. In order to develop an engagement with higher education Griffith focused on likely curriculum areas that would interest the community. So rather than a provider-led focus it moved to more of a demand and needs-led approach. The focus was on nurturing the local community rather than parachuting in and saying 'these are the courses we have'. Instead the focus was on developing courses that linked to the professions with which the community had most experience, with teachers and human services such as social workers, probation officers etc. The role models were easier to find and the roles understood. Logan now has 2,700 students of whom 60% are local.

Macquarie University offers a residential summer school programme for indigenous peoples at their campus in Sydney. Participants come from rural and isolated areas in the Northern Territory where there is no higher education presence and school resources are limited. The programme offers intensive learning support and subject specialist development. A key aim of the project is to develop the participants' abilities to survive in the city, which they may be visiting for the first time in their lives. There are two programmes, one for mature students and one for school-aged students.

Nearly all universities offer special entry programmes for indigenous students.

9. Learning, Teaching and the Student Experience

The Australian Government has proposed the development of a national scheme for the assessment of teaching performance.

Whilst there is still a period of consultation taking place, it would appear that the aim is to use quantitative measures without necessarily taking account of the context in which the university operates. Using indicators such as TER scores, retention rates normally reinforce the concepts of traditional higher education, ignoring the importance of value added within the learning process.

It was evident from the meetings that linkage between student recruitment patterns, learning and teaching and student retention was just beginning to be taken on board. The equity programmes have typically focused on 'getting students in' and, similar to some narrow views of widening participation in the UK, it is very different to the more favoured holistic approach developed within the student life cycle.

The withdrawal rates are significantly higher than those in the UK. However, this has to be recognised within the context of the typical study behaviour. Whilst many study consecutively from higher school and complete the degree within three years there are also large numbers who gradually move towards graduation. It is also important to note that students can enter higher education earlier than in the UK, which may well impact on the high levels of first-year drop out, (between 10 and 30 percent depending on the institution).

Examples

A wide range of peer-mentoring and voluntary programmes has been developed at the University of Southern Queensland to support student learning, which includes training and options to get credit at Queensland University of Technology (QUT). They have developed a model of student success predicated on three elements:

- A wellness programme (how to operate and sustain a work/life balance)
- Surviving as a student
- Academic success.

Targeted use of careers resources and excellent on-line material has produced a strategic[AU18] approach at QUT where student need can easily be targeted..

The YES programme (Youth Employment Strategy) at QUT provides pre-employment intensive training programmes for students from equity groups. The programme offers specific training in the link between study and employment and transition into employment, offering significant successes for groups who usually find it difficult to access graduate employment quickly.

The University of Southern Queensland has a unique focus and is a market leader in distance-learning degrees in having 75% of students on-line and all student services provided on-line. Student satisfaction levels are high.

The Student Experience

Working while studying is the norm in Australia, as in the UK now, 20 hours per week is reported as not uncommon. 70% of students were working more than 10 hours per week in one of the most prestigious universities and an AVCC report concluded that students worked an average of 14.5 hours per week (32.8 if part-time). One university reported that

students spent on average just 3 hours per week on-campus outside of their academic timetable.

As in the UK there is a problem of student poverty. As students tend to study close to home, they tend to live at home in their first year. Beyond that there is a tendency to live in private accommodation in the city, rather than student accommodation. This accommodation is often poor and cramped and heads of student services reported grave concern about real student poverty in a country which a recent OECD investigation reported had one of the highest levels of inequality in the distribution of income among developed countries.⁷ However there is no evidence that this process has got worse because of HECS. Rather there has been a significant increase in the cost of housing in many cities as the economy has developed.

Examples

RMIT, a dual-sector technology institution Melbourne, provides student support services which offer an integrated support programme, including clear links between services so students in need can be tracked, and interventions planned, according to their whole needs. Particular attention is paid to supporting housing and personal living needs.

Flinders University in Adelaide has developed a substantial programme of induction, including pre-entry schools and study support. They have different schools for different age groups, as well as mentoring schemes led by the Students' Union for new students from under-represented groups as well as for mature students.

University of Southern Australia, also in Adelaide, provide student advisors with open access to students on a weekly basis. Students are seen immediately. They are given a 10-minute slot to outline their problem, and appropriate action, in the form of an action plan, is developed. Students are tracked to ensure that they have had some success in implementing their plans.

