

‘There was something about aspiration’: Widening participation policy effects in England and Australia

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Abstract

This paper discusses the emergence of aspiration as a keyword linked to higher education equity policy in England and Australia since 1997. Aspiration serves multiple purposes when constructed as a problematic site in which policy must intervene. For example, it can be understood as a vector for new technologies of governance that operate through the production of entrepreneurial dispositions; as a signifier for groups that have experienced upward social mobility; and as a personality trait that correlates with future earnings and thus can be defined as a dimension of human capital. It has also provided a rallying point for equity work in higher education. Focusing on English and Australian policy contexts, as well as the recent education work of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), we examine the different perspectives of a range of stakeholders on the strategy of ‘raising aspiration’ for higher education and how these have changed over time; the partnership work undertaken in the HE systems of both countries under the aegis of aspiration-raising policies; and recent policy developments in both contexts. In particular, we consider how aspiration-focused policies have affective effects on policy actors and seek to control affects directly by modulating feelings about capacities for action in the future. Two data sets provide the empirical basis for the paper: (a) document analysis of major equity policies in England since 1997 and in Australia since 2008, as well as a review of relevant OECD policy documents; and (b) analysis of nine interviews with equity practitioners and policy personnel in England, Australia and located within the OECD.

Keywords: aspiration, widening participation, higher education policy, equity, affect

Introduction

This paper describes the emergence of aspiration as a keyword for higher education (HE) equity policy in England and Australia since the mid-1990s. In 1997 New Labour was elected in the UK and the Dearing report was published. This marked the beginning of a new period of equity policy and widening participation activity in English higher education, which coincided with (a) the entrenchment in social policy of the ‘politics of aspiration’ (Raco 2009), following the breakdown of the Keynesian welfare state, and (b) the growing influence of the OECD in education, particularly the release in 1996 of influential reports on the knowledge-based economy and lifelong learning (OECD, 1996a, 1996b). Here we consider the political and policy contexts in which aspiration emerged as a problem in and for HE policy; the views of various stakeholders regarding the objectives of aspiration-raising initiatives and how these changed over time; and the effects of different policy settings and funding models on approaches to equity work in HE over this period. In a sense, the term ‘aspiration’ provides an index of broader discursive trends in policy contexts since the mid-1990s where education has been seen as newly important for national economies and individual social mobility.

The concept of aspiration describes a set of distinct yet related cultural, social and psychological dynamics that are receiving increasing attention across various domains including governance, politics, economics and popular culture. For example, governmentality scholars have linked the rhetoric of aspiration to the emergence of technologies of governance that shift responsibility from states to individuals for their access to social services (e.g. Rose 1999), as well as the creation of markets for the provision of these services and the move to small government (Ball 20088). From this perspective, aspiration describes a disposition or sensibility that provides a nexus between the psychological and the social, making it ‘possible to govern without governing society—to govern

through the 'responsibilized' and 'educated' anxieties and aspirations of individuals and their families' (Rose 1999, p. 88). The politics of aspiration also enables a deft sleight of hand for governments, positioning them as advocates and enablers of social mobility, but without making them accountable if mobility does not occur, in which case a lack of aspiration can be blamed on individuals who have not made the most of the 'opportunities' available to them.

This ideal construction of the advanced liberal citizen permeated the rhetoric of politicians and public debate in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Labo(u)r parties in England and Australia during the mid to late 1990s became focused on a nominal social grouping referred to as 'aspirationals,' who were experiencing new social mobility and changing the demographic composition of Labo(u)r's traditional base, although it is debatable to what extent the political construction of this group corresponded to a distinct social group (Goot and Watson 2007). In this context, aspiration was associated with visible signifiers of social mobility, including the purchase of plasma televisions, large houses in new estates and a preference for private education. There was considerable borrowing and learning in relation to policy and political strategies between Australia and England at this time, including this rhetorical emphasis on aspiration (Johnson and Tonkiss, 2002). Aspiration was explicitly linked with equity agendas in education by Australian Federal Labor Party leader Mark Latham (2003), who coined the notion of 'aspirational equality' to signal an emphasis on providing social mobility through economic opportunity and social justice policies premised on ensuring equality of access to these opportunities rather than a focus on outcomes.

Aligned with the emergence of the 'aspirationals' and the function attributed to aspiration by governmentality scholars is the view of aspiration taken by economists, particularly in relation to human capital theory. From this perspective, aspiration is one of a number of 'non-cognitive traits' that correlate with future earnings and productivity (Jencks 1979; Bowles, Gintis and Osbourne 2001). The OECD (2002) has suggested that conceptions of human capital ought to be widened to include these non-cognitive or personality traits, of which 'motivational characteristics are likely to be central' (p. 124). Feher (2009) has shown how this expansion of human capital to include much more of our lives and selves than the academic and technical skills we acquire through education can be traced back to a confluence of (a) the individualisation effected by identity politics in the 1960s and 1970s, which made the personal a new site for the political, and (b) the neoliberal emphasis on individuals acting as self-entrepreneurs. As a result, human capital has become a new subjective formation in which the whole of our experiences and our emotional lives are transmutable into productive capacities or skills to which economic value can be attached (Feher 2009).

