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HAS EQUITY’S TIME COME FOR VET?
OBSERVATIONS AND PRINCIPLES FOR EQUITY POLICY AND PRACTICE IN AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION

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Abstract
Equity has a long history in education. When compulsory schooling was first introduced in industrialising nations in the mid 1800s, many advocates saw it as a way of improving the circumstances of the poorest and most disadvantaged in their communities. But access to schooling did not prove to be the great equaliser that some had hoped. Instead, it became central in the reproduction of social and economic inequalities (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977). High academic achievement became highly correlated with high socioeconomic status, and vice versa (Teese & Polesel 2003). In Australia, the Karmel Report (1973) proved to be a watershed moment in naming the equity problem in schooling and, among other things, gave rise to the Disadvantaged Schools Program (DSP): an attempt to level the playing field albeit by ‘running twice as hard’ (Connell at al. 1991). Almost two decades later, A Fair Chance for All (1990) signalled official concern for equity in Australian higher education. While access to university was not to be universal, it was to be equitable; all social groups in the Australian population were to be proportionally represented among its university students. Today, Australia is still grappling with the inequities in its schooling and higher education systems, highlighted by renewed interest by governments to address the issues. Although not of the same order of magnitude, there now appears to be an emerging policy agenda around equity in VET. Has equity’s time come for VET? This paper canvasses the history of equity in Australian schooling and higher education, with a view to drawing out principles to inform a rejuvenated equity agenda in vocational education and training.

Introduction
This year marks my twenty-first as an education researcher. While the particular focus of my work over that time has changed, from one issue to another, my central interest has remained with matters of social justice in education, which variously goes by the names of student equity, social inclusion, and widening participation. The invitation to speak to you today has given me cause to reflect back over that time and that work. And for me, there are two main things that stand out.

The first is the way in which difference and similarity are marshalled in conversations and in research about social justice.³ For example, there are some in education that fail to see difference, or at least

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³ See Gale & Densmore (2000) Just Schooling (Open University Press), particularly chapters 2 and 7, for a fuller account of the ways in which social justice is conceived in these terms.
social differences, or do not attribute social difference to anything other than the choices of individuals. Hence, for them, social justice is about rewarding people for their commitment and hard work, and about protecting the achievements that flow from these.

Difference is acknowledged but minimally, as innate; which individuals can do little about except to improve on their abilities through hard work. If there is a difference, it is just this: hard work and commitment, which is all about what individuals chose to do or not do.

There are others for whom difference is everything. It explains the social world, in all its finery and failings. At one level, it is to be celebrated: different foods, different customs, different lifestyles. While at another level, people are marginalised and oppressed because of their differences and, they would say, only those who are different can truly appreciate this.

For example, some argue that men cannot be feminists because they can’t generate knowledge about the ways in which gendered social hierarchies discriminate against women. Although, in somewhat of a concession, they can be pro-feminists: believing in and advocating for gender equality. And of course, feminists are not all the same. The comfortable liberal feminism of the middle classes, for example, does not always resonate with the feminism of women who are poor, Indigenous, or from other minority groups. In these accounts of difference, it is the difference that matters.

And then there is a third group, which argues that we are all different and, in effect, this makes us all similar. Because of this similarity – that we are all different – social justice is all about ensuring that everyone is treated the same or receives the same level of treatment. This, they would say, is equality. You may know people who subscribe to this view. For example, a teacher might say: “It doesn’t matter where they come from. When students are in my classroom I treat them all the same.”

This interplay between the collective and the individual, between similarity and difference, is nicely satirized in a scene in the Monty Python film, The Life of Brian. In the scene in question, Brian has attracted a following that he would rather he hadn’t and tries to appeal to their individualism to persuade his followers to go their own way. (See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LQqq3eO3EBQ)

The play on difference and similarity in this scene is of course deliberate and amusing. But we should not miss the more subtle critique of individualism. Being left to work it out for themselves or to rely on their own resources with no models to follow, tends to advantage some and disadvantage others. This is because understanding of the codes for participating in society is unevenly distributed. I return to some of these issues later.

