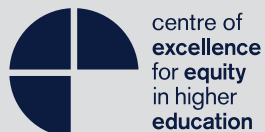

centre of **excellence** for **equity** in higher **education**

Occasional papers
Issue 01 May 2016

**Widening Participation in Higher Education:
International Perspectives**

01

Special Issue co-published with
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It is with great pleasure that I write the preface for this inaugural publication of the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE) Occasional Papers.

The four papers included in this publication offer important insights into the complex and challenging issues that frame equity in higher education policy debates across and between different national contexts. Each of the papers gives us a view of some of the historical and contemporary achievements and challenges that shape the field of equity in Australia, England, China and the United States of America. Earlier versions of these papers were presented at a conference of the International Alliance of Leading Education Institutes at Beijing Normal University and we are delighted that the Faculty of Education, Beijing Normal University is co-publishing these papers with us.

Richard James' and Carol Johnston's discussion of the Australian context raises some important historical and sociological themes to consider. They outline the history of policy commitments to widen participation in relation to the six specific 'equity groups' identified as disadvantaged and/or under-represented in higher education. They show how widening participation policy is embedded in core Australian values of fairness for all, although the ways that equity and fairness might be captured in policy discourse is far from straightforward. Explicit policy commitments to widen participation have indeed been crucial to the opening up of higher education opportunity for many individuals across Australian society; however as James and Johnston warn there continue to be significant patterns of under-representation of some groups and a growing equity gap. They point out that those who access high-status higher education continue to come from socially privileged backgrounds. Their writing brings attention to the important ways we might meet the challenges of equity in higher education, for example by shifting from competitive selection to focusing on ensuring quality and equity of outcomes for all students. They also warn that the possible deregulation of fees could have significant consequences for equity in Australian higher education.

Geoff Whitty, Annette Hayton and Sarah Tang bring attention to these issues through a Bourdieusian analysis of the possible effects of cultural and social capital in enabling and restricting engagement with education. Highlighting the ways that affluent families and parents are able to manipulate the market to their child's benefit, they shed light on the perpetuation of the accrual of social and cultural advantages across generations, despite explicit policies to widen participation to historically under-represented groups. This process of the reproduction of social and cultural advantage combined with high achieving schools and shared peer expectations helps to explain the ongoing gap in educational attainment between social groups despite decades of equity policy and practice.

Importantly, the authors point to the problematic 'poverty of aspiration' discourse and argue that 'expectations modify aspirations', because without access to the cultural and social capital, it becomes difficult to sustain high levels of aspiration. They also acknowledge the importance of interrogating the assumptions and values that underpin many widening participation activities, which might unintentionally reproduce educational inequalities. Their powerful message is that we need dual strategies that address the exclusionary nature of existing structures and systems whilst ensuring that access is improved to what currently exists.

Binglin Zhong brings much needed attention to the ways that entrance examination systems often (unintentionally) exacerbate relations of inequality. He provides a clear and concise overview of the Chinese National College Entrance Examination System (NCEES), outlining its historical development, the current challenges it faces with particular attention to questions of equity, the complexities around reforming a national system as well as recommendations for key aspects of reform for equity. He makes the important point that a nation wide system, which is framed by concerns for unification and emphasises 'general and stylized knowledge', sometimes risks excluding other crucial knowledge, understanding and skill, such as creativity, critical thinking, social responsibility and moral character.

He also highlights the ways that the national system often excludes those from rural areas, families experiencing poverty and material hardship and ethnic minority groups. His analysis is valuable for exposing some of the complex challenges for effecting change in national systems, for example difficulties in forming consensus across different and sometimes contradictory perspectives and interests. He provides a number of important insights about ways of reforming the system that might better address equity issues in China and many of the complex issues he raises will resonate across different national contexts.

In the context of higher education in the United States of America, and with a focus on racialised inequalities, Gloria Ladson-Billings illuminates the ongoing unequal higher education landscape, particularly for African-American and Latino/a students. Ladson-Billings critiques the narrative of the 'American Dream' by revealing the stark inequalities of 'race' that continue to characterise educational access and achievement. Of particular concern is the rise of for-profit higher education colleges that provide alternative programs, enticing students to 'choose' such pathways, often without their understanding of the differential value, quality and status of such provision. She contrasts this with the access programs available through public higher education institutions such as University of Wisconsin-Madison, which aim to provide high quality university degrees to students who are provided academic support pre-degree, including for example the 'cohort program'. However, such programs are embedded in selective practices through their attempt to identify talented (or potentially talented) young people from under-served backgrounds.

All four papers provide insightful overviews and analyses of the ongoing challenges of widening access to and participation in higher education. Although there are differences between the four countries of focus in this collection, there are also many similarities. Most importantly, all four point to the ways in which the problem of access is constructed and suggest that we need to pay close attention to the multiple, layered and complex social and cultural issues that play out to reproduce ongoing inequities in higher education.

This suggests that we need more refined research-informed policies and practices to redress such entrenched and historical inequalities. This inaugural issue of the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE) Occasional Papers represents CEEHE's deep commitment to driving forward a strong agenda for research-informed policy and practice across the multiple layers, contexts and challenges that characterise the field of equity in higher education.

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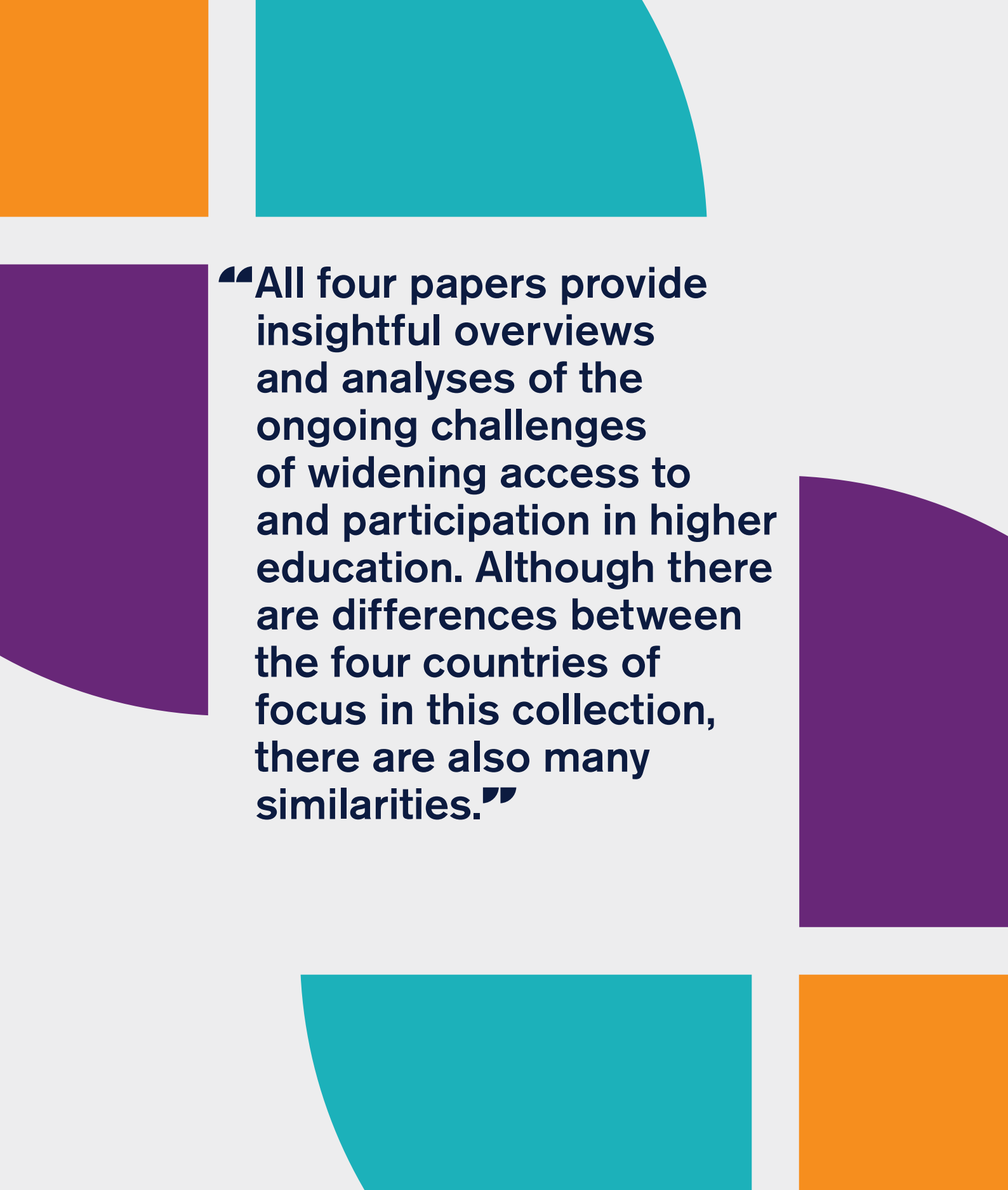
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“All four papers provide insightful overviews and analyses of the ongoing challenges of widening access to and participation in higher education. Although there are differences between the four countries of focus in this collection, there are also many similarities.”

Equity in Australian higher education: the effects of national policy to expand access for people from lower socio-economic status backgrounds

Written by
Richard James and
Carol Johnston

06



The context: Australian higher education and student access.

Higher education is significant to the quality of the Australian economy and the social fabric of the country.

The university system is of high quality and well-respected in the main part, as is evident in the high status of Australian universities in international rankings and in the strong and sustained international student demand for Australian higher education, with roughly one-quarter of Australian university students coming from overseas. Domestic demand for university places is also very strong.

