



## Equity: A key benchmark for students and staff in an era of changing demands, changing directions

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Educational equity is premised on the right of individuals to a higher education irrespective of their age, geographical location, gender, race, physical ability, or socio-economic background in order to improve their income generation and hence quality of life (Santiago et al., 2008). In the digital age, distance-, flexible-, mobile-, virtual- and e-learning are all being promoted as means by which disadvantaged learners from around the globe can access, participate in, and achieve the outcome of post-secondary qualifications. They are also promoted as the means by which staff can participate in commensurate employment irrespective of their personal circumstances. This paper examines equity as a key benchmark for both students and staff in an era of changing demands and changing directions in higher education. While grounded in the literature, the paper incorporates ethnographic (student voice) and autoethnographic (staff voice) exemplars to highlight ways that disadvantage is experienced in technologically-mediated education.

Keywords: equity; access; participation; outcomes; benchmarking; ethnography; autoethnography; student voice; staff voice

### Introduction

In a climate of rapid technological changes and their application to educational contexts, there is often the accompanying hope that the educationally disadvantaged – those who are directly excluded by existing practices (Byrne, 1999) – will achieve equity in terms of access, participation and outcomes. The word equity stems from the Middle English ‘equite’, meaning to be equal, fair, or freed “from bias or favouritism” (Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary, 2004, p. 423). Under the mantle of the federal government’s social inclusion agenda, considerations of equity are now in the spotlight for the higher education sector and, in particular, the access, participation and outcomes of a number of specific equity (under-represented) groups (Bradley et al., 2008).

However, research in the field suggests that despite advances in technology, the gaps not only remain but are widening in some cases (Bates, 2005; Sanders, 2006; Gulati, 2008; Anderson, 2009; Zondiros, 2011). What can

be done to factor equity into technologically-mediated higher education? Jordan (2010) has argued that as key stakeholders, the voices of the disadvantaged need to be heard in order to co-contribute and inform a richer understanding of equity. This paper considers equity as a key benchmark for both students and staff in an era of changing – and sometimes contradictory – demands and directions. Using ethnographic and autoethnographic methodology, the paper explores equity issues in technologically-mediated education in terms of access, participation and outcomes through both student and staff voice.

## Equity in technologically-mediated education

### Student Equity

Equity is a philosophical viewpoint concerning basic human rights. In its current usage, student equity relates to access, participation and outcomes (Coram, 2007) of different social groups (Vick, 2001) or individuals (Santiago et al., 2008) in higher education. Access and participation relate to educational opportunities irrespective of a student's age, geographical location, gender, race, physical ability, socio-economic background, or other circumstances. Outcomes relate to the successful progression or completion of studies in order to improve an individual's social mobility (Jordan, 2010), income generation and quality of life (Santiago et al., 2008). As such, student equity relates to *being in* higher education (ibid).

One mode of technologically-mediated education is distance education (DE). During the 1938 International Council for Distance Education (ICDE) conference, equity issues were listed as a suitable and necessary area for research in what was then known as correspondence instruction (Bunker, 2003). More recently, a Delphi Study on research areas in DE discerned that access, equity and ethics were considered one of the most important research areas in distance education (Zawacki-Richter, 2009). Despite this, of the 695 articles published in the top five DE journals published between 2000 and 2008 (Zawacki-Richter, Bäckér & Vogt, 2009), only 22.4% of these articles related to equity themes. Thus equity issues collectively remain a research gap in the DE literature, and possibly in the technologically-mediated education literature more broadly.

In the context of Australian higher education, this theme of equity in terms of access, participation and outcomes have been brought back into focus through the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley et al., 2008). In the report, the former 'equity' groups of students in higher education (Martin, 1994) have been relabelled as 'under-represented' groups and the focus of national concern narrowed to a close monitoring under the so-called 'social inclusion agenda' of Indigenous students, regional and remote students, and students from low socio-economic backgrounds. However, the remaining national equity categories previously noted – students who have disabilities, students from non-English speaking backgrounds, and women in non-traditional and postgraduate education – continue to be monitored (Bradley et al., 2008). While this monitoring of equity is useful, it still tends to be investigated as discrete homogenous units and measured quantitatively, rather than examining the qualitative experiences of those participating in higher education. To this end, Willems (2010a; 2010b) impresses that the educationally disadvantaged cannot be viewed – nor researched – in a simplistic manner. Instead equity (under-represented) groups are multidimensional and comprise gradients of disadvantage (Golding & Volkoff, 1998; Watson & Pope, 2000; Willems, 2004; Coram, 2007; Willems, 2010a; Willems, 2010b).