Queensland University of Technology has done excellent work in embedding support for disabled students which is achieved through "default mechanisms" in processes, and procedures, including self audit and peer audit of facilities and teaching practice in particular. IT facilities and pedagogy are audited. This makes complying with legislation easy but goes beyond compliance to provide a pro-active support package.

⁷ The Australian 29 March 2005

10. Comparison between UK and Australia

- Australia has always been a step ahead of the UK in implementing fee policy changes. It is likely that before 2009⁸ the UK will experience full or part deregulation as Australia has so there are already lessons to learn
- UK universities appear to have taken a more strategic approach to equity issues and the raising of fees, e.g. there is no history of tri -partite partnerships or of significant funding for equity initiatives
- In Australia there is a conservative approach to the secondary curriculum which puts greater emphasis on university preparation (matriculation) than on readiness for appropriate higher level vocational courses. The UK is tackling this through 14-19 curriculum reforms
- The drop out at Year 12 (school leavers) at 25.4 % (2002) is similar to in the UK and gender and participation issues are similar
- Bilateral relationships with schools in areas of low participation, mostly but not entirely are with state schools. The most comprehensive scheme in the most prestigious university anticipates the types of responses we are likely to see in the UK following the introduction of variable fees and OFFA. That is places are offered to the highest achieving students in schools which may not normally be strong feeders for the institutions. There may or may not be an impact on social class, because of who the students might be.
- Student life-cycle models and holistic approaches to recruiting and supporting students are developing and the best are exceptionally good, but this is not a widespread approach and is quite new in some areas. Retention is only just being recognised as a significant issue requiring institution-wide strategies, and there is no additional funding to support initiatives which support students
- In terms of market positioning there is no compelling evidence that domestic students in Australia perceive a correlation between price (higher fees) and quality⁹
- Over the longer term it looks as if HECS increased demand over the 1990s, and equity measures that concentrated on disabled and Aboriginal access have been successful. Successive fees measures overall have had a minimal effect on current participation by low SES[AU21], but improvement in the participation of these groups has not occurred. Evidence suggests this is not due to a fear of debt, but rather to other factors. However there is now concern amongst senior managers in HEIs about the impact of the deregulation of fees, although these are uncharted waters.

⁸ THES April 1st 2005

⁹ QUT submission - Equity Board's Working Party on Nelson Reforms, January 2004

11. Conclusions

There are clear lessons to be learned from Australia, particularly in relation to their development of income-contingent charging for fees and their conceptualisation of social equity being an important part of developing Australian higher education for the 21st century.

Universities in Australia are much more entrepreneurial than in the UK, having lived with fees for all their provision for many years now. Their work in the international market is also substantial and universities are overall much more market-focused than UK universities have been, and there are lessons to be learned from Australia, especially as we move into a much more competitive climate.

The change in government flavour from Labour to Conservative has had an impact on equity and universities are now more concerned, through government policy, to develop their brand position within the market place than ever before. The importance of international markets for all universities has increased, providing other sources of income apart from government. However all universities remain committed to social equity and see it as an important part of their mission, whatever type of institution they are. The long-term future of equity is difficult to predict but has to lie in universities' need to recruit students as well as in the need to address the secondary school curriculum and TAFE articulation arrangements.

The development of income-contingent fees happened[AU22] alongside the social equity agenda and considerable progress has been made in many areas of under-representation. However the difficulties of recruitment from lower socio-economic groups have not as yet been solved and while many of the programmes to support working-class communities are excellent, it is now the case that work being undertaken in the UK could offer new possibilities for Australian universities, rather than the other way round which had been the case 10 years ago.

Where equity targets have been reached these are to be commended. However the issue of people from lower socio-economic status backgrounds (LSES) remains a problem. Research indicates that school attainment and aspiration remain the key factors which inhibit taking up a university place for these groups, and while Australian universities do considerable work to encourage participation, there is still more to be done. Whether this is by supporting developments in schooling as is developing in the UK, or whether it is through more partnership-working between universities, as in programmes such as AimHigher, it is difficult to say, but more work needs to be done in a holistic way with school age children from LSES groups.

UK universities have been developing excellent programmes for student success and while there is good practice in Australia, overall Australia has a lot to learn from the UK.

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Universities Visited

University of Southern Queensland

Queensland University of Technology

Griffith University

Melbourne University

Victoria University

Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT)

University of Sydney

Macquarie University

University of Western Sydney

Flinders University

University of Southern Australia

University of Western Australia

Australian National University

Department for Education Science and Training (DEST)

Notes
