



Can standards drop? Social inclusion agenda and academic standards

Category:
Refereed research

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The social inclusion policies are implemented in the higher education sector to provide access and opportunity for all groups of people irrespective of their social class to participate in higher education. Such policies ensure that every citizen has access to elite education which enables them to succeed and improve their life chances. The renewal of quality assurance in Australian higher education with focus on academic standards and government's aspiration to increase the proportion of disadvantaged students by 2020 in tertiary education raises the question on the extent to which social inclusion policies could lower academic standards. This paper argues that contemporary trends such as increased student diversity; changing pattern of student participation in higher education; preparedness of many students for tertiary education; and new modes of learning will continue to grow and it is not necessary that such changes will lower academic standards. The authors provide a case of an Australian university with success in the social inclusion agenda with positive outcomes with access and participation and comparable academic outcomes.

Keywords: academic standards and social inclusion

Introduction

Governments in many developed countries such as Australia, United States of America (USA) and the United Kingdom (UK) have set targets to increase the access and participation of disadvantaged students in higher education. The Australian government has set a target for 2020 to increase the participation of disadvantaged students by 20% (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). President Obama aims for the USA to become the world's best-educated country by 2020 (The Chronicle, 2010). In the UK, the government aims for at least 50% of young people (aged 18 to 30) to enter higher education and to increase the participation rates of young people from poorer backgrounds (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2009). The focus on access and participation of disadvantaged students comes at a time when governments are also renewing their approach to quality assurance with a focus on improving the quality and standard of higher education. The renewal of quality aims to improve the quality, standard, reputation, and competitiveness of higher education and also to ensure that higher education institutions are accountable for public funding with a focus on increased accountability, transparency and meeting the needs of the broader society. The renewal of quality, places significant challenges on higher education institutions with governments aspiring to achieve its targets to improve the access and participation of disadvantaged students in higher education coupled with ongoing decrease in public funding of universities.

In both Australia and the UK, governments have made it clear that the growth of universities must not compromise quality outcomes and standards. Governments have also warned that increased enrolments in universities of disadvantaged students with low quality and outcomes will result in governments penalising universities (The Australian, 2011a & Department for Business Innovation and Skills p. 97). This paper aims to encourage debate on the topic which has not been explored in previous research on social inclusion and academic standards.

The challenges faced by universities to meet governments access and participation aspirations coupled with performance based funding and warning by policy makers that high enrolments should not compromise quality outcomes is worrying many university leaders. Most recently, two prominent Vice Chancellors in Australia warned the government that the increased focus on increasing the quantity of graduates to meet targets may risk the quality of graduate outcomes and exit standards (Campus Review, 2010 & The Australian, 2011b). The higher education sector in many economies faces another huge challenge in relation to quality, standards and comparable academic outcomes. The new challenge is related to the new dynamics in higher education – the rise of private for-profit higher education that provides diversity, access and opportunity for many students who may not have direct access to tertiary education in traditional universities due to their academic achievement in high schools or due to socio-economic backgrounds (Shah and Nair, 2011).

The current landscape of Australian higher education related to social inclusion and academic quality and outcomes inform policy makers and universities that:

- the student population will continue to be diverse with different characteristics of students. Analysis undertaken by the authors as part of this paper in a large Australian university suggests that domestic students come from 175 countries by birth and international students from 150 countries;
- the pattern of student participation will change with more students in part time or full time work while studying thus looking for flexible study options. A study in Australia with first year students in universities suggests that 61% of students studying full time are working an average of 13 hours a week (James et al, 2010. p. 49);
- the growing demand for alternative modes of education other than traditional face to face learning with online and distance learning (James et al, 2010. p. 21);
- increased enrolment of students who maybe unprepared for tertiary education;
- the rise of collaboration, partnerships and pathways between vocational, higher education and with other types of education providers with low entry standards compared to universities (Shah and Nair, 2011); and,
- high student enrolments and staff-student ratios may impact on the student experience and student achievement of learning outcomes in higher education (Shah et al, 2011)

The changing government policy in relation to performance based funding on the basis of access and participation measures for disadvantaged students provide a clear message that the university sector needs to face the reality that high student admission criteria is not necessarily an indicator of high academic achievement based on contemporary trends in higher education (Brink, 2008, Garlick & Brown, 2008). Rather, universities have to be innovative with careful planning and resourcing to ensure that low entry criteria for students who maybe unprepared for tertiary education are supported by a range of academic preparatory or transition programs to convert weak starters into high performers. Therefore the focus in institutions needs to ensure that students with low entry criteria attain learning outcomes and key generic skills which results in comparable graduate exit standards.