Between the Martin and Bradley Reports, the Nelson Report (Nelson, 2003) encouraged institutions of higher education in Australia to increase their responsiveness to national equity issues and improve educational quality. Quality and benchmarking seem to go hand in hand. Stella and Woodhouse (2007) define quality as "fitness for purpose" (p. 5). Vlăsceanu, Grünberg & Pârlea (2007, p. 33), representing UNESCO, define a benchmark as "a reference point, or a criterion against which the quality of something can be measured, judged, and evaluated,

and against which outcomes of a specified activity can be measured". Garlic and Pryor (2004) argue that in the context of Australian higher education, benchmarking is often conceptualised in two ways: for the *assessment* of an organisation's accountability and "as an ongoing diagnostic management tool focused on learning, collaboration and leadership to achieve continuous *improvement* in the organisation over time" (p. 9, italics in original). This second aspect becomes the working definition of benchmarking adopted in this paper. Assessing the practices of an institution – its teaching and learning technology, library and support services, and so on – through an equity lens is, in this sense, a diagnostic tool akin to the proverbial canary in a mineshaft. Ergo, considering equity issues is an essential benchmark for quality in an era of the social inclusion agenda.

## Staff Equity

By extension, equity is also the measure by which staff from these same disadvantaged backgrounds can have access to, participate in, and have the outcomes of, meaningful and paid employment opportunities. Ramsey (2005) reminds us that staff equity in higher education is an important issue, incorporating anti-discrimination legislation, equal opportunity legislation and employment standards, both at state and national levels. In an era when distance-, flexible-, mobile-, virtual- and e-learning are all being promoted as a means by which disadvantaged learners can achieve outcomes to improve income generation and hence quality of life through higher education (Zandiros, 2011). This relates to equity *through* higher education and the ability of these outcomes to not only affect social mobility or, more narrowly, intergenerational income mobility and the extent to which it can reduce income disparities across particular groups" (Santiago et al., 2008, p.15). However, the compounding of disadvantage appears to continue having impact. Following graduation, there is evidence that some groups of disadvantaged graduates transitioning to the workforce are more vulnerable to labour market inequalities – such as cycles of unemployment and underemployment – than others and also experience challenges in pursuing career opportunities (Formby, 2011). These sub-groups include women, mature-aged graduates, students from low SES backgrounds and ethnic minorities, although this list is not conclusive. Thus disadvantaged students who successfully navigate their way through higher education despite the odds can emerge to find that the playing field on the other side is still not level (Furlong & Cartmel, 2005). Those who have prepared for a career in academia and emerge with doctorates seem to face a worse plight.

While there are a number of institutions which embrace fully flexible off-campus working opportunities for staff who cannot work on-campus, the inability for disadvantaged staff to find work commensurate with their qualifications is generally problematic. Yet we live in an era when the Australian federal government is promoting tele-working and flexible activity-based employment opportunities to assist in overcoming employment disadvantage. From an equity perspective, Article 23 of the United Nations *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* argues that "everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment" and that "everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family (sic) an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection" (United Nations, 2011, n.p.). Yet staff who face disadvantage, especially those who are not able to work on-campus for a variety of reasons such as having a disability, financial considerations, living in rural, regional or remote areas, who have family or carer responsibilities, or who are disadvantaged in any other way, may struggle to gain access to employment, let alone the opportunity for career progression.

Shave (2011) reports that more businesses and industries are moving towards such alternative working arrangements as ‘activity-based working’. It is a model based on greater flexibility in the workplace, reportedly leading to enhanced engagement, collaboration, personal accountability and improved productivity within the organisation. At the same time, with the creation of the national broadband network (NBN) in Australia, the federal government is predicting a change in the future of work with 12% of Australian tele-working by 2020, thus giving the disadvantaged, such as those living in regional and remote locations, employment opportunities like their city counterparts (Hudson, 2011). In reality, however, while technologically-mediated education is being promoted as means to overcome equity issues in the digital age, there is a long way to travel to redress disadvantage for staff in higher education.

