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Social justice and equity issues in the higher education context

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



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1. Introduction

This document provides an analysis of the social justice and equity literature that is pertinent to the higher education sector. It is framed within the scope of the project *Good practice for safeguarding student learning engagement in higher education institutions*. In this sense this analysis provides a starting point for understanding the theoretical underpinnings and issues related to social justice in higher education and provides the foundation for the formulation of a set of principles for guiding institutional policy and programs. The particular focus of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council¹ (ALTC) project is to develop a set of principles, guidelines and resources, based on the principles of social justice, to safeguard activities designed to 'monitor' student learning engagement.

The review is prefaced by an examination of the concept of social justice and literature about social justice, specifically as it applies to the higher education sector. Participation in higher education from the perspective of the Australian experience with reference to the widening participation agenda is discussed next. Finally, the review highlights recent discussion around social justice and equity issues in the higher education sector, both in Australia and internationally and proposes a suite of themes (drawn from the literature) that could be instructive in the formation of social justice principles.

2. What is the meaning of 'Social Justice'

The first two sections of the literature review introduce the concept of social justice, its application within education, and in particular its interpretation within the higher education sector.

2.1 Social justice

While there appears no single definition of social justice, the literature suggests that the notion of social justice coexists with expressions of human rights, fairness and equality (Bates, 2007, Sturman, 1997). Theophanous (1994) summarises the modern concept of social justice as stemming from the Greek theories of justice and the ideas of two prominent Enlightenment philosophers Kant and Rousseau: that social justice mirrors ideas of equality, which is deemed as a necessary condition of democratic life. Sturman notes that theorising over social justice has been mirrored by recent debates around 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). The pursuit of social justice is therefore seen as a search for a fair distribution of what is "beneficial and valued" (Singh, p. 482, 2011).

Any examination of social justice requires a brief consideration of what is understood to be meant by the term. The notion of social justice stems from the reigns of the peasant-born sixth century Roman Emperor Justin and his nephew Justinian who succeeded him (Evans, 1996). Gale draws on Justinian who referred to social justice as 'the constant and perpetual will to render to everyone their due' (Isaacs 1996 cited in Gale, 2000). For Gale (2000) social justice is not just 'making' but 'acting' and Lummis (1996 cited in Gale 2000) considers this a reformist approach to social justice, which Gale labels as a recognitive perspective on social justice.

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).

In *A Theory of Justice*, John Rawls (1999) attempted to reconcile freedom and equality in a principled way and sought to describe ways of achieving just social structures, stressing that civil arrangements needed to be in place to support this structure. Underpinning Rawls' theory of justice is the concept of 'justice as fairness' whereby 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 social and economic inequalities should be arranged so that they are to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged (p.53). The Equality Principle is further subdivided into *fair equality of opportunity* and the *Difference Principle*.

In a more radical perspective on social justice, Amartya Sen's (2009) recent critique of Rawls' theory (*The Idea of Justice*) places social justice as an ongoing task that cannot be evaluated in terms of whether it has been achieved, but how it is understood in context. Sen's approach favours the comparative merits of different societies. At the core of Sen's argument is respect for reasoned differences in our understanding of what a 'just society' really is. Sen's view is reflective of Gale's (2000) notion of a view of social justice that values a positive regard for group differences and for democratic processes based on group representations. Sen's argument for a comparative perspective on justice to guide in the choice between alternatives that we inevitably face provides further weight to this radical/reformist view of social justice.

2.2 Perspectives on social justice

Miller (1999) draws extensively on the earlier work of Rawls and provides an overview of the empirical research and popular conceptions of justice – focusing specifically on the scope of social justice. For Miller a social justice perspective equates to distributive justice. The main constituents of distributive justice are three principles or elements: desert, need, and of equality:

Need is a claim that one is lacking in basic necessities and is being harmed or is in danger of being harmed.

Desert is a claim that one has earned reward based on performance.

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.

In his interpretation of Rawls' theories of justice Miller adds that we venture towards creating a culture of social justice when both institutions and individuals comply with principles of social justice.

Other theorists have challenged distributive justice, because it essentially focuses on the ways in which goods and services are dispersed among members of society, with a specific focus of the distribution of material goods. Iris Young (1990) argued that this type of social justice neglects the institutional context of social structures that may determine distributive patterns of resources.

