

Chapter 2

Framing the Framework: The Origins of *A Fair Chance for All*

Lin Martin

Introduction

I was asked to provide a first-hand account of the origins, development and significance of *A Fair Chance for All* and related policy instruments such as the equity performance indicator framework. I am indebted to Professor Denise Bradley, who in the late 1980s led the project which culminated in the publication of *A Fair Chance for All*, for her advice and recollections from those times.

The Precursors to *A Fair Chance for All*

While the concept of fairness and increasing participation became much more central to Government higher education policy in the late 1980s, improving student equity was an issue internationally and in Australia long before *A Fair Chance for All*. Various scholarships schemes introduced by Governments of both colours, Indigenous support programs, and the abolition of university fees in 1974 by the Whitlam Government were all significant equity initiatives (Gale and McNamee 1994) but they were based on an imprecise concept of disadvantage and on an assumption that the way to address inequalities in access to higher education was to remove financial barriers to study. The Whitlam Government policies demonstrate why more focused initiatives were required. With the abolition of fees in 1974, it was believed that the mix of students in universities would be broadened to include a higher proportion of socio-economically disadvantaged students. Unfortunately

L. Martin (✉)

Office of the Ombuds, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) University,
Melbourne, VIC, Australia

TEQSA, Melbourne, VIC, Australia

e-mail: lin.martin@rmit.edu.au

this did not happen, mainly because there were few accompanying changes to admission criteria by universities to allow for a less academically prepared clientele.

Anderson and Vervoon (1983) discussed these issues and published an early general study of participation in Australian post-secondary education entitled *Access to Privilege: Patterns of participation in Australian post-secondary education*. They commented that institutions which had the most selective access policies had the lowest percentage of students from lower socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds. In the meantime the equity policy agenda was also advancing. The national Social and Economic Summit of the Hawke Government held in 1983 first discussed the link between the social and economic agendas and expressed concerns over participation rates at tertiary institutions of 'disadvantaged' groups. Increasing the education levels of the workforce was seen to be a major pillar in a set of macro-economic reforms for Australia planned by the Government.

Linke et al. monitored participation by low socio-economic status background and rural students in a series of studies in South Australia (1985; Linke, with Oertel (Martin), and Kelsey 1988) in the mid-1980s. Their work explored how to measure the socio-economic and rural profile of higher education students and to investigate whether any of the equity initiatives introduced from 1974 to 1984 had any real impact on changing this profile. Linke's study was an early attempt to use regional analysis of census social and economic data by postcode to construct a measure of relative socio-economic disadvantage which could be used to classify higher education enrolments by socio-economic status. He spelt out in detail the limitations of such measures and calibrated the results obtained through this approach with the results of surveys conducted in South Australia at the time. The study had several important policy-related conclusions: that provision of more places over the 10 year period had done nothing to change the socio-economic profile of enrolled students as the bias was equally present in the application profile as in the enrolment profile. If all applicants had been offered places the socio-economic profile of the sector would not have changed. This was a discouraging finding and underlined the tendency to social replication of the higher education sector. Since the provision of more places and removing financial barriers were the main strategies used at that time, these results represented important conclusions in terms of advancing the social equity goals of the Labor Government into the future.

In fact, Linke's approach was an important precursor of most of the work that followed in defining equity groups in the sector in a consistent way, and demonstrated a robust approach to monitoring access and participation over time. It showed that changing the equity profile of the higher education sector in Australia would prove to be a considerable challenge.

Equity and the Dawkins Green and White Papers

The Green and White papers circulated by the Minister for Employment, Education and Training in 1987 and 1988 (Dawkins 1987, 1988) represented a step function change in the policy framework for the provision and funding of higher education in Australia and the importance of higher education participation to the future economic sustainability of the nation. The policy papers heralded significant growth in the sector, established the Unified National System, foreshadowed bringing together the traditional universities with the newer colleges of advanced education and teachers' colleges in a series of mergers, and removed disparities in funding between the two groups (Ed. Croucher, Marginson, Norton, & Wells, 2014). Expanding on the issues identified in the National Social and Economic Summit of 1983, social justice was a major plank of the new policy framework. The Green Paper stated that, in spite of considerable effort in recent years, 'substantial inequities in access to higher education remain[ed] for some groups in the population' (Dawkins 1987, p. 21). The phrase *A Fair Chance for All* was coined for the new equity framework in the spirit of the Australian belief that its citizens should all get 'a fair go' at accessing higher education opportunities. In spite of a lack of hard participation data in 1987, the groups in society that were identified as under-represented in higher education were:

People from financially disadvantaged backgrounds;
People from rural and isolated areas;
Aboriginal people;
Women in some disciplinary areas; and
Some migrant groups.

