



RESEARCH PAPER

Fairness and inclusion: Online learning as an enabler of Australian higher education policies aimed at student equity and social justice

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Building social justice through access to higher education is a central concern for many universities across the world. In Australia, as elsewhere, online delivery of degree programs provides an important avenue to implement government policies aimed at both increasing overall participation in higher education and widening the participation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. These twin aspects of higher education policy reflect two differing models for achieving student equity in higher education; one which emphasises fairness and the other, inclusion. Using a qualitative research lens, this paper looks at the place of online study within a discussion of these two equity models and related social justice theories, supported by insights into the student experience gleaned from a small case study of a first-year online unit. The fairness model of student equity, with its focus on equitable distribution, is well supported by the unit's high proportion of disadvantaged students. Yet it is the inclusion model, which provides room to go beyond the numbers and recognise the justice experienced by these students on an individual level, that more closely aligns with the transformative value that completing students report deriving from access to online study. Amartya Sen's writings on social justice are foregrounded throughout the paper.

Keywords: online learning; higher education policy; student equity; social justice; widening participation; Amartya Sen

Introduction

Over recent decades, higher education policies throughout much of the world have promoted the expansion of student participation at universities to address issues of social justice, with an emphasis on students from disadvantaged and low socio-economic backgrounds (Wilson-Strydom, 2015, p. 143). Released in 2009, the policy document, *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System* (Australian Government, 2009), positioned student equity as a central concern for Australian universities. The policy introduced a demand-driven funding system, with the removal of caps on student numbers in many university courses (James, 2010); and a performance-based funding system, linked to the success of universities in attracting enrolments from specific categories of disadvantaged students (Gale & Tranter, 2011). Since 2009, changes in government and political focus have increasingly put the commitment to widening student participation contained in this policy under threat (Department of Education and Training, 2018). An internationally recognised rationale for increased student access is the role that higher

education plays in promoting justice on a societal and individual level (Goastellec, 2008). In the global field, building social justice through access to higher education has become an indicator of reputable institutions, providing “an international standard ... [and] a key point in the legitimating process of higher education policies and comparisons” (Goastellec, 2008, p. 72). Therefore, the implementation of policies for increasing and widening student participation is an important concern for universities, both financially and in terms of reputation. Since many universities offer fully online or blended courses as an “institutional innovation related to enrolment growth” (Taylor & Holley, 2009, p. 81), online learning may also be viewed as an enabler of these policies. Drawing on Amartya Sen’s (2009) writings on justice and associated educational theories, this paper is concerned with relating students’ experiences of online learning to equity in higher education and the socially just society which government policies seek to promote.

Online learning, student equity and social justice

Online course delivery provides an avenue for universities to implement policies on equity in higher education by giving the opportunity of a university education to a diverse range of students who would otherwise be excluded (Stone, O’Shea, May, Delahunty, & Partington, 2016). Online learning has grown exponentially throughout the world with countries across all continents and economic conditions having online higher education platforms (International Council for Open and Distance Education, n.d.). The choice to study online is often made for reasons that preclude attendance on campus, such as home location, employment obligations, family commitments, and medical related issues. This can result in a higher proportional representation of ‘equity’ students in online units. There is a strong alignment with the target equity groups defined in Australian government policy as being under-represented in higher education, particularly “people from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds; people from rural and remote locations, [and] people with a disability” (Downing, 2017, p. 20). This alignment is amplified when admission is also open access (Stone et al., 2016), which allows students to enrol without meeting course pre-requisites and is a characteristic of units offered by universities through Open Universities Australia (OUA). Consequently, online, open-access units are illustrative of the push to increase and widen access to higher education, with indications that online learning can impact students’ lives in significant and transformative ways (Devlin & McKay, 2016).

