Equity, status and freedom: A note on higher education

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Strategies to enhance socio-economic equity in higher education embody one or both of two objectives. The first strategy is to advance ‘fairness’ by changing the composition of participation, bringing higher education into line with the ideal model of a socially representative system. The second strategy advances ‘inclusion’ by broadening the access and completion of under-represented groups. Governments often focus on both objectives. For example current Australian policy mentions both objectives while giving priority to fairness. But as Amartya Sen notes, the two approaches embody heterogeneous traditions of social justice. They also have diverging implications for freedom, and for social status in education (the ‘elephant in the room’). The utopian fairness approach emphasises the proper functioning of institutions. The realist inclusion approach emphasises the agency of those excluded. OECD country experience suggests that while measures of fairness provide useful information, a programmatic focus on enhanced inclusion is both more achievable and more fruitful.

Keywords: higher education, policy, socioeconomic background, widening participation

Introduction

Over time most nations have experienced significant growth in participation in higher education, both in the school leaver age group and in the population as a whole. There are annual fluctuations in participation rates, but the generalisation holds for longer time spans such as fifty years, thirty years or ten years, as comparative international data show (OECD, 2009; UNESCO, 2010). But has socio-economic equity in higher education advanced, concurrent with the growth of participation?

Social research generates two conflicting answers. These answers are governed by differing assumptions at the base of the research, assumptions that reflect different objectives in policy programs. The most recent review of equity policies in higher education by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2008) draws attention to this binary in policy-making and policy research.

One body of programs and evaluations focuses on growth in the *absolute number* of people from hitherto under-represented socio-economic groups, as defined in terms of income measures or social or occupational status (hereafter referred to as social groups), and the shrinking periphery of those excluded from higher education. It answers 'Yes, social equity has improved. The excluded have become present in greater numbers and so higher education has become more inclusive'. The other body of programs and evaluations focuses on the *proportional distribution of student places* (or graduations) between social groups, ranked in a hierarchy of social advantage. It is difficult to increase the proportion of students from hitherto excluded social groups, because this would involves some displacement of persons from the ranks of social layers more securely lodged in education institutions and with greater political resources than those who are under-represented. If research finds that there has been little or no increase in the proportion of higher education students drawn from the lower reaches of society, as is mostly the case, it answers 'No, social equity has not improved. Higher education is no more fair than it was before'. This was the thrust of the 1985 OECD review of equity in higher education. In that report the main definition of equity used by the OECD related to proportional distribution between social groups. In its 2008 review of equity in higher education the OECD again placed the main emphasis on fairness, but gave more weight to inclusion than it did in 1985. It concluded that the outcomes of equity programmes had been mixed.

Equity policy has succeeded. Equity policy has failed. The contrast could not be greater. Which is right, and is there a potential resolution of the tension between them? There is much at stake in this. The equitable provision of social opportunity is generally seen as a central function of modern systems of education. If equity programs have been a consistent failure a large amount of money has been wasted.

The first section of the paper explores the tension in policy between these two notions of social equity in higher education, equity as fairness and equity as inclusion. The next section of the paper considers the respective philosophical traditions on which fairness and inclusion are based. The paper then brings equity into conjunction with two other dimensions that contextualise equity policy. The first dimension is freedom, which is used as the regulative value for judging the different equity strategies. The second dimension is a brute (but also highly explanatory) fact largely unacknowledged in equity policy—the role of social status in higher education. The conclusion summarises an approach to policy on social equity in higher education in which the main emphasis is placed on inclusion and the agency of the hitherto excluded, rather than on fairness and the agency of institutions.

The tension in equity policy

Typically, in programs designed to enhance social equity in higher education, both methods of valuation of equity are on the agenda. The expansion of inclusion is seen as both a means to progress fairness, because it is easier to move relative shares around in a period of overall growth, and also as an end in its own right, though the apparently dull incremental objective of inclusion often takes second place to the Robin Hood challenge of social redistribution embodied in the fairness goal.

