

Widening participation in higher education: a play in five acts

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Policies and programs to address higher education disadvantage reveal four distinct approaches, each revealing certain assumptions about the nature of educational disadvantage. These are: creating mass higher education systems; redistributing or allocating certain places to disadvantaged students; changing the cultural practices of institutions; and shifting the policy focus from access towards higher education outcomes or benefits. Using the Australian higher education sector as a case study, each of these approaches is defined, identified and examined in regard to its impact on widening access and participation in higher education. An alternative approach – a fifth act – is proposed; one which concentrates on the need to understand the identity of the student, both in terms of how he/she understands disadvantage and what he/she wants out of higher education.

Keywords: access, participation, disadvantage, higher education, Australia

Introduction

For at least the last quarter century, policies designed to widen access to and participation in higher education have been largely predicated on notions of proportional representation or ‘changing the balance of the student population to reflect more closely the composition of society as a whole’ (Department of Employment Education and Training, 1990, p. 2). The goal of social justice has been a common thread linking higher education policies; various approaches represent forms of distributive justice; that is the proportional distribution of a resource to diverse groups and individuals (Gale & Densmore, 2000; Gale & Tranter, 2011). These approaches speak to fundamental principles of egalitarianism, which hold that whilst humans are of equal value, the existence of socially-constructed inequality requires intervention to ensure equitable distribution (Walton *et al.*, 2014). The aim of creating a more representative student body is,

for many policymakers, the essence of higher education equity policy.

However, whilst distributive justice is synonymous with equity in higher education, conceptualising all efforts to widen higher education participation as iterations of redistributive justice misrepresents a wider range of strategies designed to increase the access and participation of disadvantaged students in higher education. The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, it seeks to outline a framework for understanding the various approaches (what are called here ‘acts’) to addressing educational disadvantage in the tertiary stage of education. These include, but are not limited to, policies of redistributive justice. To this end, this study uses the Australian higher education sector as a case study. Examining policies dating back to the mid-1940s, four approaches or acts are identified: massification, redistribution, re-normalisation and benefit, with each described and discussed below. Second, a range of available

data and statistics is interrogated to empirically consider the effect these various acts of addressing disadvantage have had on the composition of the Australian higher education sector since 1950. These impacts are measured in terms of overall access to higher education, changes to student demographics and more recently, considerations of the post-enrolment and post-graduation outcomes for the students.

Acts of equity: four approaches to widening participation in higher education

Massification

Acts of massification seek first and foremost to increase the overall number of higher education participants, not any particular subset. The aphorism 'a rising tide lifts all boats' is regularly cited (Sheldon & Gottschalk, 1986), evidencing a belief that government social policy is most effective when it first addresses the general, macroeconomic environment (*cf.* Marks, 2009). Acts of massification are effective in transitioning a nation's higher education sector from the elite to mass stage, towards universal access (Trow, 1974, 2000). In Australia, as is frequently the case internationally, most major higher education equity policies have been founded on acts of massification. One of the most notable was the introduction of the Commonwealth Scholarships Scheme in 1951. The Scholarship scheme was academically merit-based in terms of provision and covered tuition fees for any and all students meeting the academic criteria. By 1963, it was estimated almost one in five students held a Commonwealth Scholarship (Committee on the Future of Tertiary Education in Australia, 1964). More important, in terms of the number of students involved, was the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme (CRTS), begun in 1944. Its aim was to give service men and women the opportunity to acquire occupations, with free training at a university or technical college, plus living and supplementary allowances. In 1947, more than five times as many students received financial assistance under the CRTS as had received similar forms of student assistance prior to its implementation (Anderson, Boven, Fensham, & Powell, 1980).

In 1988, the Government intervened to alter supply more than any other previous administration. At the time, the Government estimated the national demand for higher education places was exceeding supply by around 20,000 students per year. Furthermore, it considered that by the year 2000, 125,000 graduates per annum would be required to lift Australian participation in higher

education toward the levels achieved in the leading OECD countries (Dawkins, 1988). It was thought that this could only be realised by increasing the number of degree-awarding institutions, to create what became known as the unified national system (UNS) of higher education. In order to fund this expansion, the Federal Government reintroduced student tuition fees, complemented by a Commonwealth subsidy for each student place. However, to avoid reintroducing an upfront price barrier, the cost of education to the student was supported by the introduction of an income-contingent loan system known as the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS). There is broad consensus that the UNS/HECS 'double act' represented the most significant implementation of integrated policies, based on principles of massification, in the history of Australian higher education (*cf.* Croucher, Marginson, Norton, & Wells, 2013).