The current higher education funding model in Australia still has its basis in the 2009 policy, *Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System*. Funding mechanisms outlined in the policy reflect two differing theoretical models for achieving student equity in higher education; one which emphasises fairness and the other, inclusion (Marginson, 2011a). The policy promotes fairness with a target of 20% of all students in higher education to be drawn from the lowest SES category by 2020. Inclusion, on the other hand, aims to raise the overall proportion of young Australians (24-35) with a bachelor level qualification to 40% by 2040 (Australian Government, 2009), with an increase in the participation of low SES students as a result. Thus, the focus of the fairness model is on a more equal proportional distribution of student places amongst social groups while the inclusion model emphasises enrolment growth as a whole. Significantly, for the prescribed expansion of enrolments to be achieved, the inclusion target itself requires “the recruitment of young people from social strata hitherto largely excluded from university attendance” (Birrell & Edwards, 2009, p. 8). Therefore, inclusion, too, is “linked tightly with equity” (James, 2010, p. 3). Marginson (2011a) claims that strategies for inclusion allow a “focus on strengthening the human agency of persons hitherto excluded” (p. 27) and places this model in line with Sen’s (2009) ideas on social justice and the importance of a focus on the individual rather than on institutional characteristics alone.

This paper aims to situate the opportunities that online learning affords within a discussion of the two equity models and related social justice theories, supported by insights into the student experience derived from a qualitative case study of a first-year online unit. This small case study provides a means for the student voice to be heard within the discussion. Pseudonymously named ATU100 for research purposes, the unit is offered by a large public university through OUA. Generally taken as a first unit towards a Bachelor of Arts degree, the unit is designed to facilitate students' transition into university level study and equip them for academic success. It therefore provides an ideal site for examining how student equity policies play out in the lives of new-to-university, online students. Online learning must not only facilitate access but should also offer students opportunities for increased justice in their lived experience if we are to consider this mode of delivery as playing a role in leveraging the social justice related aims underpinning policies of student equity. The fairness model is well supported by the unit's high proportion of students who fall into the equity categories outlined above. Yet, as the following discussion proposes, it is the inclusion model with its emphasis on the justice actually experienced by individuals that more closely aligns with the transformative value that completing students report deriving from participation in the unit. It is also proposed that the value of inclusion extends beyond the student age range prescribed in the 2009 policy to mature age students who may have faced barriers to university study caused by past educational disadvantage.

Theoretical framework

The 'fairness' and 'inclusion' goals of Australian higher education policy outlined above reflect contrasting equity models. According to Sen (2009), fairness draws on what he calls the theory of *transcendental institutionalism*, which firstly "concentrates its attention on what it identifies as perfect justice" (p. 5) and, secondly, "on getting institutions right" (p. 6). The focus is on institutional characteristics and what these might look like when a just situation is reached. Thus, the 20% target for low SES student participation is set as the ideal arrangement by which "equity is seen to be achieved once students have entered in the right proportions" (Gale, 2012, p. 254). This *arrangement-focused* view of justice aligns with the distributive justice paradigm, which aims to quantify fair proportional distribution as a way of addressing equity issues. Gewirtz (1998) suggests that distributive justice is the conventional conception and is commonly seen as "synonymous with social justice" (p. 470). Online learning contributes to distributive justice in higher education by allowing students who find it difficult to attend campus the opportunity to enrol at university.

One problem with this paradigm is that theories of distributive justice tend to focus on the 'ideal' (Wilson-Strydom, 2015), which as Sen (2009) notes, is unlikely to be agreed upon or achieved. Marginson (2011a) asserts that difficulties in achieving the ideal create the risk of equity policy being seen as a failure even when advances have been made. Another problem with this approach is its lack of attention to the individual. Distributive justice characterises equitable access to higher education according to defined social categories (Gale & Tranter, 2011) without considering the human complexities and differences within these groups (Wilson-Strydom, 2015). Naylor and James (2015) point out the considerable differences between different equity groups in terms of enrolment growth since 2009 and question whether "defining social inclusion via group membership is the best method of pursuing equity in higher education" (p. 2). Similarly, Sen (2009) questions the adequacy of an arrangement-focused view of justice: "The question to ask in this context is whether the analysis of justice must be so confined to getting the basic institutions and general rules right? Should we not also have to examine what actually emerges in society, including the kind of lives people actually lead...?" (p. 10).

