Institutional Responses to Social Inclusion in Australian Higher Education: Responsible Citizenship or Political Pragmatism?

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Abstract: Participation in higher education has widened in recent years, to include groups who are at risk of social exclusion. Public policy in many countries has promoted increased enrolments for non-traditional student groups. Social inclusion policy and practice is underpinned by differing ideological frameworks relating to the degree of social inclusion. This paper analyses Australian universities’ high level, publicly available strategic planning documents for evidence of their strategies to implement the Australian Government’s social inclusion agenda, and their position on a social inclusion continuum extending from neoliberal access to social justice participation to human potential empowerment. Longer-established, research-intensive universities’ strategies are clustered at the neoliberal access end of the continuum, while universities articulating strategies at the human potential empowerment end of the continuum tended to be more recently established institutions, often located in rural regions. The findings suggest strongly that socially inclusive universities articulate a comprehensive and integrated suite of strategies spanning the access, participation and empowerment domains. Universities aspiring to be socially inclusive beyond any short-term government policy imperative require a high level plan or framework that articulates goals, agreed strategies for building and sustaining a socially inclusive organisation, and indicators of success.

Key terms: equity; higher education; social inclusion; strategic planning.

Introduction

Recent years have seen a shift internationally from university or higher education being for an elite few, to mass higher education (Gidley, Hampson, Wheeler and Bereded-Samuel, 2010a; Santiago, Tremblay, Basri and Arnal, 2008). The massification of higher education has occurred during a period of global economic challenge. There is a suggestion that the expansion of higher education has been accompanied by a trade-off between quality or excellence, and equity, for example in the UK (Lunt, 2008). At the same time many countries have developed, or redeveloped their social...
include policies (Armstrong, 2010; Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2009). The purpose of this paper is to examine the way in which these high level public policies are embedded and publicly acknowledged in Australian universities; specifically to question whether Australian universities’ strategic plans include social inclusion strategies that have integrity and are sustainable.

Social inclusion in higher education extends beyond opening access to all, to include strategies to inform aspiration and engage and support non-traditional students as they study (Naylor, Baik and James, 2013). There is a need to understand the implications of the recent changes in higher education in the context of social inclusion policy.

This paper accepts the conclusions of the large body of research into equity, social justice and social inclusion that widening participation in higher education requires appropriate responses from institutions, and can deliver benefits to individuals, societies and economies (David, 2009; Gale and Tranter, 2011; Leathwood and O’Connell, 2003; Morley and Lug, 2009). Diversity brings strength at multiple levels, from institutions to communities and whole economies (Fairbairn, Bold, Fulton, Hammond Ketilson and Ish, 1995). The paper aims to stimulate discussion about the sustainability of strategies that are closely aligned with the Australian Government social inclusion agenda in terms of improving access and outcomes for specified, non-traditional student target groups. It is concerned with the sustainability of social inclusion within universities if not supported adequately at the highest level of the university.

In Australia, the Bradley Review of Higher Education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent and Scales, 2008) and the Australian Government’s policy paper, A Stronger, Fairer Australia (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2009) have been the impetus for higher education changes to widen participation and increase focus on students from low Socio-Economic Status (SES) backgrounds (Moodie, 2010). The policy paper outlines the Government’s national social inclusion agenda, which seeks to reduce social disadvantage and increase national prosperity: ‘Being socially included means that people have the capabilities, opportunities, responsibilities and resources to participate fully in Australian life’ (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2009: 3). Australian Government higher education targets in response to the Bradley Review (Australian Government, 2009) (Australian Government, 2009) are ambitious, in terms of the participation of low SES students, requiring an increase in low SES participation from 15% to 20% over the period 2008 to 2025. Additionally, the Bradley Review requires an increase in attainment of bachelor degrees by the whole 25-34 year old cohort from 32% to 40%. Every one of the 37 Australian public universities has been required to establish individual equity group participation targets through their Commonwealth Compact Agreements (Department of Innovation Industry Science and Research, nd).
Government budgetary pressures in Australia, in common with many countries, have impacted on Government higher education funding. In 2012 funding was capped for pre-bachelor degree programs, which had grown in response to the widening participation agenda signalled by the Government’s higher education targets. In 2013 ‘efficiency dividends’ over the next two years, amounting to a cut of 3.25% to funding, were imposed on institutions, accompanied by reduced financial benefits for students. A number of Vice Chancellors drew attention to the impact of the funding cuts on efforts to increase participation from low SES students in particular, and student support services in general (Minchin, 2013).

