

Access and equity: Second chance education bring the policy directives into life

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Abstract

This case study illustrates how, in a time of exclusion, some initiatives still attempt to embrace the traditional concerns of inclusion. The University of Waikato in 2000 decided to push the access and equity policy envelope and ran a programme that enabled the inclusion of students into the university campus who previously would have been excluded by their lack of entrance qualifications till they were over 20. Primarily comprised of 18-19 year olds, this group represents the generation who have developed throughout the era of stratification and diversity that the conference theme denotes. This identity of the group is juxtaposed with the impetus behind their inclusion into the university's structure. The paper will explain in detail what the Certificate of University Preparation (CUP) initiative is, its relationship to the policy directive of access and equity and why the author feels that it embraces the values of inclusion rather than exclusion, albeit in today's consumer society. This will be done from the perspective of someone who is involved in the delivery of the Certificate and presents an exploration of the 'issues' associated with the programme.

Introduction and Purpose

The theme of this conference is 'social diversity and the politics of exclusion'. When Lockwood Smith, through the Education Amendment Act 1990, decided that the entry criteria to university for those under the age of 20 should be three C passes in Bursary, he created a situation of exclusion and stratification. An exclusion that, given the inaccuracy of Bursary as a predictor of university performance, was inequitable.

In 2000 the University of Waikato pioneered a new kind of bridging education programme, the Certificate of University Preparation (CUP), designed to overcome the exclusion and inequity of the three Cs entrance requirement. CUP's target group is students who wish to attend university but have failed to gain entrance in bursary. Once these students would have gone elsewhere, either into the labour market or the polytechnic sector, because they were excluded. Now CUP offers them a way to be included, breathing life into the concepts of access and equity.

The purpose of this paper is to use this bridging programme as a case study, in order to show that exclusion and inequity can still be overcome, and that the policy directive of the late 1980s, with respect to access and equity, did not fall on completely infertile ground.

A Time of Exclusion

This section examines the forces that led to the creation of CUP. It is called 'a time of exclusion' because the changes to public policy in the 1990s and the political ideology that underpinned them led to the exclusion and inequality in university education. The first part of this section will outline the neo-liberal or 'new right' ideology that has influenced New Zealand's public policy throughout the previous two decades.

King (1987) argues that the ideas underpinning neo-liberalism include: individual freedom; the free market; the role of the state, conservatism; and public choice theory. For the purposes of this paper the ideas of the free market and the role of the state are particularly important. The impact of these ideas on public policy will be explored in the next part of the paper, which outlines the discourse of access and equity.

Economic crises from the late 1960s onwards heralded a change in the direction of public policy, including post-secondary education and training (Law, 1996; Piercy,

1999; VTC, 1986). This change represented a movement away from policy influenced by the goals of the welfare state compromise, to policy influenced by the goals of the laissez-faire free market. As King (1987) notes with regard to the United Kingdom, the popularisation of these ideas and the inefficiencies of the welfare state allowed politicians to advocate a return to the liberal, laissez-faire economic principles. The neo-classical economic ideas that underpin and are part of neo-liberalism, make this hegemonic force oppositional and, therefore, incompatible with the ideas that underpinned the welfare state.

The Discourse of Access and Equity

Education, access to it and increased equity as a result, has long been influenced by the need to fulfil citizenship rights as well as the need to satisfy the requirements of industry and the economy (Williams, 1980). These two drivers, the democratic and industrial, of education have often been in conflict with each other. An important part of the education policy debate concerning those twin drivers is access and equity. If on the one hand, education is to provide an extension of citizenship rights, then it must be accessible to all. If it is, it is claimed, equity will gradually follow. If, on the other hand, however, industry's demand for qualified labour is not met or a skills mis-match arises, then the education system is expected to change its priorities. Access to education is also tied to this tension.

In the 1980s, as the nature of work altered through the introduction of technology and new production methods (Mathews, 1989) and the numbers of unemployed grew (Deeks, Parker and Ryan, 1994), the need to address the issues of the changing nature of work and increasing unemployment became more urgent. Increasingly education was seen as a focal point as a way of providing a solution to these problems (Piercy, 1999). Human capital theory (HCT) re-emerged as the dominant way of thinking about the interface between education and the economy (Marginson, 1997).