The inclusion model of Australian higher education policy concerns the goal of increasing the overall participation of students in higher education, bringing about the expansion of places for low SES students as part of this overall increase. The inclusion model is proposed as more feasible and achievable than the fairness model (Marginson, 2011a). Its major value lies in the room it provides to shift the focus away from seeing disadvantaged students in terms of numbers, towards seeing them as people whose experiences of higher education are individual. Inclusion aligns well with Sen's view of social justice (Sen, 2009); his idea of *social realisations*, concerned with "the lives that people can actually live" and the "capabilities that people actually have" (p. 19), and his notion of *capabilities*, describing an individual's freedom and ability to be or do "what he or she has reason to value" (p. 231). In the higher education context, an emphasis on capabilities aligns with recent theories regarding wider student participation, such as *Third Generation Transition (T3)* (Gale & Parker, 2014) and *Southern Theory* (Gale, 2012), which emphasise the need to move beyond numerical, point of entry models for determining the success of student equity policy. Rather, students' lives must be "seen inclusively" (Sen, 2009, p. 19) with the concern on fostering their actual capacities, particularly of those who are victims of injustice (Marginson, 2011a). The inclusion of older students in the equity discussion, whose circumstances may have previously prevented university attendance, is consistent with the idea of correcting injustice. The inclusion model ascribes value to higher education for its ability to enhance the individual agency of a diverse range of students, as well as for its contribution to wider society. It is the importance of a focus on inclusion which emerges most strongly from the case study of ATU100 discussed in the section below.

Methodology and the research process

The focus of this paper lies in linking theories of social justice through higher education to the lived experiences of those who have gained access to university study via online delivery. While discussions of theories and policies are important, exploring these discussions from the perspective of participants imparts deeper meaning (O'Shea, 2014). Qualitative perspectives may be missing from accounts of policy since they are "more invisible, personal and difficult to measure" (Gale, 2014, p. 262) than quantitative accounts. This paper aims to contribute to the visibility of such perspectives, by focusing on the experiences of twelve online students within a qualitative, instrumental case study of ATU100. While the number of case study participants is small, their voices lend a powerful first-hand frame of reference to this discussion and may also, by extrapolation, provide insight into the experiences of students in similar circumstances.

Qualitative/interpretivist research methods aim to develop an in-depth and nuanced understanding of research participants' experiences (Creswell, 2008). An insider lens is added here through the author's involvement in the unit as a member of teaching staff, with the aim of allowing this subjective experience to play a positive role in the search for meaning (Laverty, 2003). Constructivist Grounded Theory is a method of data analysis which acknowledges the place of researcher subjectivity (Creswell, 2008). Charmaz (2014) describes this method as moving away from the positivist view that meaning is something external to be discovered. Rather, understanding is a construction between the research participants and the researcher via the researcher's interpretation. Charmaz (2014) acknowledges that elements of Constructivist Grounded Theory may be adopted and adapted to suit 'diverse studies' (p. 16).

This research utilised the Grounded Theory elements of *initial sampling* and *emerging design*. The first phase of the research involved a pilot study which utilised *initial sampling* to identify potential themes and inform the research design. *Emerging design* was used throughout the study and describes a process by which the researcher collects data, immediately analyses it, and subsequently makes decisions about the next step in the research process (Creswell, 2008).

Emerging design allows the researcher to remain responsive to the data. This approach enabled a change of focus towards the development of themes, rather than a theory, as the end point of the research (Charmaz, 2014). It was found that themes could link more readily to broader macro policies, consistent with an instrumental case study (Stake, 2005). *Thematic analysis* was then introduced into the study, which is described as “the search for and identification of common threads that extend throughout a set of data” (Kehrwald, 2008, p. 93). Themes are comprised of these threads of underlying meaning subject to abstract conceptualisation (Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, & Snelgrove, 2016).