With the blossoming of positive psychology and self-help culture a new form of 'emotional capitalism' has emerged in which emotions have become a site from which to extract economic value (Illouz 2007) and the effects of this development can be seen in education with the proliferation of social and emotional well-being policies. These policies represent motivation, aspiration and optimistic thinking as goods to be cultivated through education. These dispositions also provide a popular cultural site through which certain talk show and reality television formats (Illouz 2003; Skeggs and Wood 2012) connect with audiences, who engage with their narratives of self-transformation and self-determination in an empathetic, affective mode.

We can see here that, since the mid-1990s, aspiration has become a keyword in Raymond Williams (1976, p. 15) sense of 'significant, binding words in certain activities and their interpretation ... [and] significant, indicative words in certain forms of thought'. Our aim in this paper is to examine how the emergence of aspiration as such a keyword was linked to the reinvigoration of equity policy in HE in England and later Australia, making possible forms of outreach activity based on partnerships between universities and other institutions built around equity rationales. Understandings of what is being targeted in aspiration-raising programs, and views on how best to approach this work, have varied considerably across both contexts and over time. In particular, deficit connotations implied by

the notion of 'raising aspiration' have been strongly contested (e.g. Sellar, Gale and Parker 2011; Burke 2012). This paper provides a comparison between the approaches taken to, and lessons learnt from, aspiration-focused equity agendas over this period in both countries. We focus specifically on the period of the Aimhigher program in England (2004-2010) and the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) in Australia (2010-present). We are aware however that although the period we are looking at saw significant policy activity linked to aspirations policy examples of early policy such as 'A fair chance for all' publication from Australia in the 1990's should not be overlooked.

Policy documents and interviews provide the empirical basis for our analysis. The paper reports findings from a small research project examining aspiration-focused policy across three contexts: the higher education systems in (1) England and (2) Australia, as well as (3) the HE policy work of the OECD. This project comprised document analysis of major equity policies in England since the Dearing report and in Australia since the 2008 'Bradley' Review of Higher Education (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008), as well as a review of relevant OECD publications, including the major thematic review of tertiary education published in 2008 (Santiago et al. 2008). This analysis informs the paper but is not elaborated here. Instead, we focus on the nine interviews conducted with equity practitioners, bureaucrats and policy analysts in England, Australia and the OECD in Paris. These interviews focused on the views of equity managers and policy personnel on the rhetoric of aspiration in HE equity policy and the changing rationales for and nature of equity policies and programs over the past 15 years. Many of the interviewees have longstanding experience with HE equity policy and were influential actors in the different contexts of the study. The paper is divided into three main sections: the first examines different perspectives on the rhetoric of aspiration and how they have changed and become modified over time; the second describes the partnership work that flourished under outreach-focused aspiration-raising policies; and the third takes stock of recent widening participation and equity policy developments in England and Australia.

Theoretical framework: The affective effects of policy

The study on which this paper reports took a policy sociology approach (Ball 1997), focusing primarily on policy consequences (Taylor et al. 1997) and contexts of practice (Bowe, Ball and Gold 1994) understood in relation to a policy context where aspiration assumed the status of a keyword. We attend to policies as texts open to interpretation and appropriation by policy actors, as well as policy as a 'moving discursive frame which articulates and constrains the possibilities and probabilities of interpretation and enactment' (Ball 1993). To consider the mechanisms through which the latter mode of policy operates we draw on Gulson and Webb's (2012) notion of policy prolepsis, which operates through 'actors' sense of policy and their estimations of possible outcomes' (p. 89). This approach draws attention to representations in policy of things or events that have not yet occurred have effects in the present through the sense is made during interpretations, both in terms of recognising a particular meaning and less consciously sensing what is meant. The ways in which post 9/11 rhetoric about terrorist threat had effects in the present as senses of fear and insecurity provide a clear example of such prolepses (Massumi 2010), while efforts to improve public morale during wartime provide an example of more hopeful prolepses (Anderson 2010).

Drawing on the work of Gilles Deleuze, Webb and Gulson (2012) argue that 'policy prolepses operate through affective tones, or affective sensings, that function without certainty, and indeed, on serendipity', thus requiring greater attention to 'a certain materiality of the body, or technology of self, that is intimately connected to policy texts' (p. 89).

Notions of policy 'interpretations', then, are transformed into a politics of controlling affective registers of meaning, if not, attempts to control affects themselves. Policy prolepses, then, can be understood as the ways policy signs are rhetorically figured to influence those sensings and the ways educators make

sense of policy, shape their practice, and eventually, create themselves in relation to perceived signs. (Webb and Gulson 2012, p. 92)

Webb and Gulson focus specifically on cases of policy prolepsis in which policies have effects through the fearful affects they produce, such as the way in which accountability policies and their mediatization create a climate in which teachers can become fearful of job losses or negative consequences if test results and other data are deemed unsatisfactory.

We suggest that affective registers of meaning and affects themselves are both sites in which aspiration-focused policy has effects. Policy focused on aspirations generally includes promises about the future benefits of education: the opportunity bargains described by Brown, Lauder and Ashton (2010). These promises are an example of policy prolepsis operating through the production of desire and hopeful or optimistic affects: what we refer to here as 'policy affects', following Protevi's (2009) argument regarding political affects. In this way aspiration policy makes use of policy prolepses both in terms of its effects on actors charged with implementing equity policies (e.g. triggering excitement and hope associated with 'making a difference' for disadvantaged groups) and, in turn, on the prospective HE students whose aspiration is in question and who are promised a 'good life' through higher education. In the analysis of interview data that follows we draw attention to the effects of policy on the attitudes of equity managers in particular, to show how their senses of excitement and disappointment register changing conditions of possibility in the contexts in which they work.

