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## RESEARCH PAPER

# The role of higher education in facilitating social mobility

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This paper presents findings from an initial scoping study that set out to ask and invite discussion on 'what more can be done in higher education to better facilitate social mobility for equity groups in Australia?' The research involved identifying studies which detailed information on the broad range of complex issues concerning social mobility both in Australia and internationally, in order to gain a fuller understanding of how important higher education participation has become in efforts to improve equity and social justice. Applying the findings about higher education's role in driving social mobility to a number of identified barriers to equity group engagement, the paper concludes that although social mobility discourse is problematic, continued funding for successful enabling, outreach and scholarship programs remains an essential part of ensuring that the full diversity of the Australian population is included in higher education, so that opportunities for social mobility are available to all.

*Keywords*: social mobility, Australian higher education, equity initiatives, student disadvantage, widening participation

## Introduction

In the wake of the global financial crisis of 2008, many nations were forced to grapple with growing public discomfort at rising levels of income inequality and entrenched socioeconomic disadvantage. As these issues came to the forefront of public policy discussions, social mobility emerged as a critical policy pursuit in the UK and other Western nations: to ensure that all citizens had the chance to pursue their life goals, regardless of background, class, and individual attributes. Nations such as the UK and Australia have focused on facilitating the massification of higher education as a means of driving social mobility. In this paper, social mobility is understood as the ability of an individual to have their position within society not be dependent on that of their parents, in terms of social, occupational and/or economic status (Leigh, 2007; Mallman, 2017; McKnight, 2015; Redmond, Gubhaju, Smart & Katz, 2010). In the discussion below, the policy strategies required for ensuring that there are opportunities for people to access and participate in higher education programs that enable social mobility are outlined.

Since the Australian Federal Government took responsibility for higher education funding from the states in 1973, higher education policy has focussed on broadening access to university in order to produce a skilled workforce that meets the needs of industry throughout the country, whilst continually improving the lives of its citizens. Over the course of the past three decades,

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progress has been made toward this goal through policy, government funding, and widening participation measures, to ensure university education is accessed by a wider group of people (Behrendt, Larkin, Griew & Kelly, 2012; Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008). Investments have ultimately led to Australia being perceived as a strong global leader in addressing equity in higher education (Coates & Krause, 2005; James et al., 2008).

The current policy focus of funding greater access to higher education is driving consistent growth in student enrolments in recent years (Department of Education and Training, 2016c), although more focussed measures are necessary to ensure that those from disadvantaged backgrounds are able to access higher education so that universities provide an equitable opportunity for all to achieve social mobility. As overall domestic undergraduate enrolments continue to rise year-on-year in Australian universities, many equity cohorts remain persistently under-represented in the higher education landscape (Koshy, 2016), meaning some of those with the most to gain – in terms of mobility – from higher education engagement are not always benefiting at the same rate as the rest of the population.

This paper is the result of a scoping study undertaken to consider which policy measures in Australia have acted to facilitate social mobility for equity students through higher education. This investigation has revealed a number of directions for further study which may be taken to resolve inconsistencies concerning the conceptualisation of social mobility, its relation to higher education public policy, and the competing priorities widening participation agendas pose to current concepts of social mobility within neoliberal democratic discourse (Southgate & Bennett, 2014).

## Methodology

The research from which this paper has emerged focused on the question: 'what more can be done in higher education to better facilitate social mobility for equity groups in Australia?' The research was undertaken as a scoping study (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005) aimed at identifying studies which enabled key ideas and research findings to be retrieved from literature published within the last ten years to answer questions concerning the nature of social mobility and the impact of higher education. These were:

- What are the typical characteristics of a socially mobile individual or society?
- Which nations have high social mobility, and which policies are conducive to social mobility?
- How is Australia faring in encouraging a socially mobile society, and which groups are benefiting more/less?
- What role do various institutions play in facilitating social mobility?
- How significant is higher education in fostering social mobility?

Once an initial collection of studies was identified, the literature was assessed for relevance to addressing one of the above questions and whether it developed or contained primary data and research findings. The information concerning the questions raised was grouped into sub-topics and charted in Microsoft Visio (see Figure 1) to direct further information gathering for completing the study. The sub-topics were then amended to: measures of social mobility; role of higher education; student equity and widening participation; student finances; educational preparation; and, international comparisons.

