Towards a Southern Theory of Higher Education

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Abstract

Crudely, social inclusion in Australian higher education is a numbers game. While the student recruitment departments of universities focus on 'bums on seats', equity advocates draw attention to 'which bums', in 'what proportions', and, more to the point, 'which seats', 'where'. But if the counting of bums is crude, so is the differentiation of seats. Just distinguishing between courses and universities and scrutinizing the distribution of groups, is a limited view of equity. The most prestigious seats of learning give students access primarily to dominant forms of knowledge and ways of thinking. In terms of access, it is to a diminished higher education, for all. Further, undergraduates – particularly in their first year – are rarely credited with having much to contribute. Higher education is the poorer for it. In this paper I propose an expanded conception for social inclusion and an enlarged regard for what is being accessed by students who gain entry to university. Drawing on Connell's conception of 'Southern Theory', I highlight power/knowledge relations in higher education and particularly 'southerners': those under-represented in universities – often located south of ENTER (Equivalent National Tertiary Entrance Rank) cut-offs – and whose cultural capital is similarly marginalised and discounted. While increasing regard for the importance of Indigenous knowledges is beginning to challenge the norms of higher education, we are yet to generalise such reconceptions of epistemology to include knowledges particular to people from regional and rural areas, with disabilities, and from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Nor have we really engaged with different ways of thinking about the physical and social worlds that are particular to these groups. To take account of marginalized forms of knowledge and of thinking will mean thinking differently about what higher education is and how it gets done.

Introduction

I am delighted to be invited to speak at the 12th Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education conference, not just because of the importance of this event but also because of the implied invitation to imagine connections between student equity and social inclusion, and the ways in which higher education is experienced by students, particularly in their first year. Irrespective of all the good work undertaken by and within Australian universities, such connections are not immediately apparent or obvious. In part, this is because the current definition of student equity refers only vaguely to students' learning experiences or to other parts of the university student experience.

Student equity in Australian higher education is still officially defined by and more generally understood in terms of the federal government's 1990 policy statement, *A Fair Chance for All* (Department of Employment Education and Training 1990). In brief – and I will return to these matters later – the policy describes equity in terms of the proportional representation of social

groups within the university student population: bums on seats or, to be fairer, particular bums on particular seats. On the face of it, these are matters that have more to do with what happens before and at the point of university entry, than with what students experience once they have entered.

The central argument I want to put to you today, then, is that in order to imagine a connection between student equity and what students experience within university, we must first re-imagine what we mean by equity, including what an expanded and more sophisticated understanding of equity might mean for a student's higher education.

I will begin with a consideration of current student equity policy and practice in higher education – and, to be accurate, I will probably say more about policy than about practice – and then I will move to more epistemological concerns. While I intend to problematize current policy and practice in student equity, I should point out that I am not simply arguing for the replacement of one definition with another. I rather think that proportional representation is useful symbolically – and therefore politically – because of its potential for arguing for broader and deeper equities in higher education. However, a more sophisticated approach to equity needs to account not just for bodies but also for what they embody. Nor am I suggesting that there is not already practical evidence of this more sophisticated approach, but I venture to say that it is not widespread.

In part, my argument is for a 'Southern Theory' of higher education. Raewyn Connell uses the term 'Southern Theory' to draw attention to the fact that the majority of social theory that informs higher education, for example, is produced in, and from the perspective of, the global north. Despite claims to universality, these theories are essentially Eurocentric as they fail to account for voices and knowledge from non-dominant peoples. The term 'Southern Theory' represents Connell's attempt to acknowledge that a variety of knowledges and ways of knowing have been denied voice in social theory and that they have their own contributions to make.

In Connell's (2007: viii-ix) terms, the assertion of a 'Southern Theory':

> calls attention to the centre-periphery relations in the realm of knowledge … [Connell] use[s] the term 'Southern' not to name a sharply bounded category of states or societies, but to emphasise relations – authority, exclusion and inclusion, hegemony, partnership, sponsorship, appropriation – between intellectuals and institutions in the metropole and those in the world periphery.

