

# Transcript

## Session 3: Global lessons for election-year equity policy

**SONAL SINGH:** We'll move on to session 3, which is actually taking some of the global lessons for the election year in the policy landscape. So we first of all are going to hear from Dr Jamil Salmi he's a Moroccan education economist and global tertiary education expert followed by Professor Graeme Atherton, the Founder and Director of the World Access to Higher Education Network at the University of West London, followed by Dr Nadine Zacharias, the Founder and Managing Director of Equity by Design, and hopefully we'll have some Q&A after that. Over to you, Dr Jamil.

**DR JAMIL SALMI:** Thank you very much, Sonal. Can you hear me? Yes.

**SONAL SINGH:** Yes, we can. Go ahead.

**DR JAMIL SALMI:** Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this very useful, important panel.

Over the 20th century, higher education got in trouble in three different times first, from 1933 to 45 under the Nazi regime in Germany; then in the US 1950 54 during McCarthyism; and then in China during the cultural revolution 1966 and 76. But after that, it was all positive and uphill with a universal consensus around the importance of expanding higher education, giving opportunities to students from underserved groups, would talk about the right to not only education but even higher education, in some countries they talk about the right to free higher education.

But all of a sudden in the past few years in the name of what we would call today the anti worker movement starting in Russia and then Hungary and then Poland, then moving to Florida and then to the other republican states in the US and now the entire country, Afghanistan, Iran, a little bit in France, in the UK, we've seen a big backlash against equity policies.

It has taken three forms first, exclusion of targeted groups. Afghanistan decided four years ago that women, half of the population, would be barred from entering higher education. In a growing number of countries the LGBTIQ+ community has been targeted, including first the US states and now with a ban on trans attacks against trans people throughout the US, in Russia and it's been exported also to African countries in some US states against people what you would call in Australia, I guess, First Nations people not being allowed to use their names and tribal affiliations in higher education and in Iran, if you do not properly have headdress, you will be banned from university. In France, if you come with a veil, you will be banned. So this is the first dimension of this backlash.

The second dimension, elimination of equity promotion programs. It started with the decision of the Supreme Court in the US against affirmative action and then followed by attacks on DEI programs, what you call I guess EDI, in the Republican states and now the entire US and also decreasing financial aid for professionals enrolled in private institutions in several countries, such as Chile, Colombia, Philippines and South Africa.

So I don't know how many of the participants are working full time as professionals on equity promotion, but imagine that from one day to the other your function would be erased, you would be fired and the money dedicated to diversity, equity and inclusion would be reassigned. This is what we see in the US today.

And the third dimension of this backlash takes the form of course prohibition, censorship, book banning, and introduction of indoctrination ideology. In some US states, in Texas, for example, Oklahoma, Christian religious education is being imposed in the classroom. You see Nobel Prize winners, Tony Morrison, et cetera, being banned, Harry Potter is banned in some US states and I'm told even in some private schools in the UK.

So what is the impact of this backlash? A big regression in terms of academic freedom, of institutional autonomy, the accreditation agencies in many countries, including the US, having their independence challenged, defunding of DEI programs, and this is creating an atmosphere of fear, hostility, leading to self censorship.

When you have the Vice President of the country, in this case the US, saying that the enemy, university is the enemy, you can see the result. Predicting a loss of prestige and attractivity, certainly many less people would be interested to study or even to work in the US. In Marseille, France, last week, the University of Marseille was the first of now many universities in Europe offering to welcome the US scholars who feel threatened and would like to move to a more tolerant environment.

And we see also what I would call equity hallucinations, using the terminology when we talk about AI hallucinations. So if I show you this picture of my beautiful granddaughter, actually I cannot show it as such because now in many countries the colours of the rainbow have been banned because it's symbolic of the LGBT community. In some US states, the seahorse has been banned from biology books because, as you may know, the seahorse it's the male who gets pregnant and that could create confusion among the population.

