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Title Institutional responses to the Australian student equity program: the importance of strategic intent
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Background

The vision of an Australian higher education system that actively widened participation and whose graduates reflected more closely the diversity of the Australian population was articulated in the Bradley Review of Higher Education and adopted as a fundamental aspiration of significant higher education reform implemented from 2010. The Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) was designed to encourage the sector to support the Government's aspiration, and has provided significant funding to 37 public universities to implement equity strategies and programs that enable people from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds to access and succeed in higher education. This study was conducted as part of a year-long Equity Fellowship and sought to understand how HEPPP had been implemented by universities and whether the sector had acted on the government's aspiration to transform access and radically improve participation for students from low SES backgrounds in higher education.

Methodology

The study used a qualitative methodology which included five interrelated pieces of work, including the analysis of HEPPP annual progress reports (2010-2015) to produce a typology of institutional approaches to HEPPP implementation using the analytical tools developed for the Fellowship and three institutional case studies to illustrate the diversity of institutional approaches to HEPPP. This was complemented by an engagement strategy with key stakeholders, including the Department of Education and Training.

Key Findings

This Fellowship was the first national study analysing how different Australian universities designed and implemented institutional HEPPP programs, and how these meso-structures had contributed to student outcomes and organisational change. The study found that HEPPP has provided an opportunity for universities to develop bespoke equity programs which respond to their institutional profile and strategic priorities. At sector level, the trend of stagnant participation by students from low SES backgrounds has been broken, but outcomes at the institutional level were highly variable. While the impact of institutional HEPPP programs on student outcomes is difficult to establish empirically, strategic intent emerged as an important variable. The volume of HEPPP funding had substantial influence on equity strategy and practice and, in one of the case study universities, was leveraged for transformational organisation change.

Unpacking the Complex Relationships between Institutional HEPPP Programs and Student Outcomes

The relationships between institutional HEPPP programs and institutional equity performance as defined by the Martin indicators are complex and cannot be fully explained with the methods chosen for the Fellowship study. However, the following can be observed:

- The increase recorded at sector level was not at all evenly distributed across the 37 public universities which received HEPPP funding in 2015: some universities contributed disproportionately to the national increase in low SES participation rates.
- The growth and diversification enabled by demand-driven funding have not always gone hand-in-hand with increases in the low SES participation rate: there were no clear correlations between the changes in low SES participation rates over the period 2011-2015, institutional growth, the amount of HEPPP funding received, and the size and diversity of the undergraduate student cohort.
- Put differently, more HEPPP funding did not necessarily result in larger increases of low SES participation rates. In addition, there was no empirical evidence that large increases in participation rates were mainly achieved by strong growth in the total cohort.

The Fellowship adds to the evidence that, as a policy package, HEPPP and demand-driven funding have achieved demonstrable success in widening participation to higher education.

Strategic Intent as a Variable to Explain Uneven Outcomes

This study suggests that one missing analytical ingredient to explain some of the variation in outcomes is strategic intent. It confirms and simultaneously extends existing findings (Peacock, Sellar & Lingard, 2014) that individual universities sought to attract more students from low SES backgrounds to either grow or diversify their undergraduate student cohort. The three case study universities pursued distinctly different growth strategies under the demand-driven funding system, had different approaches to HEPPP program design and achieved very different outcomes in terms of access and participation rates.

In one case study, the low SES cohort was crucial for achieving the university's ambitious growth targets and it recorded a strong increase in both numbers and participation rates of students from low SES backgrounds. The other two universities aimed for diversification of their undergraduate cohort rather than growth albeit with quite different enthusiasm. One of those achieved some diversification mainly through targeted and attainment-oriented access programs which effectively charted clear and accessible pathways into a selective institution. The third university had developed a collective target to increase applications to higher education providers across the state and the success of its widening participation program was only loosely coupled to institutional equity performance. Thus, it circumvented the instrumental, binary logic proposed by Peacock et al. (2014) and pursued social justice rather than institutional benefits.

Implications of the study for policy and research

This study can inform program-level assessments of equity/widening participation programs in other jurisdictions and enable cross-country comparisons of the differential impacts of policy regimes on

institutional practice and student outcomes. The successful combination in the Australian context of demand driven funding of undergraduate places and a substantial widening participation program may inform policy discussions elsewhere. At the same time, the mixed-methods approach was able to shed some light on the differences observed in the higher education statistics and locate them in the varying interpretations of the government policy by diverse higher education institutions.

Peacock, D., Sellar, S. & Lingard, B. (2014). *The activation, appropriation and practices of student equity policy in Australian higher education*. *Journal of Education Policy*, 29(3), pp. 377-396.