

# Addressing Social Justice in Australian Higher Education: Strategies for Inclusive and Equitable Practices

Ruilin Zhao<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Guangzhou Xinhua University, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China

<sup>a</sup>zhaoruilin@xhsysu.edu.cn

\*Corresponding author

**Abstract:** This research paper prioritizes a number of social justice issues within the context of Australian higher education. It focuses on analyzing the academic experience of marginalized student populations, including those from low socio-economic backgrounds, international students, indigenous communities, and those with different forms of disabilities. Even if there has been major trending toward inclusivity, access to higher education remains inequitable for these groups, with social barriers including financial difficulties, socio-cultural differences, and racial discrimination. In response to these issues, drawing on theories of social exclusion and Foucauldian concepts of power, this paper will critically elaborate the implementation of inclusive educational models, particularly for students with special needs, followed by examining the structural and attitudinal barriers that constantly exclude these students. This paper also proposes to focus on creating more inclusive university environments through universal design, faculty training programs, as well as the promotion of an inclusive academic curriculum. Through promoting a more accessible and equitable higher education system, this article aims to contribute to ongoing efforts to build up a fairer academic landscape for all students with various social, cultural, and economic backgrounds.

**Keywords:** Social Justice in Higher Education; Inclusive Education; Equity and Access; Marginalized Students; Disability and Education

## 1. Introduction

The contemporary allegations that issues of social justice in education become more urgent, followed by demanding quick and appropriate measures and interventions, are more likely to evince public agreement. The idea of social justice considers problems of equality of opportunities, outcomes, access, participation, and the distribution of cultural and social capital (Patton et al., 2010, p. 268)<sup>[21]</sup>. That is, the pursuit of social justice can be viewed as the search for a reasonable distribution of what is beneficial and valued as well as what is burdensome for the broader society (Singh & Mala, 2011, p. 482)<sup>[26]</sup>. In Australia, education in recent periods has been varied in its forms of delivery, contexts, and normative principles or strategies, which may have given rise to existence of numerous forms of social justice issues. In particular, massive exposure of social justice concerns were found in the context of higher education in Australia, in relation to its essential role in 'knowledge societies and knowledge economies in a globalizing world' (Singh & Mala, 2011, p. 483)<sup>[26]</sup>. Such roles lead to perception of higher education institutions as central to economic and social development, which may involve ambiguities in involvements of different social entities, including individuals of different racial, cultural and political backgrounds (Singh & Mala, 2011, p. 483)<sup>[26]</sup>. In this research paper, I will initially present and analyze numerous social justice issues embedded within the context of higher education, including social inequality, urgent needs of social inclusion and widening participation, as well as diverse communities' marginalization. As followed, I will critically elaborate the exclusion of numerous disadvantaged groups of individuals, particularly the disabled individuals with special needs, along with the potential strategy of inclusive educational model. In response to this issue, I will develop a thorough strategic plan, aims at improving disabled students' adequate access to academic resources.

