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Managing equity in higher education

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Abstract

This paper identifies and explores the practical and theoretical implications of the means by which the Federal Government has pursued its higher education equity agenda in Australia. An analysis is made of the impact of the funding and accountability mechanisms, which have stimulated a range of equity-directed activity across publicly funded higher education institutions, upon the nature of the resulting equity initiatives and, indeed, upon how equity itself has been conceptualised. The significance of the absence of any analytical or theoretical basis for the planning and prioritisation of equity initiatives is explored, particularly the limitations this has placed upon their effectiveness in terms of longer term and more wholesale change towards enhanced equity of access, participation and outcomes in higher education.

The extent to which the benefits of higher education have been the exclusive preserve of a social elite, determined not by ability, but by such factors as socio-economic status, ethnicity, regionality, gender, Aboriginality, and English language proficiency has been discussed in a range of studies[1]. In the period which is the focus of this issue of *Australian Universities' Review*, the Federal Government has consistently communicated[2] its policy intention to alter this situation towards more equal access, participation and outcomes for all members of the community and has put into place funding, program and accountability arrangements intended to achieve this across all publicly funded higher education institutions. During the same period the expectations of the wider community shifted in fundamental ways, placing demands upon higher education to accommodate not only greater numbers, but a wider diversity of students in social and educational terms. Thus the characterisation of this period of change in Australian higher education, commencing in the early 1970s and not yet completed in the middle 1990s, as its transformation from an elite to a mass system refers to not only the massive increase in participation in higher education but also, and more significantly in terms of social and political change, to the achievement of more broadly based participation including by those groups in the community which previously have had least access to and benefits from this level of education.

The Federal Government began the process of setting its higher education policy directions and national priorities in the early 1970s through direct official communication of its policy expectations, underpinned and strengthened by its control of institutional funding. Initially expressed through financial assistance to talented but disadvantaged individuals, in the early 1980s the Government's equity agenda shifted attention to the under-representation in higher education of whole groups in the community and particularly those which were to become the groups targeted by equity strategies (Ryan 1983); that is, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people from non-English speaking backgrounds, those with a disability, people from lower socio-economic backgrounds or living in remote and geographically isolated locations, and women with respect to so-called non-traditional areas of study, including research degrees. In response and on the basis of advice from the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission, in 1985 the Higher Education Equity Program and the Aboriginal Participation Initiative were put into place, and a million dollars annually was allocated to them between 1985 and 1987.

The Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) took over responsibility for higher education in mid 1987, and the Green and White Papers of 1987 and 1988 established the Government's framework for public accountability in higher education, including the need 'to change the balance of the student body to reflect more closely the structure and composition of the society as a whole' (Dawkins 1988, p.21). *A Fair Chance for All* (DEET 1990) spelled out the Government's equity policy and program intentions in more detail and individual institutions were made administratively responsible for achieving its equity objectives. From 1991 higher education institutions have been required to develop and implement an annual Equity Plan and an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy[3], targeting increased access, participation and outcomes for the groups already identified as disadvantaged, with the allocation of equity funds made directly to individual institutions on the basis of reported outcomes against identified objectives, including numerical targets. In the period 1989-92 approximately three million annually was allocated on this basis (DEET 1989), 'a powerful leverage on the system' (Williams 1990 p.151) in which 'the strategic resource role played by the marginal dollar' (Marginson 1993, p.56) is increasingly important. In the context of enhanced institutional (including financial) autonomy, Marginson refers to the 'small but significant zone of competitively based public funding' established between the (reducing) core of public funding and independent, market-based income in terms of its influence on institutions towards congruence with government policy and priorities (1993 p.56). Thus the annual equity funding, effectively marginal dollars in a resource strapped and highly competitive environment, in combination with the equity planning and reporting requirements introduced since 1991, have produced remarkable compliance at the level of programmatic activities in higher education institutions across Australia.