The argument was repeated that increasing participation generally would assist in improving equity in spite of earlier evidence to the contrary but this time the need for more 'direct measures' (Dawkins 1987, p. 21) was identified, as well as a desire to coordinate equity strategies to achieve a set of national objectives and targets. It was foreshadowed that the proposed National Board of Employment, Education and Training (NBEET) would be given responsibility for advising on particular equity issues. The involvement of the new advisory body proved to be a lasting change in the policy arrangements for equity in the sector until its abolition in 1997.

When the White Paper was released in July 1988, the Government reiterated the policy directions of the Green Paper and equity remained as a key plank of the policy. The need for diversity of both institutional mission and the student population was stressed and proposals were made to transfer greater responsibility to the Unified National System institutions for planning and development of courses and services which best served their catchment areas and missions. Most importantly, equity was mainstreamed into national and institutional planning, monitoring and review through the Educational Profiles process and treated as an essential component of a quality higher education system (Dawkins 1988, p. 26). The Government also foreshadowed its intention to implement a national coordinated approach to

achieving its equity objectives. This was a significant change in approach which required initiatives to address participation gaps and build equity into the core activities of institutions. At this time there were no international models for such an approach and the policy initiatives were based entirely on Australian work. This was a significant achievement at the time and the Australian equity framework developed has proved to be influential in development of policies internationally. However, the longevity of the framework is viewed by some as a policy stasis which has acted against equity policy innovation and refinement.

The under-represented groups were also extended by the additional of a sixth group, 'the disabled', who were identified as drawing less on the benefits of higher education than others. A further emphasis in the White Paper was a strengthening of a statement of intent to develop a set of performance indicators for the sector which could be used as the basis of funding on output and performance. Equity was included in the list of performance indicators which were to be developed, again placing equity performance alongside core teaching and learning business indicators such as student demand, retention and completion rates (Dawkins 1988, p. 86).

The emphasis on the proposed national approach to equity and the need for a set of performance indicators were critical to the further promotion of the equity agenda in higher education and set in train the formulation of *A Fair Chance for All*. On re-reading the Green and White Papers one is struck by the breadth of vision of the reform agenda, the apparently strong commitment to equity by the Government and also by how little the productivity argument and policy landscape have changed in relation to these issues over the last 25 years in spite of all that has been done.

Advancing Equity Policy in the 1990s

The discussion paper, *A Fair Chance for All*, was released in 1990 as a joint publication of the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) and NBEET (1990). Minister Dawkins had referred the task of leading the development of the policy to the Higher Education Council of NBEET and had sought advice on guidelines for institutions to apply to their equity planning as part of the Educational Profiles process. The paper was developed under the guidance of an Equity Working Group with membership from NBEET, DEET and the sector which was chaired by Professor Denise Bradley, who was at that time Deputy Chair of the Higher Education Council. In order to get a first-hand account of the development of *A Fair Chance for All*, I contacted Denise Bradley to discuss the genesis of the policy paper. Denise reports that the origins of the equity agenda as it appeared in the policy papers arose from action taken before 1985 by the then Minister, Susan Ryan, who had appointed a group of women as commissioners on the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission. This group and Minister Ryan were strongly influenced by Affirmative Action work occurring in the United States at the time and were interested in questions of what was a fair percentage of people from various groups in society having access to the benefits of education and paid work, and the

role that a critical mass of students from these groups had on raising participation. The focus at first was on women, but the same arguments applied to under-representation of other groups which eventually led to their listing in the Green and White Papers, and the development of *A Fair Chance for All*.

Following the release of the draft equity discussion paper in 1990, there was a period of consultation with the sector and input on strategies which had worked in particular institutions was taken into account in the final version. *A Fair Chance for All* aimed to provide a national overview of equity issues for the sector; to advise the Minister on guidelines for institutions for the development of their equity plans to be included in Educational Profiles; and to define a national equity objective for the sector. In particular the document was to set national equity objectives and targets for each of the six disadvantaged groups identified in the White Paper. As best could be done in an environment where precise definitions and comprehensive baseline data on participation had not been established, population shares of 15–64 year olds of the equity groups in the general population were calculated using data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and compared where possible with undergraduate participation rates from the available student data.