## 2. An assessment of social justice and education in the context of higher education

### 2.1. *The social justice issue of equity/equality*

The issue of equity in the context of higher education is emerging on the political agendas of a rising figure of higher education public authorities and institutions' governing bodies (Goastellec, 2008, p. 72)<sup>[9]</sup>. As a result, fairness in access to education is becoming an international guideline and is thus a 'determinant of higher education policies and comparisons' (Goastellec, 2008, p. 72)<sup>[9]</sup>. Considering essential variations of structure, size and origin of each country's educational system, the evaluation of access to education may differ to a large extent (Goastellec, 2008, p. 72)<sup>[9]</sup>. In Australia, it is publicly viewed as a sparsely populated nation that faces real challenges in ensuring 'equity of provision across vast distances' (Bradley et al., 2008, p. 2)<sup>[3]</sup>. Over the recent decades, a major development in the context of Australian tertiary education sector lies in the 'uncapping of Common-wealth funded university student places under the student-driven system' (Li et al., 2017, p. 625)<sup>[12]</sup>. Under the system, various forms of negative impact have been found towards vulnerable groups of people. For instance, with a rapid increasing enrolment of students, a minimum Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) has been imposed by the government, which would impact negatively on low socio-economic students (Li et al., 2017, as cited in Norton, 2013, p. 14)<sup>[12][20]</sup>. Apart from that, not limited to people with low socio-economic background, research shows that those from regional and remote Australia, as well as Indigenous Australians are significantly underrepresented in the context of tertiary education (Bradley et al., 2008, p. 27)<sup>[3]</sup>. In addition to this, other disadvantaged groups, including international students in Australia and female students still need further assistance to ensure their direct access to education (Bradley et al., 2008, p. 27)<sup>[3]</sup>. Enhancing access and equity in tertiary education for these groups has been a long-term challenged task, and responsive solutions are not immediately obvious (Bradley et al., 2008, p. 27)<sup>[3]</sup>.

#### 2.1.1. *Inadequate access to tertiary education: low socio-economic groups*

An increasing amount of research on students' access and engagement focus more on the discussion around the participation of students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Nelson et al., 2012, p. 13)<sup>[19]</sup>. In Australia, the meaning and definition of low socio-economic background can be referred as - individuals and groups with inadequate access to social, cultural, and economic resources, along with the relative value ascribed to these resources held by various individuals and groups (Nelson et al., 2012, p. 13)<sup>[19]</sup>. From an international perspective, the priority in the development of local educational policy has long been associated with the success of students from low socio-economic backgrounds ((Nelson et al., 2012, p. 13)<sup>[19]</sup>. In accordance with this global trend, the Australian government has established an objective whereby 20 per cent of the undergraduate students should be of low socio-economic backgrounds by the year of 2020 (Craft, 2018, p. 1372)<sup>[5]</sup>. However, students with relatively lower-economic backgrounds may have lower university entrance ranks, which may be problematic for the universities striving to obtain academic excellence (Craft, 2018, p. 1372)<sup>[5]</sup>. In particular, a majority of the students from low socio-economic backgrounds may not be able to enrol into the universities.

Based on the research around potential factors that give rise to low enrolment rate, students from low socio-economic backgrounds often propose with financial issues that may significantly impact on their success in tertiary education (Devlin & McKay, 2018, p. 1)<sup>[7]</sup>. Besides, students from low socio-economic background may emphasize paid work instead of university studies (Devlin & McKay, 2018, p. 1)<sup>[7]</sup>. Therefore, as compared with normal students, financial challenges were found to be one of the most essential barriers that hinders poor students' academic development. Indeed, based on the statistics gathered by Bradley and his colleagues (2008, p. 30), students from high socio-economic backgrounds are about 3 times more likely than students from low socio-economic backgrounds to attend universities (Bradley et al., 2008, p. 30)<sup>[3]</sup>. In addition to this, the current access rate for students with low socio-economic backgrounds is appropriately 16 per cents and has remained unchanged since the year of 2002 (Bradley et al., 2008, p. 30)<sup>[3]</sup>. Although the access and participation rate for these students remained in a low level, the success rate (tendency to pass the subjects) is around 97 per cents. Nevertheless, the government and educational department still prioritise the participation rate of these students, which still remain low.

#### 2.1.2. *Equity of access for students from non-English speaking background: international students*

In the context of globalization, as motivated by technology and other forces, it undoubtedly enhances the international and global connectivity (Zhai et al., 2019)<sup>[31]</sup>. During the process of higher education internationalization, international students mobility is gradually becoming an essential element (Zhai et al., 2019, as cited in Moskal, 2018)<sup>[16][31]</sup>. According to the statistical record, over 350,000 international

students enrolled in higher education sector in Australia (Moskal, 2018, p. 422)<sup>[16]</sup>. In particular, the number of Chinese university students rose up to approximately 254,500, and it has become the largest source country sending international students (Zhai et al., 2019, p. 1)<sup>[31]</sup>. Other international students were primarily from south Asian countries, including Malaysia and India (Wearing et al., 2014, p. 72)<sup>[30]</sup>.

