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Towards a Southern Theory of Student Equity in Australian Higher Education: Enlarging the Rationale for Expansion

Trevor Gale¹

1) Deakin University, Australia

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Towards a Southern Theory of Student Equity in Australian Higher Education: Enlarging the Rationale for Expansion

Trevor Gale
Deakin University, Australia

Abstract

Student equity in Australian higher education is a numbers game. While university student recruitment departments focus on ‘bums on seats’, equity advocates draw attention to which bums, in what proportions and, more to the point, which seats, where. But if the counting of ‘bums’ is crude, so is the differentiation of seats. Just distinguishing between courses and universities and scrutinizing the distribution of groups is a limited view of equity. This paper proposes an expanded conception for student equity and an enlarged regard for what is being accessed by students who gain entry to university. Drawing on Connell’s notion of ‘southern theory’, the paper highlights power/knowledge relations in higher education and particularly for ‘southerners’: those under-represented in universities, often located south of cut-off scores, and whose cultural capital is similarly marginalised and discounted. The paper concludes that taking account of marginalized forms of knowledge requires thinking differently about what higher education is and how it gets done.

Keywords: higher education, student equity, social inclusion, widening participation, power/knowledge, cultural capital

Hacia una Teoría del Sur sobre la Equidad Estudiantil en la Educación Superior Australiana: Ampliar la Base Lógica para la Expansión

Trevor Gale

Deakin University, Australia

Resumen

La equidad estudiantil en la educación superior australiana es un juego de números. Mientras que los departamentos universitarios de reclutamiento de estudiantes se centran en tener a alumnos que “hagan bulto”, los defensores de la equidad llaman la atención sobre quién “hace bulto”, en qué proporción y, especialmente, dónde. Pero si el recuento de las personas que “hacen bulto” es crudo, también lo es la diferenciación de los mismos. Sólo distinguir entre los cursos y las universidades, y escrutando la distribución de los grupos es una visión limitada de la equidad. Este artículo propone una concepción de la equidad estudiantil más expansiva, y una visión ampliada de lo que se está requiriendo para el acceso de los estudiantes que logran entrar en la universidad. Partiendo de la noción de Connell sobre la 'Teoría Sur', el artículo destaca las relaciones de poder/saber en la educación superior y en particular en el caso de los 'sureños': aquellos insuficientemente representados en las universidades, a menudo localizados en el límite sur de los resultados, y cuyo capital cultural es igualmente marginado y no tenido en cuenta. El artículo concluye que el tener en cuenta formas de conocimiento marginadas requiere pensar diferente sobre lo que es la educación superior y cómo se lleva a cabo.

Palabras clave: educación superior, equidad estudiantil, inclusión social, ampliar participación, poder/conocimiento, capital cultural.

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The interest of this paper is in the concept of ‘equity’, specifically what this means for students in higher education and particularly its expression within Australia’s higher education system. Recent policy announcements by the Australian Government ([Commonwealth of Australia, 2009](#)) to increase the participation of under-represented groups in higher education, particularly the participation of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds, is the latest in a growing number of policy initiatives by OECD nations to expand and widen their higher education provision. Others include but are not restricted to HE expansion agendas in the UK (target: 50% of 30 year olds with a degree by 2010; [DfES, 2003](#)), in Ireland (target: 72% of 17-19 year olds participating in HE by 2020; [Bradley et al 2008, 20](#)) and in the USA (target: 60% of 25 to 34 to hold college degrees by 2020; [Kelly 2010, 2](#)). The rationale for expansion tends to be more about giving their respective nations a competitive edge in the global knowledge economy ([Sellar, Gale & Parker 2011; Gale 2011b](#)). Equity features in these arrangements to the extent that expansion (from mass to universal participation; [Trow 1974; 2006](#)) is dependant on ‘raising the aspirations’ of people who previously have not been all that interested in higher education.

In this paper I provide a policy and conceptual analysis of these equity arrangements, arguing that previous conceptions of equity are increasingly inadequate for pursuing social inclusion in higher education. Student equity in Australian higher education (HE) remains officially defined by and more generally understood in terms of the Australian Government’s 1990 policy statement, *A Fair Chance for All* ([Department of Employment Education and Training, 1990](#)). In brief, the policy describes equity in terms of the proportional representation of social groups within the university student population: ‘bums’ on seats or, to be fairer, particular bums on particular seats. On the face of it, these are matters that have more to do with what happens immediately before and at the point of university entry, than with what students experience once they have entered. There has been little regard for what students bring to university, to the learning environment and experience, and little regard for what they are potentially able to contribute.