It is towards new 'relations in the realm of knowledge' that I want to move our thinking about equity, to see what this might mean for social inclusion in higher education in particular, with emphasis on what happens once students enter university. I see my comments in this regard as tentative, as pointing in a particular direction rather than naming precisely what such an approach means for practice in particular sites.

But first I will begin with where thinking about student equity is currently confined, at least by government and institutional policies.

Understanding equity

The problems encountered by some social groups in accessing higher education are now well rehearsed. People from high socioeconomic backgrounds are currently three times more likely to

enter university than people from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Indigenous Australians constitute 2.2% of the nation's population but only 1.3% of all university students. And while a quarter of Australians live in regional and remote areas, only 18% are represented within the higher education student population. The recent Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education has popularised these figures within the sector, particularly the comparatively low levels of participation by students from low SES backgrounds (Bradley et al. 2008: 28).

Perhaps less well known is that while 8% of Australians have a disability, university students with disabilities only constitute 4% of all higher education students. Yet, despite receiving a small but important mention in the Bradley Review, there is nothing in the government's budget paper, *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System*, which mentions students with disabilities (Commonwealth of Australia 2009). It is true that their participation has improved over time, but it is still short of where it needs to be. Students with disabilities would seem to have fallen off the equity policy radar, at least from recent policy announcements.

The low participation of these three plus one 'equity' groups[1] – low SES students, Indigenous students, regional and remote students, plus students with disabilities – has been a concern in Australia for some time. For instance, the proportion of low SES students in higher education has hovered around 15% for at least the last two decades and more probably since the expansion of Australian higher education in the Menzies era.[2] We know this because of the excellent statistical data that DEEWR has accumulated since the 1990 policy statement on student equity in higher education, to which I referred earlier. Indeed, equity has become defined by these statistics.

On one level, the Federal Government's new policy directions for higher education perpetuate this understanding of student equity, that it is a matter of numbers. Universities across the country are now being asked to lift their game, to raise the number of low socioeconomic status Australians

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[1] *A Fair Chance for All* also identified women in non-traditional areas and people from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) as under-represented in 1990 (Department of Employment Education and Training 1990). On crude numerical measures, their participation has significantly improved since that time. Because of this, they appear to have dropped off the mainstream equity agenda.

[2] Arguably, there have been four expansion phases to date in the history of Australian higher education: 1. The establishment of The University of Sydney, the first university in Australia, and others soon after, which created opportunities for Australians to gain a higher education without having to travel overseas; 2. The Menzies Government's creation of Colleges of Advanced Education (CAEs) enabled returned servicemen to gain access to a higher education and also served to help rebuild the nation following the second world war; 3. In the 1970s, the transfer of financial and administrative responsibility for Australian universities from the States to the Whitlam Federal Government, was accompanied by a substantial injection of funds into the system, creating more places to appease the demands of the expanding middle classes; 4. The Dawkins reforms of higher education in the late 1980s / early 1990s which, through amalgamations and other strategies, raised the status of CAEs and Institutes of Technology to universities, effectively creating more university places as did the introduction of HECS which helped to fund the sector's expansion more generally. 5. If 40% of 25 to 34 year olds are to hold bachelor degrees by 2025, as per the current Australian Government target, this will constitute the fifth expansion of Australian higher education.

enrolled in their institutions: to 20% by 2020.[3] This is both a target for the sector – with variation across institutions contributing to the overall result – and, as I now want to go on to elaborate, a 'catch-all' for all under-represented groups, particularly Indigenous peoples and people from regional and remote areas.

There are at least three questions that arise for policy and practice from the current statistical precision that is applied to conceptions of equity. And, in our current policy environment, they tend to be pursued primarily in relation to socioeconomic status. They are:

- How can we account for differences between equity groups?

- How can we, indeed should we, account for differences within equity groups?

- How confident can we be that we are measuring what we claim to be measuring?

The first question speaks to the issue of the relative importance between equity groups. In the Bradley Review and in the Federal Government's response, low socioeconomic status appears to have become an umbrella term for all under-represented groups, including not only low SES people but also Indigenous peoples and people from regional and remote areas.