Multiple perspectives on the rhetoric of aspiration

Aspiration is a term that has been prevalent in HE equity policy in England and Australia (e.g. DfE 2003, 2006; Australian Government 2009). Aspiration is a term that has meant many different things to the various interviewees in this project and here we direct our analytical attention to the sense that each made of the ambiguous and ultimately polysemic signification of the term in policy texts and contexts. Views on the concept of aspiration described by interviewees can be grouped into three categories: definitional, critical, and pragmatic. We recognise the provisional character of this as part of one discussion but hope that through opening up this categorisation we are facilitating a wider discussion about the rhetoric of aspiration. Definitional views include attempts by interviewees to describe what is at stake in equity programs that target aspiration and to explain what is important about aspiration. Critical views drew attention to deficit assumptions in the rhetoric of aspiration (i.e. raising aspiration implies a lack of aspiration among target groups) and the symbolic violence of this rhetoric. Pragmatic views focused on alleged disconnection between political and policy rhetoric and what was actually done by equity practitioners in the name of 'aspiration-raising'. Critique is still implied by these latter views, insofar as they are dismissive of the 'reality' invoked by official formulations, but this critique is not developed and these views more pragmatically emphasise what 'really' happened.

Defining aspiration

HE policies have tended to use the term aspiration to signify desire for something above or beyond one's present circumstances. In this sense, aspiration for post-secondary education is an attitude toward a future goal, which focuses attention on the ends of aspiration and the benefits of these ends for the aspirant. However, a number of interviewees commented that what is at stake in aspirations-focused equity work is shifting 'self-perceptions'. Of course, the construction of aspiration in policy texts clearly involves self-perception as part of imagining of who one is and who one could become in the future. However, these interviewees pointed towards a less tangible aspect of self-perception that was not so obviously related to an imagined future, but rather a more tacit sense of one's capacities in the present.

This perspective was most clearly expressed by a manager of an equity unit in an English university, who gestured toward 'something else' that aspiration-raising approaches target, beyond a change in people's stated desires for their future:

[T]his wasn't just about aspiration raising ... There was clearly something about aspiration but I think I would call it something else and that was more about self-image or self-confidence or self-perception; *about what I can do*. I think there's a difference between that and aspiration.

What is posited as important here is changing self-perception of one's capacities in the present—'what one can do'—as distinct from promoting a concrete future objective. This resonates with another view that was prevalent among interviewees—that aspiration-focused initiatives must be coupled with efforts to improve academic capacities—which is discussed further below. What is seen to matter here is the perception that one's capacities have changed resulting in a more 'confident' disposition. This suggests a reading of the effects of aspiration work in terms of the affects it seeks to control, where affects are defined as somatic perception of changes in one's capacities for interaction in a given context (Deleuze 1988; Lloyd and Gatens 1999).

In commenting on the issue of measuring the impact of aspiration-focused initiatives, another interviewee signalled that changes in self-perception and attitude provide a useful indicator of the effectiveness of such initiatives:

[O]ne of those measures could be working with the school to look at whether there have been changes in learning trajectory, ... whether it's starting to see changes in attitude; I mean, all of these are subjective measures ... where you will be able to gather some information about whether what the institution is doing, working with the school, is actually changing attitudes to learning, enthusing people for various different subjects, ... it's about, "Has this changed attitude? ... Has it changed the way the young person sees themselves as a learner?"

Here we can see the 'subjective' effects of these initiatives juxtaposed with more concrete indicators such as actual progression into HE or changed 'learning trajectories'. This interviewee went on to note that 'it's very difficult to show outcomes of this work in terms of progression into HE, especially if you are working with 11 year olds'. While aspiration-raising policies generally specify an explicit aim to increase progression into HE, the difficulty of assessing the substantive effects of programs on actual progression rates, particularly when working with students early in their schooling, brings to the fore a more tacit objective of these programs: to foster subjective dispositions such as motivation or enthusiasm that are considered conducive to educational engagement and progression to HE.

These data excerpts illustrate how people involved in administering and implementing aspiration-focused policies and programs posit an affective dimension to this work. Both interviewees argue that the dispositions of participants in such programs are important, with increased enthusiasm and confidence considered desirable outcomes beyond stated intentions to pursue HE. Here we can see how, in these contexts, aspiration-focused policy works at the level of affect and 'induces and prompts particular behaviours and desires' (Webb and Gulson 2012, p. 96).

Critiquing aspiration-raising

A dominant theme across the set of interviews was critique of the deficit perspectives implied by the rhetoric of 'raising' aspiration. Many interviewees criticised the individualised construction of the problem of low aspirations, which tends to bracket structural explanations for disadvantage and thus encourage 'culture of poverty' explanations for a lack of social mobility, as well as the potential elitism of promoting of higher education as the best pathway for all. A manager of an equity unit in an Australian university commented that 'it's a convenience, in terms of public discourse, because ... it problematises the aspirant and their families and their communities'. However, the implication that certain groups lack aspiration was quickly challenged in contexts of practice and equity managers moved to distinguish their work from remedial logics of aspiration-raising.