It should be emphasised that the Government's policy settings were focussed on the student population in these groups. That is, the approach was one of measuring participation at the group level to enable judgements to be made by government not only about national progress but also the relative performance at this level between institutions. Thus, the subsequent work on tighter definitions of the groups and the development of performance indicators was not focussed on identifying the equity status of individuals to enable targeting or evaluation of specific initiatives or to provide information about possible access to benefits. The view of the Working Party, too, was that the task was to develop broad national objectives for what appeared from contemporary evidence to be educationally disadvantaged groups. It felt that institutions were best placed to identify the particular nuances of need in their communities within and between these groups and to monitor the needs and performance of individuals in local settings. Institutional autonomy was a fraught issue at this time of major policy change and to move any further down the path of monitoring institutional performance in detail was considered counterproductive to the policy intent. Institutions needed to 'own' the fine detail of their own locally produced Equity Plans. Times have changed with the introduction of mission-based compacts in place of the post-1988 Educational Profile documents but the arguments about autonomy of the universities persist. While there was and remains an imperative to be able to measure equity group participation there is now considerable flexibility in the unit record student collection for institutions to do their own monitoring of other groups in line with their own descriptions of disadvantage.

Within this broad framework, a national objective, targets mainly relating to access and participation, and a possible set of strategies to achieve equity were described for each of the six groups. Even at this early stage, the Equity Working Group was concerned about areas of multiple disadvantage and commented that the siloed approach to describing the groups and strategies 'did not mean to imply that these groups are mutually exclusive' (p. 10). This issue still remains a concern of

equity practitioners. Annual analyses done using comprehensive data 25 years on still rarely explore the concept of multiple disadvantage quantitatively even though it is known that many strategies put in place to redress disadvantage are applicable across several groups. The broader availability of unit record data to institutions in recent years through the national data collection now allows institutions more easily to undertake this analysis themselves and to share that data. In fact there was always capability for institutional analysis of the impact of their equity strategies after agreement was obtained on the definitions.

The national objectives and targets for the disadvantaged groups covered various aspects of access, participation and completion in higher education as shown in Table 2.1. Targets were mostly qualitative as baselines could not be established or realistic future values be set due to lack of data. This meant that the framework established in *A Fair Chance for All* was still a long way from the goal stated in the White Paper for a suite of meaningful performance indicators to be developed.

Against these objectives and targets, suggestions for appropriate strategies were made for each group. Similar strategies were listed for a number of the groups but they were always targeted at remedying under-participation or access, taking into account knowledge of the characteristics of each group. For example, awareness programs were listed as a strategy for non-English speaking background (NESB) students and those with disabilities but the type of programs suggested varied. Similarly, flexible study options were thought helpful in improving participation for ATSI students, women, students with disabilities and rural and isolated students but for quite different reasons related to their type of disadvantage. The types of strategies were based on examples of good practice volunteered by the sector members involved in the *A Fair Chance for All* consultations at that time and compiled and synthesised by the Higher Education Council (HEC) Working Party.

Table 2.1 Type of objectives in *A Fair Chance for All* by disadvantaged groups

Disadvantaged group	Access	Participation	Completion	Postgrad study	Quantitative targets
Socio-economically disadvantaged	X	–		–	No
ATSI	–	X	X	X	Yes
Women	–	X	–	X	Yes
		In non-traditional fields			
NESB	–	X	–	–	No
		By sex and discipline			
People with disabilities	X	X	–	–	Yes
		And in professional disciplines			
Rural/Isolated people	–	X	–	X	No

There was no requirement for institutions to identify strategies in their Equity Plans for every disadvantaged group and they were encouraged to analyse their catchment areas for their student population and address those groups most under-represented in their current student profile. In fact, few did this and most addressed all categories. Summary reports of these institutional equity plans were later prepared annually by DEET drawing out qualitative information about success of various strategies and allowing sharing of information about the equity agenda across the sector.

A Fair Chance for All represented a landmark report internationally – no country had attempted to aim for a higher education profile which was representative of the population profile; to set national participation targets or objectives; to identify groups where there was some evidence of disadvantage; or to mainstream student equity as a core component of institutional planning and performance monitoring. Awareness of the issues behind under-representation of groups in the higher education population was raised by the publication of the discussion paper, and the need for positive action to address these issues was recognised. But the measurement of actual progress towards the targets set was still not possible because of the lack of common definitions and metrics for the disadvantaged groups.