In responding to this absence, my argument is for a ‘southern theory’ of HE. [Connell \(2007\)](#) uses this term to draw attention to the fact that

much social theory (informing HE) is produced in, and from the perspective of the global north. Despite claims to universality, these theories fail to account for voices and knowledges from non-dominant peoples. The phrase ‘southern theory’ ‘calls attention to the centre-periphery relations in the realm of knowledge’, specifically that a variety of knowledges and ways of knowing have been denied voice in social theory and that they have their own contributions to make. ‘Northern’ and ‘southern’ are used by Connell:

... not to name a sharply bounded category of states or societies, but to emphasise relations – authority, exclusion and inclusion, hegemony, partnership, sponsorship, appropriation – between intellectuals and institutions in the metropole and those in the world periphery. (Connell, 2007, pp. viii-ix)

Drawing on a ‘southern’ disposition, the paper seeks to move thinking about equity towards new ‘relations in the realm of knowledge’, to see what this might mean for student equity in HE in particular, with emphasis on what happens once students enter university. It seeks to point in a particular direction, to give conceptual directions rather than name precisely what such an approach means for practice in particular sites.

The paper begins with a consideration of current student equity policy in Australian HE, before addressing more epistemological concerns. While the intention is to problematize current policy and practice in student equity, this does not simply mean the replacement of one definition with another. Proportional representation as a definition of equity remains useful symbolically and politically because of its potential for arguing for broader and deeper equities in HE. However, a more sophisticated approach to equity needs to account not just for bodies but also for what they embody (Sefa Dei, 2008; Dall’Alba & Barnacle, 2005; Bourdieu, 1990; Turner, 1996), specifically, their knowledges and ways of knowing. These are issues taken up later in the paper.

Understanding equity

The problems encountered by some social groups in accessing Australian HE are now well rehearsed. Australians from high

socioeconomic backgrounds are currently three times more likely to enter university than people from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008, p. 30). Indigenous Australians constitute 2.2 percent of the nation's population but only 1.3 percent of all university students (Bradley et al., 2008, p. 28). And while a quarter of Australians live in regional and remote areas, only 18 percent are represented within the HE student population (Bradley et al., 2008, p. 28; Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009a). The 2008 Review of Australian Higher Education (the Bradley Review) has now popularised these figures within Australia, particularly the comparatively low levels of participation by students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds (Bradley et al., 2008, p. 28).

Perhaps less well known is that while 8 percent of Australians have a disability, university students with disabilities only constitute 4 percent of all HE students (Bradley et al., 2008, p. 28; DEEWR, 2009a). Yet, despite receiving a small but important mention in the *Bradley Review* (2008, p. 29), there is nothing in the Government's budget response, *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System*, which mentions students with disabilities (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). While their participation has improved over time, it is still short of where it needs to be. Students with disabilities seem to have fallen off the policy radar, at least from recent government announcements.

In 1990, *A Fair Chance for All* also identified people from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) and women in non-traditional areas as under-represented in Australian universities (Department of Employment Education and Training, 1990). On crude numerical measures, the participation of people from NESBs has significantly improved since that time. Because of this, they appear to have dropped off the mainstream equity agenda. However, there is a need to disaggregate these figures to distinguish between the HE participation of skilled migrants and people who have migrated to Australia as refugees. Similarly, women continue to be grossly under-represented in non-traditional areas, specifically in engineering, at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels (DEEWR, 2009a) but this also does not appear to be an issue of current policy concern. As in the UK, gender equity has lost its critical edge (David, 2011).

The low participation of these ‘equity’ groups has been a concern in Australia for some time. For instance, the proportion of students from low SES backgrounds in HE has hovered around 15 percent for at least the last two decades and more probably since the expansion of Australian HE in the post-war Menzies era (Gale & Tranter, 2011). We know this because of the statistical data generated by the Australian Government since 1990. Indeed, equity has become defined by these statistics (Gale, 2011a). On one level, the Federal Government’s policy directions for HE perpetuate this understanding of student equity, that it is a matter of numbers. Framed in this way, Australian universities are now being asked to ‘lift their game’, to raise the number of Australians from low SES backgrounds enrolled in their institutions to 20 percent by 2020. At the same time, they are being invited to enrol more undergraduate students, to increase the overall participation of Australians in HE, to 40 percent of 25 to 34 year olds by 2025. The extent to which institutions contribute to reaching these targets is the subject of compacts: negotiated agreements between government and each institution.

