Social justice and equity issues in the higher education context

Literature analysis and synthesis: Development of a set of social justice principles

Professor Karen Nelson
Tracy Creagh
Adjunct Professor John Clarke
Queensland University of Technology

Good practice for safeguarding student learning engagement in higher education institutions
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Table of Contents

1. Introduction ........................................................................................................................................... 3
2. The meaning of ‘social justice’ ................................................................................................................ 3
   2.1 Concepts of social justice .................................................................................................................. 4
   2.2 Perspectives on social justice ........................................................................................................... 4
3. Social justice in education ....................................................................................................................... 5
   3.1 Social justice and the higher education context ............................................................................... 6
   3.2 Philosophical stance adopted for the Project ..................................................................................... 8
4. Enacting social justice within higher education .................................................................................... 8
   4.1 Social inclusion and widening participation ...................................................................................... 8
   4.2 Participation in Australia’s Higher Education sector ....................................................................... 9
5. A focus on student engagement ............................................................................................................... 11
   5.1 Student Engagement ....................................................................................................................... 11
   5.2 Monitoring student learning engagement ......................................................................................... 13
6. Social justice principles for higher education ....................................................................................... 14
   6.1 Developing a set of social justice principles .................................................................................... 15
   6.2 Self-determination ........................................................................................................................... 15
   6.3 Rights ............................................................................................................................................... 16
   6.4 Access ............................................................................................................................................. 16
   6.5 Equity ............................................................................................................................................. 16
   6.6 Participation .................................................................................................................................... 17
   6.7 A set of social justice principles for safeguarding MSLE ................................................................. 17
7. Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................... 21
References ................................................................................................................................................. 22
1. Introduction

This document has been developed purposely to inform the Australian Office for Learning and Teaching1 (OLT) project Good practice for safeguarding student learning engagement in higher education institutions. The goal of the project is to develop a set of principles, guidelines and resources, based on the principles of social justice, to safeguard programs and practices designed to monitor student learning engagement. To achieve the project’s aim, this review draws on relevant literature from three key domains: social justice, contemporary higher education and the notion of student engagement.

In light of government targets for wider participation and social inclusion in higher education many institutions, including the eight universities who participated in this project, have initiated programs that aim to identify students who may be at-risk of disengaging from their studies. Students identified by these programs are then contacted in a timely way and offered advice and support (early intervention) to assist them re-engage and progress with their program of study. In this project these initiatives are referred to collectively as programs that monitor student learning engagement (MSLE).

The concern of this project is that MSLE initiatives must be designed and enacted appropriately and ethically; and in particular that they are consistent with the philosophical underpinnings and traditions of social justice. In this way the outcomes for students who are identified through the program’s activities will be safeguarded. This alignment is essential to ensure that MSLE programs mitigate against the impediments to successful participation that exist because of previous unequitable access to social, financial, political and cultural resources. Thus MSLE that are consistent with notions of social justice will also safeguard activities designed to enhance students’ participation and engagement.

In this sense, the project is timely and the literature summarised here provides a starting point for understanding the philosophical underpinnings and issues associated with social inclusion in higher education. The review then serves as a foundation for the formulation of a set of social justice principles to guide institutional MSLE policy and programs.

The review commences with an examination of the concepts and perspectives of social justice and then specifically their application in contemporary education contexts. The issues associated with participation in higher education, otherwise known as social inclusion or widening participation are then canvassed followed by a discussion of the notion of student engagement. The review then proposes a suite of instructive themes on which the social justice principles are based. Finally, this document presents a set of social justice principles interpreted specifically for this project based on the literature reviewed.

2. The meaning of ‘social justice’

Sections 2 and 3 focus on the first of the domains of literature and introduce the concept of and perspectives on social justice, its application within education, and set the scene for a discussion about the interpretations of social justice within the higher education sector which follows.

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1 The project Good practice for safeguarding student learning engagement in higher education institutions commenced in 2010 as a Competitive Grant with funding provided by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council. The research is now overseen by the Office for Learning and Teaching within the Australian Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education.
2.1 Concepts of social justice

The notions of social justice stem from ancient Greek and Roman times; and in particular from the period which commenced with the development of Greek classical thought and ended with the demise of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century BC. During this thousand year period the notions of justice and equality were used to organise political and social life (Lane, 2011). According to Theophanous (1994), the modern concept of social justice stems primarily from the Greek theories of justice which were taken up by two prominent Enlightenment philosophers Kant and Rousseau. Whereas for Evans, (1996) social justice arises from the reign of the peasant-born sixth century Roman Emperor Justin and his nephew Justinian who succeeded him (Evans, 1996). However, for both schools of thought “justice was about treating equals equally and only the equals as full citizens” (Lane, 2011). Nevertheless these equal citizens were usually from the elite classes and generally also wealthy. Unsurprisingly given these roots a single definition of social justice is not apparent however, the literature suggests that contemporary notions of social justice coexist with expressions of human rights, fairness and equality (Bates, 2007; Sturman, 1997). Sturman notes that theorising about social justice is reflected in recent debates about equity and equality adding, “the concept of ‘social justice’ ... is not clearly defined (in fact, the term is often used as a synonym for ‘equal’ opportunities or ‘equity’)” (p. 1). Thus the notion of equity often replaces politically motivated conceptions of equality and social justice reframed in this way is deemed as necessary for democratic life (Theophanous 1994).

More recently, Gale draws again on Justinian who described social justice as “the constant and perpetual will to render to everyone their due” (Isaacs, 1996, as cited in Gale, 2000, p. 260), while Singh (2011) defines the pursuit of social justice as being the fair distribution of material and non material resources that are “beneficial and valued” (p. 482).