While it is true that many Indigenous and regional and remote people are from low SES backgrounds, it is also the case that many are not. For example, at least one third of Indigenous students are not eligible for the youth support allowance. Moreover, even those who are from low SES backgrounds, these backgrounds do not describe in full their particular social and cultural circumstances. Again, Australia's Indigenous population rightly claims their distinctiveness in Australian society, as first Australians, as having legitimate claims to and relationships with the land, as having distinctive values, understandings, practices and rights.

To its credit, the Government's recent budget paper, *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System*, announced its intention to support 'a review of the effectiveness of measures to improve the participation of indigenous students in higher education' (Commonwealth of Australia 2009). Nonetheless, the Government is still of the view that 'The steps to improve low SES student participation will impact on and benefit Indigenous students' (Commonwealth of Australia 2009). The same concessions have not been afforded people from regional and remote areas of Australia, despite the fact that, of all equity groups, their participation in higher education has seen the largest reduction over time. In effect, in the current equity policy hierarchy, Indigenous people and people from regional and remote areas are located first and second respectively under the low socioeconomic banner, while students with disabilities are less conveniently subsumed and indeed are displaced from current policy debates.

The second issue, then, that arises from our current fixation on proportional representation concerns the categorisation of groups, particularly the way in which people from low socioeconomic backgrounds are conceived as a homogenous group. There are in fact distinct differences within this grouping that again are derived from their different social and cultural differences. Refugees, for

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[3] At the same time, universities are being invited to enrol more undergraduate students, to increase the overall participation of Australians in higher education, to 40% of 25 to 34 year olds by 2025. If achieved, this will be the fifth expansion phase in the history of Australian higher education.

example, are quite a different group from the fourth and fifth generation unemployed of Anglo heritage. Take language – which we know is intimately related to culture – as just one example of these differences. For some, English is a third or fourth language, for others mastery is difficult even when English is their first language. And there are other examples of differences within this cohort that I am sure you could cite.

The third issue I and others have with a narrowly statistical approach to defining equity involves the question of precision, in particular in how socioeconomic status is measured. Not very well, some would say. We currently use an ABS-generated measure of the employment and educational attainment of individuals within postcodes, which are then rated from highest to lowest. Those postcodes in the bottom quartile, the bottom 25%, and, by association, those people living in them, are deemed to be of low socioeconomic status. One of the problems with this measure is that it does not take account of wealthy and high status areas within low SES postcodes or of poorer and lower status areas in middle and high SES postcodes.

Naturally, Vice Chancellors are concerned about the lack of clarity around these issues, particularly those who believe that their current student populations include students from low SES backgrounds who originate from and/or live in middle and high SES postcodes. Vice Chancellors are also concerned about the compacts that each institution will be required to establish with the Government in 2010, which will include institutional commitments to meeting certain targets related to the improved participation of students from low SES backgrounds. A university may well be in a position where, in effect, it is able to meet its target but this may not be represented within the official statistics.

In recognition of these difficulties, the Government has advised that it intends to revise the way in which low SES is currently measured for higher education participation purposes. This will most likely include taking account of smaller areas within postcodes. It may also involve combining this with data on students' parental educational attainment,[4] which DEEWR is requiring universities to collect

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[4] While the research suggests that people whose parent(s) have a university degree are more likely to seek a university education themselves, and information about a student's 'parental educational attainment' (PEA) would be useful to know, it is less clear that PEA is a good proxy for socioeconomic status. Socioeconomic status is far more than the educational qualification one has received. Certainly it would appear that people from low socioeconomic backgrounds tend not to have parents with a university degree, but this might be by association rather than indicative of a cause and effect relationship. Even so, if the Australian government and Australian universities are successful in raising the participation levels of low SES students in higher education, over time, when those students have their own children approaching a higher education, the PEA effect will be less relevant with respect to their SES. That is, PEAs will have lost its potency as a SES measure. In addition, PEAs, as they are currently proposed to be measured, do not take account of degree types. We know, for example, that some Australian university degrees are harder to access than others (e.g. compare degrees from elite with 'equity' universities, or degrees obtained in law and medicine compared with teaching and nursing), and that degrees obtained in other parts of the world are not of the same standard as Australian university degrees. We also know that it is one thing to have obtained a degree in the 1960s and another to have obtained it in the 1980s. This has implications particularly for mature age students, and for the institutions that tend to enrol large numbers of them (e.g. regional universities), who's parents may have obtained the highest education qualification available to them at the time (e.g. grade 8). And in times of global financial crisis (GFC), we know that mature age students are highly likely to be attracted to enrol in university and will be needed to do so, if the higher education sector is going to meet its 40% target of 25-34 year olds with bachelor degrees by

