

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

Sam Sellar

*The University of Queensland*

John Storan

*The University of East London*

# Background and research design

- Forthcoming paper in *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*
- Findings from project funded by UQ Early Career Research grant, in collaboration with Continuum at UEL
- Why has the rhetoric of aspiration been so pervasive in HE policy since the mid-1990s *and* how has it been connected to equity practice?
- Data:
  - Document analysis of HE equity policies and reports from England, Australia and OECD
  - 9 interviews with HE equity managers and policy makers in England and Australia and policy analysts at OECD

# Scope of the study

1996-1997

- **England:** New Labour, Dearing report
- **OECD:** Knowledge economy, lifelong learning

2001-2008

- **England:** Excellence Challenge, Partnerships for progression, Aimhigher

2008-  
present

- **Australia:** 'Bradley' Review of Australian HE, Higher Education Participation and Partnerships program (HEPPP)
- **England:** post-Aimhigher

# Australian context

- 2008 'Bradley' Review of Australian Higher Education
  - Targets: 40% attainment by 2025; 20% low-SES participation by 2020
  - Uncapping places, move to 'demand driven' system
  - Equity focus on aspiration borrowed from UK/Aimhigher
- Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP)
  - Participation component based on institutional enrolment of students from low SES backgrounds; rewards institution-specific recruitment
  - Partnerships component to drive collaborative area-based work between universities, schools and other organisations
- HEPPP funding provided directly to universities not separate entities managing partnership work

# Aspiration

- Aspiration as a **keyword**:
  - *significant, binding words in certain activities and their interpretation ... [and] significant, indicative words in certain forms of thought* (Williams 1976: 15).
- The politics of aspiration (Raco 2009):
  - *governmentality ‘through the “responsibilized” and “educated” anxieties and aspirations of individuals and their families’* (Rose 1999, p. 88).
- A ‘non-cognitive’ dimension of human capital (OECD 2002)
- A problem for HE policy in the context of systemic expansion and widening participation

# 'Policy prolepsis'

- **Prolepsis**: representation or anticipation of a future event or thing in the present; preconception
- **Policy prolepses** 'operate through affective tones, or affective sensings,' 'a certain materiality of the body, or technology of self, that is intimately connected to policy texts' (Webb & Gulson, 2012: 89)
- Aspiration-focused policies work **affectively** on:
  - **Equity practitioners and policy actors** e.g. triggering excitement about possibilities for change; and
  - **Prospective students** e.g. promises of a 'good life' through higher education.

# Policy affects

- **Affect:** felt sense of increased or diminished capacity for action in a given context (Spinoza 1994; Deleuze 1998)
- The ‘something’ about aspiration:  
*[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.  
(English equity practitioner)*
- Implicitly recognised in arguments for improving academic achievement as well as raising aspiration: ‘capacity building’

# Affective sense-making of policy

- Aimhigher/HEPPP produced moments of felt possibility among equity practitioners:
  - *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.'* (Australian equity practitioner)
- Structure of feeling (Williams 1977) or **political affects** (Protevi 2009): feeling what can and cannot be done in a particular situation and forming political bodies on this basis, e.g. partnership work



# Making sense of 'aspiration raising'

## Critical

Challenges to politics of aspiration and deficit constructions of 'low' aspirations

## Economic

The provision of information to encourage rational choices: human capital investment



## Pragmatic

Recognition of opportunities for equity work: 'intelligent opportunism'...

# Commonalities across contexts (1)

- Aimhigher and HEPPP created new ways of working:
  - *[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. (English policymaker)*
- Both policy contexts and funding structures conducive to area-based partnership work:
  - *Partnership work, why would a university engage in it? What is it getting out of it? ... 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. (English equity practitioner)*
  - *'[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'. (Australian equity practitioner)*

# Commonalities across contexts (2)

- Tension between:
  - **equity** rationales for long-term partnership-based approaches; and
  - **economic/symbolic** imperatives to (a) grow institutions and/or (b) improve 'quality' through targeted recruitment.
- Balance shifting toward the latter in the current context?
  - HEPPP: *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. (Australian equity manager)*
  - Post-Aimhigher: *Social mobility is [understood] purely in economic terms. That's it; that's all they are interested in. (English policymaker)*

# Conclusion

- Aspiration policy an example of how policy (a) directly targets affects and (b) gives rise to diverse interpretations through affective sense-making
- Aimhigher/HEPPP: Policy context + political feeling + funding structures encouraged area-based partnership work with the potential to undermine institution-specific economic and symbolic rationales
- ‘Intelligent opportunism’ aims to leverage equity benefits from policy contexts focused on expanding/widening participation **but** must contend with:
  - reductive economic/symbolic rationalities
  - ‘opportunity traps’ (Brown et al. 2010) and ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant 2011)
  - aspiration as human capital vs source of alternative imaginaries...