The research participants and data collection process

Overall, the case study consisted of twelve students who had previously participated in the unit in one of six study periods across 2013-2016. ATU100 runs across all four study periods of the OUA academic year. Details in the table below were given by students in pre-interview questionnaires.

Table 1: Participant characteristics (n=12)

Name ¹	Study Period	Age Group	Income Bracket	Location	Highest level of previous study	Time away from study	Reason for choosing to study online	Successful (completed and passed)
Moira	SP3 2013	46-55	Lowest	Major metro	Bachelor degree attempted	9 years	Requires ongoing medical treatment	Yes
Melissa	SP2 2014	46-55	Lowest	Rural	Bachelor degree completed	22 years	Rural location and family commitments	Yes
Amanda	SP3 2014	26-35	Not given	Major metro	Bachelor degree attempted	15 years	Disability (bipolar disorder) and single mother	Yes
Louise	SP2 2015	56-65	Highest	Major metro	Bachelor degree attempted	20 years	Carer for husband and two children with disabilities	Yes
Ayla	SP2 2015	66-75	Lowest	Rural	Bachelor degree attempted	40 years	Too far from nearest university to commute	Yes
Joanna	SP3 2015	36-45	Low	Major metro	High school completed	20 years	Disabled single mother and two of her children have disability	Yes
Elise	SP3 2015	46-55	Lowest	Major metro	Bachelor degree completed	17 years	Bedridden with degenerative disease	No
Christiana	SP1 2016	18-25	Lowest	Remote	High school completed	School leaver	Remote location/ primary carer for disabled mother/ suffers from ill health	Yes

¹ Students’ names have been altered and no personal identifiers have been used.

Daniel	SP1 2016	26-35	Low	Major metro	TAFE ² Diploma attempted	11 years	In full time employment	Yes
Lina	SP1 2016	46-55	Not given	Remote	TAFE Diploma completed	5 years	Remote location	Yes
Georgiana	SP1 2016	Not given	Not given	Not given	Not given	12 years	Not given	No
Janelle	SP1 2016	26-35	Lowest	Major metro	Bachelor degree completed	6 years	Work and parenting responsibilitie s	Yes

Students were emailed a pre-interview questionnaire consisting of a mix of open-ended questions and statements with Likert-scale responses, along with an invitation to participate in one or more interviews. A mix of purposeful sampling and broad-based sampling was used throughout the research process. The first three students listed in the table were involved in the initial sampling of the pilot study. Broad-based sampling followed, with emails being sent to approximately 350 students in two study periods to which four students responded. Purposeful sampling was then used to seek out specific types of students; both to confirm findings that were emerging from the study, and to seek out those not yet adequately represented, namely non-completers, male students and school leavers. Twenty-three students were identified by the researcher and were sent personalised emails, resulting in five new participants. Of the twelve participants, eight consented to be interviewed while four made written contributions. The interviews lasted from 45-60 minutes and were conducted and recorded using online conferencing software and subsequently transcribed. An initial table of themes was then developed using quotes from the interviews. These themes were sent to the participants for checking through a follow-up questionnaire. The research participants were also asked to give permission for their reflective journals, completed as a unit assessment, to be analysed for correspondence to the themes in order to gain a real-time perspective on their experiences. The written texts from the interview transcripts, questionnaires and journals were then re-analysed to produce the final themes. Through these processes, data was triangulated for trustworthiness (Creswell, 2008).