In the context of higher education and Australian policy documents (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2009), social inclusion focuses on informing aspirations, providing opportunities, and creating a supportive environment so that all students with the ability to succeed at higher education are empowered to realise their potential and become agents of social transformation. This includes students studying by distance or mixed mode, international students, students who do not have a family history of higher education, and those from equity groups such as Indigenous, low SES, students experiencing a disability, and rural and remote students.

People from low-SES backgrounds face challenges in accessing higher education (Lee Dow, Adams, Dawson and Phillips, 2013; Reay, David and Ball, 2005). Compared to other groups, poorer school performance and limited educational cultural capital leaves them underprepared for higher education (Clegg, 2011; Pike and Kuh, 2005; Reay et al., 2005). Higher education institutions face the challenge of maintaining academic standards while providing access to students who may need additional support to meet those standards (Lawrence, 2003). An alternative to this deficit view of students from low SES backgrounds is that they bring with them different social resources, such as resilience, that can contribute to success in higher education. Either view requires that higher education adapt curriculum and the wider social and learning environment to be inclusive of non-traditional student groups (Clegg, 2011).

Indicators of access, participation, success and retention in higher education show that since the mid 1990s, progress has been made for some groups such as students from non-English-speaking backgrounds and those experiencing a disability. Despite more than a decade of concerted equity activity, low SES groups, Indigenous Australians and people from rural and isolated areas remain significantly under-represented relative to their share of the population (Ferrier, Heagney and Long, 2008; Lee, 2011).

Social Inclusion and Higher Education

Social inclusion policy and practice is underpinned by differing ideological frameworks that relate to the degree of social inclusion, ranging from
neoliberal access to social justice participation to human potential empowerment (Gidley et al., 2010a). Drawing on work by Gidley et al. (2010a), which conceptualises the three approaches as a continuum, social inclusion within Australia is linked to relevant theories and interventions, as follows:

- **Neoliberal access**: Social inclusion viewed in terms of increased opportunities to access education and employment is based on neoliberal theories of economic growth through investment in human capital to address skills shortages. These theories propose that social inclusion is facilitated by access to the social capital of the dominant culture. The impact of social power imbalances on access is not addressed. Operating from a deficit approach, social inclusion interventions target groups described as disadvantaged and with particular needs, and include equity scholarships, income support, use of technology, physical modifications for students experiencing a disability, and counselling for students with mental health challenges.

- **Social justice participation**: Social inclusion viewed in terms of increased participation is based on social justice theories (sociological or critical social theory) that focus on human rights and dignity, egalitarianism and fairness. Although there may also be an economic goal, the key purpose is to enable full participation and engagement in society, sometimes linked to community sustainability. This approach recognises that for many groups, participation in higher education requires building appropriate cultural capital (Reay et al., 2005). Social inclusion interventions based on increased participation and engagement often feature university-community partnerships and collaborations. Examples of interventions include peer mentoring programs involving new university students from under-represented schools and continuing students who attended the same school; school outreach programs to inform aspiration, and community arts and cultural projects designed to facilitate social inclusion. The formation of community partnerships assists in negotiation of alternative pathways to higher education, such as bridging courses and VET pathways.