from students from 2010. Another possible measure could be derived from youth support allowance data, available from Centrelink, particularly now that the Government is committed to 'cleaning up' the eligibility criteria to exclude students whose financial circumstances do not warrant such support.

To be worthy of our trust, any new measure of low socioeconomic status needs to be cognisant of at least three things:

- First, socioeconomic status is a concept that is defined by its context; we need to avoid measures that 'context-strip' individuals, effectively discounting their social and cultural circumstances, which contribute to who they are;

- Second, because of the range of circumstances that constitute socioeconomic status, better statistical measures need to involve a combination rather than rely on one single measure;

- Third, the combination of social, cultural and economic circumstances that define socioeconomic status means that any statistical representation needs to be treated as indicative rather than prescriptive; statistical measures of social and cultural issues are always approximations.

As I have already noted, the Government has recently commented that 'Better measures of low socio economic status will be developed which are based on the circumstances of individual students and their families' (Commonwealth of Australia 2009: 14). The value of the current and arguably flawed measure is its regard for context and that it is not purely derived from economic considerations, although one's employment certainly speaks to this. The danger in any new measure is that it becomes so focused on individuals and their individual circumstances, that it loses any sense of the influence of these individuals' socio-cultural contexts, and which constitute the group.[5]

In developing a new measure of socioeconomic status – and I would argue that this also needs to account for mid and high as well as low socioeconomic status, because wealth and poverty tend to be relative terms in advanced economies – the Government would do well not to lose sight of 'family', and I would add 'community', in its calculations. We need to avoid reducing socioeconomic status to a single measure of an individual's financial and/or educational attainment alone.

Responding to equity targets

I have laboured these matters of equity definitions because they are important in their own right and because they have implications for what we imagine the purposes of higher education to be. But they also draw attention to what is missing, what is not considered in policy on student equity. An

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2025. In short, PEAs will be so varied that it will be almost impossible to use them as a viable measure across the higher education system and it is doubtful that they will be indicative of SES anyway.

[5] Margaret Thatcher once famously claimed that 'there's no such thing as society', that we are simply a collection of disparate individuals or 'individuals plural'. Of course, this gives no account of the way in which individuals negotiate their lives in combination with others. Indeed, our very lives involve others. We are social beings and social arrangements govern our interactions. We do this in collectives or groups: individuals interacting with each other in groups, groups interacting with other groups, and rules that govern our interactions.

emphasis on equity as proportional representation tends to focus our minds on what happens *before* students get into higher education. It draws attention to the point of entry, almost to the exclusion of other considerations.

In the current policy configuration, equity is seen to be achieved once students have entered in the right proportions. Obscured from our view is the impact of proportional representation on higher education itself. If the Australian Government and Australian universities are successful in achieving the proportional representation of equity groups within higher education, it is not difficult to imagine that their increased presence will have an impact on what happens within universities.

I will turn to these matters of what happens to equity once students gain entry, but I feel that having raised the notion that this constitutes 'success', at least in policy terms, I should first add a few caveats about this success before moving on.

First, the Government's target of 20% of university students derived from low SES backgrounds by 2020, falls short of the 25% of all Australians from low SES backgrounds. So even if the target is reached, proportional representation will not have been achieved. In addition, we know that higher education is not all the same. For equity policy to have real teeth, proportional representation would apply across institution and course types. Short of this, it will be difficult to argue that the policy or at least its equity intent, has been successful. And in this context we should acknowledge that Australians from low SES backgrounds are not evenly spread across the nation. In some parts they are more heavily concentrated, in other parts less so.