There are at least three questions that arise for policy and practice from the current statistical precision that is applied to conceptions of equity: How can we, indeed should we, account for differences within equity groups? How can we account for differences between equity groups? How confident can we be that we are measuring what we claim to be measuring?

The first and second questions concern the imagined and real differences within and between equity groups, which are not well acknowledged by their current official definitions (see Martin, 1994). For example, people from low SES backgrounds are not a homogenous group. They can differ by race/ethnicity, social/cultural capital, geographical locations and the interrelations between these. In the same way, socioeconomic status as a category does not ‘capture’ all differences, as it is conceived within current Australian Government policy. For example, in the Bradley Review and in the Federal Government’s policy response, low SES appears to have become an umbrella term for all under-represented groups, including Indigenous peoples and people from regional and remote areas. While it is true that many of these Australians are from low SES backgrounds, it is also the case that many

are not. Moreover, even those who are, their socioeconomic backgrounds do not describe in full their particular social, cultural and political circumstances. Increasing the participation of people from low SES backgrounds is now being articulated as both a target for the sector and a 'catch-all' for all under-represented groups.

To its credit, the Government's budget paper, *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System*, announced its intention to support 'a review of the effectiveness of measures to improve the participation of Indigenous students in higher education' (Australian Government, 2009, p. 14), due to report in September 2012. Nonetheless, the Government is still of the view that 'The steps to improve low SES student participation will impact on and benefit Indigenous students' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p. 14). The same concessions have not been afforded other equity groups, including people from regional and remote areas of Australia, despite the fact that of all groups their participation in HE has seen the largest reduction over time (Bradley et al., 2008, p. 29). In effect, in the current equity policy hierarchy, Indigenous people and people from regional and remote areas are located first and second respectively under the low socioeconomic banner, while students with disabilities are less conveniently subsumed and indeed are displaced from current policy debates.

The third issue with utilising a narrowly statistical approach to defining equity involves the question of precision, in particular in how socioeconomic status is measured. Much national debate has focussed on the inefficiency of the current ABS-generated measure of the employment and education attainment of individuals within postcodes (e.g. DEEWR, 2009b; James, 2009; Phillimore, & Koshy, 2010a; Sellar & MacMullin, 2010; Sealey, 2011; Ross, 2011a). One of the problems with this measure is that it does not take account of wealthy and high status areas within low SES postcodes, or of poorer and lower status areas in middle and high SES postcodes. Naturally, universities are concerned about the lack of clarity around these issues, particularly those with current student populations that include people from low SES backgrounds who originate from and/or live in middle and high SES postcodes. In recognition of these difficulties, the Australian Government has established an interim measure of SES² that combines data from an Australian Bureau of Statistics socioeconomic index

(collected at the level of census districts) with Centrelink³ data on individual students. The Australian Government has foreshadowed that even ‘better measures of low socioeconomic status will be developed which are based on the circumstances of individual students and their families’ (Australian Government, 2009, p. 14).

However, the value of the current and arguably flawed measure is its regard for context and that it is not purely derived from economic considerations. The danger in any new measure is that it becomes so focused on individuals and their individual circumstances, that it loses any sense of the influence of these individuals’ socio-cultural contexts, which constitute the group.⁴ In developing a new measure of SES, it is important not to lose sight of ‘family’, and ‘community’, in calculations. There is a danger in reducing SES to a single measure of an individual or their parents’ financial and/or educational attainment alone, which does not take account of the way in which individuals negotiate their social and cultural lives in combination with others.

Responding to equity targets

These definitions of equity have implications for what we imagine to be the purposes of HE. At one level they draw attention to what is missing, what is not considered in policy on student equity. For instance, an emphasis on equity as proportional representation tends to focus our minds on what happens before students get into HE. It draws attention to the point of entry, almost to the exclusion of other considerations. In the current policy configuration, equity is seen to be achieved once students have entered in the right proportions. Obscured from view is the impact of proportional representation on HE itself. If the Australian Government and Australian universities are successful in achieving the proportional representation of equity groups within HE, it is not difficult to imagine that their increased presence will have an impact on what happens within universities (discussed below). But it is worth considering the extent to which this constitutes ‘success’, at least in policy terms.