## **Equity, student voice and staff voice**

Equity is a qualitative term concerning issues of justice for individuals (Secada, 1989). The notion of voice relates to the individual’s right to have their views and experiences heard and it brings subjective understandings to given situations. In educational contexts, West (2004) argues that the voice is not simply a means to express ideas and opinions, but can also be influential agents of change. This reflects Britzman’s (1989) definition of the voice as having three components: the literal (the thoughts and utterances of the individual), the metaphorical (feelings), and the political (the right to speak and be heard).

Research on student voice relates to what students express about a given situation. Owen and Moyle (2008, p. 3) argue that it is important to listen to the student voice as they are the “main stakeholders in education or training”. Further, Cook-Sather (2006) argues that students have their own unique perspectives on learning, teaching, and schooling, and that these insights warrant the attention of those guiding the teaching and learning process. Thus, attending to student voice is the way to ensure true student-centred learning is being achieved (Hargreaves, 2004). Yet Owen and Moyle (2008) argue that “there appears to be little research that has focused upon hearing students’ perspectives to learning with technologies” (p. 6). It is noted as a research gap.

By extension, staff (or employee) voice is another consideration in terms of equity in technologically-mediated learning environments. Dundon et al. (2004) argue that employee voice has four different but potentially overlapping purposes: to express individual dissatisfaction; the expression of collective organisation; to contribute to organisational decision-making; and to demonstrate co-operative relations. Yet listening to the voices of staff in academia who are disadvantaged – including those experiencing unemployment or underemployment as a consequence of these disadvantages – is also a research gap.

## **Methodology**

As equity is a qualitative term (Secada, 1989), qualitative ethnographic and autoethnographic approaches are exceptionally useful to capture the lived experience of equity issues in technologically-mediated higher education. Ethnography – referred also to as ethnomethodology – relates to exploring and trying to understand this situated experience (Cohen & Manion, 1994). When ethnography incorporates mixed methods approaches, it can capture the ‘thick descriptions’ (Andrews & Tynan, 2010) of students’ voices to their learning experiences in authentic contexts (Mayes, 2006), so that the hype of new technology and/or modes of learning does not obliterate the perpetuation or widening of the gap for the disadvantaged.

Autoethnography – a contraction of the term autobiographical ethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) – is an extension of ethnography. It allows for personal experiences to be told in the words and through the eyes of the

participant researcher themselves (Smith, 2005). According to Ellis and Bochner (2000), the emphasis in autoethnography varies between participant researchers between the self (*auto*), the culture (*ethno*), or the research process itself (*graphy*). Irrespective of emphasis, autoethnography utilises this “data about self and its context to gain an understanding of the connectivity between self and others within the same context” (Ngunjiri, Hernandez & Chang, 2010, n.p.). Further, Denzin (2003) argues that autoethnography has a crucial role to play in democratic societies, founded as they are on the set of basic principles of justice, equity, freedom, liberty, accountability, openness and transparency (Oluwole, 2003). For without such approaches, experiences surrounding equity in higher education may not be understood by individuals who have not experienced – or may not understand – the issues of marginalisation in academia. However, autoethnography is not without its critiques. One is the danger that the self-disclosure may cause the participant researcher harm and the maxim is to protect oneself as one would a research participant in any ethnographic approach (Chatham-Carpenter, 2010).

Through a combination of survey questionnaires and email or telephone interviews, mixed method research was used to capture the student’s voice on their experiences in technologically-mediated distance learning environments (Willems, 2004; Willems, 2005). Over a five-year period, thirty-five distance learners were initially surveyed, then interviewed via telephone or email to gain feedback on their distance learning experiences via technology (Willems, 2004). All respondents were Australian residents. One was living off-shore at the time of the study. There were four male and thirty one female respondents who were enrolled through seven providers of higher education: five in Australia and two located off-shore. Of the research cohort, thirty-four of the thirty-five participants were investigated using an ethnographic approach. The remaining participant – the researcher – adopted an autoethnographic approach. The participant researcher from the initial study now works in academia and continues to represent the same equity groups as she did while being a student in the initial research.