The debates about difference and similarity are important for understanding what we mean by social justice in education. I have skimmed over them because of the constraints of time although I’ll return to them a bit later on. But I wanted to illustrate at the outset the more general point that the arguments about social justice tend to fall on the side of one or the other, of difference or similarity.

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4 Margaret Thatcher once famously claimed that ‘there’s no such thing as society’, that we are simply a collection of disparate individuals or ‘individuals plural’. Of course, this gives no account of the way in which individuals negotiate their lives in combination with others. Indeed, our very lives involve others. We are social beings and social arrangements govern our interactions. We do this in collectives or groups: individuals interacting with each other in groups, groups interacting with other groups, and rules that govern our interactions.
As a critical sociologist of education, I tend to think that the empirical evidence can support both, although not necessarily in the stereotypes I have described. That is, in the one moment, we are both similar and different from each other. There are some with whom we share greater similarities, which mark us out as a group (a family, for example) and as different from other groups. And our differences can also be points of similarity between groups of difference.

For example, I’m a Collingwood supporter and I am not alone! But it is also a point of difference from others. Indeed, there are many who take great delight in being anti-Collingwood as a matter of principle. Yet I share a passion for Football with supporters of other AFL clubs and I would align myself with supporters of some clubs more than others. For AFL supporters, these are important matters to reassert at a time of World Cup Soccer and defections from Rugby League, which both lay claim to being football!

This way of thinking about the social world, that is, holding two seemingly opposite ideas together without letting one displace the other, is not easy conceptual work. And it seems to be particularly hard with regard to conceptions of difference and similarity.

For example, in the past I have been frustrated as a teacher educator by students preparing to be secondary school teachers who cannot see the value of engaging with material about primary teachers because that is not what they are preparing to become. They identify so closely with being a secondary school teacher, with their particular group, that they cannot see the value of ideas, principles and observations derived from other contexts and other groups, even though you and I might recognise the similarities of the activities in which they will engage in these different education contexts.

In the twenty-one years I have been researching social justice in education, my focus has been on schooling and higher education. I know a little about vocational education and training, much more since becoming a member of NQC and NVEAC, but really not all that much. I suspect that on this front most of you would know more than me. Although I am willing test out on you what I think I know about equity and VET a bit later.

I know at least that VET is different from schooling and higher education and that many of these differences are important and valuable. I also know that VET shares similarities with other education contexts. I am hoping that what I am able to share with you about equity in schooling and higher education might be of some value in the pursuit of equity in VET. The issues won’t necessarily be the same but the way in which they are understood and approached might be similarly informed.

And this brings me to the second thing that stands out in my mind. Many of the social justice issues that were of concern in my early years as an education researcher still remain issues now. Much has been done by many good people to address these issues but the effort doesn’t seem commensurate with the effect. In part I think that this is because we don’t always take sufficient account of the lessons of history. And we don’t always take sufficient account of how circumstances change over time, which might help us to adjust our efforts accordingly.

So, I plan to give you a potted history of social justice in schooling and higher education. And I plan to do this by concentrating loosely on two policies, their implementation and related contexts; one focused on Australian schooling and the other on Australian higher education. These two policies – the Disadvantaged Schools Program (1974) and A Fair Chance for All (1990) – serve as markers of when social justice in education was first given its own voice in the policy arenas of these two sectors.
and at a federal level; not as part of a broader policy on education but policy concerned solely with student equity in education.

In doing this I am making a couple of perhaps technical claims in relation to VET. First, that even though equity in VET also has history, it is yet to see equity policy of the same order as in schooling and higher education. This is not to deny the Kangan Report of 1974 or the Finn Report in 1991, which defined disadvantage and outlined strategies for specific groups. In particular, Finn suggested that: “all states and territories should be responsible for establishing mechanisms for monitoring and reporting on the participation and attainment of disadvantaged young people against targets and specified performance indicators” (Australian Education Review Council 1991: 152). As significant as this is, the Finn Report was not solely focused on student equity in VET and did not lead to the implementation of equity policy as recommended, and has occurred in schooling and higher education.