First, the Government’s target of 20 percent of university students derived from low SES backgrounds by 2020, falls short of the 25 percent of all Australians from low SES backgrounds. Hence, even if

the target is reached, proportional representation will not have been achieved. The task is even more difficult when we take into account that Australians from low SES backgrounds are not evenly spread across the nation. In some parts they are more heavily concentrated, in other parts less so (Phillimore & Koshy, 2010a; 2010b). Responding to such observations, the Government has announced ‘excellence targets’ or institutional variations to the sector’s equity target in proportion to an institution’s history and the low SES population of the political jurisdiction in which the institution is located (Trounson, 2011). Some acknowledgement has also been given to universities that draw significant student numbers from outside these state boundaries, whose mission or *raison d’être* is national or even global. But given the way in which equity is currently defined – as proportional representation – even breaking down the sector target into institutional targets is not enough. HE is not all the same. For equity to have real teeth, proportional representation also needs to apply across institution and course types. Short of this, it will be difficult to argue that the policy or at least its equity intent, has been successful.

Second, equity ‘success’ must consider what happens once enrolments of equity groups reach their proportional representation within the university student population. The implications of this are not lost on the HE sector or on government. Indeed, they are often raised by some as reasons for not increasing the numbers of underrepresented groups in universities (Gallagher, 2009). The most common claim is that many students from disadvantaged backgrounds are not sufficiently prepared for university (Ross 2011b). To enrol them in a HE would require a lowering of academic entry standards measured in terms of eligible ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank) scores. This is such a widely and deeply held view that it is hard to dislodge even when faced with evidence to the contrary. Richard Teese’s research, for example, clearly demonstrates that students with low ATAR scores are highly correlated with low SES, and vice versa. In other words, the ATAR is more indicative of socioeconomic status than it is of a student’s academic potential (Teese & Polesel, 2003). Echoing Teese’s sentiments, George et al. argue that ‘the TER [Tertiary Entrance Rank; a form of ATAR] is an authoritative measure that rewards the cultural resources characteristic of the most economically powerful groups in

society' (George, Lucas, & Tranter, 2005, p. 144).

The fallacy of the claim that enrolling more students from low SES backgrounds will inevitably lower academic standards is also born out in the research on these students' university performance. The evidence from large numbers of small and large-scale research projects across the country and across different university types, is that university students from low SES backgrounds perform at or about the same as their peers (Dobson & Skuja, 2005; Tranter, Murdoch, & Saville, 2007; Dobozy, 2008; Win & Miller, 2005). If there is any variation, it would seem that students from low SES backgrounds perform better than their peers in the 'soft' sciences and not as well as their peers in the 'hard' sciences (Dobson & Skuja, 2005). Disparities in school facilities and in access to experienced science and mathematics teachers, could reasonably explain the soft/hard science variation. However, the spectre of the lack of preparation of students from low SES backgrounds is enough to have some in HE deflecting attention away from their equity responsibilities. How can we achieve the government's equity targets, they argue, if schools do not present us with adequately prepared students? Certainly, more could be done to ensure the quality of schooling for all students. Yet, it could equally be argued that universities are intimately involved in the nature of schooling: in directly and indirectly determining its curricula (Gale, 1994), in valorising academic over vocational pathways, and in preparing its teachers. However, this is to take away from the evidence that students from low SES backgrounds perform well at university when given the opportunity to participate.

In need of support

Even among those who are prepared to accept this evidence, some suggest that achieving the Government's low SES target will require enrolling students who are qualitatively different from those students from low SES backgrounds who have been enrolled to date. Others have determined that if their institution is able to reduce or even eliminate the attrition rate of their current population of students from low SES backgrounds,⁴ they will meet their low SES targets. Both point to the need for increased support at university for students from equity groups, in order for them to be successful. This is generally conceived as co-

curricula activities that provide students with support outside regular classes: in study skills (including literacy and numeracy skills) but also in mentoring, counselling, accommodation, health care, childcare, and so on. It is an argument that has found traction in government policy. For example, the 2009 budget document on HE (Australian Government, 2009, p. 13) announced a new Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program (HEPPP) involving an enrolment loading (of \$A325m) to encourage universities to enrol students from low SES backgrounds. As well as being an incentive to encourage universities to enrol students from low SES backgrounds, the Australian Government's explicit intention is that the additional funding will be used 'to fund the intensive support needed to improve their completion and retention rates' (Australian Government, 2009, p. 14). This compares with \$A108m over the same period, which has been set aside to support university outreach activities or what are now called partnership activities with schools and vocational education and training providers. In funding terms, the HEPPP establishes a 3 to 1 ratio in favour of supporting students from low SES backgrounds enrolled in university, over activities that enable and encourage these same students to gain access to university.