3. Social justice in education

Examining the literature on social justice and education is a complex process because it interfaces the development of society with the role of education and in terms of purpose and

outcomes means that educational institutions are directly involved in and reflect the social, cultural and economic activity of society. Singh (2011) summarises this:

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.
(p. 491-492)

A relatively recent examination of the broad nature of social justice and education was undertaken by the Social Justice Research Collective at Flinders University (McInerney, 2004). Focused on the primary and secondary education periods (K-12) McInerney provides a rich summary of the literature of relevance to social justice in education and points to the forms of injustice that manifest in education: socioeconomic disadvantage, racism, and cultural oppression. McInerney refers to the work of Raewyn Connell (1993), who advocates for curricular justice by investigating the concept of dominant cultural hegemony and makes a case for curriculum reform based on redistributive justice. For McInerney, whole of school reform, curriculum and pedagogy, and government responses are the most prevalent social justice strategies advocated in the education-based social justice literature. Bates (2007) also focuses on the K-12 education system and finds there is an emphasis on redistributive and recognitional approaches to social justice in educational administration.

Sturman's (1997) examination of social justice in education – specifically in the Australian context and in secondary school education – reiterates relevant political and philosophical orientations of social justice. Sturman concludes that education public policy in Australia is fundamentally based on the principles of distributive justice in that these principles are intended to equalise. Sturman focuses on the most disadvantaged in education and suggests three components of social justice to address this: (1) the distributive component – in brief, equipping the student so that they receive equality of opportunity both within current and post-education; (2) curricular justice – ensuring the curriculum is designed around principles of social justice; and (3) non-material component – equipping the student with non-material goods and skills “such as decision making” (p. 118).

Gale (2000) and Gale and Densmore (2000) explore social justice from an educational perspective and classify explanations of social justice as *distributive* (summarised as a fairness around the distribution of basic resources), *retributive* (summarised as fairness around competition for social goods and materials and *recognitive* (summarised as recognising differences and commonality amongst cultural groups). In Table 1 the authors summarise these perspectives and differentiate distributive and retributive from recognitive justice arguing that recognitive includes not only a positive consideration for social difference but also the centrality of socially democratic processes in working towards its attainment. In essence the recognitive perspective of social justice emphasises process and action over state and form.

Table 1 summarises social justice perspectives – distributive, retributive and recognitive.

Perspectives of Justice	<i>The will</i> What should social justice desire? Whose desire?	<i>To render</i> How should social justice be achieved?	<i>To everyone</i> Who should social justice benefit?	<i>Their due</i> What should social justice deliver?
Distributive	Freedom, social cooperation and compensation. Individuals/ groups represented by govt / authorities	Proportional distribution	Disadvantaged individuals groups	Basic material & social goods / opportunities
Retributive	Liberty, protection of rights, punishments for	Open competitive and govt protection	Individuals who contribute to	Material & social goods /

	infringements. Individuals in free market.	of life and property	society	opportunities commensurate with talent and effort
Recognitive	Means for all to exercise capability and determine their actions. All people within and among social groups	Democratic processes that include / generalize from the interests of the least advantaged	All people differently experienced within and among social groups	Positive self-identity. Self development; self determination.

(Gale, 2000 p. 268)

3.1 Social justice and the higher education context

Discussion about social justice in the higher education context has previously been limited to an international context. Most recently, Singh (2011) discussed how social justice features in the discourse about higher education's socio-economic role within knowledge societies in a globalising world. International authors such as Gerwitz (1998, 2006) and North (2006), in examining the work of Young (1990), note it may be too convenient to equate social justice with distributive justice and overlook the institutional processes and social structures that are the producers of these distributions in higher education. 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 overview of social justice in Australian higher education policy detailing policy post-World War Two through to the 2008 Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008). This account of social justice in higher education policy illuminates the authors' views of social justice as "distributive, retributive and recognitive" (p.29). Firstly, periods of expansion of the higher education system that have attended to the "notions of social justice" have been met by new opportunities (p.41) and access to higher education. Secondly, in consolidation phases of higher education provision, retributive notions of social justice have become more obvious and Gale and Tranter 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. The authors add, "... 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). As well the authors suggest that these perceptions should be addressed by policy and practice embracing a recognitive perspective of social justice so that widening participation is not considered in terms of comparative representation.