- **Human potential empowerment**: Social inclusion viewed in terms of transformation and empowerment is based on human potential empowerment theories. These theories acknowledge but move beyond participation and engagement as a human right, to focus on maximising individual potential by addressing issues of power and dominant cultural discourses. In contrast to neoliberal theories which are described as deficiency models focused on disadvantage, empowerment theories are strengths-based and value difference and diversity as an important resource or source of social transformation. They focus on the transformative role of education including lifelong learning. Social inclusion interventions based on transformation and
empowerment include opportunities for different voices to be heard, opportunities to assist people to envision positive futures and provide hope (for example, pathways to higher education as a means of rehabilitation for those who are incarcerated), and cultural festivals which allow people ‘to express their own cultural values in ways whereby they are fully honoured’ (Gidley, Hampson, Wheeler and Bereded-Samuel, 2010b: 26).

What does a Socially Inclusive University Look Like?

There is no ‘one size fits all’ model of a socially inclusive university. Reviews of the effectiveness of social inclusion interventions in higher education, particularly in the Australian context (Devlin, 2011; Naylor et al., 2013), found that effective interventions were located at different points on the student journey from aspiration to successful participation in higher education. Naylor et al. (2013) conducted an extensive literature review and examined Australian university responses to the Government’s social inclusion agenda, post the Bradley Review (Bradley et al., 2008). They documented variation across universities in the actions that constituted their response. According to Cairnduff (2011) universities that aspire to be socially inclusive are likely to share the following high level principles:

- High level of community engagement to address inclusion issues
- Collaborative approaches involving all stakeholders
- Strong focus on outcomes for students and the community
- Strong commitment to strengths-based rather than deficit models

These principles are operationalised by actions including:

- Multiple pathways to university (vocational education and training pathways, high achievers, number of equity scholarships)
- Range and relevance of programs to increase social inclusion (aspiration/awareness programs, professional learning for staff)
- Identification and valuing of diversity in the curriculum (content, pedagogy, assessment)
- Range of general and targeted learning and personal support programs for students (bridging and enabling programs, mentoring, academic support, focus on first year student retention).
- Staff and student profile reflective of diversity (Cairnduff, 2011)

This paper examines Australian higher education institutions’ response to the widening participation agenda through the lens of their publicly available strategic plans and related high level strategies. It examines the strategic plans in light of the three approaches to social inclusion: neoliberal access, social justice participation and human potential empowerment (Gidley et al., 2010a). The paper aims to understand the extent to which institutional responses may have been prompted by a need to respond to
Government policy, and the extent to which the universities aspire to sustainability in terms of social inclusion, in order to stimulate discussion about the sustainability of the social inclusion agenda.

The Australian Higher Education Context

While Australia has a number of non-university higher education providers, universities dominate higher education with over one million enrolments (Universities Australia, 2013). The population of Australia is 23 million (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013). There are 39 universities in Australia; 37 of these are public universities which receive the majority of their funding from the Australian Government, and two are private universities. Many of the public universities are members of networks or groups which share some resources, mainly for advocacy and exchange of information. Eight of the older, research intensive, and more prestigious universities have formed the Group of Eight (Go8); five universities formed in the 1980s and 1990s from institutes of technology make up the Australian Technology Network (ATN); seven universities, most established in the 1960s and 1970s, form the Innovative Research Universities (IRU); and six smaller, rurally-based universities compromise the Regional Universities Network (RUN). The remainder, known as the non-aligned universities (NAU) are diverse in terms of size and location. The Go8 universities are based in capital cities and have the highest university entrance scores. The ATN universities are all based in capital cities, although several also have small regional campuses. The IRU universities are mid-size institutions, all with a regional presence, though four are based in capital cities. Many of the RUN universities are located in areas with a higher than national average Indigenous population.