In OECD member countries, HCT was adopted by policy makers as part of a drive to enhance international competitiveness. Behind this focus on HCT and the accompanying expectation of educational reform was the belief the more education countries have, through their human capital or people, the better it could deal with economic crises. Countries such as Germany and Japan were often used to evidence the claims that advanced education and training regimes, and a highly educated workforce strengthened a country's ability to survive economic crises (Jurgens, Malsch and Dohse, 1993; Piercy, 1999). In New Zealand this led to education policies, which assumed that the economy had to move to one that was knowledge based. It followed that increased access to education and training was required. However, woven into this renewed focus on HCT were a number of neo-liberal ideas like individual freedom, choice and the free market, which held that the benefits of education accrued to the individual. This resulted in policies that required individuals to pay more for the costs of their education. In summary, while more access was facilitated, the historic role of the state as a major funder was reduced.

Meanwhile, within education policy debates, a different argument emerged, related to assessment. The view developed that norm-referenced exams were not the most efficient way of assessing a student's learning. This debate led to substantial changes in the education system. The debate, initially, was outlined in the two reports *Learning and Achieving* (1986), particularly the second report (Piercy, 1999). This Committee of Inquiry into Curriculum, Assessment and Qualifications in Forms 5 to 7 pushed the idea that the curriculum should move away from norm-referenced assessment to performance-based assessment for all three senior secondary school forms. This debate combined with the HCT debate to lead to changes in the education system, such as the establishment of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority, and the creation of the

National Qualifications Framework with its emphasis on standards-based assessment (NZQA, 1991).

On the one hand, this debate around assessment raised equity issues in terms of how to fairly assess knowledge gained. On the other hand, it linked with a concern raised by the human capital theory debate. Norm-referenced assessment means that a portion (usually 50%) of each cohort group will fail each year. Hood (1998) argues that this has had a detrimental effect on the number of students making the transition from compulsory to post-compulsory education. The OECD (1993) was concerned that by the late 1980s early 1990s, one third of the New Zealand population had no qualifications, a situation that needed to be altered if we, as a nation, were to address the issues of unemployment, the impact of technology on work and other economic crises.

Thus, the public policy debate began to centre on the need to increase access and equity within education for all members of New Zealand society, at the same time as policy makers embraced the HCT influenced conception of lifelong learning. These ideas were expressed very clearly in key policy documents such as *Learning for Life I and II* (1988 and 1989). The *Learning for Life* reports sought to encourage increased participation by removing barriers for under-represented groups by requiring equity targets to be included in an institution's charter. User pays and developing pathways between institutions and qualifications were also methods promoted by the reports as ways of increasing access and equity. These initiatives reflected the different pressures and motivations shaping education policy by the late 1980s.

The election of a National Government in late 1990 led to more enthusiasm for neo-liberal ideas. However, despite their other radical changes, such as repealing the Pay Equity Act 1990 and, later, the legislation governing the Trade Union Education Authority, National continued to implement the ideas outlined in *Learning for Life II*. In fact, it extended the agenda to cover the compulsory sector qualifications in order to achieve seamlessness in the education system (NZQA, 1991).

The idea of increasing access and equity in education was implemented against the backdrop of a reduction in the role of the state, reduced public funding, and the increasing presence of a competitive free market in tertiary education. This market model meant that polytechnics as well as universities could offer degrees, that private training establishments (PTEs) were established in increasing numbers, and that funding continued to be based on student enrolments. These changes were implemented to increase competition and therefore access. Equity too was to be achieved by the operation of the free market, which, Simon Upton (1987) argues, is the most efficient mechanism of obtaining equity for all individuals because state intervention coerces and impinges on individual freedom and choice.

A Time of Inclusion

This second section discusses CUP and how it represents an access and equity initiative and illustrates that the need to readdress inequalities is never outdated. This section outlines the aim of CUP and then describes how CUP operates. The practicalities of running CUP, the nature of the students, and the issues that arise from both are also discussed.