The most recent act of massification has been the introduction of a demand-driven system of funding higher education in 2012. This has removed the cap on the overall number of places subsidised by the Federal Government so as to enable a closer match between demand and supply and a more flexible and responsive allocation of university places (Department of Industry Innovation Climate Change Science Research and Tertiary Education, 2013). The potential of this act of massification is significant; however it is too soon to assess its full impact and therefore the scheme is not considered further here.

Redistribution

Acts of redistribution occur when policy and action directly target disadvantaged students to increase their proportional representation within higher education. Redistributive acts are the most commonly-recognised form of higher education equity policy. In Australia, the above mentioned policies of massification were generally enacted in conjunction with acts of redistribution. As part of the Commonwealth Scholarships Scheme a means-tested living allowance was provided for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The abolition of tuition fees in 1974 was also accompanied by the introduction of a means-tested living allowance for students. When tuition fees were reintroduced in 1989, means-tested student support packages continued. And at the same time the Government introduced the demand driven system of funding in 2012, it adopted ambitious targets and a range of measures to support increased participation from students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). These targets were supported by significant funding to

encourage and reward universities for enrolling these students.

Policies based upon principles of redistribution assume that acts of massification function to broaden access to higher education more than widen it. The persistence of inequity at more disaggregated levels thus requires government policy to become more targeted. In 1990, the Australian Federal Government argued for the need to define particular groups of disadvantaged students and set national equity objectives and targets for each. The groups specifically targeted were: Indigenous students; students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds; women enrolled in non-traditional areas of study; people from non-English speaking backgrounds; people with disabilities; and people from rural and isolated areas (Department of Employment Education and Training, 1990; Martin, 1994). Targets, ranging from a 15 to 50 per cent increase in enrolments were set for each group. Strategies to effect these improvements included 'tertiary awareness and schools link programs... special admission arrangements, bridging and support programs and units; and strategies to make teaching materials and processes more relevant to the needs of disadvantaged students' (Department of Employment Education and Training, 1990, p. 3).

Re-normalisation

Acts of re-normalisation refer to policies and practices designed to alter the normative behaviour or culture of the higher education sector or its constituent institutions, so as to make it and them more inclusive and embracing of student diversity. Rather than requiring students to fit the existing institutional culture, acts of re-normalisation require that these cultures be adapted to better fit the needs of increasingly diverse student groups (Zepke & Leach, 2005). Research indicates that recruitment of female faculty members in science-centric courses has the potential to increase female student recruitment (Bettinger & Long, 2005) and subsequent retention in the course (Robst, Keil, & Russo, 1998). Similar findings show the positive influence of role models for students based on their ethnic or socio-economic background (cf. Crosnoe, Mistry, & Elder, 2002; Freeman, 1997). From 2013, Australian universities have been required to set progressive targets for the number of Indigenous staff, both academic and general, in their employ. This followed recommendations arising from the *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* (Behrendt, Larkin, Griew, & Kelly, 2012).

Acts of re-normalisation are not restricted to staffing profiles; they also extend to cover the mechanisms by which students are selected. In Australia, the focus of re-normalisation acts has been on supporting non-traditional pathways to higher education beyond the traditional means of completion of Year 12 studies; more specifically the undertaking of academic-track subjects that are eligible to be considered in the construction of an entry score. This entry score is known as the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR). The ATAR is a percentile score denoting a student's ranking relative to his or her peers in the same cohort. A wealth of research has demonstrated links between socio-economic factors and ATAR scores (cf. Dobson & Skuja, 2005; Jacobs & Harvey, 2005; Marks, McMillan, & Himman, 2001). In response, Government higher education equity policy has focussed on 'articulation', which refers to increasing and improving pathways between vocational education and training (VET) and higher education. The hypothesis is that since disadvantaged students have higher rates of participation in VET than higher education, VET studies can act to enhance both aspiration and preparation for higher education (James, 2007; Wheelahan, 2009a). In theory at least, admissions processes are 'blind' to the type of academic qualifications being used by the prospective student, as the various pathways all feed in to a common ranking system.

