

**Launch of *Student Equity in Australian Higher Education*  
State Library of Victoria, 3 May 2016**

**Speech by Professor John Dewar, Vice-Chancellor, La Trobe University**

Thank you, Andrew.

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet tonight, and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

Welcome and thank you for coming. There's a certain irony in the fact that we meet tonight in a room with so many pictures of middle aged white males; but at least we have the portrait of the Wurundjeri elder William Barak just over my left shoulder.

I am very proud to say a few words about a book that is edited by two great La Trobe people – Matt Brett and Andrew Harvey.

And of course let's also acknowledge Catherine Burnheim and her good colleagues at Monash – but remember that Catherine is a former La Trobe staff member, so we claim her too.

There is a very strong connection between this book and La Trobe, even leaving its editors aside. Last year, a new ranking was published of Australian universities, called the 'Quality, Equity and Diversity' (or 'QED') ranking. It measured universities on all aspects of a university's mission – not just research, but the quality of learning and teaching and the degree of diversity in its staff and student bodies. I'm pleased to say that La Trobe came second nationally in that ranking – which confirmed something that we have always known, which is that La Trobe is a great example of a modern Australian university in its combination of inclusiveness with excellence. We exemplify the aspiration of Arizona State University to be defined 'not by whom we exclude, but by whom we include'.

I have to confess, though, that this ranking was one we made ourselves (indeed, Andrew Harvey was its chief architect). It would be a shame if we didn't perform well in a ranking of our own devising. But we were trying to make a serious point – which is that for too long we have allowed ideas of excellence to be captured by research excellence only, and that there are

other ways of being excellent, and universities other than the usual suspects who can be considered excellent.

Tonight's launch isn't about La Trobe University; but spending time at La Trobe does give you an idea of the living importance of equity, because so many of our students are first in family and from disadvantaged backgrounds; or are disabled, or are from migrant, regional or refugee backgrounds, or are LGBTI. We see them succeed and go on to enrich the capacity of their communities – something that is only possible because they have been given access to a transformative higher education experience and all the opportunities it provides.

I congratulate Andrew, Catherine and Matt on editing an excellent book – it is substantial and important, but also thoughtfully edited so there is a natural continuity and flow from chapter to chapter.

As editors, they had the foresight to identify equity as a significant issue but, perhaps more importantly, were able to engage some of the best thinkers, scholars and writers on higher education anywhere in the world today.

This is an important time to be thinking hard about the positive external impact that universities have, and the lens of 'equity' is a good one to use for these purposes. Just recently, Glyn Davis has speculated that universities could suffer the same fate as the monasteries in England under Henry VIII – that is, dissolution. Both are cloistered, wealthy, have a strong sense of entitlement and owe allegiances to foreign powers (eg, journal editors). The thing that will redeem universities from this fate is being able to demonstrate that they do positive good in their communities.

I congratulate all of the chapter authors – who write with such authority on the key issues that matter, and which we must grapple with to drive the improvements that are needed to make the Australian higher education system as equitable as possible.

The list of authors is a 'Who's who' of higher education policy thought, and it would be remiss of me not to make a special mention of Lin Martin, who casts a very long shadow over us all. The term 'living legend' is overused, but in Lin's case it is entirely suitable.

The fact that *A Fair Chance for All* has endured for 25 years tells us something about the quality of the policy work that went into it. But we also need to recognise that much has changed in those 25 years. University populations have become far more diverse in ways not foreseen – more overseas students, more postgraduate students and, frankly, just more students. This makes urgent the question of what a good equity framework for the sector might look like now, especially when these changes reverberate across most areas of university activity (admissions being the latest to capture public attention). And there is an excellent research report on that topic available at the back of the room.

In addition to its pragmatic impact in driving changes in the design of programs, *A Fair Chance for All* has also taken on a symbolic significance – it has inspired people like Andrew, Catherine and Matt to follow in Lin’s footsteps and want to take on careers that make a difference.

While tonight’s launch coincides with the Federal Budget – another irony, given that HEPP funding is likely to be cut – it also coincides with a watershed period in Australian higher education.

While our sector has seen unprecedented growth in recent years, its sustainability and affordability are by no means guaranteed. At the same time that governments aim to curtail the cost to the budget of higher education, our student population is as diverse as ever. And there are new and evolving expectations of the graduates we produce, the education we provide them with and the ways we deliver it.

So there is a set of very complex pressures on the system, and this is why it is so important that this book is being launched at this point in our sector’s history.

The book rightly situates student equity as central to the success or otherwise of higher education policy reforms, regardless of which party comes to power at the next election and whichever funding route is chosen to manage the cost pressures facing the sector. It also questions the assumption that equity and excellence are in tension with each other, and suggests that one may be a precondition of the other.

It contains an extraordinary array of insights, across a very broad spectrum of topics. If you consider the themes explored across the book, the complexity and significance of the issues we face is clear:

- New ways of thinking about equity policy
- Indigenous participation
- The regional agenda
- The VET/Higher Ed interface
- Low SES, NESB and disability access and achievement
- Gender equity and women's progression through academic hierarchies
- International student equity and wellbeing
- The role of markets
- Accountability and outcomes

I note in passing with some sadness, as a VC of an important provider of regional higher education, the opening sentence of the chapter on regional students – which says that participation rates for regional students have not improved in the last 25 years – a sad indictment of our past, present and foreseeable future policy settings in this regard.

The book not only contributes to our understanding of the current status and future directions of student equity, however, it helps us understand the origins and history of efforts to make higher education access and participation equitable. The past gives important cues for the future, and the book frames our present choices in an important historical context.

Once again, congratulations to the editors and contributors.

I am sure that in twenty-five years' time *Student Equity in Australian Higher Education* will take its place alongside *A Fair Chance for All* as a fundamentally important text for anyone who wants to understand what efforts have been made to maximise educational access for all members of society, something that makes Australia better for every one of us.

Thank you.