CHALLENGES OF ACCESS AND EQUITY – THE HIGHER EDUCATION CURRICULUM ANSWERS BACK
New Zealand Project Report[1]

The New Zealand WUN-funded 'Challenges of access and equity – the higher education curriculum answers back' project entailed two sub-projects: one explored the challenges in relation to the curriculum of academic professional learning, specifically through the academic promotions process, while the other explored these challenges in the curriculum of doctoral education. This report provides a descriptive overview of both sub-projects.

Sub-Project 1:
Academic Professional Learning at a NZ university

1. **National context**

Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ) has eight universities. Four were established in the late 19th century as constituent colleges of a single University of New Zealand, the sole degree-granting institution in NZ between 1874 and 1962. In 1962, the colleges were converted into four independent universities with their own Acts of Parliament.[2] Soon after, two new universities were established, followed by a seventh (very small) university in the 1990s, while the eighth was formed in 2000 from an institute of technology.[3] Arguably academic staff within those institutions have been subject to experience-based professional learning from the outset but, since the 1970s, the curriculum of such learning has become more explicit with the emergence of academic development units (Barrow & Grant, 2012) and the proliferation of policies designed to shape academic conduct.

Based on the ruling 1989 Education Act, the relationship between NZ's universities and government is a mix of practices that simultaneously enable and constrict institutional autonomy. One of the Act's objectives is to foster "equity of access" in tertiary (post-compulsory) education (§159AAA[1a]): the Act allows institutions to "give preference to eligible persons who are included in a class of persons that is under-represented among the students undertaking the programme" (§224[6]). The Act also requires government to promulgate a national 'tertiary education strategy' to guide the work of agencies (such as the funding agency) in their dealings with tertiary institutions and to steer sectoral priorities. A corner-stone of the Act is a commitment to academic freedom in matters related to teaching (including assessment) and research (Grant, 2016).

2. **Institutional context**

The case-study university (UoA) is NZ's largest and mostly highly ranked university (2016 *THE* ranking 172; *QS* ranking 82). In 2015, the University employed 5075 staff, 2183 of these being academic. In its *Strategic* and *Equity Plans*, the University states its commitment towards addressing access and equity for target groups of students. The institution assigns responsibility for this commitment to particular staff members (such as those in the Equity Office) but the fuller realisation of its commitment rests upon the beliefs and actions of

---

[2] The University of Otago (established 1869), University of Canterbury (1873), University of Auckland (1883), and Victoria University of Wellington (1897).
[3] First, the University of Waikato and Massey University, later Lincoln and AUT Universities.

individual academics. Thus, individual beliefs and actions can be understood as the target of an implicit curriculum for the University's access and equity commitments.

From among its comprehensive suite of HR policies, the University provides guidance to academic staff about the requirements to be met for promotion. In their detail, these policies, guidelines and application forms valorise certain activities and behaviours and, in doing so, set out an informal curriculum to guide academics' professional learning.

3. Questions investigated

We focused on promotion policy documentation and decision-making processes to address the following questions:

i. What understandings of access and equity (if any) inform the documents related to academic standards (criteria for continuation and promotion)?
ii. What understandings of access and equity (if any) inform the decisions of staffing committees in relation to continuation and promotion?
iii. To what extent do applications for promotion or continuation usually describe academic's activities for student access and equity? How does the presence or absence of these elements affect committee decisions?

4. Project design

We answered these questions through two sets of data. First, we undertook a close reading of the following documents:
- The University's key strategy documents including the current *Strategic Plan*, and the *Equity Plan* and *Report*
- Various HR policy documents and associated materials[4] provided to academics to assist them to produce applications for continuation and promotion.

Second, we carried out interviews with:
- Three (out of eight) Chairs of Faculty Staffing Committees (which make recommendations about the promotion, as well as appointment level and continuation, of academic staff)
- The University's Director of Staff Equity (from the University's Equity Office).