In *Tertiary Education for the Knowledge Society* (2008), the OECD explains this definition of equity in terms of fairness. The ideal tertiary education system is one in which 'educational potential at tertiary level' is unaffected by any form of social group membership, i.e. the student population is statistically representative of the population as a whole:

> Equitable tertiary systems are those that ensure that access to, participation in and outcomes of tertiary education are based only on individuals' innate ability and study effort. They ensure that educational potential at tertiary level is not the result of personal

> and social circumstances, including of factors such as socioeconomic status, gender, ethnic origin, immigrant status, place of residence, age, or disability.
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> Up until recently, research studies seemed to indicate that expansion had not significantly reduced social class inequalities in access to tertiary education. Shavit and Blossfeld (1993), analysing the relative chances of different social groups attaining a specific education level in 13 countries, conclude that only two countries – the Netherlands and Sweden – achieved a significant equalisation among socio-economic groups. Other studies which concluded that class inequalities in access to tertiary education have remained relatively stable in recent decades include Halsey (1993) for the British case and Kivinen et al. (2001) for the Finnish case (OECD, 2008, p. 14 & p. 18).

The emphasis on fairness is consistent with the long OECD study of social equity in access (Husen, 1985; OECD 1985). Yet the OECD also notes the alternate interpretation of equity. It cites Clancy and Goastellec (2007) who state that 'it is necessary to take account of changes both in relative and absolute levels of participation of disadvantaged groups (rather than concentrating exclusively on relative changes)… "absolute changes point to the significance of improvement in participation of any particular group irrespective of how other groups have fared."' Also, the OECD cites Shavit and colleagues (2007) who find that 'when inequality in an expanding system is stable rather than increasing, the system should be considered as increasingly inclusive because it allows larger proportions of all social strata to attend' (OECD, 2008, p. 18).

This ambiguity of equity policy in higher education, with its characteristic mix of success/failure, is often structured into government reform programs themselves. Typically, government-driven equity programs foster higher overall participation and the enhanced participation of under-represented groups, while at the same time defining themselves primarily in terms of the goal of enhanced distributional fairness. They succeed in the means, but fail in the primary end that they seek—unless the means, the enhancement of social inclusion, becomes redefined as the primary end.

A recent example is the Australian government. In March 2009 the Australian education minister and Deputy Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, announced a new policy

on higher education. The centrepiece was a renewed emphasis on social equity. The government announced two system-wide targets. One was specifically directed towards better inclusion, the other sought better fairness. The first target stated that by the year 2025, 40 per cent of all 25-34 year old Australians would have a qualification at three-year bachelor degree level or above. The level in 2009 was 32 per cent. The second target stated that by the year 2020, 20 per cent of all students in higher education[1] would be drawn from the lowest socio-economic status (SES) category, defined as the bottom population quartile (25 per cent). When the target was issued the level of participation by bottom quartile students was 16 per cent (Gillard, 2009a). The government also supported the two targets with policy initiatives. It announced a new system of 'demand-driven' funding whereby it would subsidize all local students admitted by institutions, without a fiscal ceiling. This would facilitate the growth of participation. It also announced a system of performance-based funding whereby institutions would receive additional monies to support programs designed to enhance social equity, defined in terms of enhanced low SES enrolment (Gillard, 2009b).

The fairness target was thus given priority over the inclusion target, in that the fairness target was meant to be achieved five years earlier. Likewise in the policy announcement, the hard edge was the statement about equity as fairness. It seemed the institutions needed little persuasion about the need to expand to meet social demand, but much persuasion on fairness. The government pointed to the fact that there had been little change in the share of places held by the bottom quartile during the previous 12 years. 'Every higher education institution must play its part', said the minister. 'Our elite institutions have by far the lowest proportion of low socio-economic status enrolments. While uniformity will never be possible or desirable,

every institution should be able to improve its social inclusiveness' (Gillard, 2009a)—in this instance 'inclusiveness' actually referred to 'fairness'.

No doubt, if this Australian policy is implemented as intended, the results are predictable. As participation in higher education grows the number of persons from the bottom quartile will expand. Social inclusion will be enhanced. And if the map of higher education institutions stays the same,[2] if there are no concurrent changes that would weaken the hold of existing social users of the system, and if the measures are constant over time, there will be only modest change – and perhaps no change at all - in students from the bottom quartile as a proportion of all higher education students. The system will be little or no more fair than before. The 20 per cent target will not be met. Regardless of the fact that the absolute level of participation of low SES groups has expanded, this outcome will be seen as a 'failure' of equity policy, primarily judged as it is in terms of fairness. No doubt the chief villains will be the universities, that refused to 'play their part'. No doubt also the failure of this prolonged effort to secure fairness will be followed by a slackening of support for measures to strengthen the position of the disadvantaged, as happened in Australia in the 1980s after the 1970s educational egalitarianism was seen to fail (Marginson, 1997a; 1997b). In that case efforts to enhance not just proportional fairness but also social inclusion will fall away.