Australian universities have a strong tradition of self-regulation and independence and have autonomy over student admissions as well as the criteria under which students are accepted into courses. Universities determine how many students are admitted to each course and the prerequisites for entry. The primary selection tool for domestic students at the undergraduate level is the Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR), which is a national rank between 0 and 100 calculated from results of the assessment undertaken in the final year of secondary schooling. The ATAR is not the only selection device, for account may also be taken of factors deemed to be indications of disadvantage including residence in rural and isolated locations or Indigenous heritage. There are also pathways into higher education for mature-age students who do not have an ATAR rank. An English language proficiency requirement is also a common prerequisite for entry for international students.

Universities do not have autonomy over the fees that are charged for domestic undergraduate students, the fee prices for different fields of study being determined by the government. Domestic students are able to defer the payment of tuition fees – undergraduate students are effectively offered an income contingent, low interest government loan with repayment collected through the taxation system when their future income reaches a threshold level. The possibility of undergraduate fee deregulation is currently a topic of intense political debate, with strong polarised views of the merit of a deregulated fee environment that has been proposed by the federal government.

Quality, efficiency and equity are the hallmarks of an effective higher education system (Baldwin & James, 2010; NBEET, 1996). Equity of access to higher education has historically been important to Australian higher education policy. Australia has prided itself on being the 'lucky country' and on giving 'a fair go' to all. A formal definition of equity in Australian higher education derives from *A Fair Chance for All* (Commonwealth of Australia, 1990 p. 2):

The overall objective for equity in higher education is to ensure that Australians from all groups in society have the opportunity to participate successfully in higher education. This will be achieved by changing the balance of the student population to reflect more closely the composition of the society as a whole.

Equity in the higher education system addresses core Australian principles in relation to justice, aspirations for a fairer society and the aspirations of families for social mobility. Nonetheless, equity is an issue for ongoing political debate, for its realisation in policy, practice and outcomes is challenging (James & McInnis, 2005; James, 2012).

To help ensure that all Australians have equal opportunity to access and successfully participate in higher education, *A Fair Chance for All* identified six designated equity groups and five performance indicators which have provided an enduring framework for data collection. The equity groups identified are those from low socio-economic backgrounds, those located in rural or isolated areas, people with disabilities, Indigenous people, those from non-English speaking backgrounds and women, especially those in non-traditional fields of study and higher degrees. The performance indicators relate to access, participation, success, retention and completion.

There have been four key expansion phases in the Australian higher education sector since the middle of the twentieth century (DEET, 1993). The first took place after WW2 when the original universities, which were established in each State capital city, were joined by newly established universities. The second phase, in the period 1960 to 1980, created a binary system of universities and Colleges of Advanced Education (CAE). In the middle of this period university fees were abolished and a Tertiary Education Allowance System was introduced to build growth in higher education participation. Phase three in the late 1980s was led by the 'Dawkins reforms', which created a Unified National System of universities (Harman, 1991) and introduced the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) of deferred, income-contingent fee payments, in order to assist in the funding of university places without restricting access to those who could pay upfront.

Under this scheme students pay a proportion of their course fees through the taxation system once their income reaches a threshold level. A key foundation aim of the Dawkins reforms was to improve equity in the Australian higher education system. This aim was reiterated in the Review of Australian Higher Education, known as the Bradley Review, which marked the start of phase four of expansion in 2008 by providing a framework for the deregulation of the number of university places.

Following the Bradley Review and the looming expansion of access, the sector moved more vigorously to assure quality and standards in the system (King & James, 2014). A new national regulator, the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) was established in 2011 to register and evaluate the performance of higher education providers against the threshold standards devised by the Higher Education Standards Framework (HESF) that all providers must meet in order to enter and remain within Australia's higher education system. The establishment of this regulator foreshadowed community concerns that standards might slip as participation rates expanded and as the number and type of tertiary institutions further diversified.

The Bradley Review recommended a target for increasing the proportion of Australians holding a bachelor degree qualification. The national target proposed was for 40% of 25–34 year olds holding a bachelors degree or higher by the year 2025, up from around 30% in 2007. A national equity target was also established for the participation of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds. The aim was for 20% of undergraduate university places to be held by people from lower SES backgrounds by 2020, up from around 15% in 2007. Significantly, the Bradley Review led to the uncapping of the number of university places, which previously were centrally regulated. The aim in lifting caps on the number of tertiary places was to improve both competition and diversity in the sector.

Arising from the Bradley Review, the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Programme (HEPPP) provided funding to assist universities to undertake activities and implement strategies that improved access, retention and completion rates of low SES students. HEPPP had three components. The first related to projects designed to improve participation and nearly \$500 million was provided in the period 2010–2014. The second related to partnerships between universities and schools, Vocational Education and Training (VET) providers, other universities, State and Territory governments, community groups and other stakeholders for activities to raise participation of the targeted equity groups. The third was a National Priorities Pool, around \$10 million in 2014, that supported projects to develop evidence, trial innovative ideas, build capacity and reform systems in order to maximise opportunity and outcomes for low SES groups in higher education.

The partnerships component of HEPPP reflects awareness that inequality at the tertiary level has its foundation much earlier and is reflected in primary and secondary school performance. Social class differences in school completion rates and levels of achievement are central to present inequalities in access to higher education in Australia. Professor Denise Bradley at the 2009 Student Equity in Higher Education Forum noted that the gap in student equity widens quickly from the start of schooling. She reported that in the United Kingdom bright children from poor families have a lower educational performance by the age of six than comparable children from more affluent homes. In Australia, the difference at age 15 between the highest and lowest SES groups in reading and mathematics is about two years. This gap between low SES and high SES is more evident in Australia than in other OECD countries as Australia is currently 20th out of 35 OECD countries in terms of 25 to 34 year olds who have completed a post-secondary education.

Specific equity policy measures arising from the Bradley reforms included institutional targets for improvement in low SES percentage participation that were built into Mission Based Compacts, which were triennial agreements between individual institutions and the federal government that provided financial rewards for achieving agreed SES targets. Additional funding was also provided to each university to support outreach, recruitment and in-course support to low SES students to stimulate successful completion.

Performance in relation to improving equity

For policy and analytic purposes, Australian society is often divided into socioeconomic quartiles in which 25% of the population is defined as Low Socio Economic Status (LSES), 25% as High Socio Economic Status (HSES) and the remaining two quartiles 50% as Middle Socio Economic Status (MSES). The indicator used to determine in which SES quartile a higher education student belongs is the postcode of home address. These postcodes are classified using an index of socio economic status drawn from the national census data. While home addresses are a broad brush geographic indicator of SES they nevertheless provide an overview against which change in performance can be ascertained.

In the 30 year period 1980 to 2010 there has been an expansion in total student participation as overall a reasonably steady annual growth rate of around 5% has been recorded. The rise in participation has been most dramatic in the 20–24 year old age group where participation increased from just over 8% to nearly 18% in the period 1985 to 2010.

Since the late 1990s students from a high or medium SES background have been twice as likely to attend university in Australia as those drawn from low SES backgrounds. Those from high SES background have been roughly three times more likely to attend university than those from low SES backgrounds. The Bradley low SES target of 20% participation by 2020 appears elusive, for universities have struggled to improve equity of access for low SES groups and for those from rural and remote backgrounds despite a period of growth in participation—over the period 2008–2011 the participation rate for low SES was ostensibly stable increasing less than a percentage point in the three years.

University access, participation and completion for Indigenous Australians continues to be a major challenge for policy and practice. Indigenous access rates are about half Indigenous population share and many of these students are enrolled in preparatory or enabling programs. National Indigenous completion rates are below 50% and as low as 20% in some institutions.

The history in relation to the other designated equity groups, people from rural and isolated areas, people with disabilities, those from non-English speaking backgrounds and women is more varied. Women have increased their participation in higher education markedly over the last 30 years and are over-represented in terms of population share in certain fields of study such as arts, humanities and social sciences, health and education. However, they are under-represented in other fields, such as engineering, and at masters level and in research degrees female participation is often lower than that for males. The participation rates of people from non-English speaking backgrounds also varies, for this is not an homogenous group. Broadly speaking, however, Australians of Chinese and Vietnamese origin have a higher participation rate in university education than is the case for the general population, a sign perhaps of high family aspirations and drive to succeed. The participation share for people with disabilities has improved from under 2% in 1996 to nearly 5% in 2011, though still below the national reference target of their population share of 8% (DEEWR, 2011).

“The rise in participation has been most dramatic in the 20–24 year old age group where participation increased from just over 8% to nearly 18% in the period 1985 to 2010.”

While aggregate equity imbalances are striking, when the data are explored at a deeper level further disparities emerge. There are variations in the type of institutions that students from different SES group attend. Four university types can be identified in the Australian context (James, Baldwin, Coates, Krause, & McInnis, 2004; James, Bexley, & Maxwell, 2008): Technical universities; Suburban universities; the Group of Eight; and Regional universities. Medium and low SES students are most highly represented in regional universities while high SES are most highly represented in the research-intensive Group of Eight universities. Low SES students are least likely to attend a Group of Eight university. A further disparity can be seen in the distribution of low SES students within particular discipline areas. Students from low SES backgrounds are under represented in fields of study where there is the most competitive entry and in postgraduate study. For example, Architecture has the lowest share of low SES students while Agriculture and Education have the highest share. Low SES students are least represented in the fields of Law and Medicine.

While low SES and rural students demonstrate a first year drop-out rate that is broadly on a par with other groups, low SES students from remote or Indigenous backgrounds have higher attrition rates. Attrition rates differ substantially across Australian universities, with the Group of Eight universities generally having the lowest attrition rates while regional universities have the highest. Remote and Indigenous students have the highest rates of attrition among the disadvantaged student groups.