While not initially a focal point of the research, it became evident that equity issues could not be overlooked in the analysis of the findings as technologically-mediated education was the means by which these disadvantaged students could access higher education. While two of the respondents did not identify with any of the six national equity groups (Martin, 1994) at the time of the study, the remaining 33 were members of at least one equity group. Of these, two were Indigenous students; two were from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB); nine students had disabilities; there were twenty-nine rural and isolated students; sixteen students had a low socio-economic status (SES); and seventeen students were women studying in either non-traditional fields or in post-graduate study. This overlap of equity group membership was a significant finding of the research. In eleven cases, participants belonged to at least three or more equity groups, including the participant researcher. Where multiple equity groups were present, the most common combination was for ‘rural and isolated students’ or ‘students with disabilities’, coupled with ‘low socio-economic status’, plus a third or fourth equity group. However, all participants in the study – and not simply those from disadvantaged backgrounds – experienced disadvantage, prompting the re-evaluation of the concept of equity as a homogenous entity to one that is multidimensional and encompasses gradients of disadvantage (Golding & Volkoff, 1998; Watson & Pope, 2000; Willems, 2004; Coram, 2007; Willems, 2010a, 2010b).

## Research findings

The qualitative data (survey questionnaire responses and interview material) was subjected to thematic analysis to identify major themes in the data. As equity in its current usage in the Australian context relates to access, participation and outcomes (Coram, 2007), these will be used as to help organise some of the participant responses. *Access* includes such considerations as flexible (and DE) learning opportunities for the

disadvantaged; access to the required technology; access to a stable power supply; and the financial ability to enter into study. *Participation* includes such considerations as skills; the instructional design, including aspects of individual differences; and participation in social networks in higher education. Finally, *outcomes* relate to considerations such as the successful completion of studies and to the expectant improvement of income generation and job security.

The students' voices presented in the paper are presented as either direct quotes or paraphrased to tell the story and the respondent identified by an acronym to protect their identity. Following Chatham-Carpenter (2010), the autoethnographic comments will be presented in italics. Space precludes a larger number of personal vignettes on the experience of disadvantage but those provided are exemplars to support the point being raised. It is worth mentioning that the students' voices presented in the paper tend to be weighted to issues surrounding the administrative and organisational issues of the technologically-mediated learning experience (the macro and meso perspectives), with fewer concerning the pedagogical issues relating to teaching and learning in technologically-mediated education (the micro issues). This is of note, as according to Zawacki-Richter, Bäcker and Vogt (2009), the most researched areas in distance education (highest frequency) are those that lie at the micro level (instructional design, interaction and communication in learning communities, and learner characteristics) in contrast to those issues at the macro level (access, equity and ethics; globalisation of education and cross-cultural aspects; distance teaching systems and institutions; theories and models; and research methods in distance education and knowledge transfer) and the meso level (management and organisation of DE; costs and benefits; educational technology; innovation and change; professional development and faculty support; learner support services; and quality assurance) combined. Student voice and staff voice are means by which a more realistic understanding of the lived experiences of the disadvantage (theory-in-use) over the espoused rhetoric of a given situation may be possible. By listening to the voice, research might be better directed in examining the issues that are of the main concern to those who are the major stakeholders in technologically-mediated higher education.

## **Equity in terms of *access* to technologically-mediated education**

### *Equity and flexible learning opportunities*

Flexible learning opportunities enabled through such technologically-mediated environments as distance-, flexible-, mobile-, virtual- and e-learning are often argued as being the conduit via which educational equity can be achieved (Zondiros, 2011). Flexible learning is defined by its ability and adaptability to meet the individual needs and circumstances of learners (Bowles, 2004) and as such is often suggested to be student-centred. However, Goodyear (2008) argues that "some of the practical guidance provided in the literature would be more useful if it took a less romantic or naïve view of the charms of flexibility" (p. 253). Student and staff voice can help provide this.

- Angelina is a rural resident from a non-English speaking background (NESB). She says: "I needed flexible learning opportunities due to my family responsibilities, the distance our farm is from the closest university, and because of my part-time work responsibilities." However, communication issues are a continual challenge for Angelina, and not simply due to English being her second language. She says that sometimes there is a lack of clear information from her lecturers and markers. She would like to have all requirements of units and general information available online and up-front to help in the choice of subjects in order to make informed decisions about their study. Angelina also adds that despite the benefits of flexible learning in being able to access her materials over a 24-hour period that she still feels isolated from other students.
- Ken lives in a regional town. He says: "I needed to choose a distance education option as I am caring for elderly parents and they live too far from the nearest regional university. I am also on a carer's pension so don't have much money. Having studied on-campus before however, I feel 'deprived' not being on-campus."