Is this ritualistic cycle inevitable? Is equity policy in higher education doomed to be a domain of perpetual unachievement, in which equity programs are periodically tried and periodically fall away again? The fact that advances in relative share are hardly achieved, and rarely last historically, in all international higher education systems—despite significant variations in the configuration of those systems (e.g. overall participation rates, the degree of vertical stratification between institutions),

and despite the wide international diversity in social equity according to measures such as gini coefficients, wage stratification, the incidence of social welfare and so on—ought to be food for thought. Are modern mass universities really doomed to be like mediaeval fortresses, with the peasants always locked outside their gates? Is there an explanation for this long litany of 'failure' other than the recalcitrant 'unfairness' of institutions?

But should fairness be the dominant goal of equity policy? Is the normative construction of higher education as a model of social composition the best way to empower those excluded from higher education? Does the recurring failure to deliver on fairness, thus defined, empower or depower those who miss out? Might we reconsider the grounds on which orthodox equity policies are built, with a view to rendering those policies more coherent? And more potent in transformation?

It will be argued here that despite its normative potency as an idea of justice, and despite its apparent clarity of measurement, the primacy of the fairness objective is misplaced. Instead priority should be given to inclusion. There are two reasons for this. One reason is the raw difficulty of achieving fairness—utopian policies that are neither achieved, nor sustain a long-term dynamic of transformation that moves systems in the desired direction, are of limited value. They absorb energies better used elsewhere. The other reason is that the inclusion objective typically brings with it a generative set of practices, as the OECD (2008) review notes. Inclusion policies and strategies typically move beyond changing the terms of social competition (the objective of fairness policies) to focus on strengthening the human agency of persons hitherto excluded. While the fairness objective seems more challenging and transformative because it appears to essay a frontal assault on privilege, it typically remains largely confined to the realm of macro political symbols. Fair competition

has no necessary implications for transforming human motivations and behaviours. But the enhancement of equity can only succeed when manifest in behavioural change. The important point is that these patterns are no accident—the difference, in practices associated with fairness and inclusion, is not merely conjunctural but derives from a long-standing divergence in notions of social justice, between the philosophical traditions underlying the respective claims of equity as fairness and equity as inclusion. This essential philosophical divergence will now be examined.

Ideas matter. Theories of justice affect policy. There is a close correspondence between two pairs here—on one hand the two heterogeneous objectives of fairness and inclusion in equity policy and programmes; on the other hand two differing traditions in the evolution of ideas of social justice. To ground this correspondence empirically to the satisfaction of all would require more space than the article format allows, but the signs of correspondence that are reviewed here are suggestive.

Dual traditions of social justice

In *The Idea of Justice* (2009) Amartya Sen outlines two distinctive traditions of justice, each of which was brought to fruition in the European Enlightenment. The first and on the whole dominant tradition, associated with a hypothetical social contract, is pursued by Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant, and by John Rawls in the current era. It is concerned to identify what purely just social arrangements might be, including the laws, systems and institutions. (The example relevant to the current discussion is the ideal higher education system representative of the balance of social groups in the general population). This approach to justice, which Sen calls 'transcendent institutionalism' (p. 5), is inescapably utopian. It is interested in fashioning ideal models rather than comparing different imperfect real life situations. Sen remarks on the long list of institutional and

systemic models intended to generate automatically fair outcomes without intervening at the level of behavioural change (for example, the neo-liberal idea of higher education as a pure economic market). 'None of these grand institutional formulae typically deliver what their visionary advocates hope', he remarks. 'Their actual success… is thoroughly contingent on varying social, economic, political and cultural circumstances' (p. 83). But in this 'totalist' approach to justice, 'incompleteness tends to appear as failure' (p. 103). (As in the recurring statements about the failure of higher education to replicate the composition of society. Given the social composition of those excluded, higher education could only 'succeed' in this respect if the participation rate reached 100 per cent).