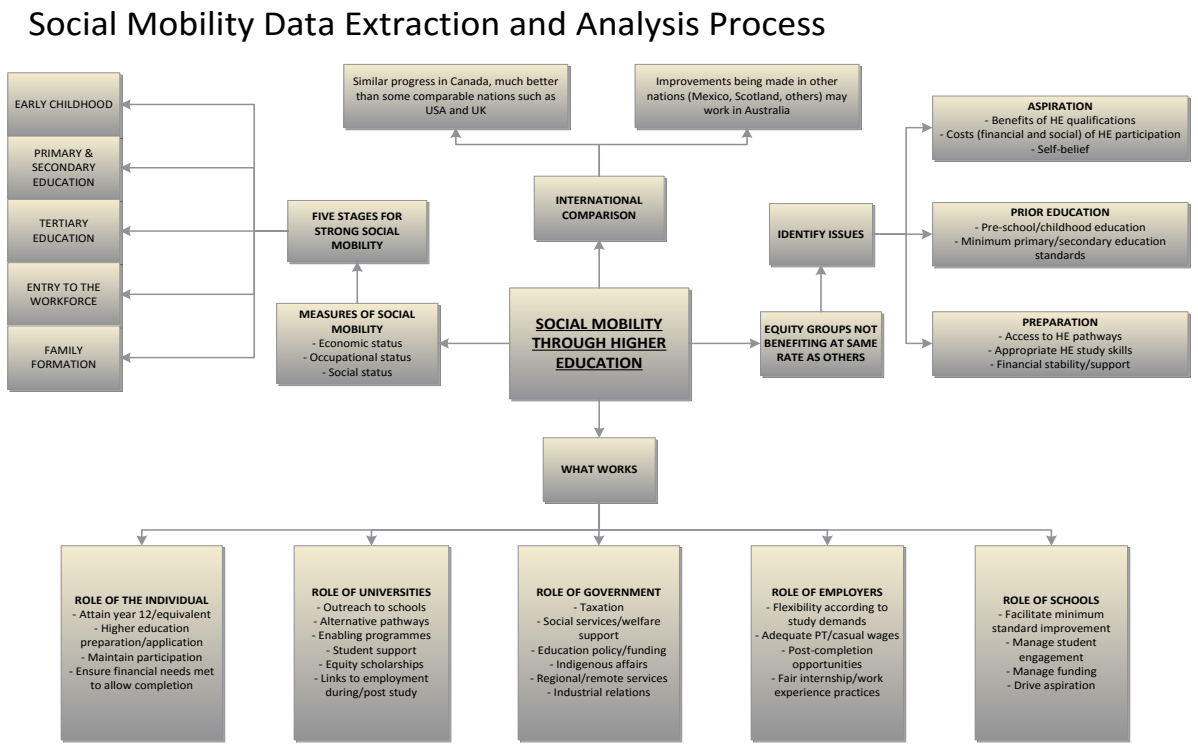


**Figure 1:** Social mobility data extraction and analysis process

## Findings

### *Measures of social mobility*

Relevant literature (Leigh, 2007; Mallman, 2017; McKnight, 2015; Redmond, Gubhaju, Smart & Katz, 2010) regarding social mobility in Australia (and similar nations) describe it as the ability of an individual to have their position within society not be dependent on their family background. A number of sources indicate a strong relationship between economic inequality, growth and mobility (for example, Andrews & Leigh, 2009; Magnani & Zhu, 2015). Nations with low inequality and steady growth have a more socially mobile society, whilst high inequality and low/negative growth limit social mobility (Breen, 1997; Corak, 2013; Ostry, Berg & Tsangarides, 2014).

In the past, Australia has exhibited high levels of social mobility, especially in comparison to a number of similar nations such as the United States and United Kingdom (Causa & Johansson, 2010; Leigh, 2007). Historically lower levels of economic inequality in Australia have typically prevented intergenerational retention of economic and social capital associated with low mobility, described by Howard and Reeves (2013) and McKnight (2015) as the 'glass floor' for the way in which intergenerational retention of capital insulates future generations from falling below the position of previous generations. However, through more recent analysis of intergenerational economic data, Mendolia and Siminski (2015) have identified that Australia is trending toward higher levels of inequality, which is subsequently reducing the capacity for social mobility.