Benefit

Acts of benefit involve attempts to widen the discussion from participation, where it has traditionally been focussed, to more fully consider the social and economic outcomes of higher education for disadvantaged students, as well as society more broadly (Brennan & Shah, 2003; Gidley, Hampson, Wheeler, & Bereded-Samuel, 2010). This is generally measured in three ways: satisfaction with the course experience; employment and earnings; and transition to further (e.g. postgraduate) studies (Pitman & Koshy, 2014). However, acts of benefit also encompass in-program strategies designed to increase the completion rates for disadvantaged students. To date, Australian higher education equity policy at the national level has been mostly focussed on access and participation. The policy debate concerning post-graduation behaviours historically has focussed on matching higher education supply with workforce demand at the generic (i.e. graduate) level. Since the 1990s, educational qualifications have become increasingly important to almost all forms of long-term, career oriented employment (Marginson, 1993). However, the ability of either universities or government to predict

Table 1: Gender representation in Australian higher education, 1950-2010

Year	National population	National population (female) %	University population	Female %
1950	8,178,696	49.6%	30,630	21.6%
1951	Introduction of Commonwealth Scholarships Scheme and means-tested allowance			
1955	9,199,729	49.4%	30,792	21.9%
1960	10,275,020	49.5%	53,633	23.1%
1965	11,387,665	49.6%	110,250	24.0%
1970	12,507,349	49.7%	161,455	27.1%
1974	Abolition of university tuition fees and introduction of new means-tested living allowance			
1975	13,892,995	49.8%	276,559	40.6%
1980	14,695,356	50.1%	329,523	45.3%
1985	15,788,312	50.1%	370,016	47.6%
1989	Creation of the unified national system, introduction of income contingent loan system and continuation of means-tested living allowances			
1990	17,065,128	50.1%	485,066	52.7%
1995	18,004,882	50.2%	604,176	53.9%
2000	19,028,802	50.4%	695,485	55.2%
2005	19,855,288	50.6%	957,176	54.3%
2010	21,507,717	50.5%	1,111,352	55.8%

Sources: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Department of Education and Training

future demand and match it with supply has always been problematic. Consequently, government policy has more often than not addressed workforce shortages via the more direct and immediate route of increasing visas for skilled migration (cf. Birrell, Edwards & Dobson, 2007). Policy interest in and engagement with ensuring equality of post-graduation outcomes for disadvantaged students currently operates at the margins of policy debate.

The impact of higher education equity policy on the Australian higher education sector since 1950

Assessing the impact of policies of massification, redistribution, re-normalisation and benefit can be informed by empirical data. However, statistics relating to specific groups of disadvantaged students have only appeared regularly since 1994, when they were defined as the focus of policies to widen access and participation. Excepting smaller-scale, case-study approaches to data

collection, data for sector-wide, long-term trends prior to this time require the use of proximal assessments of disadvantage. For the period 1950–2000, female student enrolments are used as a proximal of disadvantage. Given women comprise approximately one-half the overall population yet prior to the 1990s were under-represented in higher education; and that gender is one of the most stable demographic identifiers when tracing trends over long periods of time, gender provides an accurate, albeit proximate, indication of the effect of higher education equity policy on addressing disadvantage. Table 1 shows the change in population of Australia and its universities from 1950-2010 and highlights the rise in enrolments of students overall and female students. The table also indicates the major policy ‘acts’ of massification and redistribution as described above.

The trend reveals that as supply has increased, the female student population has increased both in raw numbers and as a proportion of the student body. Today, female students outnumber male students in Australian public universities. Over time, the nation’s universities have become more public in that, literally, more of the public are now able to access them. Furthermore, the proportional increase in enrolments from female students has been greater than that of male students, meaning they are more publicly representative in terms of gender today than they were in 1950.