With the small number of participants, these qualitative themes enable students' individual experiences to remain visible while signalling the commonalities between them. The majority of the students who participated in the research were mature age females who completed the unit successfully. They were the most enthusiastic responders to the research invitation. It proved more difficult to obtain responses from non-completing students. One non-completer responded in the broad-based sampling phase and was interviewed. The other non-completer responded to a targeted personal email and gave permission for her email reply to be used in the research but declined further participation. In response to personal emails, one male student agreed to participate via questionnaire only, and the school leaver agreed to full participation after receiving a targeted email. For this reason, the findings here may be less indicative of the experiences of these types of students.

The overarching research question addressed by the research was:

- To what extent are the objectives of ATU100 students met through their experience of studying online and what does this imply for equity and social justice?

Themes and findings from the case study include:

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- Online study is the means for students to gain access to a degree:
All the research participants stated that they could only access university study via online delivery.
- Students are highly enthusiastic about the unit after completion:
Research participants found the unit to be enjoyable and extremely helpful in their transition to university study. Students used superlatives such as *wonderful*, *grateful*, and *fabulous* to describe their feelings after completing the unit.
- The unit is challenging but the challenges had beneficial outcomes:
Research participants found that overcoming the challenges of adjusting to the scholarly terminology and content that they were introduced to in the unit gave them a sense of achievement, and important skills for further study.
- Interaction with peers can create a sense of being in a learning community:
Research participants reported feeling supported and welcomed by their peers.
- Support from others involved in the unit helps students to persevere but personal determination is the key element for successful completion:
Research participants indicated that support from teaching staff and peers was important but personal determination was the most critical attribute that enabled them to persevere.
- The unit may transform students' thinking and self-perceptions in positive ways:
Research participants reported seeing the world and their place within it in new ways as a result of their access to university study and their achievement in the unit.

It was the emergence of these positive themes from the case study which led the author to a deeper exploration of theories of equity and social justice in higher education and how they pertain to online learning which is further discussed below.

Relating social justice to online learning: The literature and the student voice

By joining together the literature, most notably Sen's (2009) *The Idea of Justice*, and the student voice that emerged from the case study of ATU100, this section analyses the relationship between online learning in higher education and ideas of equity and social justice. Concerns about student attrition are addressed first followed by a deeper exploration of the two equity models, fairness and inclusion.

Attrition concerns

Stone (2017) notes that perseverance is more difficult in online environments with the rate of degree completion for online students significantly lower than that of on-campus students. This is a key concern raised in relation to online study which challenges the idea of online learning as an equity enabler. Yet, as Nichols (2010) points out, the measurement of attrition in online courses is complex. For example, it is difficult to determine who should be counted in attrition numbers since it is more likely that students may "drop out before the course even begins" (p. 95) in the online environment, which can falsely inflate these figures. This indicates that some students may enrol in the unit without making a firm commitment to study or with no clear idea as to the nature and requirements of online study prior to enrolment. The latter appears to be the case for Elise, who was interviewed as a non-completer. Elise is bedridden with illness but wanted to keep her intellect sharp. After she was given a second-hand iPad, she decided to enrol in ATU100 and start a university degree. During her interview, she expressed confusion about online study which was primarily caused by her inadequate technology. She stated: "*I didn't know the ins and outs of how to do it. It didn't work out*".

In the context of open access online learning, Tresman (2002) challenges the perception that all attrition is negative. Non-completing students may be involved in movement across courses and institutions or may judge that they have met their personal objectives before formal completion. This acknowledges the agency of individuals to make their own choices in ways that have value to them. Having the possibility to choose is an important aspect of social justice as “being able to reason and choose is a significant aspect of human life” (Sen, 2009, p. 18). It should be noted, however, that respect for students’ choices needs to go beyond the provision of access. Georgiana, one of the non-completing participants, was deeply distressed by an administrative requirement to remain enrolled in the unit towards a fail result, when personal circumstances forced her to stop participating late in the study period: *“I feel punished and completely inadequate”*. Georgiana’s response indicates an experience quite different to the positive accounts given by other participants. However, other negative experiences with online study are largely hidden from the research due to the difficulties of getting non-completers involved.