2.2 Perspectives on social justice

In A Theory of Justice, (first published in 1971 and revised in 1999), John Rawls attempted to reconcile freedom and equality in a principled way and described ways of achieving just social structures, stressing that civil arrangements needed to be in place to support these structures. Underpinning Rawls’ theory of justice is the concept of “justice as fairness” and Rawls offers two principles of justice: (1) the “Liberty Principle” where each person should have equal right to an extensive system of equal basic liberties; and (2) the “Equality Principle” where in a departure from classical Roman and Greek conceptions, social and economic inequalities would be rearranged so that they are to the greatest benefit for the least advantaged (1999, p. 53). Thus for Rawls the equality principle requires the rearrangement of social and economic goods to be guided by considerations of opportunity and by the differences that arise from individual circumstances.

Miller (1999) draws extensively on the work of Rawls and provides an overview of the empirical research and popular conceptions of justice – focusing specifically on the scope of social justice. In his interpretation of Rawls’, Miller contends that society will attain a culture of social justice when both individuals and institutions adhere to the principles of social justice. After Rawls, Miller interprets social justice from the standpoint of distributive justice. The main constituents of distributive justice are three principles or elements: desert, need, and equality:

- Desert is a claim that one has earned reward based on performance.
- Need is a claim that one is lacking basic necessities and is being harmed or is in danger of being harmed.
Equality refers to the social ideal that society regards and treats its citizens as equals, and that benefits such as certain rights should be distributed equally.

Other theorists have challenged the distributive perspective of social justice, because it essentially focuses on the ways in which goods and services are shared among members of society, with a specific focus on the distribution of material goods. For example, Iris Young (1990) argued that this interpretation of social justice does not attend to the institutional context of social structures that may predetermine access to or the distribution of resources. Lummis (1996, as cited in Gale, 2000) considers that a reformist approach to social justice is required and Gale (2000) contents that this perspective includes “acting” as well as “making” just social structures. Gale labels this approach as a recognitive perspective on social justice and this perspective is discussed further in Section 3. Nancy Fraser (1995) explored the relationship between redistribution of material resources and recognition of social determinants and found that there is a need to consider both approaches to achieve social justice.

In a more radical perspective on social justice, Amartya Sen’s (2009) recent critique of The Idea of Justice (Rawls, 1999) proposes that social justice is an ongoing activity that cannot be evaluated in terms of whether it has been achieved, but in terms of how it is understood in context. Sen’s view emphasises the comparative merits of different societies and at the core of his thesis is respect for reasoned differences and understanding what a just society really is. Sen’s view reflects Gale’s (2000) position that social justice should value a positive regard for group differences and include democratic processes based on the participation of various social groups.

3. Social justice in education

The literature on social justice and education exists in a complex space that focuses on the development of society and the role of education in creating just social structures. McInerney (2004) highlighted three forms of injustice that manifest within educational contexts: socioeconomic disadvantage, racism, and cultural oppression. In her summary of the social justice and education literature, McInerney (2004) specifically refers to the work of Raewyn Connell (1993), who investigated the concept of dominant cultural hegemony. Connell advocated for curricular justice and made a case for curriculum reform based on a redistributive approach to social justice. Similarly Sturman’s (1997) examination of social justice in education – specifically in the Australian secondary education context – is reflective of an active and philosophical orientation of social justice. In concluding that Australian public education policy is fundamentally based on the principles of distributive justice and that these principles are applied in ways that are intended to equalise, Sturman found that three aspects of social justice are required to achieve equity for the most disadvantaged: (1) a distributive component – equipping students so that they receive equality of opportunity both within current and post-education; (2) curricular justice – ensuring that curriculum design and enactment attends to the principles of social justice; and (3) a non-material component – equipping students with non-material goods and skills “such as decision making” (p. 118).

Reflecting these views McInerney found that whole of school reform, reviews of curriculum and pedagogy, and responses to government policies were the most prevalent social justice strategies in the education-based social justice literature. Bates (2007) also focused on the primary and secondary systems and found there an emphasis on redistributive and on recognitive approaches to social justice in educational administration.
In terms of both purpose and outcomes, educational institutions are directly involved in reflecting as well as shaping the social, cultural and economic activities of society. Singh (2011) summarises this complexity, explicitly for the context of higher education:

The social justice goal of constructing societies which are more inclusive, fair and democratically enabling remains a central normative and policy challenge, both in relation to the contribution of higher education to societal progress as well as within higher education itself (pp. 491-492)

Usefully, Gale (2000) and Gale and Densmore (2000) explored social justice in education contexts and categorised approaches to social justice as: distributive (fairness achieved through the redistribution of basic resources); retributive (fairness achieved through competition for social goods and materials; and recognitive (fairness achieved through positive recognition of the differences between cultural groups). Table 1 provides a summary of these perspectives and differentiates distributive and retributive from recognitive justice by arguing that a recognitive perspective on social justice not only includes positive considerations of social difference but also considers the centrality of socially democratic processes in working towards the attainment of just societies. In essence, a recognitive perspective on social justice emphasises processes and action to achieve socially just structures over the existing state and form of those structures.