The focus on social inclusion and access to higher education to the disadvantaged in our society is a moral purpose of all higher education institutions (Shah & Nair, 2011; Shah et al, 2011 and Keohane, 2006). However, the result to-date suggests that minority students from disadvantaged backgrounds have had poor access to elite education which is enjoyed by traditional students. For example, analysis undertaken on three elite and three post-1987 universities in Australia suggests that elite universities have an average of 7% of students from low socio economic background compared to 21.5 % in three post-1987 universities (Shah et al, 2011). The same study shows that performance based funding between 2005-2008 in Australia based on measures such as student retention, progression and student satisfaction of all domestic students is mostly enjoyed by elite universities sharing 48% of the reward. Elite universities with high student admission criteria, high retention rates, well-developed and mature academic and support services with high student satisfaction benefited from the controversial reward system. By comparison, the participation of the poorest students in elite universities in the UK such as Oxford and Cambridge is less than 1% (Guardian, 2010). The low participation of disadvantaged students in higher education raises questions on the extent to which universities as publicly funded

institutions are committed to the social inclusion agenda and open their doors for such group of students. It also raises the question on whether autonomous institutions are doing justice and practicing moral values in our society about equity, access and opportunity to participate in tertiary education.

One of the difficulties with the social inclusion agenda is the prominence in the use of ranking and league tables using various educational and research measures. Ranking and league tables across the world does not include social inclusion and diversity as a measure of institutional quality outcomes. Rather it lowers the ranking of universities that provide access and opportunity with low entry criteria for disadvantaged students (Brink, 2008). The debate on whether social inclusion outcomes should be part of ranking raises the question on whether student diversity is an ingredient of quality or a reputational risk in the emergence of ranking and its wide use in assessing and rewarding quality outcomes in institutions.

Egalitarian views on social inclusion and its impact on academic standards

The egalitarian view is that social inclusion is a fundamental category of social organisation and members of an ethnic group have a sense of common historical origins and may also share a distinctive culture, religion or language (Stone, 1996). The debates on inherent ability of disadvantaged students represent a deficit thinking paradigm, positing that all students who fail in school do so because of internal deficiencies (e.g., cognitive and/or motivational limitations). This viewpoint maybe appealing to policy makers and educational leaders at the secondary and postsecondary levels; it provides a simple explanation that absolves those in privileged positions of any guilt for the disparities that is observed and for not making effort to promote greater educational opportunities (Valencia 1997). The egalitarian view is that access to elite education for selected group of students is inhumane, unethical and immoral in a democratic society. The limiting of access and opportunity for disadvantaged students based on their previous educational achievements or social class ignores the basic fundamental rights of individuals in our society. The increased diversity of students in our society requires institutions to ease student entry with various transition programs to support underperforming students into high performers with comparable exit standards. Such measures with government funding for various support programs will undoubtedly increase disadvantaged student success in higher education with excellence and opportunity for further study at the postgraduate level.

A study undertaken with black African American males who are underrepresented in higher education in USA suggest that such students now have better academic records, and greater confidence in their skills and abilities than their peers who entered college in earlier decades (Griffin et al, 2010). Researchers have found that first-generation students heavily rely on self motivation, self-efficacy, and an internalised locus on control to persist (Naumann et al, 2003). However, such studies documenting the successful achievement of these students are few. Grebennikov and Skaines, (2010) findings in Australia suggest that despite poor grades of one equity group, non-English speaking background students, they carry on with their program even if they have academic difficulties, while traditional students with fewer difficulties are more likely to withdraw. This, at least in part, confirms one finding of McKenzie and Schweitzer (2001) stating that 'high academic achievement is not necessarily related to retention and poor academic performance does not always result in attrition' (p. 29). According to Richardson (2011), ethnicity is almost certainly not the effective variable influencing student's academic attainment; rather it is a proxy for other factors that have yet to be identified. Study by Fike et al (2010) on the achievement of Hispanic students in the School of Pharmacy suggest that such group of students are underrepresented in health care professions. Hayes (2008) suggests that increased racial/ethnic diversity in health professions is needed, noting that 'evidence indicates that diversity is associated with improved access to care for racial and ethnic parents, greater patient choice and satisfaction, better patient provider communication, and improved educational experiences for health professions students' (p.3). Edwards and Coates (2011) suggest that the major indicator of productivity of university education is the extent to which it can enable people from disadvantaged backgrounds to successfully complete a university degree. They also argue that the transformative power of university study is fully evidenced when people who start from behind are able to succeed at

the highest level (p. 154). Harbour et al (2003) argues the need for educational institutions to relook at the profile of teachers. They suggest that teacher failure to acknowledge the values and beliefs held by disadvantaged students may undermine their success in a class and deny them educational equity.