We submitted the data (documents and interview transcripts) to critical analysis of the extent to which ideas about access and equity are linked to processes of preparing for and deciding upon academic promotions, with a focus on exploring the extent to which the institution positions promotion documents and processes as a solution to problems of access and equity.

5. Key findings and discussion

As we might expect, the overarching strategic documents (*Strategic Plan*, *Equity Plan* and *Report*) contain many references to access and equity, but rarely with respect to academic staff performance and never in relation to promotion.

Analysis of the promotion-related documents reveals a compression of the complex issues relating to access and equity. First, the abbreviations 'EEO' or 'EEdO' are used to refer to equity-related activities, a truncation that serves to almost erase the referent. Should an

---

[4] These included *Academic Standards for Research Fellows, Senior Research Fellows, Lecturers, Senior Lecturers, Associate Professors and Professors*; the *Promotion to Professor* policy; as well as Application for Promotion forms (e.g. HR09, HR08).

academic seek amplification of what it might actually mean to undertake access and equity activities, they would need to consult a range of other documents; yet elsewhere, even in the *Equity Policy*, we find a high level of generality not particularly helpful to an academic trying to figure out what might be involved in furthering access and equity. Second, there is a tendency in the documents to conjoin 'equity' with 'Treaty of Waitangi' as if the two commitments are interchangeable. This trend is particularly apparent in the most recent of the documents analysed, the 2016 *Academic Standards.* In contrast with its the former version, in which contribution to equal educational opportunities (EEdO) activities is both more detailed and also distinct from reference to the commitments to the Treaty of Waitangi, the latter refers to the need to 'address the University's equity and Treaty of Waitangi obligations' (p. 18). When the Treaty and access and equity issues are linked in this way, the obligation to one extends to the other, undermining the specificity of each and confusing the underlying logic – which, on both counts, remains contested – in the mind of readers.

Taken as a suite, the promotions policy, guidelines and application forms create uncertainty for academic staff around access and equity: it is unclear what these ideas might actually involve, or what specific activities could be undertaken to promote them. Interestingly, however, not all academic positions suffer the same degree of vagueness around these areas of professional learning. In those relevant to the positions of senior tutor and professional teaching fellow, we find some amplification of what it might mean to have an 'equity obligation': "Contributions to the achievement of the University's EEO and EEdO objectives e.g. *as mentor, role model, advisor*, may be taken into account" (Sections 3.4 and 3.5; p. 19, italics added). This statement is not included in promotion documents for senior lecturer, associate professor or professor, suggesting that only staff appointed to certain academic positions, *those with little or no research component*, are encouraged to integrate these roles and objectives into their teaching practices. It is as if the teaching-only roles carry the burden of the institution's obligation of access and equity while the rest can ignore it.

The interviews with Faculty Staffing Committee Chairs and the Director of Staff Equity addressed our questions relating to the extent to which applications address access and equity and the decisions around promotion and the consequences of this for decision making. Our main finding is that reference to access and equity is *not* highly visible in promotion applications, nor is it expected to be. Work that does promote access and equity at the university is visible mainly in relation to the service role: through work within the University on specific committees, or programmes and mentoring roles for targeted groups of students, and through roles held (especially by Māori and Pasifika staff) in external communities. While some academic staff do account for equity-related work in relation to teaching, there is some difference between faculties, and the EO noted that this kind of work is often less visible because it involves "individual interactions" between staff and students. In terms of research, equity is visibly a dimension of an application only if an academic has a specific research interest in a related area – we were given examples of this. Generally, a contribution to access and equity can be absent entirely from a promotion application and it would not harm an individual's prospects.