There is considerable belief embedded in this policy initiative, that support for students from equity groups, particularly students from low SES backgrounds, is needed in order for them to be successful at university. Indeed, some suggest that it is because of the support they have been provided to date that students from low SES backgrounds have performance and attrition rates comparable with their peers. However, there is minimal evidence to support this claim across the sector. Student support provided by universities across the nation is quite varied, not just in its range but also in its quality and quantity. Indeed, elite universities compared with 'equity' universities – with arguably lower levels of student support in the former – demonstrate lower rates of attrition by students from equity groups (Group of Eight, 2009). One explanation for this might be that elite universities enrol more students directly from school. For example, 82 percent of the University of West Australia's first year students are in this direct-from-school category (Skene & Evamy, 2009). Whereas, the 2009 Government budget document notes that 'adult learners... comprise a

large proportion of students who require additional support' (Australian Government, 2009, p. 15). However, a closer examination of the retention statistics indicates that "those institutions with a higher proportion of disadvantaged students [often 'equity' universities] retain them at a higher rate than they do the overall student population, and perform better in this regard than more prestigious universities with lower low SES participation rates" (Parker & Peters, 2011).

More research is required in this area of student support in order for the sector and government to be able to make informed judgements at a policy and system level about what forms of support are needed and with what effect, for what kinds of students, and in which contexts. Co-curricular activities are an important part of the university student experience but there is a fundamental problem with our conception of student equity in HE if these student support activities constitute all there is to equity. Vince Tinto's phrase, that 'access without support is not opportunity', is now well known (Tinto, 2008; see also Smith et al., 2011). However, opportunity confined to support is not equity. This is because 'support', by definition, is not designed to challenge what a HE means. Rather, its purpose is to reinforce what it currently is. Mentoring, for example, is "about the maintenance and reproduction of the existing hierarchy and the status quo, [with] the primary beneficiary [being] the institution" (Margolis & Romero, 2001, p. 80; Gale & Parker, *in press*). The primary function of a university's support services is to enable its students to engage effectively with the university's teaching and learning programs. In this sense, student support is peripheral to the central activity of universities. The mainstream activity of universities – the legitimation and dissemination of certain forms of knowledge – is taken as a given, as normative. It is students who must adjust to it in order to be successful. Support services provide the mechanisms for students to achieve this, if they do not come to university with the capacities and resources to achieve this on their own.

Effectively, students are not just 'supported' but positioned as requiring change, adjustment, up-skilling, additional resources, and so on, in order to fit in to established patterns of participation. In its most positive sense, support services provide students with ways of coping with university, even mastering it. Typically, it is not the university, its teaching and learning programs or its administrative structures that

adjust to accommodate different kinds of students. Indeed, many academics who deliver the university's teaching programs would regard adjusting those programs to accommodate different kinds of students as a threat to academic standards. For some, accommodating equity to that extent is in clear opposition to excellence as it represents:

... a distraction of scarce resources for an unattainable vision of an undifferentiated university system ... The serious risk is a drift to mediocrity ... as some universities will divert resources to do what they cannot do well. ... Every university cannot be expected to contribute equally to the nation's achievement of research excellence and equity of higher education access. Policy should enable each institution to play to its strengths. (Gallagher, 2009; see also Gale, 2011a).

Improving the student learning experience

Nevertheless, the government is of the view that 'to achieve [its] ambitious attainment targets there will also need to be an increased emphasis on improving the student learning experience in order to boost retention, progress and ultimately, completion rates' (Australian Government, 2009, p. 15). Given that explicit targets for the completion rates of students from low SES backgrounds have not been set, student equity appears subsumed by a productivity agenda (Gale & Tranter, 2011). It is the 40 percent attainment target (noted above) rather than the 20 percent participation target that informs the rationale for improving the student learning experience. While student diversity has become an important concept in this field, there is a need for a stronger social justice rationale and direction beyond what is evident in the government's current policy agenda and in institutional practice. This necessarily will involve unsettling 'the centre-periphery relations in the realm of knowledge' (Connell, 2007, p. viii), as Connell describes the problematic of 'northern theory', suggesting a counter-hegemonic or southern theory of HE (Connell, 1993, p. 52; 2006; 2007). The prime motivation is a commitment to and understanding of social justice but there is also potential benefit for all (Milem, 2003). Indeed, a mature understanding of social justice, 'a sophisticated approach' (Bradley et al., 2008) to equity, needs to be able to conceive of 'multiple payoffs'.