In *A Theory of Justice* (1971) Rawls sets out to carry the idea of the social contract to 'a higher level of abstraction' (p. 10). His core notion of justice is fairness, and the means of advancing fairness is the perfection of institutions and processes. Institutions and rules should avoid bias and avoid being influenced by the vested interests of institutions or rule maker. (This notion of fairness appeals to governments. They treat institutions such as universities as self-interested, while managing to see themselves as neutral or if necessary, representative of an abstract public interest or taxpayer interest, rather than having a distinctive interest of their own). It is assumed that when institutions are reformed, the appropriate human behaviours will follow. Rawls also argued that inequalities can only be justified if they are contestable, that is, there is equality of opportunity; and these inequalities must be of greatest benefit to the least advantaged persons (Sen, 2009, p. 54 & p. 59). This emphasis on just procedures and systems, not the contents of justice or power of human agents, parallels the dominant liberal notion of freedom, that of negative freedom, whereby

freedom is understood primarily in terms of procedural conditions[3] rather than the self-determining power of human agents able to achieve their objectives.

The second tradition of justice is pursued among others by Adam Smith, the Marquis de Condorcet, Mary Wollstonecraft, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx. Sen calls it 'realisation-focused comparison' (pp. 6-7). This tradition is realist rather than utopian. It is concerned with 'social realisations', i.e. with actual human behaviours and the achievement of justice in real situations; with comparisons between different instances of justice/injustice, and different conceptions of justice; and with weighing different partly just outcomes against each other, so as to make difficult but necessary decisions about competing claims and priorities. These thinkers acknowledge that justice is inescapably plural and interest-bound. The medium for comparing and sorting the various conceptions of justice is open public reasoning. The fostering of the capacities of human agents, particularly of victims of injustice, has a key role to play in the advance of justice. (In relation to the present discussion, this approach to justice suggests emphasis on the role of higher education—not so much as a place where perfectly just arrangements should be devised, as a place where human agents should be included, and their capacities developed, including the capacity for public reason). Sen aligns himself with this second camp, arguing that:

> A theory of justice that can serve as the basis of practical reasoning must include ways of judging how to reduce injustice and advance justice, rather than aiming only at the characterization of perfectly just societies… [Moreover] there are some crucial inadequacies in this overpowering concentration on institutions (where behaviour is assumed to be appropriately compliant), rather than on the lives that people are able to lead (Sen, 2009, p. ix & p. xi).
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> … Importance must be attached to the starting point, in particular the selection of some questions to be advanced (for example, "how would justice be advanced?"), rather than others (for example, "what would be perfectly just institutions?") (Sen, 2009, p. 9).
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> If a theory of justice is to guide reasoned choice of policies, strategies or institutions, then the identification of fully just social arrangements is neither necessary nor sufficient… we have to seek institutions that promote justice, rather than treating the institutions as themselves manifestations of justice, which would reflect a kind of institutionally fundamentalist view (Sen, 2009, p. 15 & p. 82).

The larger setting: equity, status and freedom

Whichever approach to equity is preferred, the ultimate rationale of any strategy for the enhancement of social equity, in higher education and other sectors, is its potential to advance human freedoms. Freedom is the regulative value in this discussion. The implications for freedom of the two primary approaches to equity are now considered. Here Amartya Sen's conception of three aspects or forms of freedom is helpful.

Further, when applying the alternative conceptions of equity/freedom to higher education, with a view to realisation, it becomes essential to consider the larger social setting. To the extent the literature concerning fairness in higher education acknowledges social factors, the discussion is mostly focused on institutional policies and operations, structural relations between institutions within a system, and perhaps the financial elements seen to structure student participation (e.g. Bradley, 2008). The missing element is the production of social status in and through higher education, which has profound implications for equity. These are also now considered.

Freedoms

Sen distinguishes three aspects of freedom: 'agency freedom'; 'freedom as power', which approximates the better known notion of positive freedom; and 'freedom as control', or negative freedom. The argument will be briefly summarised.[4] The self-determining person is constituted by a combination of agency freedom and freedom as power. Freedom requires an independent agent with an identity and a will to act on her/his own behalf (agency freedom). The agent must have the capacity and power to act, including the resources and capabilities to do so, such as educated capabilities (freedom as power). Freedom as power incorporates the orthodox liberal notion of freedom from constraint or negative freedom, which Sen calls freedom as control.