Table 1: The distributive, retributive and recognitive perspectives on social justice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perspectives of Justice</th>
<th>The will</th>
<th>To render</th>
<th>To everyone</th>
<th>Their due</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What should social justice desire? Whose desire?</td>
<td>How should social justice be achieved?</td>
<td>Who should social justice benefit?</td>
<td>What should social justice deliver?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distributive</td>
<td>Freedom, social cooperation and compensation. Individuals/groups represented by govt/authorities</td>
<td>Proportional distribution</td>
<td>Disadvantaged individuals groups</td>
<td>Basic material &amp; social goods /opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retributive</td>
<td>Liberty, protection of rights, punishments for infringements. Individuals in free market.</td>
<td>Open competitive and govt protection of life and property</td>
<td>Individuals who contribute to society</td>
<td>Material &amp; social goods /opportunities commensurate with talent and effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognitive</td>
<td>Means for all to exercise capability and determine their actions. All people within and among social groups</td>
<td>Democratic processes that include / generalize from the interests of the least advantaged</td>
<td>All people differently experienced within and among social groups</td>
<td>Positive self-identity. Self development; self determination.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Adapted from Gale (2000 p. 268)

3.1 Social justice and the higher education context

As can be seen from the literature that appears in the previous section, various understandings of social justice exist in the context of education. Practically, the term social inclusion is used when referring to initiatives aimed at creating a socially just educational system. O’Connor and Moodie (2008) discussed the concept of social inclusion to mean the inclusion of an individual, group or particular community in society in general and in higher education in particular. Armstrong and Spandagou (2009) note that the use of the term social inclusion has changed from a narrow meaning applied to specific groups of students, for example students...
with disabilities, to a broader interpretation which is applied to the provision of higher education to diverse groups of students.

As academics and policymakers engage with concepts such as special education, globalisation, education for all and inclusion other terms such as social justice, equity, equal opportunity, human rights and diversity in education, citizenship and social inclusion have crept into the populist international vocabulary as well as the language of academia. (p. 2)

Gewirtz (1998, 2006) and North (2006), examine the work of Young (1990), and note that a distributive view of social justice may be well be inadequate in terms of achieving social inclusion in education. A distributive approach to social justice overlooks the role that the processes and social structures of educational institutions play as mechanisms in determining the inequitable distribution of resources. Singh (2011) provides a response to this conflict by considering social justice in terms of higher education’s socio-economic role in establishing knowledge societies in a globalising world. She suggests that access and inclusion strategies need to be structured within a discussion about the role of knowledge societies, noting: “Social justice has kinships and associations with notions of human and socio-economic rights, social inclusion, equity, and access to resources and capabilities for human wellbeing” (p. 482).

More broadly still, Patton, Shahjahan, and Osei-Kofi (2010) contend that social justice in higher education “requires a multi-faceted, holistic, and contextual approach to understanding the concept of social justice in a broader sense” (p. 269) and in addition,

... in light of the questions we raise, what we are certain of is that higher education must deliberately move toward advancing a social justice agenda comprised of more theoretical scholarship and data driven research, grounded in social justice that can inform policies, practices, and decisions that influence postsecondary institutions. (p. 276)

Gale and Tranter (2011) provide a comprehensive historical analysis of policy and regulatory initiatives aimed at achieving social justice in the Australian higher education context by analysing changes in the environment from World War Two through to the 2008 Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008). Their review is framed by Gale’s (2000) and Gale and Densmore’s (2000) previous categorisation of social justice perspectives being “distributive, retributive and recognitive” (p. 29). Gale and Tranter note that the periods of expansion in the Australian higher education system have attended to the “notions of social justice” and have resulted in new opportunities (p. 41) and access to higher education. These authors also point out that during periods of consolidation in the provision of higher education, retributive notions of social justice tend to become more apparent and they caution that from this perspective, the inclusion of larger numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds may be perceived as destabilising the benefits of higher education, stating “... the inclusion of more people from disadvantaged backgrounds may be seen to undermine the talent and hard work of ‘deserving individuals’ and traditional notions of merit and standards” (p. 42). Reflecting Gale’s (2009) notion of a truly inclusive approach to higher education, Gale and Tranter (2011) conclude that higher education policy and practice should embrace a recognitive perspective on social justice so that public policy initiatives aimed at widening participation and social inclusion take into consideration systemic processes leading to disadvantage are not constructed in terms of the comparative merit of various groups.
3.2 Philosophical stance adopted for the Project

The material reviewed so far shows that contemporary discussions of social justice focus on three perspectives (distributive, retributive and recognitive) and these three views have been articulated for education systems by Gale (see Gale, 2000; Gale & Densmore, 2000; Gale & Tranter, 2011).

In the specific context of the project—Good practice for safeguarding student learning engagement in higher education institutions—a recognitive approach to social justice has been adopted for developing the Social Justice Framework and the Good Practice Guide. A recognitive social justice stance suggests that everyone is able to participate and contribute within a democratic society. A recognitive perspective includes a positive consideration for social difference and also focuses on the centrality of socially democratic processes in working towards its attainment. In essence, a recognitive perspective on social justice emphasises process and action to change underlying structures over the existing state and form of those mechanisms. In this context, the Social Justice Framework that arises from this work is designed to challenge thinking about dominant cultures and ways of knowing in higher education institutions. Central to the social justice framework is a set of principles to guide and inform the design and enactment of MSLE initiatives so that existing relationships based on power, identity, assumed rights and needs are not privileged over socially just and democratic processes.

Therefore, from a recognitive position the intent of the social justice principles are to:
- guide monitoring student learning engagement initiatives and innovations;
- inform students and staff in the areas of policy, procedure and communication;
- foster a sense of connection and partnership between academic and professional areas;
- realise or instantiate programs and innovations;
- offer a mechanism for reconciling value conflicts; and finally,
- provide filters by which programs and processes can be evaluated.

4. Enacting social justice within higher education

The higher education sector in Australia and elsewhere has responded to public policy-driven social, political and economic imperatives to both increase participation in and broaden access to post secondary education. This section focuses on the second domain of literature the manifestation of social justice within higher education context. Strategies fall into two general categories, social inclusion and widening participation.