- Vicki lives in the city but struggles with ill-health. She says: “With a chronic disability, flexible online learning made a tertiary education possible for me, but I found that it is not flexible.” (Vicki)
- *There is a disjuncture between students accessing higher education via flexible learning opportunities and staff also trying to access employment in higher education via the same methods. There is a misnomer that if you really want work, you just simply move to the city, or interstate or off-shore. In our region, we do see a lot of drift to the city. Yet it is not always possible to up stakes and move due to one’s life circumstances.*

#### *Equity and technology*

While enabling participation for many, the media and technology of instruction can continue to pose a great deal of challenges for the diverse student body. Implementing technological change needs to be a key consideration for the disadvantaged.

- Cindy, a low income mother with a young child, says that “my husband takes his computer to work – I only get it 2 weeks out of 4” and due to this, has to arrange computer and internet access to undertake her courses, through friends, family and the local library. Her study is disrupted as a consequence.
- Amanda, is enrolled in a non-traditional area of study. Between working in the local town for three days per week and helping her husband on the family property, she studies to become a teacher. Amanda says: “Just because universities have the technology available for [on-campus] students to complete these requirements, you cannot assume that all students will have the same capability to do so. People setting up such courses should consider the circumstances of the enrolling learners so as to consider what obstacles may exist for distance learners before setting up the course structure. Finances and living rurally do make access to, and acquisition of, the necessary technology not always possible despite the best attempts.”
- *I love trying new technology whenever I can access it. However, I remember the challenges of finding out at the start of a new semester that new technology was required. For example, at one point in my undergraduate degree, some of the learning materials had arrived via video. At the time we had no television set, let alone a video player. At first I asked friends if I could view my learning materials in their homes. While they were gracious about it, I rushed to get through so as not to be an inconvenience. Eventually I was able to save to buy the television and video player, but within a semester, learning materials stopped being produced in video format. If I had known that the technology would change so swiftly, I would have held off on my purchase and put the money towards the next wave of technology. There does not seem to be enough recognition of this ‘lag’ time by the educationally disadvantaged for new technological acquisitions.*

#### *Equity and access to a stable power supply*

Even in developed nations such as Australia, stable power supplies cannot be taken-for-granted for students and this has implications for those providing technologically-mediated higher education.

- Kathy works off-shore. She says: “I am living in an under-developed country. Phone line and power failure are constant problems.”
- Jodi is from a low-socio economic background and lives in a rural and isolated setting. She says: “Living rurally has many challenges as a distance learner. Power failure and phone-lines being out affect Internet access. We get lots of black-outs or brownouts here. Sometimes it takes weeks on end for the phone-line to be restored. Sometimes lecturers just don't understand. Some are good, though. We need extra assistance so as to be able to participate without being disadvantaged.”
- *We live near a number of power stations yet we still tend to lose power frequently due to brownouts or blackouts. If you are in the midst of any online work at the time, you can lose the lot. My strategy – and what I pass on to any student – is that if there is a ‘save’ function in the form (such as email or an online job application) to save the work frequently. However, there is not always a ‘save’ function, and in these instances, though it may take a little more time at the outset, it is prudent to work and save items in the standard word processing format and then copy-and-paste this into the online activity. That way if the power is ever interrupted, you still have your material, plus this strategy can you save hours in having to retype what you had already commenced.*

#### *Equity and financial ability to access higher education*

Formal educational qualifications cost money – not only for initial access but also to progress through the course of studies. Financial ability to pay not only involves overt costs but covert ones as well.

- Margaret completed her secondary schooling many decades ago. While she lives in the city, she is debilitated by rheumatoid-arthritis which causes mobility and fine-motor impairments. Margaret says: “While I have a computer, affording fees are a problem.”
- Carolyn has a low income, is a single parent, and resides in a rural area. She says: “My biggest hurdle is the

money. Finances cripple me. Universities don't understand that it takes months of saving to afford every piece of new materials or equipment. They should tell students up-front if a subject requires any additional materials and equipment. In some subjects, you don't know these additional requirements until well into a subject and past the withdrawal date. It is worse if the subject is a compulsory one for your degree. There is the assumption that you can just go out and buy it or have access to it. With little income and living rurally, how can you do that?"