Fairness: an arrangement-focused view

The fairness aspect of higher education policy includes the goal of a 20% representation of low SES students within the student body (Australian Government, 2009). Online access opens up higher education to many students who would otherwise be excluded through a diverse range of circumstances, including disadvantage due to disability, remoteness, work and/or caring responsibilities, and so on. All the research participants stated that online, flexible learning was their only enrolment option. As Joanna summed up: *“Basically, if the units weren’t offered online I wouldn’t be able to study”*. It follows, then, that online learning is one mode of delivery where the 20% goal is often exceeded, with students from low SES and other disadvantaged backgrounds “represented particularly strongly in online undergraduate programs” (Stone, 2017, p. 5). The findings from the ATU100 case study show that students derive a sense of belonging from being in a learning community where students share similar backgrounds and experiences. Research participants reported that they did not feel out of place but rather felt accepted and supported by their peers. For instance, Ayla stated: *“You didn’t feel like you were the only one in that – sort of – age group or with those kinds of experiences”*. The fragile self-belief that is common amongst equity students (Willans & Seary, 2011) was to some extent ameliorated by having these feelings widely shared by fellow students. This helped overcome the isolation often associated with online learning as students had the confidence to interact, as Janelle stated: *“Just knowing that people are...lost and unsure...like I was, is very comforting and made me want to get online as often as I could to offer my advice and ideas to others”*. The presence of higher proportions of equity students in the online learning community also works to remove the stigma these students may suffer on campus. For example, Mallman and Lee (2016) describe mature-age students on campus as being “disadvantaged by an identity that is marginalised” (p. 687) compared to the traditional school-leaver identity, particularly because many of these older students also “represent historically marginalised demographics” (p. 690). It is disadvantaged students who are the most likely to experience a sense of socio-cultural incongruity in the academic environment, which can hinder their success (Devlin, 2013). Online learning can provide an environment where the marginalised become the majority group, allowing greater confidence.

These types of individual experiences are peripheral to the considerations of the fairness/distributive justice paradigm, however, which concentrates almost exclusively on proportional representation at point of entry (Gale, 2012). There are also concerns that the over-selection required to shift proportional distribution can lead to claims that equity students lack merit (Marginson, 2011a), producing a deficit conception. This deficit model creates a perceived need for equity students to change to suit the academy and leaves aside ideas about how these

students may themselves change and enhance the academy. This creates a discourse of inadequacy surrounding equity students (Smit, 2012) which gives little regard to the quality of knowledge and experience that these students can contribute (Gale, 2012). The implicit risk is that online learning, with its higher representation of equity students, could be perceived as a second-tier form of higher education. It is thus highly important to consider the quality of online students' experiences subsequent to enrolment, rather than access alone. It is also important not to dismiss expansion in the overall participation of low SES students when the proportional distribution may show little change (Marginson, 2011a). As Sen (2009) proposes, the value of access to higher education may be seen through the expansion of individual capabilities "even if there is no distributional gain" (p. 298).

Inclusion: a social realisations view

The inclusion model for furthering student equity in higher education takes the focus off proportional distribution of places and allows room to look beyond the numbers of equity students an institution enrolls to the experiences of the individuals themselves. We can then perceive the effects of access to higher education in students' lives, following Sen's (2009) concept of social realisations which "demands that outcomes be seen in these broader terms" (p. 217). The focus shifts to individual capabilities, a term used by Sen (2009) to describe the freedom derived from "substantive opportunities" (p. 287), such as those provided by online access. While the common experiences shared by members of socially disadvantaged groups cannot be discounted entirely, the inclusion approach allows recognition of the individual diversity within these groups and the importance of individual gains; "what they learn, the effects in person formation and in labour market outcomes" (Marginson, 2011a, p. 35). This thinking is in line with Sen's (2009) emphasis on justice that is "linked to the world that actually emerges, not just the institutions or rules we happen to have" (p. 20).