4. Enacting social justice within higher education

There are various interpretations of the term social justice in the context of higher education. Often, social inclusion is discussed in the education context when discussion social justice. Armstrong and Spandagou (2009) chart the changes in the definitions of this term from a

narrow meaning applied to students with disabilities through to a broader interpretation about the provision of educational opportunities for broader 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)

Singh (2011) discusses more broadly the idea of social inclusion suggesting access and inclusion strategies structured within knowledge society discourses and notes, “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). Along similar lines, O’Connor and Moodie (2008) discussed the concept of ‘social inclusion’ and its importance in relation to the higher education sector where social inclusion implies the inclusion of an individual, group or community in society in general and higher education in particular.

4.1 Social inclusion and widening participation

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). Internationally, the issue of widening participation has mirrored policy developments determined by broad political and democratic movements for social or human rights in these countries (Vignoles, 2009; David, 2010). A focus on widening participation in higher education has resulted from policy developments in countries such as the UK, Canada and the USA.

The requirement to widen participation in higher education has been taken up extensively at both a sector level and within different institutions. Goastellec (2008) measures higher education participation via an historical analysis of the evolution of greater access to higher education by outlining a series of international case studies that assist in the mapping of the assertion of an “equity principle” around the organisation of access to higher education (p. 71). Widening participation also accounts for the emergence of several trends, notably that new norms have been created around how access is defined as a move away from a selection, and that globalisation has made education more accountable to public scrutiny and international evaluations and comparisons. Goastellec adds “we are witnessing a permanent reinvention of tools aimed at widening access or at making it more fair” (p.82).

The UK’s dedication to Widening Participation is exemplified in specific funding activities undertaken by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Higher Education Academy (HEA). This is despite concerns that participation may decrease with the introduction of a fee-based system as cautioned by Yorke (in Nelson, Clarke and Kift 2011). In the US, participation initiatives are more complex with “ethno-racial dimensions” the main category being utilised to measure participation (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007, p. 139). Australia’s approach to widening participation (as noted in 2.1) and the release of the report *Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System* has highlighted the equity agenda. Gale and Tranter (2011) document this process with an overview of the establishment of new institutional programs or the provision of alternate access points to higher education. The authors also point to the introduction of the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) in 2010 which provides funding to institutions to implement strategies aimed to increasing access and retention of low SES students.

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 included a range of measures including merit-based scholarships, the policy reforms of the Whitlam government, and in the 1990s the massification of the sector driven by the Dawkins reforms announced in *Higher education: A policy statement* - known as Dawkin's 'White Paper' (Department of Employment, Education and Training [DEET], 1988). Collectively, these changes have moved the context of higher education 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 institutions with the institutions. The discussion paper identified six equity groups for particular attention: people from low-socioeconomic backgrounds (low SES); 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 is a significant marker of social justice 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)

In 1996 it was reported that there had been an improvement in participation for most of these designated groups apart from 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 via learning scholarships, an increase in funding for the HE Equity Programme and a reform package to increase participation and outcomes for both Indigenous students and staff in higher education (Nelson, 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. This report identified three under-represented groups in higher education: students from low SES backgrounds, students from regional and remote areas and Indigenous students. In response to the review, the Government set attainment targets, in particular, raising low SES group participation targets by 2020 (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009a).

Silver (2010) believes Australia has a distinct approach to social inclusion which can be understood in terms of having a vision of "membership, belonging and social integration" (p. 183). She argues that a mass globalised world positions higher education in a role that assists individuals, groups and communities to engage at a higher level. Gale and Tranter (2011) describe the establishment of the Ministry of Social Inclusion within the DEEWR. The Ministry's Australian Social Inclusion Board (ASIB) has adopted several principles to guide their agenda: Aspirational Principles (what is required) and Principles of Approach (how it can be achieved) (ASIB, 2010). Gale and Tranter (2011) add that, "Widening participation in higher education and 'social inclusion' more generally are seen as possible only in periods of expansion" (p.