Should 'success', therefore, be geographically determined and, if so, should geographical boundaries or university 'catchment areas' be differently imagined? For example, if a university attracts students from high SES backgrounds from far afield, shouldn't it also be expected to attract low SES students from far afield? If a university's mission or raison d'être is national or even global, shouldn't this too inform determinations of its catchment area and hence the proportion of low SES students we could reasonably expect it to enrol?

But let's now move on to consider what this success means for universities, once enrolments of equity groups reach their proportional representation within the university student population and, therefore, once they are no longer an equity group, at least in how this is currently defined.

The implications of this are not lost on the higher education sector or on government. Indeed, these implications are often raised by some as reasons for not increasing the numbers of underrepresented groups in universities. The most common claim is that many students from disadvantaged backgrounds are not sufficiently prepared for university. To enrol them in a higher education would require a lowering of eligible ENTER (Equivalent National Tertiary Entrance Rank) scores; a lowering of academic entry standards.

This is such a widely and deeply held view that it is hard to dislodge even when faced with evidence to the contrary. Richard Teese's research, for example, clearly demonstrates that students with low ENTER scores are highly correlated with low socioeconomic status, and vice versa. In other words, the ENTER (or TER or OP or UAI) is more indicative of socioeconomic status than it is of a student's academic potential (Teese & Polesel 2003).

Echoing Teese's sentiments, George at al. argue that:

the TER is an authoritative measure that rewards the cultural resources characteristic of the most economically powerful groups in society. (George et al. 2005: 144)

The fallacy of the claim that enrolling more students from low SES backgrounds will inevitably lower academic standards, is also born out in the research on students' university performance. The evidence from any number of small and large-scale research projects across the country and across different university types, is that university students from low SES backgrounds perform at or about the same as their peers. If there is any variation – and I think more research is needed on this – it would seem that low SES students perform better than their peers in the 'soft' sciences and not as well as their peers in the 'hard' sciences.

Disparities in school facilities and in access to experienced science and mathematics teachers, could reasonably explain the 'hard' science variation. But talk of the lack of preparation of low SES students by schooling is enough to have some in higher education deflecting attention away from their equity responsibilities. How can we achieve the government's equity targets, they argue, if schools do not present us with adequately prepared students?

Of course, more could be done to ensure the quality of schooling for all students. We could equally argue that universities are intimately involved in the nature of schooling: in directly and indirectly determining its curricula, in preparing its teachers, and in valorising academic over vocational pathways. But this is to take us away from the evidence that students from low SES backgrounds perform well at university when given the opportunity to participate.

In need of support

Even among those who are prepared to accept this evidence, some suggest that achieving the government's low SES target will require enrolling students who are qualitatively different from those low SES students who have been enrolled to date. Others have determined that if their institution is able to reduce or even eliminate the attrition rate of their current low SES student population,[6] they will meet their low SES student targets.

Both observations and observers point to the need for increased support at university for students from equity groups, in order for them to be successful. What they have in mind are co-curricula activities that provide students with support outside regular classes: in study skills (including literacy and numeracy skills) but also in mentoring, counselling, accommodation, health care, childcare, and so on, including many of the programs and activities that have been the subject of discussion at this conference.

It is an argument that has found traction in recent government policy. The most recent budget paper on higher education (Commonwealth of Australia 2009: 13) announced a new enrolment loading to encourage universities to enrol students from low SES backgrounds, beginning from mid 2009 at around $100 extra for every enrolled low SES student and rising in 2012 to around $1000 extra for

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[6] It is worth noting that the attrition rate for university students from low SES backgrounds is not appreciably different from their peers. However, it is the case that Indigenous students at university have higher rates of attrition than other university students. Among other reasons for this, Indigenous people with even just one year of university education are highly sought after by government and industry for positions of employment.

every enrolled low SES student. The total funding for this across the sector and across the four-year period is estimated at $325m.

As well as being an incentive to encourage universities to enrol low SES students, the government's explicit intention is that the additional funding will be used 'to fund the intensive support needed to improve their completion and retention rates' (Commonwealth of Australia 2009: 14). This compares with $108m over the same period, which has been set aside to support university outreach activities or what are now called partnership activities with schools and vocational education and training providers; in funding terms, a 3 to 1 ratio in favour of supporting low SES students enrolled in university, favoured over activities that enable and encourage these same students to gain access to university.