In broad terms, the Australian data suggest that once students from disadvantaged backgrounds commence university their performance in terms of pass and completion rates is broadly similar to that of other students. A study conducted by the Australian Council for Educational Research as part of the Longitudinal Studies of Australian Youth research series, concluded that once students from a low socio economic background enter university, their background does not negatively affect their chances of completing the course (Marks, 2007).

Possible explanations for the under-representation of low SES background students in higher education Factors that contribute to under-representation of low SES students in Australian higher education are interrelated and are similar to those experienced in other OECD countries. Universities are responding to educational disparities that have their roots in schooling. Social class difference in school completion rates and level of achievement underlie, and are reflected in, inequalities in access to higher education. In essence, low SES students are less likely to complete their schooling, may experience lower levels of achievement in schools, and may have lower educational aspirations or narrower educational horizons. These factors are likely to have been generated in their earliest years of schooling in conjunction with influences of family background including the educational attainment of parents. It is likely that the culture of universities may be an alien one for low SES students and their confidence in the relevance of higher education to their career and personal lives is weaker than for other SES groups.

While financial factors are frequently cited by students as deterrents to participation in higher education (James et al., 2004) the available data indicate that the impact of these factors is uncertain. Thus, while student loan schemes, scholarships, bursaries and other financial support programs are part of the solution to encourage participation, they are not the whole answer. Changing perceptions and aspirations at the primary and secondary school level appears crucial if improvement in equity is to take place.

Indigenous Australians experience additional challenges in participating in higher education. School completion rates for Indigenous students are about half of those for other Australians. Even when these students successfully gain a place at university their completion rates are well below 50%, as noted earlier, for a range of complex reasons. Various sub-degree and enabling programs are in place to build preparedness for university study but at present these appear to have had only modest impact on improving retention. A study for Universities Australia (formerly the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee) indicates that financial factors are highly significant for Indigenous students (James, Bexley, & Marginson, 2007).

Equity and growth in participation

System expansion does not in itself improve the participation share of people from low SES backgrounds though absolute numbers may increase. While the number of places available in higher education has been uncapped as a result of the Bradley Review there is little indication that this has improved equity in terms of disadvantage group participation in higher education. Student numbers have certainly increased but most of this increase can be attributed to higher rates of participation by the middle and high SES groups. As noted earlier, the government has provided per capita funding incentives to help achieve its national equity target. With these resources, universities have made sustained effort to recruit more low SES students. While there has been some modest improvement, evidence of longer-term improvement would be needed to achieve policy success – certainly the pace of improvement would need to increase dramatically if the government equity targets were to be met by 2020.

Equity and standards

A concern that is frequently raised in relation to the massification/universalisation of higher education is that standards will necessarily be negatively affected. The implicit thinking, in essence, is that by providing access to higher education to a much wider cohort of students many will be accepted who do not have the capacity to complete a university degree at previous levels of academic standards. The shift to massification/universalisation of participation requires a corresponding shift in thinking regarding the locus of standards, from 'inputs' to 'outcomes'. The idea that the quality of the input, crudely conceived as 'the quality of the students', will safeguard academic standards is no longer sound. Rather, the protection of standards relies on improved methods of measuring graduate attributes.

In Australia, potential concerns about any weakening of higher education standards were foreshadowed by the creation of a new national agency, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), with responsibility for the external monitoring and regulation of all higher education providers. This agency uses standards for quality assurance purposes in relation to the operation of the organisation, aspects of teaching and learning, and expectations for research. The Higher Education Standards Panel establishes the standards framework that TEQSA uses for its regulatory role.

If TEQSA is effective in applying the national standards, a decline in the standard of Australian degree programs and graduates appears unlikely. However, it is probably too early in TEQSA's evolution to establish its efficacy as a 'watchdog'. Nonetheless, it appears on the face of it that appropriate institutional safeguards are in place to protect the integrity of the higher education system in Australia.

“Assessing the readiness for higher education for low SES mature-age students without ATARs is more challenging. Around one-fifth of commencing under-graduates and over two-thirds of postgraduates are aged over 25.”

Equity and academic merit

The Bradley Review suggested possible avenues that the higher education sector could explore to improve equity. Probably the most controversial, at least for some universities, was the exploration of alternative entry requirements. At present there is a heavy reliance on the ATAR for school leavers seeking entry to university. The ATAR, while an efficient method of screening applicants in the sense that it is relatively easy to administer and resource effective being based on final year school testing, is not a measure of intrinsic academic ability for it also is related to family, school and community circumstances. The ATAR is therefore not perfect as a proxy for academic potential in higher education and if equity is to be actively pursued then other methods of selection must be explored. Among these could be open access admission, portfolios, or admission interviews, as is the case now in some medical faculties. Nevertheless, the ATAR is viewed as an informal pointer to high entry standards, particularly in the Group of Eight universities, and a rise in mean ATAR ranks or cut-offs is often celebrated in faculties and universities. The challenge for the high-demand, more selective universities is to identify educationally disadvantaged students who have high academic potential.

While the ATAR is not an ideal proxy for potential ability it does appear to have modest predictive power for the preparedness for higher education study for school leavers. Universities have in place a number of support and enabling programs to assist students who reach university with lower ATAR ranks to ease the transition from school to university.

Assessing the readiness for higher education for low SES mature-age students without ATARs is more challenging. Around one-fifth of commencing undergraduates and over two-thirds of postgraduates are aged over 25. The socio economic background of these students is particularly unclear given the limitations of the postcode measure that is currently used as a proxy for low SES background.

Equity and the responsibility for addressing it

The Australian government's approach has been to place pressure on universities to address the higher education equity issue. While universities clearly must assume some responsibility it is not sensible to ascribe them with the entire responsibility. The improvement of equity in higher education requires improvement in all education sectors as all sectors contribute to raising equity (Gemici, Lim, & Karmel, 2013).

Generally, inequality has been born long before students' transition from school to higher education. In terms of school leavers, universities' low SES recruitment initiatives engage with an already reduced cohort: these are the low SES students who have successfully completed secondary school, whose attainment is at a suitable level, who understand the relevance of tertiary education and have confidence in their ability to succeed. This is a relatively narrow band of students and to focus only on these students as a way of addressing inequality is to avoid the main challenge. Many, maybe most, low SES students do get to this point of 'choice' and are effectively lost from the 'pipeline' long before the final years of schooling. One focus of the universities therefore is to reach back into the school years to assist school students through programs designed to boost familiarity with higher education and to build confidence in aspiring to go on to higher education. School and university partnerships are proving to be essential in this process of informing aspirations. The identification of schools that have fewer students gaining university places provides a focus for some targeted programs as does geographic location.

Equity and barriers

A common criticism of Australian politicians who attended university during a period of free higher education in the early 1970s is that while they received, and benefited from, a free education, they are now creating policies that require today's students to pay ever increasing fees. Fees are seen as a barrier to participation and equity and rising fees are a frequent complaint in protests about the costs of education.

However, there is little concrete evidence in Australia to date that free or low cost higher education increases participation – indeed the social composition of university students in the early 1970s is very much the same as it is today.

While the cost of higher education today may be one factor in deterring low SES students from attending university, other possibly interrelated and more important factors are also in play in the decision. Low levels of school achievement, aspirations and lack of perceived relevance are also potent factors. In any event it is most unlikely that governments in the current and likely future Australian context would be willing or able to fund appropriate quality higher education in this era of mass/universal higher education. Free higher education would likely result in far fewer places or a drastic reduction in quality provision.

Equity and choices

A challenge at least equal to removing barriers to entry is to seek ways to improve the range of choices for students. Not only choices in what to study, but also choices in the manner in which they can engage with the courses they choose to undertake. The Bradley Review pointed to curriculum innovation and diversification for accessibility and relevance. Equity policies and programs at individual institutions in turn influence first year curriculum decisions as universities seek to teach and support students who are more diverse and potentially less well-prepared than was the case in previous decades. In some cases this is prompting a reconceptualisation of first year curricula to accommodate more diverse student cohorts.

A mix of campus-based and blended online curricula is one option being explored by universities as they move to ensure that first year programs effectively engage with a wider range of students. Improving support for students in their first year at university through targeted programs aims to improve retention at regional universities where attrition rates are particularly high.

Conditions necessary for advancing equity in Australian higher education

The present conservative government in Australia effectively put aside the aspirational target of 40% of 25 year olds possessing a degree by 2025 and the equity target of low SES student higher education participation rising to 20% by 2020 that were set by the previous government. Slow progress towards achieving these targets may have partly prompted this decision though there are no doubt ideological factors at play as well.

The recent history in Australia is that the 'the tide lifts all boats', for relative participation rates across the socio economic classes have remained relatively stable despite a dramatic overall expansion in participation rates. Thus there has been disappointing progress in achieving better equity in higher education access for low SES Australians. Nevertheless if new approaches are not taken, resources will be wasted on well-intentioned but low impact programs and the apparently intractable nature of the problem will not be resolved.

While low SES background is the most important characteristic used for equity purposes it is infused with problems of definition and measurement. Postcodes of home address act as a proxy for socio economic status and while useful for identifying trends and aggregate data they are not an appropriate way in which to identify individual economic or educational disadvantage. A key problem for universities in implementing access programs to improve equity is in identifying individual students with educational disadvantage from the patterns of disadvantage experienced by particular groups.

Postcode is of course not useful in this regard and alternatives need to be considered including individual level indicators such as parental occupation, education and income levels – data more costly to gather, and more intrusive.