1989–1991: The Research Group on Performance Indicators

In 1989 the Commonwealth Government commissioned a Performance Indicators Research Group ‘to develop and trial a broad range of quantitative indicators suitable for evaluating relative performance in higher education at both system and institution levels and to report on their practicability, data requirements and appropriate conditions of use’ (Linke et al. 1991). The Research Group was led by Russell Linke and comprised a number of senior university staff who had previously been involved in similar work undertaken by the Australian Vice Chancellors’ Committee and the Australian Committee of Directors and Principals in Advanced Education before the establishment of the Unified National System. I was also appointed to that research group. Equity indicators were included in the Research Group’s brief, but the primary purpose was to establish a minimal set of general performance indicators which would allow evaluation of how well the sector was achieving teaching and research targets established through the Educational Profiles process.

The project was a very practical one which tested each proposed indicator using real data from a selection of institutions to ascertain whether it reliably differentiated levels of performance adequately between the trial institutions. But the Research Group also developed some of the metrics commonly used today by commissioning new work on teaching and staff quality. In particular, Paul Ramsden was commissioned to develop a student survey which was the first version of the Course Experience Questionnaire. New indicators were also developed on student progress rates, attrition and completion times for students.

Unfortunately, less attention was paid to the indicators of participation and social equity by the Research Group, although the importance of their development was emphasised. The only two indicators relevant to *A Fair Chance for All* that were tested related to access to courses by women and the female academic staffing profile of institutions. This was in spite of the Research Group stating that ‘it is one of the fundamental aims of higher education in any free society to promote the full development of individual potential beyond the circumstantial constraints imposed by social or cultural background, language, distance, age, sex or physical disability’ (Linke et al. 1991, p 116), a view which aligned with the philosophy of *A Fair Chance for All*. I was disappointed with the progress made in this area by the Research Group given its brief but took heart from the statement in the report (Linke et al. 1991, p. 116) that the indicators which had been developed were not comprehensive and that, following the release of *A Fair Chance for All*, a more appropriate indicator set might be addressed by a number of research and evaluation projects in the future.

Performance Measurement in Equity: The Conceptual Framework

Following the release of the Performance Indicators Research Group’s report in 1991, the Government identified a priority for further research into performance measurement through the Evaluations and Investigations program. At the time I was working for Denise Bradley at the newly formed University of South Australia and I suggested we should submit a proposal to do what the Research Group had not achieved and try to develop and test a set of equity performance indicators which were aligned with the national objectives and targets specified in *A Fair Chance for All*.

We submitted a proposal to DEET with Denise Bradley as Chair of the Project Management Team and me as the investigator. The aim of our project was to define and evaluate a set of equity indicators to augment the Research Group’s set of general performance indicators and to develop a computer package for institutions to extract the necessary data from their statistical files reported to the Government and calculate the full set of general and equity indicators. The project bid was successful and funds were granted at the end of 1991. As well as Denise Bradley, the Project Management Team comprised two members from DEET, a representative of the Higher Education Council, and four members of the previous Performance Indicators Research Group (Linke, West, Mackay, & Martin). Gavin Moodie was secretary to the Project Management Team.

The methodology for the part of the project that related to the equity indicators was to:

- Review the DEET data collections and determine a set of operational definitions for the six designated equity groups;

- Canvass views of institutions on these definitions;
- Define a prototype set of equity performance indicators and test the feasibility of these indicators on a subset of institutional data; and
- Analyse the indicator values for the trial data and ensure the validity of the indicators in discriminating performance differences.

The underpinning philosophy for the project was to keep the number of indicators small while enabling measurement of progress against the national objectives and targets for the groups enunciated in *A Fair Chance for All*, and to use as far as possible the existing student and staff data collections for the sector.

Until then, institutions had been asked to describe their own categorisations of equity groups which led to a plethora of definitions. The pressure not to extend the range of data in the national collections meant that it was necessary to consider surrogates for some of the areas of disadvantage and to build on the work done by Linke a decade earlier on regional measures in the definitions of the equity groups.

The conceptual framework I developed for equity measurement under the guidance of the Project Management Team consisted of:

- Precise operational definitions for the six designated groups from *A Fair Chance for All*;
- A set of performance indicators which could be applied across each of the groups so defined, aligned with the objectives set down in *A Fair Chance for All*;
- The set of national targets from *A Fair Chance for All*;
- A set of reference values linked to the objective or standard for each group indicating what an unbiased profile might be; and
- Institutional targets to be set by each provider.

An examination of the national targets and objectives from *A Fair Chance for All* as summarised in Table 2.1 revealed that performance measures would need to cover the following concepts, and analysis would need to be undertaken by level of course and field of study.