The Aims of CUP

Part of the motive for CUP was to increase student numbers and so the intention behind CUP was not framed solely by the pursuit of social justice. Rather, it reflected the reality of the context within which tertiary education finds itself: a user pays, free market competitive environment. An aim of the programme, that is in tune with social justice, is to offer students an alternative pathway into the university system, recognising that a norm-referenced exam may not be the most reliable way of assessing a student's ability to do well in a university environment. Regardless, of the drive to

increase student numbers, I believe that the aim of CUP embrace the policy directives of access and equity in the truest sense. This is because CUP acknowledges the idea that not all members of society have equal opportunities. An alternative pathway also recognises the difficulties that can be faced by students in rural and lower decile schools.

The programme

The certificate ran for the first time in 2000, with places offered to students who were under age 20 but who did not fulfil the entry requirements. The majority of these students had sat Bursary but had failed to gain three C passes. However, there were others who had not sat Bursary but had, for example, repeated sixth form twice or felt they needed to brush up on certain skills. The majority of the students recruited to CUP had already applied to the university to be accepted into a degree programme.

The certificate is a non-credit, but ECTS generating, bridging programme run through the Centre for Continuing Education. However, as an interdisciplinary programme it also involves the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) as well as the School of Science and Engineering (SSE). Students must complete four, non-credit papers to gain the certificate. Two papers are compulsory; the other two are selected from six optional papers offered by FASS and SSE.

The two compulsory papers are:

- Introduction to Study Skills; and
- Introduction to Critical Thought and Expression.

FASS offers two of the optional papers:

- Bridging Arts; and
- Bridging Social Sciences.

SSE offers the other four optional papers:

- Bridging Maths and Statistics;
- Bridging Biology;
- Bridging Chemistry; and
- Bridging Physics.

The certificate runs for the duration of the A semester and is taught on campus in order to integrate the students, many of whom stay at the halls of residence, into University life and 'discipline'. This integrative approach is carried over into the way the papers are structured and run. The students' assessment within each paper consists of tasks similar to those completed in first year credit papers, from tutorial participation through to formal exams. If students gain less than 50% of the assessment in all or any of the four papers, they do not gain the certificate or straightforward entry into the University in the B semester. Other integrative elements that are part of the bridging papers offered by FASS include; creating a lecture format and structure that allows the delivery of a certain amount of content as well as introducing the students to the subjects offered within the Faculty; and having guest lecturers from the Faculty rather than bridging staff only.

Students who successfully complete the programme can enrol in FASS, SSE or can enrol in teaching training through the School of Education. Other faculties accept CUP students who have completed, but often require a B average across the four papers.

The Reality of CUP

The students' performances both in CUP and in the context of the wider university have proved that the intention of CUP is sound. Whether they fail to gain entrance to university by 1% or 3% the students have done well gaining the mid-stream grades, in

credit university papers taken towards degrees, that they have had or have aimed for in the past.

However, the way CUP has operated in practice presents some trends that have risen in conflict with the first aim of CUP. These trends relate to: the nature of the CUP student/'consumer'; who enrolls in CUP; and the support that CUP students receive.

CUP students, in a similar fashion to other first year students, stay in the halls of residence, dress in fashionable clothing, go to the Hilly (local student bar) and have cell-phones – which ring regularly in class! They are the 'consumer generation', more so than any other before them. Most were born after 1980 and have grown up in a world that watched the steady replacement of the welfare state and its underpinning values and ideas. If they have had a job it was under an employment contract. E-mail and the internet have been part of their lives before high school, and the need to replace an item simply because the technology has been transcended is normal. The cost of education is unquestionable – they have breathed in individualised human capital theory and learnt how they are the consumers of all, including their education. This means that their approach to education is one of a consumer where the programme has to be worth the money and their time. As discussed below these 'consumer' students do not always follow the path planned for them by the university.