42). In this way, social inclusion in higher education in Australian has manifest as a widening participation agenda and is associated with public policy and performance based funding.

Moves to measure participation, particularly of equity groups, provides a tool to implement and monitor change in the sector (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2010). However, Clancy and Goastellec (2007) warn against attempts to make comparisons between countries because of the variety in measures of participation and varying definitions of what constitutes higher education. Earlier, Sharma (2008) had discussed the massification of the Australian higher education sector along with the emergent issues around student access and equity, referring to external mechanisms such as the establishment of the Australian Universities Quality Agency² (AUQA) as ways of continuing to ensure academic quality. Discussions about participation in higher education have also appeared in the academic literature (see for example: Gale & Tranter, 2011; James, 2002; James, 2008; McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000) James (2007) considers that equity is one of the three elemental measures of the effectiveness (alongside quality and efficiency) of higher education. More recently Gale and Tranter (2011) viewing the shift from “elite to mass to near universal ...” (p. 30) caution that these changes do not necessarily imply equality in opportunity for participation.

5. The impact of widening participation and social inclusion on higher education

Funding-linked public policy and changes to the higher education regulatory environment have been accompanied by concomitant discussions about the notion of student engagement in higher education.

5.1 Student Engagement

5.1.1. Definition of student engagement

Student engagement is a wide-ranging phenomenon that includes both the academic and non-academic activities of the student within the university experience and is noted as a significant factor in student attainment and retention (Krause & Coates, 2008; Kuh, 2009; Tinto, 2010). The commitment of institutions to students is a critical factor in retention—Tinto (2010) maintains that institutions should not only take some responsibility for but also encourage student involvement, while, in a similar but more specific vein, Nelson, Kift and Clarke (2008) contend that universities need to instigate, sustain and promote student personal, social and academic engagement, particularly for those students who face the greatest challenges in transition.

In the first year space, it has been established that the potential for successful engagement involves an inclusive and intentional curriculum (Nelson, Smith & Clarke, 2011). This strongly suggests that learning and the classroom experience though an intentional curriculum are the key to first year success and engagement with recent literature reiterating the Nelson et al. (2008) contention above of the importance of an “holistic” (an integrated personal, social and academic) approach to engagement.

Trowler’s (2010) recent literature review on student engagement identifies and defines engagement as being concerned with:

² AUQA operations have now transferred to the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA)

... 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)

Recent authors on student engagement include George Kuh, who is a founding member of North America's National Survey of Student Engagement. In the Australasian context Hamish Coates has written extensively on engagement via his affiliation to the Australian Survey of Student Engagement (Australian Council for Educational Research [ACER], 2011a) and regular annual Research Briefing publications. Prominent among the longitudinal studies around student experience are the First Year Experience reports (James, Krause & Jennings, 2010) published from the Centre for the Study of Higher Education. Krause and Coates (2008) remind us that levels of engagement often indicate whether students are engaging with their studies and their institutional environment and that greater engagement may equate to high-quality learning. Engagement is often identified both inside and outside the curriculum. Burdett and Crossman (2010) identified the value of social engagement activities in the higher education context such as the value of social activities and the experience of international students. However, Coates (2007) describes engagement within the realms of both as "a broad construct intended to encompass salient academic as well as certain non-academic aspects of the student experience" (p. 122). Finally, Trowler reminds us of the importance of student engagement in the context of equality and social justice and cites the work of Harper and Quaye (2009) who note:

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.

(Harper and Quaye, 2009 as cited in Trowler 2010, p. 24)

5.1.2 Supporting Engagement

According to Nelson (2010), activities designed to engender student support and to monitor student engagement must 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. Nelson adds:

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)

Crucial to student engagement is the levels of support offered by the institution. Essentially student support services provide context for students to adjust their methods of coping to the institution. As Gale (2009) describes:

The mainstream activity of university life – the legitimization and dissemination of certain forms of knowledge – is taken as a given, as normative. It is students who must adjust to it in order to be successful. Support services provide the mechanisms for students to achieve this, if they do not come to university with the capacities and resources to achieve this on their own.