The pragmatic and strategic impact of the requirement to develop equity plans for the specified groups of students, to report publicly on targets and outcomes within an annual cycle and the funding which has been made available to support these processes, has undeniably produced a flurry of equity-directed activity across publicly funded higher education institutions. These funding and accountability mechanisms exert considerable influence on the means by which equity initiatives are put into place in higher education institutions, the nature of those initiatives and, indeed, upon how equity itself is conceptualised. For those very factors which have stimulated equity planning and equity initiatives in higher education institutions have also produced some theoretical dilemmas and operational issues which are explored below. Relevant matters include structural and staffing matters, particularly with respect to the expected mainstreaming of equity funding and responsibility (see Bowen in this volume), lack of institutional coordination and leadership, an emphasis on short-term and identifiable outcomes, and the absence of any serious or consistent attempts to analyse the causes and nature of the current inequities in higher education which the equity program has been established to change.

Equity planning and reporting have occurred as part of the introduction into higher education institutions of what Marginson (1993) refers to as the technical tools of corporate management, such as corporate planning, quality assurance processes, performance indicators, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Indeed, the equity planning and reporting processes required by the Government and put into place by DEET are clearly derived from the corporate planning methodologies

which predominate in both public and private sector organisations in the 1990s; the defining characteristics of which are the pressure exerted towards action and away from analysis and the concentration on outcomes to the exclusion of any consideration of causes. Thus the equity planning approach in higher education has been notable for its effectiveness and speed in moving institutions to put equity initiatives into place and in attracting organisational interest in achieving identifiable outcomes, particularly given the relationship between additional funding and progress towards institution identified equity targets. It has, however, avoided any analysis of the causes of the inequalities which it targets for change. In common with the language and processes of corporate planning[4], the technical-rational language of the equity planning and program performance processes ignores or masks the fundamental contradictions involved in achieving equity progressive change within the structures and culture of higher education institutions. The impact of this lack of analysis and blindness to these contradictions in terms of the efficacy of the equity reform agenda is explored below.

In this context, it is relevant to note that the processes of equity planning and reporting as put into place in Australian higher education institutions, and the discourses within which they are based, preclude any consideration of the role which these organisations may themselves play in constructing and reproducing the educational disadvantages they aim to reduce. Yet it is acknowledged in official discussion of these issues that the higher education system itself may be 'organised so as to reproduce social inequalities (including) patterns of exclusion and division which disfigure the process of education' (Department of Education and Youth Affairs, November 1984, p.4 cited in Beasley 1985). In literature informed by a critical policy analysis[5], this acknowledgment emerges as a sharply focussed critique of education 'as a power-mediating arena serving some interests (and) generating winners and losers' (Ham and Hill 1984, p.20-21 cited in Henry 1992), 'the preserve of the privileged few, being structurally in favour of some groups over others' (Gale and McNamee 1993, p.1). This literature problematises the nature and role of higher educational institutions themselves, their structures, processes, culture and even the content of courses and their pedagogy, and the contribution these make to creating, protecting and reproducing the privileged position of a social elite reflected in a disproportionate participation in this level of education and enjoyment of its resulting benefits.

The equity planning process currently in place avoids interrogation of these matters by discouraging analysis of the causes of the inequities and disadvantages which it aims to remedy. Its outcomes have been characterised as 'institutional arrangements that simply open the door a little wider (but) do little about what is done within their walls' (Gale and McNamee 1993, p.16). In addition, there is no acknowledgment of the contradiction involved in making those at the top of higher education institutions responsible for the equity planning process and its implementation. Almost without exception such people are themselves the product of this system; they have succeeded in it and have been advantaged by the current arrangements in higher education and yet they are made responsible for changing these to achieve greater equity; that is, they are charged with acting against their own interests. The resulting equity activities may well be counted as strategic and tactical successes given this inherent yet unacknowledged contradiction, the surprising lack of debate within institutions with respect to whether or why they are required, and the speed with which they have been put into place. However, their nature has been determined and their effectiveness in terms of lasting change has been constrained by the absence of any theoretical or analytical basis upon which to plan and determine priorities. More attention is given to the theoretical and practical significance of this lack of analysis later in this paper.