In *Well-being, Agency and Freedom: The Dewey Lectures 1984* Sen (1985) remarks that the perspectives of 'well-being' and 'agency' each yield distinct notions

of freedom (p. 169). The notion of well-being suggests a choice-making individual but it does not necessarily imply an active or interactive individual. The notion of agency suggests an intrinsically active and proactive human will. In the well-being perspective the person is seen as a beneficiary whose interests and advantages have to be considered. In the agency perspective, a person is seen as a doer and a judge. These two notions of freedom have different implications for goals and valuations. As Sen puts it, 'the well-being aspect of a person is important in assessing a person's *advantage*, whereas the agency aspect is important in assessing what a person can do in line with his or her conception of *the good*. The ability to do more good need not be to the person's advantage' (p. 206).[5] The example he gives is that of the person who chooses solidarity with the interests or needs of another despite an inconvenience to herself/himself. Sen notes that in the last 150 years the perspective of well-being has occupied more attention than that of agency, signifying the impact of utilitarianism and of neo-classical economics. Nevertheless, well-being alone is insufficient to serve as the foundation of identity. Agency is at the core of concepts of self. Notions of autonomy, personal liberty, dignity and 'who one is' relate to this special role of agency, which goes well beyond considerations of well-being or utility.

When discussing freedom as power, Sen distinguishes power from control. 'A person's freedom may well be assessed in terms of the power to achieve chosen results: whether the person is free to achieve one outcome or another'. This element of freedom, called 'effective power … is not really concerned with the mechanisms and procedures of control'. It does not matter how the choices are enacted. 'In contrast, a person's freedom may be assessed in terms of whether the person is herself or himself exercising control over the process of choice'(Sen, 1985, pp. 208-209). In liberal political philosophy the control element receives most attention. But, argues

Sen, while control, particularly in the form of freedom from constraint, is important in many contexts, the power element cannot be neglected in any adequate formulation of liberty. Agency freedom requires conditions that permit and support its exercise. Freedom as power invokes the larger relational setting in which agency freedom is practiced, including social, political and economic opportunities and resources—such as higher education. Sen notes a 'deep complementarily' between individual agency and the social setting, one that is integral to self-determination. In higher education, the social setting includes the time, money and other 'capabilities' needed to practice agency freedom. Such capabilities are distributed unequally, shaping the uneven landscape of agency freedom worldwide (Sen, 1985, p. 212; Sen, 1999).

Sen's argument underlines the potential of higher education in expanding freedoms for those included, not so much for its potential to advance freedom as control but for the augmentation of agency freedom, and especially freedom as power, through learning, knowledge and credentialing. It also draws attention to the need for all three of agency freedom, freedom as control and especially freedom of power, if persons formerly excluded are to gain access and sustain effective presence within higher education. This suggests that integral to a politics of equity is the need to build effective agency in people from groups formerly excluded or under-represented.

Here a focus on equity as fairness provides little intrinsic guidance. It emphasises the responsibility of institutions to facilitate access and completion, as if simply opening the gates of privilege is enough. There can be no democratisation without democratic agents. But fairness strategies are less focused on measures that would directly strengthen the agency and freedom of power (in Sen's sense) of excluded persons, enhancing their confidence to push through the barriers and their capacity to stay the course and benefit from higher education. Instead fairness

strategies focus on purifying the mechanisms of fair competition, especially at the point of entry into first degrees. But this neglects the fact that individual agents have an unequal capacity to compete. The key is to build capacity in the excluded so they can make and use opportunities for themselves. Unless capacity is built from below, the 'reformed' system will spring back to type, reverting to the earlier distribution.

Alternately, the fairness approach points towards interventions in institutional process to provide positive discrimination in favour of those otherwise excluded—but this act of 'over-selection' leaves the beneficiaries vulnerable to claims they are charity cases without merit, undeserving of entry, the agents of a reverse injustice. This paves the way for the rolling back of positive discrimination measures which again has the outcome of restoring the original injustice (e.g. see Pusser 2004).

The problem of realising equity as fairness is that there is no possible practice of disinterested universal fairness, except in the ideal world of Rawls' imagining. There is only the imperfect social equity achieved by real people in real institutions, and the how of doing that is the primary issue of practical policy making here.