My second claim is that there are equity observations and principles that can be derived from schooling and higher education, which may have relevance for VET. Again, this is not to deny equity’s history in VET. But some cross-pollination might be just what is needed to reassert the importance of equity in VET at this point in time. Indeed, at this point in time, some suggest that equity in VET is being undermined by the imagination of VET institutions as profitable enterprises, not just because of the influx of private providers securing a greater share of government funding, but also in the privatisation of the public VET system. Of course, public institutions are not necessarily more public or equitable than private ones. But that’s another story.

Lessons in equity in Australian schooling

So, what equity lessons are there to be learned from Australian schools?

Compulsory schooling was introduced in Australia in the mid to late nineteenth century, at a very similar time as the introduction of higher education and VET. This is the basis of my first observation⁵. At any one time, reform rarely happens in one education context alone, although that is not to say that such reform is necessarily coordinated or that it plays out in every context in the same way.

Nevertheless, the general point remains: education in all its forums is subject to the influence of broader social and economic policies and contexts. Education systems cannot and do not operate in isolation, even when they are subject to different jurisdictions. If equity is to have traction in education, it must connect with broader social and economic agendas.

In fact, compulsory schooling:

- arose in the broader context of a struggle for social improvement and transformation, to provide opportunities for the ‘poorer classes’. This is not to deny that the introduction of mass schooling was also motivated by a number of other purposes, including the need to supply a more educated workforce for the newly mechanised industries and the desire of the authorities to contain social disorder among the propertyless masses. ...

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⁵ See Appendix A for a full list of the ten observations and principles for equity policy and practice in education.
[However, social reformers] viewed the expansion of school systems under compulsory education laws as a great achievement because such laws reflected an overriding concern for social justice. With mass schooling, so it was thought, everyone was given an opportunity for social improvement, and for access to power and privilege which only a few in society had [up to that point] enjoyed. (Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard & Henry 1997: 126)

In brief, the promises of compulsory schooling were two fold. Schooling society’s children in the moral and work ethics of industry would provide the nation with a source of skilled labour. And, such preparation, it was said, would enable these students to gain access to a better life, via a job.

This too is a recurring theme. When equity finds voice in education policy, it is frequently justified in terms of its contribution to the economy, specifically in relation to the workforce. For example, when he was Australia’s Prime Minister, Paul Keating once remarked that: “The great access, the great opportunity to participate in this country, is through a job” (The Australian, March 24, 1995, p. 3).

However, as the histories of schooling and higher education show, when equity in education is justified purely in economic or human capital terms and its social justifications are neglected, its chances of success are diminished.

As it has transpired, compulsory schooling has not delivered on the promises made at the time of its introduction. Universal access to schooling has not provided universal access to power and privilege, as some thought it would. In fact, power and privilege have remained in the hands of the powerful and privileged. By definition, privilege in particular is not something that can be shared, although we could reasonably hope for a more even distribution of power.

However, the research of Richard Teese and John Polesel (2003) at the University of Melbourne has clearly shown that high academic achievement in school – often seen as the passport to power and privilege – is highly correlated with high socioeconomic status. Similarly, low academic achievement is highly correlated with low socioeconomic status. This is the nexus – between academic achievement and socioeconomic circumstances – that the current Australian Government is trying to break.

The fact that this nexus exists means that schooling has not only failed to change the inequitable structure of Australian society, it is also implicated in the reproduction of its social and economic differences. As Pierre Bourdieu, the French sociologist, has commented:

> to favour the most favoured and disfavor the most disfavoured, all that is necessary and sufficient is for the school to ignore, in the content and teaching it transmits, in the methods and techniques of transmission and the criteria for judgement it deploys, the cultural inequalities that divide children from different social classes. In other words, by treating all students, however much they differ, as equal in rights and duties, the educational system actually gives its sanction to the initial inequality in relation to culture. (Bourdieu 2008: 36)

Here then is a third equity principle or observation: **equitable education outcomes for all groups in society require education systems to favour the disfavoured.** Raewyn Connell (1993: 43) refers to such equity strategy as taking the standpoint of the disadvantaged as its starting point. (See also Sandra Harding (1992) on standpoint epistemology.)
This is necessary because students do not enter education systems with the same cultural baggage. Their virtual school bags (Thomson 2002) or archives of experience (Appadurai 2003) differ in quality and quantity, in relation to what is privileged in schools. Hence, the capacity of students from advantaged backgrounds to perform well at school is often ‘misrecognised’ as related to differences in individual capacities; a “social gift treated as a natural one” (Bourdieu 1976: 110).