(p. 9)

In line with Tinto (2008) and Kift and Nelson (2005), Gale positions student support as coming from the centre – within the curriculum. Gale's (2009) notion of a "Southern Theory of higher education" also requires the embodiment of the students' knowledges - their social and cultural knowledges:

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)

Putting a lens over the social justice and equity component of student engagement allows for some concentration of scope. There are numerous areas of concern which align with the findings from the *Review of Australian higher education* (Bradley et. al., 2008) which targets three main areas of under-representation in the sector. For the purposes of this review two areas of the research are summarised in the following section: Indigenous¹ participation; and participation of students from low socio-economic status (low SES) circumstances. The third area of regional and remote participation is covered comprehensively in the recent DEEWR Report (2010b) *Regional Participation: The Role of Socioeconomic Status and Access*.

Indigenous participation

Internationally, the literature on social justice in higher education continues to ignore the Indigenous perspective (Patton et. al., 2010). Kuokkanen (2007) summarises this most meaningfully:

The "indigenous" continues to be unabated in most academic circles. In the same way that indigenous peoples (and their epistemes) remained invisible when the nation-states were being shaped, indigenous scholarships remains invisible and unreflected in most academic discourses, including that of some of the most progressive intellectuals.

(p. 156)

From a social justice perspective, Australia Indigenous³ participation in higher education is an imperative:

Low levels of education participation and completion underpin a number of poor outcomes for the Indigenous population, including low life expectancy, high morbidity across a number of highly treatable conditions, low levels of engagement with the labour market and high rates of poverty and deprivation.

(Biddle, 2010, p.30)

Currently the *Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council* has well-developed priorities for progressing Indigenous peoples' involvement in higher education and provides this advice to government. However, at all levels of education, Indigenous participation is significantly disproportionate to non-Indigenous participation. According to James (2008), Indigenous people participate in higher education at less than half the rate of non-Indigenous persons (p. 43). James adds that the reasons for low participation include non-completion of secondary education and the high rate of progression into the VET sector or employment. For those who enter higher education, there is an alarmingly high attrition rate, particularly in their first year. James notes that multiple factors affect retention, (including rural and regional location,

³ Indigenous Australian students refer to students who identify as being of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background.

financial concerns, prior educational disadvantage and cultural isolation) and that the provision of academic, administrative and counselling support services is a specific institutional responsibility. Larkin (2011) calls for a racially inclusive sector as a means to address the high rates of attrition by Indigenous students.

In 2010, Indigenous Australian students represented 0.9 per cent of all enrolments increasing their representation slightly from the previous year (DEEWR 2011). A recent AUSSE Research Briefing (ACER 2011b) discusses the engagement levels of Indigenous students and notes that while Indigenous students have a traditionally higher attrition rate as compared with non-Indigenous students, they are engaged with their learning at a similar or slightly higher level than their non-Indigenous counterparts. Indigenous students enrolled in work-integrated learning activities reported noticeably higher levels of engagement. The Research Briefing also discusses the role of support for Indigenous students noting that while Indigenous students were satisfied that both academic and administrative staff provided enough support to succeed academically, there was less or very little support from institutions to help them cope with non-academic responsibilities. Additionally, the report authors infer that the majority of support for Indigenous students occurs within Indigenous centres rather than the institution as a whole. Importantly in this data, is the link between the students' perceived level of institutional support and their intentions to depart with the report noting "... Indigenous students who have seriously considered departing their institution are also less likely to feel highly supported" (p.12).

A recent report from the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research suggests that there is still a significant amount of work to be done to improve the level of engagement in formative education. While the report points towards intensive and targeted interventions it also calls for and cites example of "creative curriculum modifications" (Biddle, 2010, p. 32). Recent literature has discussed the indigenisation of the curriculum and specific examples of good practice models. Indigenisation of the curriculum is predominantly viewed as embedding Indigenous knowledge into the curriculum (Hauser, Howlett & Matthews, 2009). Alternatively, Nolan, Hill and Harris (2010) surmise that providing non-indigenous students with a knowledge of Indigenous Australian histories, cultures and realities will produce "future professionals and citizens committed to reconciliation and social justice" (p. 71). Hart and Moore (2005) outline a project that attempts to embed Indigenous perspectives and content into two Australian Studies units at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT). The authors concede that a dichotomy continues to exist around "how Aboriginal Australia and white Australia cohabitate as historical and cultural meanings in the national and cultural identity constructions of students and lecturers alike" (p.9).