In contrast, a focus on equity as inclusion has three direct implications. First, persons and institutions in higher education require the freedom to shape and pursue differing approaches to the reduction of injustice. Though a core of universal human rights, including the right to education and knowledge, is integral to social justice, one-size-fits-all equity policy is unlikely to be optimal in higher education. Second, when persons formerly excluded or under-represented are empowered and resourced, they become their own best advocates and drivers of participation. Third, the excluded must become included not just at a small number of structural portals, but at all points and in all zones where agency and the capacity for higher education are formed: schools and other education institutions; communities, families and the public debate;

policy on student financial support; all the potential routes whereby student enter or can enter and move through higher education. Structural entry levels and improved completion rates are seen as one facet of a continuous program of engagement to enhance social equity in participation, not a substitute for such a program.

Status

Higher education institutions, especially research universities, are instruments in the creation and reproduction of social status. As Hirsch (1976), Frank (1985) and others suggest, status is also a primary currency and a differentiating factor in higher education. Leading universities attract leading students and high achieving staff in an on-going process of status exchange. The universities draw institutional status from the presence of these valued persons, and apply individual status back to them. Much of what economics calls ‘human capital’ derives from the credentialing power of degrees in the labour market. The higher the status of the institution, the larger the human capital of its graduates, irrespective of what is learned. It is often remarked that status is more important to universities than money. For commercial firms the financial bottom-line is the end in itself. For universities money is a mechanism for securing prestige. Institutions are ranked, informally and formally, according to the status hierarchy. Rankings feed back into their status positions. Knowledge is ordered according to the status of universities that produce it and in continuous judgements about relative position in systems of research publication and valuation. Here the countervailing force to status is not state-driven equity, but the ‘flat’ dissemination of ideas and knowledge in open-source networks, which continually undercuts the formation of status hierarchies within knowledge itself, even while leaving intact the uneven power of universities, national systems and disciplines (Marginson, 2009).

This ubiquity of status in higher education is a formidable challenge to equity policy. All equity policies are premised on the notion of equality of respect, which is intrinsic to modernity and sets itself against all claims for permanent status of the aristocratic kind. Yet in the modern era status hierarchies in higher education have proven to be highly stable, more permanent than any aristocrat. And the old role of status is renewed continually by quasi-market competition, and individual and of institutional investments in relative advantage through education. It is doubtful if the dominant policy notion of higher education as an engine for the macro-economy is fully compatible with equality of respect of all persons. An instrumental policy such as utilitarianism can unite the pursuit of private benefit with the macro-economy, but tends to debar all other kinds of public goods from consideration (Taylor, 1988, p. 340). There is more to equality of respect than rights of market entry.

The status hierarchy of institutions is a profound obstacle to the achievement of policies in which equity is defined as fairness and the pure goal is accurate social representation. Participation in a low status institution is not the same as participation in a high status institution. Fairness could only be achieved when the ideal social competition is replicated in institutions at each level of the hierarchy. But all over the world, elite institutions are dominated by students from advantaged social backgrounds. As Pierre Bourdieu (1988) explains, these institutions are golden pathways to the sought-after professions and create privileged networks. While entry into leading institutions can be loosened, enabling some pluralisation, to prise these institutions altogether away from the grip of the social elite would require nothing less than a revolution. It is naïve to suppose that the actions of the institutions alone could achieve the ideal fairness. These institutions do not operate in a social vacuum. Much more than institutional practice is in the way. And few research-intensive universities

are likely to divest themselves of the status benefits they secure from leading families. To do so is to contradict their *raison d'etre*, their own engine of status. Governments that define targets for equity as fairness know all of this. Policies intended to reduce the share of places held by the socially privileged are tilted not at institutions but at the heart of social status. This means it is certain that those policies will fail. But no democratic politician commits electoral suicide in a frontal conflict with social privilege in education. The symbolic politics of targets and feints at justice are much safer and earn easy populist points. The trick here is to impose a frame of reference in which responsibility for social outcomes can be transferred from government to autonomous institutions which can then be blamed for failing to 'play their part'.