There are suggestions that rising inequality in Australia may be due to the shifting nature of how social mobility is interpreted and addressed by policymakers. Sellar and Gale (2011) and Southgate and Bennett (2014) contend that the continual progression toward neoliberal framed

political discourse and policy development has led to social mobility being viewed as solely concerned with the progression of the individual through the use of their personal traits in competition with others. Raco (2009, as cited in Sellar & Gale, 2011) notes that this view represents a shift away from "the Keynesian social contract […] to an individualist politics of aspiration-building" (p. 122). This frames social mobility as an individual action in an attempt to remove the social aspects of mobility and focus on individual drivers of economic capital.

Although there is strong evidence concerning the impact of economic inequality on social mobility, addressing social inequality is just as important in facilitating opportunity for all. The influence of Bourdieu's (1983) demonstrations of the interconnected nature of social, cultural, and economic capital show that assessments of individuals based on their socioeconomic class background provide insufficient detail in assessing social mobility potential. Individual and collective social and cultural distinctions must also be considered. As recent studies in the UK (Savage et al., 2013) and Australia (Sheppard & Biddle, 2015) have shown, social class is far more diverse than traditional working, middle, and upper class distinctions separated along earnings levels. Critically, Sheppard and Biddle's (2015) survey of attitudes towards class shows that although the vast majority perceive themselves as belonging to either the working class or middle class, their perceptions (particularly for those self-describing as working class) are often vastly underestimated.

***The role of higher education***

Apart from broader national economic factors, there are actions which may be made at the individual level to improve one's chances of achieving social mobility. Reeves and Grannis (2013) identify five stages through an individual's life which significantly influence their ability to achieve social mobility, of which post-secondary education – understood in Australia as post-compulsory education – is identified as a critical stage. In Australia post-compulsory study includes vocational education as well as higher education study; this paper's focus being the latter. According to Mallman (2017) and Reeves and Grannis (2013), although early life plays a crucial role in social mobility, higher education is far more beneficial as the returns on investment to individual economic capital in post-compulsory education are greater than that of primary and secondary education (Patrinos & Montenegro, 2014; Patrinos, Ridao-Cano & Sakellariou, 2006; Reeves & Grannis, 2013). Bourdieu's (1983, p. 244) theorisation of education as involving the transmission of specific, dominant forms of 'cultural capital' through 'hereditary transmission' means that children of parents/carers with tertiary qualifications are more likely to experience greater pre-school education and opportunity at the beginning of their lives (Murray, 2009; Reeves & Grannis, 2013). This early exposure often results in an increased likelihood of that child participating in higher education (Feinstein & Duckworth, 2006).

Recent studies suggest that increased higher education attainment levels result in greater living standards and higher wages (Deloitte Access Economics, 2015). However, this is dependent again on broader policy positions in areas of social welfare and taxation. Along with the increased likelihood of high positive mobility for those who participate in higher education through improved employment outcomes, there is the capacity for non-participation to result in low or even negative mobility for those without degrees if their wages are unable to match the returns on investment associated with higher education (even with the effect of raising aggregate wages for all described earlier). Drawing on economic frameworks for intergenerational income mobility developed by Becker and Tomes (1986) and Solon (2004), Blanden (2009) identifies lower public spending on education and higher returns to education are seen to be associated with low social mobility. Corak (2013) explains further that broader public policy mechanisms such as these influence the extent to which human capital is valued and transmitted from one

generation to the next, either enabling or inhibiting intergenerational mobility.

It is worth remembering that although social mobility is often viewed as an intergenerational process, later life engagement in further education can result in an individual achieving within-generation mobility. Almost a third of students participating in higher education (undergraduate and postgraduate) in Australia are aged 25 and above (Department of Education and Training, 2016b), indicating a large cohort of those utilising higher education to improve their position.

***Student equity and widening participation***

Given the relationship between inequality and mobility, it is imperative that an egalitarian approach be maintained regarding higher education participation. As Blackburn (1999) notes, egalitarian progress is less about eliminating inequalities entirely, and more concerned with achieving equity through recognising equivalence in different personal characteristics. As such, increased participation amongst under-represented groups in higher education is critical to ensuring that social mobility remains an achievable goal. However, this idea is in contrast to current policy frameworks throughout a number of social democratic nations. The neoliberal discourses inherent in widening participation agendas throughout the UK and Australia which focus on aspiration building for those with 'potential' and 'capability', follow from theoretical reinterpretations of egalitarian political theories as articulated by Roemer and Trannoy (2015). Such notions have been challenged by Burke, Bennett, Burgess, Gray and Southgate (2016), who argue that perceptions of ability and potential are heavily influenced by representations of social and cultural advantage or disadvantage, and therefore judgements concerning 'natural ability' or 'personal choice' have to factor in socioeconomic inequities.