A debate around avenues to improve equity that centres only on financial disadvantage and barriers is too narrowly focused (James et al., 2007). Boosting the enabling factors is as necessary as removing barriers. While scholarships and other forms of financial incentives and support are necessary, these are only part of the solution. Policy needs to be framed around a multi-causal understanding of the factors underlying equity. Equity initiatives will have limited impact if they operate only at the point of transition into university. It is not only an issue of selection but also one that requires more focus on the early stages of the creation of educational ambition. Programs that are conducted in under-represented schools to build ambition and confidence are needed and strong partnerships between schools and higher education providers are required.

Improvement in the pathways to higher education that are not focused on competitive selection would assist in reaching equity goals. Mature-aged entry to universities and more flexible pathways to facilitate this are also required. While loosening the grip of the ATAR on university selection is likely to be difficult, it may well be one of the most important changes required to improve equity. Clearly a necessary co-development would be the creation of more robust output measures of graduate quality to help shift the emphasis from student admissions to student outcomes. Better information on what students have actually learned through their degree program is a vital next step. A 'value-added measure' of the outcomes of a university education would shift institutional status based on reputational effects towards one based on graduate attributes and outcomes, including employment outcomes (Dockery & Miller, 2012).

In the past year the conservative government in Australia has unsuccessfully attempted to deregulate higher education fees and to require part of the additional revenue collected to be allocated to a new scholarship scheme to ensure students from disadvantaged backgrounds have access to more scholarships – to offset concerns that higher fees in a deregulated fee environment would significantly damage equity. At present there is considerable uncertainty in the higher education sector as a divided parliament has limited the government's ability to pass key elements of its proposed higher education reform program. Only time will tell if the proposed changes will become policy and if they result in more equitable outcomes in Australia. It is clear, however, that higher education fees will rise in Australia in the short to medium term and the consequences for equity may be profound.

“A challenge at least equal to removing barriers to entry is to seek ways to improve the range of choices for students. Not only choices in what to study, but also choices in the manner in which they can engage with the courses they choose to undertake.”

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The growth of participation in higher education in England

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Access to higher education by any route was still very much a minority pursuit until the 1960s. In England, the shift from an elite to a mass system of higher education only began just over 50 years ago (Trow, 1974; Scott, 1995) when the Robbins Report articulated what came to be known as the Robbins principle that:

*Courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so.
(Robbins, 1963, p. 8).*

The economic conditions and meritocratic beliefs of the post-war years brought an overall rise in participation. However, the small numbers of working class students who progressed on to higher education demonstrated that expansion was not enough to ensure equal access.

From 1970, there was a considerable and persistent gap in the rates of participation in higher education in England between those from higher and lower socio economic groups – a gap of 25 to 30 percentage points (Whitty et al., 2015).

New Labour policies in England

In England the New Labour Government that was elected in 1997 championed the role of education in developing a high skills workforce and promoting social justice (Wilkins & Burke, 2013).

New Labour had two prongs to its policy. The first, widening participation, was primarily concerned with narrowing the participation gap in the system as a whole. The second prong, fair access, indicated a need to widen participation at elite universities whose admissions policies had often been accused of being biased in favour of rich kids from elite private schools (Bekhradnia, 2003).

In 2001, Prime Minister Tony Blair embraced a new ambition to increase the participation of 18–30 year olds in higher education to 50% by 2010. From 2002 all English universities were required to develop and publish a Widening Participation Strategy in return for widening participation funding. In 2004 most existing outreach and other widening participation initiatives were expanded and incorporated into Aimhigher, a major national initiative based on local partnerships to increase participation in higher education through outreach work to raise aspirations among previously under-represented groups (Whitty et al., 2015).

The issue of access soon became tied up with debates about the funding of higher education more generally as upfront tuition fees of £1000 had been introduced in 1998 and from 2006 universities could choose to charge a maximum of £3000 per year. Recognising that one of the risks of this policy, particularly for a Labour government publicly committed to social justice, was

that students from poorer backgrounds would be put off higher education, maintenance grants, which had been abolished in 1998, were reintroduced for poorer students in 2004. In the same year, an Office for Fair Access (OFFA) was established and all universities planning to charge the new ‘top-up’ fees were required to produce an Access Agreement setting out their plans for widening participation (DfES, 2003; OFFA, 2004; Whitty et al., 2015).

Although there was resistance to imposing quotas on universities, each university was given an individual widening participation benchmark which was calculated by taking into account the range of subjects offered at the institution and the entry qualification of the students recruited.

Performance against targets

Academics have sought to evaluate New Labour’s performance by considering the extent to which quantitative inequality and qualitative inequality were reduced during its period of office (Boliver, 2008). In broad terms, the first is a measure of widening participation, the second of fair access.

Quantitative inequality

In 2007, the British government revised the methodology it used to measure the participation gap (Kelly & Cook, 2007). This new measure showed a more positive picture, with the participation gap declining since the mid-1990s and standing at 20.2% in 2007/08.

However, other research carried out at that time showed major disparities and differences in participation between diverse social groups when you dug beneath the surface (David, 2010). It is thus important to consider participation in a more nuanced way than simply comparing participation rates from high and low socio economic groups or neighbourhoods.

Qualitative inequality

But even if low SES participation rates do increase overall, the so-called theory of Effectively Maintained Inequality (EMI) suggests that those groups who had previously had more exclusive access to higher education will maintain their advantage by seeking out supposedly 'better' education (Lucas, 2001). It does not actually have to be better than elsewhere, but people have to believe it is. In England, more affluent families maintain their positional advantage by attending highly prestigious institutions at which low SES students are a rarity (Curtis et al., 2008). As has been said of a similar phenomenon in the USA, 'student access to the system as a whole does not mean access to the whole system' (Bastedo & Gumpert, 2003, p. 355).

For England, there is a clearly uneven distribution of students from different socio economic groups across different types of university. Forty-four percent of students from professional families who attend universities go to Russell Group universities, the equivalent of the Group of Eight in Australia, but only 23% of students from unskilled backgrounds do so. Partly these figures reflect the fact that access to the most prestigious higher education institutions is still dominated by those from elite fee-paying independent schools. Forty-six per cent of young full-time first degree entrants to the University of Oxford still come from elite private schools (Whitty et al., 2015).

This figure is all the more striking when in England only about 7% of children receive the bulk of their education in such schools (DCSF, 2008). Even in state schools, it is the more advantaged students who secure the high grades needed for Oxbridge, so the socio economic mix is skewed, regardless of the type of school attended (Sutton Trust, 2008).

Recent policies

A key policy of the 2010–15 Conservative-led Coalition government was to raise maximum university fee levels from £3000 per year to £9000 but covered by an income contingent upfront loan to students (Garner, 2009). It also abolished Aimhigher, putting the responsibility back on to individual institutions, though retaining some national funding streams to support equity measures. In order to stop these policies reversing what progress had been made on widening participation, universities charging over £6000 in fees were required to produce more elaborate Access Agreements showing how they would enhance financial support to students, ensure fair admissions, deliver outreach activities to support students from under-represented groups and improve the retention of disadvantaged students (Whitty et al., 2015).

So far, it is unclear what effect these policies have had in practice on widening participation and fair access. Nevertheless, an expected reduction in applications as a result of the new higher fees regime has not materialised to anything like the degree anticipated by its critics and seems to have affected mature and part-time applicants rather than school leavers. There has also been a small increase in the numbers of low SES students attending the more prestigious institutions. However, the recent abandonment of a National Scholarship Scheme may penalise disadvantaged students, especially those with lower examination scores who are concentrated in newer universities (McCaig, 2016).

For now, demand has remained relatively buoyant and, in December 2013, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, unexpectedly announced that student number controls would be ended from 2015/16 onwards. In this case, England was following the post-Bradley policy in Australia. Although potentially welcome news for widening access to the system as a whole, the detailed effects of this change remain unpredictable (Hillman, 2014). One prediction is that some more traditional institutions with significant research income will choose to maintain their present size and status, making competition for entry to them even tighter to the potential detriment of applicants from disadvantaged families and schools.

Nevertheless, it is encouraging that a further £22 million has been earmarked for collaborative outreach activities to ensure schools have contact with universities, possibly a belated recognition that the abolition of Aimhigher was a mistake (Whitty et al., 2015).

Barriers to participation and fair access

We now explore some of the continuing barriers to widening participation and fair access with a view to identifying what more might be done to ensure a more equitable system, especially in the context of a market-driven system. Is the inequitable distribution of places at different universities brought about by 'who you know, what you know, or knowing the ropes' – or indeed by the financial resources available to different families?

Student Finance

Although the recent fee rises in England do not appear to have had the disastrous impact on school leavers their critics predicted, there is an academic literature suggesting that, even for younger students, there may be subtle financial inhibitions to widening participation, particularly affecting those for whom applying for university was a marginal decision. While fear of debt may not be pivotal in the decision on whether to enter higher education at all, it may have an impact, particularly for disadvantaged students, on location of study, thereby restricting the options for such students (Callender & Jackson, 2008).

Young people from lower socio economic backgrounds are more likely to choose to live at home with their parents, which both restricts their choice of university and means that they can miss out on other aspects of the traditional experience of higher education (Davies, Qiu, & Davies, 2014; Mangan, Hughes, Davies, & Slack, 2010). It is not clear that the financial assistance available to students in England is sufficient where the young person cannot also draw on their parents to cover the full costs of attending higher education away from home. This in turn makes them more likely to seek part-time or even full-time work while studying (Van Dyke et al., 2005). So finance does still make a difference at least at the margins.

Aspiration and awareness

The positioning of under-represented groups as somehow lacking in aspirations has been a key feature of widening participation and fair access initiatives to date. Yet research in London found that most first year secondary school pupils knew about university and 75% wanted to attend one and this did not vary as much as might be expected by socio economic background. This work stands in contrast to the 'poverty of aspiration' thesis, which is popular with politicians.