For example, in “a multidisciplinary analysis of the research literature”, Jeffery Milem (2003, p. 129) has found that heterogeneous university student populations exhibit higher levels of academic achievement than homogenous university student populations and that the greatest gains are by “majority students who have previously lacked significant direct exposure to minorities” (Milem, 2003, pp. 131-132). But it is not the sheer presence of different students that generates this effect. The educational benefits for all university students in more diverse cohorts include: “greater relative gains in critical and active thinking ... greater intellectual engagement and academic motivation ... [and] greater relative gains in intellectual and social self-concept” (Milem, 2003, p. 142). In fact, institutions and their staff who fail to engage with the diversity of their students also fail to see this academic improvement (Association of American Universities, 1997). In short, creating space for and valuing “diversity in colleges and universities is not only a matter of social justice but also a matter of promoting educational excellence” (Milem, 2003, p. 126).

Clearly, the most effective site to engage in changing HE is from the centre. Student support services are important and essential but they are largely peripheral to the mainstream of HE. A student equity agenda for HE must centre on the student learning environment and experience if it is to challenge the exclusion of certain bodies and what they embody. Drawing on Gale and Densmore’s (2000) typology of social justice, a southern theory of HE can be characterised by three important dimensions. First, in the most ideal of circumstances, learning environments and experiences are such that students are appreciated for who they are and for how they identify themselves. Second, there are opportunities in these environments and experiences for all students to make knowledge contributions as well as to develop their understandings and skills. And third, all students are provided with genuine opportunities to shape how their learning environments and experiences are structured. These dimensions provide a more robust social justice framing for the ‘diversity principle’ in current thinking on first year HE curriculum (Kift & Nelson, 2005, pp. 230-232). Indeed, the principle is about ‘engaging with difference’ (Hayes, Mills, Christie & Lingard, 2006) rather than with merely celebrating the presence of diversity or variety.

In the past, and in much of the present, universities have tended to make assumptions about the knowledges and understandings of their students, even in relation to those who have come from privileged backgrounds. HE learning environments and student experiences have been informed by what Paulo Freire (1996, p. 52) has termed a ‘banking concept’ of education: with academics making deposits in the minds of their students from which they (both) are able to make later withdrawals. Knowledge has been assumed to reside in the cloisters of the university, in the hands and heads of its dons. Indeed, universities and their scholars have positioned themselves as the legitimate, almost exclusive, producers of knowledge (Connell 2007).

However, we are beginning to understand that this is not necessarily the case, at least in some cases. For example, Australian HE is starting to come to terms with the importance of Indigenous knowledges, although this is more prevalent in places like Canada and in parts of Africa. Apart from a distinctive body of knowledge, Indigenous peoples also have different ways of engaging with and expressing knowledge, for example through narrative. Narrative is not a teaching or research method traditionally employed in universities. Indeed, it has been and still is regarded by many as ‘unscientific’. Yet there are things that all students can learn from a narrative approach. Similarly, international students are now very much part of the landscape of Australian universities. Their very presence, and in such numbers, has changed Australian HE for domestic students, for the most part for the better. They have challenged our epistemologies and ontologies and prompted many Australian academics to think differently about the kind of HE offered to all, not just to students who come from overseas. Internationalising the curriculum may be regarded by some as a matter of translation, positioning teaching staff as interpreters. However, for many Australian academics it is more importantly about recognising and being informed by different ways of thinking about and engaging with the world, informed by the social and cultural backgrounds of their international students.

These are matters of pedagogy as much as they are about curriculum. Improving the student learning experience is not simply about teaching students about foreign places or Indigenous knowledges, although there is certainly a place for that. It is also about the need for a curriculum

that provides room for different ways of thinking about, and different ways of engaging with knowledge, and inserting different kinds of understandings into the learning environment and experience that perhaps have not been part of Australian HE before. It is about how we structure the student learning experience in ways that open it up and make it possible for students to contribute from who they are and what they know. It is about an enriched learning experience for all students.

