

**Serial number** 0083  
**Title** The Fragmentation of Equality in the Internationalised University  
**Submitter** Dr. Stuart Tannock

### **The Fragmentation of Equality in the Internationalised University**

This paper addresses a simple but vitally important question: what happens to the principle of educational equality in the internationalised university? Most academic, policy and practice literature on educational justice and equality has been framed entirely by the borders of the nation state; yet, on the other hand, most universities in the UK, as in other countries around the world, now recruit an increasingly international student body. In 2014, there were 437,000 international students studying in universities in the UK: together, these students comprised 18% of all higher education students in the country, 69% of taught postgraduate students and 48% of full time research degree students (UKCISA 2016). Across all OECD countries, international students made up 6% of all higher education students in 2014, 12% of all Master's degree level students, and 27% of all doctoral students; the number of international higher education students in these countries increased by 50% between 2005 and 2012 (OECD 2016). Given such figures, the question of how and whether principles of educational equality should apply to international students has significance not just for these students, but for educational institutions more generally, as well as both host countries and sending countries from which international students come.

The paper reports on an SRHE funded research project that approached this core question by investigating how higher education leaders, staff and students (n = 56) working at the national level (n = 7) and in a diverse range of different universities (n = 20) around the UK conceptualise and promote educational equality and justice for international as well as home students. The premise of the study was that because UK universities now recruit an increasingly international student body, they are forced to address the question of whether and how ideals of educational equality and justice, that have traditionally been framed at the level of the nation state, should apply internationally; and that, due to the requirements of UK law (among other factors), the two extreme options of either extending national principles of educational equality to all students everywhere without exception or qualification, or alternatively, denying these principles outright to any student not considered to be a "home student" are not viable choices for UK universities in the current historical conjuncture. As a consequence, there is an extensive grey area of global or transnational educational justice that universities in the UK, as in other countries, are now compelled to navigate daily, as they make decisions about such things as home and international student recruitment and admissions, tuition fees and bursaries (or grants), pedagogy and curriculum, institutional culture and structure, social rights and protections. The aim of the study was to understand both the explicit and tacit models of educational equality that are emerging in this context of higher education internationalisation in the UK; the kinds of equality concerns that are being foregrounded and backgrounded for different students, depending on their original national domiciles; and the conflicts and dilemmas that internationalisation is posing for higher education actors seeking to promote educational equality and justice for all students studying in UK universities today.

Some of the key findings of the study are the following. First, there is considerable ambivalence, uncertainty and contradiction among many professional and academic staff working in UK universities today on the question of educational equality for international students. Second, this uncertainty and contradiction is predictable given that the ideal of educational equality has been consistently framed by the nation state, and that the recruitment of international students in the UK has been overwhelmingly driven by market interests and not social justice or social welfare agendas. Third, the outcome of higher education internationalisation has not been that educational equality has disappeared as an ideal; rather, it has been extensively fragmented. This is not to claim that there are two separate models of equality, one for home and one for international students: for things are not so simple in the internationalised university, where sometimes equality principles apply universally to home and international students alike. Instead, it means that the populations, institutional structures, spatial locations and temporal dimensions in which the ideal of educational equality is to be applied in the internationalised university have all been broken up and differentially combined; the vital public character of the concept of educational equality has been erased; and the foundational principles upon which different models of educational equality are constructed within the confines of the nation state have been abandoned.

It is only once we understand this landscape of fragmentation that we can make sense of the common phenomenon in which universities, their staff and students regularly invoke claims about the universality of educational equality, in environments in which there exist blatant and transparent social and educational inequalities between home and international students. "I think all students we treat the same," an administrator at an elite Russell Group university in the UK says in a round table discussion: "For instance, in the administration, everything is the same, it doesn't matter whether a person is from home or overseas, the attendance recording is the same, or the administration behind the scenes is the same." In the internationalised university, educational equality is like a carnival house of mirrors: look one way, and absolutely, there is equality for all students, home and international alike; but look another, and there is extreme inequality or, perhaps to be more precise, a complete absence of equality concerns for international students whatsoever. While a single unified model of global educational equality and justice that applies to all individuals everywhere in the world may not be necessary, desirable or possible, the high level of contradiction and fragmentation that exists with respect to equality concerns in the internationalised university suggests that the question of how the principle of educational equality should be extended across nation state borders demands considerably more sustained attention and coherent policy on the part of UK universities than is currently the case.