4.1 Social inclusion and widening participation

Social inclusion strategies are targeted at the inclusion of students from under-represented social or cultural groups while widening participation strategies aim to increase the participation of non-school leavers in higher education with the aim of increasing the proportion of people in the population who have post-secondary qualifications. Goastellec (2008) assesses participation in higher education using an historical analysis of the evolution of greater access to higher education and outlines a series of international case studies that exemplify the “equity principle” (p. 71) in terms of how access to higher education is...
organised. Adopting a recognitive stance Marginson (2011) discusses social inclusion as a way “to progress fairness” (p. 24) and finds that social inclusion is advanced by the broadening of access of under-represented groups.

David (2010) provides a general definition of widening participation which “... is taken to mean extending and enhancing access to and experience of HE, and achievement within HE, of people from so-called under represented and diverse social backgrounds, families, groups and communities ...”(p.15). Widening participation efforts also account for the emergence of two trends. Firstly that the new norms around access have led to higher education now being described as moving from selective (elite) to mass and now universal (James, 2008; Marginson, 2011; Marginson & van der Wende 2007). While secondly, globalisation has made education more accountable to public scrutiny, international evaluation and comparisons. Goastellec (2008) notes “we are witnessing a permanent reinvention of tools aimed at widening access or at making [education] more fair” (p. 82).

Internationally, the issue of widening participation has mirrored policy developments determined by broad political and democratic movements for social or human rights (David, 2010; Vignoles, 2009). The United Kingdom’s commitment to widening participation is exemplified in specific funding activities undertaken by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (2011) and the Higher Education Academy (2011). More recently, some concern has been expressed that participation may decrease with the introduction of a fee-based system (Yorke in Nelson, Clarke & Kift, 2011), although this is not an agreed concern (Thomas in Nelson, Clarke & Kift, 2012) and the impact of these changes has yet to be analysed. In the United States of America widening participation initiatives are complicated by the use of “ethno-racial dimensions” as the main categories used to measure participation (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007, p. 139). In contrast, the approach adopted in Aotearoa (New Zealand) has been substantial reform of the entire tertiary sector (including higher education) to align with the government’s social and economic agenda (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2006, pp. 15-16). This reform has been specifically focused on increasing participation in programs at bachelor levels and more recently in particular has focused on the participation of Māori and Pacific Island students and students with disabilities, as well as on the participation of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (pp. 72-73).

Australia’s approach to widening participation has been documented in Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009b) and is focused on a social inclusion agenda. In this sense, social inclusion in higher education in Australian manifests as public policy for widening participation linked to reward and performance-based funding.

4.2 Participation in Australia’s Higher Education sector

Public policy changes aimed at promoting participation in higher education have been occurring in Australia since the mid 1960s. These have incorporated a range of measures including merit-based scholarships, the policy reforms of the Whitlam government—which included the establishment of the National Student Assistance Scheme and the Federal government assuming complete control of funding for higher education (Meek, 1991). In the 1990s, the massification of the sector was driven by the Dawkins reforms announced in Higher education: A policy statement, known as the Dawkin’s White Paper (Department of Employment, Education and Training [DEET], 1988). These changes have moved the provision and context of higher education in Australia from selective to mass participation.
Foundational policy work to increase the participation of students from equity groups in Australian higher education was undertaken through a review of the sector in 1990 and reported in the discussion paper *A fair chance for all* (DEET, 1990). This report placed responsibility for improving student equity in higher education with the institutions themselves. Critically, this paper identified six equity groups as requiring particular attention: people from low SES backgrounds; people in rural or isolated areas; people with disabilities; Indigenous people; women in non-traditional areas of study and; people from non-English speaking backgrounds. For Gale (2010), this report was an inflexion point and marker of significant change of social justice practices in higher education because it 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. (p. 8)

By 1996, there had been an improvement in participation for most of these designated groups except for the low SES and rural and isolated groups (National Board of Employment, Education and Training Higher Education Council, 1996). In 2003, the Australian Government announced further support for several equity groups in learning scholarships, an increase in funding for the Higher Education Equity Programme and a reform package to increase participation and outcomes for both Indigenous students and staff in higher education (Nelson, B., 2003). The under-representation of particular groups was further addressed in 2008 in the *Review of Australian higher education* (Bradley et al., 2008) which found that increased participation in higher education had not resulted in increased social equity. Denise Bradley and her colleagues reported that three groups were still under-represented in higher education: students from low SES backgrounds, students from regional and remote areas and Indigenous students. In response, the Rudd/Gillard Government set out participation targets, specifically a social inclusion target that the participation of students from low SES backgrounds should increase from approximately 15% to 20% by 2020 and continued the support for wider participation in that the target proportion of the population aged 25-34 with at least an undergraduate degree would rise from approximately 33% to 40% by 2025 (DEEWR, 2009a).

Reflecting this history, Silver (2010) believes that Australia has a distinct approach to social inclusion which can be understood in terms of having a vision for “membership, belonging and social integration” (p. 184). She argues that in a mass globalised world, higher education is positioned to assist individuals, groups and communities to engage at a more informed level. However, Gale and Tranter (2011) caution that “widening participation in higher education and ‘social inclusion’ more generally have only been considered possible during periods of expansion” (p. 42). A thorough analysis of the impact of these recent wider participation on social inclusion targets on the participation and attainment of the target groups has not yet been possible.

Nevertheless, a range of structural mechanisms exist to support the achievement of the Government’s goals. Gale and Tranter (2011) note the establishment of the Ministry of Social Inclusion within DEEWR. The Ministry’s Australian Social Inclusion Board (ASIB) has adopted two principles to guide their agenda: Principles of Aspiration (what is required) and Principles

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2 The higher education portfolio moved from DEEWR to the federal Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education (DIISTRE or Innovation) in 2011.
of Approach (how social inclusion can be achieved) (ASIB, 2010). Sharma (2008) focuses on the massification of higher education and the issues of access and equity, and notes the establishment of the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) and as a means to ensure academic quality in a mass higher education system. More recent and in a related series developments there is a focus on implementing the Australian Qualifications Framework (2012), the establishment of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) and the release of the TEQSA Threshold Standards.