Certain governments, such as the Australian government, further blur the equity issue by pretending status does not exist. All universities with at least some research activity are ranked as nominally equivalent and funded and administered accordingly, as if their missions are identical. All government formulae are applied on a uniform basis. Status is the 'elephant in the room'. No one can talk about it—even though everyone knows is there, and that it matters. By becoming status blind, the government can re-represent participation in all institutions as equivalent—regardless of the real social power of participation in different kinds of institution—using aggregate targets such as 20 per cent of all enrolments. It sidesteps the question of the status (or quality) of particular student places. Thus the government may buy marginal progress towards its fairness target and avoid a costly political confrontation, while the disadvantaged are mostly fobbed off with places in least valued institutions. Some inclusion is always better than no participation. But inclusion at the bottom level only becomes turned into an advance in 'fairness' by suppressing the meaning of differences in participation, and disguising the means whereby actual social advantage

and disadvantage are reproduced. The motors of status in private wealth, schooling and the labour markets are left outside policy, especially in a neo-liberal era.

These manoeuvres blunt the momentum for social change of an egalitarian kind in education, whether it is to be achieved through a genuine social redistribution to create fairness, or through the advance of inclusion and the empowerment of the excluded. There is little gain for equity and freedom in all of this.

Status blindness also has an unintended cost. In all higher education systems, only some institutions are top flight research universities. Intellectual discovery is not a universal good. It is episodic and localised. Knowledge production is typically concentrated, so that stellar research is confined to certain centres. In part it is because there is an absolute shortage of cutting edge ideas, while intellectual synergies are maximized as scale expands. In part it is because when knowledge production takes institutional form it is inevitably governed by a status logic. Unevenness in research performance is inevitable, if not necessary to creativity itself. At the same time, the research role of the strongest research universities enhances their status in first degrees and magnifies their selectivity. This fact taken in isolation would suggest that fairness is enhanced by spreading that research role across the whole system. But in a global knowledge economy high research performance is not solely a marker of status (though it is used as that). To deconstruct the strong research institutions is to weaken the research effort. No government attempts it. Nevertheless the official blindness towards status has the same effect, at a lesser level. Basic curiosity-driven research is a public good in the economic sense (Stiglitz, 1999), dependent on state or philanthropic support. By refusing to recognise the special research role of certain institutions, and denying it the public funding needed to fully sustain that role—the

denial being dictated by the notion of equity as fairness, with fairness determined by institutional arrangements—governments undermine national research outcomes.

Not all governments do this. The Australian government does. It refuses to provide sufficient funding to support research-intensive activity. Except at the Australian National University, on grounds of fairness it applies the same mission definition and one-size-fits-all funding formula to all institutions, regardless of their research capacity. The Australian research-intensive sector remains socially elite with little change in the fairness settings, but the misplaced application of the fairness model retards research objectives that are unrelated to the issue of social equity (Gallagher, 2009, pp. 15-18). This is the worst of all the possible outcomes. This kind of policy dilemma affects all three of the Westminster systems of Australia, New Zealand and the UK to some degree, though until the 2010 cuts were announced the UK had manage to sustained research, against the grain. It is interesting to note that the Scandinavian nations are not caught in the same bind, despite their more egalitarian polities. In these nations social equity is a more important organising principle than in the English-speaking world, but Scandinavia freely tolerates research concentrations, such as the University of Helsinki in Finland, alongside high participation in generally good quality institutions. This is because in the Scandinavian countries the notion of equity is shaped in the first instance by policies of inclusion and educational empowerment, prior to abstract fairness. These systems sustain research concentrations alongside a vigorous social agenda. The primary definition of equity as inclusion enables a more grounded and multiple policy.

A note on the global dimension

A complicating factor in national equity policy is that some countries enrol many international students relative to the local population, for example Australia, the UK,

New Zealand, Germany and France. These are not included in policy calculations of equity as fairness (Gale, 2009, 12). It is never suggested that higher education should model and replicate the socio-economic stratification of the world as a whole. Fairness policies are nation-bound (Sen, 2009, p. 71). The education export nations rarely research the social backgrounds of their international students, and address the needs of international students from poorer backgrounds only indirectly, through foreign aid. This leads to the odd situation where in countries such as Australia, where 27 per cent of all students were international in 2008 (DEEWR, 2010), fairness applies to just 73 per cent of the student population. Why should justice stop at the national border? In principle all considerations of equity should involve persons from across the border as a matter of course, to incorporate their interests, and to draw on their diverse perspectives on the means and ends of justice (Sen, 2009, p. 402).