The data for Australia indicate that, at the aggregate level, acts of massification, combined with acts of redistribution, ameliorate disadvantage, when disadvantage is defined in broad terms (i.e. gender). Since acts of massification and redistribution tend to occur simultaneously, it is difficult to ascribe degrees of success to one act over another. However, there appears to be general consensus that before participation can be widened, it must first be increased (Gale & Tranter, 2011; Osborne, 2003).

Table 2 shows the proportional share of domestic student enrolments of each of the six higher education equity groups, from 1998 to 2008. Two things are apparent. First, the effect of government policy in addressing disadvantage in higher education becomes dissipated at greater levels of disaggregation. In fact, more equity groups have seen a deterioration in their proportional share over the ten-year time period than experienced any improvement. Second, even in cases where improvements have been recorded, the revised proportional share is still below the national population average. Even when policies of massification address the issue of supply, it is often the more privileged students who take advantage of the extra places available to a

Table 2: Equity groups proportional share of domestic student enrolments 1998-2008

	<i>Students from a Non English speaking background</i>	<i>Students with a disability</i>	<i>Women in Non-Traditional Area</i>	<i>Indigenous students</i>	<i>Low SES</i>	<i>Regional</i>	<i>Remote</i>
1998	4.7%	2.8%	19.5%	1.3%	14.7%	n.a	n.a
1999	4.2%	2.9%	19.9%	1.3%	14.7%	n.a	n.a
2000	3.8%	3.0%	19.9%	1.2%	14.8%	n.a	n.a
2001	3.6%	3.1%	19.9%	1.3%	15.4%	19.0%	1.4%
2002	3.5%	3.4%	19.8%	1.3%	15.2%	18.7%	1.3%
2003	3.7%	3.6%	19.7%	1.3%	15.0%	18.5%	1.3%
2004	3.8%	3.7%	19.6%	1.3%	14.8%	18.2%	1.2%
2005	3.7%	4.0%	19.1%	1.2%	14.6%	17.9%	1.1%
2006	3.5%	4.0%	18.6%	1.2%	14.7%	17.9%	1.1%
2007	3.7%	4.1%	18.2%	1.3%	14.9%	17.8%	1.1%
2008	3.8%	4.1%	17.9%	1.3%	15.0%	17.8%	1.1%
Representation in national population	~ 10.0%	18.5%	50.3%	2.5%	25.0%	27.2%	2.3%

Source: Department of Education and Training, *Selected Higher Education Statistics (2005 and 2010)*

greater degree than the less privileged (*cf.* Pitman, Koshy, & Phillimore, 2014).

Furthermore, policies of massification, and most policies of redistribution, assume an equality of institution, where a degree from one university has the same value (in terms of economic and cultural capital) as the others. The reality is that mass higher education systems contain within them elite groupings, which tend to be much more restrictive in their selection and admission practices, leading to even greater levels of under-representation than the sector as a whole (*cf.* Boliver, 2013; Karabel, 2005; Zimdars, 2010). In Australia, the Group of Eight universities in Australia are comprised of Australia’s oldest and most prestigious universities. Table 3 shows the most recent data pertaining to enrolments of disadvantaged students for the Group of Eight universities, compared to the Australian higher education sector as a whole. Students from low SES backgrounds, regional and remote areas, Indigenous students, and students with a disability are all excluded from Australia’s elite universities at higher rates than the sector average (which are themselves below-

representation). These four groups with below-sector representation in the elite universities are more closely correlated with socio-economic disadvantage than the two that are not (*cf.* Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010; Bradbury, Norris, & Abello, 2001). It therefore appears that the elite universities in Australia are enrolling women and non-English speaking students from predominantly medium to high SES backgrounds. Similar findings have been found in other research (*cf.* Coates & Krause, 2005).

