Recognising lifelong and life-wide learning to achieve Bradley's participation and equity targets for Australian higher education

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Abstract

As a result of the Bradley Review (2008) of higher education, Australian universities are under pressure to enrol more students from diverse social and educational backgrounds. This paper considers how the recognition of lifelong and life-wide learning (commonly known as 'recognition of prior learning' or RPL) might be used to enhance higher education access for a larger and more diverse group of students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Within a critical theoretical framing, the paper presents selected findings from a larger research study of the admission policies and practices of different types of universities. The focus here is on the Australian Technology Network (ATN) group, which prides itself on championing principles of participation and equity, consistent with the goals of the Bradley Review. To complement a discourse analysis of university policy documents, findings from interviews with staff involved in the development and enactment of admission policy at one ATN university are analysed. Findings reveal that the ATN group is well-positioned to deliver increased enrolments of students from disadvantaged backgrounds through RPL. However there is evidence that current admission policies and practices focus on notions of academic quality and meritocracy, and this might act to undermine attempts to make the sector more accessible. Implications for admissions policy development which harmonise with the Bradley reforms are also discussed.

Introduction

In March 2008, as part of the new Labor Government's 'Education Revolution', the Federal Minister for Education initiated a Review of Australian Higher Education to examine and report on the future direction of the higher education sector, its fitness for purpose in meeting the needs of the Australian community and economy, and the options for reform. A significant part of the Review focussed on the need to widen participation in higher education. The previous two decades had been described as a time of equity policy 'stasis' where, despite more than a decade of policy activity, the participation of disadvantaged groups in higher education remained negligible (James & McInnis, 2005). The authors of the Bradley Review recommended that the Government set a national target that 40 percent of 25 to 34-year olds would have attained at least a bachelor-level qualification by 2020. Furthermore, another important target set was that by 2020, 20 per cent of undergraduate enrolments in higher education should be students from disadvantaged groups – mostly those from a low socio-economic background (LSEB). The Bradley Review's recommendations, therefore, define equity in terms of both inputs (i.e. the enrolment target) and outputs (i.e. the attainment target).

The Government has largely accepted the Bradley Review's recommendations, although the 40 percent attainment target has been delayed to 2025. Consequently the Government has activated a number of policy levers including: giving institutions the freedom to enrol as many students as they wish; giving students greater freedom in choice of institution, allocating a proportion of Federal funding on the basis of performance against specific targets for teaching and equity; and guaranteeing a subsided higher education place for all qualified students. At the same time, the Government is rolling out a new national body for regulation and quality assurance, known as the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA). The Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) states that TEQSA will ensure that "increased

participation will be accompanied by improvements in the quality of university teaching and learning" (DEEWR, 2009a), highlighting a concern that universities might exploit the Government's multimillion-dollar equity push by enrolling underprepared students (Healy, 2010).

One means of achieving these enrolment targets, particularly for LSEB students, is to change relatively conservative admission policies and practices to allow more 'qualified' students to enrol in higher education. The majority of students accepted into Australian universities are admitted on the basis of formal studies, such as completion of Year 12; completion of a vocational education and training (VET) qualification; or transferring from one university to another. In 2009, only 13 percent of offers made to new students were on the basis of informal or non-formal educational backgrounds, such as mature-age special entry provision, or professional qualifications (DEEWR, 2009b). Yet in the most recent Household Survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 3.3 million Australians reported participation in non-formal learning in the previous twelve months. The most common type of recent non-formal learning was a work-related course, followed by arts, crafts or recreational learning (ABS, 2007). There is potential, therefore, for universities to attract a more diverse range of able students who have acquired knowledge through lifelong and life-wide learning. Here, 'lifelong' refers to learning that occurs at anytime, such as that of mature-age learners, and 'life-wide' refers to informal and non-formal learning experiences, such as work experience, employer professional development programs, or community courses (Clark, 2005). All of these pursuits have potential to prepare 'non-traditional' learners for university studies, much in the same way that formal education (high school, TAFE, etc) does. This is known as recognition of prior learning or RPL. RPL, as a process, might be afforded more serious consideration by universities for the purpose of admission into, or credit towards, a qualification.