It might seem that a definition of equity as inclusion would encourage a more cosmopolitan approach. If so this is not practised. For the purposes of regulation all education export nations treat mobile non-citizen students as outsiders rather than as temporary quasi-citizens. In Australia, there are 25 areas in which local students enjoy rights and entitlements superior to international students, from legal and financial rights, to health insurance costs, to transport concessions, some postgraduate research scholarships provided by universities, and more (Marginson, et al., 2010). But the question of international students and equity policy, and the tensions between national equity and global equity, require a further and extended treatment not possible here.

Concluding remarks

Expanding higher education systems sustain elite sub-systems at their core. These are largely closed. Symbolic fairness bests its wings against this closure in vain. The way

through the world of status in higher education, with its ancient overtones of the great chain of being, is labelled 'modernity' and 'continuing social transformation'.

The means of transformation are openness, inclusion, public transparency, and above all the power of human agents. Richer notions of freedom move beyond the exclusive focus on negative freedom in neo-liberalism, to imagine freedoms in terms of self-determining human agents with the power to act. Such agents can emerge from anywhere in society, notwithstanding the social hierarchy and the corresponding status hierarchy in higher education. The question is how to facilitate that democratic process of agent formation. Higher education is a principal means of making human capability but it requires a measure of prior agency in order to access its benefits.

No direct confrontation with structural unfairness in higher education has achieved lasting success, in any OECD nation. This is because social inequalities in education are organic to social relations and sustained from outside as well as inside regulated education systems, in the reproduction of families, classes, professions, wealth and political power. This suggests that it is more fruitful to map educational inequalities in detail, rather than in aggregate. This can facilitate strategies in pursuit of smaller changes at many points, rather than all points at once (and hence in none)—for example by identifying zones of high value participation for targeted intervention, and creating plural routes into those zones. Rather than pretending educational status is not there, or charging at it with symbolic sabres, equity policy should operate alongside and around status. In the process it can make status visible, critique it, and build the collective support needed for piecemeal, real and lasting changes to it. As Sen notes, an inclusion politics is one based on 'realisation-focused comparison'. It depends on public reason to nurture its weight and momentum.

In this context two kinds of comparative measures are helpful: measures of changes in participation and completion over time, by social group; and fairness measures that compare the norm of social representation with existing patterns. In other words, the norm of proportional fairness has a role in mapping the stratification of participation and status and of pinpointing strategic interventions.

Above all, equity as inclusion means fostering first generation participation in higher education by building aspirations, confidence and educational capabilities (Bowden & Doughney, 2010), from early childhood to higher education, and during the university experience itself (OECD, 2008, p. 50). The OECD notes (pp. 40-45) that under some circumstances financial incentives are crucial in encouraging first generation participation, though there is no universal law here. As for institutions, research universities can do more for equity as inclusion by donating personnel to augment the educational resources of schools in socially disadvantaged areas, supporting the advance of literacy, than by marginal adjustments to selection criteria, though loosening the structural barriers can create niches for agency to gain purchase. The inclusion approach also suggests the need to focus on the uses people (especially those who have been under-represented) make of higher education; what they learn, the effects in person formation and in labour market outcome; so as to devise reforms that will magnify those benefits and better draw participation. A politics of inclusion works when higher education is an instrument for advancing individual and social freedoms—and is known and deeply felt as such by the subjects of equity strategy.

When the goal is inclusion, each advance in the participation of persons from under-represented groups is a move forward, regardless of whether the participation of the middle class is also advanced. Instead of reprogramming the structural distribution in abstract, openly summoning the whole phalanx of privilege to its own

defence while looking for excluded human agents to include, it would seem better to foster self-forming human agents who will drive their own inclusion, while ferreting out localised spaces and diverse routes into and through the structures. When enough such agents are moving, the distribution of opportunities will take care of itself.

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Notes

[1] In Australia 'higher education' is confined to institutions offering three-year bachelor degree qualifications and requires formal designation. A small number of Vocational Education and Training (VET) institutions, not defined as higher education, offer degree programs alongside a much larger enrolment in one-year and two-year tertiary programs.
[2] One way the Australian government could appear to move closer to achieving its fairness target would be to designate lower status VET institutions as 'higher education'.
[3] See for example F.A. Hayek in *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960).
[4] For more detailed discussion see Sen (1985) and *Inequality Reexamined* (Sen, 1992).
[5] Emphasis in original.

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