However, the key enabling mechanism underlying the 2009 participation and inclusion strategies was the introduction of the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) which provides funding for institutions to implement strategies aimed at increasing the access and retention of students from low SES backgrounds (DEEWR, 2010a). Gale and Tranter (2011) provided an early review of this initiative and described institutional programs and identified alternative access pathways that have arisen since its inception.

Invariably, government funding of these types of activities involves measures of quality and the application of performance indicators (Yorke & Longden, 2004). However, measures of participation, particularly of students who are members of equity groups, is important as it provides a way to monitor change in the sector (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2010). Clancy and Goastellec (2007) warn against attempts to make comparisons between countries because of the differences in the criteria for participation and varying definitions of what constitutes higher education. Within Australia there has been considerable debate about how to measure and track the access and participation of target groups. James (2007) considers that equity is one of the three measures of the effectiveness (alongside quality and efficiency) of higher education. However, recently Gale and Tranter (2011) caution that the shift from an “elite to mass to near universal higher education ...” (p. 30) does not necessarily imply equality in opportunity for participation. Evaluation of the effectiveness of strategies is complicated by a reasonably ‘blunt’ identification of low SES using residential post-codes or on a slightly more granular level using census data collection area codes. Further complicating impact evaluation is a reluctance to single out target group students for special attention once they enter institutions, with many institutions favouring universal strategies and good practice.

5. A focus on student engagement

Public policy linked to higher education funding and changes to the higher education regulatory environment have been accompanied by concomitant discussions about the notions of student engagement in higher education. This section discusses the third domain of literature of relevance to this project, student engagement and institutional initiatives designed to monitor and support student engagement.

5.1 Student Engagement

Student engagement is a broad construct widely understood to encompass both academic and non-academic activities. Further, student engagement (however idiosyncratically defined) is generally accepted as being a significant contributor to student attainment and retention (Krause & Coates, 2008; Kuh, 2009; Tinto, 2010).

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2 AUQA operations have now transferred to the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA)
For George Kuh, the founder of North America’s National Survey of Student Engagement, the “engagement premise” is straightforward and easily understood:

The more students study a subject, the more they learn about it. Likewise, the more students practice and get feedback on their writing, analyzing, or problem solving, the more adept they become. The very act of being engaged also adds to the foundation of skills and dispositions that is essential to live a productive, satisfying life after college. That is, students who are involved in educationally productive activities in college are developing habits of the mind and heart that enlarge their capacity for continuous learning and personal development. (Kuh, 2003, cited in Trowler, 2010, p. 36)

In the Australasian context, Hamish Coates has written extensively on engagement in the context of his affiliation with the Australian Survey of Student Engagement (Australian Council for Educational Research [ACER], 2011a) and through regular annual Research Briefing publications. He (Coates, 2007) describes engagement as “a broad construct intended to encompass salient academic as well as certain non-academic aspects of the student experience” (p. 122). Krause and Coates (2008) explain the importance of measuring the degree to which students engage with their studies and their institutional environment; and contend that higher levels of engagement appear to lead to higher-quality learning.

The commitment of institutions to fostering student engagement is also seen to be a critical factor in retention. Tinto (2010) maintains that institutions should take responsibility for and encourage student engagement, while, in a similar but more specific vein, Nelson, Kift and Clarke (2008) argue that universities need to instigate, sustain and promote students personal, social and academic engagement, particularly for those students who face the greatest challenges in transition. Similarly, Trowler’s (2010) recent literature review on student engagement identifies and defines engagement as being concerned with

the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance, and reputation of the institution. (p. 3)

Critically, and in the context of this project, Kuh defines engagement as “the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities” (Kuh, 2001, 2003, 2009a, cited in Trowler, 2010, p. 7).

Tinto (2008), and earlier still Kift and Nelson, K. (2005), posit that institutional activities designed to engage students should be located within the curriculum and Gale’s (2009) notion of a Southern Theory of higher education requires the embodiment of the students’ social and cultural knowledges within the curriculum.

It is about how we structure the student learning experience in ways that open it up and make it possible for students to contribute from who they are and what they know. It is about an enriched learning experience for all students. (p. 12)

Nelson, Smith and Clarke (2011) and Nelson, Kift and Clarke (2012) argue that successful engagement, particularly in the critical first year of university experience, requires an inclusive and intentional approach to first year curriculum design and enactment. They reiterate the Nelson et al. (2008) contention of the importance of an holistic (an integrated personal, social and academic) approach to engagement.
Trowler (2010) returns to the importance of student engagement in the context of equality and social justice and cites the work of Harper and Quaye (2009) who note that

... we are persuaded by a large volume of empirical evidence that confirms that strategizing ways to increase the engagement of various student populations, especially those for whom engagement is known to be problematic, is a worthwhile endeavour. The gains and outcomes are too robust to leave to chance, and social justice is unlikely to ensue if some students come to enjoy the beneficial by-products of engagement but others do not. (p. 24)

Therefore, there seems to be general agreement in the literature that engagement is achieved through a combination of students’ efforts and institutional activities and that all students, irrespective of their backgrounds, should be able to participate in activities designed to promote engagement and the institution has an active role to play in creating academic structures in which engagement is possible.