Despite of such high proportionate of international students in Australian tertiary education, studies of student experience of tertiary education tend to portray international students as a group different from local students and staff (Benzie, 2015, p. 18)<sup>[2]</sup>. That is because, their learning backgrounds are often considered as significantly differentiated, so that international students are expected to struggle (Benzie, 2015, p. 18)<sup>[2]</sup>. Due to this reason, instead of announcing academic contribution or performance to the Australian society, institutional discourses often depict international students in terms of their 'financial benefit to the institution' or their 'contribution to the skills shortages' in the broader community (Benzie, 2015, as cited in Madge et al., 2009, p. 35)<sup>[2][13]</sup>. Research suggest that various factors hinder international students' academic development in Australia. To begin with, international students may possess lower testable English proficiency, and it may closely associate with bad academic performance (Wearing et al., 2014, p. 74)<sup>[30]</sup>. In the classroom, they cannot access to the education fully, since they are normally identified as passive and unwilling to participate into discussions and collaborations (Benzie, 2015, p. 18)<sup>[2]</sup>. Besides, the existence of socio-cultural differences may result in negative impact upon international students' academic performance and ordinary living in Australia (Wearing et al., 2014, p. 73). For instance, students from China tend to study based on stereotypes with assumed Confucian rote-learning styles (Wearing et al., 2014, p. 74)<sup>[30]</sup>. Cultural groups of these international students are characterised by the strengths and weaknesses of their local education systems (Wearing et al., 2014, p. 74)<sup>[30]</sup>. Therefore, these contentions of international students tend to depict them as a homogenous group, positioning them as lacking in a range of requirements for tertiary education (Benzie, 2015, p. 18)<sup>[2]</sup>.

### ***2.1.3. Limited access to tertiary education for diverse communities – Indigenous participation***

Even if access to tertiary education for Aboriginal and Torres Islander peoples in Australia has increased over the last decade, it is still lower than those of non-Indigenous Australian, along with inadequate participation and low level of completion rate (Gore et al., 2017, p. 1)<sup>[10]</sup>. Indeed, according to Andersen and his colleagues' analysis (2012, p. 1), the participation rates of Aboriginal people in Australian higher education is less than half those of the non-Indigenous individuals. In addition, the figure of Indigenous Australian students accounts for only 0.9 per cents of all university enrolments (Nelson et al., 2012, as cited in DEEWR, 2011)<sup>[6][19]</sup>. This phenomenon is apparently shown among different levels and departments of tertiary education, including undergraduate, postgraduate, as well as staff members (Andersen et al., 2012, p. 1)<sup>[1]</sup>. Similar statements were also proposed by Nelson and his colleagues (2012, p. 11), whom contend that literature on social justice continues to underestimate the essentiality of Indigenous perspectives. That is, Indigenous people in higher education remains invisible and unreflected in most of the academic discourse (Nelson et al., 2012, p. 11)<sup>[19]</sup>. This phenomenon is primarily due to stereotypical and discriminatory notions that exclude Indigenous students from entering the field of tertiary education. Such low level of participation and access to Australian higher education may result in a large number of negative outcomes in the long term, including high morbidity in some occasions, as well as lower engagement with the labour market and high possibility of poverty (Nelson et al., 2012, p. 11)<sup>[19]</sup>.