In a broad discussion of the University of Newcastle's experience in the context of indigenising the curriculum, Butler and Young (2009) approach 'indigenisation' from a social justice criteria employing two perspectives:

1. *The curricular justice goal, which has as its objective the provision of educational opportunity and outcomes*
2. *The wider responsibility goal, which focuses on educating all students for social justice and anti-racism through programs of anti-racism education.*

(p. 51)

The authors draw upon the social justice perspective in their approach to sector-wide difficulties with the definitions of Indigenous issues in education. A different perspective around Indigenous education comes from Hauser, Howlett and Matthews (2009) who view education as a central strategy in addressing the incongruities that shape the lives of Indigenous peoples in Australia. Their examination of the experience of Canadian practices in

indigenising the curriculum in science education suggests that the programs should be community-driven, with inclusive curriculum. Significant in this case study is the issue of “ontological pluralism” – whereby both Western sciences and Indigenous knowledges are distinct and the aim is to develop a working relationship between the two (p. 52). Martin Nakata (2007) refers to these differences as contested knowledge spaces and that within these two knowledge systems is “the cultural interface” (p.9). Nakata stresses the need to maintain a focus on flexible learning and teaching methods for Indigenous students in higher education adding:

... we need curriculum designs to build on these capacities and to create opportunities for learners to achieve balance of knowledge, skills and processes for exploring disciplinary boundaries.

(p. 13)

In summary the current social justice and equity issues that need to be addressed in regards to Indigenous participation are the disproportionate number of Indigenous student representation in the sector and the embedding of Indigenous knowledge in the higher education curriculum.

Low socio-economic groups

More prominent in the literature on student engagement is the discussion of the participation of students from low socio-economic (low SES) backgrounds. While definitions of socioeconomic status vary dependent on context, it can be broadly defined in terms of:

... social, cultural and economic resources, the extent to which individuals and groups' have access to these resources and the relative value ascribed to the resources held by different individuals and groups.

(DEEWR, 2009b, p. li)

From an international perspective, the success of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds has become a priority in the development of educational policy. Yorke and Thomas (2003) outline the UK experience and highlight, through the examination of various institutions with a higher proportion of low SES students, key factors for the recruitment and retention of low SES students. The authors view the commitment of the institution to the low SES student experience as vital. Staff, both professional and academic, had a significant role to play in supporting students and creating a sense of belonging. A focus on the first year experience of the student was espoused as being vital in the building of stronger engagement. Outreach activities to potential students were also cited in regards to pre-enrolment and expectation development.

In the Australian context, despite many national initiatives (for example, the Higher Education Contribution Scheme), higher education participation remains inequitable, principally in terms of access rates for people from a low SES background (James, 2007). Phillimore and Koshy (2010) discuss the Rudd/Gillard government targets for increased participation of low SES students by 2020 (from 16.3 per cent at 2008 to 20 per cent). The authors suggest three policy options for raising the national average of participation and raise concerns around the current definition of low SES within Australia. The three policy options are summarised as: standardised increases across all institutions to meet the target; differential increases in indirect proportion to current levels of low SES participation; and differential increases proportional to the share of the low SES population situated within each state and territory (p. 1).

Redefining the low SES measurement scales has been identified by the Australian Government as a means to determine progress towards the increased participation rate (DEEWR, 2009b).

In Australia, low SES is defined by the so-called “postcode measure” – which defines low SES students whose permanent address postcode falls within postcodes comprising the bottom 25 per cent as coded by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Socio-economic Indexes for Areas [SEIFA] Index of Education and Occupation (Phillimore & Koshy, 2010, p.2). Some commentators (for example, Phillimore and Koshy, 2011) believe these figures are not necessarily an accurate indication of economic status and are inconsistent across the different states and territories (also discussed by James, 2008). Phillimore and Koshy also raise additional concerns around participation and access if institutions are required to enrol one in three students considered from a low SES context.