Zepke and Leach (2005) go further and suggest that rather than expecting students to fit into the institutional culture, that the institutions should adapt their culture to promote the engagement of all the students. They add that

central to the emerging discourse is the idea that students should maintain their identity in their culture of origin ... Content, teaching methods and assessment, for example, should reflect the diversity of people enrolled in the course. This requires significant adaptation by institutional cultures ... The foreshadowed outcome of this institutional change is better student retention, persistence and achievement. (p. 54)

Given that the concept of student engagement is well accepted as important and critical to student achievement and retention, many international and Australasian universities have introduced a variety of specific initiatives aimed at monitoring and intervening with students who are at risk of disengaging.4

In the context of this project, which seeks to identify an appropriate ethical framework to guide these MSLE initiatives, good practice in retention initiatives has been described by Coley and Coley (2010) as institutions that “have determined a clear methodology to define and identify ‘at-risk’ students, to reach out to students with appropriate resources and support, and to track and monitor student engagement” (p. 6).

The following section (5.2) details specific programs and activities that are designed to monitor student learning engagement.

5.2 Monitoring student learning engagement

Monitoring student learning engagement involves the combination and use of existing corporate data and a range of descriptive and academic indicators (such as attendance, assessment submission details and participation in face-to-face and online activities) to make supportive interventions with students who appear to be at-risk of disengaging. Arguably the most well-known international intervention program is Purdue University’s Signals Project.

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4 In this specific project, Good practice for safeguarding student learning engagement in higher education institutions, we refer to these initiatives as monitoring student learning engagement (MSLE). Reports of these initiatives commonly refer to them as early intervention strategies or programs and these terms are used interchangeably in this review.
Within Australasia, Auckland University of Technology (Australian Universities Quality Agency, 2007), the University of New England (Office for Learning and Teaching, 2011) and Queensland University of Technology (Office for Learning and Teaching, 2012) have been recognised for their MSLE initiatives. The range of early intervention strategies appearing in the first year experience literature and range from isolated case studies (e.g. Johnston, Quinn, Aziz & Kava, 2010; Potter & Parkinson, 2010) to institution-wide programs (e.g. Carlson & Holland, 2009; Nelson, Quinn, Marrington & Clarke, 2010, Wilson & Lizzio, 2008) are indicative of recent developments in this area.

The Signals Project at Purdue University in the United States of America operates as an early warning of potential student attrition and actively demonstrates the potential of applying academic analytics by providing “near real-time status updates of performance and effort in a course ... [providing] the student with detailed, positive steps to take in averting trouble” (Arnold, 2010, para. 5). The Student Success Program (SSP) at the Queensland University of Technology in Australia utilises a custom-built Contact Management System (CMS) to retrieve data available within other student systems and to import data from external sources. In the SSP,

... proactive highly individualised contact is attempted with all students identified as being at-risk of disengaging. A managed team of discipline-experienced and trained later year students employed as Student Success Advisors (SSAs) makes the outbound contact by telephone. ... When at-risk students require specialist support, the advisors refer them on (e.g. to library staff) or in some cases, manage the referral process with the student’s permission (e.g. to a Counsellor). (Nelson, Quinn, et al., 2011, p. 86)

Early evidence of the impact of the SSP has been documented (Nelson, Duncan & Clarke, 2009) and Nelson, Quinn, et al. (2011) have provided qualitative and quantitative data to suggest that the impact of the SSP interventions on student persistence has been sustained and has positively influenced student retention at that institution (p. 83). Nevertheless, programs such as SSP and Signals, while actively monitoring student learning engagement, need to be mindful of the diverse student cohort and not make assumptions about the conditions that may lead to a student indicating as at-risk. However, we contend (Nelson, K., 2010), that MSLE activities must therefore be founded on a philosophy of social justice and equity, particularly given the pressures on the sector for wider participation and improved retention of students from social groups currently under-represented in the higher education sector. We argue that “to be consistent with these national imperatives requires constructive alignment between on the one hand policy and practice aimed at widening participation and on the other, efforts aimed at increasing the retention of these same students” (p. 4).

6. Social justice principles for higher education

As discussed earlier in this review, the aspiration to achieve social justice in higher education policy is exemplified by programs aimed at social inclusion and widening participation. These programs have been accompanied by a focus on student engagement and on the expansion of activities aimed at measuring and monitoring students learning engagement. The following section considers criteria for quality principles and then briefly revisits the themes which emerged from the social justice literature to elicit a set of principles that are readily applicable to activities and initiatives that monitor student learning engagement in higher education institutions.

*Literature analysis and synthesis – Social justice and equity issues in the higher education context*

Good practice for safeguarding student learning engagement in higher education institutions.

OLT Competitive Grant CG10-1730 2010-2012.
6.1 Developing a set of social justice principles

Defining a set of social justice principles to guide MSLE initiatives provides an important foundation for sector guidelines and assists in determining good practice. David Nicol (2007) developed a set of principles for assessment and feedback in higher education and articulated the characteristics of a quality principle. Notably in the context of this project he recommends that principles should capture the salient research and provide enough evidence to support implementation; and that principles should be broad enough and flexible to guide practice. Nicol added that these characteristics would indicate that the principle could be implemented independent of context; and that where there are several principles, there should only be minimal overlap between them so that they can be defined independently; and finally, that good principles should assist in the evaluation of the practice. These guidelines were adhered to during the development of a set of social justice principles for MSLE.

Following Nichol’s work on assessment, other higher education examples which employ a set of principles as benchmarks for good practice can be found in Good Practice Principles for English language proficiency for international students in Australian universities (DEEWR, 2008); the National Best Practice Framework for Indigenous Cultural Competency in Australian Universities (Universities Australia, 2011) which elaborates on a set of five guiding principles for Indigenous cultural competency in Australian universities; and most recently Principles to promote and protect the human rights of international students (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2012).

Therefore, the development of a quality set of principles for MSLE should not only be consistent with the notions of equity and social justice but should also provide a strategic approach to the design of initiatives and be accompanied by resources to facilitate the uptake of those principles in the sector.