In the Australian higher education sector, the tendency has been to view RPL as an outcome, that is; the actual assessment and the outcome of the assessment (Wheelahan et al., 2003). The focus here is very much on finding evidence to support claims for credit - or as Trowler (1996, p. 17) more poetically puts it "the angel already exists within the person; their abilities… are simply given credit value through assessment." The term RPL is regularly conflated with the notion of 'advanced standing': informal learning is matched against particular learning outcomes and, where appropriate, credit is given for the unit of study. This raises at least two important issues for universities. First, giving credit for informal learning is frequently viewed as being 'inappropriate' for university studies and more suited to the VET sector (Golding, Marginson, & Pascoe, 1996). Second, since universities are precluded by legislation from charging for RPL, credit given for informal learning equals revenue lost by the university. The problem of the cost of recognition of prior learning has existed for decades and is yet to be overcome (Bowman et al., 2003; Golding, et al., 1996; Hargreaves, 2006). However there is evidence that RPL becomes less problematic for universities when it is considered as a mechanism for access to higher education, rather than credit towards a course of study (see for example Breier & Ralphs, 2009). For the purposes of this paper, the focus is on RPL for admission.

As Wheelahan (2009) has observed, a key assumption of equity policies is that pathways to university which target concentrations of LSEB students are able to act as an equity mechanism. This is an equity approach which focuses more on inputs than outcomes and is predicated on the belief that equity policies can act as mechanisms to ensure that the population profile is reflected in the composition of student populations in higher education. However it is important not to conflate statements concerning equity with those concerning the LSEB demographic. The Federal Government recognise an additional five equity groups: Indigenous Australians; people from a non-English speaking background; people with disabilities; people from rural and isolated areas; and women in non-traditional areas of study., Furthermore, the general concept of equity usually involves often notions of merit, fairness, and equality of opportunity (James, 2007). Equity must therefore be contextualised in terms of which equity group is being targeted, what opportunity is being addressed, and how the associated processes will ensure equity without a loss of quality. In the particular case of the Bradley recommendations the main equity group being targeted is the LSEB one, and the equity opportunity being addressed is an input i.e. participation in higher education. For the purposes of this study, the focus was on the potential for RPL to create an alternative pathway for LSEB students, without compromising the quality of the admission process.

Drawn from a larger research project which focussed on RPL in different types of universities, this paper analyses the RPL policies and practices of the Australian Technology Network (ATN) group of universities to explore discourses of equity and participation. The ATN was chosen because the group has traditionally championed principles of participation and equity, and positions itself as providing higher education to diverse students. The ATN website states that it "will continue to champion the principles of access and equity that have ensured its members are the universities of first choice for more students" (www.atn.edu.au). ATN universities are characterised by large undergraduate student populations and all member universities are ranked internationally in the top 200 by the UK Times Higher Education Supplement. This group, therefore, is strategically positioned to deal with the participation and equity targets arising from the Bradley Review; in terms of its avowed mission, the quality of its educational programs, and the sheer number of student places it collectively offers. The five universities comprising the ATN are: The University of Technology, Sydney (UTS); RMIT University (RMIT); Curtin University of Technology (Curtin); Queensland University of Technology (QUT); and The University of South Australia (UniSA).

To complement the analysis of the overall policies and practices of the group, one ATN university was chosen as a more detailed case study. Key individuals at this university were interviewed on the subject of equity in general and RPL in particular. For both the ATN group and case-study university, this paper explores how RPL policy was understood and employed and the ways in which university policies might include or possibly exclude LSEB students from higher education.

Methodology

The data for the critical discourse analysis of the ATN group's policies came from publicly available policy documents concerning admission policies in general and RPL in particular. These documents included universities' policies, statutes, rules, protocols and handbooks. These documents were available online, via the universities' home pages. Data sources from these documents are identified in the discussion below, due to the public nature of the information. In respect of the ATN case-study university, nine participants from the selected university agreed to be interviewed, in depth, about RPL policy and practices at the institution. For anonymity purposes, both the university and the participants have been de-identified, and the roles and offices of the participants have been generalised. Three participants were senior executives involved in the development of university policy, including matters relating to admission, equity and access. These persons are referred to as "senior executives" and the participants are coded E1 to E3. The remaining six participants were professional or academic staff members charged with the enactment of admission, equity and access policies. These participants are generically referred to as "admissions officers" and coded A1 through A6.

This was a qualitative study of RPL policy and practice, as policy enactment is essentially a social event, affected by a wide range of policy actors throughout the course of its development, implementation, enactment and enforcement (Ball, 1994; Fairclough, 1989). In line with a critical approach, the researchers searched for ideologies which acted to maintain an inequitable status quo. This encouraged the researchers to question claims made on behalf of official knowledge regarding its neutrality, disinterestedness, objectivity, rationality and universality, by "debunking, unmasking or deconstructing" these claims (Moore, 2007, pp. 30-31). Then the researchers sought to explicate, from the policies and practices, a normative approach to policy that might offer an alternative idea of society which is fairer and more equitable. Again in line with critical theoretical approaches, the researchers considered how any policy changes might be effected to empower disadvantaged groups (Hammersley, 1997; Peters, 2007a, 2007b).