- Access (related to commencing students who were in the equity group);
- Overall participation (related to total students in the equity group);
- Completion (successful completion of awards); and
- Staff participation.

The Performance Indicator Research Group had already proven that completion rates and times were very difficult to calculate accurately because of the impact of different types of enrolment on the outcome. Instead, they had derived measures based on the last 1 or 2 years' data collection and found that these were more stable and effective at differentiating performance between institutions. The two base indicators recommended by the Research Group which could be combined to provide an estimate of completion were Initial (or first year) Retention Rate and annual Student Progress Rate. As these had been well tested for feasibility by the Research Group in the previous study, the Equity Indicators Project Management Team agreed to use them instead of the single measure of completion. The two indicators

were Success, which was the ratio of student progress rate for students in the equity group to that of other students, and the Apparent Retention Rate which was the ratio of the between years retention rate for all students in the equity group to the rate for all other students. Several indicators relating to staff incidence in the institutional profile for some under-represented groups were also proposed in the report, but these never received the same prominence as the student measures.

It appeared that these four indicators – Access, Participation, Success, and Apparent Retention – could be applied to each equity group once it was systematically defined and progress against all of the national objectives and targets set in *A Fair Chance for All* could be covered off. This had potential to provide a simple and consistent way to monitor progress in improving representation of the groups within and between institutions as well as nationally. Because the equity groups were identified due to their suspected under-representation in student enrolment profiles compared with their incidence in the higher education age group of the population, the access and participation indicators were related to these population percentages. The exception to this was the low SES indicator which was based on the concept of bias in the student population used by Linke in his South Australian study in 1983 and so compared the total enrolment of low versus high SES students in the relevant student population. The construction of the indicators made it easy to develop the set of benchmarks for equality against which the indicator values were to be compared. An unbiased indicator result was usually 1 or a population share and progress towards these benchmarks was easy to interpret.

The challenge remained to identify the best possible operational definitions for each of the six groups to which the indicators could be applied. My proposal to the Project Management Team was for a set of definitions which were based on self-identification by students at enrolment in terms of existing elements in the national student data collections. Those definitions are described in detail for each group in the report of the equity indicators project (Martin 1994). Only one group, students with disabilities, required additional data to be captured.

A consultation paper was prepared on the proposed definitions and indicators and DEET circulated it to all Unified National System institutions. It is an indication of the level of interest in the project that 33 of the 38 universities provided a response to the paper. A detailed summary of the responses was compiled by DEET and the Project Management Team's views on them is included in the final report of the project (Martin 1994, pp. 155–180). Some minor changes were made to the definitions as a result.

Once the definitions were settled, the indicators were trialled for feasibility and reliability using semi-aggregated data files provided by six selected universities. This involved extensive manual calculations because the software package had not yet been developed but proved that the indicators differentiated institutional performance well and enabled the calculation of a consistent time series of data for monitoring. The report was finalised and published by the Department in 1994 and at their request I conducted workshops in most States to explain the project and its outcomes and how institutions could use the software package included in Volume 2 of the report to calculate the equity indicators. Subsequently in 1995 the Department implemented the indicators nationally and required institutions to com-

ment on their outcomes as part of their equity documentation in their Educational Profiles submissions.

Issues Arising During the Consultations and Finalisation of the Report

The general issues which received the most attention from the sector included the use of the concept of under-representation as an indication of disadvantage; the implied uniformity of the equity groups; and multiple disadvantage. The Project Management Team argued that under-representation reflected unequal opportunity of access and support to succeed in higher education and therefore was an indication of disadvantage. It recognised that there was variation between individuals' circumstances within an equity group but reiterated the argument made earlier about the government and policy focus being on the groups rather than the individuals for this project.

The more specific issues that emerged, which were hotly debated within the Project Management Team, were as follows.

Non-English Speaking Background Students

While the issue of low participation by people from non-English speaking backgrounds as a group was identified in *A Fair Chance for All*, under-representation was specific to some cultural groups. The issues of whether only first generation migrants should be considered and the impact of language difficulties or cultural differences on success for these students were discussed. Some cultural groups were over-represented in particular fields of study and generally women were under-represented in all cultural groups. In the end the Project Management Group supported the definition which pragmatically represented NESB in terms of *educational* disadvantage arising from their immigration circumstances, recognising that this was a change in philosophy from that used for other demographically determined groups. To be included in the group the student had to be born overseas and speak a language other than English at home, but also to have arrived in Australia a relatively short time before their higher education studies. The period was set as 10 years because potential higher education students arriving earlier than that were likely to have undertaken part of their primary or secondary education in Australia and were therefore less educationally disadvantaged. This concept was based at the time on a model of first and second phase learners, but it did reduce the number of students in the NESB group. Classifying outcomes for the indicators by broad country of origin (European, Asian etc.) was also considered but rejected because some language groups were not large in number and when combined with field of study

sometimes produced stereotypical participation patterns (e.g. some European groups with high participation in law and medicine and Asian students being over-represented in science and technology studies while being under-represented generally in higher education) which reinforced prejudices about the levels of disadvantage really suffered by this group.