In regard to acts of re-normalisation: as noted previously, the focus of Australian higher education policy is on increasing access via pathways other than Year 12 studies. Statistics relating to VET to university transitions have not been recorded uniformly for any period of time, however the following can be extrapolated from the Higher Education Statistics collections between 2002 and 2010. First, the proportion of students being admitted to university on the basis of prior VET study increased from 8.9 per cent of commencing domestic undergraduate students in 2002 to 10.1 per cent in 2006 (Department of Education Employment and Workplace

Table 3: Domestic undergraduate student enrolments by equity group, 2013

	<i>Students from a Non English speaking background</i>	<i>Students with a disability</i>	<i>Women in Non-Traditional Area</i>	<i>Indigenous students</i>	<i>Low SES</i>	<i>Regional</i>	<i>Remote</i>
Sector	3.3%	5.4%	17.3%	1.4%	15.8%	20.2%	0.8%
Group of Eight	4.0%	4.7%	21.8%	0.8%	9.1%	11.3%	0.5%

Relations, 2008). Second, applications from persons with prior VET participation increased from 14.5 per cent of all applications in 2009, to 16 per cent in 2010 and 17.3 per cent in 2011 (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, 2011; Department of Industry Innovation Climate Change Science Research and Tertiary Education, 2010). A change in reporting in 2012 prevents subsequent comparisons; nonetheless the data suggest that over time, the Government's policy focus on improving VET pathways to higher education is bearing fruit. However, the extent to which this translates to improved outcomes for disadvantaged students is less clear.

In 2009, Leesa Wheelahan undertook an analysis of published and unpublished statistics on commencing domestic under-graduate students produced by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, as well as some data on VET students produced by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research and data produced by some state tertiary admissions centres. Whilst encountering problems with the nature of the data collected, as this study has, Wheelahan's conclusion was that VET pathways 'play a modest role in increasing the efficiency of tertiary education in Australia, but they have a long way to go before they contribute to meeting equity and social justice objectives' (Wheelahan, 2009b, p. 19). This appeared to be the result of the VET sector reproducing wider socio-economic disadvantage much in the same way universities themselves did (Wheelahan, 2009a).

To date, there has been no coordinated government policy relating to acts of benefit; that is ensuring the outcomes of higher education are equally realised by disadvantaged students. This is an area of policy that requires greater attention, as it is apparent that many disadvantaged students do not enjoy the same higher education completion rates and post-graduation benefits as other students. In 2013, the Department of Education and Training undertook an analysis of students entering higher education in 2005, tracking their completion rates up to 2012. They found:

- Indigenous and remote students had completion rates significantly lower than the national average;
- Regional students and students from low SES backgrounds had completion rates slightly below the national average;
- Students from a non-English speaking background had completion rates above the national average; and
- Whilst women in general had above-average completion rates, they remained under-represented in non-

traditional areas of study such as engineering, science and information technology (Department of Education, 2014)

Women are also under-represented in terms of the post-graduation benefits they experience. In 2013, the median starting salary for Australian female graduates (A\$51,600) was equivalent to 93.9 per cent of the median starting salary earned by their male counterparts (A\$55,000). Male graduates tended to be overrepresented in fields of education with higher median starting salaries like engineering, whilst women outnumbered males in fields such as humanities, which was ranked at the lower end of the salary distribution. Even when controlling for field of education, personal, enrolment and occupational characteristics of male and female graduates, the aggregate gender wage gap was 4.4 per cent (Graduate Careers Australia, 2014).

In 2016, a report into graduate outcomes for the aforementioned student equity groups found mixed results for the six groups of students. When considering issues such as earnings, relevance of qualification to employment and security of tenure, Indigenous graduates and graduates from low-SES and regional backgrounds generally experienced above average outcomes, when compared to all graduates. Conversely, graduates with a disability, females graduating from non-traditional areas of study and graduates from non-English speaking backgrounds tended to experience worse outcomes (Richardson, Bennett & Roberts, 2016).

Discussion

The history of higher education equity policy in Australia has been a play in four acts. First have come acts of massification, seeking to increase supply or provide support at the aggregate level. Policies of these types have been closely followed or at times enacted in conjunction with acts of redistribution. Here, policies have focussed more on the composition of higher education student demographics, rather than increasing the size of the sector *per se*. As the higher education sector moves closer to near-universal access, inequities are identified at greater levels of disaggregation and accordingly policies and programs become themselves more focussed. Increasingly, attention shifts to acts of re-normalisation, to make the sector less homogenous, and benefit, to ensure that more disadvantaged students complete their studies and realise post-graduation benefits. The evidence is that of these four approaches, policies or acts of massification have been the most successful.