There is considerable belief embedded in this policy initiative, that support for students from equity groups, particularly students from low SES backgrounds, is needed in order for them to be successful at university. Indeed, some suggest that it is because of the support they have been provided to date that students from low SES backgrounds have performance and attrition rates comparable with their peers. From data presented at this conference, this would certainly seem to be the case at the University of Western Australia's UniSkills program. But it is difficult to find evidence to support this claim across the sector. Student support provided by universities across the nation is quite varied, not just in its range but also in its quality and quantity.

Indeed, elite universities compared with 'equity' universities – with arguably lower levels of student support in the former – demonstrate lower rates of attrition by students from equity groups (Go8 Newsletter, March 2009). One explanation for this might be that elite universities enrol more students directly from school. For example, 82% of UWA's first year students are in this direct-from-school category. Whereas, the recent government budget paper notes that 'adult learners … comprise a large proportion of students who require additional support' (Commonwealth of Australia 2009: 15).

More research is required in this area of student support, in order for the sector and government to be able to make informed judgements at a policy and system level about what forms of support are needed and with what effect, for what kinds of students, and in which contexts.

Co-curricular activities are an important part of the university student experience. But there is a fundamental problem with our conception of student equity in higher education if these student support activities constitute all there is to equity.

Vince Tinto's phrase, that 'access without support is not opportunity', is now well known (Tinto 2008). I would add that 'opportunity confined to support is not equity'. This is because 'support', by definition, is not designed to challenge what a higher education means. Rather, its purpose is to reinforce what it currently means.

The primary function of a university's support services is to enable its students to engage effectively with its teaching and learning programs. In this sense – and I am speaking about universities in general here – student support is peripheral to the central activity of universities. The mainstream activity of university life – the legitimation and dissemination of certain forms of knowledge – is taken as a given, as normative. It is students who must adjust to it in order to be successful. Support

services provide the mechanisms for students to achieve this, if they do not come to university with the capacities and resources to achieve this on their own.

Effectively, students are not just 'supported' but positioned as requiring change, adjustment, up-skilling, additional resources, and so on, in order to fit in to established patterns of participation. In its most positive sense, support services provide students with ways of coping with university, even mastering it. Typically, it is not the university, its teaching and learning programs or its administrative structures, which adjust to accommodate different kinds of students. It is these arrangements to which the curriculum focus within the first year experience community speaks. Still, many academics who deliver the university's teaching programs would regard adjusting those programs to accommodate different kinds of students, as a threat to academic standards. In their minds, accommodating equity to that extent is in clear opposition to excellence.

Improving the student learning experience

Nevertheless, the government is of the view that 'to achieve [its] ambitious attainment targets there will also need to be an increased emphasis on improving the student learning experience in order to boost retention, progress and ultimately, completion rates' (Commonwealth of Australia 2009: 15). The targets referred to here include a target of 40% of 25 to 34 year olds with bachelor degrees by 2025, as well as the 20% low SES university student population target by 2020.[7] Given that explicit targets for the completion rates of low SES students have not been set, in these comments student equity appears subsumed by a productivity agenda. It is the 40% rather than the 20% target that seems to inform the rationale for improving the student learning environment and experience.

The work of Sally Kift, Vince Tinto and others is well known and regarded in this area of university student learning experiences. In the time that I have left, I do not intend to rehearse that work but to add to it and provide more of a social justice rationale and direction for it, and more than what I think is evident in the government's current policy agenda and in institutional practice.

Specifically, I want to unsettle 'the centre-periphery relations in the realm of knowledge' (Connell 2007: viii), as Connell describes the problematic of 'Northern Theory', and suggest a counter-hegemonic or Southern Theory of higher education (Connell 1993: 52; 2006; 2007). My prime motivation is my commitment to and understanding of social justice but I also see potential benefit for all. Indeed, a mature understanding of social justice, 'a sophisticated approach to equity' (Bradley et al. 2008), needs to be able to conceive of 'multiple payoffs'.