At the same time, interviewees suggested that evidence of access and equity-related activities may be read as indicative of a good "all-rounder" staff member, and also that such evidence might be taken into account in a holistic reading of a promotion application. In such a reading, thi equity element is seen as an "embellishment", "extra", or "an enhancement" of a promotion portfolio. These descriptions reinforce our sense from the document analysis that attention to access and equity is not integral to academic work. Two Chairs referred to the 'busy' lives of academics who will accordingly focus on the elements that strongly *count* in promotions (research first and foremost, then teaching in terms of courses and numbers), which leaves little or no time for access and equity considerations, despite the general agreement that it would be a good thing.

Moreover, the interviewees recognise the relation between equity-related work and an expectation that academics have a role in promoting public good – in improving lives and contributing to communities. When asked if they considered the public good dimension of academic work, there was general agreement that access and equity-related academic work could be viewed in this light. However, there was also a sense of the *challenge* to this element of academic work: where the current rationale and focus of universities has become primarily economic, the social justice agenda has suffered. For example, one Chair described how the drive for ever-larger classes and greater numbers of students makes it difficult to see – and care – about the "whole student".

One Chair described how institutional curriculum documents generally convey messages to teachers about prioritised areas of learning: those that are 'nice to have' are often found in opening statements, but disappear when the focus shifts to particular, measurable dimensions. He suggested a similar prioritising can be seen in relation to academic professional learning curriculum: access and equity are part of the general expectation, yet there is little (in former documents) or no (in current ones) specificity about *how* an academic might actually undertake this dimension of academic work, except maybe from teaching-only staff.

By and large, our interviewees commented that access and equity "needs to be more visible and recognised", with one Chair suggesting that the University's new leadership framework may help efforts in this domain of academic work become more visible.

6. Conclusions[5]

Between the documents analysed and the interviews held, there is little evidence to indicate that academics' professional learning as expressed in their applications for promotions *is* seen to be a solution to problems related to access and equity. If the institution does assume its commitment to access and equity will be realised through the actions and beliefs of academic staff, it has not yet come to expect an expression of those actions and beliefs in applications for academic promotion, except perhaps from teaching-only staff, who are a tiny minority.

7. Future possibilities

What possibilities lie ahead for rethinking the academic promotions process as a moment for evaluating the extent to which academic staff – as a matter of professional learning – have taken on an active commitment to an element of the institution's core mission? Some provisional ideas:

- The matter of access and equity is a contentious (ideological) one. Bringing academics to share that mission is a complex institutional task but one that might be more actively addressed in an open-ended way.
- There are other tools that can be used to this end, alongside the promotions process: teaching awards, teaching enhancement funds
- Preparing members of Faculty Staffing Committees to be able to make wise judgments on these matters in another challenge.
- Writing strong, yet flexible, institutional documents (such as guidelines etc) is a challenge that has yet to be met.

Caveats are needed as well. Academic workloads have intensified greatly over the past decade and many academics struggle to meet their work responsibilities and manage a healthy work-life balance. However academic professional learning is called on to respond to the access and equity agenda, the investment of time and effort required must be acknowledged.

---

[5] For a more extensive discussion of this sub-project, see Barrow and Grant (2018).

Sub-Project 2:
Doctoral Education at the University of Auckland

1. National context

In NZ, ten institutions award doctoral degrees (the PhD and often a range of named doctorates): all eight universities, one of our 18 polytechnics, and one of three wānanga (Māori tertiary institutions). All are public institutions drawing government tuition subsidies as well as student-paid tuition fees. While most international students pay full fees to attend a NZ university, those enrolled in a PhD programme attract the government subsidy, and so pay the same fee as locals.

Based on the 1989 Education Act, the relationship between NZ's universities and government is a mix of practices that enable and constrict institutional autonomy. One of the Act's objectives is to foster "equity of access" in tertiary (post-compulsory) education (§159AAA[1a]): the Act allows institutions to "give preference to eligible persons who are included in a class of persons that is under-represented among the students undertaking the programme" (§224[6]). The Act also requires government to promulgate a 'tertiary education strategy' to guide the work of agencies (such as the funding agency) in their dealings with tertiary institutions and to steer sectoral priorities.