Students with Disabilities

The Project Team recognised the significant barriers to higher education suffered by students who had profound disabilities, but this area was a sensitive one for which no data at all existed until the mid-1990s. There were also difficulties in determining the size of the population to be used as a reference value for the group.

Once the report was finalised with the rather weak definition documented earlier, DEET proposed to augment the national student data collection by including the required questions. The Australian Vice Chancellors' Committee strongly resisted this. I attended the meetings where the changes were discussed as a representative of the Higher Education Council, where I was working by that time. The decision to include the new data elements on disability in the national collection was won by a close vote with DEET and the Higher Education Council members supporting the change. While far from perfect, it seemed to be better to have some information on this group than nothing at all, and DEET agreed to trial the definition of this group for a period of 3 years. It still remains.

Rural and Isolated Students

The postcode classification scheme devised by the then Department of Primary Industry and Energy (DPIE) had been used by DEET in analyses of enrolments in urban, rural and remote regions and was under review when the equity indicators were being developed. The classification was known to produce some spurious results for students living in rural or regional areas which had a university presence. I was keen to try a different scheme based on travel time or cost of travel to a university campus. Relevant work had been done by Dennis Griffith from the Northern Territory who had devised a composite access score for each ABS Collectors District using data on the size of the population centre being accessed, the time/cost/distance to a range of services and the economic resources of the geographic area (Griffith 1992). This seemed to have potential for applicability to the definition of the rural and isolated equity group although Griffith warned that his approach might produce perverse results for isolated areas. The Project Management Team planned to trial the Griffith approach in two South Australian universities and compare the results with those obtained for the indicators using the DPIE classification scheme

but in the end this was not done and the definition remained as described above. The use of Collectors District data was not readily available at the time so this trial would have been a significant piece of additional work for the project team.

Low Socio-Economic Status Students

The most contentious definition related to socio-economic status and the use of postcode analysis although this had been the subject of several pieces of research commissioned by DEET since the Linke regional analysis from 1983. The key issues were the assumed homogeneity of the postcode areas and the use of averaged data as the basis of the index of socio-economic disadvantage. A further matter was how to classify mature aged students whose SES was not any longer based on the characteristics of their parents.

But the decision to use the postcode methodology was not taken lightly and relied heavily on a study done in 1993 by Roger Jones of the ANU (Jones 1993) which compared distributions of the populations of students recorded in the 1986 census based on the components of the ABS EdOcc index with the value of SES assigned under the postcode methodology. Jones concluded (1993, p. 63) that subject to some limitations ‘at the national level, state and capital city level,... the postcode methodology can usefully be applied using the ABS Index of Education and Occupation to develop profiles for the following subgroups:

- Students aged 17–24, with no restriction on region; and
- Students aged 25–64 in major urban areas’.

This finding was similar to comments made by Linke et al. back in 1988. The other limitation placed on use of postcode data as a surrogate for SES was related to the size of the postcode areas and the incidence of rural/isolated postcode areas in the low and high socio-economic status groups defined as a proportion of the whole population. Jones found that SES groups defined in terms of postcode areas could only be used reliably at the State or national level rather than for smaller population groups.

The use of postcodes in the SES methodology in the study has remained a running sore of criticism over the years and many attempts have been made to improve on it. There have also been changes made to the approach to measurement of participation both in terms of the indicator, which lost the concept of bias, and also introduced the use of Collectors Districts rather than postcodes to address the issue of homogeneity of the area of analysis. I had always taken the view, when asked, that I did not expect the differences in trends for the indicators at the national level to vary significantly from those derived under the postcode methodology, and this has been largely proven. However, relativities between different institutions do change, which matters when individual university performance is being considered.