Method

The websites of all 39 Australian universities were searched to locate the institutions’ strategic plans and any sub plans or high level strategy documents related to social inclusion. Strategic plans communicate the mission, vision and values that underpin institutional planning and decision-making and are usually publicly available. They are likely to be supported by sub plans or high level strategy documents that relate to specific areas of activity such as social inclusion, and that may include specific targets. In order to focus on universities’ publicly promoted image the study included only documents that universities chose to make available on their websites. It did not extend to any mention of social inclusion in their Commonwealth Compact Agreements, held on a Government website (see Introduction), because these agreements are principally for the purpose of accountability in administering Commonwealth funding. The time period covered by the strategic and other plans was noted. All publicly available plans, with one exception, were dated post the 2008 Bradley Review (Bradley et al., 2008).
A content analysis was employed (Babbie, 2004) to examine the strategic and sub plans for evidence of intent to address social inclusion, equity, and/or access for people from groups underrepresented in Australian higher education and/or at risk of social exclusion from university. While the main focus of this research is on students, evidence of intent to address social inclusion for staff was also noted. The plans were searched for the following terms: social inclusion/cohesion/inclusiveness, equity, access, diversity, participation, Indigenous, low socioeconomic status/SES, culturally and linguistically diverse, regional, rural, remote, disability, women, and differently. Relevant sections of the documents were scanned to ensure that social inclusion strategies described in other terms were not overlooked. Groups explicitly mentioned in the plans were noted, as well as any targets for specific groups (Lee Dow et al., 2010; Polesel, O’Hanlon and Clarke, 2011).

Content analysis focused on the future context. Documents that described what was happening now but did not include reference to future plans and strategies were not included in the review. Content analysis included quantitative elements in terms of frequency of social inclusion entries and sub plans, as well as a qualitative focus on the scope and significance of social inclusion content (Schreir, 2012). This included the extent to which these plans embraced the continuum of social inclusion strategies: neoliberal access, social justice participation and human potential empowerment (Gidley et al., 2010a). The plans were also analysed by the five university groupings described earlier.

For many years, Australia has required institutions to facilitate inclusion of people experiencing a disability. Nineteen institutions made their disability action plans publicly available. Disability action plans were excluded from the analysis because a scan of the documents revealed a focus on regulatory compliance, particularly regarding physical disability, and further, disability action planning pre-dates the Government push toward social inclusion. Where disability was mentioned in the strategic plan of an institution in the context of inclusive strategies, the disability group was included in the analysis.

A limitation of this study is that findings are based on publicly available and current high level strategic plans or related sub plans in the broad areas of social inclusion and equity and diversity. This means that it was not possible to examine fully the high level responses of every university to the social inclusion agenda. However, the method was appropriate to the purpose of the study: to overview the extent to which social inclusion is embedded and publicly acknowledged at the highest level of university activity, independent of Australian and State government imperatives.
Findings

Social Inclusion in Strategic Plans

Nearly all universities (n=38) had publicly available strategic plans or high level strategies (collectively referred to here as strategic plans). One institution indicated it had a strategic plan, but access was restricted to staff members. The published mission and vision of this institution, a dual sector higher education-technical and further education provider in the State of Victoria, indicates some commitment to social inclusion in stating ‘Our 2020 vision is to be known and respected… for… who we include, rather than who we exclude’ (Swinburne University of Technology, 2013).

Eleven universities also had social inclusion related sub plans or strategies that were publicly available (collectively referred to here as sub plans). They typically included social inclusion, diversity and/or equity in their title. In addition, fifteen universities had separate publicly available plans relating to Indigenous education or Reconciliation Action Plans. The Reconciliation Action Plan program encourages Australian organisations to develop plans setting out practical actions for the organisation to contribute to reconciliation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other Australians (Reconciliation Australia, 2010). Two universities had a multicultural plan, and another two had an international plan with a social inclusion focus.

Table 1 shows that thirty four of the universities had strategic plans that explicitly referred to social inclusion. Most of these (n=29) included strategies to address social inclusion, equity and/or access for underrepresented or disadvantaged groups. The other five within this group set out social inclusion principles or values in their strategic plan and provided their strategies in sub plan documents. Of the remaining five universities, one set out social inclusion strategies for Indigenous students in its strategic plan, but not for other groups; one had a strategy consistent with social inclusion but not explicitly identified as social inclusion (to attract higher achievers from all backgrounds); two did not have publicly available strategies to act, and one did not have a publicly available plan.