2. Institutional context

In 2015, UoA enrolled 33,489 equivalent full-time students. Of these, 1915 were enrolled in the PhD programme (approximately half being international) and 82 in other doctorates. Doctoral programmes are controlled and administered by the institution's Board and School of Graduate Studies. In that year, the University awarded 350 PhDs and 27 other doctorates.

Several institutional policies establish a commitment to improving access and success for students from 'under-represented' groups. Currently, these groups are Māori[6] and six others: Pacific, those with disabilities, from low socioeconomic or refugee backgrounds, members of LGBTI[7] communities, as well as men or women in contexts where there are barriers to access and success (eg women in engineering). While the range of equity groups is broad, key institutional documents (echoing government policies) privilege Māori and Pacific students.

3. Questions investigated

Our project investigated three core questions:

i.   What understandings of access and equity are driving decisions about curriculum[8] in doctoral education at UoA?
ii. How do people involved in shaping (and experiencing) doctoral curricula understand themselves (and others) in relation to access and equity?
iii. In what ways can the emergence (or absence) of the *doctoral curriculum* be read as a response to the challenges of access and equity?

---

[6] When referring to the members of these groups, the University typically refers to "Māori and equity groups" (*Equity Plan 2015,* p. 2): this ordering recognises the status of Māori as the indigenous people of NZ with a special relationship to the Crown established by the (1840) Treaty of Waitangi.
[7] Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and intersex.
[8] We take curriculum to be complex, a tangle of "taught content and the pedagogy supporting it" (Osberg & Biesta, 2010, p. 594). Curriculum, whether stated and explicit, implicit or hidden, places teacher and students in a "complicated conversation" (Pinar, 2012, p. 214), which "takes place intersubjectively *and* intrasubjectively, in public squares and in rooms of our own" (p. 229).

4. Project design

We answered these questions through two sets of data. First, we undertook a close reading of the following documents:
- Central government policies for tertiary education
- The University's current strategic plan, the Equity plan and report
- The PhD statute and associated guidelines
- The doctoral scholarship regulations
- Curriculum documents related to both the compulsory doctoral induction day (DID) and the optional (and selective) academic careers programme (Doctoral Academic Leadership Initiative [DALI]).

Second, we carried out interviews with:
- The Dean of Graduate Studies (DOGS)
- The convenors of the DID and DALI progammes
- An expert supervisor (selected on the basis of experience in supervising doctoral students from equity groups and having won a university supervision award).

We submitted the data (documents and interview transcripts) to critical analysis in order to pursue our questions, with a particular interest in the extent to which the institution has positioned doctoral education curriculum as a solution to problems of access and equity.

5. Key findings and discussion

In response to the question of what understandings of access and equity are driving decisions about curriculum in doctoral education: while there are clear articulations of general aims and understandings with respect to access and equity in government policy, these become *much less clear* at the institutional level and in terms of doctoral education specifically.

The Education Act (1989) binds government and institutions to "ensure" equity of access to tertiary education and allows for "preference" to be given to members of under-represented groups. The *Tertiary Education Strategy 2014-2019* targets two groups:

> In particular during the term of this strategy, the government is seeking further strengthening of the tertiary education sector's focus on supporting improved achievement from two key groups: Māori and Pasifika learners. By 2030, 30% of New Zealanders will be Māori or Pasifika, and as such it is essential that tertiary education improves its delivery to these groups. (TEC, 2014, p. 12)

The rationale of the *Strategy* is that "the Government is working to improve this pattern of participation and achievement for Māori, to ensure Māori benefit from the higher wages that come with higher qualifications" (p. 13) and, for Pasifika, "this learning should support successful economic, social, and cultural outcomes, including good employment outcomes." (p.14). Higher degree qualifications, such as the PhD, are seen to contribute to better employment outcomes, higher wages and better standards of living according to government documents and, to this end, doctoral completions by Māori and Pasifika bring double the standard doctoral tuition subsidy to institutions. Additionally, the Tertiary Education Commission expects institutional Investment Plans to respond "to the diverse needs and aspirations of students of all ethnicities, genders, ages, abilities and socio-economic backgrounds" (TEC, 2017, para 2).

