

The future of student equity and higher education:
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What does the international picture tell us?

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Questions of social fairness (or equity), manifest as equality, never go away in higher education and can arise in any country of the world . They are as integral as (and just as problematic as) the other main theme of education policy, which is the role of education in economic futures. More fundamentally, the idea of *equality of respect* now commands universal support. Beginning in the late eighteenth century with the French and American revolutions, equality of respect, has moved to the core of modern societies all over the world. It is one of the marks of modernity.

The ultimate preoccupation of our culture, rightly I think, is with freedom, with human agency. With an expressive, self-determining individuality. We understand freedom as a universal right. But we vector freedom in varying ways in relation to the coordinates of private and public good. Different societies give varying levels of importance to the question of the collective conditions for the development of human capacities, and the role of government and the non market civil order in providing for that. Many of us in education have made enhancing those collective conditions, mostly in and through open public institutions, into our life's work. Amartya Sen provides a particularly compelling argument for why that orientation is essential to freedom. Others put their faith in the automatic mechanisms of competitive markets, or governmental formula designed to simulate markets.

But all sides agree without question on equality of respect, for all people, in the life of the world. To that extent we are all universal (and secular) humanists. Arguments about equality of respect pluck at everyone's heart, and are used by Friedmanites, and Hansonites, and Laborites, and feminists, and indigenous activists, and disabled activists, and socialists alike. They are essential to the way we use education and the way we organize and fund it. They are foundational to our ideas of universal rights to access and our opposition to all forms of privilege and discrimination in education, This is clear from examining the policy discourse of every OECD country and the reports of global agencies, from the World Bank to the UN family.

At the same time it is hard to reconcile ideas of equality of respect and universal justice, with other powerful ideas in the culture. Logically speaking, how can there be equality of respect or social equity in higher education, if it is seen as the domain of investment in private goods without regard to the position of other people, and the whole social picture? And is equality of respect compatible with the idea of education as an engine room for the economy? As Charles Taylor points out an instrumental policy, utilitarianism, can unite private benefit with the macro economy, but it debars all other kinds of ‘goods’ such as social equity from consideration.

So equality needs its advocates, always. Yet we can’t get too one-sided about it. ‘Equity’ is not the answer to everything – if it is, what is the question? – and all OECD (and other) governments face the problem of resolving policy conflicts. Not only does *absolute* equality cost too much, the pursuit of absolute equality within one national system is dysfunctional. A good example is the research university problem, in the era of the knowledge economy. Cutting edge research, by definition, is not a universally produced good. It is localised, specific, episodic and the product of intensive concentration of resources. Some of us have argued for building Australia’s research strength as an end in itself, not by giving to some universities at the expense of others, but yes, by creating some research concentrations without giving the same to every institution. But all too easily, this is read as an equity issue – not a research and knowledge issue, an equity issue – so that the argument for research concentration is represented as a grab for status, engineered inequality, greedy Go8 self-interest, and so on. Australia needs to find a way of building social equity *and* building research concentrations, like Finland, Denmark and Sweden have done very well – universalising participation, concentrating knowledge production, while broadly disseminating knowledge and its uses. At the moment, we are failing at *both* research concentration and social equity.

Last year, on the basis of 24 separate studies of national systems, the OECD reviewed social equity in higher education. It said that equity is becoming more important in OECD countries. Its definition is straightforward, though it begs questions about causes, remedies and obstacles. The OECD noted two dimensions to equity, *fairness* and *inclusion*. The second is easier to define and progress than the first. Fairness involves not just education itself, but access to labour markets. Equity can be fostered most effectively by policies in early childhood and compulsory education, including inter-

generational social mobility which is a key sign of equity as fairness. Fairness involves the question of how much education is a positional good or private benefit and how that good is distributed. But equality of respect is also advanced by inclusion and by treating education as a common good.

A key issue is the structure of secondary schooling. Highly segmented or tracked school systems, as in the countries influenced by German tradition, are bad for policies designed to lift tertiary equity and to lift the standard of achievement overall. In Australia the institutional segmentation into high status independent schools, medium status Catholic schools and government schools with mixed status but concentrated at the lower end, has something of the same negative impact. It is a form of institutional segmentation which parallels the educational segmentation in multiple track systems. All forms of segmentation tend to slow the growth of participation, especially those that concentrate low achievers. 'There is a large body of evidence that shows that students benefit from being exposed to able peers'. On the other hand, when there are multiple pathways into higher education, through more than type of track or institution, the negative effects can be modified. The OECD also recommends integration of planning in secondary and tertiary education, and better pathways between different tertiary institutions.

Expansion provides positive conditions for equity, especially inclusion, notes the OECD. The data suggest that in only two countries, the Netherlands and Sweden, has the expansion of tertiary education been accompanied by a reduction in inequalities by social class. The potential is there, but expansion is often stymied by stratification. Expansion and inclusion mainly happen in the lower tiers of national systems. Highly sought after private goods tend to remain scarce, elite universities stay elite. Diversification, sector segmentation and nuanced missions ring alarm bells for fairness, might advance inclusion, and can have non-equity benefits. In many nations in Europe, the main equity issue is fairness and inclusion for non traditional immigrant populations. Here Australia has a better record than most OECD countries. Yet a worse record with indigenous people. New Zealand does much better, and Canada is improving faster than Australia.

The gender gap has largely closed in first degrees, where women are dominant in many countries. But research degree entry is higher for males. In most nations women appear to be undervalued in the labour market. Students with disabilities are under-represented in nearly all countries. Because of their number, improved access can make a major difference

overall. The participation of mature students is increasing in many countries but remains highly uneven across the OECD. Australia's rate of mature age participation in tertiary education is one of the highest in the world.

In most OECD countries, equity policies traditionally emphasised access rather than outcomes. There is a growing focus on progression and completion and measures to assist under-represented groups during the course of study, in some but not all countries. Norway does this well. A mix of programs, able to attract a wide range of students, also builds inclusion. The effects of financial assistance for students, and reforms in selection methods, are more mixed. These policies make a difference under some circumstances but not all circumstances. They are context specific. On the other hand, the OECD is sure that offering financial incentives to tertiary institutions, to improve the access and success of under-represented groups, is likely to pay dividends. But schools above all are where we need to look

Thank you very much for listening. I hope we have a good discussion. I wish you inclusion, fairness, access and success for the conference and beyond!