Table 1

Averaged failure rate	No. of students enrolled in CUP	Results for CUP 2000	No. of students enrolled in B Semester	Results for B Semester 2000	No. of students enrolled in A semester	Results for A Semester 2001
Students who failed by 1-5 marks	27	Passed: 26 Failed: 1 Grades: A to IC	23	Passed: 19 Failed: 3 Did not enrol: 3 Grades: A to D	18	Passed: 18 Failed: 0 Grades: A to C
Students who failed by 6-10 marks	15	Passed: 14 Failed: 1 Grades: B+ to IC	14	Passed: 13 Failed: 1 Did not enrol: 1 Grades: B to D	11	Passed: 11 Failed: 0 Grades: B to C
Students who failed by up to 20+	10	Passed: 7 Failed: 3 Grades: B+ to D	7	Passed: 6 Failed: 1 Did not enrol: 3 Grades: B to D	5	Passed: 4 Failed: 1 Grades: B+ to D
Other	5	Passed: 3 Failed: 2 Grades: B to IC	3	Passed: 2 Failed: 1 Did not enrol: 2 Grades: B- to D	4	Passed: 2 Failed: 2 Grades: B- to D

Further Issues to be Explored

There are five key issues, that have emerged from the reality or practice of CUP. The first relates to who enrolls in CUP – or rather who does not, the second relates to the limited ability of CUP to reach out to those for whom there are real barriers in the education system to gaining university entrance, and the third relates to the 'consumer' student and how they utilise the programme to fulfil their own needs. The fourth and fifth issues relate to the nature of the programme rather than the students. The fourth concerns the support offered to CUP students when they are in the programme and how it prepares them for university study in a way that other school leavers do not have access to, to the same extent, and the fifth relates to the ethical problem of providing an alternative pathway that sixth formers have the potential to access.

As stated before, the grades obtained by most CUP students, once they begin their degree programme, vindicate their inclusion into the university system. However, other elements that have appeared in practice question the ability of CUP to remain true to its aims.

A key issue arising from the nature of the students is that the take up of CUP is limited. Under-represented groups obviously still face the same barriers created by the compulsory education system that caused them to fail, either by not reaching bursary or if they do, by not being consumer oriented enough to see the opportunities offered by CUP. That the programme is a fee paying one could also contribute to the limited up take by some of these groups.

My wish is for the programme to reflect its intentions and increase access and equity for all students, rather than only those who already know how to work the system. But my wish could be beyond reach until the context and the target of the programme is changed. This is because those reaching 7th form have already proved that they are willing and able to stay within the education system and those sitting bursary indicate that they wish to continue on in their studies. So as the targeted CUP students are those who have sat Bursary, they had the potential to be captured anyhow. It is only the happenstance of failing one or more exams by minimal percentage that has pushed these students into the CUP programme. What this means in practice is that we only capture the next few percentiles down instead of offering a bridge to those who are truly disadvantaged by the education system.

But on a more positive side, the students' savvy as consumers means that some are likely to take the B semester off and go and work to reduce their student loan. Other options that illustrate their ability to exploit the system is part-time study of the papers or the completion of only the papers that they feel will be useful instead of working towards a qualification.

Issues arise from the nature of the programme as well. In general, CUP students are very well prepared for study within the University of Waikato, having learned about its infrastructure and its assessment requirements in a safer environment than those taking first year papers. The question this raises is, 'does this not create a situation of inequity when some students entering first year papers are taught the skills needed to be prepared for university study and other first year students are not?'

Another issue arising from the programme is its very nature as an alternative pathway. Why would a student who knows that they will not do well in Bursary exams, because of the one off nature of the exam, or high-pressure stress, sit the exam when they can enrol in CUP instead? Not only would they avoid the exam, but they would also gain entry a semester earlier, an attractive option for the savvy consumer student.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe that CUP does represent an attempt to include rather than exclude. In this sense, it really does redress the inequity of norm-referenced assessment. Therefore, this initiative is one that embraces access and equity, albeit in an environment of individualism. However, as the further issues explored highlight, today's education context and the legacy of neo-liberal public policy influences how the 'student consumer's' thinking is shaped and thus, how the system is used. So there is a slight caveat to my initial claim because it seems in reality that it has led in part to increasing the participation of those who already were capable of accessing the system.

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