However, even if aspiration seems to exist across the board in younger children, a key issue is how expectations modify aspiration, particularly as students move through secondary school. Disadvantaged students often have high aspirations, but they may not know how to achieve them and may struggle to maintain them. Such work highlights the importance of relevant information, advice and guidance.

Bok (2010), drawing upon experience in Australia, quotes a teacher as saying that students from low socio economic backgrounds who aspire to go to university have 'to perform in a play without a script'. In other words, despite their aspirations, they don't 'know the ropes'. The ability to navigate educational pathways towards aspirations is seen to be 'influenced by students' access to "hot" knowledge' (Ball & Vincent, 1998) provided by families and local networks. This has huge implications for those university students who are 'first in family', especially in terms of entry to 'elite' institutions.

“In 2007, the British government revised the methodology it used to measure the participation gap (Kelly & Cook, 2007). This new measure showed a more positive picture, with the participation gap declining since the mid-1990s and standing at 20.2% in 2007/08.”

Prior attainment

'What you know' about the system is important but at least as important is 'what you know' through the curriculum. The major formal impediment to students proceeding to higher education is still low prior attainment. In England, while there is still a considerable gap in higher education participation between those from different backgrounds, the gap shrinks or even disappears once prior academic attainment is controlled (Chowdry et al., 2013). And while participation in 'high-status' universities is also unevenly distributed across different groups when looking at the raw numbers, this bias towards higher socio economic groups attending higher-status institutions is reduced – though not entirely eliminated – once other variables are included.

Schools of course influence attainment. Crawford (2012) suggests that the key school influence on participation is its capacity to produce good examination performance at age 16. The implication is that, in order to narrow the participation gap, the main policies likely to have any impact would be raising the school attainment of those from lower socio economic backgrounds in all schools or making use of contextual data to identify those students from less advantaged backgrounds, including underperforming schools, who have greater academic potential than their attainment to date might suggest.

The importance of social and cultural capital

Most of the research just described suggests that, using standard measures of deprivation, socio economic status is relatively unimportant in determining the participation rate once prior attainment is taken into account. But, even leaving aside the fact that levels of attainment at school are strongly associated with socio economic status, that might not be the whole of the story.

Bourdieu (1986) has highlighted the role of social and cultural capital in enabling and restricting engagement with education. He used the term 'cultural capital' to mean forms of privilege, specifically in terms of education and broader cultural taste, passed down through families. In studies of contemporary education it is often used when considering how affluent parents 'play the system' and get their children into the most prestigious secondary schools. The combination of well-informed, educated parents, high achieving schools and a peer group with similar expectations tends to result in higher attainment. Alongside that is social capital, which crucially includes social networks that can be drawn upon to perpetuate privilege.

Although we are seeing a growing orthodoxy emerge among economists that there is little or no difference in university entry between students from different socio economic groups once prior attainment is taken into account (Anders, 2012), social and cultural capital affect school attainment from an early age and certainly enter the picture in that way. Furthermore, other work suggests that there may be social and cultural capital influences on decisions to participate in higher education even if they do not show up in crude indicators of socio economic status, although this does not mean they are necessarily independent of 'social class' (Harrison & Waller, 2010).

Noble and Davies (2009), for example, found that attainment was still the most powerful predictor of participation, but cultural capital did appear to have an independent impact. They considered such factors as whether the family home was rented, the number of siblings in the family, the books in the home, and the level of parental education. Davies et al. (2014) have subsequently concluded that it would make sense for widening participation initiatives 'to identify students with non-graduate parents, low levels of cultural capital or low graduate premium expectations as less likely than other students to go to university'. They suggest that 'awarding reduced fees or offering participation in 'Outreach' activities on the basis of income indicators seems less sensible than using more targeted indicators like these.

Ball et al. (2002) suggest that the very process of deciding whether or not to go to higher education is significantly different for those from different backgrounds. The 'embedded chooser' is someone who is more likely than not to go on to higher education whereas the 'contingent chooser' is less likely to progress on to higher education. These categories are broadly related to family and community circumstances. If more contingent choosers are to enter higher education, an area which is particularly important is the support, advice, guidance and encouragement given to students in applying to university.

This is especially crucial for those young people whose family does not possess relevant cultural capital and social networks to provide appropriate support and guidance. In England there is a big difference between private and state schools in this respect. So it may still be that who you know – but crucially 'knowing the ropes' – is still what is important here. Families that lack past experience of higher education often do not have easy access to the sorts of networks that help provide advice and support for second generation university families.

Equity might seem to require that such knowledge should be acquired through school–university links rather than being solely dependent on family background and social contacts. However, working class suspicion of official knowledge (Ball & Vincent, 1998) means that schools and universities need to develop strong community links, so that potential students are matched with successful students from similar backgrounds to themselves.

School as well as parental background can be particularly relevant here. Some English research (BIS, 2009) showed that while there were significant differences between the proportions of similarly qualified students attending prestigious institutions from different types of schools, this seemed to be due to disparities in applications rather than any bias from admissions tutors at the point of entry. This suggests that extra support is needed in some schools to encourage students who want to apply to more prestigious universities.

It seems then that these quite complex interactions between home, school and university cultures pose a considerable challenge for those seeking to widen participation in higher education and these help to explain why only limited progress has been made to date. It is too easy to blame 'deficits' in students, families and communities. There are significant deficits in schools and universities that need to be addressed.

“Policy makers and institutional leaders need access to more sophisticated research and datasets if they are to monitor performance and act to enhance equity in all its manifestations.”

Policy directions

While there has been some progress in getting these issues onto the agenda and in widening participation generally, we now need to make more progress in actually achieving equity in access to all types of university, not least because some commentators are suggesting that current policies may herald 'a retreat from WP' (McCaig, 2014).

Although writers like Burke (2012) and Gale (2015) are undoubtedly right that widening participation needs to be reconceptualised as a project of social justice in the widest sense, at the moment there is little, if any, appetite within any of the main political parties for radical redistributive policies. Or indeed for entry to selective universities by lottery or taking the top students from each school.

However, there are some actions that might be taken within existing policy frameworks to encourage more individuals from non-traditional backgrounds to consider entry to all forms of higher education and acquire the means to do so especially through what they know and knowing the ropes. These include a focus on narrowing attainment gaps and supporting aspiration much earlier in pupils' educational careers; radically improving the quality of information, advice and guidance that young people receive about higher education and its different forms; ensuring that school–university links are developed for all schools; and planning joint activities on a more regular basis.

In addition, funding for carefully targeted mentoring, including academic mentoring, needs to be provided to keep young people in education longer and to support students from non-traditional backgrounds through higher education, while parents and communities need to be involved in universities' outreach activities to encourage and sustain interest in higher education.

For the time being anyway, contextual data about student backgrounds should be used as part of the toolbox for making admissions decisions, especially at highly selective universities.

Research priorities

Policy makers and institutional leaders need access to more sophisticated research and datasets if they are to monitor performance and act to enhance equity in all its manifestations.

Data sources are relatively rich in both countries, but one of the major challenges lies in linking up different data sets. There is an even bigger challenge when comparing countries, as can be seen from the incommensurability of some of the data presented here.

Research into higher education participation needs to draw on qualitative as well as quantitative data, and to utilise a range of theories from across the disciplines. It should also be clear from what we have said earlier that research into higher education participation and progression requires the involvement of researchers who are interested in schools as well as higher education.

More research on the relative effectiveness of different approaches to widening participation and ensuring fair access is also needed. Including, for example, studies of what sort of outreach activities are most effective with different groups.

Last but not least, we also need more alternative and critical perspectives that question the assumptions underlying many widening participation activities (Southgate & Bennett, 2014). However, although we would like to see more alternatives to traditional university education as advocated by its critics, that will take time. Cultures and pedagogies currently excluded from or marginalised in the academy certainly need to be given greater prominence. But we should surely not accept that in the meantime certain groups will be effectively excluded from higher education. We need to improve access to what exists and change what people gain access to. In our view, social justice demands both.

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The historical development, current status, and future outlook of the Chinese National College Entrance Examination System

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China was one of the first countries in the world to enrol college students based primarily on unified examinations. The establishment of the National College Entrance Examination System (NCEES) in 1952 has played an important role in talent selection, the promotion of educational reform, the improvement of educational equity, and social justice.

China was one of the first countries in the world to enrol college students based primarily on unified examinations. The establishment of the National College Entrance Examination System (NCEES) in 1952 has played an important role in talent selection, the promotion of educational reform, the improvement of educational equity, and social justice. However, given the changes occurring within the internal and external education systems, the NCEES is facing increased pressure due to inner educational reforms and outside appeals for educational equity. The extensive function of the NCEES and diverse appeals from different stakeholders has created a gap between the progress of reforms and social expectations, thereby highlighting the difficulty of enacting such changes. To actively and steadily push forward NCEES reforms, China should conduct corresponding reforms such as improving its top-level design, regulating enrolment orders, and establishing an interest coordination mechanism.

The historical development and significance of the National College Entrance Examination System (NCEES)

When the People's Republic of China was founded, there was a severe conflict between a need for specialised talents for societal and economic development and the backward level of the education system, particularly higher education. This discrepancy necessitated educational reconstruction and reforms. The challenges that faced educational reconstruction concerned how to develop professional and formal education, expand the scale of higher education, and accommodate a pressing need for talent throughout the course of China's social and economic development. In higher education particularly, a major bottleneck to expanding its scale was an insufficient number of qualified high school graduates. Moreover, higher education enrolment tasks and the number of qualified high school graduates varied according to administrative region. There was also a gap between the number of students who sought admittance to certain colleges or majors and those that were accepted.