The findings from this study do not purport to be representative of the entire Australian higher education sector, nor could the findings be said to necessarily be transferrable. Nonetheless the rich detail provided in the analysis of policy documents and interviews has potentially broader relevance as 'food for thought' across the entire sector, especially given the universal imperative of the Government's policy on participation and equity in higher education.

Findings

The findings are presented in three sections. The first section provides an analysis of statistical data pertaining to equity and participation in the Australian higher education sector in general, and the ATN group as well as the ATN case-study university in particular. The second section examines notions of equity and participation within the ATN group, as revealed in their policy documents. The third section analyses the ways in which RPL policies and practices intersect with discourses of equity, as revealed by both ATN group policy documents, and participant interview responses within the ATN case-study university.

(i) Equity and participation in the ATN group and the ATN case-study university

The proportion of LSEB students in the ATN is low, both in real terms and in comparison to the higher education sector as a whole. In the five-year period 2004-2008, the ATN group as a whole enrolled fewer LSEB students than did the entire sector (See Table 1). Only one ATN university exceeded the national averages and is currently placed to achieve the Bradley Review's targets without any change to its practices.

Table 1: LSEB enrolments in the Australian higher education sector, 2004-2008

	2004	2005	2006	2007
LSEB enrolments at all Australian universities (*)	15.4%	15.5%	15.7%	15.9%
LSEB enrolments at ATN Group (*)				
Curtin University of Technology	10.6%	10.9%	11.5%	11.2%
Queensland University of Technology	13.7%	13.0%	13.3%	14.2%
RMIT University	11.2%	11.6%	11.8%	12.0%
University of South Australia	22.3%	23.4%	22.5%	23.1%
University of Technology, Sydney	7.6%	7.8%	8.7%	8.1%

expressed as a percentage of overall domestic student enrolments

Source: compiled from Australian Higher Education Statistics Series, from
http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Publications/HEStatistics/Publications/Pages/Home.aspx

RPL, potentially, can be used to increase LSEB enrolments. Again, however, the ATN group's performance in this respect is below the sector's average. According to data from DEEWR, in 2009 only 7.7 percent of new students enrolled in ATN universities were admitted on the basis of informal or non-formal learning. Again, on this measure the ATN is less diverse than the higher education sector overall, since during the same period the entire sector admitted 13 percent of students on the basis of informal learning (DEEWR, 2009b). Currently, only the elite research universities (known as the Group of Eight) accept fewer students on the basis of informal learning, than the ATN does.

In 2009, the ATN case-study university enrolled 11.5 percent of its new students on the basis of informal and non-formal learning. Whilst this is above the ATN group's average, it is still below the sector-wide average.

(ii) Representations of equity in ATN group policy

In 2004, the ATN universities signed a memorandum of understanding, in part to facilitate student mobility between member universities. The preamble to the memorandum states that the group's aim is to "help secure Australia's academic reputation, and contribute to its social and economic wealth,

while championing the principles of access and equity that have ensured its members are the universities of first choice for more students (ATN, 2004). "Academic reputation" is the language of scholarly achievement and quality education, which is increasingly defined in terms of international competitiveness. As it is aligned with the notion of social and economic wealth, the focus is on outcomes, or outputs. Thus, the ATN's mission highlights the group's role as building an educational product that provides both social capital and economic gain for Australia. Here, social capital appears to be defined in neoliberal, market terms; that is "wealth". The ATN uses the statement to position itself as an ecumenical provider, providing benefit not to the group, but to Australia as a whole. Equally, the ATN aims to "champion" the principles of access and equity. By contrast, the desire for the ATN to be the "first choice" universities for more students is a strategic move for market share. Crucial in this statement is the use and placement of the word "while" to link the first aim with the other two. Used here in the contrastive sense, "while" infers a potential conflict between the goals of academic reputation and social and economic wealth, with the ideal of access and equity. Furthermore, the ATN explicitly links its equity policies to its attractiveness to the market and not to its altruistic desire to enhance the social and economic fabric of Australia. Thus, equity policy is here posited as a potential detriment to high quality and high value education.