However, that statement must be contextualised in two respects. First, the success of acts of massification may be largely attributed to the circumstances in which they are initially enacted, where higher education is generally an elite activity and qualified demand far exceeds the number of places available. Second, the success of massification policies can be more easily accounted for, as they are generally measured in higher degrees of aggregation, such as overall increases in student numbers or increases by broad demographic profile such as gender. Acts of redistribution – and later, acts of re-normalisation and benefit – require policy actors to define, and measure, more nuanced understandings of disadvantage. Their frequency increases as more ‘sub-groups’ of disadvantaged students are identified (Carpenter & Hayden, 1993). However, somewhat paradoxically, the more precise our understanding of disadvantage becomes, the more compartmentalised our approaches to dealing with it appear to be. Government policies become increasingly focussed on one group of disadvantaged students, one contributor to disadvantage or one consequence of the same.

The aforementioned six equity groups, which are the focus of Australian higher education policy design, were defined more than 20 years ago. Since then, Australia’s social composition, backgrounds, family structures and ways of participating in higher education have undergone significant change (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013). Some students, such as those from lower socio-economic groups and/or neighbourhoods, are defined by their place in time and space, such as living in a particular postcode at a particular moment in time. This is a cost-effective mechanism for the purposes of classification but, as James *et al.* (2004, p. 19) observe, ‘blunt and inadequate for measuring both the aggregate patterns and the potential educational disadvantage of individuals’. Creating definitions of disadvantage such as these also marginalise other disadvantaged students, including: students who are first in their family to attend university; many part-time students, students of sole parents; students who are sole parents, refugees, and students who are carers – all of whom have been identified in the literature as experiencing disadvantage. Furthermore, as described in the paper, there is often overlap between categories of disadvantage and many students experience multiple types of disadvantage. These difficulties are exacerbated by a tendency to label all pupils from specific groups as underachievers (Stevens, 2007). A key challenge for researchers and policymakers therefore lies in conceptualising disadvantage, and policies to address it,

when the nature of disadvantage itself is ever-changing and intersecting.

In many cases, disadvantage can only be addressed with the consent of the disadvantaged person him/herself. Particular definitions of disadvantage rely on processes of self-identification, for example Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (A&TSI) and disabled students. However, research has shown that for A&TSI people, self-identification is a complex process, variously affected by social dislocation (Clark, 2000) and personal exposure to racism (Ziersch, Gallaher, Baum, & Bentley, 2011). Indeed, some individuals choose to change their A&TSI identity over time in official records, such as the National Census (Biddle, 2014). In a similar vein; for many disabled students ‘the process of identification hurts... it is best to avoid that liminal space’ (Chandler, 2010). Acceptance, disclosure and documentation of the disability by disabled applicants and students are key legal issues in Australia, as with the US and the UK (Konur, 2006). Moreover, the identities that shape definitions and understandings of disadvantage are not static; they change both at different points in the time of creation and also when they are remembered. Frequently it is the combination of life events, the personality of the student and their desire to create a life narrative that others understand, which influences the students’ identification of disadvantage (Goodson, Biesta, Tedder, & Adair, 2010; Pitman, 2013). A student’s personal perception and experience of disadvantage are therefore key foci for a more integrated evaluation of disadvantage, as the final section of this paper describes.

The need for another act – identity

Ultimately, it is the student who is best placed to identify the forms of disadvantage that have had an impact on his or her educational experience. Barbara Comber does an excellent job of explaining the dangers in foregrounding background; that is, allowing an individual’s demographics to overwhelm the reality of their lived experience:

How can the ‘characters’ be introduced without reducing them to statistics, categories, exotics or stereotypes? On what basis do researchers make decisions about aspects of students’ material lives to count as data, interpretive categories, contextual information, results? (Comber, 1998, p. 1)

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p. 106) refer to a ‘resemblance within a difference’; that is the ways in which certain individuals share a common doxa, which unites them despite their individual traits. However, the reverse is equally true: categories of disadvantage

overlook the reality that each person's experience with the same is highly individualistic. In other words, from a policy perspective the act of defining a particular group of students as being disadvantaged risks overlooking critical 'differences within a resemblance'. Engaging with more nuanced understandings of disadvantage, through acts of identity, is one way in which more formulaic approaches to addressing higher education disadvantage can be de-inscribed from current policy. For example, any critical assessment of a policy should critique whether the policy takes into account the underlying sources of the problem it intends to address (Bessant, 1993). However, in the case of addressing low-SES disadvantage, which is measured by postcode, it is a proxy of disadvantage that is being targeted, not its actual causes. Students of other SES backgrounds, who have not experienced significant disadvantage, can be labelled as such by virtue of the postcode they state on their application form. And even for those who are disadvantaged, as Connell (1994, p. 128) observes, 'the poverty of indigenous peoples, still grappling with the consequences of invasion and colonisation, is different from the poverty of recent immigrant groups.'