- Diane travels a lot and has struggled with the shift from printed course guides to fully online material. She says: "I prefer all material as [a] hard copy. Portable. [I have] No internet connection on my laptop. On-line components need to be downloaded and printed at a huge cost to me."
- Katharine lives in rural Victoria. She has a disability and receives a small wage for her part-time work. She says that online education: "increases the costs of higher education by distance learners. For example, increased Internet costs in downloading materials; increased electricity, printer, ink and paper costs in printing out on-line materials; and the increased cost in time and labour to download and print, puts the costs back onto already disadvantaged learners."
- Susan is a mature-aged student and mother of two. Although her household has a moderate income "on paper", the household finances are always tight. She says: "I have a very old computer. With the cost of fees, texts, and ISP (internet service provider), there is no money to upgrade or buy the software I need. There is a need to constantly up-grade skills and equipment, which is challenging for me financially."

### **Equity in terms of *participation* through technologically-mediated education**

#### *Equity and skills*

Assumptions over the baseline skills of enrolling or continuing students in the widening participation climate can be erroneous. With students coming into higher education from alternative pathways, cultural capital, technology skills, study skills, or even academic knowledge for students who are 'first in the family' to participate in higher education, cannot be assumed or taken for granted. Not all students will enter or continue through higher education with the requisite skills or cultural knowledge to participate freely, although the assumption that these skills exist can be inherent within a course.

- Susan, whose background has been described previously, says: "I had to take compulsory computer courses and a 2-day course on-campus for computers prior to commencing. It was too fast for mature-aged students. I almost 'died' first semester. Too pressed for time with kids and work to read how. What a shock."
- Sharon lives in a coastal village with her two children and is both visually-impaired and has rheumatoid arthritis, both of which pose challenges to the successful participation in her online studies. She says: "I learnt my computer skills through trial and error and through my children doing it at school."
- Linda lives in rural Australia and juggles part-time work, part-time studies and a full-time family. She says: "We need clearer instructions, [like] a proper beginners manual. [There are] assumptions as to base knowledge of students."

#### *Equity and instructional design*

With the increasingly diverse student population in higher education, instructional design (ID) needs to consider inclusive practices in order to promote equity as students participate in higher education in different ways and for different purposes. One challenge, for example, is the association of technologically-mediated modes of learning with being predominantly text-based. While many educators now incorporate multimedia into their learning design, text can still predominate through online learning materials, emails, and forum participation, leading to a perception in some parts of the broader community of academia's lag with society at large. Willems (2009, p. 79) relates the voice of a rural-based student who stated: "I really want to study, I really do. But I could not do distance education. I am such a visual learner". For this purpose, the experiences of the educationally disadvantaged are particularly pertinent as a yardstick in the considerations of ID.

- Marianne is a relatively young off-campus learner who lives rurally. She is frustrated about her course's compulsory participation in forums. She feels that "they could be used more effectively", have a more active presence on the part of the lecturers, and she would like important or key information more clearly identified so that they do not get lost in long strings of other information and communication. She is also concerned that when the lecturers do not have an active presence on the forum, information generated within student discussions may in fact be erroneous and misleading, and subsequently affect assessment.

- Linda, whose background has been described previously, also has issues over the compulsory participation in the online forums. She says: “I don’t like answering questions online for fear of looking stupid.”
- *I learnt very early on how to structure a good essay. However, I struggled in any handwritten tasks such as the 2-3 hour exams due to my carpal tunnel syndrome. The units that I thrived in, however, were those which offered an alternative assessment option, such as using multimedia or taking part in an online role play. Indeed, it is these subjects which I still remember to this day. I take these experiences with me as an educator.*

### *Equity and participation in social networks in higher education*

Social networks are described as enabling “communication among ever-widening circles of contacts [and] inviting convergence among the hitherto separate activities of email, messaging, website creation, diaries, photo albums and music or video uploading and downloading” (Livingston, 2008, p. 395). Social networks can help provide the student with social presence, the perception of belonging to a community within the technologically-mediated environment, and even a greater participatory role in their studies (Swan & Shin, 2005).