Various scholars suggest that culturally diverse universities create richly varied educational experiences that help students learn and prepare them for participation in an increasingly diverse world (Gurin et al 2002; Astin 1993; Bowen and Bok, 1998). More recently, Wells, Duran, and White (2008) reported that the most important outcome of their diverse high school experience was being more accepting and comfortable with diverse people, which in turn better prepared them for an increasingly diverse workforce and society. According to Chang (2001), having a diverse student body increases the chances that students will become more involved in diversity-related activities and will socialise more often with diverse peers, which, in turn, will both have a positive impact on students' development.

The review of higher education in Australia in 2008 suggests the need for social inclusion policies which improve access and participation of the disadvantaged in higher education. The review suggests that by deepening understanding of health and social issues, and by providing access to higher levels of learning to people from all backgrounds, it can enhance social inclusion and reduce social and economic disadvantage. The report also suggest that by engaging with scholars from other countries and educating people from other countries, it helps create a nation confident and engaged both with its geographic region and the wider community of nations (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008. p. 5). The egalitarian view of social inclusion agenda in higher education related to the internationalisation of higher education is preparing global citizens; preparing graduates to be globally mobile; and contributing towards the social and economic benefit of various economies. More importantly, the social inclusion agenda also enables individuals, governments and the broader society to tackle issues of global significance.

Evidence of success

There is evidence to suggest that social inclusion initiatives related to and access and participation of disadvantaged students have worked well without compromising quality outcomes. For example in South Africa, various preparatory programs have played a key role in improving access and success for students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The science foundation programme (SFP) was developed to assist disadvantaged Black students engaged in science studies at the tertiary level. The experience in South Africa suggest that 1101 (or 71.8%) students who completed the SFP programme enrolled into tertiary study and went on to further study after graduations at the postgraduate level (Downs, 2010). Another similar case was at the University of Cape Town in South Africa, where disadvantaged students were admitted to the university on an alternative admissions project with flexible access, active support, and extra tutorial support, walk-in consulting rooms, better staff-student ratios, extended degree programmes. Students admitted under such programs successfully completed their degree with the aid of such support schemes, with equal exit standards on graduations to students who had completed the standard programme (Brink, 2008).

A Study by Whitla et al, (2003 with fourth year medical students in Harvard University and the University of California suggest that interaction with a diverse student body greatly enhanced their educational experiences in the medical school. These students strongly supported maintaining or strengthening current affirmative action policies in admissions at their respective schools. Another study in the US suggest that black and Hispanic students benefit academically by the size of minority enrolment, which demonstrates the role of racial and ethnic context in improving academic performance of minority students (Hallinan, 1998). A recent study by Denson and Bowman, (2011) concluded a growing body of research attesting to the educational benefits of university diversity experiences on student development, and is also in line with more research demonstrating the important role of the quality of those experiences.

In the UK at the Newcastle University, students from disadvantaged backgrounds with lower school leaving results have been admitted into medical school in the Partners Programme. 92% of the 2002-

2004 cohorts of the partner's alumni graduated with a first or second class degree, which compared well with the overall average of 95% for the same three years (Brink, 2008). Similar efforts with success is also found at the King's College London where disadvantaged students are admitted with a school leaving result of three C-grades and put through an extra year of study. Despite lower entry grades, and slower start, in the later clinical years pass rates were comparable to those of conventional students (Garlick & Brown, 2008). Similar initiatives and outcomes are also found at the Universities of Bradford and Leeds in the UK (Beedham et al, 2006).

Case of an Australian university

The social inclusion agenda is clearly on the cards in Australian universities. The research suggests that this move has merit. This section of the paper draws on a case of an Australian university that has utilised the institutional mission in progressing its social inclusion agenda while maintaining academic standards and student outcomes. The Australian university reported in this study is a large multi campus institution located in one of the fastest growing regions in Australia with one of the largest proportions of immigrants. The university has a high percentage (22%) of students from low socio economic background and almost 56% of students who are first in the immediate family to undertake tertiary education. The university is located in a region with 32% of its population from non-English speaking backgrounds (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009). For the purpose of this paper this university will be referred to as the Outer Metropolitan University (OMU). OMU has a mission to achieve excellence in teaching and research in its region and national and international communities.