As well as the techniques used to measure low SES status, Gale (2009) adds that in light of the Bradley Report low SES has become a blanket term for other underrepresented groups including Indigenous and students from rural and remote areas. The participation of regional and remote students in higher education is identified as a group whose participation has seen the largest reduction over time as compared to other groups (Gale, 2009). Additionally, low socioeconomic groups are often viewed as a “homogenous group” when in fact there are distinct cultural and social differences (p.4).

There are plenty of examples in the literature of attempts to widen the participation of students from defined low SES backgrounds and areas. Scull and Cuthill (2010) discuss an action-research project around engaged outreach whereby the institution establishes a relationship with a local community and relevant stakeholders to target potential students from low SES regions. Additionally, the authors cite several reasons for the under-representation of low SES groups in higher education, such as economic costs and the interrelationship between persistence variables such as the lack of support networks, limited understanding of further education and minimal family experiences in higher education.

The literature also cautions about the common characteristics among equity groups and low SES. Willems (2010) warns of ignoring overlap in the six equity groups discussed previously (Section 2.1) and cites earlier discussions in the literature about specific combinations of equity groups, (for example, rural or isolated students and Indigenous) who may fall into a low SES bracket. In consideration of these overlaps and via a discussion of the inter-relationships and potential equity subgroups, Willems suggests an Equity Raw Score Matrix (ERSM) to pinpoint the high indicators of potential disadvantage. Early research with a specific cohort identified a high incidence of the combination pattern ‘rural or isolated’, ‘with a disability’ and ‘low SES’.

Most recently, several significant reports have acknowledged the imperatives around addressing participation of low SES students in Australian education. A report commissioned by DEEWR and undertaken by the National Centre for Equity in Higher Education (Gale et. al., 2010) examined early interventions by universities in schools. Seven institutional outreach activities were examined in order to identify what constitutes an effective program. Tactical interventions that proved effective in cultivating higher participation contained the following characteristics:

- *Collaboration*
- *Early, long-term and sustained*
- *People-rich*
- *Cohort-based*
- *Communication and information*
- *Familiarisation/site experience*
- *Recognition of difference*
- *Enhanced academic curriculum*
- *Financial supports and/or incentives*

(p. 84)

Finally, a 2008 report prepared by the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne sought to address the issue of continual under-representation of individuals from low SES backgrounds and Indigenous people in the Australian higher education environment (James 2008). Key reasons were highlighted, with attribution given to early education achievement and financial factors as deterrents. James notes that,

All things considered, the available data do show that disadvantage with respect to higher education should not be conceptualised narrowly in terms of extrinsic barriers that confront students at or near the point of higher education, such as distance and financial cost. There are clearly broader social, educational and cultural factors involved.

(p.4)

So, while a brief overview of these two particular equity groups indicate fundamental attributes that seem to impair the engagement and participation of these student cohorts in university life (previous education, non-academic responsibilities, financial support), institutional support systems - both academic and professional - continue to be cited as essential exponents of student commitment and continuation.

6. Social justice principles for higher education

The obligation to social justice in higher education policy making is exemplified in the expansion of activities aimed at monitoring student learning engagement and may take the form of quality assurance systems and the application of performance indicators (Yorke & Longden, 2004). This following section melds Australia's current widening participation agenda with the broader definitions of social justice and details an attempt to illicit a set of social justice principles that could be applied to activities and initiatives that monitor student learning engagement in the higher education sector.

6.1 Developing a set of social justice principles

While Australasian universities understand the significance of monitoring and measuring student engagement, some universities have actually adopted and put into practice inclusive strategies for monitoring student learning engagement (MSLE). Examples of these programs include, but are not limited to, Queensland University of Technology's (QUT) *Student Success Program* (Nelson, Smith & Clarke, 2011), the University of New England's *Early Alert program* (University of New England, 2011) and Auckland University of Technology's *First Year Experience Program* (Australian Universities Quality Agency, 2007).

Defining a set of social justice principles may serve as an important foundation for sector guidelines and assist in determining practice. When David Nicol (2007) developed a set of principles for assessment and feedback in higher education he elaborated on what he had surmised as being a quality principle: that the principle should capture the research and provide evidence to support implementation; that the principle should be broad enough and flexible to guide a practitioner. Nicol added that this indicates the principle could be implemented depending on context; that where there are several principles, there should 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 can be considered within the context of the development of a set of social justice principles despite reiterating that Nicol is applying this counsel to the development of assessment principles.