Perhaps the clearest example of deficit views in popular interpretations of the rhetoric surrounding aspiration was provided by an interviewee running programs in an English university equity unit:

[W]hen I first came here, I told the press office what we were doing and they wrote an article and luckily I managed to proofread it beforehand, but they changed it around from 'aspiration raising,' which of course was what we said we were doing, to 'the university is working with local parents who lack ambition'. So suddenly there was this terrible twist on it! I have always been uncomfortable about what it means by 'aspiration raising' and I think what we are seeing is ... changes that have happened, not certainly in the language but in what we do.

Here we can see the discomfort produced for many working in this area by such deficit perceptions, in response to which emerged more pragmatic views on the objectives of aspiration-focused equity programs—discussed further in the next section—that seek to bracket the political and policy rhetoric, as well as to resist popular deficit perceptions of 'lacking' ambition.

Another interviewee explained how simplistic interpretations of aspiration-focused policy were prevalent early-on and tended to focus on raising awareness about the benefits of HE and addressing inhibitions to people imagining HE as a desirable option:

The whole idea of raising aspiration was quite simplistically approached to begin with. It was very much about, 'Well, if you just tell people about higher education and what it can deliver and that actually it is not that scary, they will aspire to go.' And there were ... no considerations about a willingness to step outside the social and cultural norms and all the rest of it. ... It's been a learning process all the way along.'

This learning process in England transferred to the Australian context, where equity practitioners were quick to problematize the focus on aspiration in HE equity policy following the 'Bradley' Review of Australian Higher Education in 2008. A manager of an equity unit in an Australian university explained:

The 'raising aspiration' notion was pretty much directly imported from England and the work that they had been doing over there. ...[O]ur conversation moved very quickly from the terminology 'raising aspiration' and we problematised that as an elitist view about higher education being the place to end up. What we quickly started talking about was building aspiration, with a view to building in an aspiration to higher education as one of the number of post-school options.

Initial enthusiasm about the possibilities and funding associated with equity work that were rationalised in terms of aspiration-raising quickly transitioned through a critical moment in both the English and Australian contexts, leading to an evolving understanding of the complexities involved in outreach work that aimed to increase progression to university for disadvantaged groups. The development of alternative vocabularies such as 'building aspiration' could be linked to more sophisticated conceptions of outreach work (e.g. as capacity building rather than spruiking the benefits of HE). In other cases, equity managers sought to distance equity work on the ground from the rhetoric of aspiration in policy texts and discourses.

Pragmatic approaches to aspiration

Many of the interviewees working in university equity units described the conceptual underpinnings of their programs and emphasised that these were and are more complex than suggested by the policy headline of raising aspiration. A manager of an equity unit in an Australian university argued that 'it would be a problem if all that was happening were people talking about aspiration but that isn't all that's happening'. This interviewee described aspiration as 'a word that sounds really good'

and a 'code of convenience' for politicians, while emphasising the more multidimensional nature of the work actually undertaken by their unit: 'the work has broadened in scale and depth and that's been about the guidelines, not the public discourse. I'm not sure that public discourse has any effect on what practitioners do on a day-to-day basis'. Indeed, for this interviewee aspiration represented a new term for an old problem:

I don't think aspiration is new. I think if you translate it as being the concept of wanting to do post-school study, then it is a legitimate part of the debate because the cultural capital [of some groups] ... does not create that want; does not provide information for good choice-making and does not build capability or confidence that it's a real choice. They are real things to do. But aspiration alone is a bumper sticker; it's not a program.

Here we can see what this interviewee described as the 'intelligent opportunism' with which they sought to exploit the political and policy enthusiasm for aspirations in order to pursue a more sophisticated and multi-faceted approach to outreach activity. The position developed here could be read as a challenge to the critical assumptions underpinning conceptions of 'policy as discourse' and its effects on those working with policy (see Boltanski 2011 for a careful discussion of sociological critique and everyday critiques; the meta-critical perspective of the former is problematised by this interviewee, who rejects the suggestion that 'public discourse' has an effect on the work of equity practitioners). For example, this interviewee was dismissive of the notion that aspiration constituted a new site of governmentality: 'I haven't really picked up a kind of plot for it to privatise the notion of going to Uni, through it being something psychological about how you think about the world. I just don't think it's that deeply thought through'. Instead, the political convenience of the term is acknowledged here and its rhetorical effects are distanced from practice, which is presented as a matter of exploiting an opportunity to tackle longstanding issues of poverty and racism through strategies that are known to work.

A different variety of pragmatism was evident among interviewees located in the OECD. For example, one interviewee also emphasised the political attractiveness of aspiration and sought to reframe the problem in different terms: '[R]aising aspirations looks a lot more sexy for policy. But 'raising' is very much about making sure you convey the right information about the potential benefits of higher education.' This interviewee emphasised that the problem of aspiration constructed in HE equity policy is primarily one of lack of access to appropriate information on which to base decisions about the individual benefits of HE, but also that institutions have the right information about what HE needs to provide for students: 'one thing is to make sure that institutions and the supply adapts to a more diverse set of individuals'. In this account, the problem of aspiration is presented as a technical one of ensuring that the supply of HE articulates with demand and with the needs of labour markets to realise people's 'educational potential'.

The three broad views on the rhetoric of aspiration described here—definitional, critical and pragmatic—were often present across a single interview and can be seen as related: critical positions lead to reframing of the task at hand and efforts to understand what is at stake in efforts to increase the HE participation of disadvantaged groups. Clearly, aspiration as a keyword means different things in different moments and is sufficiently ambiguous in its signification that it can serve different objectives in political rhetoric and appropriations of this rhetoric to legitimise particular equity agendas.