The difficulty is that when favouring the disfavoured is attempted, it is read by some as disfavouring the favoured. And to the extent that the favoured no longer receive favours, this is true. So when universities offer TER bonus points to students from disadvantaged schools, this tends to provoke cries of inequality. It can also prompt the favoured to reposition themselves as disfavoured in order to re-find favour, illustrated in the ‘boys too’ discourses that react to the favouring of girls. Although manipulating equity policy to preserve privilege is probably not their main weapon of defence.

Nonetheless, this gives rise to a fourth equity observation: equity strategy can be used by the advantaged to re-assert their advantage.

For example, the gap year – the year that some students take off from their education following the completion of their secondary schooling and before they begin their post-school education – has been invented primarily to enable the students of financially-able parents to demonstrate, through getting a job and earning an income, their financial independence from their parents and hence qualify for an independent and much higher Youth Allowance to support their post-school studies.

While the issues were slightly different, these inequitable outcomes of Australian schooling were first given official airing in the 1973 Karmel Report, Schools in Australia. The Report and the Australian Government’s response formed part of a whole-of-government approach to address poverty and led to the formation of the Disadvantaged Schools Program (the DSP), targeting Australian school students living in the most adverse financial circumstances: some 15 percent of the Australian student population. The funding made available was minimal, only about $100 per student (Thomson 2001: 131).

And it highlights a fifth equity observation or principle: equity in education requires funding, although funding is not all that equity in education requires:

From the outset, the objectives of the DSP were to improve the participation and outcomes from schooling for those from low socio-economic backgrounds. There was also a stress on making schools pleasant places where students actually wanted to be. ... [To do this] the DSP focused on whole-school change and improved school-community relations. (Lingard 1998: 2)

An important equity principle that informed such strategy was that: to advance equity, education institutions need to be knowledgeable about and form meaningful relations with their communities.

In this context, meaningful relations included schools and teachers assessing how they themselves were implicated in their students’ disadvantage. "Instead of individual pathology and ‘blaming the victim’ assumptions, there was a focus on how school structures, curricula and pedagogies contributed to the reproduction of educational disadvantage across generations” (Lingard 1998: 2).

This provides a seventh equity observation: equity in education is not simply about access; it is also concerned with the nature of the education that students receive.
Kangan raised this issue in relation to VET in 1974. Leesa Wheelahan has also made a similar point. She argues that, even though Competency-Based Training is knowledge-informed, because it does not place knowledge at the centre of the curriculum, “it excludes working class students from access to powerful knowledge” (Wheelahan 2009: 227) and, more specifically, to the “style of reasoning” associated with the powerful (Wheelahan 2007: 649).

“Much has been learnt about the relationship between poverty and educational participation and performance since the inception of the DSP [the Disadvantaged Schools Program] (see Connell et al. 1991, Connell 1993). [As I have mentioned] perhaps the most important lesson has been the need to focus on whole-school change and improving school-community relations. In that context, programmes for individual students were framed by these broader considerations” (Lingard 1998: 2). The experience of schooling under the DSP and other strategies, such as Productive Pedagogies, has been that where a school made a concerted and sustained effort, then the nexus between poverty and low achievement was altered for the better.

This then is my eighth equity observation: **equity benefits flow to individuals when the education institution is the primary site for action, not the individual or his/her community.**

**Lessons in equity in Australian higher education**

Many of these lessons about equity learned in the schooling sector have been repeated in higher education. In part, this is because, as I noted at the outset, we are often better at seeing differences between education sectors than similarities and so we are destined to learn our lessons over.

For example, the barriers to student equity in higher education were initially imagined purely in financial terms, to the exclusion of other equity principles. So, in 1972, the incoming Australian Government was of the view that two hurdles stood in the way of opportunities for disadvantaged Australians to access higher education:

- the cost to individuals; that is, tuition fees and living expenses, and
- the cost to universities to make more places available.