To place students in a unified manner and meet enrolment objectives, China established a nationwide enrolment examination system in 1952, which featured unified planning, organisation and leadership, registration, enrolment, and deployment (Liu, 2013). To some extent the system achieved its primary goals (i.e., to extend the scale of enrolment and increase selection through administrative means); however, during the Cultural Revolution the examination system was temporarily halted. The subsequent resumption of the NCEES in 1977 enabled a wider array of citizens to enter institutions of higher education based on their grades and achievements rather than economic status or political affiliation, and was consequently coined the 'Great Turning Point'.

The establishment, continuation, and improvement of the NCEES also increased social mobility, thereby exerting profound influence not only on education, but Chinese society and economics as well. Indeed, the NCEES has greater public credibility than any other national examination, as it maintains educational equity and is referenced by numerous national examinations, including the civil service examination and other specialised tests.

The NCEES: Current status and challenges

Economic and social development, educational reform, and a need to promote educational equity are driving factors for NCEES reform. The subsections that follow examine these issues in depth.

Inability of the NCEES to fulfill the demands of Chinese economic, social, and educational development

In general, the NCEES is currently unable to adapt to China's urgent need for economic, social, and educational development. This can be attributed to three inadequacies specifically. First, the system cannot adapt to increased public demand for higher education, as it was established according to the notion of 'elite education', which entails selecting a small number of talented individuals from a large pool of students (Xie, 2015). In this configuration, enrolment was strictly based on a particular model of academic standards and the presumption that everyone is considered equal when evaluated in light of test scores. In that respect, China's objective to promote educational equity and social justice by identifying talented students had been met. However, since 1999, higher education in China has been expanding rapidly. In 2002, gross enrolment had reached 15%; by 2012 this figure had risen to 30%, thereby indicating that the opportunity to receive a higher education was no longer scarce. Against this backdrop, the practice of relying solely upon National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) scores to determine college admission became questionable. On one hand, the popularisation of higher education prompted universities to set enrolment standards in order to meet the specialised needs of different universities; on the other hand, given that university and college admission rates reached 75% in 2012, it became feasible for vocational colleges to admit students based on applications alone, thus casting doubt on the necessity of a national exam to select applicants for both undergraduate and vocational colleges (Liu, 2015).

The second inadequacy of the NCEES concerns its ineffectiveness in scientifically identifying skills that are in demand and necessary for economic and social development. The NCEE emphasises general and stylised knowledge, but fails to account for creativity, critical thinking, or comprehensive abilities such as social responsibility and teamwork or moral character. Since test scores are the primary and often sole criterion for admission to colleges and universities, students without ideal scores who nonetheless possess exemplary skills in other areas are not afforded an opportunity to continue their studies. Even though the Independent Enrollment System (also known as independent recruitment) has recently resulted in the admission of 80 000 students to 90 pilot universities, it is difficult to guarantee that gifted students in specialised disciplines can reach their fullest potential given independent recruitment's limited scale, in addition to the assessment criteria and methods employed by the aforementioned pilot universities.

The third inadequacy of the system involves its inability to satisfy the demands of basic educational reform. The cultivating mode, curriculum system, instructional methods, and teaching administrative system in China are undergoing profound transformations; accordingly, the need for different examination evaluation systems, including the NCEES, has increased. In recent years, difficulties have been encountered with respect to curriculum reform in primary and secondary schools, thus highlighting the problems associated with exam-oriented approaches, which in the primary and secondary school context have caused students to become overwhelmed by their studies and suffer from health problems (Liu, 2015). When people discuss problems of basic education blame is frequently placed on the NCEES, as it sets the standard for exam-oriented education and regulates the administrative systems of schools, the instructional behaviour of teachers, and the learning behaviour of students. Hence, the public logically assumes that basic education reform is dependent on reforms to the NCEES.

The NCEES and doubts concerning its equity

Throughout the more than 30-year evolution of the NCEES its equity has been gradually eroded. As new problems emerge, need for its reform is becoming increasingly evident. Some NCEES policies deviate from their intended design during the implementation phase, thereby leading to criticism from media and the public. For example, to increase the enrolment of students possessing specialised skills, a preferential policy that adds bonus points to college entrance examination scores was implemented; however, owing to the absence of unified standards, transparency, and supervision, the policy has spiraled out of control (Yu & Wang, 2015). Similar problems can be found in policies regarding independent and special types of enrolment, which negatively affect the NCEE's credibility.

Problems continue to emerge that raise doubts concerning the college entrance examination system's equity. For instance, China's reform and opening up policy has increased the number of non-local residents present in some cities, with domestic migrant workers currently accounting for 250 million. Although a national policy has been enacted to enable the children of migrant workers to complete the NCEE in the cities where their parents work and live, existing problems are still serious. Another example is that despite enormous efforts to provide equal opportunities, gross enrolment and college admission rates (as well as college admission scores) vary considerably by region due to economic, social, and cultural factors (Zhang, 2012). These disparities are most severe for students in Midwest regions and rural areas, poor families, and ethnic minorities, who struggle to procure admission to higher education institutions. This prompts some individuals to claim residency in provinces other than their own in order to complete the NCEE in a different, more favourable location. This phenomenon of 'migration for NCEE' certainly harms the principle of education equity.

The arduous nature of NCEES reforms

Despite strong appeals for NCEES reforms, there is an obvious gap between public expectations and the actual effectiveness of reforms to date. Conflicts between equity and efficiency, as well as between short- and long-term goals contribute to the difficulty of enacting reforms (Liu, 2015). This problem is rooted in two general issues. First, with higher education's expansion and the deepening of reforms, the number of stakeholders has increased as various groups appeal for different changes. Nevertheless, these viewpoints and suggestions are frequently diverse or even contradictory – whereas one group may perceive reform as a means to enhance the selection of skilled students, others may focus on the promotion of educational equity. Similarly, while one group may hope the reform could help their children to get admission to good universities, others may hope it could help to reduce their children's academic load. Although such diverse concerns ultimately strengthen enthusiasm toward reforms, they nonetheless make the formation of a consensus difficult, thereby impacting the actual enactment of reforms in general.

Second, in addition to the NCEES's role in assisting institutions of higher education with the screening and selection of applicants, the exam performs several other social functions (Qu, 2014). For instance, the NCEES is a means for many students not only to change their own destiny, but their families' as well. This is particularly true among rural students, as the NCEES enables such individuals to cross China's rural-urban divide and achieve social mobility. Moreover, the aforementioned initiative targeting the children of migrant workers is important from both an educational and social perspective, as it involves reforms of the country's residence registration and social administration systems (Chu, 2015). In sum, NCEES reforms must take diverse viewpoints and social contexts into consideration while also adapting to political, economic, and cultural constraints.

“The NCEES is a means for many students not only to change their own destiny, but their families’ as well. This is particularly true among rural students, as the NCEES enables such individuals to cross China’s rural-urban divide and achieve social mobility.”

Future outlook of the NCEES

NCEES reform should be implemented in a scientific manner so as to identify prerequisite academic skills, promote student growth, and maintain social equity. The sections that follow identify necessary NCEES reforms and suggest ways to successfully implement them.

Fundamental proposals to NCEES reforms

Reform to enrolment quota allocation

Presently, enrolment quota allocation is overseen by government authorities; however, abuse of this system has become rampant in recent years. This can be attributed to the difficulty of ensuring that higher education institutions are truly autonomous, significant differences in provincial enrolment quotas, and a tendency for some colleges and universities (under the direction of certain central ministries) to enrol large numbers of students from their respective provinces. Therefore, reforms to the current enrolment quota allocation system are key to establishing equal access to higher education. This entails encouraging institutions of higher education to develop greater autonomy, basing enrolment quota allocation on multiple factors (e.g., population, access to higher education), and the supervision of quota allocation to ensure that students do not receive preferential treatment by local colleges and universities who are under the direction of central ministries (Yu & Wang, 2015; Zhang, 2012).

Reforms to forms of examination

The current forms of NCEES examination have several features: it is government-dominant with a focus on unification; it can only be taken once a year; and generally students must take it in the location in which they were born. Therefore, reforms to the NCEES could begin with changes to the forms of the examination. For example, whereas entrance exams for undergraduate colleges could be organised in a nationally unified way, those for vocational colleges might be managed according to provinces, autonomous regions, or municipalities; registration-based enrolment could likewise be implemented on a trial basis (GOV, 2014; People, 2013). In addition, the possibility of arranging multiple exams for subjects such as English ought to be explored in order to provide students with greater opportunities (People, 2013). Furthermore, policies should be enacted to allow children of non-resident Chinese citizens to complete exams offsite, thereby protecting their legal right to an education.

Reforms to content of examination

Presently, the NCEE is a nationally unified test comprising three compulsory exams for subjects of Chinese, mathematics, and English, in addition to an elective exam for science (i.e., physics, chemistry, biology) or art (i.e., history, geography, politics), known as the '3+X' model. However, by separating science and art the ability to gauge students' comprehensive abilities is inhibited, which causes learners to place extreme emphasis on a single subject or group of subjects. Moreover, the exam over emphasises unification, and therefore cannot reliably identify skills that are prerequisite for certain subjects and professions.

Hence, screening and directive functions should be integrated into the NCEE to improve its identification of skills and to lessen the emphasis placed on exams in China's basic education system. This necessitates the creation of supplementary modules in the NCEE in order to provide a more robust reference for institutions of higher education to select their potential candidates. In addition, greater emphasis should be placed on the development of students' comprehensive abilities based on the skills highlighted in the nationwide curriculum standards for basic education (GOV, 2014; Zhang, 2012). Last but not the least, a more detailed study report concerning students' overall learning achievement should be produced along with the NCEE in order to provide higher education institutions with more information for selection.