'A change of trend': The possibilities of partnership work under Aimhigher and HEPPP

Prior to the release in 1997 of the Dearing Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, approaches to widening participation in English HE did not have a substantive national dimension. Equity was largely seen to be a matter for institutional policy and approaches to widening participation varied depending on institutional context and mission. However, as a

manager of widening participation centre in an English university noted, there was 'a change of trend when Labour came in 1997 with the 50 per cent target' for increasing participation following the publication of the Dearing Report. A new moment for HE equity work emerged in response to this target for systemic expansion, other recommendations in the Dearing report, and an approach to social policy characterised by the nascent rhetoric of aspiration. A similar moment was experienced in Australia a decade later, following the publication of the 'Bradley' Review of Higher Education in 2008 and the release of new tertiary education policy by the Australian Labor Government in 2009, including the introduction of the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP). Interviewees located in university equity units in both countries described a sense of excitement and possibility characterised these moments and pointed to how a focus on expanding participation, and an associated emphasis on stimulating aspiration, directed attention and funding to outreach activities with young people in schools, which in turn encouraged the partnership work that many interviewees considered to be the most positive direction for HE equity policy over the past decade.

In England the Aimhigher program was established in 2004, through the amalgamation of the Excellence Challenge program, which was introduced in 2001 to link universities with schools in large cities, and the Partnerships for Progression program, which was introduced in 2003 to support progression from further education colleges into university. In different ways, both antecedent programs had directed attention to aspirations and encouraged HE institutions to enter into cross-sectoral partnerships. With a title that explicitly registered the keyword status of aspiration at the time, 44 Aimhigher partnerships were originally established across England and it was this partnership structure that represented perhaps the most significant change in the way that widening participation activity was conducted:

[P]eople very soon realised, 'Actually, it is not aspiration on its own that's going to do this and it's not about institutions taking this to schools. It's much more about cooperative working, collaborative working, about this being a partnership approach that is equal, and that can actually look at aspiration, putting HE up there as an achievable outcome for people; but also then giving them the tools along the way to enable them to get there.'

This emphasis on collaboration differentiated widening participation activities from the institution-specific recruitment programs through its focus on building capacity for progression to HE more generally. The Aimhigher partnerships also established an infrastructure that supported regional and national debates and facilitated the dissemination of strategies for widening participation. As we discuss later, the end of Aimhigher has seen the balance shift back toward institution-specific initiatives, also accompanied by a gradual marketisation of services previously delivered by Aimhigher partnerships.

In exploring partnership working our research revealed multiple layers of collaboration and overlaps between individuals, institutions, organisations and other overlapping partnerships such as the 14-19 Consortia. In part this is a result of partnership working which predated Aimhigher, but the strength and resilience of these ties is due to the partnership's social capital. It is this social capital, which will contribute to the sustainability of such educational partnerships.

The clearest difference between Aimhigher and more recent Australian partnership work conducted under the auspices of HEPPP was the establishment of Aimhigher partnerships as separate organizational entities to universities and other institutions. The partnerships had an explicit regional focus, although their size and function varied depending on funding envelopes, with some regions receiving substantially more resourcing than others. For example, some partnerships had the funds to drive outreach initiatives directly whereas in other areas the partnerships performed more of a

brokering role between universities, who in this case were more directly involved in outreach activities, and provided a mechanism for coordinating engagement with schools. In any event, the Aimhigher partnerships represented a significant increase in the coherence and coverage of widening participation strategies nationally:

Aimhigher was very much about creating the strategic partnerships between higher education, colleges, schools, local authorities, local guidance centres and so on, so that you get a much more coordinated and systematic approach that also aims to reach all of the different schools and young people in the area.

Aimhigher provided a central source of funding, through the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), for the local planning and delivery of widening participation activities. Importantly, there was provision for schools to receive funding for programs and, for some universities, a shift of emphasis from offering a menu of outreach activities from which schools could select toward more collaborative development of programs that better aligned with the particular needs of schools. This helped to destabilise long-standing hierarchical relationships between universities and schools and to establish relationships in which a more horizontal exchange of skills, knowledge and understanding could occur. One equity manager explained that ‘suddenly we were having to talk different languages. We didn't know about the language of the national curriculum, we didn't know how students were taught at schools; they didn't know how students were taught at university. It showed a real split’. However, the same interviewee also worried that more lessons could have been learned by universities from schools at this time, particularly in terms of teaching and learning strategies that engage and support students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In 2008 a similar policy moment began to emerge for widening participation in the Australian system. Equity practitioners had looked to England when making submissions to the 2008 ‘Bradley’ Review of Australian Higher Education and lobbied for the recommendation of partnership approaches that were seen to be successful in England under Aimhigher. A manager of an equity unit in an Australian university explained that the ‘Bradley [Review] was modelled on the UK and we strongly supported that. We submitted for it, we supported it, we said “Partnerships is the way to go”’. In 2010, the Australian Government introduced the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP), which is divided into two funding streams providing a total of around one billion dollars from 2010 to 2015: the first is a participation component that effectively rewards universities based on the share of students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds they enrol each year; and a partnerships component that provides funding on a competitive bid basis for universities to collaborate with other organisations in outreach activities. There was significant lobbying from equity practitioners to (a) press for the inclusion of the partnership component and (b) to create scope within the funding guidelines for participation funds, which are by far the larger component, to be used for increasing access among students from low-SES backgrounds, rather than just for the provision of support and retention to students once they have enrolled. This has contributed to a strong focus on outreach initiatives over the past three years.