The annual equity reporting requirements and its funding consequences[6] have inevitably influenced equity programs and initiatives towards observable outcomes and indicators which can be demonstrated and if possible quantified in the short rather than in the longer term. Gale and McNamee have identified many problems inherent in the current approach to evaluation of higher education equity programs, including the difficulty of isolating their impact in terms of enhanced participation by under-represented groups given the dramatic increase and broadening of student participation during the same period[7]. (Also see Gale and McNamee this volume.) More significantly, the effects of deeper-seated structural and cultural changes with the potential to make a more lasting and widespread impact in terms of enhanced equity in higher education are simply not apparent in annual enrolment and participation data. In addition, without existing participation and progression data with respect to the groups of students targeted for action, the initial goals and targets set by institutions could be no more than intelligent guesses about what might be achieved. Yet these have been used as the benchmark against which performance within and between institutions has been evaluated and subsequent funds allocated.

Not only can the accuracy and validity of these benchmarks be questioned, but inconsistencies in the nature of the original targets set by different institutions has produced distortions, with funding rewards allocated for the realisation of cautious and modest targets[8] acting as a disincentive for institutions to be more ambitious. While diversity across higher educational institutions is promoted as desirable at the national level, little recognition has been given to what this means in terms of the nature of the barriers to equity progress faced by different institutions, as a result of such factors as their history, academic profile and cultural identification. For example, significant shifts towards equity in cultural and structural terms may require considerable resources and efforts in some institutions, yet result in minimal quantifiable improvements in the short term, whereas institutions operating in more favourable conditions may produce impressive data-based outcomes with little real commitment or longer term impact. Finally, the focus on short-term, observable outcomes against fragmented targets has allowed no acknowledgment of the cumulative impact in those institutions which have attempted to achieve progress across the full range of equity target groups.

The literature which documents and analyses equity initiatives in higher education across Australia[9] reveals that the current approach is characterised by a complex and confusing array of individual, separate and often unrelated projects and initiatives, the efficacy of which is sought in largely quantitative data with respect to participation and occasionally progression rates of those groups identified as disadvantaged on the basis of their under-representation. In addition to the problems already mentioned with attempting to identify the effectiveness of equity interventions on the basis of such data, this approach begs the question of what it is that has caused the current inequities of access and participation and therefore what needs to occur at an institutional level to eliminate these causes and to counteract their effects. Thus, the requirement to report on outcomes may well have significantly undermined the longer term impact of the equity program, for it discourages the very analysis of causes which might have resulted in more thoroughly and theoretically grounded action.[10] Without an identification or analysis of the causes of the existing inequities in higher education, equity programs and priorities will remain vulnerable to the influence of such factors as individual enthusiasm and institutional convenience, with progress towards equity reform of higher education at both an institutional and national level likely to be superficial and short lived.

The speed and nature of the processes which have put equity programs and initiatives into place in higher education institutions have also had an impact in terms of staffing and structural arrangements within organisations. Equity funding has been distributed to institutions on the basis of individual and separate project submissions with the result that access and equity initiatives have arisen 'in a less than co-ordinated way within and among institutions, often controlled by success or failure in receiving funding for a proposal to DEET' (Cobbin and Barlow 1993, p v). This distribution of DEET equity funding to a range of often disparate and unrelated, although plausible programs and initiatives, has resulted in staffing and structural arrangements which have several dysfunctional characteristics in terms of achieving longer term change towards equity in higher education.