Reforms to NCEE evaluation methods

Evaluation of the NCEE is currently conducted nationally and provincially in a unified and autonomous manner respectively. This is problematic since standards for evaluation frequently vary between provinces. Meanwhile, evaluators are often drafted temporarily from colleges, universities, and high schools; most of these individuals are employed part-time, and therefore lack job stability. This is probably one of the reasons that the credibility of the examination paper has been questioned in recent years. Therefore, improvements to how the NCEE is evaluated are key to ensuring its scientific reliability and capacity to function as a standard for university and college admissions (GOV, 2014). Hence, team-building for evaluation experts is necessary to ensure the quality of exam questions both at the national and provincial levels. In addition, the national examination database ought to be improved and expanded upon, and experts should be employed to conduct research concerning NCEES regulations and standards; in turn, this will increase the clarity and validity of exam questions (GOV, 2014). Furthermore, for provinces deemed unfit to conduct evaluations independently, their right to make examination papers should be deprived and integrated to the national system (Yu & Wang, 2015).

Reforms to enrolment system

In its current state, the enrolment system suffers from two major flaws. First, college entrance examination scores are the sole determiner of college admissions, thereby reducing the autonomy afforded to colleges and universities in the selection process. Second, various policies allow for bonus points to be added to examinees' scores, which gives some applicants an arguably unfair advantage. Therefore, reforms to the enrolment system are imperative to addressing these two aforementioned issues. Although unified exams should continue to play a key role in admitting students to institutions of higher education, performance on high school proficiency exams and comprehensive evaluations should also be considered and afforded appropriate weight in evaluating students' abilities (MOE, 2010; People, 2013).

As for qualified students with creative potential, extraordinary talent, or expertise in a specialised discipline, institutions of higher education ought to be afforded an opportunity to enrol them independently. Likewise, institutions of higher education should be given the option to enrol high school students who have exhibited outstanding performance based on recommendations from their teachers and/or principals (Xie, 2015). Furthermore, qualifying students who volunteer to work in industries or regions wherein demand is high could be enrolled by means of mutual agreements; similarly, exceptions might be made for students in practical posts who possess special talents or who have made outstanding contributions.

Leading the way toward the NEECS reform

Reforms to the college entrance examination system are dependent on changes in various factors such as perception, interest, innovation, and the application of relevant technologies. These reforms require participation from the government, institutions of higher education, and society at large in order to ensure a proper and consistent implementation.

Top-level design and the gradual implementation of reforms

Effective top-level design is key to ensuring the implementation and continued exploration of reform objectives (Liu, 2013). Tasks for reform must be plainly defined, and clear road maps and timetables need to be created. This entails not only setting and considering the feasibility and priority of short-term objectives, but also establishing mid- and long-term objectives in order to plan for future demands. Moreover, the implementation of NCEES reforms is dependent on cooperation between many departments; accordingly, a mechanism must be developed to ensure that each entity works toward a common goal, and that their responsibilities are clear. Leading roles should not only be assumed by the central government, but through local groups and initiatives so as to accommodate regional needs. It is likewise important for NCEES reforms to undergo risk assessment on a regular basis.

Increased government supervision and standardisation

The credibility of reforms and public trust in them are dependent on proper organisation and standardised operations (Zhang, 2012). Thus, equal emphasis must be placed on preventing NCEE fraud and punishing individuals whose actions are deemed unethical (GOV, 2014). Similarly, policies that award bonus points to certain examinees should be eliminated so that all the students can compete equally (Yu & Wang, 2015). Further, decisions by institutions of higher education concerning enrolment should be scrutinised, particularly in cases involving students majoring in arts and athletics.

Establishing a balance between interests

NCEES reforms will inevitably lead to changes of interests or benefits of current stakeholders and therefore may cause fierce conflicts between these stakeholders during the reform. Therefore, appeals from different regions and stakeholders must be considered to achieve a balance between various groups' vested interests. For example, special measurements that benefit certain groups, which nevertheless are against the principle of equity, must

be removed regardless of potential obstacles. At the same time, special consideration or complementary mechanisms should be established for certain disadvantaged groups while the reform is implemented.

Coordination and corresponding reforms

The reformation of the NCEES is a complex task whose success is dependent on coordination with not only the higher education system, but basic, inner, and external educational systems as well (Zhang, 2012). Therefore, a series of corresponding reforms are necessary with respect to primary and secondary school curricula, social administration, and the model of education in institutions of higher education.

Promotion and public relations

Reforms to the NCEES will ultimately impact millions of students' futures, and therefore may produce extremely complex issues that are intertwined with numerous social concerns. That said, even the slightest misstep can result in public criticism, which in turn negatively affects the reform process. As such, advanced educational ideas and the concept of quality education need to be embedded in the public psyche. This will help teachers, parents and different interest groups in society to understand the objectives of NCEES reform. Indeed, by alleviating the constraints of outdated notions from the public mindset, the objectives of NCEES reforms will become more apparent, and widespread acceptance can be achieved. Positive guidance and meaningful examples should also be promoted and circulated throughout the reform process (however, caution ought to be taken not to arouse press speculation) (GOV, 2014). Moreover, the complexity of the reform process must be presented according to tangible facts so that the public's expectations are reasonable.

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Who goes to college? Investigating the 'American Dream'

Written by
Gloria Ladson-Billings

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Despite the rhetoric about US social mobility, demographic data indicate that few people move beyond their original class position. While more students are enrolling in colleges and universities, the type of colleges and universities vary widely by race/ethnicity and class. Wealthy and upper middle class White students are much more likely to go to elite colleges such as Ivy League, flagship state universities and selective liberal arts colleges while working class, poorer students and those from non-White racial and ethnic groups will attend less selective four-year colleges and open enrolment two-year colleges.

America has regularly been touted as the ‘Land of Opportunity’ for its promise of allowing individuals to move from lower rungs of the society to a place in the middle class. The ability to receive a quality education, attend college or university, work at a satisfying job, and own a home, all constitute what we call, ‘The American Dream’. Indeed it is the promise of that dream that keeps each generation of Americans striving for the prerequisite skills to attain it. But, how real is that meritocratic, upwardly mobile society that runs so deeply in the lore and legend of the United States? How likely is it that Americans can go from ‘rags to riches’? In this paper I take a look at the reality of social mobility with a specific interest in college access as a gateway to social and economic success.

The facts about US college participation

According to the US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2011) in 2010, 18 million students were enrolled in US degree-granting institutions. Of those 18 million, 10.8 million were White, 2.67 million were African American, 2.54 million were Latino/Hispanic, 1.08 million were Asian American/ Pacific Islander, 179 000 were American Indian or Alaskan Native and 400 000 were non-resident aliens. If we think in terms of percentages, 60.3% were White, 14.8% were African American, 14.1% were Latino/Hispanic, 6.0% were Asian American/Pacific Islander, 1.0% was American Indian, and 2.2% were non-resident alien.

Over the last 35 years we have seen some dramatic demographic shifts in the percentages of non-White students attending degree-granting institutions. However that shift parallels the shift of the general population. According to the Pew Research Center, the White population has gone from 85% in 1960 to 60% in 2011. The Latino/Hispanic population went from 3.5 to 17%. The African American population went from 11% to 12% and the Asian American population went from 0.6% to 5%.

The importance of college participation and graduating cannot be over-estimated in a US economy that has moved rapidly toward producing knowledge rather than manufacturing things. Despite President Obama’s focus on lowering the cost of college education there is another powerful challenge facing many students – the issue of ‘under-matching’ or ending up at colleges that are not the best academic fit for them. Most of these students, according to Carol Barash (2013), ‘never even apply to the best colleges and universities they could be admitted to because they have no idea what their college options really are’.

According to Root Cause in their report, ‘College Access and Success’ (2010) in 2007, 76% of students from high-income families obtained a bachelor’s degree by age 24, compared to only 10% of students from low-income families. We know that low-income students, particularly those who are racially or ethnically marginalised, must confront issues of college access and success. The risk factors associated with college access include:

- Poverty
- Being a first generation college student
- Being a member of a minority group
- Not having a parent fluent in English
- Having older siblings who dropped out of high school
- Having repeated a grade between 1st and 8th grade
- Having inadequate academic preparation

The risk factors associated with college success include:

- Taking remedial classes (in college)
- Part-time enrolment
- Delayed entry into post-secondary education
- Completion of high school by GED (alternative high school completion)
- Being a parent
- Being employed full time while enrolled

“Despite President Obama’s focus on lowering the cost of college education there is another powerful challenge facing many students—the issue of ‘under-matching’ or ending up at colleges that are not the best academic fit for them.”

In the US the large disparities in high school graduation rates decrease the pool of potential college applicants. More than 90% of students from the top two income quartiles graduate from high school and subsequently have the opportunity to apply to college compared to 65% of those from the bottom quartile. In 2002, 72% of White students graduated from high school compared to 51% of African American and 52% of Latino students. However, the disparity in high school graduation does not tell the whole story. More than half of the students who graduate from high school do not satisfy the minimal requirements needed to apply to a four-year college because they lack basic skills and have not taken coursework required for college admission. In 2008, 72% of White high school graduates entered college compared to 56% of African American and 64% of Latino high school graduates.