Epilogue

The definitions and indicators for measuring higher education equity performance published in 1994 have been used in two major reviews: the first in 1995 related to progress in the equity of the designated groups against *A Fair Chance for All* objectives and targets by the Higher Education Council; and secondly in the Bradley Review of Higher Education in 2008. The former review is an example of masterly misjudgement in timing as the report was presented to the Labor Minister just prior to the 1996 election being called. While recommendations about relative performance of the groups and the need to focus in future on Indigenous, rural/isolated and low SES students were used in subsequent Government initiatives, the broad recommendations in that Higher Education Council report were not really acted upon by the Coalition Government.

The Bradley et al. review (2008) contained detailed recommendations about equity based on the analysis of the participation and success data from the indicators and led to the setting of a national target of participation for low SES undergraduate students of at least 20 % by 2020 in parallel with a removal of the volume caps on the sector as a whole. Figure 2.1 shows the impact on access of the changes resulting since 2009 for the sector, and the fine-tuned low SES definitions – the first sustained inroads to reducing disadvantage for low SES students in over 20 years.

In my view it is fitting that *A Fair Chance for All* and the Bradley report top and tail this analysis of equity policy and the recent improvements demonstrate the vision and commitment of Denise Bradley in this long quest of a fair chance of participation in higher education for all Australians.

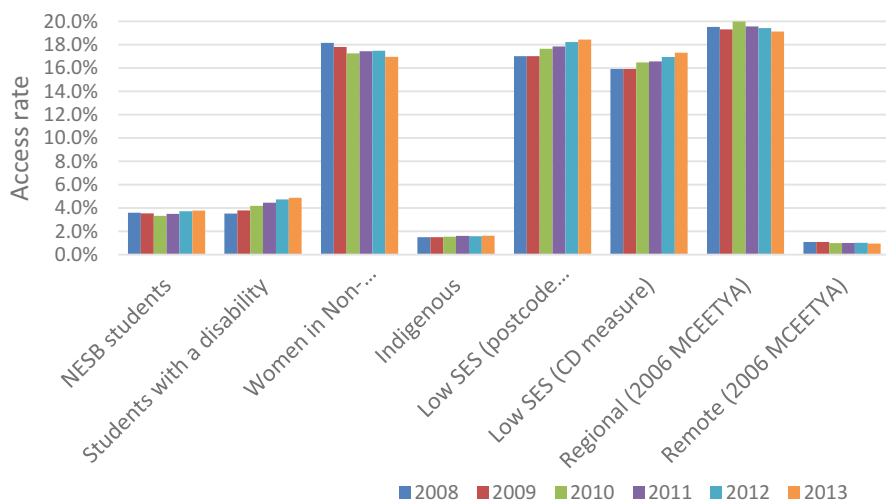


Fig. 2.1 Undergraduate domestic access rates by equity group 2008–2013 (Source: Department of Education Higher Education Statistics, 2013, Appendix 2 Equity groups)

What Were the Achievements?

The longevity of the policy framework for equity which commenced in 1990 with the publication of *A Fair Chance for All* is remarkable. There is little doubt that being able to quantify access, participation, success and retention led to more targeted equity initiatives and provided feedback to Government that funds committed were contributing to greater social justice and opportunities for disadvantaged groups. In my view it was the simplicity of the model and its alignment with *A Fair Chance for All* which contributed to its easy use and the ongoing interest in its outcomes. Its survival over more than two decades has meant that we are able to see where the national effort has succeeded and where it has faltered. It has provided evidence about where we need to try harder and where we are having success at national and institutional level.

I believe that what gets measured gets addressed and acted upon. The development of the equity framework and its national implementation as a core element of the planning and monitoring structures for the sector led to it being taken seriously by senior management in the universities, and the mainstreaming of the data collection and reporting allowed a degree of analysis and identification of gaps in provision of support at a broad level which would not have been possible without either component.

Since 1990, overall participation improvements have been made in most categories and the total number of students in the equity groups at least kept pace with their non-equity group peers, so that some groups identified in *A Fair Chance for All* are no longer regarded as under-represented.

What Worked Well?

Approaches that worked well included:

- The methodology used in the development of *A Fair Chance for All* of setting national targets and using a mixture of good planning and involvement of practice leaders in institutions who were committed to the advancement of disadvantaged students and who already had some good initiatives in place;
- Enunciation of a clear Government vision and a combination of funding carrots and legislative sticks to bring the sector along with that vision;
- An easily understandable conceptual framework which allowed alignment of programs to the particular aspect of equity being addressed;
- The pragmatism of the equity indicators Project Management Team on some measures combined with quantitative rigour of definitions and indicator calculation; and
- A truly cooperative venture between DEET, the Higher Education Council and the sector and the commitment of the Department to the facilitation of data collection in the development and trialling of the definitions and indicators.