The OMU is renowned for providing access and opportunity for disadvantaged students in higher education. The university has also been actively involved in tracking the academic performance of students to ensure comparable standards between disadvantaged students and traditional students. Five different measures utilised at the university are used in this discussion to gauge the performance of the university related to social inclusion success and academic outcomes. These measures to assess the performance with some measures widely recognised in the literature as a measure of student achievement. They include: first year retention rates; continuing progression rates; student agreement on the extent to which they have attained generic skills via the national Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ); graduate full time employment and first year student experience survey results related to course outcomes with different cohorts of students.

Table 1 illustrates first year retention rates of the institution with comparators which include the areas of social agenda. Despite the high proportion of low socio economic (LSES) and first in the family students in OMU, the first year retention rates of LSES and non English speaking background (NESB) students is higher than the overall university retention rates, higher than the sector average and also higher than a comparative multi campus university. This strongly suggests that retention, transitions and other support programs if effectively managed will improve the academic outcomes such as retention rates of disadvantaged students. OMU has well established transitions and other support programs that assists all groups of students to access relevant academic and non-academic support in learning with the aim to improve student retention and success.

Table 1: OMU student retention rates for first years (2007 – 2009)

First year student retention rates	2007	2008	2009
OMU	81.3%	79.9%	81.5%
All Australian Universities	82.2%	82.7%	82.7%
Benchmark with comparative University	78.4%	79.1%	78.3%
Low socio economic status students	82.9%	83.2%	84.0%
Non English speaking background students	84.6%	84.7%	83.8%

Progression rates of first year students is the other measure used to gauge the performance of the social inclusion agenda. Table 2 shows that OMU has significantly improved the continuing progression rates of LSES. The 2009 results show that progression rates of LSES students have improved from 77.6% in 2007 to 81.9% in 2009. The 2009 progression rate of LSES students is 1.0%

lower than the overall OMU and also lower than the sector and benchmarked university. The results in Table 2 clearly suggest that social inclusion in higher education and the access and participation of disadvantaged students does not compromise student outcomes. Studies suggest that this factor can be further strengthened if appropriate support mechanisms are in place to improve success of such students (Brink, 2008; Downs, 2010).

Table 2: OMU student progression rates 2007 – 2009

Continuing progression rates	2007	2008	2009
OMU	81.7%	80.3%	82.9%
All Australian Universities	85.1%	85.4%	85.5%
Benchmark with comparative University	83.5%	84.5%	84.5%
Low socio economic status students	77.6%	79.8%	81.9%

Student attainment of generic skills is one of the indicators of student achievement of learning outcomes. The national CEQ enables graduating students to rate the extent to which they agree the attainment of generic skills using six items. They include measurements of certain attributes, the development of team work, analytic skills, problem-solving skills and written communication skills; the confidence about tackling unfamiliar problems; and the development of ones ability to plan their own work.

Table 3: OMU student agreement on the attainment of generic skills (2007 – 2009)

Generic skills scale	2007	2008	2009
OMU	81.7%	80.3%	82.2%
All Australian Universities	70.6%	69.5%	68.9%
Benchmark with comparative University	54.4%	54.9%	63.8%

The result is presented in Table 3 shows that OMU graduates have rated higher satisfaction on the course they completed and the attainment of generic skills compared to the sector average and the comparative university. The data however presented with respect to this factor is limited as further analysis to a finer level was not possible with respect to the LSES student cohort. The result of OMU however, suggests that student attainment of generic skills is comparative and the participation of disadvantaged students does not necessarily lower student achievement of learning outcomes and generic skills.

Analysis of graduate outcomes which assesses the success in getting a job in their profession is another factor that has been used by OMU to review the performance of the university related to social inclusion success and academic outcomes. The current practice in institutions is to analyse graduate employment at university, faculty and course level. The focus on access and participation of disadvantaged students in higher education requires institutions to monitor graduate outcomes with different cohort of students. Table 4 shows that OMU graduates in full time and part time employment is comparable to the sector average in 2007 and 2008 and slightly below in 2009. The result demonstrates that OMU university graduates have similar graduate employment compared to other graduates and they are well regarded by employers and professions.

Table 4: OMU graduate employment (2007 – 2009)

Graduate employment	2007	2008	2009
OMU	81.7%	80.3%	82.9%
All Australian Universities	82.6%	82.2%	82.0%
Benchmark with comparative University	80.1%	80.6%	84.0%

The final area of analysis is the first year student views on course outcomes. First year students were asked to rate various course outcomes related items which students have rated as most important in various internal and external surveys undertaken at OMU. Students were asked to rate the importance

on various items on a five point Likert scale with 1= low importance; 3 = moderate importance; and 5 = high importance. The results clearly show that various cohorts of students including LSES, NESB, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island (ATSI), and international (Intl) have comparable expectations on course outcomes compare with the overall OMU score. The analysis suggests that all groups of students rate gaining employment in the chosen area of study as highly important. This is followed by using learning to make life better for others and effective time, learning and project management. The analysis suggests that traditional and non-traditional students have similar expectations on course outcomes. Table 5 outlines the full result using mean scores.