### ***2.1.4. Limited access to higher education for students with special needs – inclusive education***

During the last several decades, the increasing figure of individuals with numerous forms of disabilities raises urgent concerns in terms of their rights and opportunities of receiving adequate tertiary education in Australia. Although the participation rate of disabled students in the universities has increased thanks to the implementation of inclusive educational practice, individuals with disabilities are still being marginalised and discriminated globally (Morgado et al., 2016, p. 639)<sup>[14]</sup>. In Australia, universities are perceived as the most discriminating institutions, in terms of access for certain types of students, particularly for those with various forms of disabilities (Morgado et al., 2016, p. 639)<sup>[14]</sup>. Without receiving proper amount of education, individuals with disabilities are less likely to pursue their expected career in the future. Accordingly, the existence of disabled individuals is a challenge for the university, due to an inadequate access to the 'curriculum, teaching, learning and evaluation' (Morgado et al., 2016, p. 639)<sup>[14]</sup>. In response to this situation, an effective inclusive educational model is gradually being emphasized by the educational departments, aims at eliminating the barriers that hinder disabled individuals' future development. Nevertheless, a large number of difficulties are observed during the process of implementation, which need to be furtherly addressed, elaborated and dealt with.

### 3. Identification and critical discussion of inclusive education for students with special needs in higher education

Considering there is a rapidly increasing number of students with disabilities, different institutions of tertiary education are facing great challenges to ensure these students' equal access to normal studies. In general, students with special needs refer to those with physical, mental and psychological issues that may hinder their full potential during the process of learning (Collins et al., 2018, p. 1476)<sup>[4]</sup>. In this sense, as compared with the normal ones, students with disabilities are more likely to face additional challenges when they strive to change their lives with education (Collins et al., 2018, p. 1476)<sup>[4]</sup>. Instead of being emphasized and encouraged by their peers and the educational department, they are more likely to be excluded, marginalized and rejected by the broader society. Indeed, according to the statistics gathered by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2019), the highest level of educational attainment for people with disabilities is a bachelor's degree, which generally lower than people without disability. In addition, merely 15 percent of people with disabilities aged 20 and over are able to enroll into tertiary education institutions (AIHW, 2019). In Australia, rather than including them into the classroom of higher education with their peers, they are more likely to be placed in a special education institution or directly abandoned (Dreyer, 2017, p. 32)<sup>[8]</sup>. However, some authors proposed that special education is more suitable for students with disabilities, as teachers can design their own specially adapted teaching methods (Hornby, 2014, p. 2)<sup>[11]</sup>. But in contemporary society, students who study in special education centers are unable to foster essential skills that prepare them for the future career, particularly the 21st century skills, which include creative thinking, critical thinking, team collaboration, written communication, etc. (Trilling & Fadel, 2013, p. 7)<sup>[28]</sup>. Thus, rather than focusing on easing educators' pressure on course content delivery, it is relatively more significant to consider how to improve the overall standard of education for those with special needs.

Before elaborating practices to ensure disabled students' opportunities of access to tertiary education, it is essential to clarify how vulnerable groups of individuals are being excluded in the broader social context. As defined by Mowat (2015, p. 457)<sup>[18]</sup>, social exclusion refers to a state in which individuals or groups lack effective participation in key activities or benefits of the society in which they live'. Academic discourses around 'marginalization' and 'social exclusion' should be known as a state that encompasses feelings about the state (Mowat, 2015, p. 457)<sup>[18]</sup>. That is, to be excluded and marginalized should be perceived as a sense that one does not belong, or as neither a member of a community nor being able to make contribution to the broader society (Mowat, 2015, p. 457)<sup>[18]</sup>. For students with disabilities in tertiary education institutions, social exclusion arises from a lack of equal opportunities and barriers to learning and participation (Mowat, 2015, p. 457)<sup>[18]</sup>. In this sense, without proper arrangements or interventions that promote 'inclusion for all', students with different forms of disabilities ought to be recognized as a group that is particularly vulnerable to exclusion and stigmatization (Mowat, 2015, p. 457)<sup>[18]</sup>. The other interpretation of how disabled students are being excluded in higher education can rely on Foucauldian ideologies of 'norms' and 'disciplinary power'. Based on Michel Foucault's words, he frequently cites schools as the sites where 'normalization' occurs, since this is the place where individuals are evaluated and classified (Mourad, 2017, p. 327)<sup>[17]</sup>. During this process of 'normalization', those who 'violate' against the 'norms' based on their particular characteristics, including disabled individuals, are more likely to be deemed as deviants in the context of higher education, followed by being furtherly marginalized (Mourad, 2017, p. 327)<sup>[17]</sup>.