To deal with this potential conflict, the institutions within the ATN group enact merit-based admission processes, with allowance for equity. For example, the admission policy for RMIT provides a list of criteria in the following, descending order: "(1) students capable of success are selected; (2) students are selected by fair and open practices which are defensible; (3) profile and equity targets are met; (4) appropriate account is taken of equity principles in selection criteria" (RMIT, 2008). A consequence of the policy format, intentional or otherwise, is to juxtapose success and equity, with an inference that students selected on equity criteria have lower chances of success than other students. Curtin's admission policy advises that processes for determining eligibility for admission must "ensure fair, open and consistent practices for admission and selection, taking into account the University's access and equity objectives" (Curtin, 2009, p. 10). The policy wording, therefore, provided for the interpretation that its access and equity policy might be (or at least appear to be), opaque to some observers. Similarly, at UniSA, admission policy states that, whilst applicants are in general selected on the basis of "academic merit", selection processes also take into consideration "the effect of different forms of educational advantage and disadvantage on the ability of an applicant to demonstrate academic merit against traditional standards" (UniSA, 2004). Thus, merit – in the sense of academic meritocracy - is separated from equity. Furthermore, the consideration of equity is presented as an additional, stand-alone admission process, rather than embedded within the standard process. Since merit-based selection processes are presented as "fair", "open", "defensible" and "consistent", the inference is that equity-based admission processes are subjective, hidden and contestable.

Whilst the ATN group makes provision for equity-based selection processes, many of it member universities' policies are neither clear nor well-defined. At Curtin, admission policy allows for special consideration for entry for applicants being part of an equity group defined by DEEWR, including LSEB. However applications for special consideration are dealt with on a "case-by-case basis" by an individual officer (Curtin, 2009, p. 32). UTS also have in place a special admissions scheme for applicants who could demonstrate educational disadvantage. Yet, paradoxically, the scheme excludes much of its target group, since the pathway is restricted to applicants who have completed "Years 11 and/or 12 or equivalent qualification" (UTS, 2010b).

Within the ATN group, there are varying and conflicting discourses concerning LSEB status, educational opportunity, and the notion of equity. When it comes to the selection of students, only three of the five member universities recognise LSEB as a justification for equity consideration. Curtin policy states that a student "may" be eligible for special consideration if they are of LSEB status – in contrast to, for example, students who have suffered an accident or illness, family bereavement or incorrect advice provided in relation to university entry, who "will" be given special consideration (Curtin, 2010). And in their list of special consideration groups, UTS do not include LSEB students as an equity group within their educational access schemes. They do, however, provide concessions for "elite athletes or performers...whose sport or performance commitments have impacted on their studies" (UTS, 2010a). In other words, in

almost half of the ATN member universities, a lifetime of social and economic disadvantage is given less consideration than, potentially, a single incidence of misfortune - or indeed opportunity.

(iii) RPL and equity

Previous research has established strong positive links between RPL, educational access, social opportunity and individual empowerment (Breier, 2005; Cleary et al., 2002; Harris, 1999; Jones & Martin, 1997). Yet within the ATN group, rather than acting to facilitate the acceptance of lifelong and life-wide learning, the language of policy documents in many ways acts to restrict or even exclude its use. Discursively, the notion of equity moves through 180 degrees and becomes, rather than a means of positive discrimination, a way of restricting the pathways available for admission by adopting "a consistent and equitable approach to the granting of credit" (UniSA, 2009). RPL must be "academically defensible and take into account the student's assessed ability to successfully complete the requirements of the remainder of the course" (Curtin, 2009, p. 43). Here, the institution is presented as passive and controlling, while the informal learner is a more fluid actor in the policy process. The learner is required to conform to the institution's mores; no concession is required nor offered by the university.