In UoA policy documents, the terms "access" and "equity" appear often, although not always together, and are often paired with "high academic potential" and/or "excellence". With this repeat juxtaposition, elite research-intensive institutions (as UoA claims to be) achieve a

complex effect. They explicitly remind readers that an access and equity agenda is not antithetical to that of academic excellence; at the same time, they hint at concerns that 'equity subjects' may not be good enough to succeed at this university. Such a 'mixed message' illustrates the competing and intersecting (traditional liberal, neoliberal and social justice) discourses driving contemporary universities and illustrates attempts to balance institutional distinctiveness and traditions while showing compliance with government expectations (Burke & Kuo, 2015). Notably, these terms are nowhere explicitly paired with the descriptor 'doctoral candidate/student/research', and the phrase 'doctoral curriculum' never appears in any policy document. Moreover, reference to access and equity is almost entirely absent from curriculum documents. A search of several such documents – the PhD Statute, the DID programme, the DALI website – for the terms equity, access, affirmative, inclusive, impaired, diversity, gender, inequality (and so on) showed no occurrences.

In terms of how the *knowledge produced* might be seen via access and equity, institutional documents occasionally refer to the importance of "Matauranga Māori" (Māori knowledge) and "indigenous research", although these references are never linked explicitly to doctoral education. However, we found a more explicit opening where the University gestures towards the possibility that new forms of knowledge might be associated with diverse students (a reference that suggests access and equity): "All these changes [increasing diversity, increasing disparity] create the challenges and opportunities of working with different intellectual traditions and different bodies of experience to create an environment that is attractive to all students of high academic potential" (UoA *Strategic Plan 2013-2020*, p. 6).

In relation to our second question, how the people involved in shaping doctoral curricula understand themselves and others in relation to access and equity, the interviews with experts offered several understandings:

- Of doctoral curriculum as more accessible for equity groups: "We've got a guaranteed scholarship grade point average and it's lower for Māori and Pasifika students, 7.5 instead of 8." (interview with DOGS)
- Of doctoral curriculum as developing assessable 'equity skills' for *all* candidates: "One of the things that is specifically NZ [about our doctoral curriculum] would be a certain kind of cultural awareness of bi-culturalism and multiculturalism. And one of the sticking points here is, how do you measure that capacity? How does it become part of the curriculum as in something that is actively developed?" (interview with DOGS)
- Of centralised doctoral curriculum as generic, addressing a 'normal' (and normative) 'doctoral student': "A doctoral candidate is a doctoral candidate is a doctoral candidate. This is what they have in common, irrespective of their backgrounds" (interview with DID convenor). The DALI convenor noted the "near-zero participation in the Polynesian category. So I've chatted with some people about that and it actually brought me back to what I thought when I was a first-year student – that this system is actually not intended for us." (interview with DALI convenor).

A different understanding of the relationship between curriculum, access and equity emerged from the interview with the expert supervisor, who considered that Western knowledge-making modes are valuable and sought-after by equity students (in contrast to a view that suggests the knowledge-making processes should be changed to suit such students): "I sincerely believe in science. What my [Māori and Pasifika] students want to do is become kind of fluent in that world – that's a really powerful tool of thinking and engaging and writing that they want" (interview with supervisor). She also noted that curriculum-*as-pedagogy* is of primary importance to some students: "Generally speaking, they will seek you out for some kind of reason and, in my experience, it's usually the relationship that already exists, that already has been formed, even if in their own mind." This highlights a *relational*

dimension to doctoral curriculum-as-pedagogy, allowing for a potential rethinking *of* access not only in terms of knowledge (the recognition and valuing of knowledge that is brought, as well as what is gained) but also in terms of the importance of fostering relationships. The supervisor argued that relationships matter *more* than targeted admission schemes, lower GPAs or targeted scholarships when it comes to entry into doctoral programmes.