The abolition of fees and the introduction of a means-tested allowance (the Tertiary Education Assistance Allowance, TEAS) in 1974 were directed at the first hurdle, particularly for people from low SES backgrounds. The second, the availability of places, was addressed when the Australian Government assumed full financial responsibility from the states for Australian higher education, and increased the sector’s funding by almost 176 percent in its first two budgets (Marginson 1997).

However, by the 1980s, it was clear that while these new financial arrangements in higher education had delivered better outcomes for many people from disadvantaged groups – including I suspect many of you here – people from low socioeconomic backgrounds continued to be under-represented as a group in higher education (Anderson et al. 1980). Then, as now, the proportion of university students from low SES backgrounds was well below their representation in the population as a whole.
These outcomes for disadvantaged groups from the Whitlam initiatives served to underscore an equity principle I mentioned earlier; that is: **equity in education requires funding, although funding is not all that equity in education requires.**

During the mid to late 1980s, “the need for a better educated and more highly skilled population” (Dawkins 1988: 4) was again on the agenda. A new Australian government chose to respond with a more efficient method of supplying university places. Through a series of institutional mergers and amalgamations it upgraded Colleges of Advanced Education (CAEs) to university status and created a Unified National System of around 37 universities with a significant net gain in university places.

In order to defray the cost of funding these increased places, the government also introduced a user-pays system of tuition fees (the Higher Education Contribution Scheme or HECS) collected through the taxation system and able to be deferred until a student earned a threshold income level. The introduction of HECS also served to remove the ‘middle-class welfare’ associated with free university tuition, purportedly without being a deterrent to entry for the poor because of the deferred nature of HECS.

In light of these events, it is interesting to see the structural adjustments mooted at the present moment. While not all are the subject of explicit policy, there are those in the higher education sector who would like to see greater differentiation than the current Unified National System implies. Research-intensive universities fed by teaching-only or undergraduate universities or TAFEs, for example. And the VET sector has its own versions of these re-arrangements, with some now offering degrees, others wanting to become universities or institutions somewhere between a TAFE and a university, and HECS-style arrangements for Diploma and Advanced Diploma students in Victorian TAFEs and now proposed for South Australians as well. All of these have potential equity implications.

Back in the late 1980s, equity was again justified in economic and human capital terms and largely in the absence of social policy justifications. The suturing together of these two agendas – equity and economics – was clearly expressed in the Government’s 1988 White Paper on Higher Education, which stated that:

> The larger and more diverse is the pool from which we draw our skilled workforce, the greater is our capacity to take advantage of opportunities as they emerge. The current barriers to the participation of financially and other disadvantaged groups limit our capacity to develop the highest skilled workforce possible and are a source of economic inefficiency. (Dawkins 1988: 7)

This way of locating equity within economic policy had been seen before. However, the difference from the higher education initiatives of the Whitlam years was the Government’s explicit policy statement on equity, known as **A Fair Chance for All** (1990). Reminiscent of the Disadvantaged Schools Program, **A Fair Chance for All** reassigned responsibility for equity (particularly for those from under-represented groups) to universities themselves. Specifically, it required universities to:

- develop strategic plans and targets to achieve equity (with separate Indigenous education strategies and targets); and
- report on progress towards these as part of their annual educational profile submissions to government.
This raises a ninth equity principle or observation: *equity in education has teeth when education institutions are held accountable for their equity strategies and achievements.*

The ability of the sector to meet these requirements was enhanced by the development of a set of equity indicators that could be used by an institution to measure its performance against its own targets and those of the sector as a whole (Martin 1994). Lin Martin, who developed these measures, also established for the first time a set of system-wide definitions of equity groups that were initially named in the Government’s 1990 policy statement (1990).

My tenth and final observation, then, is this: *equity definitions help to provide direction for policy and practice and to monitor progress towards achievement, although this is only as good as the definition.*

For example, the recent Bradley *Review of Australian Higher Education* (2008) clearly demonstrates that equity, defined in terms of proportional representation, has not been a strong suit of higher education over the last twenty years, particularly with regard to people from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, Indigenous people and those from regional and rural areas.