African American and Latino access to post-secondary education over the past 15 years reflects mixed results. Although these groups have scored large gains in access to post-secondary education, both groups are losing ground in the ability to move up to the most selective colleges. So even though the absolute numbers of African Americans and Latinos going to post-secondary institutions have grown rapidly, they are on separate and unequal pathways from their White peers:

- Between 1995 and 2009, more than 8 in 10 of new White students have gone to the US 468 most selective colleges, while more than 7 in 10 of new African American and Latino students have gone to the 3250 two- and four-year open access colleges.
- Between 1995 and 2009, the White share of enrolments in the two- and four-year open access colleges declined from 69% to 57%.
- While more than 140 institutions have moved up into the top three tiers of selectivity since the mid-1990s, the number of four-year open access colleges is declining. The result of this dynamic is increased spending per student at the most selective colleges and overcrowding and reduced resources per student in the open access sector.
- Enrolments at the most selective and better resourced colleges grew significantly (78%), reflecting increased demand for high quality post-secondary education. The vast majority of new seats at top schools went to White students. Among open access, four-year colleges, growth has been significantly slower (just 21%), but the net increases in minority enrolments were concentrated at those schools, resulting in more crowding and fewer resources per student.
- In 1995, the White share of the college-age population was 68% and the White share of enrolments at the top 468 colleges was 77%, a nine percentage point advantage of enrolment share over population share.
- By 2009, the White share of the college-age population was 62% and the White share of enrolment at the top 468 colleges was 75%, a 13 percentage point advantage of enrolment over population share and a four percentage point increase within the college-age population.

Over the same period, the enrolment shares of African American and Latino in the top 468 colleges declined relative to their shares of the college-age population.

- In 1995, the African American and Latino share of the college age population was 27% and their share of enrolments at the top 468 colleges was 12%, a 15 percentage point deficit of enrolment share compared with population share.
- By 2009, the African American and Latino share of the college-age population was 33%, and their share of enrolment at the top 468 colleges was 15%, an 18 percentage point deficit of enrolment versus population share and a three percentage point drop within the college-age population.

We are seeing the White share of enrolment in the nation's 3450 two- and four-year open access colleges declining relative to the White share of the college-age population:

- In 1995, the White share of the college-age population was 68% and the White share of enrolment at the 3250 two- and four-year open access colleges was 69%, reflecting a balance between enrolments and population shares.
- By 2009, the White share of the college-age population was 62% and the White share of the college-age population was 68% and the White share of enrolment at the 3250 two- and four-year open access colleges was 57%, a five percentage point deficit of enrolment relative to population share and a six percentage point decline within the college-age population.

Over the same 15 years, the African American and Latino share of enrolment in the nation's 3250 two and four-year open access colleges increased relative to their share of the college-age population.

- In 1995, the African American and Latino share of the college-age population was 27%, and their share of enrolment at the 3250 two- and four-year open access colleges was 24%, a three percentage point deficit of enrolment relative to population share.
- By 2009, the African American and Latino share of the college-age population was 33%, and their share of the enrolment at the 3250 two- and four-year open access colleges was 37%, a four percentage point excess of enrolment relative to population share.

The importance of these enrolment trends should not be underestimated for they show a post-secondary education system that is complicit in reproducing racial and ethnic inequities across the system. We are seeing African American and Latino students who are qualified to attend more selective colleges be tracked into overcrowded and under-funded colleges where they are less likely to fully develop or graduate.

Conversely, White students also are 'tracked' into the top-tier colleges and such tracking perpetuates higher rates of college completion for White students, especially at the elite colleges. More college completion among White students whose parents are college graduates perpetuates the intergenerational reproduction of privilege evident in higher earnings, better and more expensive housing, and better schooling for their next generation of students. For example, at Harvard, applicants who are 'primary legacy' (i.e. one or more of their parents attended Harvard) have a 45.1 advantage over a non-legacy applicant.

“More than 30% of African Americans and Latinos with a high school grade point average of 3.5 (out of 4) go to community colleges, compared to 22% of Whites with the same GPA.”

The American higher education system has become a dual system of racially separate pathways, even as overall minority access to the post-secondary system has grown dramatically. The dual pathways are not only racially separate but they produce unequal results, even among equally qualified students:

- More than 30% of African Americans and Latinos with a high school grade point average of 3.5 (out of 4) go to community colleges, compared to 22% of Whites with the same GPA.
- Among students who score in the top half of test score distributions in the nation's high schools and attend college, 51% of White students get a BA or higher, compared with 34% of African American students and 32% of Latino students.

The 468 most selective colleges spend between two and five times more per student as the open access schools. This difference in spending leads to higher graduation rates, greater access to graduate and professional schools, and better economic outcomes in the labour market, even compared with White, African American, and Latino students who are equally qualified but attend less competitive schools:

- The completion rate for the 468 most selective four-year colleges is 82%, compared with 49% for two- and four-year open access colleges.
- At top-tier colleges, students who enrolled with SAT scores over 1000 obtain a graduate degree at a rate of 15% compared with 3% of similarly qualified students who attend a four-year open access college.
- Thirty-five per cent of students from top-tier schools obtain a graduate degree within 10 years of obtaining a Bachelor's degree, compared with 21% of students from the open access schools.

- Greater post-secondary resources and completion rates for White students concentrated in the 468 most selective colleges leads to greater labour market advantages, including more than \$2 million per student in higher lifetime earnings, and access to professional and managerial elites, and careers that bring personal and social empowerment.

Although college readiness is important in explaining the problem of low completion rates among African American and Latino students, it does not tell the entire story. According to Carnevale and Strohl (2013), 'virtually all of the increase in college dropouts and the slowdown in completions are concentrated in open-access colleges, in substantial part because they are too crowded and underfunded'.

They show that:

- More than 240 000 high-scoring students who come from the bottom half of the income distribution, do not get a two- or four-year degree within eight years of graduation from high school. The data show that roughly one in four (62 thousand) of these high-scoring/low-income students are African American or Latino.
- There are more than 110 000 high-scoring African Americans and Latinos who do not achieve a two or four-year degree within eight years. If these students had attended one of the top 468 colleges and graduate at similar rates, 73% would have graduated.

Approaches to college access and success

The University of Wisconsin-Madison uses a variety of programs and strategies to increase access and success for traditionally under-served students.

One program model is a cohort model where we provide support for a group of students from the same school or class to ensure that they are well-prepared for the college experience. At UW-Madison our most successful cohort model is our Pre-Collegiate Educational Opportunity Program for Learning Excellence or P.E.O.P.L.E. In this program we recruit students during middle school (aged 10 or 11 years old) and provide academic support through high school and college. Currently, we have approximately 1400 students in the middle school through senior year of college. The program provides tuition and academic support. Another UW-Madison cohort program is the POSSE Program. POSSE is a private foundation that helps identify talented students of colour who are selected along with a small group of peers with whom they attend college. UW-Madison is one of almost 50 universities who recruits and supports (academically and financially) under-served students through the POSSE foundation.

The other access and success model is the individual student model. In this model colleges search for talented (or potentially talented) individuals from under-served groups and provide academic, financial, and sometimes social and cultural support. Nationally, the most widely used individual model was Upward Bound, a program that was established as part of the US Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. While these programs vary in how they deliver services and in what components they emphasise, all of the programs focus on providing comprehensive services to individual students. UW-Madison has a premier merit scholarship program for high achieving under-served students, especially those interested in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields. This program is our Chancellor's (and Powers-Knapp) Scholarship Program that provides tuition, mentoring, social and cultural support. The program boasts an almost 30 year history and has grown from a small first class of eight students to almost 500 students. This program also has a strong alumni network of physicians, business people, engineers, teachers, lawyers, professors, and other professionals who understand the need to give back to current scholars.

Issues of college access and success are not only about what individuals are able to accomplish but also about the overall impact on society and the government. Increasing college participation and success means increasing civic participation and producing more tolerant citizens; increased participation in the democratic process; lower crime and related costs; and increased employment and productivity. On the government side, increased college participation decreases expenditures in public assistance, public housing, and the criminal justice system. It also means higher tax revenues.

Why going to which college matters

The point of this paper is that it does not matter merely that students go to college. It matters more which colleges they attend. In addition to the distinction between top-tier and open access colleges we are seeing the proliferation of 'for-profit' colleges both in the US and throughout the world. In the US, programs such as the University of Phoenix, DeVry, and Kaplan advertise widely to working adults, particularly those who represent low- to moderate-income communities. They promise a jumpstart career for working adults who are less concerned about actually earning a degree. These for-profits realised that they could be profitable as a business even when they were not successful as an educational institution.

Interestingly, the for-profit institutions became victims of the 2008 financial crisis in the US. Enrolment in these institutions has fallen by nearly 14% and several of these schools have closed a number of their locations and rededicated their efforts toward online instruction. One of the reasons for the drop in enrolment is recent state or provincial level crackdowns on financial aid for-profit schools receive. Because the for-profits are open access institutions that focus primarily on technical and limited mobility jobs (e.g., dental hygienists, certified nurse assistants, data entry, medical transcription, paralegal, etc.), they cater to those who either barely complete high school or complete it via an alternative route such as the General Education Diploma (GED) or the High School Equivalency Diploma (HSED). Because there is a lack of regulation, for-profits are often 'diploma mills' that charge high tuitions, promise job skills and job placement, and experience large numbers of students who fail to complete their programs. Those who do regularly complain about the inability to find jobs in their fields and most leave these institutions deeply in debt.

While for-profit post-secondary schools have long been a part of the US education landscape, they are beginning to show up in many emerging markets – particularly throughout Africa and Asia. Pearson, the UK education company, has begun offering low-cost private schools in Africa to meet the millennium goal of universal primary education. However, these same entities are sponsoring post-secondary education and promising 'college' education for eager populations who are unaware that 'degrees' from such entities often lead to nowhere.

It is important for nations to improve access to higher education but it is more important to help potential students understand the true value of the education they receive. The reality is that elites in each of our nations typically come from a very narrow band of colleges and universities and the so-called expansion of post-secondary opportunities rarely signals mobility toward the highest levels of the social structure. We have to ask just how likely wider access to colleges and universities will translate into increased standards of living and a broader middle class. Will earning a college degree earn one the American Dream? For far too many the answer is a resounding 'No!'

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