The development of a set of social justice principles should not only be consistent with the notions of equity and social justice but also be able to provide a strategic approach to that process supported by resources for good practice for the sector. Re-visiting the literature on social justice in education and drawing upon the research and discussion on widening participation and student engagement in the higher education sector alludes to several common themes. Each of these themes may form the basis of the development of a set of social inclusion principles. In the Australian higher education literature around participation, engagement and social inclusion we notice three key themes that can be articulated via a social justice perspective:

- Access
- Equity
- Participation

Richard James, from the Centre for the Study of Higher Education, is the most notable researcher to align social justice with the themes of equity, access and participation (2007, 2008).

In addition to these three themes, two other themes emerge from the literature on social justice in higher education, particularly in the focus on Indigenous participation and the participation of students from low SES backgrounds. 'Self-determination' and 'Rights' are highlighted here as key themes extrapolated in the literature detailing social justice and higher education.

These five themes – *Self-determination, Equity, Access, Participation* and *Rights* are briefly discussed below in the context of social justice in higher education.

6.2 Overview of themes

6.2.1 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 that social justice entailed freedom from oppressive relations and domination –a constraint on self-determination (in her discussion on the five faces of oppression p. 39-63). Self-determination is also an outcome of recognitive justice, discussed in Gale and Densmore (2000) and further in Gale and Tranter (2011)

Self-determination is also expressed in the literature on Indigenous inclusion in education (but specifically in society) and the social justice agenda for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia (specifically the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2007). Applying this principle in the context of monitoring student learning engagement could ensure the particular program adheres to democratic processes around self-identification.

6.2.2. Equity

In the discourse around social justice in higher education, there exists a strong concept of equity (particularly tied to the idea of distributive justice). 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.

Equality and equity are often used interchangeably in the literature. Patton et al. (2010) assist in the examination of the differences in the terminology and use when they note that equality refers to the equal distribution of goods whereas equity shifts this debate from equal treatment to that of access and removal of noted barriers for groups traditionally disadvantaged.

In addition, the notion of equity is also closely aligned to the theme of access in the higher education literature (Clancy & Goastcellec, 2007; David, 2010; Sharma, 2008). Applying this principle in the context of monitoring student learning engagement would highlight the conditions of support and services that consider the student's educational, cultural and social backgrounds.

6.2.3 Access

In the social justice literature, particularly Young (1990) and Gerwitz (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 is an over-riding theme in regards to monitoring student learning engagement. As with equity, access is determined by the inclusive structures, systems and strategies an institution might utilise to facilitate student support.

6.2.4 Participation

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

In its application to initiatives that monitor student learning engagement, participation is enabled via the promotion of the activity and can be improved by the quality of engagement and the quantity of the connections.

6.2.5 Rights

Social justice as "fairness" is concentrated on the rights of the individual. The literature on social justice often infers that social justice is preoccupied with the notion of an individual's rights and specifically that individual rights are determined 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:

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, to social relationships that enable to constrain action.

(p. 25)

Monitoring student learning engagement activities would therefore 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.

In summary, the five social justice principles are identified in the literature on participation, engagement and social inclusion as re-emerging themes that can be identified in the discourse around social justice and education.

7. Conclusion and discussion

The review of the available literature has provided an overview of the concept of social justice themes in higher education. An overview of the various historical and current perceptions of social justice indicated the various discrepancies in interpretations and definitions. The widening participation agenda in Australian higher education and the terminology used in the literature around social inclusion aligns directly with issues of social justice and equity. For example, recent literature and reporting, particularly in the Australian context, furthers the necessity to increase the participation of low SES students and Indigenous students in higher education.

Examination of the social justice literature and amalgamation with the current issues around student participation and engagement assists in drawing out key themes that may be utilised in developing key principles and a framework of initiatives aimed at monitoring and safeguarding student learning engagement. The identified themes – or principles - : *Self-determination, Equity, Access, Participation and Rights* can then be applied to specific initiatives undertaken in the higher education sector that focus on safeguarding student learning engagement.

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