To take this further, arguments for Indigenous and international contributions to HE need to be generalised across all equity groups (Connell, 1993, p. 52). For example, students with a physical disability do not simply comprehend their disability as physical. It is also experienced socially and culturally and understood by them as socially and culturally constructed. In the same way, people from low socioeconomic backgrounds come to university with sets of knowledges about the world, of how to engage with the world, and of what the world is, that are potentially different from and valuable to others (Luttrell, 1989; Zipin, 2009; Gonzáles, 2005). One example is the way in which formal learning environments regard relations between pure and applied knowledge. For some people from low SES backgrounds, knowledge has no value outside of its use or application. But the dominant perspective in formal learning environments is that one needs to learn the theory before it can be applied in some practical situation. 'Even where periods of practicum, work experience, or projects are incorporated into programs, they are usually presented as opportunities to practice or apply the knowledge and skills gained' (Dall'Alba & Barnacle, 2005, p. 719). The relation is uni-directional: knowledge of the pure must precede knowledge of the applied. Hence:

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

Similar distinctions are formed between ‘street’ and ‘institutional’ knowledge, with what students learn informally and from practice not being valued within formal learning environments. The point is that valuable ways of understanding and engaging with the world, which have different understandings of the relations between pure and applied knowledge or that do not even make this distinction, are hence denied, suppressed or lost to others in the learning environment.

One method of translating this theoretical acknowledgement of marginalised knowledges into real world curriculum is through what is known as a ‘funds of knowledge’ approach (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzáles, 1992; Gonzáles, 2005). This includes recognising that all students come with valuable understandings that can contribute to the education of others. This requires identifying and inviting students’ knowledges into the learning environment and using them to develop curricular. Students are then positioned differently, because they are now expert in the kinds of knowledges that inform the learning experience. Complementing this approach, Zipin (2009) argues that we also need to identify ‘funds of pedagogy’. It is not just the knowledges from students’ different socio-cultural groups but also the ways in which students learn in those groups, which need to be taken into account. Finding a way of bringing those into the formal learning environment is far more challenging to the logic of HE.

Conclusion

The way HE policy currently defines student equity is in terms of student numbers and, superseding all others, numbers of students from low SES backgrounds. It is not a highly nuanced account although it is politically useful to some degree. At the same time, university student support services, including co-curricular activities (that is, first generation First Year in Higher Education (FYHE) approaches) and enhanced curricula design (that is, second generation FYHE approaches) (Wilson 2009),⁶ are increasingly being positioned as what student equity means within HE. These activities are important but they do not constitute all there is to student equity. A more sophisticated approach entails the creation of space in HE not just for new kinds of student bodies but also for their embodied knowledges and ways of

knowing. Within this paper, this is referred to as a southern theory of HE and constitutes a third generation approach to FYHE. It applies not just to Indigenous peoples or international students, their knowledges and ways of knowing, but has relevance for the epistemologies of all socio-cultural groups, including people from low SES backgrounds. In short, an expanded understanding of student equity requires an expanded understanding of higher education. The alternative is a diminished HE for all university students.

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Notes

1 Professor Trevor Gale is the Chair in Education Policy and Social Justice at Deakin University, Australia. Previously he was the founding director of Australia's National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. He is the founding editor of *Critical Studies in Education*. His latest books are *Schooling in Disadvantaged Communities* (Springer 2010) with Carmen Mills and *Educational Research by Association* (Sense 2010) with Bob Lingard.

2 Interestingly, the new measure suggests a lower rate of participation in university by people from low SES backgrounds.

3 Centrelink is the Australian Government's social security agency. One category of payments is 'Youth Allowance', which is an age-related (16-20 years) and means-tested payment for young people looking for full time work and/or engaged in study.

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

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

6 Wilson (2009) characterizes first and second generation first year experience (FYE) approaches in terms of: (1) university student support services (including course advice and student decision-making support and other co-curricular activities (including orientation activities)); and (2) curricula activities (curriculum, pedagogy, assessment) as

well as the broad curriculum of institutions.

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Trevor Gale is Professor of Education Policy and Social Justice at School of Education in Deakin University, Australia

Contact Address: Direct correspondence to Trevor Gale at School of Education, Deakin University, Melbourne Burwood Campus, 221 Burwood Highway, Burwood VIC 3125 Australia. Email: trevor.gale@deakin.edu.au