6. Conclusions

Overall, this project found limited evidence of doctoral curriculum measures premised on access and equity and, indeed, limited evidence that the construct of 'doctoral curriculum' itself is currently a meaningful one. Yet, there are promising gestures towards making space for "Matauranga Māori", "indigenous research" and "different intellectual traditions". These gestures, while tentative and mostly indicative of the institution's ongoing and unsettled negotiations with the implications of the Treaty of Waitangi, represent a disturbance in the surface of traditional academic curriculum. This disturbance offers unpredictable but promising curriculum possibilities.

7. Future possibilities

Where to from here? We are reluctant to suggest that government should steer matters of doctoral curriculum – and other forms of research activity – any more than they are already doing (most notably through the use of teaching and research funding mechanisms to grow activity in STEM). But what about institutions like UoA – how might they see the space of doctoral curriculum as one in which to further their access and equity agendas? Some preliminary thoughts towards this end:
- Explore how to use the enhanced tuition subsidy for Māori and Pasifika doctoral student completions to attract more programme entrants
- Take seriously the 'relationship' dimension that is suggested to be foundational for attracting and holding Māori and Pasifika students (at least)
- Focus as much energy on attracting equity students as is given to attracting international students, eg by profiling such doctoral students and their research, which is often aimed at making a difference to their communities, by going out to communities and inviting potential students.

Final Matters

The University of Auckland research team

Associate Professor Mark Barrow, Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences (now Dean, Faculty of Education & Social Work)
Associate Professor Barbara Grant, Critical Studies in Education, Faculty of Education & Social Work
Dr Frances Kelly, Critical Studies in Education, Faculty of Education & Social Work

References

Barrow, M., & Grant, B. M. (2018). The uneasy place of equity in higher education: Tracing its (in)significance in academic promotions. *Higher Education*. doi:10.1007/s10734-018-0334-2

Barrow, M., & Grant, B. M. (2012). The 'truth' of academic development: how did it get to be about 'teaching and learning'? *Higher Education Research & Development, 31*(4), 465–477.

Burke, P. J., & Kuo, Y-C. (2015). Widening participation in higher education: Policy regimes and globalizing discourses. In J. Huisman, H. de Boer, D. D. Dill & M. Souto Otero (Eds.), *The Palgrave international handbook of higher education policy and governance* (pp. 547–568). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Grant, B. M. (2016). Room for improvement: Scoring Aotearoa New Zealand. A response to Beiter, Karran and Appiagyei-Atua's 'Retrogression in the legal protection of the right to academic freedom in Europe'. *New Zealand Journal of Research on Europe, 10*(1), 61–77.

Osberg, D., & Biesta, G. (2010). The end/s of education: Complexity and the conundrum of the inclusive educational curriculum. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 14*(6), 593–607. 10.1080/13603110802530684

Pinar, W. F. (2012). *What is curriculum theory?* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.

Tertiary Education Commission (NZ). (2017). Equity funding [accessed 14 Jan 2019] https://moetec.cwp.govt.nz/funding/funding-and-performance/funding/fund-finder/equity-funding/

Tertiary Education Commission (NZ). (2014). *Tertiary Education Strategy 2014-2019* [accessed 14 Jan 2019] https://www.education.govt.nz/further-education/policies-and-strategies/tertiary-education-strategy/

University of Auckland. (2015). *Annual Plan 2015: Equity Office* [no longer available online].

University of Auckland. (2013). *Strategic Plan 2013-2020* [accessed 14 Jan 2019] https://www.auckland.ac.nz/en/about-us/about-the-university/the-university/official-publications/strategic-plan.html

Timeline

Research undertaken in 2014-2015; report written in November 2016; web-links and references updated January 2019.