The programs themselves and the staff responsible for them are scattered amongst a range of units and structures within institutions, often at a fairly powerless level in institutional terms and working in relative isolation from each other. Another difficulty arises from the understandable ownership and expectations which develop amongst the staff responsible for such programs, making it extremely difficult to re-direct funding towards emerging or more co-ordinated priorities. This reduces the likelihood of an overall and longer term equity impact by militating against the development of an institutionally co-ordinated approach based on the identification of strategically significant priorities.

In addition, institutional responsibility for equity matters is generally located with a member of senior management, at a level so remote from the operational staff that overall equity leadership and co-ordination becomes even more unlikely or ineffective, a matter of chance or personality, rather than structural intention. While its symbolic significance may be helpful in terms of institutional acceptance, the gap is too great between the staff responsible for generating equity initiatives and equity solutions, those who are actually doing the work and confronting the issues of equity change on the ground, and those notionally responsible for the equity portfolio at the senior institutional level. Not only are the former likely to have more experience and therefore understanding of student equity issues, they are also likely to be highly committed staff fully occupied with matters of direct program and service delivery with neither the time nor the intellectual space to reflect on the meaning of their work, nor to identify an overall framework in which to articulate this, and within which to refine current approaches or to plan future strategies. Further, it is unlikely that such staff will have either the necessary responsibilities, seniority or structural location to provide co-ordination of equity matters beyond their own individual and usually unrelated programs, or the theoretical and conceptual leadership currently largely absent at the institutional level. Nor is this achieved by simply tacking equity responsibility onto an existing portfolio of senior responsibilities, since most of those occupying such positions within higher education institutions have little previous experience or understanding in the area; and given the inherent contradictions noted above, their commitment to it cannot be assumed.

The matters which arise from the staffing and structural arrangements discussed above are even more significant in the context of the expectation that institutions should "mainstream" responsibility for equity and the intention to roll equity funding into general institutional grants. The frequent official references to mainstreaming[11] clearly intend that institutions as a whole, rather than DEET funded specialist equity staff, should accept and respond to this responsibility as an organisational priority. DEET's annual analysis and evaluation of institutional equity plans indicates the expectation that institutional commitment to equity should be reflected in overall mission statements and that responsibility and resourcing of equity matters be embedded in the normal, ongoing structures and allocations of the organisation (see Bowen in this volume). While some have interpreted these expectations 'primarily as exercises in reducing costs' (Gale and McNamee, 1992, p 14), it is clearly desirable in terms of longer term effectiveness to entrench equity commitment and responsibility within institutions generally, rather than relying on specialist funding, staff and programs which may disappear if policy priorities (or the government) change. And there are clear management implications which arise from this strategic, as well as policy, imperative. For example, in their analysis of school-institutional link programs, King et al (1993) have identified the different arrangements which have led to the survival and ongoing effectiveness of some such programs and the disappearance of others. As well as the enthusiasm and commitment of key individuals in initiating and establishing successful programs, those that survived were 'nested within the institution (with) the necessary infrastructure to ensure support and resources for continuity', whereas those which 'remained the responsibility of individuals, outside established frameworks ... failed to gain broader institutional support' and so withered away after the initial stimulus provided by pilot funding (King et al 1993, p 95).

It is important, however, to clarify what is intended by mainstreaming when it is being applied to the processes intended to achieve greater equity in higher education. The term itself arouses well-founded suspicions since it has been used in the context of various public sector restructures to promote, disguise or justify a wide spectrum of approaches, amongst which a genuine intention to support longer term equity progressive change has not been common. More frequently the term has been used as a flag of convenience to abandon any serious intention to pursue equity matters and to disband the structures, funding and positions upon which this has relied. The compelling logic of the mainstreaming argument, that equity matters should become everybody's responsibility in the organisation, has distracted attention from the result, whether intended or not, that it often becomes nobody's responsibility. Such an outcome has been most common, when the mainstreaming process has occurred without a sound theoretical analysis of equity itself, or any appreciation of and commitment to, the structural and cultural changes involved in achieving it. On the other hand, if equity matters remain the exclusive concern and responsibility of specialist equity units and officers, without any commitment or acceptance of responsibility by senior and middle management across the institution, then they themselves, as well as the issues for which they are advocates, are in danger of being marginalised. Even if such officers are highly committed, knowledgeable and skilled, and they usually are, and even if the programs and projects they establish are carefully conceived and well managed, their impact will remain highly localised and limited in terms of the overall culture and structure of the institution in which they are working, unless responsibility for equity matters is integrated within normal management and administrative processes of organisational planning, monitoring and accountability.