In the educational context, understanding individual difference and agency is critical as a student's "specific personal, social, economic and familial context may be quite different from the context of other group members" (Wilson-Strydom, 2015, p. 148). There is a need to move away from perceiving equity students "according to pre-determined expectations rather than individual circumstances" (O'Shea, Lysaght, Roberts, & Harwood, 2016, p. 330). Further, the label of 'equity student', as applied to specific social groups, may not match students' own self-perceptions (Trowler, 2015). Online learning allows students to disclose as much or as little of themselves as they wish. As trust grows in the learning community, more of their personal identities may be shared. This is shown through the students' voices; for example, "*I transformed from a student unable to participate, to one who really looked forward to reading and participating in the discussion threads*" (Joanna) and "*I tend to be an introvert, I can live without human contact. But I think for those days when things are harder it helps to have that human contact, to know that you aren't alone*" (Christiana).

The inclusion model acknowledges the "heterogeneity of experience and understanding" (Trowler, 2015, p. 11) inherent in higher education spaces, and sees students as whole people with unique backgrounds, experiences and world-views (Gale & Parker, 2014). Inclusion is furthered through a two-way process of change and development between institution and students (Devlin, 2013). Institutions hold the responsibility to adapt to the realities of students' lives and foster inclusion for diverse students by "creating collaborative and inclusive spaces, in which students are encouraged to share their beliefs, knowledge and experiences" (Devlin, 2013, p. 948). Responses from research participants indicate that online learning offers a way for this to be achieved: "*It taught me that it's okay to have an opinion, and it's okay to express it, but you need to do it in a way that is...constructive*" (Joanna); "*The [courses] I have been successful*

at have provided an exciting environment where ideas can be discussed without prejudice or ill-feeling” (Louise). Online learning can meet students where they are currently placed, allowing participation in ways that suit the student considering their individual circumstances and the personal barriers they may have. As Moira shared, “I suffer ill health...I don’t know from one day to the next how I will be feeling. The online courses allow me to pace myself so as to minimise any disruption to my medical treatment”. Amanda, who has bipolar disorder, described her experience: “...making [study] work for myself...Getting rid of the idea that I had to do it a certain way and I can’t do it the way I need to do it”.

Inclusion allows a focus on “the prevention of manifest injustice, rather than seeking the perfectly just” (Sen, 2009, p. 21). A number of the research participants, particularly those in older age groups, saw the opportunity to attend university online as a way to overcome past barriers to participation. Ayla was previously accepted into university but “*finances sent me back to work*”. Similarly, Amanda commenced a degree but “*...didn’t cope so well. I have mental health issues*”. Lina, who lives in a remote area, stated: “*I’ve always wanted to do a...degree, ever since I was young, so it’s something that’s been in the back of my mind for a long time. But my circumstances never allowed for me to do that*”. Marginson (2011a) asserts that “integral to the politics of equity is the need to build effective agency in people from groups formerly excluded or under-represented” (p. 30). The opportunity to build agency through online access to university study allows individuals from these groups to be “empowered and resourced” (p. 30) and freed from a prior sense of educational and personal failure. As Joanna shared, “*My previous experience [in education] served to silence me...Now...the voice in my head began to be more positive than negative*”. After dropping out of a TAFE course, Daniel “*...went into this course expecting to fail. I didn’t believe that I could do it*” but subsequently achieved high marks in the unit, allowing him to rethink his abilities: “*If I can complete this unit, why can’t I complete every other unit in this degree?*”.