How do we resist the backlash? The first option in democratic countries is to push back through the democratic process and sometimes it works. We've seen a big reversal, positive reversal in Poland, which had adopted policies similar to Hungary trying to leverage acquired legal commitments. Until January 20th in democratic states in the US you could rely on the federal equity regulations to defer yourself from the attacks on the GI agenda. It's not the case anymore in the US, but hopefully you can still leverage international commitment to education, education rights, to resist the onslaught.

Some universities in the US have moved to direct consideration of access barriers now that you cannot do affirmative action, so by looking at students who are first generation

students who come from low SES groups, that's another way of helping promote the access of success agenda. Alternative modes of resistance trying to use and also perhaps the most powerful is to keep framing a strong body of evidence showing the data, showing that US universities today the situation is still as bad as 100 years ago where children of the richest 100 persons represent a higher proportion of students than from the poorest 60%.

Similar data, statistics from Oxford and Cambridge show that while on average for the entire UK first generation students represent 48% of the student population, at Oxford institutions it's only 18%.

And I'll leave you with a picture describing the distressing situation that we see in the US and that's where the focus of the anti-equity movement is and it's reaching proportions that really are mind boggling and really distressing just banning 199 names. I was looking at your title, Sonal, and I'm afraid that if you were in the US, you would the only thing you would be allowed to say is Student Access, but you could not say any more that you are dealing with Student Access & Equity and your centre, you could not say that your centre is for social justice and inclusion.

I like this description by Garfield DEI initiatives were not meant to prevent lower qualified sorry, the screen doesn't allow me to read it out. You will have it in the share.

I want to leave you with two quotes because I know I'm showing a very dark picture of what's happening in the world and should we just stay with this anxiety and fear, or is there hope. A New York Times journalist described today's world by saying the nature of reality itself is in deep dispute, but Shakespeare gives us hope because he wrote many centuries ago, "What's past is prologue, what to come, in yours and my discharge". Over to you, Sonal.

**SONAL SINGH:** Thank you, Jamil. As always, an inspiring presentation of hope as well, but also reality where we've come. Over to you, Graeme Atherton.

**PROF. GRAEME ATHERTON:** Thank you, Sonal. I'm just going to share my slides. Okay, hopefully you can see the slides there.

Thank you, Sonal. I'm speaking from London. It's quite early in the morning here. I've just seen the milkman delivering milk. I didn't think that happened still, but apparently it does.

Anyway, I lead the World Access to Higher Education Network, which I'll talk about in a moment, but I also work in the UK primarily and for 13 years led NEON, the National Education Opportunities Network, which is a national organisation for widening access to education in the UK. So most of my remarks will relate to the experiences of the UK in recent years, but also will touch a little bit upon the global context as well.

So I've got four points I want to make really around reflecting on what I've heard so far, I don't know what might be useful for the Aussie working in the Australian context.

Firstly, on preparation, firstly on locating equity, evidence and advocacy, and then some overall conclusions.

So firstly, preparation. On preparation, this is a little quote here from a speech that was given at a NEON event just under five years ago now. So this was kind of early in the pandemic and NEON organised an online conference, not dissimilar to this one, and we had quite a lot of numbers on the call and we had a speech from the then Minister for Universities, Higher Education, called Michelle Donelan. Obviously, we thought she would come on to the event and speak about access fairly positively as you would do to nearly 800 people who were involved in delivering widening access.

When she came on to the call, there was about 800 people there, most universities were members with us, early in the pandemic, so people were quite engaged in this online communication, and told essentially our work was a waste of time and for 20 years we'd been deceiving students by encouraging them to go to higher education from learning access backgrounds. This precipitated a period of the next four years or so where the Government was very hostile to higher education and the kind of bipartisanship in regards to equity really declined a lot with that government.

So the point being there about preparation, ie, we didn't anticipate that happening and the thing is that while the past is a guide to the future, the bipartisanship which you may well enjoy is always somewhat contingent. So preparation or preparing for the worst is really important and that's something, I guess, that came through from our experiences where we had this speech and then what came afterwards back in 2020.