Table 1: Social inclusion strategies in strategic or sub plans by university group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social inclusion strategies</th>
<th>Go8 Group of Eight</th>
<th>ATN Australian Technology Network</th>
<th>IRU Innovative Research Universities</th>
<th>RUN Regional Universities Network</th>
<th>NAU Non-Aligned Universities</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explicitly included</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous only</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistent with social inclusion but not explicit</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan not public</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Examples of strategies that explicitly identified social inclusion and target groups include:

- Build upon the existing social inclusion and equity strategy, and the integrated education program to widen the opportunities for non-traditional students, especially from the West of Melbourne to access and succeed in tertiary education (NAU university).

- Development of pathways to ensure access to University and academic attainment for students from a range of backgrounds including Indigenous students, non-school leavers and students from low socio-economic status background (IRU university).

An example of a strategy consistent with social inclusion:

- Attract and support promising students from a diversity of social and cultural backgrounds (Go8 university).

Groups and Targets

Table 2 shows that thirty-three of the universities with publicly available strategic plans and sub plans mentioned at least one particular group in relation to social inclusion strategies for students (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, or Indigenous peoples). Around three-quarters (n=28) of the 37 universities with publicly available plans, made specific mention of people from low SES, underrepresented, disadvantaged or non-traditional higher education participant groups. Twelve mentioned people experiencing a disability, eleven mentioned people from a particular geographic area, usually rural areas, or regions or suburbs surrounding their campuses, and six mentioned people from other cultural groups such as those from non English speaking backgrounds. Further analysis revealed no apparent relationship between mention of various social inclusion groups and membership of a university group.

**Table 2**: Groups cited and group targets in plans

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Low SES</th>
<th>Indigenous</th>
<th>Other cultural groups</th>
<th>Region/rural</th>
<th>Disability*</th>
<th>Gender (Women or other)</th>
<th>Staff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cited in strategic or sub plan</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific targets cited</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*In strategic or sub plan, excluding Disability Action Plans

Approximately half of the universities (n=16) had targets for various equity groups in their publicly available strategic plans or sub plans. Of
these, low SES and Indigenous targets were most frequently identified. A few also had targets for students from a particular geographic area, usually rural areas, regions or suburbs surrounding their campuses, or other underrepresented group. It should be noted that all universities have equity group targets which appear in their Commonwealth Compacts, available from the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research website.

Twenty-five universities explicitly mentioned social inclusion strategies for staff in their plans. Twenty two of these had strategies to increase the numbers of Indigenous staff and women in senior positions, while the remaining three universities set out inclusion strategies only in relation to Indigenous staff. While a number of plans identified the need to increase representation, or outline strategies through which employment targets would be developed, only eight provided specific targets.

From Access to Participation and Empowerment

The review of Australian university websites showed that almost all universities (n=34) have plans that articulate strategies based around access, and around three quarters (n=26) articulate participation strategies. Table 3 shows that fewer (n=15) have strategies that take an empowerment approach to social inclusion, that is, strategies framed in positive terms (strengths-based) and including social, psychological and economic dimensions (Gidley et al., 2010a).

Table 3: Social inclusion strategies by approach and university group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social inclusion strategies</th>
<th>Go Group of Eight</th>
<th>ATN Australian Technology Network</th>
<th>IRU Innovative Research Universities</th>
<th>RUN Regional Universities Network</th>
<th>NAU Non-Aligned Universities</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Access (access pathway)</td>
<td>6 (3)</td>
<td>5 (3)</td>
<td>7 (1)</td>
<td>6 (3)</td>
<td>10 (4)</td>
<td>34 (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation (participation pathway) (student experience focus) (institutional focus)</td>
<td>5 (4)</td>
<td>2 (3)</td>
<td>7 (3)</td>
<td>4 (1)</td>
<td>8 (1)</td>
<td>26 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment (Indigenous only)</td>
<td>0 (1)</td>
<td>2 (1)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>5 (2)</td>
<td>7 (5)</td>
<td>15 (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None identified</td>
<td>2 (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>3 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plans not public</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL IN EACH UNIVERSITY GROUP</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To be counted has having social inclusion access strategies, universities’ strategic or sub plans had to state actions that targeted groups underrepresented in Australian higher education to assist them to apply for or enrol in a place at that university, or state an intention to increase numbers from one or more named underrepresented groups. Examples are equity scholarships, special entrance criteria, or other support: ‘articulating pathways and support for the disadvantaged’ (Go8 university) and physical or electronic provision: ‘providing regional education within Western Australia through campuses and education centres spread across the state’ (ATN university).