However, this integration of equity responsibilities into organisational structures must occur in such a way that it moves well beyond the tokenism often evident as members of the senior management of various universities are wheeled out to say or sign the right thing in a generalised, well meaning way at equity conferences or in the prefaces of equity policies and guidelines. While not doubting the genuine commitment which some universities and individual senior managers may have towards the equity agenda, and while recognising the legitimacy and encouragement such gestures provide to the equity operatives working to achieve meaningful change, this generalised commitment and global acceptance of responsibility needs to be replaced with a specific articulation of who is being made responsible for what, over what period of time and within what parameters of accountability. In other words, the integration of equity responsibility and concerns within the normal management practices of the institution must be done in a careful and detailed way, based on precise analysis of the equity issues facing that particular institution, and thoughtful and strategic planning with respect to how these issues are to be addressed over time. Such an identification of institutional issues and strategic planning can only proceed, however, if it is preceded by an exploration of the causes of the inequalities and disadvantage experienced by identified groups in relation to higher education. Yet the characteristics identified above arising from the methods used to implement the Government's higher education equity agenda have discouraged the very analysis upon which effective mainstreaming of that agenda depends.

And just as the allocation of responsibility for equity matters to "mainstream" managers must avoid being so global as to remain meaningless in actual practice, it must also occur with honesty and realism with respect to the level of understanding and commitment to equity of those to whom some specified equity responsibilities are being allocated. While no one should escape some responsibility for equity, nor the expectation that managers should increase their understanding of the issues involved over time, particularly at senior levels, it is counterproductive and threatens the credibility of an institution's commitment to equity overall, if responsibilities are allocated prematurely or unwisely. The expected rolling-in of DEET equity funding will provide a significant challenge in this regard, as well as an

indication of the level of actual commitment to equity priorities and programs in the various higher education institutions across Australia; a challenge which may be all the more testing in the context of the end of the period of government funded national growth in higher education, and the expected reallocation of funded places to the remaining growth areas of southern Queensland and northern NSW. Clearly, this will have significant implications for existing equity programs, since these were introduced, conceptualised and acknowledged as at least partially dependant upon the significant growth in participation (see eg Dawkins, 1988 p.21) which is now over.

Documentation[12] of the range of equity programs in place reveals that a large proportion of them tackle problems of access and participation which arise from the characteristics of the groups targeted, such as special entry schemes, preparatory and bridging programs, various support programs and study assistance. This is not to imply that such programs are based on any simplistic notions of deficit amongst those targeted. Indeed, the many official statements with respect to the need for participation in higher education to 'reflect more closely the structure and composition of society as a whole' (Dawkins 1988, p 21) reveal a concern with respect to the assumed wastage and underutilisation of the full range of ability available to the community and hence to the economy caused by the existing skewed higher education participation[13]. However, the majority of current equity programs focus on the characteristics of the targetted groups themselves to enhance their access and participation in higher education, not a lack of ability or potential, but such symptomatic factors as their previous educational experiences, their geographic location, their lack of confidence, or inadequacy of information. As a result, such programs could be characterised as compensatory in that they provide special assistance for those who, through no lack of ability, might not otherwise gain entry to or participate successfully in higher education.