Table 5: OMU Student expectations on course outcomes (2007 – 2009)

Importance Rating on Course Outcomes	OMU	LSES	NESB	ATSI	Intl	OMU rank
Gaining employment in my chosen area of study	4.63	4.70	4.55	4.71	4.39	1
Learning how to work productively with diverse groups of people and cultures	4.13	4.21	4.22	4.42	4.20	9
Understanding what ethical practice involves	4.02	4.12	4.14	4.30	4.03	10
Improving my problem-solving skills	4.26	4.30	4.32	4.38	4.28	5
How to promote social, economic and environmental sustainability	3.96	4.01	4.04	4.18	4.03	11
Using what I learn to make life better for others	4.36	4.40	4.35	4.62	4.22	2
Effective time, learning and project management	4.36	4.43	4.33	4.42	4.19	3
Develop my ability to learn from my errors and accept feedback	4.31	4.36	4.40	4.31	4.23	4
Develop my ability to persevere when things are not turning out as expected	4.25	4.32	4.31	4.26	4.16	6
Being well prepared to undertake higher studies in my area of study (e.g. Postgraduate Program)	4.13	4.24	4.16	4.08	4.06	7
Developing strong networks amongst my fellow students	4.13	4.15	4.16	4.14	4.01	8

LSES denotes low socio-economic status; NESB denotes non English speaking background; ATSI denotes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander; and Intl denotes International students

Conclusion

The evidence suggests that social inclusion agenda related to access and participation of disadvantaged students does not have a negative impact on academic standards and outcomes. However, such effort requires the commitment of the university, careful planning and resourcing, funding for academic support programs and the commitment of individuals in the university including teaching and support staff. The evidence also suggests that ease of entry for disadvantaged students into the university does not necessarily mean lower graduate exit standards. Rather, this study has shown that weak starters could finish with comparable exit standards with the range of support programs and initiatives by universities. This finding is in line with earlier work of Brink (2008) and Garlick & Brown (2008). Further, the research literature also demonstrates strong evidence that social inclusion and the access and equity agenda is critical for any successful economy and opening the doors for all groups of people in higher education is one of the many moral purposes of higher education institutions (Koehane, 2006). If universities as autonomous institutions of higher education are promoting intellectual knowledge via teaching, research and engagement, then it is critical to face the reality that student population is and will be more diverse and there is a need for innovative and creative strategies to be deployed in the changing context of higher education landscape.

In addition, research also suggest that student diversity is important to prepare students for the workforce that is characterised by diversity including colour, ethnicity, language, religion, cultural values, beliefs and other characteristics (Keohane, 2006). Therefore institutions need to break its homogeneity and open its doors for all groups of students to access, participate and succeed in higher education.

The primary aim of this paper is to encourage debate and discussion on the extent to which social inclusion agenda could have impact on academic standards and student outcomes. The literature on the

topic is limited and further research in various contexts is needed as governments shift focus on quality assurance in higher education from systems and processes for quality assurance to standards and outcomes. Australia and other economies are facing the challenge of increasing the accessing and opportunity for disadvantaged students who may not be prepared for tertiary education and at the same time ensuring that low entry criteria of students does not compromise graduate exit standards.

The review of literature and the case of one Australian university suggests that institutional mission and strategy implementation plays an important role in achieving social inclusion aspirations (Shah & Nair, 2011). In line with the literature research, this case study also shows that the range of academic support programs targeted to diverse students is critical in improving student engagement and retention in tertiary education. The performance based funding using access and participation measures in Australia will witness changes in the way universities provide academic support to students who are at risk of withdrawal. It is yet to see whether the new performance based funding will drive sustainable change and engage universities and academics in the new quality agenda which is focused on accountability and outcomes.

The traditional view that access to the disadvantaged students will damage institutional reputation should not be the norm at Australian universities. Supporting this approach is the earlier work of Crebert et al (2004). They argue that academic rigour and standards-based quality assurance must ensure that traditional and non traditional students are facilitated to engage in learning and to develop appropriate generic skills.

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Please cite as: Shah, M. & Nair, C. S. (2012). Can standards drop? Social inclusion agenda and academic standards. In *Creating an inclusive learning environment: Engagement, equity, and retention. Proceedings of the 21st Annual Teaching Learning Forum*, 2-3 February 2012. Perth: Murdoch University. <http://otl.curtin.edu.au/tlf/tlf2012/refereed/shah.html>