

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

0447

Employability and the Possibility Paradox in Australian Higher Education

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Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Abstract:

Widening participation in higher education is an accelerating policy and funding concern in many western contexts. The imperative for this growth in student participation is variously couched in a language of equity and social justice, and/or nation-state productivity in relation to supposed 'knowledge economies', or confections blending the two. This paper articulates a proposed paradoxical effect that discourses of choice, agency and opportunity produce. We begin to interrogate the effects of this ongoing construction via an agential realist re-reading of policy papers and reviews, drawing on Brøgger and Madsen (2021) and their affirmative-diffractive re-reading of policy instrumentation approach. In doing so, we consider the performative production of realities through practices and doings performed in relation to contemporary policy texts. We explain the problem we see in the production of these realities and theorise their effects on projects of equity in higher education.

Paper:

Australian higher education policy settings are increasingly taking up employability and job-readiness imperatives. The recent 'Job-Ready Graduates package' passed federal parliament in 2020, claiming to 'ensure better university funding arrangements, a better integrated tertiary system, targeted investments in national priorities, improved transparency and accountability, and more opportunities for regional, remote and Indigenous students' (DESE, 2020). There is however a growing patterning of the purpose of participation in higher education through economic terms that blur with messages of equality of opportunity and equity. These commitments are to be embedded in funding frameworks too, with 'performance funding' announced that is tied to graduate employment outcomes (DESE, 2020). Whilst the future of these schemes remains unclear, with the interaction of aspects of them deemed by experts as potentially illegal (Hare, 2021), there are moves to gather education policy and funding around particular notions of employability, with industry's interests playing a key role in this conceptualisation, as part of broader shifts in the way formal education settings and systems are understood and positioned.

The *Looking To The Future (2020)* report emerged out of a review of senior secondary pathways into work, further education and training delivered by a standing council established under the high level Council Of Australian Governments. The authors claim to have student interests 'front and centre', yet they review schooling and tertiary education settings with an underlying ethos exemplified by findings such as, 'effective partnerships with industry have proven hard to establish and are not adequately embedded in education systems. Industry collaboration needs to be accorded more

weight and pursued with greater vigour' (Shergold et al, 2020, p.94). The authors are academics, bureaucrats, businesspeople, and representatives of industry interests (e.g., the Business Council of Australia). It seems worthy of note that, at a time of intense scrutiny regarding the need to evaluate the impact and value of large-scale federal equity initiatives such as the Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program, a co-author of the *Looking To The Future* report is **Sarina Russo**, one of Australia's richest women whose careers-themed companies have reportedly enjoyed more than \$1.8 billion in federal government contracts since 2006 (Hunter, 2017). As Brogger and Madsen (2021) argue with their affirmative-diffractive re-reading of policy instrumentation approach, 'Different policy instruments do not merely offer different perspectives on a world that is indirectly and often inadvertently assumed to be there ... (but) ... enact different worlds and not merely world-views through material-discursive practices' (2021, p.6). A pertinent question therefore might be: who is privileged to practice policy that enacts the worlds into which students are stepping?

In another recent example, the NSW state government commissioned a review of the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector, led by prominent businessman David Gonski (Gonski & Shergold, 2021). Largely ignoring how political parties when in government have deregulated VET with disastrous consequences including fraudulent behaviour and unethical enrolment practices, this report adopts claims such as 'The uptake in VET is declining' to justify recommending a new form of tertiary education that brings higher and vocational education together *In The Same Sentence* to '...deliver fully integrated theoretical and practical employability skills, provided through a number of constituent colleges, with curriculums designed in collaboration with industry...' (Gonski and Shergold, 2021, p. 7). Returning to Brogger and Madsen (2021), who analysed the Danish university accreditation system, we see here a precursor to how quality becomes equated with employability and the labour market value of study, and whereby 'good' education comes only to indicate its production of high rates of precarious employment.

These processes arguably work to cloak the effects of class, gender, race and other forms of marginalisation, establishing 'failures' as individual deficiencies in a variety of different forms (including deficits in, for example, aspiration, talent and intelligence). In previous work (Lumb & Bunn, 2021), we paid attention to how students are coerced into adopting these conditions described above as a limit on their current and future ways of being. Here, we propose the existence of a paradoxical effect. Through processes of individualisation, the taking up of 'opportunities' and the creation of 'successes' are positioned as choices made at the level of the individual. As part of an ontological formation, these become elements of a performative structure and the basis for logics of practice. We argue this dynamic is *precisely* the constraint of possibility for the individual, working as the relational manipulator of the conditions of being, setting forth certain ways and kinds of being as acceptable, realistic, and achievable, while inhibiting or obscuring others.

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