Like Kift, I too argue that the most effective site to engage in changing higher education is from the centre. Student support services are important and essential but, as I argued earlier, they are largely peripheral to the mainstream of higher education. A student equity agenda for higher education must centre on the student learning environment and experience if it is to challenge the exclusion of certain bodies and what they embody.

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[7] It should be noted that these targets are not necessarily compatible. The university that enrols large numbers of mature-aged students, who are more often from low SES backgrounds, may meet its low SES student target but not its student completions target. This is particularly the case for regional universities, which typically have higher rates of mature age student enrolments.

From this perspective, a Southern Theory of higher education involves three important dimensions (see Gale & Densmore 2000). In the most ideal of circumstances:

- First and foremost, student learning environments and experiences are such that students are appreciated for who they are and for how they identify themselves;

- Second, there are opportunities in these environments and experiences for all students to make knowledge contributions as well as to develop their understandings and skills;

- Third, all students are provided with genuine opportunities to shape how their learning environments and experiences are structured.

These I think would provide a more robust social justice framing for the Diversity principle in the current set of First Year Curriculum Principles, devised by Sally and her colleagues at QUT (Kift & Nelson 2005: 230-232). Indeed, I think the principle is about 'engaging with difference' rather than with diversity or variety and could usefully draw on the work of Bob Lingard and his colleagues at the University of Queensland and their major study on productive pedagogies, which now informs the policies on curriculum and pedagogy of most Australian state departments of education (Hayes et al 2006).

In the past, and in much of the present, universities have tended to make assumptions about the knowledges and understandings of their students, even in relation to those who have come from privileged backgrounds. Higher education learning environments and student experiences have been informed by what Paulo Freire (1996: 52) has termed a 'banking concept' of education: with academics making deposits in the minds of their students from which they (both) are able to make later withdrawals.

There has been little regard for what students bring to university, to the learning environment and experience, and little regard for what they are potentially able to contribute. Knowledge has been assumed to reside in the cloisters of the university, in the hands and heads of its dons. Indeed, universities and their scholars have positioned themselves as the legitimate, almost exclusive, producers of knowledge.

But we are beginning to understand that this is not necessarily the case, at least in some cases. For example, Australian higher education is starting to come to terms with the importance of Indigenous knowledges, although this is more prevalent in places like Canada and in parts of Africa. Apart from a distinctive body of knowledge, Indigenous peoples also have different ways of engaging with and expressing knowledge, for example through narrative.

Narrative is not a teaching or research method traditionally employed in universities. Indeed, it has been and still is regarded by many as 'unscientific'. Yet there are things that all students can learn from a narrative approach. Even in this past year, since student equity has become hot on everyone's lips, I have heard several Vice Chancellors whose discipline origins are in the hard sciences, express their personal and institutional commitment to student equity through a narrative of their own circumstances. Narrative has explanatory power that should not be under-estimated.

Similarly, international students are now very much part of the landscape of Australian universities. Their very presence, and in such numbers, has changed Australian higher education for domestic

students, for the most part for the better. They have challenged our epistemologies and ontologies and prompted many Australian academics to think differently about the kind of higher education offered to all, not just to students who come from overseas. Internationalising the curriculum may be regarded by some as a matter of translation, positioning teaching staff as interpreters. But for many Australian academics it is more importantly about recognising and being informed by different ways of thinking about and engaging with the world, informed by the social and cultural backgrounds of their international students.

These are matters of pedagogy as much as they are about curriculum. Improving the student learning experience is not simply about teaching students about foreign places or Indigenous knowledges, although there is certainly a place for that. Rather, it is about the need for a curriculum that provides room for different ways of thinking about, and different ways of engaging with knowledge, and indeed inserting different kinds of understandings that perhaps have not been part of Australian higher education before. It is about how we structure the student learning experience in ways that open it up and make it possible for students to contribute from who they are and what they know. It is about an enriched learning experience for *all* students.

To take this further, these arguments for Indigenous and international contributions to higher education need to be generalised across all equity groups (Connell 1993: 52). For example, students with a physical disability do not simply comprehend their disability as physical. It is also experienced socially and culturally and understood by them as socially and culturally constructed, which generate knowledges and ways of engaging with the world that are potentially valuable also for the non-disabled to acquire and understand.