What Could Have Been Done Better?

Some aspects might also have been dealt with better. In spite of the extensive work done on the use of postcodes, the sector remained unconvinced and the focus on monitoring of results for low SES students was diminished. It may have been better to use the actual surrogates of low SES in a different way and to push to get agreement to additional data elements related to individual student characteristics, but this would also have required some comparative index of socio-economic to be developed. This was ‘a bridge too far’ for the Government grappling with a much more comprehensive student data collection and for the bigger picture.

The issue of multiple disadvantage might also have been addressed more fully in the report at the risk of making the conceptual framework more complex.

Looking Back and Forward

The methodology developed and applied in the indicators project was fit for purpose at the time given that the use of the concept of under-representation of groups by the Government then was a cornerstone of the *A Fair Chance for All* policy statements. But in my view effective policy making always should have regard for feasibility of implementation and should apply a principle of economy of effort for institutions and for bureaucrats. This was an over-riding factor for the equity indicators project and is also the basis of its ultimate success. There is little point in having a wonderful policy solution that is so complex that the administrative overheads mean it cannot be effectively implemented or the outcomes from it interpreted.

With the current sophistication in equity units and the collaborative ventures funded through the additional equity and participation resources which flowed to universities after the adoption of the Bradley Review recommendations, there is a much greater need for a focus on evaluating the success of particular initiatives. Nevertheless, there is still a place for group indicators in identifying broad areas of disadvantage and the extent of them in the sector and to point the way to broad areas where action is required. The development of more numerous and complex indicators must balance the benefits of possibly greater precision of measurement against the cost of their development and maintenance. That said, there is a stronger imperative to measure outcomes of specially funded equity projects in a way that demonstrates to government that the investment was worth it in terms of changing the higher education profile. The equity landscape is also changing with the current Government’s emphasis on individual benefits such as scholarships, which will require development of new approaches.

However, any new conceptual framework for equity should not lose sight of the lessons learned in the projects undertaken 20 years ago. These are that any new system should:

- be sufficiently simple that it can be easily understood;
- be practical and cost effective to implement;

- use a small number of indicators which when combined allow a coherent analysis of the factors which impact on participation to be understood; and
- be a catalyst for action.

References

- Anderson, D., & Vervoorn, A. (1983). *Access to privilege: Patterns of participation in Australian post-secondary education*. Canberra: ANU Press.
- Bradley, D., Scales, W., Noonan, P., & Nugent, H. (2008). *Review of Australian higher education*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Croucher, G., Marginson, S., Norton, A., & Wells, J. (Eds.). (2014). *The Dawkins revolution 25 years on*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- Dawkins, J. (1987). *Higher education: A policy discussion paper*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.
- Dawkins, J. (1988). *Higher education: A policy statement*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.
- Department of Education, Employment and Training. (1990). *A fair chance for all: National and institutional planning for equity in higher education*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.
- Gale, T., & McNamee, P. (1994). Just out of reach: Access to equity in Australian higher education. *The Australian Universities Review*, 37(2), 8–11.
- Griffith, D. (1992). *Quantifying access to services in remote and rural Australia*. Paper presented at the Rural Education and Research Association Conference, Alice Springs.
- Jones, R. (1993). *Socio-economic status of higher education students – Stage 1 report : Assessment of the postcode methodology* (Vol. Report submitted to DEET from Evaluations and Investigations Project). Canberra.
- Linke, R., Oertel (Martin), L., & Kelsey, N. (1985). Participation and equity in higher education: A preliminary report on the socio-economic profile of higher education students in South Australia, 1974–1984. *Australian Bulletin of Labour*, 11(3), 124–141.
- Linke, R., with Oertel (Martin), L., & Kelsey, N. (1988). *Regional analysis of socio-economic trends in educational participation* (Vol. Departmental Monograph no. 7): Research School of Social Sciences, The Australian National University.
- Linke R., et al. (1991). *Performance Indicators in Higher Education – Report of a trial evaluation study commissioned by the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Training*. Canberra.
- Martin, L. (1994). *Equity and general performance indicators in higher education* (Vol. 1). Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.

Student Equity in Australian Higher Education

Twenty-five years of A Fair Chance for All

Harvey, A.; Burnheim, C.; Brett, M. (Eds.)

2016, XVII, 292 p. 44 illus., 34 illus. in color., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-981-10-0313-4