What all these programs share is the assumption that higher education is a good thing to which some groups, unfairly and through no fault of their own, have had unequal access[14]. Indeed, their very disadvantage has been identified on the basis of their under-representation within it. Amongst such programs, a minority are differentiated by their implicit acknowledgment that aspects of the structures, culture or processes of the institutions themselves may (presumably inadvertently) erect barriers to participation, some even targeting the content of courses and the pedagogy of those who deliver them as the site of exclusion of certain groups of students. These are rare, however, with the majority of equity plans and programs giving little or no attention to the role of higher education itself in constructing and reproducing the privilege of some groups and the disadvantage of others, instead problematising their unequal access to it as the focus for equity attention and remedial or compensatory action. In addition to the problems with this approach identified above, it overlooks the potential for entrenched resistance to equity programs by those who have benefited from the current arrangements. Indeed, in common with the literature[15] which describes attempts to eliminate discrimination in organisations in general, neither the documentation of equity programs in higher education nor the discourse in which it is couched, contains any reference to, or analysis of, the resistance which is regularly mounted to block, stall or overturn progress towards equity.

In conclusion, the approach which has been taken to achieve the Government's higher education equity agenda has been notable for its success and speed in achieving institutional compliance and a significant level of equity directed activities across Australian higher education. However, the very characteristics responsible for this have also limited the potential for longer-term more broadly based equity reforms and achievements. Significant matters include the concentration upon symptomatic factors and short-term identifiable outcomes to the exclusion of any identification and analysis of the causes of the current inequalities. More fundamentally, the current approach to equity in higher education, and the many programs it has spawned, avoid reference to the role of higher education itself in constructing and reproducing the privilege of the few and the disadvantage of the many with respect to access to and participation in this level of education, as well as to the cultural, political, and economic capital to which it provides such a significant point of entry (Yeatman, 1990). If such matters were to enter the discourse of those leading and managing equity in higher education, this would involve a fundamental shift away from problematising the under-representation of certain groups, and from the current identification of the causes and hence the solutions to this in the characteristics and experiences of the groups themselves. The various strategies used by those who seek to resist equity progressive changes would also enter the discussion and hence the planning of those responsible for achieving equity change rather than leaving them, as at present, surprised and powerless in response. Attention would move to problematising the privilege of those who have participated in and benefited from higher education disproportionately, and to the causes of this in terms of the nature of higher education itself, its structures, its culture, its processes and its content.

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Footnotes

1. See for example Williams (1997), Anderson and Vervoorn (1983) and Abbott-Chapman, Hughes and Wyld (1991).

2. A significant and surprising inconsistency which must be noted in this context was the omission of access and equity in the national institutional reporting requirements of the inaugural quality audit process put into place in 1993, nor acknowledgment of student diversity as a strength in the Quality Committee's institutional analyses. It is yet to be revealed whether this signals a change in policy priorities and a diminution of the Government's commitment to its higher education equity agenda or an aberration arising from the lack of experience and speed with which the initial quality processes were put into place. Or perhaps it simply reflects equity's allocation to a lower category in higher education's emerging status hierarchies, as discussed by Miriam Henry, as well as that, it is what commentators cited by her refer to as symbolic policy (Henry 1992, p.405). Equity is to be a component of the 1994 Quality audit (Editors).

3. Some of the discussion in this paper applies broadly to the processes and requirements with respect to both the annual equity plans and to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education strategies. The details and all of the references apply to the former since I am more directly responsible for this area at the University of South Australia. More significantly, the critique of the equity planning process developed in the second half of this paper with respect to the absence of analysis or a theoretical framework within which to base the equity plans does not apply to the processes for the annual Aboriginal Education strategies. These differ in a fundamental and highly significant way since they are framed with reference to the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy which itself is informed by an impressive amount of research and analysis with respect to the causes of the current educational inequalities and disadvantages experienced by indigenous Australians and, indeed, by the identification of nationally accepted key principles upon which the required reforms are to be based. This fundamental difference between the two processes is explored in another paper (Ramsay, 1994).

