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Participation and equity in higher education: are we going back to the future?

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of policy developments related to participation and equity in higher education in New Zealand, England and Australia from the 1960s to 2011. It explores these developments in four sections. First, it sets the scene by tracing the shift from elite universities to massification. Second, it summarises key participation and equity policy developments between the 1960s and 2008 in the three countries to set the context for the post-global financial crisis developments. It then traces the different policy responses to the financial crisis, identifying Australia's pathway as different from those taken in New Zealand and England. Fourth, it explores the success of these policies, identifies a change in the equity discourse and considers some strategic institutional responses to the changing policies in each country and the likely effects of those. It argues that the austerity approaches taken by New Zealand and England are likely to take them back to a future of selective, elite universities but

that Australia may continue its counter-cyclical policies to support equity objectives—unless there is a change of Government and/or pressures from rapidly increasing enrolments produce policy change.

Keywords:

equity | higher education | access | widening participation | policy

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Notes

1. ‘Higher education’ is used differently across countries. In this article it is used to refer primarily to universities, though some policy developments may include, for example, further education in England or the whole tertiary (post-school) sector in New Zealand.

2. The Treaty of Waitangi was signed by Māori and the British Crown in 1840. It is the founding document of Aotearoa New Zealand.

3. The indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand.

4. People living in Aotearoa New Zealand who were born in or trace their ethnic heritage to Pacific Island nations.

5. Pasifika is the term now used to refer to people from Pacific Island nations.

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