The possession of academic potential is irrelevant: what counts as worthy lifelong and life-wide learning is that which can be demonstrated "through the completion of some type of assessment or activity such as testing or compiling a portfolio of learning and/or experience" (UTS, 2003). The assessments or activities explicated in policy documents overwhelmingly refer to more traditional, formal pathways, such as VET qualifications or partially completed university studies. Formal studies are presented as ordered, assessable and accountable. By contrast, due to the "unstructured and highly variable nature" of RPL, its assessment "cannot be the subject of any precedents" and must be handled on a "case by case basis" (QUT, 2007). This is the language of exception, of a case to be made rather than an entitlement to be upheld. In the language of equity, this is much the same as the difference between a refugee and an immigrant. For the refugee, the focus is upon their circumstances, but for the immigrant it is their potential for normative behaviour. In RPL terms, the lifelong learner here is treated as a skilled migrant who must possess and be able to demonstrate, normative behaviour. Significantly, it is the responsibility of the learner to provide "current, relevant, valid, verifiable and substantial information and/or evidence about their [RPL]" (RMIT, 2007). At the ATN case-study university, certain participants' interview responses reveal the same notion of a 180-degree shift whereby equity policy becomes another act of normalisation, rather than distinction. One senior executive described how RPL was a means towards equity goals because "we're treating everyone the same - regardless of how they came to that knowledge they're being treated the same" (E1). For an admissions officer, the purpose of RPL policy was to "achieve consistency" (A5). When describing how informal learning might be considered, or assessed, again the language of exception is commonly used. The applicant is regularly posited as a non-normative outsider who must demonstrate their suitability. One admissions officer described the assessment process in terms of "getting proof" and "substantiating claims" (A1). One senior executive said that, unfortunately the university "used language as a gatekeeper" (E2).

As with the ATN group, at the ATN case-study university there was a similar preoccupation with accountability and the primacy of the institution's norms. All nine interview participants were unanimous that RPL had the potential to make higher education more accessible. However one admissions officer worried specifically in respect of LSEB applicants that "some people would not cope in university life" (A4). Lifelong and life-wide learning is here presented as inadequate not only in pedagogical terms but also in terms of motivation and conformation. A lack of traditional schooling is seen to exclude the individual from essential preparation, both pedagogical and personal. This places the learner in an irrevocable situation which "no amount of RPL can change" (A4). Likewise, one senior executive stated he saw evidence that students given RPL "hit second year and can't cope" (E1). This, he said, was "a failure of academic standards." The university is presented as a constant force presenting the informal learner with a Catch-22: in order to be accepted the informal learner must adopt formal learning norms – but these norms are generally only be possessed by a formal learner. Interestingly, there was an implicit notion that, measured against an academic ideal, the ATN

universities were somewhere 'in the middle'. Believing that a university education should be "more than a set of tick boxes and outcomes", one admissions officer believed that Group of Eight universities provided the highest quality education, a new generation university didn't, and his (ATN) university "would like to but struggles" (S2). It is also interesting that this subjective ranking of quality education in the Australia higher education sector is directly proportional to the take-up of RPL by the relevant university groups. The Group of Eight universities mostly reject applications for RPL, the new generation universities accept the most, and the ATN is somewhere in between (Pitman, 2009). For some, it seems, RPL is antonymous to quality –when quality is defined in terms of prestige and tradition.

Another senior executive believed that good RPL practice would ensure that only students "with the capacity to pass" would be let in (E3). For her, the biggest risk to academic standards was "a really shonky assessment practice, not RPL". Yet this view reinforces the academic status quo at the same time that it supports RPL, since there is no suggestion that normative behaviour at the university will be challenged. Ideally, this senior executive conceptualised RPL as a determination of quality in the sense that it measured "the potential that someone has to succeed at what you do, it doesn't measure what you do" (E3). But at the same time she acknowledged that the university was "tough on RPL", meaning that in practice, a lot of informal learners with potential were excluded.

Within the university, another perceived reason for closely regulating RPL was a desire to protect its reputation since , in the words of one admissions officer, "the most effective way of recruiting students was through word of mouth and a compromise of academic standard also compromises our ability to function" (A6). Many participants used neo-liberal discourses in this respect, with another admissions officer speaking of sending "diluted graduates out into the market" (A4). Another spoke of "universities being in competition with each other, with graduates as the marketing tool" (A1). A senior executive described the circumstances in which RPL acted neither as a tool of equity nor pedagogical assessment, but as a strategic tool for positioning the university within the 'market':

> If RPL is about pedagogy then why don't you just let them in and see what your first assessment does? It's because you're worried about retention, which is a performance indicator. What you do is set yourself a mark and a position within the sector and decide what universities you want to partner with and position yourself as an institution that has a quality and a licence to deliver. That's why I think we've got to be careful when we talk about RPL and pedagogy (E3).

In this way, RPL acts not as a fixed determinant of ability, but a shifting market lever, dictating academic standards according to the strategic needs of the university. For many in the front line of student recruitment at the university, this was a cause of concern or, in the words of an admissions officer, "when RPL becomes a buying tool and not an academic one, that's when it becomes a waste of time for me" (A1).