Within the plans there were examples of pathways from underrepresented schools or from technical and vocational education and training (TVET): ‘Through our Alternative Entry Pathway partnerships, we will... increase participation of low SES students’ (RUN university). Pathways to university are access strategies. The number of universities that document access pathways in their plans is shown in Table 3. However, the pathway process through partnerships with schools and TVET providers can also be a participation strategy, that is, where an institution details the process of community engagement and/or student transition as a key part of the strategy. Whilst just under half the institutions (n=18) identified access or participation pathways, Table 3 shows that nearly all of those (n=14) were described as access strategies designed to increase participation by underrepresented groups. The remaining four focused on pathways as a way to facilitate both access and participation. Three of those four universities were IRU universities, such as the following: ‘Implement and monitor effective and integrated strategies to improve pathways, retention and the student experience’.

Access strategies were often incorporated within participation strategies. Participation strategies build or strengthen educational cultural capital, either before students enter higher education, in terms of informing aspiration, or through targeted learning such as authentic learning, constructivist teaching (Devlin, 2011) or other support to retain students and assist them to succeed in higher education: ‘Focus on the quality of the first year experience of students from target groups to ensure retention’ (Go8 university).

Over half of the participation approaches targeted specific, named equity groups, in particular Indigenous students. Examples of participation strategies which encompass access strategies:

- increasing the number and supports for students from low socio-economic areas by strengthening our relationship with schools, secondary students and their families (NAU university).

As shown in Table 3, participation strategies were framed in terms of their focus: pathways (presented above); student experience, and empowerment. Over half of the universities with participation strategies
(n=17) framed these in terms of providing an enhanced student experience. For example:

support successful participation in Indigenous communities and remote and isolated communities... provide an enriching and supportive student experience for its diverse range of students by: .. Physical facilities and information and communication technologies that optimise student engagement (NAU university).

The remaining universities (n=11) framed their participation strategies in broad, institutional terms, suggesting a focus on measurable outcomes such as progression and retention. Most of these were in the IRU, RUN and NAU categories. For example: improve the access, participation and outcomes for people from identified equity groups (NAU university).

An empowerment approach to social inclusion that moved beyond building educational capital to a strengths-based approach that valued and drew on the cultural capital of diverse groups, was evident in the plans of 15 universities (see Table 3). Nine of the empowerment social inclusion strategies targeted only Indigenous students. Empowerment strategy examples are:

Promote and affirm diversity through celebrations, workshops, promotional materials and events on campus (RUN university).

We aspire to provide an equitable and inclusive environment for our students, valuing diversity and encouraging respect, fairness and justice (NAU university).

embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, insights and knowledge in education planning, programs, events, teaching, learning, and research (RUN university).

create a University environment that acknowledges Indigenous rights and interests, and legitimises Indigenous knowledge, perspectives and practices by ensuring participation of Indigenous Australian people in appropriate planning and decision-making, and including appropriate accommodations in organisational practices (ATN university).

One university had a strategy for Indigenous social inclusion that embedded access, participation and empowerment approaches:

The University promotes access to and successful participation in its teaching programs for Indigenous Australians, providing a supportive organisation ethos which values Indigenous culture and knowledge (NAU university).