Critically, identity is not static. Individuals shape and reshape their sense of self over the life course and education is a key part in this narrative process (Goodson *et al.*, 2010). Prior research exists into the construction of student identity (*cf.* Moss & Pittaway, 2010; Yannuzzi & Martin, 2014); however, these are difficult to incorporate in their current abstractions. In effect, they present the exact opposite problem to the problem that currently exists. Contemporary policy understands higher education disadvantage in broad, aggregated terms. These are relatively easy to measure and track longitudinally, however they are manifestly inadequate for purpose. Conversely, emerging theories of student identity are more accurate and dynamic however extremely difficult to enact effectively within an institution, let alone across an entire sector. There is however, potential in exploiting a peculiarity of Australian higher education financing; one which has arisen as a consequence of the creation of the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS, now known as HELP - the Higher Education Loan Program). Every student graduating with a HELP debt has their higher education and taxation data linked, to allow repayment of the debt over the long-term. Consequently, this has given rise to an extraordinary amount of information spanning the higher education spectrum from prior socio-economic disadvantage to long-term, post-graduation outcomes. Coupled with the relatively detailed demographic data, this creates the possibility for constructing 'meso' levels

of student identity. Whilst they would still not be entirely accurate and still rely on proximal understandings of disadvantage, they would be more highly nuanced than the current definitions and - crucially - be able to be operationalised at the governmental level.

Conclusion

With our improved understanding of higher education disadvantage comes a need to incorporate student identities into our definitions of the same. This act requires policymakers and researchers to explore higher education disadvantage first and foremost from the perspective of the individual. Of course, individual interventions into defining disadvantage are problematic for policymakers, who not only seek to measure what they value but, to some degree, value only what they can measure. Statistics are central to the governing practices of the state; they make the nation 'legible' for governing (Lingard, Creagh, & Vass, 2011). Such measurements have a direct impact on higher education policy for when 'we are required to report, count, are funded, and held accountable for something, it starts to matter a lot' (Wheelahan *et al.*, 2003, p. 41). However, in pursuit of numbers at the aggregate level, true educational disadvantage may be obscured. Mapping educational inequalities in detail, rather than in aggregate 'can facilitate strategies in pursuit of smaller changes at many points, rather than all points at once (and hence in none)' (Marginson, 2011, p. 34). In order to achieve this, researchers and policymakers need to more fully engage with how the (prospective) students themselves have experienced, and understand, educational disadvantage.

Here, the need for a rigorous, systematic approach to mapping disaggregated disadvantage is crucial. Simply to call for the 'voice' of the student to be heard and appreciated might exacerbate, rather than ameliorate disadvantage. This is because the evidence suggests students from advantaged backgrounds possess greater ability to harness their social and cultural capital/networks to improve their position within a competitive system. For example, policies designed to facilitate the recognition of prior formal and informal learning for the purposes of academic credit frequently contain an emancipatory agenda, by placing greater value on non-traditional learning experiences (Harris & Cooper, 2013). However, it is often the case that more privileged students are better able to exploit social networks to gain 'knowledge-rich' employment. If acts of identity are simply about codifying a student's experiences in an analogous fashion, students with high cultural capital and some (but

relatively lower) levels of disadvantage might perversely benefit the most (cf. Kaufman & Gabler, 2004)

Understanding acts of identity is about exploring the diverse nature of educational disadvantage in greater detail and frequency, in order to better inform policy design. The more we generate complex and intersecting data sets that track cohorts over extended periods of time, the greater the need to understand what it is that we are searching for within them. This will only occur when policymakers embrace, rather than avoid, the diversity and complexity of educational disadvantage.

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