The introduction of Aimhigher and HEPPP was felt by equity managers in both countries to be an ‘exciting’ moment for widening participation in HE and for social justice agendas in education more broadly. Some interviewees described how these new policies resonated at the level of ‘sensed possibilities’ and it is important to acknowledge the role of these ‘affective sensings’ in shaping the attitudes of equity managers toward the implementation of policy and the development of programs. For example, an Australian interviewee described this sense of possibility as key moment in her career:

So there really was a very exciting moment for me. I don't think ever in my career I was so excited as I was at the time of [the Bradley Review], when the

government was right on the money; they were talking about injecting money. ... [I] felt that this was the moment in our careers when we were positioned to provide guidance and direction to the universities, drawing on all that we knew from the UK, for example, ... to be able to say, 'This is how we need to construct the way forward.'

Here we can see how the excitement associated with the Bradley Review and HEPPP arose through a combination of policy learning from the English context and a sense that Australian policy promised similar opportunities. This sense was shared by another Australian equity manager who also described the sense of 'excitement' when HEPPP was introduced in parallel with a set of programs designed to redress educational disadvantage in schooling nationally: 'that was why HEPPP was a little bit exciting; all of that national partnership stuff almost had some coherence'.

There are a number of interesting commonalities and contrasts between the introduction of Aimhigher and HEPPP. First, while each provided a new national framework that increased the coherence of widening participation policy at a national level and made increased funding available, this coherence was not always evident in the local initiatives that were undertaken. For example, an equity manager in England commented that, amid the ebullience of the early Aimhigher years, funding was not always used as strategically as it could have been: '[L]ooking back on it, there was so much money around, we all did things differently. There was no coordination. ... [L]ooking back on it, it was a real waste'. However, much was learnt over time and by its conclusion in 2010 there was evidence to suggest that a number of programs had been effective. Equity practitioners in Australia had learnt from the English experience and were able to prepare strategically for the policy moment that emerged with HEPPP, with one equity manager describing the 'intelligent opportunism' that informed their approach to the post-Bradley Review moment in Australia. However, it is reasonable to conclude that there was a two way policy learning exchange taking place between the two countries over a longer timeframe than the one used here.

Yet despite this 'intelligent opportunism', university structures, missions and the directions pursued by senior management have significantly affected the approach taken to HEPPP funding in Australian universities. First, HEPPP funds are distributed directly to universities or to a single administering university in the case of consortia bids for partnership funds. This cuts out the organisational separation that was an important characteristic of Aimhigher partnerships. Second, there are different imperatives for the participation component—rewarding institution-specific enrolment of low-SES students—and the partnership component—encouraging collaborative, regionally focused outreach activity). In some cases, equity managers were not able to bring to bear their learning from the UK experience, as they had hoped, to maximise the opportunities provided by HEPPP. A manager of an equity unit in an elite Australian university, where equity programs are administered by the recruitment office, described this issue at length:

For me, it became just a really disappointing exercise. ... They were giving money to the universities, to do new things with ... People who had been playing in the equity field for years and who actually did know what they were talking about, were often not given terribly much credit ... and the people who were experts in a whole range of other areas made decisions that were based on narrow, institutional short-term goals and not on the broad equity agenda. People like myself, who saw this as a moment to actually make a difference in social justice, found it very frustrating when we didn't end up having a senior management who also believed that, or who saw that filtered through short-term institutional goals ... and the government drove that because of the way in which they set up the funding. They set the funding up to get bums on seats [e.g. primarily rewarding participation].

This points to an enduring tension between the equity rationales for partnership-based aspiration-focused outreach activity, which often involves long-term interventions focused on students in the middle or primary years of schooling, and 'short-term' imperatives to (a) grow institutions through increasing undergraduate student numbers and/or (b) preserve or improve the 'quality' of the undergraduate student population by focusing on recruiting the students with the strongest academic records. In the case of HEPPP, the dual funding components provide mixed messages to some institutions, encouraging an underlying focus on recruitment activity rather than broader based outreach work.

A related issue described by equity managers in both England and Australia was the need to be strategic in soliciting the support of senior management for widening participation work, which often involves making a 'business case' as well as a 'social justice' case. An equity manager in Australia described how, in contexts where HE systems are expanding and many institutions are seeking to increase their undergraduate numbers, imperatives to increase participation and to widen participation are aligned: '[Y]ou have got to have a business case and a social justice case and you just run them together and people will pick and choose from amongst those rationales. Some people are convinced by one and not by the other. In this case, luckily, both led to the same solution'. Another equity manager, this time from England, also elaborated on this need to translate equity rationales into economic or academic imperatives: 'This is how you would sell it to an institution or a Vice Chancellor, you might say: 'We are quite clear that what we are trying to do, forget the widening participation aspect, if you are trying to invest in attracting students to your university then you want to get a dialogue going with those students'.

While it is clearly possible to make this dual case for widening participation work aimed at increasing participation for disadvantaged groups and more generic recruitment activity without an equity focus, it is not necessarily as straightforward to make a case for partnership work as the most effective strategy for both. An English equity manager described the difficulty of making a case for outreach-focused partnership work, particularly with the end of Aimhigher:

Partnership work, why would a university engage in it? What is it getting out of it? Who leads that? We have gone through all that stuff. Unfortunately, because we are now at the end of [Aimhigher] ... we have lost all that. But all of those things are crucial and at the end the day it's got to be understood by the senior management. I mean, the real point is senior management at the university has to sign up for it.