One senior executive was sanguine that academic standards would "always be compromised by the massification of education" (E2). But for him that was the whole point, since a more participative higher education sector would require more harmonised understandings of qualifications and preparation. Universities might "start to look at graduating people at different levels, but whether that affects the standards or whether that just changes the way in which we classify students, I'm not sure" (E2). Thus, notions of 'academic standards' and 'quality control' are understood as normative rather than absolute concepts.

Discussion

RPL within the ATN group is a fluid and contested discourse. It is not exclusively an instrument of equity, nor an empirical measure of academic ability, or a marketing tool, nor an assurance of quality. Instead it has the potential to be an effective instrument in all these respects, as its particular function shifts depending on the interpretative eye of the beholder and the immediate purpose for which it is being employed. The group's policies focus on process, rather than intent; they describe clearly the *what* of RPL policy without explicating the *why*. Certainly, the policies imply a concern for academic

quality that RPL might possibly threaten. However the threat is not so much the recognition of prior learning itself, but the values and understandings that informal learners bring with them and which might contest the normative processes of the universities. This 'policy vagueness' has the potential to undermine any future attempt by the ATN group to increase its LSEB enrolments, by passively reinforcing the group's current normative practices. Currently, these practices maintain relatively homogenous admission policies that place concerns for academic quality and meritocratic accountability above aspirations of a more accessible and equitable higher education sector. Students are selected from a 'common pool' in which the small contingent of lifelong and life-wide learners are placed together with the much larger contingent of learners with traditional, formal educational background. This is potentially inequitable in terms of how the students are assessed as being qualified and competitive and may contribute to the current low levels LSEB students in the Australian higher education sector.

In order to meet the Bradley Review's 20 percent LSEB target as recommended, universities might consider moving to separate quotas; for example creating one cohort of LSEB enrolments and another for the rest. In this way, the idea of a one-dimensional 'proto-student' might be challenged. This view posits the Government's educational reforms as a challenge to contemporary understandings of both academic meritocracy and normative behaviour. Yet this is not the same as directing universities to compromise essential pedagogical standards in the attempts to meet the LSEB targets set by the Government. Whilst this study revealed no evidence that RPL policies have been enacted for the purposes of equitable admission within the ATN, the very nature of these policies – in particular their lack of overt purpose and the various interpretations the policy actors place upon them – make them fertile ground for equitable action. Policy actors are used to taking into account criteria other than the notional academic 'score' of the applicant. Currently the criteria most commonly addressed are the relative market position of the university and the extent to which the informal learner evidences normative behaviour. Equity is not a current priority, a fact borne out by the empirical data concerning LSEB enrolments. Still, it is quite possible for the ATN universities to supplement, or even replace, market and academic concerns with notions of equity, within their RPL policies and practices.

It is too simple to say that an increased emphasis on RPL for access would result in increased enrolments from people from an LSEB. Many of the learners considering using RPL in this manner would have faced a lifetime of educational disadvantage, leaving them pedagogically and motivationally underprepared for tertiary studies. However an increased focus on the role informal and non-formal learning plays in preparing individuals for formal studies can assist in focussing educational researchers' attention on the nature of assessment and evaluation practices more widely. This in turn might lead to more creative and inclusive admission policies. Admission policies which encourage the use of portfolios, interviews or other supplementary evidence of academic ability have greater potential to explore and validate the educational potential of learners coming from non-traditional learning backgrounds.

Although this study focussed on the ATN universities in general and one ATN university in particular, previous research indicates similarities in lifelong, life-wide and RPL practices throughout the Australian higher education sector (Pitman, 2009; Pitman & Broomhall, 2009). It is not just the ATN universities that use RPL and associated practices to maintain institutional norms. Throughout the sector, these policies and practices prioritise academic quality and meritocracy over notions of equity. Yet, similar to the ATN group's policies, many of these other policies provide scope for the greater incorporation of equity goals into institutional admission practices. Whilst this can be done without explicating the ideals of equity and participation, it is preferable that these concepts are identified overtly within the formal policy framework. If the Bradley Review's recommendations in respect of LSEB students are to be realised, then it would be helpful to see them formally identified within the sector's admission policies.

The purpose of equity policy should not be to compromise meritocratic admission processes. Rather, they should circumvent them completely – and circumvent is not meant in this context as a compromise of the system. Recognising that some students have not had the same opportunity might also mean recognition that it is not too late to give them that opportunity. One way in which this can

be done is by ensuring that students with informal learning backgrounds are given genuine opportunities to participate in higher education. The final word on this study comes from one of the senior executives interviewed as part of the case study and who said: 'What we always forget is that what we deliver is the outcomes, rather than the input - and if you only get one input, what's the point?' (E3).

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