In response to this social justice issue, the inclusive educational model should be gradually promoted by higher education institutions, aims at providing students with an inclusive environment during academic learning. As Shaeffer (2015, p. 57) stated in his discussion around the importance of inclusive education<sup>[23]</sup>, 'education' shall not only be regarded as an approach to make students more knowledgeable and responsible, but also constructing a society that is more democratic and equitable. With the use of inclusive educational model, different educational institutions are more likely to resist authoritarianism and become democratic (Shaeffer, 2019, p. 182)<sup>[24]</sup>. Moreover, it promotes equity and rejects gross disparities, followed by ensuring that society is a fair one for all social entities (Shaeffer, 2019, p. 182)<sup>[24]</sup>. In general terms, inclusive education should be perceived as a multi-dimensional concept that includes the respect and admiration of difference and diversity, adequate consideration of human rights, social justice and equity issues (Hornby, 2014, p. 2)<sup>[11]</sup>. Besides, it strives to ensure that all types of students are welcome to learn in the same classroom, along with the provision of engaging and challenging general educational curricula (Hornby, 2014, p. 2). Nonetheless, negative perspectives of inclusive educational model depict it as merely a 'fashionable term' that has not provided disabled individuals with a safe and appropriate learning environment (Hornby, 2014, p. 2)<sup>[11]</sup>. Despite these negative viewpoints, the inclusive educational model is currently recognized as the only way to ensure all students being educated

in the mainstream classroom (Hornby, 2014, p. 2)<sup>[11]</sup>.

However, in the context of tertiary education, several challenges were still observed during the implementation of inclusive educational model. To begin with, research shows that the problems of unhelpful staff attitudes with inadequate training experience may fail to encourage inclusive students' participation and achievement (Collins et al., 2018, p. 1482)<sup>[4]</sup>. Although a majority of university students with disabilities describe the academic staff as accommodating and flexible, some of them label their lecturers and tutors as unhelpful and lacking in awareness about their needs (Collins et al., 2018, p. 1482)<sup>[4]</sup>. Although all personnel in universities have received training in providing support to disabled individuals, they have not yet been able to properly interact with disabled students (Collins et al., 2018, p. 1482)<sup>[4]</sup>. Secondly, the provision of excessive amount of resources has resulted in growing dependence. That is, with large amount resources the university makes available to support students with physical disabilities, many of them view it as an excuse instead of the resources that assist them to learn (Collins et al., 2018, p. 1481)<sup>[4]</sup>. Such an arrangement raises concerns around the possibility of not receiving same level of support in the real workplaces (Collins et al., 2018, p. 1481)<sup>[4]</sup>. Although few pieces of research proposed there is still an inadequate amount of tools and equipment provided for disabled individuals, recent investigation reveals that a majority of tertiary education institutions are offering too many resources to these students, which may lead to a sense of dependence and avenue creation for exploitation (Collins et al., 2018, p. 1481; Sharma et al., 2018, p. 42)<sup>[4][25]</sup>.