So the next point is locating equity. I heard what Chris said earlier on and I kind of agreed a lot with some of the points, his observations about where we speak about equity work and who we seek about that work to and how often, obviously, we engage with those within higher education to speak about equity in higher education when obviously it's a broader issue. But the question is how do we connect what we do in higher education and equity to a broader perspective and also what does that mean because in doing that, you're almost strategically distancing yourself sometimes, or trying to distance yourself to a degree, from the way in which higher education is perceived by policymakers overall, which may be indeed rather negatively.

So there's two kind of experiences again from the UK. We didn't necessarily achieve this in the first instance, although we'll see what happens with this Government. But the previous Government we had a strategy called levelling up. Levelling up was a government agenda to address regional inequality within the UK, particularly, I guess, to try and appeal to areas of the UK that deliver the conservative MPs for the first time in a long time or indeed for the first time ever.

The levelling up agenda didn't really succeed. A combination of the pandemic, the war in Ukraine and a real lack of kind of real commitment to it by the Government at the time meant that it never really got off the ground as such, not policy wise. It did actually highlight a lot of the extent of these inequalities in the UK. But we tried, I guess, to try to locate our work in equity and higher education to levelling up and overall higher education did. We did a fairly poor job of it really because we're always

chasing the narrative, we're always chasing to be part of levelling up without anticipating what that could be.

Then the next government, our present government, which was elected last summer, a Labour Government, which has been so far much more sympathetic to equity in higher education work without any change of policy commitment or, indeed, any extra funding, but certainly was sympathetic to the work, has focused on economic growth as its major policy priority over the forthcoming years. I think the challenge there for us will be here in the UK how you locate the equity work within the economic growth agenda and I do think with equity you are talking about broader societal issues when it comes to why you're doing this kind of work and why it matters to the individuals and society. So considering carefully how you locate that within broader political narratives if you want to be effective is I think a really important thing to consider.

So the final point before I go to the conclusions is evidence and advocacy. I mean, we've heard a lot, I think, this morning the importance of evidence, the importance of data and collecting evidence and ensuring that we can establish what we do is impactful in terms of equity work, but also establishing the nature of the problems or the challenges that we're trying to address.

Last week I was part of this evidence session you see on this slide here. The House of Lords, which is the second chamber in the UK Government, is having a new social mobility policy committee and there was a hearing last week and I was part of this hearing giving evidence on the role of universities and social mobility and equity work. But one of the peers there, an ex minister, spoke about the number of access and participation evaluation reports not even being read by our regulator's office of students. He mentioned there were 50 plus evaluation being undertaken of equity work.

The point here is that we have long had an issue in the UK regarding establishing the evidence and impact of this area of work, but in doing so, the pendulum has swung from not being a lot of work going on to a lot of work going on and that's very good and most of the work is very valuable, it's very important. However, at the same time, we have to think about which of that evidence will cut through to the broader political narrative.

You can have lots of evidence and lots of data, but what of that data, what of that evidence will really make an impact outside of your own particular sector? It's important there, but getting it on to that broader political state is your next challenge, particularly when there's a lot of evidence and data being produced.

And I guess evidence and advocacy as well, thinking about not just the UK but the global picture. As someone mentioned, the World Access to Higher Education Network is a new network that we are launching, (inaudible) part of that group, again to provide an opportunity for collaboration and communication and advocacy in a global context and we see here in WAHEN we have on the top there something we call the equity policy map, which Jamil was fundamental in preparing and producing reports for nearly 100 countries on their present policy context where higher education is concerned.

It's worth thinking then about the extent of policy commitments across the world and the differences in those policy commitments. So there are very different contextual factors to think about when it comes to higher education policy and different levels of commitment.

You have to remember as well in the countries we're talking about here, particularly UK, Australia, the level of engagement is very high. It's low in other countries. There are things one can learn from other countries in context as well. So if you have an interest in what is happening in policy terms in other countries, then the best resource available anywhere is our equity policy map, which has brief information on equity policies in well over 100 countries. So if you have interest in that area, please have a look at that.

So my final conclusions, expect the worst and prepare accordingly. I don't think we did expect the worst and therefore didn't prepare for that and I think our lesson is we now expect little and probably less than we get. Think about linking to broader societal issues, decoupling from higher education, that's an interesting point how do you in your messaging obviously retain your position within higher education, your allies in higher education, but also challenge some of the narratives and play into some of the things that are being said about higher education because equity is always a difficult place. To be effective in equity, you have to actually criticise your own sector as well. How do you actually link to those broader societal issues.