It was clear across all of the interviews with equity unit managers that, in their view, the most effective approaches to widening participation are able to be pursued under conditions where (a) there is a clear institutional mission to address equity issues supported by senior management (even though the equity case may also be a business case); and (b) a policy context and funding arrangements that encourage outreach activity and collaboration between and across HE institutions, FE institutions and schools. Introduced in the context of targets to expand HE, Aimhigher and HEPPP enabled both of these conditions to be met, although the extra-university location of Aimhigher partnerships created different conditions for collaboration than those experienced in Australia with HEPPP, where imperatives for collaboration and structures for this work have had to be laboriously established by university staff as they prepare collective bids for HEPPP partnership funds.

The ambiguous nature of aspiration as a keyword in the English and Australian policy contexts was an important factor in many of the issues described here. It can be mobilised in different yet related senses to justify equity initiatives or to endorse more purely economic rationales for education, and it provided a common focus around which partnerships could be established. In the following section we examine the different ways in which equity managers and policy personnel made sense

of this term and how this affected the different approaches to widening participation taken under both Aimhigher and HEPPP.

Narrowing the agenda: From aspiration to social mobility; from collaboration to competition

In this section of the paper we consider the changing policy context following the cessation of Aimhigher in England and following the first few years of the HEPPP program in Australia. In 2010, following the election of the Conservative-led Coalition Government in England, it was announced that Aimhigher would end with the academic year and the House of Commons voted to increase maximum tuition fees to £9000. The mood regarding widening participation has since shifted and there has been a move away from the language of aspiration to a new emphasis on 'social mobility'. In part, the shift away from the rhetoric of aspiration has been due to the critiques of deficit assumptions and the development across the Aimhigher years of more sophisticated conceptions of widening participation, as was described by a senior bureaucrat in England:

I just think in this policy environment, for higher education, I think to talk about 'raising aspiration', it hasn't gone completely and it's still seen as an important element of encouraging people to think about higher education, encouraging people to aim for higher education, but within that, there's a huge recognition that it's got to be about more than that and that it requires a deeper level of engagement than we may have thought five, six or seven years ago.

It is important to acknowledge the effect that critiques, internal to the field of policy actors engaged in widening participation activity, have had on reducing the emphasis on the term in HE equity work. However, the dispositions targeted under the auspices of aspiration-raising continue to be focus of policy intervention, but the nature of this work has changed significantly under new funding arrangements and with important changes in the broader policy context.

The election of the Conservative-led Coalition government in 2010 brought with it a change of attitude from the New Labour years, in which the politics of aspiration had flourished as part of its 'third way' ideology. The new Secretary for Education, Michael Gove, has emphasised academic excellence and equity agendas have been narrowed to focus on the more instrumental objective of social mobility. While the trope of 'raising aspiration' clearly signalled social mobility, it also retained a sense in which aspiration for HE education could be considered an end in itself. A number of interviewees commented on the effects that the combination of a return to more elitist ways of thinking about HE and more instrumental rationalisations for equity in education have had on widening participation:

I think there's a certain sense of retrenchment with the ending of Aim Higher and reversion back to old behaviours patterns inside universities as well, a return of a more so elitist way of thinking about and doing these things.

[T]he issue I have got with social mobility is that it's very, very narrowly defined in the political discourse and actually in a lot of the more general discourse that's out there in the sector. Social mobility is [understood] purely in economic terms. That's it; that's all they are interested in.

Here we can see two issues that have characterised the current policy context in England and which have also been evident as the HEPPP unfolds in Australia: the persistence of academic elitism that contrasts the objectives of 'equity' and 'excellence' and presents the former as a threat to the latter; and a conjunction of economic and equity agendas, clearly evident in the education work of the OECD, that helps to sustain attention to the latter in the minds of policymakers while encouraging equity to be defined in increasingly narrow terms.

One of the main issues for widening participation in England after Aimhigher is changed funding arrangements. Interestingly, the funding quanta for widening participation provided through the Higher Education Funding Council and the Office for Fair Access (OFA) has not diminished substantially since the end of Aimhigher. However, the way in which funding is now provided directly to universities has changed the way in which widening participation activity is undertaken, reducing the onus on universities to work in partnership. A senior bureaucrat described how, with the end of Aimhigher and changes associated with the rise in tuition fees, funding now encourages a focus on student support rather than outreach:

The funding for WP, if anything, seems to have increased ... But it is also a little bit misleading as well because the funding that institutions are putting in, the vast majority of it is going towards student financing. So I think it's about 75 per cent of the additional [tuition] fee income for access is actually going into student support measures. Whereas HEFCE funding can't be used for that purpose. HEFCE funding is to provide ... outreach and retention activity.

As a result of the reconfiguration of funding arrangements a similar tension to that evident between participation and partnership imperatives in HEPPP has emerged for many English universities. Here we can see the effect that the extra-institutional location of Aimhigher partnerships had on the approach taken to the outreach initiatives they sponsored and brokered. HEFCE and OFFA, through mission compact negotiations with institutions in which commitments to widening participation must be made, can still provide some incentive for work of this kind, but the 'business case' for such partnership activities has been weakened, as one widening participation manager explained:

We are in this new arena where all the money is with the university. There's no partnership work ... If we didn't have OFFA ... telling us to do partnership work, then we wouldn't get that money. They wouldn't get any buy-in. So we have that through our access agreement.