The literature canvassed earlier in this document on social justice in education and research-and practice-based evidence on widening participation and student engagement in the higher education sector has revealed several recurring themes. These themes are equity, access and participation (James, 2007, 2008). Two additional themes, self-determination and rights emerge strongly from the recognitive justice literature and are particularly pertinent when considering the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the participation of students from low SES backgrounds. Each of these five themes – Self-determination, Equity, Access, Participation and Rights are briefly discussed below in the context of social justice in higher education. These themes form the foundation for developing a set of social inclusion principles for safeguarding the conduct of MSLE initiatives.

6.2 Self-determination

The idea of self determination is best articulated in seminal literature about social justice. Young (1990) noted that a sense of self determination forms the basis of democracy and basic democratic processes. She argued in her discussion on the five faces of oppression (pp. 39-63), that social justice entails freedom from oppressive relations and domination which are constraints on self-determination. Self-determination is also an outcome of recognitive justice, discussed in Gale and Densmore (2000) and further in Gale and Tranter (2011).

The need for self-determination is expressed in the literature on Indigenous inclusion in education, more generally in society, and specifically in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples 2007 (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2011). This focus is
of particular interest in terms of the social justice in higher education agenda for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia and for Māori and Pacific Island people in Aotearoa (New Zealand). Applying this principle in the context of MSLE would aim to ensure that a particular MSLE initiatives program adhered to democratic processes in terms of the involvement of students in the program.

6.3 Rights

Social justice as fairness is concentrated on the rights of the individual. The literature on social justice infers that individual rights are often pre-determined United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples by their cultural and social backgrounds. Retributive justice concerns itself with the protection of rights (and often the punishment of individuals who infringe these rights) (Gale, 2000).

Iris Young (1990) summarises the social justice perception of rights as “rights are relationships, not things; they are institutionally defined rules specifying what people can do in relation to one another. Rights refer to doing more than having, and to social relationships that enable or constrain action” (p. 25).

Processes used to monitor student learning engagement activities would therefore need to be mindful of student rights (to be treated fairly with dignity and respect) as well as their right to obtain information and expectations - as would be reciprocated by the institution who expects compliance with institutional policies.

6.4 Access

In the social justice literature, particularly Young (1990) and Gewirtz (1998), the notion of distributive justice considers issues of access, specifically equality of access and participation. The literature notes that social justice occurs when individuals have access to social, cultural, political and economic resources. Australia’s higher education equity framework also espouses the access theme, both within the equity framework and the current government’s widening participation agenda.

Essentially, access in higher education can be interpreted as being access to institutional resources (for example, culture and language of higher education, the curriculum, learning and life support services, staff and advice). As with equity, access is determined by the inclusive structures, systems and strategies an institution might utilise to facilitate student support, which has implications for design and practice in MLSE.

6.5 Equity

The notion of equity is closely aligned to the theme of access in the higher education literature (Clancy & Goastcelllec, 2007; David, 2010; Sharma, 2008). However, in this project they are treated as distinct constructs.

An equity framework implies that social difference is understood so that different responses can be applied to a particular situation. Equity issues feature heavily in the literature on Australia’s higher education sector with a specific endorsement of equity policy, targets and programs. The National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (2010), in defining equity, proposes that
equity is predicated on recognition that social systems (including education systems) tend to produce unequal outcomes (advantage and disadvantage) and that in part this is because individuals’ starting positions and the processes involved in the production of social and economic outcomes are unfair. In this context, equity is a commitment to adjusting social systems for socially just means and ends.

Implicit in this view is that “equity” and “social justice” are different but closely related. Equity is conceived as a strategy: (a) based on a commitment to achieving (more) socially just ends; and (b) developed from a theory about why a particular social system is not socially just. (para 4)

Unfortunately, the terms equality and equity are often used interchangeably in the literature. However their meanings are not the same. Patton et al. (2010) clarify the terminology, noting that equality refers to the equal distribution of goods whereas equity refers to strategies that lead to equal access and the removal of known barriers for groups traditionally disadvantaged in existing social processes and systems.

Applying the principle of equity to the context of MSLE would enable the MSLE activities, support and service interventions to be tailored to actively address barriers or impediments to engagement caused by students’ previous educational, cultural or social backgrounds.

6.6 Participation

Gewirtz (1998) and Young (1990) discuss participation as arising from equality of opportunity. Gale and Tranter (2011) discuss participation from recognitive social justice stance. In the higher education literature, participation is discussed extensively with regards to the specific government activities and initiatives in the last decade (the Widening Participation agendas in both the UK and Australia are key examples).

In its application to initiatives that monitor student learning engagement, participation is enabled through the instantiation of the previous four principles in MSLE initiatives and reflects effectiveness of activities designed to engender engagement.

6.7 A set of social justice principles for safeguarding MSLE

The following section summarises the social justice principles presented earlier and then rearticulates each of these principles specifically as they relate to activities and programs that actively monitor student learning engagement.

Self-determination

Self-determination refers to the rights of an individual to have control over their life and is also an outcome of recognitive justice (Gale & Densmore, 2000, Gale & Tranter, 2011). A sense of self-determination provides a foundation for democracy and basic democratic processes. Self-determination is key to the participation of indigenous people in education, and more generally in society through the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007). From a recognitive social justice perspective, this principle can be expressed schematically as follows:
Fundamental to recognitive social justice; individuals participate in democratic processes to ensure self-control over their lives.

In the context of MSLE, this principle is interpreted to mean that students are actively involved in the design and enactment of programs and in the review of program outcomes.

Therefore, to achieve good practice in MSLE initiatives, the Self-determination principle is interpreted as:

Students participate in program design, enactment and evaluation and make informed decisions about their individual participation in the program.