Nationally collected data indicate that, overall, higher education participation in Australia has risen steadily over time; particularly since government began to focus efforts to increase participation and encourage more young people to seek higher education qualifications (Department of Education, 2013; Department of Education and Training, 2016c; Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 2001; Koshy & Seymour, 2015). Policy positions and implementation of programs such as free university tuition in the 1970's, up to the introduction of the Higher Education Contribution/Loan Scheme (HECS-HELP), and, more recently, uncapped student placements, have resulted in year-on-year increases in university enrolments (Department of Education, 2014) and overall completions (Department of Education, 2015). Despite these improvements amongst the general student population, access, participation, and completion amongst disadvantaged groups remains inequitable (Koshy & Seymour, 2015), and further policy and program development needs to focus on improving opportunity and access for equity students.

***Student finances***

Student finances are a critical aspect of opportunity for equity groups in higher education. Low socioeconomic (SES) students – a central focus for many international equity agendas – are acutely at risk with university participation due to financial stress, and currently comprise roughly a third of all undergraduate equity students in Australia. Furthermore, at least a quarter of Indigenous students and a third of regional and remote students are also categorised as low SES (Department of Education and Training, 2016a). Although Australia's Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) – a world-leading income contingent loan system developed in 1989 – removes the initial cost of a university degree for domestic students by deferring payment until their earnings meet a threshold (Marks, 2009), costs associated with basics such as food, housing, transport and study materials result in many equity students requiring some form of government welfare during their studies (Anderson et al., 2008; Bexley, Daroesman, Arkoudis

& James, 2013). Welfare receipt has a relatively unknown effect on student participation, as receiving Youth Allowance – the primary source of support for students in Australia – is "positively associated with completion of both university and full-time VET courses" (Halliday-Wynes & Nguyen, 2014), yet levels of financial stress and the prevalence of coping pressures are greater amongst these students due to strict compliance measures and the financial instability inherent with welfare payments.

Whilst paid employment is a common means of supplementing or eliminating the need for welfare support for many students, work commitments can often be significantly detrimental to a student's ability to study effectively, with part-time work and/or part-time study shown to negatively influence completion rates (Edwards & McMillan, 2015). Moreover, where students are enrolled in intensive courses with unpaid practical work placement requirements – such as teaching and health services – the need for paid employment can compromise the ability to effectively engage with the learning process (Brough, Correa-Velez, Crane, Johnstone & Marston, 2015). Financial stresses associated with the need to engage in paid employment – especially when unrelated to their field of study – leads to equity students reporting increased rates of serious concern for their financial position and greater incidences of work severely hampering their studies (Bexley et al., 2013). Additionally, absence of work and/or sufficient financial support may contribute to an alarming share of students – 30.5% Indigenous and 18.2% non-Indigenous – reporting that at times they cannot afford food or other necessities (Bexley, Daroesman, Arkoudis & James, 2013, p. 57).

Recent research on the value of equity scholarships shows that a number of pressures may be alleviated by providing financial assistance on a needs basis through institutions to low SES students. Researchers found that students receiving equity scholarships experienced higher retention, greater engagement with university and community life, less stress regarding their personal financial position, and more time to focus on their studies (Reed & Hurd, 2016; Zacharias et al., 2016).

***Educational preparation***

A critical issue concerning access for equity students in higher education is prior educational attainment. Equity students are significantly disadvantaged in this area, as data show many are more likely to be below minimum national educational standards even before they reach the senior years of secondary education when a student's preparedness for higher education studies is assessed (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015; Lamb, Jackson, Walstab & Huo, 2015). Such disadvantages materialise in both geographical differences (regional v metro, low SES v high SES areas) as well as individual characteristics (Indigenous v non-Indigenous, public v private institution, NESB status). As disparities in prior educational achievement show, the complexity of links between prior attainment and access to higher education may require consideration and analysis of social and cultural capital disparities and methods for addressing these differences (Whitty, Hayton & Tang, 2015).