4. Clare Burton (1993) has commented upon the extent to which the language and processes of corporate planning promote a logical-rational view of organisations which denies the untidy reality of conflicting interests and competing priorities lying beneath the surface.

5. See discussion of this literature in Miriam Henry 1992, p.400, also Bowles and Gintis (1976), Gale and McNamee (1993), and Giroux (1989).

6. The precise nature of these funding consequences is difficult to predict. This can involve additional equity specific funding for the achievement of targets, but it can also entail a reduction in normal institutional funding. For example, the funding for fifty student places, and the places themselves, were removed from the University of South Australia in 1993 as a result of short falls in meeting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student targets in 1992. However, in outlining arrangements for equity funding for the 1994-96 triennium DEET warned that institutions might experience a reduction in funding levels not due to a decline in the standard of equity plans, but from increased competition for the HEEP funds resulting from an overall marked improvement in the standard of equity plans across a larger number of institutions (Beazley 1993, p.37).

7. It will be interesting to note the impact on the targeted increase in participation by the various equity groups now that the period of publicly funded national growth in student numbers has ended, particularly in those institutions which stand to lose funded places to the remaining growth areas of northern NSW and southern Queensland.

8. In the 1993 DEET profiling discussions, the University of Adelaide was described as the most successful institution in terms of the achievement of equity targets which it admits were modest while the University of South Australia, falling short of some of its more ambitious targets, was rated only 'good'.

9. See the range of publications funded by the DEET Higher Education Division's Evaluations and Investigations Program, Canberra, Australian Government Publishing Service.

10. This criticism and the discussion which follows from it do not apply to the Aboriginal Education strategies as explained in footnote 3.

11. See for example the foreword by Kim Beazley in Department of Employment, Education and Training May 1993, *Equity in higher education: a summary report. Institutional equity plans 1992-94 Triennium,* Canberra, Australian Government Publishing Service and Bowen in this volume.

12. See Department of Employment, Education and Training May 1993, *Equity in higher education: a summary report. Institutional equity plans 1992-94 triennium*, Canberra, Australian Government Publishing Service.

13. The assumption that existing ability and potential amongst the equity target groups is currently being wasted by their under-representation in higher education has fascinating implications for existing entry policies which to date have remained largely unexplored. In addition, in the context of the increasing diversity in applicants' previous education, training and employment experience, the trend towards adult re-entry to formal education, the promotion at a national level of credit transfer and articulation arrangements between higher education and training providers, the introduction of the concept of Recognition of Prior Learning, and the rapid and unexpectedly large up-take of the various open learning courses now available which have no entry requirements, together open up the whole matter of who should gain entry to higher education and upon what basis. See Bradley (1993), Gale and McNamee (1992), Gardiner (1993), Vivian (1990), Henry and Taylor in this volume and also Bartlett and Rowan in this volume.

14. This section has benefited from discussion with the Equity Plan Working Party of the University of South Australia.

15. Cynthia Cockburn's (1991) *In the way of women: Men's resistance to sex equality in organisations*, London, Macmillan, is a notable exception to this.

Mainstreaming equity activities in universities: The next challenge*

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Abstract

Since 1988, and the release of *Higher Education: A Policy Statement* (1988), equity has been elevated to the central policy agenda in universities. The unambiguous linking of Higher Education Equity Program (HEEP) funding to the quality of Equity Plans produced annually as part of the Educational Profile process has proved to be an effective mechanism to encourage compliance with this centrally defined policy. However, the nexus between Equity Plans and the level of equity funding will become much less apparent in the near future when mainstreaming results in HEEP funding being rolled-in to the operating grants for universities. The next challenge for equity supporters within institutions is to ensure that mainstreaming results in no diminution of commitment to equity and that it be viewed instead as an opportunity to establish equity as a legitimate stakeholder in the institutional planning process.