An associated change in funding has been to move away from block grants and the flexibility these provide for decisions to be made locally about planning and delivery of programs, as well as an intensification of new accountabilities associated with the pervasive audit culture (Power 1997) and pressures associated with the culture of evidence-based policymaking in which the quantification of 'impact' has become a common precondition for funding.

The whole block grant principle is kind of disappearing and all of our funding is becoming much more targeted. Obviously, we are under pressure as well to show how institutions are using the money and what impact the funding is having on the ultimate aim of increasing social mobility. So ... [there will be] a greater level of accountability for the funding from institutions ... to demonstrate [the] effectiveness and impact of what they are doing.

The new funding arrangements have weakened the incentives for universities to engage in outreach activities, while encouraging more centralised determination of policy objectives and accountability for meeting these objectives, which are now rhetorically framed in terms of social mobility and encouraging the progression of disadvantaged groups into elite institutions and professions.

Some of these issues are now also evident in the Australian context. Firstly, as discussed above, HEPPP funding was from the outset provided directly to institutions, lessening the incentive for partnership activity (although not necessarily diminishing the possibilities for such activities where equity practitioners have worked to build collaborative infrastructures). Second, following the 2007 election of a Labor federal government, and in the lead up to the Bradley Review and the introduction to HEPPP, there was considerable emphasis at the federal level on education reform

designed to reduce disadvantage through redistributive mechanisms. The rationale behind these reforms in both schooling and tertiary education was a view of social and educational disadvantage are compounded by a lack of resourcing and access to services in particular areas. Policies introduced at this time were informed by a belief in the role that universities and schools could play in helping to reduce the social cost of disadvantage (Vinson 2003). Universities and schools both received substantial additional funding for programs to address educational disadvantage and improve educational progression. However, like the narrowing of the agenda in the UK signalled by the emphasis on social mobility, economic rationales for improving educational access and outcomes, and the structure of economic incentives for institutions that have tended to more strongly reward institution-specific recruitment, have tended to weaken possibilities that many initially felt.

Conclusion

In this paper we have provided a comparative overview of HE equity policy in England and Australia during a period when aspiration emerged as a keyword (Williams 1977) in HE policy and more broadly. Drawing on Webb and Gulson (2012), we sought to understand how aspiration-focused policy works through affective sense-making, in this case through a sense of possibility and excitement felt during a period of renewed funding for and attention to equity issues in HE in both England and Australia since 1997. This affective sense-making has real effects on the ways that policies are mediated during their enactment. For example, in both England and Australia the ebullition and excitement prompted among equity managers by new policy moments in which equity issues in HE received greater attention and funding were associated with a flourishing of partnership-based outreach activities. While Aimhigher and HEPPP both explicitly supported partnership work, it is important to see the success of this work as also linked to optimism created by political and policy change. In particular, we can see how the identity of equity managers, constituted in terms of their desire to advance social justice agendas in education, intersects with changing policy moments to manifest as feelings of excitement and disappointment.

Aspiration-focused policies provide a clear example of how policy attempts to control affects directly. In defining what is important about aspiration, interviewees involved in delivering equity programs described how people feel about their capacities to act were central to this work. Theories of affect that attend to the capacities for bodies to act and be acted upon, and the registering of changes in these capacities as feelings or intensities that cannot be easily described in terms of distinct attitudes or emotions (Deleuze 1988; Massumi 2002), provide one useful way for understanding the 'something else' that is important about aspiration, beyond the desired future pathways that people are able to describe.

The ambiguous signification of aspiration as a keyword amplifies its potential for diverse sense-making among various policy actors and in popular and political discourse. The term is politically expedient because it displaces responsibility to individuals while enabling governments to talk about what is being done to reduce disadvantage and increase opportunity. However, it also provided a common focus for partnership work and reinforced the view that education is a universal good that should be accessible to all. This ambiguity facilitated a consensus of sorts around an educational agenda that played well politically while limiting political accountability and, aligned with expansionary moments in both systems, sponsored significant moments of outreach activity in partnership modes with increasingly diverse and sophisticated objectives. Over time, critiques of the term and the distancing of what widening participation work was 'really' felt to be about has seen its resonance in equity contexts diminish, while at the same time the political and economic agendas to which it was linked are being increasingly described, in the UK at least, using the more economically instrumental notion of social mobility.

In conclusion, we note how some of the trends evident in aspiration-focused educational policies during this period are continuing to play out in education. It is important to understand the link between equity agendas that focus on aspiration to promote participation and work on human capital theory that increasingly seeks to quantify the relationship between personality traits, particularly those associated with motivation (OECD 2002), and future earnings. Motivation and other 'aspirational' dispositions are now seen as an important dimension of human capital and the promotion of these dispositions serves economic rationales for education just as well as equity rationales oriented toward widening participation. Here we can see another manifestation of how aspiration facilitates an overlapping of 'social justice' and 'business' cases for equity policies and programs. Reflecting on forms of 'intelligent opportunism' that are able to leverage tangible benefits in terms of social justice from policy contexts rich in promises about the benefits of education for all, while resisting the reductive and instrumental economic rationalities captured in the current turn to 'social mobility' and the 'opportunity traps' associated with credential inflation during a period of dramatic global education expansion (Brown et al. 2010), is an ongoing challenge for those concerned with HE equity.

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