The strength of this data is its ability to highlight the under-representation of disadvantaged groups and support advocacy for change. The weakness is the danger of reducing equity to ‘bums on seats’ and ignoring the other important observations and principles indentified in the histories of schooling and of higher education.

**Conclusion**

These ten observations and principles for equity policy and practice in education will speak to some groups more than others. They provide insight, guidance and words of caution for governments, institutions and others engaged in developing and enacting equity policy in education. And perhaps they provide a starting point for developing equity policy specifically for Australian VET.

Has equity’s time come for VET? It seems to me that that depends in part on whether governments and VET institutions and organizations are able to recognize and understand VET’s particular equity problems. At the moment, there are good reasons to believe that no problem exists. Compared with higher education, VET is more open and accessible, warm and friendly. And compared with schooling, it is more caring and supportive of students and its adult environment more appealing. It is easy to think that VET is more welcoming of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Certainly the over-representation of these students in VET would support this. Even beyond the numbers, there are reasons to believe that these are not empty claims.

However, there do seem to be some equity issues in VET requiring attention. While I don’t claim to know what all of these are, there are five that stand out in my mind. For example:

- While VET is often regarded as a valuable and meaningful way in which to engage students and encourage them to continue their education, particularly in the development of skills for the workplace, schools and their teachers have been known to encourage students towards VET when they don’t know what else to do with them or they can’t do anything else with
them. This is not the fault of VET, just how others sometimes position it. It is also in the context of state and territory jurisdictions raising the age at which students can legally leave the education system and the federal government requiring Australian young people to be either earning or learning in order to receive financial support. That is, young people have to be somewhere and many who have nowhere else to be, find themselves in VET. That said, Australia has one of the highest rates of 15-19 year old non-participation in education or employment of any OECD nation.

- Secondly, equity groups, predominantly those from low SES backgrounds and Indigenous people, are over-represented in VET and specifically at its lower end, which is characterized by ‘student churn’: repeated enrolment in Certificates 1 and 2;
- And the voice of VET students is marginalized in the VET curriculum, which is primarily industry driven (see NVEAC discussion paper and Wheelehan 2007, 2009);
- Further, the linking of VET level qualifications with employment and pay levels discourages employers from encouraging their employees to upgrade their skills and qualifications;
- And most tellingly, equity groups are under-represented at the upper end of VET (Diploma and Advanced Diploma but also Certificate 4), providing them with less possibility of achieving high-level outcomes, such as high levels of employment and/or progress to higher education.

These are significant problems and not easily resolved. They will require us to deal with difference differently. And while they still have their own equity problems, the histories of schooling and of higher education do provide us with understandings that could inform how dealing differently with difference might be achieved in the VET context. The difference, I think, is that for the most part those involved with schooling and higher education now understand how they themselves are implicated in the reproduction of social and economic inequalities, even if they are unsure about what to do about it or whether they want to.

In the current moment, the Australian Government’s participation targets for low SES students in higher education and its National Partnerships on low SES participation in schools, are focusing the collective minds in these sectors on equity. Something of this order and magnitude is now required in VET, particularly if we are to address VET’s internal social stratification.

I look forward to opportunities to discuss these observations and principles with you further and to listen to your views on what they might mean in the context of VET.

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Appendix A: Observations and principles for equity policy and practice in education

1. If equity is to have traction in education, it must connect with broader social and economic agendas.
2. When equity in education is justified purely in economic or human capital terms and its social justifications are neglected, its chances of success are diminished.
3. Equitable education outcomes for all groups in society require education systems to favour the disfavoured.
4. Equity strategy can be used by the advantaged to re-assert their advantage.
5. Equity in education requires funding, although funding is not all that equity in education requires.
6. To advance equity, education institutions need to be knowledgeable about and form meaningful relations with their communities.
7. Equity in education is not simply about access; it is also concerned with the nature of the education that students receive.
8. Equity benefits flow to individuals when the education institution is the primary site for action, not the individual or his/her community.
9. Equity in education has teeth when education institutions are held accountable for their equity strategies and achievements.
10. Equity definitions help to provide direction for policy and practice and to monitor progress towards achievement, although this is only as good as the definition.