One university had a participation and empowerment strategy, but no access strategy. The strategy related to Indigenous students:

Give special attention in curriculum, course design and student support to the advancement of indigenous people and the promotion of
reconciliation between the indigenous and nonindigenous people of Australia (NAU university).

None of the Group of Eight universities included empowerment approach strategies to social inclusion in their strategic plans or sub plans, and only one IRU and seven of the 13 NAU did so. All but one of these universities is located outside the large mainland State capital cities, and the one exception has a large regional campus. The RUN universities were the group most likely to adopt an empowerment approach to social inclusion, with five of the six articulating such strategies. The IRU university and five of the seven NAU included empowerment approaches only in relation to Indigenous students, as did three of the ATN and RUN universities. For example:

A national showcase of social inclusion in higher education through innovative partnerships, industry engagement and program pathways (IRU university).

All these strategies for inclusion of Indigenous peoples were in a Reconciliation Action Plan or similar document.

Language of Social Inclusion

Universities with a neoliberal access approach to social inclusion tended to use language that reflected a deficit view of equity groups as people with needs to be addressed: ‘Build education and training opportunities for disadvantaged urban populations’ (ATN university).

Other institutions framed the same objective using more moderate language: ‘improving access and support for students who would not otherwise enjoy the benefits that flow from higher education’ (NAU university).

Universities with social justice participation strategies did not use deficit language: ‘continue to attract and support students from low socio-economic backgrounds’ (IRU university), and ‘Our programs will be relevant, inclusive and flexible, provided in a supportive and stimulating learning environment’ (NAU university).

The small group of universities that adopted a human potential empowerment approach used strengths-based language, for example: ‘Learn in partnership with Indigenous students, staff and communities’ (IRU university).

Discussion

Findings from this review of Australian universities indicate multiple approaches to social inclusion. Strategies in some universities are closely aligned to the Australian government social inclusion agenda, in terms of widening participation in tertiary study for specified equity groups, most notably Indigenous and low SES. This includes a strong focus on access in
particular, and may include access performance targets. Other universities focus on strategies that span the access and participation domains, articulating a range of strategies in the areas of access, engagement and retention. Some participation strategies are institutionally focussed, with measurable outcomes for specific equity groups (mainly Indigenous and low SES), and aligned to Government targets informed by the Bradley Review (Bradley et al., 2008). This is particularly true of the newer Innovative Research Universities and of the regional universities (RUN) which is not surprising, given their target populations of equity learners.

A larger group of universities’ participation strategies incorporate but move beyond targets and measurable outcomes, to emphasise the quality of the student experience, suggesting a broader approach to the social inclusion agenda.

The findings show that only a small number of universities have embraced a holistic approach to social inclusion, articulating an integrated suite of strategies spanning the access, participation and empowerment domains.

This analysis of universities’ high level social inclusion strategies reveals that an institution’s social inclusion strategy is influenced by institutional context: location and student demographics, research intensity, tradition and culture. Nearly all universities have strategies to facilitate access, although the research-intensive universities (G08) tend to emphasise access for students who are likely to achieve. Universities that have evolved from a tradition of technology-based education tend to focus, in particular, on developing access pathways including TVET pathways, although half of the regional (RUN) and research intensive (Go8) universities also have strategies that feature access pathways. Newer universities (IRU) all have participation strategies and are more likely to have integrated pathway strategies, that move beyond access to facilitate participation. This may reflect the lower level of preparedness of students who are admitted to these universities, particularly compared to G08 universities.