In the same way, people from low socioeconomic backgrounds come to university with sets of knowledges about the world, of how to engage with the world, and of what the world is, that are potentially different from and valuable to others. One example is the way in which formal learning environments regard relations between pure and applied knowledge. For some people from low SES backgrounds, knowledge has no value outside of its use or application. But the dominant perspective in formal learning environments is that one needs to learn the theory before it can be applied in some practical situation. 'Even where periods of practicum, work experience, or projects are incorporated into programs, they are usually presented as opportunities to practice or apply the knowledge and skills gained' (Dall'Alba & Barnacle 2005: 719).

The relation is uni-directional: knowledge of the pure must precede knowledge of the applied. Hence:

> increasingly, knowledges and skills which could once only be acquired 'on the job,' and which had no existence outside of their use or application, are now deemed to have a formal component, which is a knowledge like any other; their practical component now presupposes a mastery of the theory of which the practical component is the application. Nursing and tourism become university subjects, knowledges which have to be learned in such a way that the students can draw upon their stock of formal knowledge and 'apply' it according to context. (Seth 2007: 38-39)

Similar distinctions are formed between 'street' knowledge and 'institutional' knowledge, with what students learn informally and from practice not being valued within formal learning environments.

My point is that valuable ways of understanding and engaging with the world, which have different understandings of the relations between pure and applied knowledge or that don't even make this distinction, are hence denied or lost to others in the learning environment.

Knowing and ways of knowing

One method of translating this theoretical acknowledgement of marginalised knowledges into real world curriculum is through what is known as a *funds of knowledge* approach (Moll et al. 1992; Gonzáles 2005). This includes recognising that all students come with valuable understandings that can contribute to the education of others. The approach requires identifying and inviting students' knowledges into the learning environment and using them to develop curricular. Students are then positioned differently, because they are now expert in the kinds of knowledges that inform the learning experience.

Complementing this approach, Lew Zipin (2005) argues that we also need to identify *funds of pedagogy*. It is not just the knowledges from students' different socio-cultural groups but also the ways in which students learn in those groups, which need to be taken into account. Finding a way of bringing those into the formal learning environment is far more challenging to the logic of higher education. To bring in different content is one thing. To bring in different ways of knowing at a deeper level is more threatening.

A third approach is potentially a hybrid or fusion of these funds (Gonzáles 2005). It involves lightly framed, open curricula and pedagogy that allow for student contributions, without these being predetermined.

Such an approach has implications for:

- The repositioning of lecturers, peers, academic literature, fieldwork, etc as resources for students' learning;

- The repositioning of disciplines and traditions as resources to aid the understanding of issues, problems, themes, and so on.

As I said at the outset, this deference to funds of knowledge and of pedagogy, are tentative ideas that need fleshing out in the higher education context but they have significant potential to re-inform the way we currently do higher education.

Conclusion

So let me try to pull all this together in these last few minutes. In my mind at least, I have made three main points:

- First, the way higher education policy currently defines student equity and social inclusion is in terms of student numbers and, superseding all others, numbers of students from low SES backgrounds. It is not a highly nuanced account although it is politically useful to some degree;

- Second, university student support services – including co-curricular activities (first generation FYE approaches) and enhanced curricula design (second generation FYE

approaches) – are increasingly being positioned as what student equity and social inclusion mean within higher education. These activities are incredibly important but they do not constitute all there is to equity, social inclusion or social justice;

- Third, a more sophisticated approach to student equity and social inclusion entails the creation of space in higher education not just for new kinds of student bodies but also for their embodied knowledges and ways of knowing. This is what I have called a Southern Theory of higher education and which perhaps could be dubbed third generation FYE. It applies not just to Indigenous peoples, their knowledges and ways of knowing, but has relevance for the epistemologies of all socio-cultural groups, including people of low socioeconomic status. Their current absence from our universities means a diminished higher education for our current university students, particularly for those enrolled in our elite institutions, which tend to have more homogeneous student populations.

I suspect that support for a Southern Theory of higher education will be hard to sell, but even if we are able to move some way towards it, what an education revolution that would be!

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