Think about cut through with your evidence. There's lots of evidence being produced I think and data in Australia as well as in the UK, what is it it's going to cut through to make an impact on the broader narrative. Think both globally and locally with your advocacy. Think about what may be happening in other parts of the world which we can learn and take points from, but think locally as well.

The final point again is a local point, made I think in other presentations as well that again bringing finally back to the UK when we have thought about advocacy is making it local and place based in really important because that does play and is important to all politicians of whatever ilk they come from. I'll leave it at that. Thank you.

**SONAL SINGH:** Thanks. Over to you, Nadine.

**DR NADINE ZACHARIAS:** And I am going to make this really brief. So what I'm going to do is the local historical piece and I'm starting us in 2008 with the release of the Bradley report and taking us through to the current conversation today.

The good news on this is much of it has been covered, so I'm going to look at history through the lens of bipartisanship for equity policy and what I've called out as some of the key highlights and low lights of attempted and actual policy reform. Somebody asked in the chat what constitutes policy reform. I guess when the legislative tool changes most of the times.

So the biggest Bradley started the biggest piece of higher education policy reform in the last 15 years. It was introduced under Julia Gillard as Education Minister in the Rudd Government. That was the introduction of HEPPP and alongside demand driven funding. To put it in perspective, we've talked about the quadrupling of the DSP. HEPPP increased equity funding times 12 from its predecessor program. So by volume, it was an unbelievable increase in funding. Over the last 16 years more than \$2 billion has gone to Australian universities in institutional funding alone, plus funding for ACSES and its predecessor NCSEHE plus funding for competitive grants. So it has been a very well funded program over time.

Two things I'd call out. 2014 was probably the greatest near miss in terms of equity policy, so we could have lost it quite quickly. Christopher Pyne was the Education Minister, Tony Abbott was the PM, and there was a proposal of deregulation of university fees which would have had a major negative impact on equity groups, particularly women and particularly students from low SES backgrounds.

There's some fabulous I really had fun with this, I told Sonal, to go down in history and down this rabbit hole, so there's lots that I could call out here. I think, in the interests of time and people sort of signing off, bipartisanship is not universal and most of us have talked about this. So in Australia, particularly on the Coalition side, as I said, the real near miss and the greatest problem was in 2014 and most of the Vice Chancellors except for Stephen Parker were complicit. So we also need to be aware of that.

Shamit talked about working with senior management. It remains absolutely critical as our members of Parliament and our political representatives, but then under Birmingham Turnbull in 2017, lots of support for equity funding and a proposal to write HEPPP into the HESA.

So this is my final point, will bipartisanship hold? I think it is fair to say, you know, there is diversion. Sarah Henderson said she wasn't quite sure how needs based funding would apply in a higher education context, so there certainly is need to make an argument, but I don't think that Australia is falling for Trumpian politics, and again, thank you, Jamil, for that really dystopian picture. I don't think that is going to be our reality, even if a Dutton Government does get elected, but what I would say is equity funding is vulnerable because it is a line item in the budget. It is managed through grant guidelines, it is not written into legislation, and that always makes it vulnerable. You know, like if we had a Musk like budget savings mission that comes through, you know, like it's only a cross of a pen away. So that is a risk. But I would not yet freak out.

So not quite as optimistic as Maria, but also not quite as dystopian as what's happening across the pond. Sonal, back to you.

**SONAL SINGH:** Thank you, Nadine, and thank you to all our presenters. It was a tall ask. We had a lot of presentations to go through, but there was a lot of content to go through as well.



Thank you, everyone that attended the session. Thank you to all our presenters. We haven't got time for Q&A and I think it was important that we do go through the discussion first.

The slides, the transcripts will be shared with everyone and we will definitely, as a group of practitioners, bring together everyone to have a robust discussion post election. But remember what Maria said as well, it is the time to make sure we come together and work towards the collective impact.

On that note, bye, everyone. Thank you for having us.