Universities that have evolved from a tradition of technology-based education (ATN) tend to focus on enriching the student experience, although more than half the research-intensive (Go8) universities also report a focus on the student experience as part of a suite of participation strategies. Again, this may reflect a better prepared student cohort compared with other university groupings, and so less need for social inclusion strategies. Universities that are the only provider of higher education located in a particular area tend to adopt what could be described as a community development or community capacity building approach to social inclusion, one that targets and empowers all to participate and succeed in higher education. This includes regionally-based universities, which are located in areas where families have not traditionally participated in higher education. Given their location and stated mission, it is not surprising that most of these specifically address the social inclusion of Indigenous students.
The observed variations suggest that while context is important, there may be other factors at play. University leaders are major influencers of strategic direction and underpinning values and principles. The review did not examine strategic plans from a historical perspective, so was not able to determine the influence of a change in university leadership on the framing of each institution’s social inclusion agenda. We therefore ask the question: to what extent do university leaders influence strategic approaches to social inclusion in higher education? It is suggested this area may benefit from further investigation.

The findings suggest strongly that socially inclusive universities, such as most of the RUN group of universities, articulate a comprehensive and integrated suite of strategies spanning the access, participation and empowerment domains, as defined by Gidley et al. (2010b) and Naylor et al. (2013). Their strategies are framed in language consistent with a strengths-based, human empowerment paradigm, and they are proactive in creating a socially inclusive culture and environment in which all learners are respected and valued. It is further suggested that such universities acknowledge a responsibility to facilitate access and participation by all, including but not limited to, equity groups. This ensures that others (for example, those who are incarcerated, members of the gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual and intersex (GLTBI) community) are also supported to access and participate fully in higher education. Socially inclusive universities’ strategies are underpinned by the following principles:

- A strengths-based approach, in which students and staff who may be socially disadvantaged are not seen as having problems that need to be fixed, but as bringing different strengths and diversity to the university which should be celebrated.
- An all-encompassing and proactive approach, where social inclusion is embedded in the core activities of the university (learning, teaching and research), and facilitated through a range of participation and empowerment strategies.
- An integrated strategy that focuses on social inclusion at all levels – access, participation and empowerment.
- A holistic view of participation and engagement which extends across the student engagement cycle, from shaping aspirations through to graduate transitions (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2011).

By contrast, universities whose approach to social inclusion is more reflective of the neoliberal access paradigm, tend to use deficit-based language such as ‘disadvantaged’, perceiving such students as needing assistance to overcome disadvantage.

It is suggested that universities aspiring to be socially inclusive beyond any short-term government policy imperative require a high level plan or framework to guide activity. Attention to the four principles outlined above
(Australian Council for Educational Research, 2011) should assist universities to develop a holistic and authentic set of social inclusion strategies. From the plans reviewed in this research, it appears that the framework might articulate a common purpose and goals, agreed strategies for building and sustaining a socially inclusive organisation, and indicators of success. Further research is required to confirm whether or not this is the case. Recently completed research by the authors in relation to TVET pathways as a social inclusion strategy (Kilpatrick, Johns, Sainsbury, Cooper and Coyle, submitted February 2014), identified strong central leadership and the existence of a comprehensive strategic plan, along with institutional buy-in, as critical to effectiveness and sustainability.

There are implications for social inclusion from this analysis of universities’ stated high level strategic documents. In general terms, older, more prestigious, research intensive universities appear to be willing to accept students who have been able to demonstrate ability despite any educational cultural capital barriers they may have had to overcome, while locally connected, often younger universities are proactive in supporting the aspiration and transition of non-traditional students to higher education.

Conclusions

It is acknowledged that university activity in the social inclusion space is not necessarily limited or defined by the existence or otherwise of high level, publicly available plans. Most universities have in place a range of programs and activities that fit within the equity, diversity and social inclusion space. However, an aim of this paper was to question the sustainability of social inclusion within universities if not supported adequately at the highest level of the university, by articulation in strategic or other high level university plans. Another aim was to question the sustainability of strategies that are closely aligned with the Australian Government social inclusion agenda in terms of improving access and outcomes for specified target groups. We argue that universities that have implemented the social inclusion agenda in a very specific way, aligned closely to Government targets for widening participation, may be missing a valuable opportunity. The issues raised in this paper are relevant to the international academic community, given the extent of the widening participation agenda globally. Universities that expand their commitment to social inclusion would seem well-placed to benefit from the strength that diversity brings.

References


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