The most effective initiatives implemented throughout Australian universities for reducing the impact of low educational preparedness amongst equity cohorts are enabling programs such as bridging or preparatory courses focused on preparing mature-aged and non-traditional students for undergraduate studies (Hodges et al., 2013). Although enabling programs are more commonly aimed at mature-aged students with significant lapses in time since they last engaged in education and who therefore require a preparatory pathway to university, an increasing number of low-achieving recent school leavers are entering these programs as an alternative pathway to higher education (Pitman et al., 2016), or as a means of boosting their academic

preparedness following admittance to particular courses of study (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2014).

Some studies have shown that when delivered effectively to disadvantaged student cohorts, enabling programs result in improved levels of participation and student retention (Abbott-Chapman, 2007; Hodges et al., 2013; Pitman et al., 2016). Additionally, enabling programs which focus on higher education preparedness prior to commencement have been found to serve the dual purpose of improving opportunity by reducing educational deficiencies experienced by low-achieving students, whilst providing an alternative means of accessing higher education for those who do not meet traditional entrance requirements (Habel, 2012; Muldoon, 2011; Pitman et al., 2016).

Further measures to facilitate access to Australian universities include school and community outreach programs, which typically involve university students and teachers visiting schools and communities with larger contingents of equity students, or inviting class groups to attend student engagement programs on campus (Naylor, Baik & James, 2013). Many Australian universities run such programs to provide secondary students with a better understanding of what studying at university entails, and to provide introductory teaching modules for use in classrooms alongside secondary education courses (Bennett et al., 2015). Evaluations of these programs show students are more likely to consider higher education and work towards attending university following completion of their secondary school studies (Bennett et al., 2015; Cupitt & Costello, 2014; Quin, Phillimore, Worden & De Vries, 2014; Quin, Trinidad & Worden, 2015a, 2015b).

***International comparisons***

In broad terms, Australians are more socially mobile than most comparable nations. However, in order to make more detailed comparisons as to the effects of higher education policies and programs, further quantitative study is required. OECD data from the annual *Education at a Glance* report (OECD, 2015) does allow for comparisons to be made on the outcomes of overall policy platforms. Net returns on investment in tertiary education for individuals in Australia are high but below the OECD average (OECD, 2015, pp. 147-148), a positive indicator for social mobility. Expenditure on tertiary institutions has also held positive comparison with the OECD average (p. 234). The percentage of those with tertiary qualifications is also well above the OECD and G20 averages across 25-65 year olds (p. 44).

Australia compares well internationally on student loans and the cost of degrees, primarily due to its comprehensive income contingent student loan scheme (HECS-HELP) assisting with higher education affordability (Chapman, 2006; Marks, 2009). A number of other nations have since introduced similar schemes with varying differences, and whilst Australia's HECS-HELP system is among the best examples of providing a balance between individual and government affordability (Armstrong & Chapman, 2011; Chapman, 2006), there are supplementary equity initiatives undertaken in other nations (such as needs-based scholarships and bursaries) which can inform further government policies to alleviate other financial pressures for Australian students.

Some countries with consistently higher levels of tertiary educated citizens as compared to Australia, such as Canada (54%) and Korea (45%), have also shown substantial growth in attainment rates (OECD, 2015), and therefore further research may be useful to identify any measures which might increase rates of attainment in the Australian university sector. Additionally, in countries such as the United States (see for example, Cahalan & Perna, 2015)

and the United Kingdom which currently have significant issues with social mobility and engagement with higher education, a renewed focus on widening participation is being undertaken, thereby providing further opportunity for identifying innovative approaches to improving equity participation. Again, it is very difficult to make international comparisons for individual details in education policy, however, as no one measure alone holds the key to solving equity disparities it is imperative that policymakers continue to seek additional measures to foster social mobility through higher education.

## Conclusion

The discussion of literature detailed in this paper found that although broad economic factors affect the extent to which social mobility is possible within a nation, it is becoming increasingly important that a university education is within reach of all Australians, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Persistent issues such as financial pressures and lack of educational preparedness make it significantly more difficult for equity students to engage with and complete higher education studies. As such, continued funding along with the development of programs and policies aimed at ensuring equity groups are adequately represented in student cohorts, and have the support necessary to complete their studies, will go a long way to ensuring every Australian has the opportunity to achieve social mobility.

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