Introduction

Equity activity within the higher education sector in Australia is not a new phenomena. Many institutions were supporting equity programs for a considerable period of time prior to the release of *Higher Education: A Policy Statement* (1988). However, what has changed substantially since 1988 is the requirement for institutions to be more systematic in the manner in which equity activities are undertaken, and this has impacted enormously on both the quantity and quality of equity programs that now operate in Australian universities. Equity has effectively been elevated to the central policy agenda within the tertiary sector and all institutions are now compelled to regularly review their equity performance as part of the annual educational profile process. Despite the considerable change which has already occurred, further change is just around the corner, and careful consideration needs to be given as to how equity practice will adapt to the new challenge of "mainstreaming".

This paper aims to examine recent higher education equity policy development with the emphasis being on identifying strategies which might facilitate the move to mainstreaming at the institutional level.

A brief analysis of equity policy

An analysis of higher education equity policy provides some useful examples of how educational policy can be effectively implemented. For equity practitioners, frequently located at a distance from policy development within their institutions, this may seem to be a purely academic exercise with little practical value. However, understanding how policy is implemented, particularly within the institution, is critical if one is to exploit the opportunities opened up by any new policy direction, including mainstreaming. Far from being irrelevant, it could be argued that it is important to locate practice within the broader context of higher education policy and its implementation at the institutional level if one is to manage equity activities most effectively "at the coal-face". The following provides a very brief analysis of higher education equity policy implementation. (No attempt will be made to analyse the content of the policy.)

Recent equity policy development has been but one element of an avalanche of higher education change announced in *Higher Education: A Policy Statement* (1988). The tertiary sector has been altered dramatically since this document was released and it is within this context that equity policy has undergone rapid development. It is interesting to note the mechanism which has allowed this rapid change to be effected in the traditionally conservative setting of Australian universities.

For a major document such as *Higher Education: A Policy Statement* (1988) to be successfully implemented, it was apparent that there needed to be substantial Federal Government control over the tertiary sector. In the absence of constitutional control over education, the Federal Government needed to use some other lever to obtain compliance with its radical reforms. How then did the Federal Government acquire this control in the higher education sector when constitutionally, education is a responsibility of the States?[1] The answer lies in the historical development of higher education since the late 1950s and could be distilled down to one very potent factor - funding.

From the time of the implementation of the recommendations in the Murray Report in 1957, through to the election of the Whitlam Labor Government in 1972, Commonwealth Government intervention in the tertiary sector had been increasing. With the abolition of tertiary fees for students in the 70s, the Commonwealth accepted total responsibility for the funding of universities, thereby relieving the States of their financial obligation to the tertiary sector. With institutions then totally at the mercy of the Commonwealth for funds, "manipulation" of the tertiary system to fit particular policy agendas became feasible.

The financial control over universities was not exploited to any great extent by the Commonwealth until the late 1980s when it was used extensively to gain compliance with *Higher Education: A Policy Statement* (1988). Smart (1991) protested this move strongly when he referred to the impact of what he described as 'coercive federalism'. Smart argued:

> *In effect, the Commonwealth Minister (Dawkins) has used the ultimate power of the Commonwealth purse to strip universities of their traditional autonomy and to coerce them into undesirable but binding agreements which do violence both to the quality of their teaching and research and to the concept of academic freedom* (Smart, 1991, p100).

While not all would agree totally with Smart's condemnation of the outcomes of this process, it was apparent that financial control, described by Smart as 'coercive federalism', was the primary tool used to ensure the adoption of the *Higher Education* (1988) policy statement. Marceau (1993) refers to this form of control as 'steering from a distance' and notes:

> *Funding, its generosity or scarcity, source (public, 'core' or specific purpose) and the conditions of its obtention and use are critical developments in all aspects of higher education life. Financial control by public authorities is the key to 'steering from a distance'. The move is from administrative control to funding allocation decisions and the methods devised for the allocation of funds are governments' new tools encouraging a fractured and often recalcitrant system of enormous and increasing size to respond to new and changing public policy and socio-economic developments.*(Marceau, 1993, p 24)