A capability approach to education and social justice has a focus on the substantive opportunities that students are able to develop (Gale & Molla, 2015). As Sen (2009) notes “the concept of capability is ... closely linked with the opportunity aspect of freedom [and] ... respects our being free to determine what we want, what we value and ultimately what we decide to choose” (p. 232). The research participants valued being able to access and engage with the university learning community partly for the freedom it gave them to be something ‘other’ to the constrained roles of their daily lives. Louise is a carer for members of her family, all of whom have health issues which require significant amounts of her attention, support and time. For her, online study provides relief: “*I love studying so much - I’m hoping that it will become an anchor in my life - something I can cling to*”. For Melissa, studying at university proved “*I’m OK. I’m part of this world. I’m not a housewife that is dated and not in touch with technology*”. Sen (2009) describes how people “cherish their ability to reason, appraise, choose, participate and act” (p. 250). In a number of interviews, there was a sense of exhilaration as students felt their university experience activated and enhanced these abilities: “*It’s opened a whole new world to me that I didn’t even know existed before I started studying*” (Melissa); “*I felt empowered...to search for knowledge competently. I no longer find reading academic texts frightening. I love them*” (Louise). The capability perspective allows the intrinsic value of higher education to be seen along with its instrumental value (Gale & Molla, 2015). Central to this perspective is agency (Wilson-Strydom, 2015) which is “at the core of concepts of self” (Marginson, 2011a, p. 29). Through their studies, successful students experienced a positive change in their self-perceptions by discovering their own capacity to succeed. “*I realised that I have more resilience than I gave myself credit for when I was younger*” (Amanda). Successful students felt a new capability both in academic and societal terms, allowing a more confident participation and contribution within

wider society: “*I feel now that I have an opinion, that I have something to say...*” (Melissa); “*I now see the world through my ‘educated’ lens*” (Moira).

Participation in higher education is an opportunity which can promote students’ agency and self-determination (Marginson, 2011b). The emergence of these important educational capacities is strongly apparent in the findings discussed above, which are consistent in depicting a positive experience of personal transformation and empowerment for completing students. The majority of participating students described fundamental shifts in their self-concepts, with greater confidence and self-esteem as a result. In the case of the participants who were successful in completing the unit, it can be argued that their participation in online learning went significantly towards producing some measure of social justice in their lives. While students are eager to gain the tools to transform themselves into capable university students, there is still the sense that they are affirmed both in their own identities and for the diverse understandings they bring to their education (Gale, 2012). Joanna, for instance, felt “*as though I were an equal, and that I was welcome and my input and my learning were important...that I had as much right to be there as anybody*”. This valuable aspect of online learning becomes evident through a focus on their experiences beyond the point of entry as has been the case with this research.

Conclusion

Online learning plays an important and increasing role in contemporary higher education in Australia and elsewhere, with its capacity to enable participation of many who would otherwise be excluded. Both fairness and inclusion are concepts which are foregrounded in Australian government policies to widen and increase access to higher education, aiming to foster a more socially just society. This is a goal for higher education widely shared internationally (Jia & Ericson, 2017). As stated by Sen (2009), policies which aim to increase social justice must “be alive to both fairness in the processes involved and to the equity and efficiency of the substantive opportunities people can enjoy” (p. 296). An exclusive focus on fairness, as determined by the number of equity students represented at enrolment, limits the development of a deeper understanding of the wide benefits equity students can gain from university participation. The power of online higher education to transform the lives of students from under-represented and disadvantaged backgrounds in substantive and positive ways becomes clear when the focus shifts to their individual experiences. The inclusion model allows this shift. Study options offered through online learning create important avenues to increase participation and facilitate inclusion for a diverse range of students. They allow those prevented from attending campus not only the opportunity to study at university level but also to participate in learning communities that recognise and affirm them. The voices of the successful online students who participated in the case study of ATU100 reveal the high value they placed on these opportunities through which they experienced enhanced self-worth and expanded capabilities. On the other hand, it is clear from the high attrition rate in online units and from the comments of non-completing students in the case study that this positive experience is not shared by all who study online. While further research is needed to gain more understanding of non-completers’ views, it is important that the central place of online learning in fostering inclusion in higher education, and its potential to transform students’ lives, is widely recognised and valued in higher education policies.

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