#### 4. Strategic plan for how to work towards more equitable practices

To ensure equal access and participation for students with special needs in the context of higher education, a range of transformations, both at the structural level and classroom practices, should be carefully considered to build up an inclusive university (Morina, 2019, p. 13)<sup>[15]</sup>. To begin with, leaders in the universities should carry out procedures, aims at enhancing accessibility through removing barriers and defeating ableism (Powell, 2012, p. 33)<sup>[22]</sup>. The most essential barrier that hinders disabled individuals' academic development is the so-called 'attitudinal barriers', which refers to prejudice, negative stereotypes, stigmatization and marginalization towards vulnerable groups of individuals (Powell, 2012, p. 34)<sup>[22]</sup>. These have undoubtedly given rise to limited contribution and access to normal community life (Powell, 2012, p. 34)<sup>[22]</sup>. In response to this issue, apart from promoting necessary social, scientific and legal changes, different tertiary education institutions should strive to construct 'Universal Design Universities' which adopt universal design principles of ensuring disabled individuals' adequate access to resources (Morina, 2019, p. 13; Powell, 2012, p. 33)<sup>[18][22]</sup>. This can be done by publicly propagandizing the essentiality of inclusive education through various forms of media representations, aims at embracing social and political paradigms of disability (Powell, 2012, p. 33). In addition, leaders in universities should carefully consider the voice of diverse participants to engage and change public awareness and attitude, followed by advancing the educational and social inclusion of students with disabilities in the context of higher education (Powell, 2012, p. 33)<sup>[22]</sup>. Secondly, universities should give emphasis on the sensitive transition of disabled students from their first semester of study. To avoid early leaving or dropping out due to an inadequate amount of assistance or transitional programs, universities should take proactive action (Morina, 2019, p. 13)<sup>[15]</sup>. This can be done by designing special orientation sessions, tutorials, or assigning student representatives with disabilities in the official student union (Morina, 2019, p. 13)<sup>[15]</sup>. Apart from that, special training programs should also be implemented for disabled graduates, so that they can obtain a smooth transition from the universities to the workplaces. This can include specially designed career webinars with the provision of job opportunities for individuals with disabilities specifically.

As university-based education is being questioned and educators are under pressure to achieve high standard of academic performance towards diverse groups of students, teachers should be adequately and thoroughly trained before delivering classes (Spratt & Florian, 2015, p. 90)<sup>[27]</sup>. As Morina (2019, p. 13) stated in her discussion, higher education should support training the faculty members, not only in terms of the courses they teach, but also in how to teach. Unlike teaching normal students in the classroom, educators under inclusive settings should learn to use appropriate teaching methods. For instance, teachers shall not pay excessive attention to those with special needs or providing additional targeted learning support too obviously, as these may reinforce the division between disabled students and those who are normal (Spratt & Florian, 2015, p. 93)<sup>[27]</sup>. This may furtherly stigmatize those who are labelled and classified as 'different' (Spratt & Florian, 2015, p. 93)<sup>[27]</sup>. To avoid the occurrence of such phenomena, in addition to implementing general training under inclusive settings, a more targeted approach should be adopted. For example, as proposed by Tristani and Bassett-Gunter (2019, p. 258)<sup>[29]</sup>, educators should be trained in response to specific types of disabilities, followed by providing targeted assistance to

students with special needs. That is, instrumental and methodological strategies to address the needs of students with disabilities should be mandatory for all faculty personnel. Such training programs should be legitimated and guaranteed by the educational department of government, in addition to prescriptive enrolment numbers of students with special needs.

## 5. Conclusion

This research paper highlights how higher education can be perceived as a place with a number of social justice issues that hinder the academic development of various types of marginalized students. These students include those with low socio-economic backgrounds that possess low income, which may give rise to high drop-out rate at the universities. In addition, students from overseas may not get full access to tertiary education in Australia, primarily due to cultural differences and low levels of language proficiency. Besides, students from diverse cultural backgrounds and communities, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Islander peoples, who are normally excluded because of discriminatory notions. As followed, this paper focuses on elaborating how students with special needs are being excluded and marginalized by the universities, in terms of Foucault's theories of disciplinary power. Moreover, an inclusive educational model is examined as a potential approach to improve this situation, followed by examining its strengths and limitations. At the end of the paper, numerous strategies and coping methods are proposed in response to disabled individuals' inadequate access to higher education. These include the promotion of 'Universal Design Universities', in terms of removing stereotypical notions of students with disabilities. Apart from that, an adequate amount of targeted training should be reinforced by the government for educators in inclusive classrooms.

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