**Rights**

The literature on social justice emphasises the notion of individual rights and specifically that these rights include appropriate consideration of the forces that shape an individual’s cultural and social backgrounds. From a recognitive social justice perspective, this principle can be expressed schematically as follows:

Individuals have the right to be treated with dignity and respect and to have their individual cultural, social and knowledge systems valued.

When this principle is interpreted for MSLE initiatives, consideration has to given as to whether MSLE activities are mindful of the rights of students to be treated fairly with dignity and respect, as well as their rights to obtain or withhold information and to have these rights recognised by institutions that expect compliance with institutional policies.
Therefore, to achieve good practice in MSLE initiatives, the Rights principle is interpreted as:

**MSLE initiatives should ensure that all students are treated with dignity and respect and have their individual cultural, social and knowledge systems recognised and valued.**

**Access**

In the social justice literature, particularly Young (1990) and Gewirtz (1998), the notion of distributive justice considers issues of access, specifically equality of access and participation. The literature notes that social justice occurs when all individuals have equal access to social, cultural, political and economic resources.

Australia’s higher education equity framework also espouses the access theme, both within the equity framework and the current government’s widening participation agenda. From a recognitive social justice perspective this principle can be expressed schematically as follows:

*All individuals have access to social, cultural, political and economic resources.*

In the context of MSLE, this principle is interpreted to mean that Access is intentionally determined by inclusive structures, systems and strategies that promote learning engagement, particularly for students whose access to higher education has been previously compromised by their social, political and/or economic backgrounds.

Therefore, to achieve good practice in MSLE initiatives, the Access principle is interpreted as:

*Programs are designed to serve as active and impartial conduits to the resources of the institution (e.g. curriculum, learning, academic, social, cultural, support, financial and other resources).*
Equity

Equity implies that social differences are understood and that different responses are therefore designed and applied to particular situations to redress previous imbalances. The notion of equity features heavily in the literature about Australian higher education and there has been a history of endorsement of equity policy, targets and programs. Unfortunately the terms equality and equity are often used interchangeably in practice as well as in the literature. Usefully, Patton et al. (2010) reminds us that equality refers to the equal distribution of goods or equality in treatment, whereas equity focuses on the removal of noted barriers for individuals and groups who have been traditionally disadvantaged by dominant cultures and power structures. From a recognitive social justice perspective this principle can be expressed schematically as follows:

Social difference is understood so that responses can be designed and applied to particular situations to counteract the barriers that impede participation.

In the context of MSLE, this principle is interpreted to mean that the focus is on counteracting barriers to participation such as finances and broadening knowledge and experiences of higher education to previously under-represented groups.

Therefore, to achieve good practice in MSLE initiatives, the Equity principle is interpreted as:

Programs are designed to demystify and decode dominant university cultures, processes, expectations and language for differently prepared cohorts.

Participation

In the social justice literature, both Gewirtz (1998) and Young (1990) note that participation arises if and when there is equality of opportunity. Recognising inequities, Gale and Tranter (2011) point out that participation needs to be considered from a recognitive stance. In terms of the higher education literature, participation has been discussed extensively in terms of government activities and initiatives (the Widening Participation agendas in both the UK and Australia are key examples). From a recognitive social justice perspective, this principle can be expressed schematically as follows:

Literature analysis and synthesis – Social justice and equity issues in the higher education context
Good practice for safeguarding student learning engagement in higher education institutions.
OLT Competitive Grant CG10-1730 2010-2012.
Participation is not predicated on previous opportunity or privilege.

In the context of MSLE, this principle is interpreted to mean that all students have the opportunity to participate in university activities and to complete their qualification(s) in ways that are harmonious with their individual backgrounds and circumstances.

Therefore, to achieve good practice in MSLE initiatives, the Participation principle is interpreted as:

\[ \text{MSLE programs lead to socially inclusive practices and students experience a sense of belonging and connectedness.} \]

7. Conclusion

This review was designed to frame the development of a set of principles for establishing good practice in MSLE. It has canvassed the literature of social justice and in particular social justice in higher education and has reviewed how social justice manifests in public policy and efforts to achieve wider participation and social inclusion. The notion of engagement in leading to better outcomes for students has been examined noting that successful engagement occurs as a result of both student and institutional efforts. Higher education institutions have recognised the importance of engagement to student attainment and retention with many institutions implementing programs and activities that seek to monitor student engagement. The aim of these programs is to provide early supportive interventions to prevent students from disengaging. However, these programs are information-rich and must be designed and enacted consistent with the notion of social justice if they are to achieve beneficial and socially just outcomes for all students.

The literature covered by this review has provided an overview of the concept of social justice in higher education and has revealed various historical and contemporary perspectives and interpretations of social justice. The widening participation agenda in Australian higher education and the terminology used in the literature around social inclusion is closely aligned with the issues that are traditionally regarded as of interest to social justice and equity—for example, the recent focus in Australia on increasing the participation of students from low SES
backgrounds. Importantly the review has led to a philosophical stance of recognitive social justice being adopted to guide the development of the Social Justice Framework in this project.

Examination of the social justice literature in light of contemporary issues around student participation and engagement has enabled five key themes to be identified. Refinement of these themes—Self-determination, Equity, Access, Participation and Rights—has resulted in a set of five interconnected and co-dependent principles that provide the underpinnings of a Social Justice Framework for Safeguarding Student Learning Engagement. The outcome of this work is that the framework and the principles which underpin it are available to be used to guide the development and implementation of MSLE initiatives. Used in this way the Social Justice Framework will ensure that these MSLE programs and the students that participate in them are safeguarded against unethical and inappropriate actions.

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Literature analysis and synthesis – Social justice and equity issues in the higher education context

Good practice for safeguarding student learning engagement in higher education institutions.

OLT Competitive Grant CG10-1730 2010-2012.


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**Literature analysis and synthesis – Social justice and equity issues in the higher education context**

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