- Anne faces many challenges as a student. She is a single parent of three children (two of whom have disabilities) and subsists on a pension. She actively desires to be involved in social networks during her studies: “The biggest problem [is the] human factor. So close to quitting. Privacy laws prevent [my] uni giving out other students’ contact details. I was trying to start up social group. It needs to feel part of my uni life.”
- Susan, whose background has been described previously, says: “There was a forum requirement. There were only 8 regular contributors which was frustrating as others were watching on and copied us without contributing. We formed own study group who now support each other even when lecturers are non-communicative. We meet on-line but off the forum. I finally feel as if I have ‘real’ contact.”
- *As a distance learner for 20 years, I was expected to develop social networks with my peers and lecturers. Yet in attempts to find off-campus technologically-mediated employment, one of the concerns given by potential employers is that I might not be able to develop and maintain social networks with my colleagues (or students) if I do not work on-campus with them. This is counter to my lived experience in which I use social media on a daily basis for activities ranging from the supervision of a student via Skype through to research collaboration with a colleague through Facebook.*

### **Equity in terms of *outcomes* from technologically-mediated education**

#### *Equity and the completion of assessments, units or courses*

It is not easy for the educationally disadvantaged to achieve successful outcomes. Individual assessment tasks, then subject units, and finally the course itself, all need to be successfully completed.

- Sarah lives geographically close to one university, but studies off-campus with another institution due to her chronic disability which requires hospitalisation from time to time (Willems, 2005). One particular incident serves to highlight the complexities of this situation. Sarah had an unexpected episode of illness which required hospitalisation. Despite supportive documentation to verify this fact, contact with the lecturer following her discharge from hospital, and her attempts to submit major assessment task that fell due whilst she was in hospital as soon as she was able to, Sarah received a ‘Fail’. The grounds given were that she had not advised her lecturer in advance and arranged an alternative assessment task *prior* to her emergency hospitalisation. As a consequence of the subject assessment weightings, Sarah subsequently failed the entire subject unit.
- Angelina is a self-funded post-graduate student who lives on a farm. She is from a NESB and her undergraduate qualifications were attained in the country of her origin. She says: “I had a problem with an

assignment in one subject that could not be explained or laid out on-line. The lecturer was not satisfied. She said that I should have got help from a tutor who looks after students who have difficulties with assignments. I did not know that I needed help as I had passed the first two assessments but the third assessment was worth 40% of my mark. She should have told me that I needed this help before I failed. I have had to re-sit the subject again at the additional cost of \$800.”

- Carolyn, whose background has been described previously, says: “[The] Completion rate for women is much lower. We need support. Women worry about extended problems not just the task at hand.”

### *Equity and finding work*

- *I was working in academia as a tutor and marker when I was very strongly encouraged to complete my doctorate as the basis for job security in higher education and for career progression post completion. While this was sound advice, the reality has been quite different. Those same issues which identified me as educationally disadvantaged as a student still seem to be the barriers to secure employment post completion.*

## **Conclusions**

The notion of equity is premised on the right of individuals to have the opportunity to access, participate in and achieve successful outcomes in higher education in order to improve their quality of life by being able to find paid work. In the digital age, distance-, flexible-, mobile-, virtual-, and e-learning are all being promoted as means by which this can take place. Yet as the student and staff voice exemplars in this paper serve to highlight, there can be a disjuncture between the espoused rhetoric and the personal experiences of the disadvantaged.

Further research on equity in technologically-mediated education is suggested through exploring both student voice and staff voice. First, and in relation to student voice, it is suggested that longitudinal case studies track the lived equity experiences of the educationally disadvantaged in terms of access, participation and outcomes. Second, and in relation to staff voice, barriers to pursuing flexible working options within higher education might be better understood if examined through an equity lens. I flag this issue as a research gap in technologically-mediated higher education and suggest the exploration of staff voice using a collaborative autoethnographic approach (see **Ngunjiri, Hernandez & Chang, 2010**). Third, the voices represented in this paper have tended to focus more on the macro and meso issues in technologically-mediated education and less on the micro issues of teaching and learning themselves. This warrants further investigation as it might indicate the need for a shifting of research foci.

This paper has explored equity as a diagnostic benchmark in higher education for students and staff in technologically-mediated education. Assessing the practices of an institution through such an equity lens is akin to the proverbial canary in a mineshaft. Ergo, considering equity issues is an essential benchmark for quality in an era of the social inclusion agenda. For without such considerations of equity, education will remain the enclave of an exclusionist agenda, and gaps for the disadvantaged will continue to grow.

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